

**Monday
13 June 2022**

**Volume 716
No. 16**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 13 June 2022

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

(FORMED BY THE RT HON. BORIS JOHNSON, MP, DECEMBER 2019)

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE UNION AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—
The Rt Hon. Boris Johnson, MP

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE—The Rt Hon. Dominic Raab, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Rishi Sunak, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT AFFAIRS, AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND
EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Elizabeth Truss, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT—The Rt Hon. Priti Patel, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE—The Rt Hon. Ben Wallace, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES AND MINISTER FOR INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS—
The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY—The Rt Hon. Kwasi Kwarteng, MP

COP26 PRESIDENT—The Rt Hon. Alok Sharma, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—
The Rt Hon. Anne-Marie Trevelyan, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS—The Rt Hon. Dr Thérèse Coffey, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION—The Rt Hon. Nadhim Zahawi, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. George Eustice, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT—The Rt Hon. Grant Shapps, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND—The Rt Hon. Brandon Lewis CBE, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Alister Jack, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES—The Rt Hon. Simon Hart, MP

LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS AND LORD PRIVY SEAL—The Rt Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—The Rt Hon. Nadine Dorries, MP

MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO—The Rt Hon. Oliver Dowden, MP

MINISTER FOR BREXIT OPPORTUNITIES AND GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY—The Rt Hon. Jacob Rees-Mogg, MP

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Kwasi Kwarteng, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Greg Hands, MP (Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change)

Lord Grimstone of Boscobel Kt (Minister for Investment) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

George Freeman, MP

Paul Scully, MP

Lee Rowley, MP §

Lord Callanan

Cabinet Office—

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE UNION AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—
The Rt Hon. Boris Johnson, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP

MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE AND PAYMASTER GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Michael Ellis, QC, MP

COP26 PRESIDENT—The Rt Hon. Alok Sharma, MP

MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO—The Rt Hon. Oliver Dowden CBE, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Jacob Rees-Mogg, MP (Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency)

Lord True CBE

The Rt Hon. Nigel Adams, MP (Minister without Portfolio)

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

Leo Docherty, MP (Minister for Defence People and Veterans) §

Andrew Griffith, MP (Minister for Policy and Head of the Prime Minister's Policy Unit)

Heather Wheeler, MP §

Defence—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Ben Wallace, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Jeremy Quin, MP (Minister for Defence Procurement)

Baroness Goldie DL

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

James Heappey, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)
Leo Docherty, MP (Minister for Defence People and Veterans) §

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Nadine Dorries, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Julia Lopez, MP (Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Nigel Huddleston, MP
Chris Philp, MP
Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay §

Education—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Nadhim Zahawi, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Michelle Donelan, MP (Minister for Higher and Further Education)
Robin Walker, MP (Minister for School Standards)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Baroness Barran MBE
Alex Burghart, MP
Will Quince, MP

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. George Eustice, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park (Minister for the Pacific and the International Environment) §
Victoria Prentis, MP (Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Rebecca Pow, MP
The Rt Hon. Lord Benyon
Jo Churchill, MP

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Elizabeth Truss, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. James Cleverly, MP (Minister for Europe and North America)
The Rt Hon. Amanda Milling, MP (Minister for Asia and the Middle East)
Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Minister for South and Central Asia, North Africa, the United Nations and the Commonwealth)
The Rt Hon. Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park (Minister for the Pacific and the International Environment) §
Kemi Badenoch, MP (Minister for Equalities) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Vicky Ford, MP
Baroness Stedman-Scott OBE DL (Minister for Women) §
Mike Freer, MP (Minister for Equalities) §

Health and Social Care—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Edward Argar, MP (Minister for Health)
Gillian Keegan, MP (Minister for Care and Mental Health)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Maggie Throup, MP
Lord Kamall
Maria Caulfield, MP

Home Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Priti Patel, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP (Minister for Security and Borders)
The Rt Hon. Kit Malthouse, MP (Minister for Crime and Policing) §
The Rt Hon. Baroness Williams of Trafford §
Lord Greenhalgh (Minister for Building Safety and Fire) §
Lord Harrington of Watford (Minister for Refugees) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Kevin Foster, MP
Rachel Maclean, MP
Tom Pursglove, MP §

International Trade—

SECRETARY OF STATE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Anne-Marie Trevelyan, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP (Minister for Trade Policy)

Lord Grimstone of Boscobel Kt (Minister for Investment) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Ranil Jayawardena, MP

Mike Freer, MP §

Justice—

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Dominic Raab, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Kit Malthouse, MP (Minister for Crime and Policing) §

Victoria Atkins, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Sir Christopher Bellamy, QC

Tom Pursglove, MP §

James Cartlidge, MP §

Law Officers—

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Suella Braverman, QC, MP

SOLICITOR GENERAL—Alex Chalk, QC, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—Lord Stewart of Dirleton, QC

Leader of the House of Commons—

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—The Rt Hon. Mark Spencer, MP

Leader of the House of Lords—

LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt. Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Earl Howe CBE

Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—

SECRETARY OF STATE AND MINISTER FOR INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Stuart Andrew, MP (Minister for Housing)

Kemi Badenoch, MP (Minister for Local Government, Faith and Communities) §

Lord Greenhalgh (Minister for Building Safety and Fire) §

Lord Harrington of Watford (Minister for Refugees) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Eddie Hughes, MP

Neil O'Brien, MP

Northern Ireland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Brandon Lewis CBE, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Conor Burns, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Lord Caine

Scotland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Alister Jack, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Iain Stewart, MP

Lord Offord of Garvel

Transport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Grant Shapps, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Andrew Stephenson, MP

Wendy Morton, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Baroness Vere of Norbiton

Robert Courts, MP

Trudy Harrison, MP

Treasury—

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE UNION AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt Hon. Boris Johnson, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Rishi Sunak, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Simon Clarke, MP

FINANCIAL SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Lucy Frazer, QC, MP

ECONOMIC SECRETARY—John Glen, MP

EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Helen Whately, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Chris Heaton-Harris, MP

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—

Rebecca Harris, MP
 Michael Tomlinson, MP
 Alan Mak, MP
 Lee Rowley, MP §
 Amanda Solloway, MP
 Gareth Johnson, MP

ASSISTANT WHIPS—

Scott Mann, MP
 David T. C. Davies, MP §
 James Cartlidge, MP §
 Heather Wheeler, MP §
 Andrea Jenkyns, MP
 Steve Double, MP
 Sarah Dines, MP

UK Export Finance—

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Anne-Marie Trevelyan, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Mike Freer, MP §

Wales Office —

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Simon Hart, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—David T. C. Davies, MP §

Work and Pensions—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Dr Thérèse Coffey, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Chloe Smith, MP (Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Mims Davies, MP
 Guy Opperman, MP
 David Rutley, MP
 Baroness Stedman-Scott OBE DL §

Her Majesty's Household—

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Lord Parker of Minsmere, KCB

LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Dalhousie

MASTER OF THE HORSE—Lord de Mauley

TREASURER—The Rt Hon. Christopher Pincher, MP

COMPTROLLER—Marcus Jones, MP

VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—James Morris, MP

CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Ashton of Hyde

CAPTAIN OF THE QUEEN'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Earl of Courtown

BARONESSSES IN WAITING—

Baroness Scott of Bybrook OBE
 Baroness Bloomfield of Hinton Waldrist
 Baroness Penn (Minister on Leave)

LORDS IN WAITING—

Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay §
 Viscount Younger of Leckie
 Lord Sharpe of Epsom OBE

§ *Members of the Government listed under more than one Department*

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING THE CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—Andrew Selous, MP

REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION—Christian Matheson, MP

REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY—
 Sir Charles Walker, MP

REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—Sir Charles Walker, MP

REPRESENTING THE PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY—The Rt Hon. Mark Tami, MP

CHAIRMAN OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION—The Rt Hon. Sir Edward Leigh, MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE SPEAKER—The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Eleanor Laing, MP

FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP

SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Mr Nigel Evans, MP

PANEL OF CHAIRS—

Rushanara Ali, Hannah Bardell, Mr Clive Betts, Mr Peter Bone, Sir Graham Brady, Sir Christopher Chope, Judith Cummins, Geraint Davies, Philip Davies, Peter Dowd, Dame Angela Eagle, Clive Efford, Julie Elliott, Yvonne Fovargue, The Rt Hon. Sir Roger Gale, Ms Nusrat Ghani, James Gray, Sir Mark Hendrick, Mr Philip Hollobone, The Rt Hon. Stewart Hosie, The Rt Hon. Sir George Howarth, Dr Rupa Huq, The Rt Hon. Sir Edward Leigh, Steve McCabe, Siobhain McDonagh, The Rt Hon. Esther McVey, The Rt Hon. Dame Maria Miller, The Rt Hon. David Mundell, Mrs Sheryll Murray, The Rt Hon. Caroline Nokes, Ian Paisley, The Rt Hon. Mark Pritchard, Christina Rees, Mr Laurence Robertson, Andrew Rosindell, Mr Virendra Sharma, Sir Gary Streeter, Graham Stringer, Derek Twigg, Sir Charles Walker

SECRETARY—Chris Stanton

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—

The Rt Hon. The Speaker (Chairman), Nickie Aiken MP, Dr John Benger (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service), The Rt Hon. Nicholas Brown, MP, Marianne Cwynarski CBE (Director General, Operations), Thangam Debbonaire, MP, Mr Shrinivas Honap (External Member), The Rt Hon. Mark Spencer, MP (Leader of the House), Sir Charles Walker, MP, Louise Wilson (External Member), Pete Wishart, MP

SECRETARY TO THE COMMISSION—Gosia McBride

ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Edward Potton

ADMINISTRATION ESTIMATE AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE AND MEMBERS ESTIMATE AUDIT COMMITTEE—

Mr Shrinivas Honap (Chair), Harriett Baldwin, MP, Mr Clive Betts, MP, Frances Done, Sir Charles Walker, MP, Louise Wilson

SECRETARY TO THE COMMITTEE—Hannah Bryce

COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD—

Dr John Benger (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service) (Chair), Isabel Coman (Managing Director, In-House Services & Estates), Marianne Cwynarski CBE (Director General, Operations), Sarah Davies (Clerk Assistant and Managing Director, Chamber and Participation), Mandy Eddolls (Managing Director, People and Culture), Alison Giles (Director of Security for Parliament), Colin Lee (Managing Director, Select Committee Team), Saira Salimi (Speaker's Counsel), David Smith (Managing Director, Parliamentary Digital Service), Penny Young (Librarian and Managing Director, Research and Information)

SECRETARY TO THE BOARD—Katharine Williams

SPEAKER'S SECRETARY AND CHIEF OF STAFF—Helen Wood

SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—Saira Salimi

SPEAKER'S CHAPLAIN—The Rev. Canon Patricia Hillas

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Kathryn Stone OBE

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SEVENTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 716

THIRD VOLUME OF SESSION 2022-2023

House of Commons

Monday 13 June 2022

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cost of Living: Armed Forces Personnel

1. **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the impact of the rise in the cost of living on armed forces personnel. [900416]

11. **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the impact of the rise in the cost of living on armed forces personnel living in Newport West constituency. [900427]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): Armed forces personnel, like everyone else, are not immune to the international inflationary pressures and cost of living pressures, and I am therefore very pleased to announce that the Defence Secretary has chosen to freeze the daily food charge for our armed forces personnel. We are also limiting the increase in accommodation charges to 1%, ensuring that the council tax rebate reaches those in military accommodation, and increasing the availability of free wraparound childcare at the start of the new academic year.

Stephen Morgan: The Government are failing our frontline forces during a cost of living crisis. According to data from the Minister's own Department, the percentage of personnel who believe that their pay and benefits are fair has fallen for the first time in four years, with four in 10 servicemen and servicewomen unhappy with their pay and benefits. What success has the Minister had with the Chancellor in securing the pay rise our troops need and deserve?

Leo Docherty: In terms of measuring the contentment of those serving, the reality that I see day in, day out is that armed forces personnel are content with their pay and conditions. They are also content because of the remarkable job security they have in the armed forces, the subsidised accommodation, and the remarkable and unique non-contributory pension. That is all thanks to the £24 billion uplift made available by the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary.

Ruth Jones: As we commemorate 40 years since the Falklands conflict, I pay tribute to the brave soldiers who did their duty there, such as Lance Sergeant Alan Dalglish, who lived in Newport West. But I am afraid, sadly, that the Government's approach to the welfare and livelihoods of armed forces personnel and veterans such as Lance Sergeant Dalglish is lacking in both compassion and practical support. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the impact that the Tory cost of living crisis is having on forces personnel living in Newport West?

Leo Docherty: I do not recognise that characterisation, but of course I join the hon. Lady in solemn and compassionate commendation of the veterans of the Falklands liberation. The Defence Secretary will speak more about that. On her question, I ask her to recognise the work we have done specifically in Wales. I hope that she, like me, is very pleased to see the independent Wales Veterans Commissioner in place, and that she will work with him to improve the lives of veterans in Wales.

NATO Effectiveness

2. Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of NATO in safeguarding the freedom and security of its members by political and military means. [900417]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heappey): NATO remains the cornerstone of the UK's defence and security. All allies stand steadfast to defend and deter threats to the Euro-Atlantic, underlined by our unwavering collective commitment to article 5 of the Washington treaty.

Giles Watling: With the EU leading the charge to support Ukraine and combat Putin's horrific invasion, does my hon. Friend agree that the next Secretary-General of NATO should be, if not British, from a nation with real skin in the game such as Poland?

James Heappey: You will not be surprised, Mr Speaker, to know that I think there are a number of excellent candidates to be the next NATO Secretary General, and I absolutely agree that those who have been to the fore during the response to Ukraine and who have skin in the game, as my hon. Friend says, should be leading contenders.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Let me ask the Minister this, and I want a straight answer: if we are going to be an effective member of NATO, when are we going to stop this crazy policy of diminishing the size of the armed forces? Seven years ago, I asked a former Defence Secretary, "What if Mr Putin's people just arrived in the English channel?", as we went below 100,000 service personnel. The plan today now is to go down to 72,000. Is that credible as a major armed force in NATO?

James Heappey: In the context of a question about NATO, the hon. Gentleman is wrong. NATO massively outnumbers Russia as an adversary. The UK commits more than our minimum requirement to NATO. Moreover, allies around NATO are clear that contributing in the traditional domains of land, sea and air is no longer sufficient and that NATO needs capabilities in space and cyber-space, on which, through the integrated review, the UK has invested and is to the fore.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I am going to follow up that question, I am afraid. NATO does outnumber Russia, it is true, but we have to have the weight, muscle and mass, to a certain extent, to react in the event, God forbid, of some form of confrontation with Russia. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to reverse the very bad decision to reduce the Army by 10,000.

James Heappey: The Secretary of State has been clear throughout the integrated review process that we are a threat-led Department. As things stand, and as I have said at the Dispatch Box a number of times—I know that my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary has said likewise—a lot of what is in the IR is proving to be vindicated by the realities of the conflict in Ukraine. As we move towards Madrid, and NATO is increasingly

clear about what it wants as an alliance as capabilities across all five domains, the UK continues to lead thinking, rather than being behind it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): NATO meets in two weeks to agree its masterplan for the next 10 years, yet there are growing concerns about the UK meeting even its core NATO commitments. Is it true that the Defence Secretary warned the Chancellor that Britain risks missing its 2% spending commitment? What is the Defence Secretary doing about Ajax, given that the Public Accounts Committee's new report states that the MoD

"is failing to deliver the...capability that the Army needs to...meet its NATO commitments"?

Why has the Defence Secretary failed to set out a vision to ensure that Britain continues to be NATO's leading European nation?

James Heappey: The Defence Secretary is a passionate advocate for our nation's armed forces and for defence within the Government, but his correspondence with other Ministers in the Cabinet necessarily should remain private. The reality is, as I said in answer to the question earlier from the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), that the UK exceeds its NATO minimum requirement, and as NATO moves into its new strategic concept and looks at how it will operate across all five domains, it is the UK's decisions from the IR that are informing what others will now contribute to NATO, rather than vice versa. The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) finished with a question about the Secretary of State setting out a vision for NATO. I cannot think of anybody within NATO who has set out a more compelling vision for the alliance and the UK's role within it.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Can the Minister set out what input the UK Government have had into the 2022 strategic concept, due to be published at the Madrid summit later this month? What impact might that have on UK defence interests over the next decade?

James Heappey: The concept has not been signed off yet. At Defence Minister meetings this week, the Secretary of State will be looking at it further before it goes to the NATO summit in Madrid. As the hon. Lady would expect, Ministers from the MOD and the Secretary of State most obviously are travelling around the Euro-Atlantic all the time in order to have these discussions, and people from other NATO capitals are visiting the MOD, so that we can build a shared consensus before we reach the moment of decision, and the UK has been instrumental in shaping those thoughts.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): A couple of weeks ago, Members from all parts of the House went to Romania with the armed forces parliamentary scheme, where we saw the work being done by the RAF as part of NATO's air policing role. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking 140 Expeditionary Air Wing for all it is doing to keep our skies safe? Does he agree that that work is an excellent example of the role of NATO in safeguarding our freedom and security?

James Heappey: I was in Bucharest on Thursday evening and Friday morning, having the exact conversations that the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) was checking we were having. I had the honour when I was there of meeting members of the RAF who are involved in Operation Biloxi and air policing. I indeed pay tribute to 140 Expeditionary Air Wing and all other members of the RAF who have been involved in air policing in Romania, Lithuania and elsewhere.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the SNP spokesperson, Stewart Malcolm McDonald.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Before I get into my question, as this will be our last Defence questions before Armed Forces Day, may I thank those in the armed forces for all their service, particularly over the past couple of years during the pandemic? I also offer the support of those on these Benches to the Government in getting home the two UK nationals currently held by a Russian puppet court in eastern Ukraine.

On the strategic concept, there are three areas that we believe the Government must push for NATO to strengthen: the state levers of conventional defence power; societal resilience across the alliance, particularly in conjunction with the European Union's strategic compass; and the international rules-based system that keeps us safe, including among alliance members themselves. Can the Minister outline, as he tries to garner that consensus, what he thinks a successful strategic concept looks like?

James Heappey: It is one of those wonderful moments when we are in vigorous agreement. We would share the view that the state levers of hard power and the societal levers of resilience are hugely important, that NATO must stand for something and that its members must subscribe to a rules-based international system. Those discussions are not hard to have because just about everybody else in NATO would passionately agree with that position.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am grateful for that answer, but as other hon. Members have said, including on the Conservative Benches, a successful strategic concept surely does not include the UK Government cutting the armed forces by 10,000 and reducing the Army to its size in the war of the Spanish succession in 1701. Will the Minister, along with his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence, revisit the arbitrary cutting in size of the Army by 10,000? Would that not show NATO allies that he was serious about conventional defence forces in the UK and send the right message ahead of Armed Forces Day later this month?

James Heappey: Opposition spokespeople are in the habit of starting the clock on pledges for defence spending increases the day after the UK makes an enormous increase in defence spending. The UK led the alliance in deciding to increase spending in the face of increased insecurity in the Euro-Atlantic. NATO's strategic concept does not specify exactly what each nation must have; the strategic concept is what NATO as an alliance wants to do. The key to that, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said at the start, is having interoperable levers of hard power that are shared across the alliance with the countries that do them best; having real homeland resilience so

that, across all domains, on the eastern front and in-depth, there is real resilience within NATO members; and having a set of values that NATO unites around, stands up for and sells around the world.

LGBT Armed Forces Personnel: Courts Martial

3. **James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): How many LGBT armed forces personnel were court-martialled on account of their sexuality in the most recent period for which data is available prior to 2001. [900419]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): We acknowledge wholeheartedly the fact that historically some service personnel were thrown out of the service purely because of their sexuality, which was deeply unjust. For that reason, we have commissioned an independent review. That will assess some of the figures involved, which is indeed a grey area, and we look forward to announcing that in due course.

James Gray: At a recent meeting with the organisation Fighting With Pride, I was horrified to hear that until 2001, LGBT servicemen and women were routinely court-martialled and dismissed; they lost their pensions and the right to wear their medals or their berets on Remembrance Sunday. That was an outrage, as the Minister correctly said. A far bigger outrage, however, is that that injustice has not been corrected. To this day, gay people—gay servicemen—from that time still have no pension and are treated with contempt by the armed service, which is absolutely disgraceful. I welcome the fact that he has set up an inquiry into that, although he has not yet appointed a chairman, but we need far more than an inquiry: we need those people to be pardoned and for them to get their dignity and humanity back.

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman mentioned Fighting With Pride; I commend its activity and rightful advocacy in this area. I entirely agree with him and I am pleased to say that there is a highly credible and eminent individual who will chair the review. My hopeful expectation is that we will make the formal announcement next week to coincide with Armed Forces Week.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Luke Pollard.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Before Labour lifted the ban on LGBT personnel serving in our armed forces, thousands of LGBT personnel were hounded out of service, removed and abandoned after serving with pride. I welcome Ministers allowing sacked personnel to wear medals, but there are further restrictions, including written orders from commanding officers saying that the sacked personnel will not be able to wear headwear or insignia as veterans. Does the Minister agree that until all restrictions are lifted on those personnel, and pension issues resolved, the MOD will remain in breach of the military covenant?

Leo Docherty: Of course, I absolutely agree and I am pleased to say that the scope of the review will be very broad and that the Government will listen with compassion and sincerity to the recommendations of the independent reviewer. We hope that will provide a path towards delivering justice.

UK Nuclear Deterrent

4. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to maintain the effectiveness of the UK's nuclear deterrent. [900420]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): Four new Dreadnought class submarines will enter service from the early 2030s, and we will replace the current nuclear warhead. We keep our nuclear posture under constant review in the light of the global security environment. About 30,000 jobs across the nuclear enterprise are dedicated to maintaining and delivering the deterrent, now and tomorrow.

John Lamont: The Government will be aware of a recent opinion poll that shows that Trident enjoys 58% support among Scots, yet the SNP and Green Ministers in the Scottish Government wish to see us remove Trident and even leave NATO altogether. Given the current international crisis, does the Defence Secretary think their position is wise?

Mr Wallace: It is certainly the case that the SNP cannot have it both ways. It wants to have an independent Scotland and join NATO, while also removing part of its nuclear defence. I notice that the First Minister alone said in 2021 that an independent Scotland would be a "keen signatory" to the treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons. That would make it the only NATO country to be a signatory to that treaty, and it is a clue to how the SNP says one thing and does another.

Support for Ukraine's Military

5. Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): What support his Department is providing to Ukraine's military. [900421]

14. Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): What support his Department is providing to Ukraine's military. [900430]

21. Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): What support his Department is providing to Ukraine's military. [900438]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): The UK has committed £1.3 billion for military operations and aid to Ukraine. As part of the delivery of lethal and non-lethal aid in support of Ukraine's military, we are liaising with Ukraine's armed forces to meet their operational requirements. Most recently, we have announced that we will be providing highly capable multiple launch rocket systems, which will provide Ukraine with a significant boost in capability.

Nicola Richards: I had the pleasure of virtually meeting Iryna, a young member of the European Solidarity party in Ukraine, and some of the stories she told me of the frontline in Ukraine were shocking. Young members of Iryna's party, like many brave people, have been on the frontline in this fight—some kidnapped, and some killed. Could my right hon. Friend spell out what steps his Department is taking to support all young people in the Ukrainian army during this terrible conflict?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right: it is not just about weapons; it is often about non-lethal aid, such as medicines and body armour. The UK has sent over 200,000 pieces of non-lethal aid, including body armour, range finders and medical equipment, and we will continue to do so. This is also about making sure that we look at the training being given to those young people, because if they are to have the best chance of survival on the frontline, we need to make sure that they are not only properly equipped, but properly trained.

Stephen Hammond: I had the honour to meet a number of Ukrainian officials recently, and the Secretary of State is right that they are very pleased about our commitment of military hardware. He is aware, of course, that they continue to ask for more. Could I ask him what consideration he has given to or discussions he has had with allies about providing air capability?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right that that is often the request we receive from the Ukrainians and the international community, and he will remember the discussion about MiG-29s from Poland a few months ago. Air is a requirement of the Ukrainians, and we have had a number of discussions at the donor conferences, which I first convened a few months ago. One or two nations have looked at providing helicopters to Ukraine, and I think they may do so at some stage. Of course, the difference between that type of weapons system and another is the amount of training. That restricts countries such as the United Kingdom, because our planes are obviously very different. Therefore, wherever we can support the provision of air from countries holding Soviet stock, we will do our best to do so.

Jason McCartney: On behalf of Huddersfield and Colne Valley's Ukrainian community, can I thank the Secretary of State for Defence for the magnificent support the UK has been giving to the Ukrainian military forces fighting such a valiant fight against the oppressive Russian forces? He mentioned support with the multiple launch rocket systems and the importance of training, but how is he balancing the timescales of that with supplying the existing Soviet-era weaponry with the ammunition it needs for the fight today and this week?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right to point out the importance of the next step and, indeed, the requirement for more artillery. The key here is to make sure that the new artillery, which is obviously designed for NATO use using NATO ammunition, is applied and used in a NATO way, rather than just repeating the way Soviets would have used artillery because that way we would run out of ammunition pretty quickly. That is why we will be sending MLRS, and we are also sending self-propelled 155s from a donor—not UK AS 90s, but others—to Ukraine to assist in giving it such deep fires capability. In tandem, we are helping alongside other countries, especially in the Baltic, in training those people to put that type of deep fires into effect.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): With reports that medical services in Mariupol are likely already near collapse and the potential for a major cholera outbreak, what discussions has the Secretary of

State had with colleagues across Government to explore urgent medical relief that could be deployed by the MOD?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Member makes the very important point that the consequences of Russian brutality, destruction of infrastructure and so on are the second-order effects such as cholera infections, starvation and, indeed, other problems. That is why, when we have our donor conferences, we make sure we talk about non-lethal aid, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and others talk to their ministerial counterparts about how we can help in those areas. The MOD itself cannot directly intervene in Mariupol, but where we have knowledge and can co-ordinate the treatment of people outside Ukraine—through lift, moving them to hospitals in other countries using our aircraft—we will do that, and I have already spoken to a number of our Black sea colleagues to see what we can do in places such as Mariupol.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): At business questions, I raised the issue of the destruction of a depot in Dnipro that was storing non-lethal supplies, including donations of medicine collected by Clare-Anna Mitchell and other constituents from Gower in Swansea. The network organising these supplies is Never Surrender; it is an efficient and effective deliverer but wants to work with the Government to make sure it can continue to do this good work. Will the Secretary of State meet me and Never Surrender to discuss how we can arrange this?

Mr Wallace: Yes, and will the hon. Lady pass on our thanks to Never Surrender and her constituents? I visited Ukraine last week and saw that this is not as easy as people think: it is not only about donating, but also about the hours and hours of queues at the border to then get through into the country to then deliver that aid, for which we are very grateful.

As the hon. Lady points out, there is the indiscriminate—sometimes deliberate—striking by Russia of targets like medical support or, as I saw, shopping centres, so that it can put people out of jobs and put pressure on the economy; that is the type of adversary we are dealing with. I will be happy to meet with the hon. Lady, but if she wants an earlier meeting I suggest one of my Ministers, as this week and next week there will obviously be NATO meetings.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): We fully support all the Government's efforts to properly arm the Ukrainians with the equipment and weapons they need, but the Secretary of State has alluded a couple of times to the fact that there is also the corresponding challenge of training. Will he say a little more about his discussions with colleagues and allies about maximising opportunities for Ukrainian personnel to be able to use the equipment and armoury that most suits their needs?

Mr Wallace: First and foremost, it is incredibly important that we get the right training to those serving in the Ukrainian armed forces. One of the tragic characteristics of the Russian armed forces is that they simply shove into one end of a meat grinder their own forces, who then—mainly men—come out and are killed en masse. It is hard to have sympathy for that, but nevertheless we

are not going to be like that; we must make sure the Ukrainians are trained in using the equipment we give them and we do not just hand it over and let them face the consequences. We will continue to work on that; I will brief the hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench spokesman soon on these topics and any further steps. The United Kingdom and a number of our European colleagues are keen to do more on training; when I have more news, I will announce that to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Tobias Ellwood.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): If all NATO countries had provided the same scale of support to Ukraine as Britain has there is every possibility that Russian forces would now have been pushed out of mainland Ukraine. Instead, Russia is consolidating in the Donbas and there is every chance it may now be turning its sights to Odesa. If that port falls, Ukraine will be landlocked, further impacting on the cost of living crisis here and across Europe because critical grain exports cannot get out.

Is it time for the UK to lead a coalition of willing NATO allies to secure a United Nations General Assembly-approved humanitarian zone around the port and territorial waters, with neighbouring international waters policed by an international maritime force? That would ensure that the breadbasket of Europe and beyond is able to function and remain part of Ukraine.

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend makes the valid and important suggestion that we must do what we can to get the grain out of Ukraine. It is not just an energy crisis that people face; it will be a food crisis if the Russians are continually to both steal and blockade that grain.

However, I am afraid, with due respect to my right hon. Friend, that securing the Black sea and the UN mandate to do that are definitely easier said than done. I continue to speak to a number of Black sea partners and other members to see what else we can do to explore getting that grain out both overland and at sea. While Russia has talked the talk, it has done the complete opposite when it comes to providing assurances on any humanitarian corridor, especially on the land, as we saw at Mariupol, and now obviously at sea.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We come now to Question 6; I am intrigued as to why Question 13 is not grouped with it.

Ajax Programme

6. **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Ajax vehicles programme. [900422]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): I think that Question 13 was not grouped with this one to give the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) a whole theatre of his own to ask his question. I will be first to support that when we come to it.

We have been clear that this is a troubled programme, and we have not paid a penny to General Dynamics under the Ajax contract since December 2020. Ajax will be a formidable capability. We want it to work and for General Dynamics to deliver it, but we will not take a vehicle into service that is not fit for purpose. We benefit from a robust contract and will make use of it.

John Spellar: But look, the Secretary of State has effectively admitted the failings of the Ajax programme, which are very public and have been comprehensively exposed by both the Defence Committee and the Public Accounts Committee. Unfortunately, since then, we have not had any indication—not even in his reply—that the fundamental problems have been resolved, and the Army is facing a dangerous gap in capacity. Will he either announce that he will scrap the failed programme or give us an early, fixed and firm timetable for such a decision? Stick or twist, Secretary of State?

Mr Wallace: The Ajax programme is a troubled programme. We agree with many of the recommendations in the Public Accounts Committee's report. We are independently testing a number of the issues arising with that programme and we must ensure that, when we take another step, it is evidence based. As I said, we are clear to make sure that we bring it into service. In the meantime, we have withheld payment—a considerable amount of money—since December 2020. That is really important. General Dynamics wants this resolved, and we want it resolved.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I am glad that the Secretary of State mentioned that the MOD did not pay General Dynamics throughout 2021; by December 2021, it had paid £1.1 billion less than scheduled. However, the position is not sustainable in the local economy or in the Welsh economy as it is causing real anxiety among the workers, the wider economy and the local supply chain. When will the Government give an answer on what they will do about Ajax? I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), who mentioned the report by the PAC. Anybody who has had anything to do with Ajax will say that, after 12 years, enough is enough and a decision must be taken.

Mr Wallace: I understand the hon. Member's frustration and that of the workforce in Wales, who had hoped and wanted to produce a vehicle that was fit for purpose and would add to the British Army's important capability. We have to proceed based on science and evidence. Like General Dynamics, we are bound to a contract, and I do not want to say anything that would jeopardise those positions. We have done independent trials and, when those results are forthcoming, we can have a further discussion. I recently met the head of General Dynamics and made my position on the next steps very clear. As I have said from the beginning, we will not accept into service a vehicle that is not fit for purpose.

Support for Veterans

7. **Damien Moore (Southport) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to help support veterans across the UK. [900423]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): We continue to work tirelessly to ensure that veterans are supported right across the UK. The "Veterans' Strategy Action Plan", published earlier this year, set out 60 commitments and £70 million of investment, particularly on the themes of healthcare and employment. There is a big demand for veterans in the employment market because, Mr Speaker, military service gives you skills for life.

Damien Moore: I recently attended the opening of Southport veterans' hub, which does an excellent job in providing support for ex-service personnel in my constituency. Will my hon. Friend join veterans at the hub to further understand what more support his Department can give?

Leo Docherty: I would like to acknowledge the importance of such gatherings, which I have seen regularly in my constituency. I thank my hon. Friend for his support of that hub. If I find myself near Southport in the near future, I would be delighted to visit.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): One veteran who served as a Royal Engineer for 38 years told me that he has been fighting for almost nine years to receive the compensation that he is entitled to. Currently, nearly 3,000 people are stuck in the Veterans UK appeals system facing similar experiences. We all know that there are issues with veterans' compensation. When will the Minister stop denying that and act?

Leo Docherty: We are acting, and I am pleased to confirm that we are investing £40 million in a radical digitalisation programme, which I saw with my own eyes a few weeks ago when I was in Norcross, where the paper records are held. There are frustrations, but work is continuing apace.

Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy

8. **Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Afghan relocations and assistance policy. [900424]

18. **Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Afghan relocations and assistance policy. [900435]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heappey): To date, over 9,500 eligible individuals have already safely relocated to the UK under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy; we think we have about the same to go in terms of the number of people eligible. Flights are leaving, principally from Islamabad, every fortnight, but obviously partners in the region have a say over what they accept as a flow rate. I was in Islamabad three weeks ago to discuss that with the Pakistan Government. I am delighted to say that they have announced a further phase to allow nations like the UK to evacuate those who have popped up in Pakistan. We will be getting on with that now.

Dan Jarvis: With your forbearance, Mr Speaker, I pay tribute to all those who served in the Falkland Islands 40 years ago.

I turn to the Minister's response. A former member of the unit I helped to establish has now been waiting nine months for his ARAP application to be processed. He is in hiding, terrified that he is going to be kidnapped and murdered by the Taliban—all because he stepped forward to serve when we asked him to. Will the Minister give an undertaking to look at the detail of this particular individual's case? Can he say what more is being done to clear the backlog of applications?

James Heappey: The hon. Gentleman is a phenomenal campaigner for those who served alongside the UK armed forces; in fact, I think I probably sign dozens of letters a week responding to his various inquiries. I am surprised that I have not already corresponded with him on this particular case if he has raised it with me, but perhaps we can talk afterwards to ensure nothing has fallen through the cracks.

Jessica Morden: Family members of Afghan interpreters in my constituency who came to the UK under the ARAP scheme are among the 12,000 Afghans stranded in bridging hotels. That is shameful. How on earth can we trust the Government to deliver on the new pathways announced today if they have accommodated only a third of those who fled the Taliban over the last year?

James Heappey: The hon. Lady's question is well intended. We want the same thing: we want to help. It is frustrating, however. The Government were criticised for outsourcing the Ukraine refugee scheme to members of the public, yet the reality is that if the Government have to be responsible for it in its entirety, people end up being stuck in hotels until councils are willing to take people out of those hotels. It is appalling that Afghan refugees are still stuck in hotels nine months later. I am desperate that councils around the UK step up and help us to accommodate the people who served our country with such amazing bravery and selflessness, and who are stuck in hotels because councils cannot accommodate them.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): As chairman of the British Council all-party parliamentary group, I have been raising the plight of 170 British Council contractors who remain in Afghanistan in fear of their lives, 85 of whom have been deemed by the Government to be at very high risk. Given the written ministerial statement today, what assurances can the Minister give that the latter group in particular will be prioritised? They are not the only ones in fear for their lives in Afghanistan—there are many more. If he cannot give that assurance, given the urgency of the situation, will he knock on whatever door is required in Government and press upon that individual the need for action?

James Heappey: My hon. Friend has already seconded me on a number of occasions to speak to colleagues around Government on his behalf, as part of his campaigning on behalf of those who worked for the British Council. He knows, I think, that both the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Home Office are seized of the need to do the right thing by them. The Afghan citizens resettlement scheme is clearly the opportunity.

In Islamabad three weeks ago, while of course my focus was ARAP, I was able to also reassure myself—I hope he will be encouraged to hear this—that all is in place to begin bringing people out under ACRS through that route as well.

Support for NATO Allies: Ukraine

9. **Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support NATO allies in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [900425]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): We have doubled our presence in Estonia, reinforced the enhanced forward presence battlegroup, and deployed an aviation taskforce to Lithuania. We are contributing to enhanced air policing over Romania and Bulgaria, and enhanced vigilance activity in Cyprus, Poland and the Baltic states. We have deployed additional troops and capabilities to Poland, and led the development of joint expeditionary force activity options.

Tony Lloyd: One of the strengths the Secretary of State will have at the NATO summit is the fact that this country has done so much to support our NATO allies. His second great strength is that we hit the 2% of GDP contribution. That is important to empower those who argue with our NATO allies that they must hit the same figure. Earlier on, the Minister for the Armed Forces would not answer directly the question of whether we will maintain that 2% spending. Can the Secretary of State assure the House now that the 2% will be maintained or, preferably, increased?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman asks a straight question and I will give him a straight answer. Between now and the end of the comprehensive spending review period, we are at 2%—in fact, 2.3%—of GDP. However, inflation, GDP and growth shrinking off GDP will affect all those GDP pledges, which is why some countries in NATO have very high GDP spend, but also have a very small economy. Within the comprehensive spending review period, I am on track to be above 2%.

Dreadnought Programme

10. **Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): What assessment he has made of the progress on the delivery of the Dreadnought programme. [900426]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): On 9 May, I visited my hon. Friend's constituency and we went to see the Dreadnought programme. He was with me when I signed the delivery of phase 3, the most important phase of rolling out the first of class HMS Dreadnought, in Barrow-in-Furness. It is set for sea trials so that it will be ready for patrol, hopefully in the early 2030s.

Simon Fell: It was a pleasure to host my right hon. Friend in Barrow for that announcement. The submarine programme based in my constituency supports more than 11,000 jobs locally, but the Astute programme, the Dreadnought programme and the boats being developed under SSN(R) will keep us and our allies safe for generations to come. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend thank those people, from pipefitters to programme directors, for the work they are doing on that critical national programme?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right. In Barrow, they are doing some of the most complex engineering on earth, and it is breath-taking and a huge achievement. Not only are we rolling out the Dreadnought class, but we have committed funding for the next stage of the attack submarine, the next generation of Astutes. It is a vital part of our subsea defence and I am delighted that the Australians, when they chose to switch from the French submarine, came to the United States and the United Kingdom as future partners in that programme, because very few places in the world can do it. One of those places is Barrow.

Armed Forces Housing Accommodation

12. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese** (Slough) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the quality of housing accommodation for armed forces personnel. [900428]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): As of 6 June 2022, 96% of service family accommodation has been assessed as meeting or exceeding the Government's decent homes standard. Housing below that standard is not allocated to service families because we are putting service families at the heart of defence, and that is reflected in the provision of their quarters.

Mr Dhese: In my recent visits to UK military bases, many of our servicemen and women raised with me the issue of substandard accommodation, which will no doubt have an impact on recruitment and retention. Indeed, complaints about service accommodation have rocketed by 20% in the first four months of 2022, compared with 2021. The Government are presiding over record low levels of satisfaction. Why are the Government failing our brave troops, and what will be done urgently to improve service accommodation?

Leo Docherty: We take these issues seriously, because we recruit the soldier but we retain the family. That is why we are putting record sums of investment into SFA. In the last seven years, we have invested more than £936 million in SFA improvements, and in the coming year we will invest £176 million in SFA. We are putting our money where our mouth is.

Mr Speaker: To ask the same question as the other one, I call Kevan Jones.

Ajax Programme

13. **Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the initial outcomes of the trials for the Ajax armoured fighting vehicle programme. [900429]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): But not the same questioner, Mr Speaker.

General Dynamics has proposed changes to Ajax to address noise and vibration problems identified in the vehicles. The changes have been assessed by Millbrook independently, and we expect to receive its final report shortly. We will not proceed without a high degree of certainty, and we will not accept a vehicle that is not fit for purpose.

Mr Kevan Jones: As my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) said earlier, it is nearly two years since the MOD had the problems with Ajax and no fix is in sight. In December last year, the Minister for Defence Procurement said that if the contract is cancelled,

"There is a parent guarantee in place between GDUK...and the parent company"—[*Official Report*, 15 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 1090.]

Is that specific to this contract or is it just a gentleman's agreement?

Mr Wallace: Given the legal weighting of that question, I think it best if I write to the right hon. Gentleman with the detail. I would not want to say anything at the Dispatch Box that would either cause the taxpayer to suffer unnecessarily as a result of any legal remedy or jeopardise a very important programme as we are trying to fix its problems and roll it out.

Support for Defence Jobs

15. **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support defence jobs across the UK. [900431]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heappey): The most recent estimate shows that Ministry of Defence investment supports more than 200,000 jobs in industries across the UK. We recently marked the first anniversary of the defence and security industrial strategy, which has received positive feedback from industry. Continued high and focused investment in defence, along with the changes that we are making as part of the DSIS, will contribute to further economic growth and prosperity, including jobs, across the United Kingdom.

Karl McCartney: As the Member for Lincoln in Bomber County, as Lincolnshire is also known, and with RAF Waddington in my constituency, I have many constituents who work in the defence sector. Investment in defence continues to be strong: there are now more than 80 defence companies across Lincolnshire, and Lincoln College has Britain's first air and defence college, working in partnership with the Royal Air Force and with companies in the defence industry. Would the Minister and perhaps the Secretary of State care to visit Lincoln, see that great facility for themselves and reaffirm the Government's commitment to supporting the defence sector in Lincolnshire?

James Heappey: I pay tribute to the work of all those at RAF Waddington and those who support them. The Greater Lincolnshire local enterprise partnership is a major investment hub for the Department and the defence industry. Lincoln College's air and defence college, which is run in partnership with the RAF and with several key defence companies, supports existing career paths into science and engineering. My hon. Friend will be gutted that I am answering his question rather than the Minister for Defence Procurement, who is on his way to the Falklands, but I am certain that the Minister will want to visit, as my hon. Friend suggests.

Topical Questions

T1. [900441] **Fay Jones** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

This year commemorates all those who fought in the Falklands conflict. We should not forget the sacrifice made by many to liberate those islands from an aggressive Argentinian invasion by a dictator. Many of us will not forget that conflict: it shaped our own childhood and upbringing. My own regiment served there, alongside those of other hon. Members, who will know veterans well. To send a force 8,000 miles to stand for Britain's values and uphold international law was some achievement then; it would be some achievement now.

Fay Jones: On behalf of the many thousands of Falklands veterans I represent, I fully endorse the Secretary of State's comments about the Falklands war.

I pay tribute to the Royal Welsh Battalion, which is proudly leading NATO's battle group in Estonia as part of our forward presence and which took part in NATO's Exercise Hedgehog in the Baltics last month. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that Welsh soldiers will continue to play a key role as we step up our efforts to support our NATO allies in eastern Europe?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes a strong point on behalf of the Welsh soldier, the Welsh airman—RAF Valley is on Anglesey—and the Welsh Navy. The Welsh are at the forefront of our responses around the world: not only did the Queen's Dragoon Guards, the Welsh cavalry, recently return from Mali, but the 1st Battalion the Royal Welsh is one of the main battle groups in Estonia enhancing the forward presence. Wales adds a lot to the United Kingdom and to the British Army. Without a Welshman in your platoon, you are not doing very well, in my experience.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): On the eve of the 40th anniversary, we remember the sacrifice in liberating the Falklands and we reaffirm the significance of the islands to our future security.

During the Defence Secretary's visit to Kyiv in recent days, two Brits fighting with the Ukrainians have faced a Russian show trial and another has been reported killed. How many former British forces personnel are fighting in Ukraine?

Mr Wallace: The simple reality is that we do not know how many ex-soldiers are fighting in Ukraine. Obviously, at the beginning of the conflict, we all publicly made statements to try to deter people from doing so. The two former soldiers who have been captured were themselves living in Ukraine or half-Ukrainian. Like others, I am saddened by the loss of the other former veteran who was reported killed recently. As far as the individuals are concerned who decided of their own volition to go and fight separately from the United Kingdom or any of its serving personnel, we are unaware of the total number, although there are estimates.

John Healey: But did the Defence Secretary even ask the question when he was in Ukraine last week? Four weeks ago, a Minister said that

"we are working with the Government of Ukraine to understand how many British Nationals have joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces." It is time that the Defence Secretary answered that question.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 14 other European countries have now rebooted their defence plans, their defence spending and their defence procurement. Why will the Defence Secretary not do the same?

Mr Wallace: Let me respond to the right hon. Gentleman's last point first. No one has said that I will not do the same. What I have said is that we are threat-based. We have in fact increased the number from 72,000 to 72,500, and increased that number by a further 500, to a total of 73,000. We have done that in response to a need as we shake up the Army.

As for the next few years, Members may recall that our spending review started earlier than those in the rest of Whitehall. We have a commitment to continue with 2% for the duration of that spending review. We were the first country in Europe—we seem to get punished by the Opposition for this—to increase our spending significantly to supply weapons to Ukraine to ensure that we keep pace with many of the threats that we face around Europe.

I did raise the question of the veterans and former veterans who are fighting in Ukraine with my Ukrainian counterpart, and indeed we have asked that question on a number of occasions. It is of course for the Ukrainians to answer and to find those details, but I have some sympathy with the Ukrainians: they are fighting a war, and not one or two or three but tens of thousands of their citizens are on that front. I think that is important.

T2. [900442] **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): The United Kingdom was the first country to supply military aid to Ukraine, and since then it has supplied thousands of anti-tank missiles, anti-aircraft systems and armoured vehicles to Ukraine's heroic armed forces. Can my hon. Friend assure me that this world-leading support will remain in place for as long as Russia's illegal invasion continues?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey): I can certainly give that assurance. We will give the Ukrainians as much as we can. We will support them with logistics, training and equipment to give them every chance of ensuring that Putin fails.

T4. [900445] **Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is now three months since the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State visited the Cammell Laird shipyard in my constituency for the launch of the national shipbuilding strategy refresh, but for all the lofty promises that were made on that day, the Government continue to sell out British shipbuilding by refusing to guarantee work for UK shipyards. Let me give just one example. British yards are ready and able to deliver the Royal Fleet Auxiliary's new fleet solid support ships, but Ministers continue to refuse to rule out offshoring the lion's share of the work on that critical project. Can the Secretary of State tell me when this Government will at last put British manufacturers first and adopt my party's policy of building in Britain by default?

Mr Wallace: I think the hon. Gentleman could have written that 20 years ago, when his party was not delivering a national shipbuilding strategy or anything like one, did not have a shipbuilding pipeline as large as ours, did not invest in the shipyards in the way in which

we are going to, and did not do anything other than spout this same old claptrap. The simple reality is that we will be building more ships in Britain with British supply chains, whether that is for the Navy or for other Government Departments. As ever, the hon. Gentleman is playing to the crowd.

T3. [900444] **Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): I am sorry to inform the House that Jordan Gatley, from Glossop in my constituency, is reported to have been killed in Ukraine. Jordan had previously served in the British Army, and was fighting alongside Ukrainian forces. My thoughts and, I am sure, those of the whole House are with Jordan's family.

I am very proud of the support that Britain is giving the Ukrainian people to help them to defend their homeland, but, thinking forward to the longer term, may I ask the Secretary of State what steps are being taken to strengthen the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian armed forces to allow them to have a strong deterrent in the face of any future Russian aggression?

James Heapey: My hon. Friend has hit upon the key point. For the last two months or so, the discussion with the Ukrainians has followed two tracks. There is the discussion about how to support them in the fight tomorrow, and there is the discussion about how to ensure that they are secure within their own borders whenever this conflict eventually ends. The UK is to the fore in both those efforts, bringing together international support and, increasingly, mobilising the UK defence industry.

T5. [900446] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): After the conference on disarmament in March, the UK representative said that while the situation in Ukraine would clearly have an impact on countries' security calculations, it also

"makes it more important than ever for the international community to revitalise our commitment to arms control and disarmament."

Can the Secretary of State tell us what discussions he has had with his NATO counterparts since then on reinvigorating multilateral nuclear disarmament talks?

Mr Wallace: None.

T6. [900447] **Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): I recently had the pleasure of welcoming the Secretary of State for International Trade to Darlington to open the new control room at Modus Ltd, which has invested £24 million in pioneering underwater sea drone technology. What consideration has my hon. Friend given to potential uses for this technology in the defence sphere?

James Heapey: The Royal Navy continues to accelerate its drive towards uncrewed capabilities, including remotely operated and fully autonomous systems, and to exploit opportunities for advances in automation technology, both above and below the water. The minehunting capability programme is full of opportunity, and I know that my hon. Friend will want to speak to the Minister for Defence Procurement about the role that businesses in his constituency can play in it.

T9. [900450] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): Labour's dossier on waste in the MOD found that at least £15 billion had been wasted since 2010, and that £6 billion has been wasted since 2019 while the current Defence Secretary

has been in post. Can he explain why the Government are failing to get a grip of the defence procurement process to secure value for money for the taxpayer?

Mr Wallace: I know that the hon. Lady will be familiar with the phrase "dodgy dossier", because I remember that her party produced one, historically. The procurement dossier that Labour has produced is so dodgy that it actually has double counting. It includes £594 million for the Warrior sustainment programme followed by the integrated review project cancellation of £540 million, and it adds those together to make £1 billion. It also confuses the retirement of old systems, claiming it as waste. I am sure she would not like to go to war with old equipment that is out of date, and that she would rather it was retired and replaced with modern equipment. Her party has added retirement to the dossier and pretended that it was waste. Labour needs to do a lot better if it wants to be taken seriously on defence procurement and the defence of the realm.

T7. [900448] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Last week, as part of a visit to Romania by the all-party parliamentary group on Romania, I had the opportunity of visiting the NATO base near the port of Constanta where we saw the RAF contribution to the NATO no-fly zone, effectively, in the territorial waters of Romania. Those brave men and women are working 18 hours a day to ensure that there is no Russian incursion in such territories. What extra support can my right hon. Friend provide so that we lessen the strain that is being placed on those wonderful people?

James Heapey: I know that the Romanian Government were grateful for the visit of the APPG. On Friday morning, I held a trilateral with the Romanian and Ukrainian deputy Defence Ministers. Snake Island was to the fore in our discussions, but what we concluded is not for public consumption.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will the Defence Secretary pay tribute to Keith Thompson, who has been the driving force in organising this coming weekend's events in Hull to mark the 40th anniversary of the Falklands conflict, as well as the role that the requisitioned North sea ferry, the *Norland*, played in transporting the 2nd Battalion the Parachute Regiment to the Falklands and the vital role that the merchant navy played in that conflict?

Mr Wallace: Yes, I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady's constituent and thank him for that work. We often forget that it was not just the Army, the Marines and the frontline Navy; it was also the merchant ships of the merchant navy, and people who had just gone to sea on a normal day who suddenly found themselves on the way to the south Atlantic. Their bravery was amazing, and we should all be great admirers of their efforts to help save lives in the thick of battle. I want to thank her and her constituent for their work.

T8. [900449] **Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): An army marches on its stomach, but according to the recent armed forces continuous attitude survey, only 47% of our personnel use the service-provided catering facilities, of whom only 25% are satisfied with the service they

receive from those contractors. Can the Minister please outline how he is going to improve the cookhouse experience?

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): I totally agree that this is an important subject. My experience of the cookhouse in Aldershot has always been very satisfactory, but we acknowledge that there is a great variation in the service, which is why we are re-letting this contract for an improved service by 2025.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I would like to associate myself with the Defence Secretary's remarks about the Falklands war. Given his recent comment that the Army is woefully behind the rest of the public sector in enabling women to have careers, can he tell us what opportunities he is taking to drive diversity in leadership positions in the armed forces? For example, how many women are on the Army Board?

Mr Wallace: On that last question, I am happy to confirm the previous announcement that we now have General Nesmith on the Army Board, the first woman to hold that position. I think the hon. Lady would agree—I am happy to listen to her ideas—that there is a long way to go in this regard, especially in the Army but across all three services. We have set out a lot of steps, especially in reply to the report from my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) on women in the armed forces, but there is still more to do, and I assure the hon. Lady that this is one of my top priorities. It is at the top of my inbox every time there is a problem, but also when there are ideas about what more we can do.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I salute the incredible bravery shown by Ukraine's military. Following Russia's use of hypersonic missiles, is the Department working at pace with partners across NATO to find an effective defence against such weaponry?

Mr Wallace: Yes, it is. We committed £6.6 billion to research and development in the defence Command Paper to make sure we are fighting not yesterday's battles but tomorrow's. We are taking steps to work internationally and on a sovereign basis to see how we can defend against both hypersonic and other types of missiles.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the brave men and women who fought for us in the Falklands. I was here at the special Saturday sitting, and I am still proud of what we accomplished. If there were to be a similar occurrence now, would we have the capacity to act in the way we did?

Mr Wallace: Yes, I think we would.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I grew up in an Army family, and I represent many Army families in Clwyd South. I therefore welcome Wales Armed Forces Day in Wrexham on Saturday. Does the Minister agree that the newly appointed veterans commissioner for Wales, Colonel James Phillips, clearly demonstrates the UK Government's practical commitment to supporting

military families across Wales who sometimes have very complex problems relating to welfare, mental health and other issues?

Leo Docherty: I agree. I hope my hon. Friend and I will meet Colonel James Phillips in Wales very soon.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): President Biden has made clear the USA's respect for Taiwan's sovereignty and its willingness to provide support to that nation. What discussions have Ministers had with our international allies about joining this recognition and any potential defence-specific support?

Mr Wallace: Taiwan is obviously a clear and growing point of tension in the Pacific. I regularly speak to our allies, both in NATO and further afield, about those tensions. Here in the United Kingdom we are reminded of Hong Kong's recent experience and what the read-across could mean for other people who are trying to live freely and within the rule of law. The UK's position is that the problems between Taiwan and China should be resolved through peaceful and diplomatic means.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): This week marks the passing of that doughty Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament campaigner ex-Monsignor Bruce Kent. While paying their due respect, will the Government nevertheless reassert the fact that, as long as other countries have nuclear weapons, Britain must never give up its nuclear deterrent?

Mr Wallace: I remember, in my formative years politically, asking the late Mr Bruce Kent a question when I was at school. I do not think I asked the question very well, and I do not think he answered it very well, either. The reality is that Britain's position is one of multilateral disarmament. It is not a position of unilateral nuclear disarmament.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend reassure the House of the parity of esteem between veterans with physical injuries and those with psychological illnesses sustained during service? Will he or one of his team meet me to discuss what support is available to a number of my constituents and other working-age veterans across the UK who are struggling with mental ill health as they adjust to civilian life?

Leo Docherty: I am pleased that we have parity of esteem and parity of provision through the excellent NHS "Op Courage," which is available for veterans with mental health needs. I look forward to showcasing it to my hon. Friend.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Last week I had the pleasure of joining my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) in opening Veterans Connect in the great town of Tunstall. Four fantastic veterans set up this fantastic organisation, which is helping homeless people across our community in north Staffordshire. Will the Minister thank Alex, Lee, Trevor and others for all their fantastic work?

Leo Docherty: I join my hon. Friend in thanking them. I hope we have an opportunity to make a joint visit.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I echo the Secretary of State's comments on the 40th anniversary of the Falklands war. Yesterday marked the anniversary of the attack on HMS Glamorgan, the last of the 22 ships to be hit during the conflict, with the loss of 14 lives—82 lives were lost on ships altogether. Will my right hon. Friend pay tribute to all those who lost their life, and to those who came back with lifelong injuries, both physical and mental?

Leo Docherty: We do put on record our thanks and we remember those people with gratitude and a sense of deep compassion about the legacy that this conflict left.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Falklands conflict. Does the Secretary of State agree that acts of wanton, unprovoked and unjustified aggression do not pay dividends?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right. If Britain stands for anything, it is that no matter whether 8,000 miles away in the south Atlantic or in Ukraine, Britain will stand up for its values and, if necessary, fight for them.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I think that the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), on the Opposition Front Bench, was talking about my constituent. If not, there are two people who served for 38 years in the Royal Engineers and are struggling with multi-year battles with Veterans UK tribunals on a number of things. Some veterans are telling me that the Minister's positive experience of VUK is not what they are experiencing on the ground, particularly on mental health issues. Will he meet me to discuss the case and perhaps—this is similar to what my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) said—talk about mental health with veterans?

Leo Docherty: I totally acknowledge that there have been problems with the awards of war pensions and armed forces compensation. I would be very happy to take up that case and expedite it, and write to my hon. Friend.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking all the members of the armed forces who worked so hard to make the Queen's platinum jubilee such a success? In particular, will he thank those from RAF Valley for the spectacular fly-past over Buckingham Palace? Perhaps he would like to come to Anglesey to thank them himself.

Mr Wallace: I was there only a few weeks ago. I think the whole House would like to give our thanks to the armed forces for the work they did over that weekend and for all the hours of rehearsal they do, sometimes in the middle of the night, which none of us ever see, to make things very special. From Trooping the Colour on the Thursday all the way through to the pageant, our armed forces did us proud, as did a number of the armed forces from the Commonwealth, which were also in attendance and on parade that day. Our armed forces are absolutely part of the fabric of our society and part of the greatness of the United Kingdom. I am delighted not only that they were there on parade, but that it was a privilege for us to see the royal family so held in high regard by those men and women of the armed forces.

Mr Speaker: After returning from the Falklands, I must congratulate those who continue to serve down in the south Atlantic, 7,000 miles from home. It would be really helpful if the Secretary of State reinstated the Chinook for them.

UK Gross Domestic Product

3.37 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on today's GDP figures.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Like other advanced economies, the UK is affected by global economic challenges, including the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine. As the Chancellor said a few weeks ago,

"A perfect storm of global supply shocks is rolling through our economy simultaneously."

At the same time, the impact from the wind-down of the national covid testing scheme is dragging on UK GDP data. Overall, the figures for April, published by the Office for National Statistics this morning, show that output fell by 0.3% on the month, with the services sector falling by 0.2%, and production and construction declining by 0.6% and 0.4% respectively. As the ONS notes, the fall in GDP on the month is driven by the impact of the wind-down of the NHS covid testing programme. Testing volumes fell by 70% from March to April, which, alongside the impact from vaccines, detracted 0.5 percentage points from GDP growth in April. Looking through the impact of falling tests, we see that the rest of the economy actually grew by 0.1%. Importantly, GDP is still 0.9% above pre-pandemic levels, and support provided over the past two years has put the UK economy in a good position to deal with any economic headwinds, with record numbers of employees on payrolls and a strong economic recovery from the pandemic.

As the Chancellor has also said:

"The next few months will be tough. But where we can act, we will."

The Government are taking significant action to support households this year, having announced an additional £15 billion of further support for households just over a fortnight ago, on top of the £22 billion announced at the spring statement. In the longer term, the Chancellor has set out his vision for a lower tax, higher growth, higher productivity economy based on the three pillars of capital, people and ideas. The plan for growth and the tax plan represent an ambitious strategy for boosting growth and productivity in the years ahead. The Government's priority going forward is to put those into effect, including through significant investment in infrastructure, skills and innovation.

We will of course keep the data under close review, and that includes monitoring the economic impact of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, but our focus will continue to be on the best solution for all: a growing economy that supports high-wage, high-skilled jobs.

Mr McFadden: I am grateful to the Minister for his response. GDP down 0.3% in April. A fall of 0.1% in March. Services down 0.3%. Production down 0.6%. Construction down 0.4%. Inflation at 9%. Tax promises broken. The trade deficit at £24 billion. The pound falling against the dollar. The director general of the CBI saying business leaders are "in despair". The OECD forecasting that, next year, the UK will have the lowest growth of any G20 economy, with the sole exception of—Russia.

That is what the Government are presiding over. Britain is going backwards under the Conservatives. Our businesses, universities and people are all great, but they do not have the partner they need in this Government. The chaos is affecting more and more areas of life: passports, driving licences, GP appointments, A&E waiting times, airports and delays in court trials. Time after time what we used to take for granted is now another feature of Boris Johnson's backlog Britain.

Those on the Government Benches had a chance to change direction last week. They had a chance to install new leadership that might have given us some hope of a greater sense of grip on all this. But what did they do? They decided that the best person to turn the economy round, to sort out the chaos and the backlogs, and to bring the qualities of focus, attention to detail and sustained delivery to these matters was the current Prime Minister. That was the judgment they made.

The question for the Minister today is simple: after making that judgment—I do not know what he did, but that was the collective judgment—and choosing to continue with the leadership that brought us here, what will the Government do now to turn matters around, and why on earth should anyone believe that the result will be different from what went before?

John Glen: As ever, I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I do not accept his characterisation of the situation. What I said in my response to him was that today's data point can be explained by the specific impact of the rapid fall-off in the testing programme. Mass testing ended on 1 April, and that constituted 0.5% of headline growth. We have also seen the impact of the Russian invasion and the impact on the supply chain across the economy. Many economies across the G7 are experiencing a significant impact on their economies and their level of growth.

The Chancellor has been clear in his long-term plan for growth and in his Mais lecture that the Government are committed to investing in research and development, investing in infrastructure and looking at how we can adjust the fiscal burden for business, in particular, to enable that growth to happen. Of course, in subsequent fiscal events, those options remain open to him.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Why are the UK Government the only Government of an advanced country making a big increase in the tax burden this year and next, at exactly the same time as we are seeing very necessary monetary tightening to control inflation and a huge hit to net incomes from that inflation itself? Is that big tax rise not bound to make things worse and slow the economy too much?

John Glen: We always listen carefully to my right hon. Friend. As he will know, we cut taxes earlier this year for hundreds of thousands of businesses though an increase in the employment allowance. We have also slashed fuel duty and halved business rates for eligible high street firms. We will continue to support growth through tax incentives, including the annual investment allowance and the super deduction—the biggest two-year business cuts in modern British history.

As I said in my response to the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) a few moments ago, we look forward to working closely with him and Back Benchers to construct the right agenda going into the future.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is interesting that the Minister talks about the covid testing scheme. Is it perhaps the case that the covid testing scheme is artificially inflating GDP, rather than the opposite way around? The UK is lagging behind every single OECD country apart from Russia. Manufacturing, construction and services are all suffering. That has all been made worse by a Brexit that Scotland did not vote for.

British Chambers of Commerce research shows that input inflation is running at 17%. Businesses simply cannot afford to absorb those costs when faced with increased energy prices with no additional support, employee costs through the national insurance tax hike—a tax on jobs—and wage pressures, so will he provide extra support to businesses to protect them and their consumers through this period, or will he wait until these additional costs in the supply chain are further passed on to the already struggling consumer? How does he expect people to eat when food prices are soaring, and for manufacturers to make things in factories when they cannot afford to get the goods to produce them never mind get them out into the shops and have people buy them?

John Glen: Most people across the country will be very grateful to the Prime Minister for the judgments made on the vaccine roll-out and on the testing regime that followed. Quite obviously, given the scale of that intervention, it was going to have a significant impact on the economy and the growth figures overall. The Government have never been complacent about the impact of the inflation levels on the people of this country. That is why just two weeks ago the Chancellor introduced a significant package of interventions in a number of dimensions that focused on the most vulnerable—those who will not be able to earn more, particularly those on means-tested benefits, the disabled and universal additional support for pensioners. Respectfully, I do not accept the hon. Lady's characterisation of how the Government have handled the situation, but those are the facts, as she well knows.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The Minister will be acutely aware of the perfect storm of inflation and surging energy costs, which UK Hospitality warned about just last week. Kate Nicholls warned that the sector is facing as big a crisis, if not bigger, than there was during the pandemic. One suggestion is for a temporary reduction in VAT on business energy bills from 20% to 5%. Is the Treasury is tempted by that idea to stave off what could otherwise be significant job losses in the sector?

John Glen: My hon. Friend always makes constructive suggestions. He will be aware of the interventions that have already been made, including the cut on VAT on energy efficiency measures, equivalent to £240 million, as well as the £6.7 billion of investment across this Parliament in energy efficiency measures. None the less, he makes a reasonable point and I am very happy to follow it up with him and discuss it further as we construct that set of interventions in the autumn.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): It is, I think, clear that, as anticipated, we are starting to see an economic penalty from the new barriers to our trade

with the European Union. Does the Minister agree that we need to work hard to improve relations with the EU with a view to reducing some of the barriers that are causing problems for us?

John Glen: Absolutely. We must always, with all our trading partners, seek to develop the best possible relationships. That has been my objective in conversations that I have had on visits to Berlin, Luxembourg, Madrid and the US over the past six months on financial services and as regards the work that the right hon. Gentleman is undertaking as we advance the conversation with the Swiss on the mutual recognition agreement. I was there last week to build on that. It is absolutely right that we build those trading relationships in goods and services across the globe in markets that are mature and in those that are yet to develop fully.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): With the largest ever research and development budget, the Government are securing the UK's status as a science superpower. Does my hon. Friend agree that when it comes to growth that status is vital in making sure that we attract high-skilled, high-paid jobs? Does he also agree that locating the Advanced Research and Invention Agency in the west midlands will allow the west midlands to lead the growth that the UK needs and deserves?

John Glen: My hon. Friend predictably, and reasonably, makes a plea for investment to be located in his constituency, but he also draws attention to the significant investment of £20 billion in R&D by 2024-25. He is right to stress that to get a high-productivity, faster-growing economy we need to make those sorts of strategic investments and build on what we have already done. I will look constructively at his suggestion about his constituency and region.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Figures published recently by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs show that the number of UK businesses exporting goods to the European Union fell by an astonishing 33% between 2020 and 2021. Do the Government recognise that the cost, bureaucracy and paperwork that they have imposed on businesses, particularly small ones, are the principal cause of that loss of export opportunities for British firms?

John Glen: No, I do not. I accept that that was a challenging period for economies everywhere. There was a period of adjustment, and the Government will be working in a co-ordinated fashion to remove any frictions and to ease the passage of trade, particularly for smaller businesses.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Much of the discussion in the House today has been about the fiscal aspects of inflation, but a huge part of the rise in inflation in this country and across the western world is the monetary system, in particular quantitative easing, which has continued long beyond the financial crisis, when it was put in place. We all know the Bank of England is independent in setting interest rates, but what is the Treasury's view on working with the Bank of England to bring down inflation, bearing in mind the significant impact that quantitative easing has had on that? Will the Minister say a bit more about that?

John Glen: As hon. Members would expect, the Treasury has a strong and frequent dialogue with different members of the Bank of England and deputy governors. However, our main inflation tools for an independent monetary policy—fiscal responsibility and supply-side activism—will remain the best weaponry for dealing with the challenges we face, and we will work in a co-ordinated fashion with an independent Bank of England to address those pressures.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Today's figures should be a wake-up call to the Government. Instead of reciting a list of events that are affecting other countries across the world and being better dealt with by other Governments in the G7, do the Government not recognise that the time has come to change direction? They must get away from the massive tax hikes that are pulling the squeezed middle into debt and creating misery across this country—tax hikes that include the £11 billion national insurance hike, which was wiped out by the Government's own incompetence in not insuring against the money created for quantitative easing. Will the Government recognise that they are getting it wrong and, instead of making excuses, act to change things?

John Glen: The Government will always look constructively at all the options. In light of the representations made across this House and across the country for more interventions to support those facing increases in the cost of energy at home, we made those interventions. The Chancellor has made clear that we will reform and cut taxes on investment in the autumn to spur that growth and productivity, and we are working closely with industry on the best possible way to make those interventions.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Like most MPs, in my constituency I have businesses that the Government spent billions of pounds supporting through the pandemic that are now incredibly stressed by the current conditions. Most understand that the state cannot fix everything; they are looking at wider options and not expecting hand-outs. UK hospitality businesses are asking the Government to look at pausing green levies for businesses to relieve energy cost pressures, as other countries are doing or are considering. Will my hon. Friend say more about what the Treasury are looking at in that regard and whether that is something they are seriously considering?

John Glen: In Gloucestershire, as across the country, we remain focused on the challenges facing both small and large businesses. As my hon. Friend mentions, during the pandemic we made a number of sector-specific interventions for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, which will continue to benefit from the business rates holidays. We are keen to ensure, however, that we achieve better productivity, with more investment in capital, in ideas and in measures that will lift us to a new level of growth. That means interventions across the whole economy.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): In the past week or so I have been contacted by a number of community nurses at their wits' end because it is costing them more to travel to see patients than they

can claim back in mileage allowance, and they are not alone—taxi drivers, couriers and others, such as domiciliary care workers, are struggling because of the surge in fuel costs. The Government have already taken 5p off fuel duty, but given that they have raked in far more in increased VAT receipts since then, how much more has the Treasury recovered in VAT receipts this year?

John Glen: Perhaps unsurprisingly, I cannot give the hon. Gentleman that figure at the Dispatch Box at this point, but we have introduced timely, temporary and targeted interventions. We recognise with a real sense of empathy the fact that people will be struggling. We have been very clear from the time we made this series of announcements and over the past six months that we will not be able to ameliorate the impact of every single additional cost. The key intervention we need to make is to encourage that growth and productivity in the economy in the context of fiscal responsibility and the commitments we have made to intervene so far.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has rightly spoken about the importance of growth in bringing together people, capital and ideas, but there is a fourth element, which is regulation. What Conservatives want to see is a comprehensive Government strategy for light-touch, pro-growth deregulation. Can he tell me what he is doing in his Department to set an example to other Departments of achieving better regulation that will support growth?

John Glen: Yes, I can. In a few weeks' time I shall introduce to the House a financial services and markets Bill that will fundamentally reset the way that our financial services industry, which constitutes 10% of the economy, will be regulated into the future. That will be underpinned by strong, independent world-class regulators in the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Financial Conduct Authority, but with an obligation to look at competitiveness and global growth as a secondary objective. That is absolutely imperative. We must make sure that we have an economy that takes account of what is going on elsewhere and regulates accordingly.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In the coalition years, we heard from the Government about rebalancing the economy, and under Chancellor Osborne and the northern powerhouse, we were told that we were going to see the proceeds of growth fairly shared across the country. Will the Minister say something about the flagship levelling-up agenda, how it will be implemented when we face a no-growth economy, and whether the levelling-up agenda will really mean levelling down for everybody?

John Glen: No, it will not. It will involve targeted investments across the country in schemes that will give us a lift in productivity and address the fact that under previous Governments, despite all the rhetoric, there was not that reset in investment across other parts of the country and we did not see the level of growth that was anticipated.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I am grateful to the Treasury for the £77 billion package of support that will stand alongside hard-pressed families and drive the growth that we need to see. But as I drove

[Fay Jones]

into central London this morning I saw fuel prices cheaper than where I live in Brecon. Rural fuel costs are simply horrendous, and with next to no public transport, that is really hampering growth in rural areas. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the Treasury will continue to monitor that aggressively?

John Glen: Absolutely we will. It is very concerning that we are not seeing the savings passed on and we will continue to look very carefully at what is happening.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Minister has tried to explain away today's disastrous figures by suggesting that it is mainly to do with the winding down of mass covid testing. That stretches credulity. Today the Office for National Statistics said:

"All main sectors contributed negatively to growth in April 2022".

Does that not show that the problem is much more widespread than the Government are prepared to accept?

John Glen: No, I think there is a pretty clear consensus that the rapid wind-down of the testing had a significant effect—around 0.5% of GDP. If that had not happened, we would have seen very modest growth during this past month.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): A recent report shows that Stoke-on-Trent is set to grow jobs third-fastest, so does my hon. Friend agree that the record of this Government economically should be judged by our jobs miracle and in particular our efforts to level up our whole country with better skills and better paid employment right across it?

John Glen: Absolutely. It is clear we are seeing the best unemployment figures for well over a generation. It is very pleasing to see the impact that is having on constituencies such as that of my hon. Friend. It is important that we build on that and look to increase that investment to get businesses investing in new capital and more productive jobs to increase productivity in the economy as a whole.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister has already conceded that the Treasury wants to reduce friction with our European trading partners—that is the right thing to do—but can he tell the House whether Treasury policy agrees that this is the right time to rip up the Northern Ireland protocol and risk a trade war with Europe?

John Glen: Clearly in different markets there will be different challenges. We must make sure that we have a deep dialogue and look to find consensus. Where we cannot, we must take action.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that one of the problems in lots of sectors is that they simply have not got enough staff to employ, let alone staff with the right skills? For instance, in the construction industry, there are projects on hold because they cannot get enough construction workers. We have farmers ploughing onions back into the fields, because they do not have enough people to harvest them. Last year,

25% of British strawberries did not get picked. We have bars, hotels and restaurants failing to open full-time because they do not have enough staff. How do we make sure that we have the staff—the workers—to be able to grow the economy?

John Glen: The hon. Gentleman will also know that the Government invested in a seasonal workers scheme for 30,000 across agriculture, which has made a significant impact. We will continue to work with industry to see what further interventions can be made and need to be made.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Cuts to VAT on fuel duty are now beyond urgent. Some £46 of tax is paid on the average fuel tank, as fuel prices rocket to new highs. As households and businesses struggle, the Treasury is raking in additional billions in VAT on fuel, which is driving inflation across the whole economy. Finally, can we at last have a temporary 10% reduction in VAT on fuel to assist households, businesses and consumers and to help get inflation back under some kind of control, which will help everyone?

John Glen: The hon. Lady will know that just two weeks ago, the Chancellor came to this Dispatch Box and made a series of targeted interventions, in a greater way than many were calling for, to give assistance to the most vulnerable in our society—to pensioners, to those on means-tested benefits and to the disabled—with more support for pensioners on top of that. She will also know that as we approach the fiscal event, we will look at the state of the economy and the best possible interventions to assist not only that growth narrative, but the most vulnerable.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It does not shock me that the Labour party uses any opportunity it has to come in here and bash Britain and sneer at places such as Stoke-on-Trent. It is thanks to this Conservative Government and a Conservative-led council that thousands of new jobs have been created through the successful Ceramics Valley enterprise zone. We also have the 500 new Home Office jobs and up to 1,700 new jobs thanks to the Kids Grove town deal. Does the Minister agree that it is this Government who are putting places such as Stoke-on-Trent firmly on the map?

John Glen: I do not think Stoke-on-Trent could have a better advocate than my hon. Friend, with his passionate desire to highlight the successes going on in his constituency. I absolutely agree that it is that positivity, and focusing on interventions that make a real difference to people who live in his community, that people will remember as we move forward.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. In Strangford, small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of our society. Some of them are crumbling at present due to high transport costs, which are heightened in Northern Ireland due to the Northern Ireland protocol. Can he confirm whether the Chancellor and the Treasury will follow other nations in substantially reducing fuel duty to aid transport costs

as well as disposable incomes for families, so that money can go back into the local economy and everyone will gain?

John Glen: The hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable point about the challenges facing the rural economy, of which I know that he has great personal experience and experience in his constituency. That is why, as we made clear, there will be an additional £500 million to supplement the household support fund and bring it to a total of £1.5 billion, so that local authorities can give additional money to those most affected where existing measures have not been helpful.

Speaker's Statement

4.5 pm

Mr Speaker: I did offer to convert the following urgent question to a statement but I got a message that that was no longer agreed. The Minister will say that he cannot say much at this stage, but we were happy to work with the Department and put on a statement at 7 o'clock. What bothers me is the mixed messages coming out of the Department, which said, "We want a statement," so I granted it, then, "We don't want a statement," so I had to go back to a UQ. There we are; at least we are all now aware of what has gone on today.

There are a number of live court cases on the policy of relocations to Rwanda. Some of them might not formally be engaged by the sub judice resolution, because they concern ministerial decisions, but for the avoidance of doubt, I am exercising a waiver in relation to the sub judice resolution on this matter, on the grounds that it is of national importance. That means that Members are able to refer to the issue on an ongoing basis.

Asylum Seekers: Removal to Rwanda

4.6 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary whether she will make a statement on the planned removal of asylum seekers to Rwanda.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Tom Pursglove): Our world-leading migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda is a global first and will change the way we collectively tackle illegal immigration. This is a global problem that requires international solutions.

Rwanda is a fundamentally safe and secure country with a track record of supporting asylum seekers. Individuals will be relocated to Rwanda and have their asylum claims processed by the Rwandan authorities. The partnership is an important part of our reform of the broken asylum and migration system. I welcome the High Court's decision on Friday on this, but, with legal proceedings ongoing, it would be inappropriate to comment further than to say that we comply fully with our legal and international obligations.

We aim to move forward with a policy that offers new opportunities for those relocated to Rwanda and enables us to focus our support on those most in need of our help. The British public rightly expect us to act. Indeed, inaction is not a responsible option when people are drowning and ruthless criminals are profiting from human misery. Decisive leadership is required to tackle the smuggling of people through illicit and criminal means. This evil trade must be stopped.

The principle of the plan is simple: people will no longer be able to pay evil people smugglers to go to a destination of their choice while passing through sometimes several safe countries. If someone comes from a safe country, they are picking the UK as a preferred destination.

Uncontrolled immigration reduces our capacity to help those who most need our support. It puts intolerable pressure on public services and local communities. Long-lasting change will not happen overnight; it requires a long-term plan. As I have said many times before in this House, there is no one single solution, but this Government will deliver the first comprehensive overhaul of the asylum system in decades.

Stuart C. McDonald: I sincerely thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

This is not world-leading policy. If anything, this leads to the total shredding of the refugee convention. This cash-for-deportations policy is akin to state-sponsored trafficking and transportation. What is more, it is a grim political stunt being rushed out to shore up the Prime Minister again. Why else was this flight organised before the relevant provisions of the horrible Nationality and Borders Act 2022 were brought into force? What is the Minister's explanation for that?

More fundamentally, why are Ministers pressing ahead when even the most basic safeguards are not in place? I fear that the age assessment processes are totally inadequate and will see children sent to Rwanda. As I understand it, such a difficult process is being crammed into a 30-minute interview with two immigration officers, with young people left unaware of their rights to challenge

the decision that they are an adult. Is that accurate? How on earth can such vulnerable people as trafficking victims, torture survivors and LGBT people be identified by a basic screening interview, which is another process that the Minister know takes a long time? Why is it permissible at all for trafficking survivors to be part of the inadmissibility procedures?

Access to legal advice is crucial, so let me ask: can the Minister confirm how many of those scheduled to be on the flight tomorrow have not yet been able to seek legal advice? There is no functioning joint committee or monitoring committee yet, so how can it possibly be right to proceed when these basic oversight bodies are not yet established? He knows that the overwhelming balance of legal opinion, including that of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is that this policy is totally illegal. Surely, if the Government had any final shred of respect for the rule of law, they would at least wait until a final ruling in July before commencing this policy.

This is a policy that will not work on its own awful terms. Will the Minister confirm that the Rwandan asylum system has capacity only for a couple of hundred new cases each year, and has he been made aware of the evidence that, even now, more risky routes are already being tried by smugglers as a result?

In conclusion, this will not hurt horrendous people smugglers one jot, but it will badly hurt those who have fled persecution and sought protection here, and this policy brings shame on the UK internationally.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the SNP spokesman for his questions, and it is fair to say that we will have to agree to differ on this. We have had many debates over the last few months on this issue, and I will comment on the broad issues he has raised, while of course reflecting the fact that there are ongoing judicial proceedings.

First, I want to say that I feel the hon. Member's use of language at the beginning of his remarks was not the sort I would expect from him. He is usually temperate in his use of language, but to compare the new partnership with human trafficking is, frankly, plain wrong and very offensive not just to this Government, but, I would argue, to the Rwandans.

The hon. Member knows full well, because I have said so repeatedly, that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children will not be transferred as part of this partnership. There will be a thorough screening process in place, and that is ongoing. Of course, cases are looked at on a case-by-case basis, taking proper account of all the relevant circumstances. On the point about access to legal advice, people are able to access legal advice in detention in the usual way.

It probably has not escaped the hon. Member's notice, and the House's notice, that the UNHCR places asylum seekers in Rwanda, which I think speaks volumes about its judgment. *[Interruption.]* Hang on! The shadow Home Secretary likes to chunter from a sedentary position, but she will have her opportunity in a moment. The truth is that the UNHCR, through its actions in placing people in Rwanda, clearly believes that it is safe for people to be placed there. We have of course been through our own thorough processes to make judgments with our country information notices, and that is the right and proper way of handling this.

Again—I have said this many times before, but it bears repeating—we will always live up to our international obligations and the laws that we are supposed to be subject to.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Last week, the Home Affairs Committee visited Dover. On the morning we were there, a boat of 38 Albanians came in, and we met some of them. There is no war raging in Albania and there are no full-scale human rights abuses; it is a candidate country to join the EU. We need practical solutions to deal with people who are jumping the queue of genuine asylum seekers and refugees, to whom we owe a duty of care, so I hope the flights start and that message gets out loud and clear.

I have one query for the Minister. We interviewed Her Majesty's inspector of borders and immigration last week, and there are still some concerns about the monitoring process that will be happening in Rwanda itself. When will he be giving us more details about those on the monitoring and scrutiny committee, and how will we ensure that the way people end up being treated once they are transported out to Rwanda will accord with the promises in the agreement?

Tom Pursglove: My hon. Friend speaks with great authority and experience on these issues and is absolutely right that the status quo is not tenable; we cannot continue as we are, with people making dangerous crossings of the channel organised by evil criminal gangs who take people's money and have no regard for whether they get here safely. That is why this has to stop, and we believe the partnership with Rwanda is an important part of the solution. On the specific point about the monitoring arrangements, I hope to be able to set those out to the House soon.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Office chaos over the last few days has shown why this scheme is completely unworkable, deeply unethical and extortionately expensive, and why it risks increasing criminal people trafficking and smuggling rather than solving the problem.

Let us look at what has emerged in the past few days. The Home Office has admitted it has been trying to send victims of torture to Rwanda; is the Minister happy with that shameful policy? We have learned that Rwanda does not have the capacity, caseworkers, translators or lawyers to deal with cases; it often only has one official in charge of putting cases together. The Home Office has ignored UNHCR warnings on Rwanda's record, including the shooting dead of 12 refugees. We have learned, too, that costs are shooting up as the UK taxpayer will have to fund ever more support in Rwanda; can the Minister tell us if that has been agreed and whether we have a final figure on top of the £120 million? The chief inspector says there has been no impact on deterrence on boats and gangs, and there is evidence instead that the Rwanda and Israel refugee relocation deal led to more trafficking and smuggling, not less.

The Home Office is failing to do the practical things we need: instead of strengthening the National Crime Agency work with France to crack down on criminal

gangs, the Home Office has asked the agency to draw up plans for 20% cuts. Can the Minister confirm that that is the case? Instead of speeding up asylum decisions, it is only making half as many decisions as five years ago and, because it is failing to take decisions, offloading responsibility.

There is lots of noise from the Minister: never taking responsibility, blaming everyone else. This plan is not just unworkable, unethical and expensive; it is also profoundly un-British, ignoring our British values of decency and common sense. It is time to think again.

Tom Pursglove: I have to say that I think it would be helpful if the shadow Home Secretary were to think in the first place, because we have not had a credible Opposition policy to tackle this issue. I have said many times that I would be delighted to hear a credible policy from those on the Benches opposite, and I think the British people deserve to hear such a policy, but I think we will be waiting for a long time to get that, if at all.

The right hon. Lady raised a number of points. First, she claimed the policy is both unworkable and extortionate; it is difficult to comprehend it being possible for it to be both of those things at once. [*Interruption.*] Well, I am convinced that this policy is going to work and will make a difference, shutting down the evil criminal gangs that take people's money, put their lives at risk and have no regard for whether they get here, while also providing resettlement opportunities that are properly supported—support around skills, around jobs, around opportunity—in Rwanda.

Our approach to this is a world first. This is not comparable to the sorts of proposals perhaps developed elsewhere; it is a different approach. The right hon. Lady will also recognise that other countries are looking at similar arrangements.

I repeat that we will live up to our international obligations under both the refugee convention and the ECHR at all times. The fact is that the UNHCR places refugees in Rwanda, so I again make the point that it clearly believes people will be properly supported and cared for and that they will be safe. I think that judgment is significant in all this.

On cost, as we have clearly set out to the House previously, we will be supporting ongoing running costs around this policy that are equivalent to the sums we spend on processing cases in the asylum system here in the UK.

On French co-operation, we of course already do that, but there is no one single solution that will resolve this issue of itself. We want to go further; we want to deepen that co-operation with our friends and neighbours to tackle this issue as it is a global problem that needs global solutions, and through the new partnership we are of course taking that co-operation further.

Finally, I will again just pose this question and ponder it for a moment: we have asked before whether the Opposition would cancel the Rwanda plan in the unfortunate event that they were in government. We have not yet heard an answer to that; perhaps at some point today we might have one.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just say to those who were late into the Chamber that they will not be called? The rules are clear; I gave three minutes, and I am sorry, but I cannot take questions from those who came in after that. It is not my fault that the Whips did not send a message out.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) on getting the urgent question, but I will not congratulate him on the language that he used, or the shadow Home Secretary on the language that she used. Mixing up the difference between smugglers and traffickers shows little knowledge of the subject.

We hear that a number of the people who were to be on the flight to Rwanda tomorrow have somehow—miraculously—got some leftie lawyer to intervene and stop it. May I suggest to the Minister that instead of booking 50 people on to each flight to Rwanda, he books 250 people so that, when half the people are stopped from travelling, we would still have a full flight? Come on—get on and send them.

Tom Pursglove: As ever, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his suggestion, which I very much take on board. For obvious reasons, I am not in a position to comment on operational matters, but his point is well made and well argued, as his points often are.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It has been difficult to get clear information and evidence about the implementation of the Rwanda scheme. As the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, the Home Affairs Committee visited Dover last week to look at the process of what happens to people who come across in small boats, and we were aware that some of those individuals were immediately earmarked for the Rwanda scheme and detained. So that we can all understand, will the Minister confirm whether it is just adult males who are being processed for the Rwanda scheme? Will he guarantee to the House that no child will be sent to Rwanda when there is a dispute over their age?

Tom Pursglove: Again, I will not comment on operational matters or matters that are also before the courts at the moment, because, as the House knows, that would be improper. I refer colleagues to previous comments that I have made in the House, including that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children will not be transferred under the partnership.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): We all wish to end abusive people trafficking and the dreadful journeys across the channel. As the Opposition's only idea to tackle it is to let in every economic migrant who wants to come, will the Minister tell us how much it costs taxpayers in Britain to set up every economic migrant in decent circumstances when they arrive?

Tom Pursglove: It is fair to say that the costs associated with this illegal migration to our country are considerable and unsustainable. That is why we have the new plan for

immigration in place to get it under control and ensure that those who follow the rules and seek to come here through safe and legal means are not disadvantaged by those attempting dangerous and unnecessary crossings as we have seen. For example, we are spending nearly £5 million a day on hotel accommodation in the asylum system. That cannot carry on, and that is why we must act as we are proposing.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The National Crime Agency has principal responsibility for prosecuting people traffickers. Is it right that there will be a 20% cut in staffing at the National Crime Agency? Is that consistent with the policy of taking back control of our borders?

Tom Pursglove: I am confident that we will have the resources that we need in place to deliver on our policies. What I find slightly frustrating about the hon. Gentleman's question is that he had the opportunity through the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 to vote for measures that will allow us to take tougher action on the evil people smugglers, and he repeatedly refused to do so. He ought to be asking himself why he did that.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Many of those who arrive on our shores from Iran do so because they have converted to Christianity and, of course, in Iran, apostasy is an offence punishable by death or by life imprisonment. So they have escaped from a predominantly Catholic country to the UK, where the established Church is the Church of England. Is the Minister aware that, out of a population of 12 million in Rwanda, a million or so describe themselves as Anglican, that there are 85,000 regular churchgoers, and that those who wish to practise their Anglican faith will receive a warm welcome in Rwanda?

Tom Pursglove: It is fair to say that there is a strong Christian faith practised in Rwanda. I was certainly struck by that characteristic of the country when I visited it recently. My right hon. Friend, as a former immigration Minister, speaks with great authority on these matters.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Rwanda deportation policy is abhorrent in its denial of refugees' fundamental human right to seek asylum in the UK. Deportation also denies us our right in Wales to offer our support and solidarity to refugees as we work to become a nation of sanctuary. Our nation of sanctuary plan aims to ensure that asylum seekers are "supported to rebuild their lives and make a full contribution to Welsh society."

How does this unethical policy sit with our aim?

Tom Pursglove: I am afraid to have to say to the right hon. Lady that what I find abhorrent is people drowning in the channel. What is not acceptable is for us to abdicate the responsibility to stop that criminality and stop the risk to life. I should also be very clear about language: this is not deportation. We deport foreign criminals. Let us be very clear about the language; it is important when we debate these issues. Again, I just make the point, for the benefit of the House, that people should come here through safe and legal routes. We have generous safe and legal routes available. That is

the right way to come to this country. There is not that risk to life in the same way when people come through safe and legal routes.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Minister agree with Oxford's professor of constitutional law, Richard Ekins, who wrote on Sunday that the root of the problem is the Human Rights Act 1998 incorporating the European convention on human rights into our law, which

"enables courts to interpret legislation unreasonably, contradicting the will of Parliament."

Will he revisit that legislation? We should not have these matters decided by unelected judges in Strasbourg.

Tom Pursglove: It is fair to say that we believe there is a legal basis for this policy and that at all times we will be compliant with our obligations under both the refugee convention and the ECHR, but my right hon. Friend will, of course, be aware that the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), the Deputy Prime Minister, is taking forward a programme of reform in relation to the Human Rights Act, and will no doubt want to make his views known.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): How can the Minister say Rwanda is a safe country when 12 refugees protesting about cuts to food rations were shot dead by security forces in 2018? It is not lawyers, but courts that are finding his policy ultra vires. Should he not pause and rethink, rather than hurling abuse at anyone who points out its defects?

Tom Pursglove: I am not going to get into a long and protracted debate with the hon. Gentleman. I have said plenty about this particular point previously. He will recognise that this matter is in front of the courts today. On that basis, it would be inappropriate for me to comment.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): There is nothing ethical whatever about allowing a system that encourages people smugglers across the English channel. Can I get an assurance from my hon. Friend the Minister that those facilitating the flights to Rwanda will not be hindered by misguided protesters or others with an agenda to stop this policy, which has been determined by this Parliament?

Tom Pursglove: My hon. Friend can be reassured that Ministers believe the law must be upheld and that individuals with no right to be here should be able to be removed from our country without any barriers to that happening.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): The human beings who are on the flight tomorrow have, as the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), said, been through torture, abuse and horrific trauma. They deserve our compassion. What has the Department done to assess the needs and mental wellbeing of those being deported? Does the Minister regret that the joint partnership monitoring committee has not yet been set up and that there is no oversight of what is happening so far?

Tom Pursglove: A proper screening process is in place that takes full account of the individual circumstances of those who are being considered for relocation to Rwanda. I cannot comment on individual cases for obvious reasons, but it is right that there is that proper screening process that takes proper account of the factors at play in each case.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): The Secretary of State and Ministers should be congratulated on bringing in legislation that finally hinders illegal people smuggling, and the Opposition should be embarrassed, frankly, by their lack of a plan and blanket opposition to the policy. If lawyers continue to try to hinder the policy, will the Minister confirm that the Home Office will attempt to bring in any legislation necessary to see that the House's—and the British people's—wishes are carried through?

Tom Pursglove: If I may, I will start by thanking my hon. Friend for all the work that he did as a Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Home Office, and for his help and support in delivering, in particular, the passage through the House of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. He will be reassured to know that, as the Prime Minister has said repeatedly, we will do whatever is necessary to deliver on this policy. We do not believe that failure is an option, because we must shut the evil criminal gangs down. That is what the British people want, that is what the British people expect and that is precisely what we are going to do.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The British people expect a lot better from the Government than what is being offered. If there is no monitoring process in place as yet, when it is in place will the Minister guarantee to publish the types of people being deported to Rwanda and the conclusions of the monitoring committee, so that we can monitor the Government?

Tom Pursglove: It is fair to say that the House never misses an opportunity to scrutinise Ministers—rightly, because that is an important feature of our parliamentary democracy and something that I recognise as important and appreciate the opportunity to do. I will set out more details of the arrangements in due course.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that millions of our fellow citizens voted in favour of Brexit and in support of this Government in 2019 to ensure that a Government would be in place to tackle illegal immigration and provide safe and secure borders? Whatever the plan may be, it is fulfilling a democratic mandate, and he should be congratulated on it.

Tom Pursglove: My hon. Friend speaks passionately on behalf of his constituents who want a common-sense approach to these matters. The British people are fair and generous—we have seen that in the response to the crisis in Ukraine, with people throwing open their homes—but what they do not find acceptable is illegal immigration to our country with people taking great risks and abusing the asylum system in the process, which then disadvantages people who come here through safe and legal routes. That is not right, and we believe strongly that action needs to be taken. That is precisely what we will get on and do.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): If the Minister finds it so offensive that my colleague calls the Tory Rwanda scheme “state-sponsored trafficking”, what else would he call the act of shipping vulnerable people across the world against their will?

Tom Pursglove: I certainly would not call it “state-sponsored trafficking”.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Many Members on this side of the House have visited Rwanda on several occasions on a social action project, and we know it to be safe and secure. Does the Minister agree that those who object to this innovative scheme purely on the basis that the destination is Rwanda do the people and the Government of that country a disservice?

Tom Pursglove: Some of the comments made in the last few weeks about the Rwandan Government and people have been appalling and completely misinformed. Some would even go so far as to say that it is deliberate scaremongering. We know the Rwandan people to be good, decent, generous people who have provided settlement and resettlement opportunities for many thousands of people in recent years. They want to continue that tradition, and they want to see global solutions to this evil criminality that we have seen, and to put our asylum system globally on a much more sustainable footing. We will work in partnership in that spirit.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The thinking that seems to underpin this plan is that to deter the criminal, we must punish the victim twice. No wonder that over the weekend both the Moderator of the Church of Scotland and the Archbishop of Glasgow have condemned the plan as unchristian and immoral. If the policy is so well thought through, how is it being assessed, what are the scientific indicators of success and what plans are being put in place in the event that it fails to stop the people-trafficking boats?

Tom Pursglove: The Government believe that as part of the wider, comprehensive new plan for immigration that we are delivering, this plan will have the effect of stopping these dangerous crossings of the channel—by small boat, for example. People are also coming across to the United Kingdom in the back of lorries, which is also highly dangerous.

Effectively, the approach that the hon. Gentleman is advocating is just to throw our hands in the air, say it is all too difficult and do absolutely nothing. I am not willing to rest until we put those criminal gangs out of business. I believe that the approach that we are taking will make a meaningful difference in that regard.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Stoke-on-Trent has done more than most when it comes to refugee resettlement, while other parts of the country—often those represented by Opposition Members—have done little to nothing. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a bit rich for Opposition Members to suddenly oppose these plans, which would offer real deterrence and stop illegal immigration into this country?

Tom Pursglove: I would argue that people in Stoke-on-Trent have been incredibly generous and big-hearted in the support and opportunities that they have provided

in the community for people who have come to the UK, particularly those who are escaping conflict. But I think that although people in Stoke-on-Trent are generous, they are also—

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Sound people.

Tom Pursglove: They are sound people, and they will be concerned that the Opposition parties have no credible plan to tackle illegal migration. We will continue to ask where precisely their plan is.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Can the Minister confirm what risk assessments were undertaken in advance of each individual being served with a notice? Was the risk of modern slavery considered as a key factor in the Court’s decision to overturn some notices?

Tom Pursglove: It is fair to say that reports of modern slavery are taken into consideration as part of the processes. I will not comment in any further detail on operational matters, but I refer the hon. Lady to the published information out there around the process. It is publicly available.

Jonathan Gullis: We are all too aware that the Labour party thinks that borders should be open and that anyone who wants border controls is a racist and a bigot; it made that perfectly clear with its attitude towards Brexit and towards the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, which is why it was overwhelmingly rejected in 2019 and an entirely blue city was elected for the first time. The Minister must understand that the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke want this Government—no matter what the leftie lawyers and the Opposition parties do or say—to carry on with this policy and deliver it, no matter whether there is one or 100 people. We must deliver for the people of this country.

Tom Pursglove: I hope that I can reassure my hon. Friend by saying that we are determined to deliver this policy. I know full well that if we do not get on and deliver it, he will be very much on my back, which is not something that I particularly want to happen. We will strain every sinew to deliver this. It is what the British people have elected us to do and what they expect us to deliver, and we are going to get on and do it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) on securing this urgent question. A lot of media attention has focused on the human rights record of Rwanda and the threat that being sent to Rwanda poses to certain communities. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, may I ask the Minister what assessment has been made of the threat facing those from religious or belief minority communities? What guarantees, if any, can be given as to the protection of religion or belief for all in Rwanda?

Tom Pursglove: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the country information available out there. That is a comprehensive assessment of the situation, and it touches on these very issues. That work, I understand, is reputable

and highly regarded in the judicial sphere as an accurate assessment of in-country situations. I certainly encourage him to have a look at it.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The BBC News website has reported in the past few minutes that the Court of Appeal has decided not to block the flights to Rwanda this week. As the Minister will remember, the Nationality and Borders Bill Committee considered and supported allowing the processing of asylum claims in safe third countries—a decision repeatedly restated by the whole House when it considered the Bill. In deciding whether Rwanda is a safe country, is the Minister aware of any other countries or international organisations that make use of the resettlement to Rwanda of either asylum seekers or refugees?

Tom Pursglove: Having known me for a long time, my hon. Friend will understand that I will want to read that judgment for myself before commenting authoritatively. What I can say to him, however, is that resettlement opportunities and support are provided for those seeking refuge in Rwanda, through, for example, the emergency transit mechanism involving the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. That, I think, speaks volumes about the view that it takes about people being safe when they are in Rwanda, and I think it is something of which we should take note.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Over the weekend, I learned that immigration and police officers who were seeking to remove from the community someone who was thought to have committed immigration offences were prevented and blocked from upholding the law by protesters. Will the Minister assure me that the individual in question will be held to account for any potential breach, as will the protesters who blocked those officers from upholding the law? Does he share my revulsion at the fact that a Labour councillor appears to have been involved in organising the protest, and the fact that Labour Members of this place have applauded those protesters over the last 24 hours?

Tom Pursglove: Those reports are somewhat surprising, are they not? What I will say, for the benefit of the House, is that I am very clear about the fact that the law should be upheld, and that individuals who have no right to be in our country should be removed. People should not be obstructing work that is in the national interest, is the right thing to do, and is in accordance with the law of the land. I will certainly be looking at this over the coming days, and I will want to be satisfied that those efforts are not being frustrated.

I thank the staff in the Home Office who facilitate removals every day of the week. It is not right that people are here illegally. There is of course due process, and it must be respected and followed at all times.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): As we take back control of our borders, may I congratulate my hon. Friend on his persistence in the face of the lefty

lawyers, the unions and the so-called charities who are abusing our judicial process? Does he agree that—as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey)—much of this opposition is born of complete ignorance of Rwanda and the people of Rwanda? We could be relocating people to Norway, Switzerland or even Monaco and these people would still oppose it, because what they actually believe in are open borders.

Tom Pursglove: It has often occurred to me that there are individuals, in this House and beyond it, who believe that we ought to have unlimited immigration to our country and that there ought not to be proper border controls, but, of course, they do not want to be straightforward about those motives and intentions. We, as a Government, believe that there must be proper border controls. The last Labour Government actually respected some of these principles, but we do not hear any of them being talked about in the modern setting by the shadow Home Secretary or the shadow immigration Minister, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock).

It is right and proper that we have those proper border controls, that they are properly enforced, that people come here through safe and legal routes, and that those with no right to be here are removed without any needless delay, and that is what we are going to deliver.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Let me say, for the avoidance of doubt, that I am aware that the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) and the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) have continued to stand, indicating that they wish to ask a question. Mr Speaker made it very clear at the beginning of the urgent question, as he has done at other times, that if a Member is not in the Chamber to hear the answer to an urgent question or the beginning of a statement, that Member will not be called to ask a question.

Mr Speaker and I, and the other occupants of the Chair, have heard every excuse under the sun for not being here on time. We have all been there, finding that we were slightly later than we meant to be, but the rule is absolutely clear: if a Member is not present to hear everything the Minister says, that Member will not be called to ask a question. That was made very clear to the hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman, who have persisted in seeking to catch my eye.

Let us make this very clear just one more time. You should not have to rely on a message from the Whips. You should not have to rely on what it says on the Annunciator. If you wish to take part in proceedings here in the Chamber, it is advisable to be here well in advance of the commencement of those proceedings. Obviously, the same rule applies to the statement that is about to begin. I am looking to see who is in the Chamber now. Everyone who is in the Chamber now will have an opportunity to take part in the statement, and anyone who is not in the Chamber now has lost that opportunity.

Government Food Strategy

4.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government's food strategy. Recent events have been a reminder of the importance of domestic food production. It gives us national resilience. Throughout the pandemic, those working at every stage of the food system, from farming and fishing to manufacturing, distribution and retail, did not let us down. The food industry has shown tremendous commitment and ingenuity in the face of recent international events.

The UK is largely self-sufficient in many products, including wheat, most meats, eggs and some sectors of the vegetable industry. Overall, for the foods that we can produce in the UK, we produce around 74% of what we consume. That has been broadly stable for the past 20 years, and in our food strategy, published today, we are committing to keep it at broadly that level in future, with the potential to increase it in areas such as seafood and horticulture. For instance, we are exploring policies to incentivise the use of surplus heat and carbon dioxide from industrial processes in a new generation of glasshouses here in the UK producing salad crops such as tomatoes and cucumbers.

With the cost of agricultural commodities linked to global gas prices, we recognise concerns about the cost of food. Through this strategy, we are setting out long-term measures to support a food system that offers access to healthy and sustainable food for all. It will complement the measures we have already taken to support those struggling to afford food and help them to eat healthily, through the Healthy Start scheme, breakfast clubs and the holiday activities and food programme.

The food industry is present in every part of our country. It is the largest manufacturing sector in the UK—bigger than automotive and aerospace combined. Food manufacturers provide employment opportunities in areas where there might otherwise be deprivation, they offer apprenticeships and opportunity, they invest in research and development and they give local areas a sense of pride and identity. None of our food manufacturers could succeed without the farmers and fishermen who supply them with high-quality produce.

Our fresh produce industry has always required access to seasonal labour, and I am pleased to announce today that we will bring forward another 10,000 visas for the seasonal workers route and expand the scheme to cover poultry. We on the Government side of the House want people at home and abroad to be lining up to buy British. Our food strategy sets out our intention to consult on ensuring that the public sector sources at least 50% of food locally or produced to higher standards.

There are new challenges to address that will require the characteristic ingenuity of our food industry. As Henry Dimbleby's independent review highlighted, poor diet has led to a growing problem of obesity, particularly among children. Good progress has been made on reformulation in some categories. Industry-backed initiatives such as Veg Power, which conceived the successful Eat Them to Defeat Them campaign, have shown the value of positive advertising to promote vegetable consumption among children. But there is more that must be done in

future, with Government and industry working in partnership on a shared endeavour to promote healthier diets. The Government accept that they have a role, and new regulations regarding the position of retail displays of foods that are high in salt, fat and sugar take effect later this year.

One of the recommendations of the Dimbleby review was the formation of a new data partnership between industry and Government, which we will be taking forward. Food manufacturers and retailers have a wealth of data and behavioural insights that can help to identify solutions. This will provide consumers with more information about the food they eat while incentivising industry to produce healthier, more ethical and sustainable food.

Our strategy acknowledges that the food system has a significant impact on the environment. We are therefore taking forward the recommendation of the Dimbleby review for a land use strategy. Our future agriculture policy will seek to financially reward sustainable farming practices, to make space for nature within the farmed landscape and to help farmers reduce their costs. From precision breeding techniques that reduce the need for pesticides to tractors fuelled with methane captured from slurry stores, and new feed additives that can significantly reduce methane emissions from ruminants, technological solutions are developing at pace. Our future farming policy will support innovative solutions to the environmental challenges we face.

Our food strategy will set us on a path to boosted food production, ensuring that everyone has access to healthy, affordable and sustainably produced food. I commend this statement to the House.

4.50 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. It certainly did not take long to read.

It is now nearly a year since the publication of Henry Dimbleby's independent review of England's food system, a review commissioned by the Secretary of State's Department. On the back of the review, he promised a national food strategy White Paper by January. Not only is he six months late on his own deadline, but this is just a statement of vague intentions from the Government, with no concrete proposals to tackle the major issues facing this country.

Henry Dimbleby's review consisted of almost 300 pages, yet the Secretary of State has responded with barely 10% of that. To call this a food strategy is farcical and, frankly, an insult to all who took the time to contribute to the review. There is no need to take my word for it, as we all saw the responses over the weekend from industry leaders and those involved in the review. They are aghast at the Government's lack of ambition, as the Secretary of State will have seen as he watched the television and read the morning newspapers over his cornflakes. This is a missed opportunity.

We should be discussing a real plan for delivery, a plan to put right the Government's record of failure: 7.3 million people, including 2.6 million children, are living in food poverty; 2.1 million food parcels were handed out last year alone; 64% of adults are obese, as are 40% of children; £2.6 billion of trade with the EU, our biggest trading partner, has been lost; a quarter of

all exports to Ireland have been lost completely; 40,000 pigs have been culled because of the labour shortage; and food is rotting in farmers' fields because it cannot be picked.

This should have been a plan for food security and ending food bank usage by ensuring every family has access to healthy, affordable and sustainable food. It should have been a plan to back our farmers rather than undercutting them through the Government's trade deals. It should have been a plan to drive growth through investment in new enterprises, the food and drink sector and our thriving co-operative sector. It should have been a plan to ensure that we buy, sell and make more here in Britain by supporting our fantastic producers and entrenching Britain's reputation as a beacon for quality food, high standards and ethical animal welfare.

This should have been a plan to ensure that our schools and hospitals are stocked with more locally sourced, excellent quality food. It should have been a radical plan to tackle the obesity scandal in this country by ensuring every family has access to the healthy food that we know too many are missing, and it should have been a plan to deal with today's supply and cost-inflation crisis.

We know, for example, that fertiliser and carbon dioxide availability has had a direct impact on the price of household staples such as bread, milk and meat products. Alarmingly, the UK's biggest producer of fertiliser and CO₂ closed one of its plants last week because of a lack of support from this Government. The Secretary of State has been warned repeatedly, but action never follows.

Where is the plan to address the real issues facing this country today? All we see in this document is more dither, more delay and absolutely no ideas to address the scale of the challenge from a Government who are, frankly, devoid of ideas. Cruelly, there is no support for British farmers who kept this country fed during one of our most difficult times. *[Interruption.]* I hear the growls from Conservative Members, but what I hear most are the calls from British farmers who, for all the Government's warm words of encouragement, are left waiting for support whenever they go to the Government for help. They wait and wait, and nothing ever comes. This is not a plan but a missed opportunity when the country can least afford it. Britain deserves better than this.

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman refers to the length of my statement. I like to keep statements in this House as brief as possible, with them being a summary. I think my statement ran for about six or seven minutes, which is generally what Mr Speaker likes to see.

Clearly, if the hon. Gentleman wanted more detail, he could have read the full report, but it is clear from the list of issues he raised that perhaps he did not read it, because I simply cannot accept any of the criticisms he made. He raises the issue of obesity, and the report deals at length with it. We have already introduced a soft drinks levy that has driven reformulation. As I said in my statement, later this year we will introduce new point of sale regulations that will also drive reformulation.

The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of labour on farms. Had he read the report, he would know that we have increased the number of seasonal agricultural workers from 30,000 to 40,000, and we have worked closely with industry to understand precisely its needs.

He says that we have no plan to increase spending on British agriculture by the public sector—by schools and hospitals—but we have set out a clear ambition to increase that spending by 50%. That is set out in great detail in the report.

On household spending on food, we absolutely recognise that with the sharp rise in energy bills there are households that are finding it difficult to afford food. That is why we have put in place a range of support mechanisms, the latest of which were announced by the Chancellor two weeks ago. We are talking about significant help for the most vulnerable families to help with those energy costs. We also know that although food prices have indeed risen, by about 0.2% in March and 1.5% in April, in the past 15 years or so, including during the last financial crisis, household spending on food remained fairly stable, even among the lowest income households, at about 16%.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman mentioned the important issue of fertilisers, and we are aware of that. It is important to note that the Billingham plant, run by the major producer of fertiliser here, is continuing to operate and has full order books until the end of this year, and that the price of ammonium nitrate has fallen back significantly from its peak in March and is now at a level that farmers are able to purchase at.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before we proceed any further, let me say that I am aware that nine Members in the Chamber did not hear what I said just before the proceedings on this statement commenced. I reiterated what Mr Speaker said at the beginning of the earlier piece of business, the urgent question, when he made it very clear that Members who are not in the Chamber at the beginning of an answer to a UQ or a statement by a Minister will not be called to ask a question during the proceedings on that UQ or statement. Sometimes it appears that people hear what Mr Speaker says but just ignore it, as though it did not apply to everyone or there might be extenuating circumstances—there are none.

So at the beginning of this statement, I reiterated what Mr Speaker said and I said that anyone not in the Chamber at that moment, 4.45 pm precisely, would not be called to take part in this statement. I have a list of the people who came in after 4.45 pm. So if you were not here at the beginning, please do not stand, because it is discourteous to do so when I have already said, or Mr Speaker has already said, that you will not be called. Let us proceed, with everybody who was here at the beginning of the statement. I call the Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Sir Robert Goodwill.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I welcome the direction in which the strategy takes us, but will the Secretary of State comment on what I might suggest are a couple of omissions? First, he rightly says that, in terms of the food that we can produce, we produce about three quarters of what we consume. However, in recent years, we have seen a dramatic reduction in the amount of vegetable oil we produce, making us more reliant on sunflower oil and rapeseed oil from Ukraine and on unsustainable palm oil from the far east. What can we do to address that? Secondly, on the location of

[Sir Robert Goodwill]

photovoltaic installations, more regard seems to be given to the proximity of an electricity substation than to the quality of the land on which they are installed. Could the Secretary of State perhaps look at that issue again?

George Eustice: First, may I take this opportunity—my first at the Dispatch Box—to welcome my right hon. Friend to his new post on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. He was a predecessor of mine as a Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and I know that he will bring considerable expertise to his new job.

On the two points that my right hon. Friend raised, planning guidance already sets out a clear presumption against building solar farms on the best and most versatile agricultural land, which is classed as grade 3b and above. I am aware that there have recently been instances where BMV land has been built on, and we are discussing that with Government colleagues.

On the second issue that my right hon. Friend raised, around our dependence on imported sunflower and rapeseed oil, the rapeseed crop has declined in recent years due to the withdrawal of the use of neonicotinoids. It has recovered in the last year, and prices are strong, but the ultimate solution probably lies in the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill, which will be introduced in the House later this week and bring forward our ability to tackle some of these agronomic challenges.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I welcome the advance sight that I had of the statement. Agrifood is a hugely significant industry, providing a great deal of employment. It is also of huge strategic importance to us as a country. It is therefore quite troubling—I hope the Secretary of State will appreciate quite how troubled I am by this—that the National Farmers Union president, Minette Batters, said earlier today that the industry is in “absolute crisis”.

It is easy to see why. We have massive labour shortages, we have food going unpicked and we have food being ploughed back into the fields. I welcome the 40,000 visas that have been announced, including the 10,000 additional visas, but that barely scratches the surface of demand across Scotland, let alone the rest of the UK, when it comes to tackling these issues. It is imperative that we do all we can during this heightened cost of living crisis to support our producers to maximise the quantities of food we produce domestically, so that we can keep costs down.

We have problems at our borders. Thanks to the Brexit we have chosen, there is effectively a free-for-all when it comes to goods coming in, but massive barriers and trade frictions when it comes to us exporting goods. The all-party parliamentary group on fisheries has today produced a report that makes for grim reading for anyone in the industry, or with a care for it, given how Brexit has played out. In addition, we have a continued welfare crisis in our pork industry, and farm incomes remain at historic lows.

It is hard to encourage people to buy as we might wish them to, when they are grinding against the cost of living crisis and, in some cases, struggling to pay for the

energy necessary to boil vegetables or even to make something as simple, basic and nourishing as a bowl of soup.

We therefore need to take steps to put our food strategy on the same basis as we would an energy strategy. We need to tackle energy prices, the cost of fertiliser and the debilitating shortage of labour. We need to support rather than undermine our producers when it comes to food and welfare standards. We need to support the industry as the custodian not just of our food chain and supply but our landscape. Finally, we absolutely need to make sure that the industry plays its part in feeding our people and battling the cost of living crisis.

George Eustice: The UK Government stand absolutely four-square behind our fantastic Scottish food industry. Scotch whisky is our biggest food and beverage export, and Scottish salmon is also a major export. We have some really strong industries in Scotland.

On the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised, we absolutely recognise that farm businesses have seen their input costs rise, particularly over the last six months. That is because the price of fertiliser and many other agricultural inputs is directly correlated with the gas price. It is also the case that agricultural commodity prices have risen. Generally speaking, since 2016, as a result of the referendum result and exchange rate changes, we have seen farm incomes and farm commodity prices rise quite strongly. The price of lamb is now more than £6 a kilo. The price of wheat has doubled in the past year, and we have seen strong prices in other sectors, such as that of beef. The picture is mixed, though. There are some sectors that have not seen that price rise, but, generally, the position has been strong. Finally, on the issue of labour, as I have said, we have a seasonal agricultural workers scheme. We work closely with the industry to understand its needs. Our assessment at the moment is that 40,000 visas are necessary for this current year.

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I will, if I may, draw my right hon. Friend's attention to paragraph 2.4.2, which concerns public procurement leading by example. It says that

“the public sector reports on progress towards an aspiration that 50% of its food expenditure is on food produced locally”.

As a very small British farmer, I think I can speak for all of agriculture when I say that we want not 50% British, but 100% British.

George Eustice: The commitment that we outlined today is in addition to the previous commitment of which my hon. Friend will be aware. It is the case that, some years ago, we introduced changes to the Government buying standard and the so-called balanced scorecard, which already requires all Government Departments and the Crown Commercial Service to follow that approach, and that is mandatory. What we are seeking to do in this case is to broaden that to hospitals and schools, which control their own budgets, but it is a slightly different situation.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is great that the Secretary of State is increasing the number of seasonal workers from 30,000 to 40,000, but, as I understand it, last year, we did not even manage to get the 30,000. A quarter of those who applied for visas and got visas did not even come here. We are now looking to Nepal and Tajikistan to pick our cucumbers, tomatoes and all the rest of it. This is a manifest failure. If we are not able to

pick our own food and put it on our own plates, how will we make sure that Britain is properly fed in the future, unless we are really going to answer that question?

George Eustice: Last year, we had just short of 30,000 people—it was around 27,000—who came to this country under the seasonal workers scheme. It was a covid year when there was a lot of stress and disruption to travel. This year, we are currently approaching the 30,000 level for those who are either here or on the way here. For the high-fruit season later in the year and for the poultry season at the end of the year, we judge that another 10,000 visas is about right. I also point out that many other European countries are struggling to find labour at the moment. The hon. Gentleman will also know that, last year, the majority of people who came here were from Ukraine for reasons that we all understand given the atrocious invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Those people have now stayed behind to fight, which is why we are drawing from a wider pool of countries in this current year.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I may have to try to press this with the Prime Minister on Wednesday, but let me try it on the Secretary of State now. The Isle of Thanet has produced, historically, some of the finest fruit and vegetables in the country bar none. I think I am right in saying that, in Thanet Earth, we have the largest greenhouse complex in the whole of Europe. This summer, Thanet Earth will be producing most of the tomatoes that most people in this House and beyond will be eating. We want to do more. We want to grow for Britain, but we will not be able to do so if we smother our farmland in housing and have nothing left on which to grow. Please may we have a moratorium on house building on grades 1 and 2 agricultural land while we get this policy right?

George Eustice: I am quite sure that my hon. Friend will take the opportunity to raise that with the Prime Minister and also with other Departments as well. I visited Thanet Earth in his constituency. It is an extraordinary operation. There is some 220 acres of glass. It is the largest salad producer here in the UK. As I set out in my statement, we want more organisations like Thanet Earth in this country. We want more of that kind of large-scale glass co-located with industrial processes, and that is what we have set out in the strategy today.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Social distributors of surplus food such as The Bread and Butter Thing and suppliers to food banks such as Klyne & Klyne, both located in my constituency, report interruptions to the supply chain and difficulties in redistributing white-labelled foods. Can the Secretary of State say what discussions he is having with such distributors to ensure continuing, stable and secure supplies for those who supply food to those on extremely low incomes?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady raises an important point. That specific issue has not been raised with me previously, but I will take it up. The Government work quite closely with organisations such as FareShare to support food charities around the country, and if there are particular difficulties of that sort I am happy to investigate.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The strategy is welcome inasmuch as it is a recognition that food security is as important as energy security. It is critical that we reduce the length of supply lines, so guaranteeing sustainability and traceability. Being that I know something about Government procurement, due to my ministerial jobs, will the Secretary of State make it clear that the desire for us to produce more food that is then consumed by the public sector is not merely an aspiration, but an obligation—not merely a hope, but an expectation?

George Eustice: We have different levers for different parts of the public sector. With core Government Departments, we can give exactly that kind of clear direction; indeed we do, through the agreements they have with organisations such as the Crown Commercial Service, they must pursue our policy. We want to work with the wider public sector on this, including schools and hospitals, but it is fair to say that they too want to support healthy, nutritious, locally produced food.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Recent surveys have demonstrated food insecurity among the workforce within food production itself. In other words, many of the workers producing the food cannot even afford to pay for it themselves. Recent surveys have also demonstrated increased dependency on food banks among food workers. Although there is a reference in the strategy to improving productivity and pay, working with the industry, that will take time. What emergency measures is the Secretary of State looking at to boost levels of pay so that the workers in food production can afford the food they produce?

George Eustice: The Government have already increased the national living wage to £9.50 an hour. We have stipulated that those coming in under the seasonal worker visa scheme must be paid at least £10.10 per hour. The right hon. Gentleman should also note that in food processing generally, because it is quite a tight labour market, we have seen significant increases in wages for the lowest paid in this country.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the strategy, which recognises that trees and butterflies are extremely important, but so is domestic food production. When the Secretary of State talks about rewarding sustainable farming, he need look no further than my constituency and its rolling green hills, grazed by livestock—a perfect example of the virtuous circle of UK livestock farming. Can I invite him to restate his support for the UK red meat sector, which, contrary to media portrayal, is good for our health, our environment and our economy?

George Eustice: The environmental issues around livestock production are more complex than some would have it. The truth is that permanent pasture has an important role to play in seeing the restoration of nature and the recovery of biodiversity in the farmed landscape. Livestock production done well, particularly in pasture-based systems, has an important role to play in rekindling that biodiversity in nature that we all want to see.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): With food and energy prices spiralling, many parents are worried about putting food on the table. Our children's health and education should be a top priority, yet not only have Ministers rejected Henry Dimbleby's recommendation to give a free school lunch to every child whose parents are on universal credit, but they have even rejected his back-up, less generous proposal to change the eligibility criteria. Will the Secretary of State listen to parents and think again about denying an extra 1.5 million children in struggling households a free school meal?

George Eustice: The principal driver of pressure on household budgets at the moment is the very sharp rise in energy costs. The measures that the Chancellor announced two weeks ago are a major step towards helping the poorest households to deal with that blow to their finances. The Department for Work and Pensions has already made some changes to eligibility for free school meals, because on 24 March it made permanent the extension of free school meal eligibility to include some of the children who had no recourse to public funds, subject to specified income thresholds.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): Opposition Members might like to note the fact that April exports to the EU were the highest on record.

I congratulate the Secretary of State on the statement, in which there is much to be welcomed. He knows of my concern and that of Back-Bench members of the 1922 committee about food security and encouraging the maximisation of the harvest over the coming months. Will he ensure that as the strategy is taken forward he does not walk away from some of the Government's biodiversity strategies, which are so important, and makes sure that they remain at the heart of what we do? In particular, can we resist the turning of farm land into pine forests to the exclusion of biodiversity and of the rewilding that can make a difference?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. He has been a long-standing champion for the hedgehog, as many Members will know, and he has previously raised with me the issue of food security. I hope that what we have set out today addresses our intentions in that regard. He is also right that sustainable environmental protection and profitable, successful food production are not in conflict with one another but are two sides of the same coin, and if we get our policy right we can achieve both.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Ind): Twelve years into Tory Governments, this pretence of a strategy says that DEFRA will work with local authorities and food charities in priority areas to tackle food-related inequalities. Some 5,000 households in Southwark used food banks last year and more than 30 organisations in my central London borough are trying to tackle the issue, which is largely driven by Government policy. When will the priority areas be fully identified, and what additional support will eventually be provided as a result of being determined a priority area?

George Eustice: As I said, we have a range of policies in place, including the holiday activities and food programme and the work we do through FareShare. We also have the household support fund, and we are

working with local authorities to identify where the needs are to ensure that that support can be directed to the right places.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I welcome this statement that the Government are bolstering food production and food security. Producing food sustainably and looking after the environment go hand in hand, and our fantastic UK farmers are best placed to do that as they have been doing it for generations. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine have brought food security into sharp relief, and farmers are faced with the challenges of rising costs of fuel, animal feed and fertiliser, the supply of which is more uncertain with the announced closure of one of the UK's fertiliser and CO₂ plants. Can my right hon. Friend reassure farmers in Cumbria and across the UK that the Government will support them through these challenges in the shared endeavour to produce more local food?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raises some important points. We are watching the situation closely on fertiliser supply. Our current assessment is that production at the Billingham plant, which has the lion's share of UK production, is continuing. We understand that it has had strong orders during the course of the year and farmers are managing to source their fertiliser by that route. We are also successfully continuing to import fertiliser from countries such as Norway. However, we monitor that closely because it is important that we ensure that farmers can get access to fertiliser, particularly for next year's winter wheat crop.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will find many of us who will support him in seeing food prices as a massively important issue as we all have constituents who are not choosing between heating and eating because they cannot afford to do either. On the question of how we can cut the cost of food and support British farming, the elephant in the Chamber is that he has not talked at all about the impact of leaving the European Union yet the evidence from the UK in a Changing Europe think-tank is very clear about the impact of that on food prices. The children of this country cannot eat red tape, yet that is exactly what has been imported into this country and is now strangling British farmers. What conversations has he had with his colleagues in the Department for International Trade and with the Prime Minister about how to cut through that and make sure that we can export all our British delicacies and put food on the plates of our constituents?

George Eustice: I think the hon. Lady is wrong on food prices for this reason: EU-produced food can still enter the UK completely tariff-free, and at the moment we are not even requiring export health certificates or other paperwork. The impact on food prices of leaving the European Union and the single market is negligible; the real driver of food prices is oil prices and exchange rates, and that has always been the case.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The Government are to be commended on a thoughtful piece of work, specifically on farming and domestic production. The approach on meat-eating and methane is right, too—technology is our friend in that—but I have to say that on salt and

sugar I am a wee bit disappointed. The Secretary of State will know that I put together the prevention Green Paper in the Department of Health and Social Care. That built on the sugar tax, which led to the sensible reformulation of soft drinks. It did not push up costs to the consumer, because the industry reformulated its products. That document, agreed across Government, had proposals to extend that winning formula to other products high in fat, salt and sugar. We can kick the idea into the long grass, and many will be pleased that we have done that—I concede that—but we are storing up obesity, type 2 diabetes and stroke, which we are increasingly seeing in younger people, for the future. Surely as a publicly funded health system, we have a right, and I would argue a responsibility, not to kick the issue into the long grass.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend highlights an important issue and I can assure him that we are not kicking it into the long grass. The soft drinks levy was indeed a tremendous success, but only because it was relatively easy to take sugar out of soft drinks, because it is only a sweetener and reformulation can be driven quite simply. With some other products, such as chocolate, cakes and so on, sugar is a different type of ingredient that is harder to reformulate and take out. Later this year, we are taking forward new point-of-sale restrictions on foods that are high in salt, fat or sugar. I can tell my hon. Friend that that is already driving reformulation and changes in retailer supply chains.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State on the issue of school food? Eighteen years ago, in 2004, Hull City Council pioneered free healthy school meals as a means of fighting food poverty, improving classroom attainment and tackling the problem of childhood poverty. The evidence is there that that works. If the Government accepted into the strategy the recommendation on that, it would help them fulfil their aims for healthy eating, easing the cost of living crisis and the levelling-up agenda. Will the Secretary of State think again about accepting the recommendation on free school meals?

George Eustice: We have to be mindful of some of the unintended consequences if we load too many of these things on to the universal credit system. As Members will know, one of the principles behind universal credit is its gradual, tapered withdrawal. If we have cliff-edge entitlements of that sort, that starts to undermine the principle that sits behind universal credit. Nevertheless, we recognise the value of free school meals—that is why we have always had them and why some changes were made permanent on 24 March. We are also more widely recognising the impact on households of the increase in energy costs, and that is why the Chancellor announced that package of measures two weeks ago.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I warmly welcome the spotlight that the strategy shines on the wonderful food produced in West Worcestershire and across the whole United Kingdom. I also welcome the fact that unemployment in this country is at an historic low. In welcoming the extra 10,000 seasonal agricultural workers that have been announced today, will the Secretary of State elaborate on the advice that he received that

meant that this year, with our strong labour market, he did not accept the request from farmers to go as high as 90,000 visas?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend does indeed represent an important part of our country for horticulture—in fact, I spent a summer working on an apple orchard at Bransford in her constituency. On her question about the evidence that we have, we work closely with the operators running the seasonal agricultural workers scheme. As I said, we are approaching 28,000 visas issued or people already here. The judgment is that for the top fruit season, which is predominantly what they will be recruiting for later this year, a further 10,000 will be sufficient. The truth is that the total number of people who do seasonal agricultural work in the UK is estimated to be between 60,000 and 70,000. We think it is still the case that close to half of that number are coming as settled EU citizens or are people who are here, with the other half being carried by the scheme. That will change over the years, but for the current year, we think that 40,000 is sufficient.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): As has been referenced already, last week, CF Fertilisers in my constituency announced that it would begin consultation on closing the plant, which puts 300 jobs at risk. It also exposes us far more to the international fertiliser market, which is the opposite of what I understood this strategy was meant to achieve. Ministers have had nine months' notice that there was a problem at the plant and, from what I can see, they have done absolutely nothing to help it survive. The Secretary of State said that he was monitoring the situation but, frankly, we need far more urgent action than that. What is being done to look at potential purchasers of the site or to keep production going there? Are my constituents' jobs not worth more than just a monitoring exercise?

George Eustice: We are monitoring the situation, but the hon. Gentleman will be aware that there are some commercially sensitive issues around that. He talks about the potential sale of the site to alternative operators, which I know that the company is investigating. If he would like, I will offer to meet him to update him on some of those issues.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for recently meeting the little pocket of marvellousness made up of the grade 1 agricultural land and glasshouse growers in South Ribble. Banks, Tarleton and Hesketh Bank are producing some of the finest celery, turnips, tomatoes and salad leaves in the world. Glasshouse growers are often forgotten, but I note that the food strategy does not forget them and actually enhances support for them; I welcome the farming innovation fund to help to improve their productivity. I hope to speak on the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill later this week, but will he assure me today that he will continue to use the flexibility that he has in the seasonal agricultural workers visa scheme to make sure that 10,000 workers are available to pull the crops out of our grade 1 agricultural land and that he will keep an eye on the situation in case it changes? My farmers rely heavily on that seasonal labour.

George Eustice: I very much enjoyed meeting growers from my hon. Friend's constituency with its wonderful fenland and high-grade horticultural land. We do indeed keep a close eye on the requirement for seasonal agricultural workers, but, as I said, we currently judge that 40,000 is sufficient for this year.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I met various farmers and farming representatives in my constituency on Friday. They are keen to produce food sustainably, but they told me that their biggest problem is the phasing out of the basic payment scheme before the environmental land management scheme is ready to go ahead. Moreover, they believe that they will not be able to get involved in the sustainable farming incentive because of the up-front costs involved in some of those schemes. Will the Secretary of State look at that problem? We are in danger not only of our environmental and welfare aspirations falling away, but of some of our critical food producers going out of business in this critical short-term period.

George Eustice: As the hon. Lady will know, the Government committed to keeping the budget that we spend on agriculture the same in cash terms for every year of this Parliament. That is exactly what we are doing. Although we are making a modest 15% further reduction to the BPS payment this year, we are simultaneously giving farmers access to that money through the sustainable farming incentive. It is universally open to all, there are not the up-front costs that she talked about, and we will pay farmers quarterly. It is a scheme that leading farming organisations, such as the Country Land and Business Association, have been supportive of. The old legacy EU subsidies on land ownership meant that 50% of the budget went to 10% of the wealthiest landowners in the country, which cannot make sense or be a coherent policy for the long term.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I draw the House's attention to the fact that I am married to a farmer.

Lincolnshire farmers produce fabulous food in harmony with the environment, but many farmers of late have been concerned that the Government were more interested in their becoming biodiverse or parkland farmers than in their growing food, so I am pleased to see this strategy and the Government's focus on the importance of food security and productivity. I am also pleased to see the £270 million farming innovation fund, but could the Secretary of State tell us how farmers apply and when this money will start to become available?

George Eustice: The money is already available, and we have already had a number of rounds. Indeed, earlier this year, when we opened a round of the farming investment fund for equipment on farms, it was oversubscribed, so we trebled its budget to £48 million. This week, we have opened a new round to support farmers who want to add value. There is £30 million going into that fund, and there will be many more rounds over the current year or two.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Food prices are rocketing and food insecurity is increasing, but this White Paper goes nowhere near addressing the root causes of these issues. The recommendation to extend free school meals to more than 1 million children on universal

credit has been ignored, so how does the Secretary of State plan to address this, and ensure that our children are well fed and nourished to be able to learn?

George Eustice: As I explained earlier, the Chancellor has unveiled a package of measures to help those on the lowest incomes deal with the sharp increase in energy costs. We also have a range of programmes, including Healthy Start and the holiday activities and food programme.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): Given the recommendations of the independent review, the White Paper is not bold enough, but I am pleased that the junk food cycle is being addressed with a goal on healthy ingredients sold and reporting with the Office for Environmental Protection, Food Standards Agency and Climate Change Committee. I am pleased with the innovation package, particularly research into diet, as well as with the visa scheme review, mandatory procurement and the target of a 50% reduction in child obesity by 2030. Does my right hon. Friend agree that these policies should be enshrined in law through a good food Bill?

George Eustice: We have judged that we do not need any new legislative powers to implement all the things we have set out to do in the strategy. However, we have been very clear that the Food Standards Agency, the OEP and others will of course perform their statutory functions in holding Government to account on progress on these agendas.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Missing from this strategy is food security for our very youngest citizens—those who require infant formula. We only need to look to the United States to see how precarious the formula market can be. The forced closure of a formula factory due to contaminants resulted in costs being driven up and families being left without. In the UK, the cost of infant formula has gone up, with which Healthy Start vouchers are not keeping pace, so families are struggling to access that. How does the Secretary of State plan to address the deficiencies in infant formula policy? Will he implement the code of marketing of breastmilk substitutes, which will protect both those who use infant formula and those who breastfeed?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady raises an important point. During the pandemic, when there were concerns about global supply chains, we looked in great detail, with the Department of Health, at possible problems with the availability of infant formula milk. She is right that we import the vast majority of our infant formula milk, principally from France and Ireland, but we have done some work to encourage and support dairy processors in this country to enter the market.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): May I confirm that, under the strategy, public money for public good in environmental land management schemes will be about food production? Will the Secretary of State push for a national food security target? Lastly, on the impact of fuel prices, fishermen in Brixham are laying up their vessels because their average takings for an entire day's work are £32. If we do not step in, fishermen across the United Kingdom will lay up vessels. We need a strategy fast, or we will not be able to do anything on fish and shellfish.

George Eustice: On the latter point, I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss some of the issues that fishermen in his constituency have raised with him. Over the last six months the price of most fish has strengthened considerably, which has generally been good for fishermen's incomes, but I am happy to look at the issue he raises. On the wider point, under the Agriculture Act 2020, Governments are already required to produce a review of food security every three years—the first was published in December last year—and they have a legal obligation, when designing future schemes, to consider food security and availability.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Our farmland in my constituency of Strangford is highly productive so we greatly welcome the strategy, but the drive for rewilding is being discussed locally. I am concerned that the United Kingdom will be reforesting land that could and should be used to grow produce and thereby enhance our food security and self-sustainability. As farming is a devolved matter for all the regional Administrations, what safeguards are in place to ensure that good arable land is planted and that reforestation and rewilding are introduced only on land that is not appropriate for productive farming?

George Eustice: Agriculture policy is indeed devolved but we have created the UK agricultural partnership. Its last meeting took place in Northern Ireland and I heard about some of the Northern Ireland Administration's plans for their future policy. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that my opposite number there, Edwin Poots, is well aware of these issues and there is very little danger that he would allow things to be planted inappropriately where there should be crops.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Secretary of State and everyone who took part in the proceedings. I noted that, at last, attention was paid to what Mr Speaker and I had said about presence in the Chamber and that all Members who were not here at the beginning of the statement had the decency and honour not to ask to be called. That has been gratefully noted.

Point of Order

5.37 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last Thursday a BBC investigation revealed shocking abuse and safeguarding failures in children's homes run by Calcot Services for Children. The report included allegations of grooming, rape, sexual assault and Calcot cutting corners on staffing ratios. None of the incidents revealed by the investigation had been reported to Ofsted despite a statutory requirement to do so. At the same time as these appalling incidents are alleged to have been taking place Calcot Services for Children recorded profits of 36%. There has been no response so far from Government Ministers to the reports of serious failings by Calcot Services for Children. Is it your understanding, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the Government have any plans to update the House on their response to the investigation, the steps being taken to ensure the safety of the children under the care of Calcot Services for Children, and why, despite such serious allegations, Ofsted has continued to rate the homes provided by Calcot as good or outstanding?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her intention to raise this point of order. I can confirm that the Speaker's Office has had no notice of a statement on that matter. I appreciate that it is a serious matter and I am sure that the hon. Lady will seek other means of raising it in the Chamber, and I am certain that if she were to seek the advice of the Clerks in the Table Office they would guide her on how best to do that. I am also confident that the Minister currently at the Dispatch Box, the Minister for Higher and Further Education, will have heard the point made by the hon. Lady—

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan) *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Minister is nodding in assent and I am confident that she will convey the hon. Lady's concerns, and the concerns of the House, to her colleagues who are responsible for this matter.

BILL PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND PROTOCOL BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Elizabeth Truss, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Dominic Raab, Steve Barclay, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Priti Patel, Secretary Sajid Javid, Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng, Secretary George Eustice, Secretary Brandon Lewis, Michael Ellis, and the Attorney General, presented a Bill to make provision about the effect in domestic law of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland in the EU withdrawal agreement, about other domestic law in subject areas dealt with by the Protocol and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 12) with explanatory notes (Bill 12—EN).

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to put on record my congratulations to the Government on bringing in the Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which of course was not a point of order for the Chair. I assure him that he will have an opportunity to speak to the issue that he raises when the Bill has its Second Reading in the House.

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee.

[Relevant documents: Fourth Report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights of Session 2017-19, Freedom of Speech in Universities, HC 589; Eighth Report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights of Session 2017-19, Freedom of Speech in Universities: Responses, HC 1279; Correspondence between the Secretary of State for Education and the Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, regarding the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, dated 24 June 2021 and 7 July 2021.]

New Clause 2

OVERSEAS FUNDING

“(1) The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 69C (as inserted by section 8) insert—

“69D Overseas funding: registered higher education providers

(1) The OfS must monitor the overseas funding of registered higher education providers and their constituent institutions with a view to assessing the extent to which the funding presents a risk to the matters in subsection (2).

(2) The matters are—

- (a) freedom of speech within the law, and
- (b) the academic freedom of academic staff of registered higher education providers and their constituent institutions,

in the provision of higher education by registered higher education providers and their constituent institutions.

(3) The duty in subsection (1) includes a duty to consider, in a case where the OfS has found that a registered higher education provider or any constituent institution of a registered higher education provider is in breach of its duty under section A1, whether overseas funding was relevant to the breach.

(4) The information which the governing body of a registered higher education provider may be required to provide under the condition under section 8(1)(b) in relation to the function of the OfS under subsection (1) is—

- (a) information as to relevant funding from a relevant overseas person, where the funding from that person exceeds the threshold in any period of 12 months specified by the OfS, and
- (b) if the OfS considers it appropriate in any circumstances, such other information as the OfS may reasonably require.

(5) In this section “relevant funding” from a relevant overseas person, in relation to a registered higher education provider, means amounts which are received by the provider or a connected person—

- (a) by way of endowment, gift or donation from the relevant overseas person,
- (b) by way of research grant from the relevant overseas person,
- (c) pursuant to a research contract with the relevant overseas person, or
- (d) pursuant to an educational or commercial partnership with the relevant overseas person.

(6) In subsection (5) “connected person”, in relation to a registered higher education provider, means—

- (a) the governing body of the provider,
- (b) a constituent institution of the provider, or
- (c) a member or member of staff of the provider or of a constituent institution, in their capacity as such.

(7) For the purposes of subsection (5), treat receipt of anything that is not money as receipt of an amount equal to the value of the thing to the recipient at the time of receipt.

- (8) In this section “relevant overseas person” means—
- (a) the government of an overseas country, other than a prescribed country,
 - (b) a body which is incorporated or registered in, or has its headquarters in, an overseas country other than a prescribed country, or
 - (c) an individual who is a politically exposed person in relation to an overseas country other than a prescribed country.

(9) In this section—

“overseas country” means any country or territory outside the United Kingdom, but not including the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man and any British overseas territory;

“politically exposed person” has the meaning given by regulation 35 of the Money Laundering, Terrorist Financing and Transfer of Funds (Information on the Payer) Regulations 2017 (S.I. 2017/692);

“prescribed country” means a country or territory specified in regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(10) For the purposes of subsection (4)(a), “the threshold” means an amount specified in regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(11) Regulations under subsection (10) may include provision—

- (a) as to how the amount specified is to be calculated;
- (b) to treat amounts received from a person other than a relevant overseas person as received from the relevant overseas person.

69E Overseas funding: students’ unions

“(1) The OfS must monitor the overseas funding of students’ unions at registered higher education providers that are eligible for financial support with a view to assessing the extent to which the funding presents a risk to the matter in subsection (2).

(2) The matter is freedom of speech within the law for—

- (a) members of the students’ unions,
- (b) students of the providers,
- (c) staff of the students’ unions,
- (d) staff and members of the providers and of their constituent institutions, and
- (e) visiting speakers.

(3) The duty in subsection (1) includes a duty to consider, in a case where the OfS has found that a students’ union is in breach of its duty under section A5, whether overseas funding was relevant to the breach.

(4) For the purpose of the function of the OfS under subsection (1), a students’ union referred to in that subsection must provide to the OfS at such times, and in respect of such periods, as the OfS may reasonably request—

- (a) information as to any amounts received from a relevant overseas person, where the amounts exceed the threshold in any period of 12 months specified by the OfS, and
- (b) if the OfS considers it appropriate in any circumstances, such other information as the OfS may reasonably require.

(5) If a students’ union fails to comply with its duty under subsection (4), the OfS may enforce the duty in civil proceedings for an injunction.

(6) The following provisions of section 69D apply for the purposes of this section—

- (a) subsection (7) (things other than money);
- (b) subsections (8) and (9) (meaning of “relevant overseas person”);
- (c) subsections (10) and (11) (meaning of “threshold”).

(3) In Schedule 1, in paragraph 13 (annual report), after sub-paragraph (3) insert—

“(3A) The report must include—

- (a) a summary of information received by the OfS pursuant to sections 69D and 69E for that year, and

- (b) a summary of conclusions drawn by the OfS for that year, from its monitoring under sections 69D(1) and 69E(1), regarding relevant patterns, trends or other matters which it has identified and which are of concern to the OfS.”

This new clause makes provision for the reporting of overseas funding by registered higher education providers and their students’ unions.—(Michelle Donelan.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

5.41 pm

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 1— *Duty to disclose overseas gifts and contracts affecting freedom of speech*—

‘In section A3 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (inserted by section 1), at end insert—

“(2) Whenever a registered higher education provider, or any of its members, employees, departments or associated bodies, enters into a disclosable arrangement with an overseas counterparty, its governing body shall, as one part of discharging the duty to promote the importance of freedom of speech and academic freedom in subsection (1), promptly report the required information about such arrangement to the OfS and the Secretary of State.

(3) By 30 April each year, the OfS shall publish on its website a searchable report which contains all required information which has been disclosed to it pursuant to subsection (2) above in the preceding year.

(4) If the governing body of a registered higher education reasonably believes that the publication of the identity of the overseas counterparty pursuant to subsection (3) or subsection (6) might present a risk of serious harm to any natural person, it may notify the OfS and will provide such information as the OfS may require to investigate such risk(s).

(5) If, following a report under subsection (4) above and such investigation as it considers appropriate in the circumstances, the OfS finds that the publication of the identity of the overseas counterparty pursuant to subsection (3) or subsection (6) might present a risk of serious harm to any natural person, then it may redact such information from its report.

(6) By 30 April 2023, the governing body of each registered higher education provider shall report to the OfS and the Secretary of State the required information of any disclosable arrangement which it, or any of its members, employees, departments or associated bodies, entered into during the ten years prior to this section coming into force, and the OfS shall publish such information on its website in a searchable report by 30 April 2024.

(7) If the registered higher education provider fails to comply with this duty, the OfS may enforce compliance in civil proceedings for an injunction.

(8) In this Part—

- (a) “associated bodies” means any company, institution, trust, organisation or similar body or group in respect of which the relevant registered higher education provider has significant control or ultimate beneficial interest;
- (b) “disclosable arrangement” means any formal or informal contract, gift or other arrangement by which a financial or other advantage is offered, promised or given to a registered higher education provider or any person or body mentioned in subsection (2) above, whether conditionally or unconditionally, which is equal to or exceeds £50,000 (or would equal or exceed such value in combination with other potentially disclosable arrangements entered into with the same overseas counterparty, or connected overseas counterparties, within the previous twelve months);

- (c) “overseas counterparty” means—
- (i) any natural person who holds citizenship of, or is domiciled in, any country or territory outside the United Kingdom (or any subdivision of such a country or territory);
 - (ii) any government, organisation, institution, company, foundation, legal person, trust, or similar body or group which is registered, incorporated, headquartered or carries out significant activities in any country or territory outside the United Kingdom (or any subdivision of such a country or territory) or in respect of which ultimate beneficial ownership or significant control resides in a person falling within subsection (c)(i) above; or
 - (iii) any person acting in any capacity for or on behalf of any person who would fall within subsection (c)(i) or (c)(ii) above if they were acting on their own account;
- (d) “required information” means—
- (i) the exact value of the relevant disclosable arrangement(s);
 - (ii) the identity of the overseas counterparty and the name of any relevant country or territory (and, if relevant, such information about the person(s) for whom they are acting or in whom ultimate beneficial ownership or significant control resides);
 - (iii) the date on which the relevant disclosable arrangement(s) was entered into;
 - (iv) details on the general purpose of the relevant disclosable arrangement(s); and
 - (v) any specific stipulations or obligations imposed on the registered higher education provider or any of its members, employees, departments or associated bodies (including, but not limited to, any changes to any curricula, governance or control of them).”

This new clause seeks to introduce transparency and public reporting of foreign donations to universities, in order to promote freedom of speech and academic freedom, and increase public confidence in universities.

New clause 3—Duties regarding language and cultural programmes—

In section A3 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (inserted by section 1), at end insert—

“(2) Whenever a registered higher education provider enters into partnership with an overseas organisation to deliver foreign language, culture or exchange programmes or courses, its governing body must, as one part of discharging the duty to promote the importance of freedom of speech and academic freedom in subsection (1), promptly report the required information about the partnership to the OfS and the Secretary of State.

(3) In response to the information received under subsection (2), and where there are concerns regarding the effect of the partnership on freedom of speech and academic freedom, the Secretary of State may issue a direction to the registered higher education provider.

- (4) A direction under subsection (3) may be either to—
- (a) terminate the partnership, or
 - (b) offer an equivalent range of programmes or courses delivered in partnership with an alternative organisation.

- (5) In this Part, “required information” means—
- (a) the financial value of the partnership;
 - (b) any specific stipulations or obligations imposed on the registered higher education provider or any of its members, employees, departments or associated bodies (including, but not limited to, any changes to curricula, governance or control of them).”

New clause 4—Appointment of the Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom—

“(1) A person may not be appointed as the Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom (‘Director’) if the person has at any time within the last three years made a donation to a political party registered under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.

(2) The person appointed as the Director may not whilst in office make any donation to a political party registered under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.

(3) The appointment for the Director shall be made by an independent advisory panel to be established by regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(4) The appointment of the Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom shall be subject to a confirmatory resolution of the relevant Select Committee of the House of Commons.

(5) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (3) may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by resolution of each House of Parliament.”

This new clause would ensure that the Director of Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom has not and cannot whilst in office donate to a political party and ensure they are only appointed subject to confirmation of an independent advisory panel, the Select Committee of the House of Commons and a resolution of each House of Parliament.

New clause 5—Sunset clause—

“(1) This Act expires at the end of the period of 3 years beginning with the day on which it is passed.

(2) A Minister of the Crown may by regulations made by statutory instrument remove any of the provisions of this Act after one year from the day on which it is passed if he is not satisfied that the provision is working as intended.

(3) Before three years from the day on which this Act is passed a Minister of the Crown must present to Parliament a written report on the effectiveness of the provisions of the Act.

(4) A Minister of the Crown may by regulations made by statutory instrument renew this Act, subject to parliamentary approval in full or in part, or make transitional, transitory or saving provision in connection with the expiry of any provision of this Act.

(5) Regulations under this section shall be subject to the affirmative procedure.”

This new clause would mean the legislation would have to be renewed by Parliament after a period of three years.

New clause 6—Academic staff: interpretation—

“(1) Section 121 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 is amended as follows.

(2) After “Act—” insert—

“academic staff, for the purposes of any provision inserted by the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2022, includes any academic staff (however engaged or employed), honorary, visiting and emeritus academic members of a provider and any other person held out as holding any academic position at the provider;”

New clause 7—Harassment—

In section 26 of the Equality Act 2010, after subsection (4)(c) insert—

“(d) when A is a student or a member of the academic staff of a registered higher education provider and the conduct took place in the context of a discussion in a higher education setting—

- (i) the importance of freedom of speech and academic freedom, as provided for under Part A1 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (as inserted by section 1 of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2022), and
- (ii) whether A intended to harass B, or was reckless as to whether A’s conduct constituted harassment towards B.”

Amendment 21, in clause 1, page 2, line 2, at end insert—

“(3A) Any conduct that would otherwise constitute conduct having the effect of harassment in accordance with section 26(1) of the Equality Act 2010 shall, notwithstanding any provision to the contrary in that Act, constitute freedom of speech within the law for the purposes of subsection (2), provided that—

- (a) the conduct constitutes, or forms part of, discussion of an academic or scientific matter in a higher education setting, and
- (b) the person engaging in such conduct did not know or could reasonably not have known that it would have the effect of harassment.”

Amendment 19, in clause 1, page 2, line 6, at end insert—

“(4A) The objective in subsection (2) includes securing that no person listed in paragraphs (a) to (d) of subsection (2) is deprived of an ability to speak freely as a result of a non-disclosure agreement or confidentiality agreement between that person and the governing body of the registered higher education provider.

(4B) The provision in subsection (4A) does not prevent the use of a non-disclosure agreement in any case where the governing body and academic staff member agree that a non-disclosure agreement or confidentiality agreement is necessary for the protection of intellectual property.”

This amendment would ensure that non-disclosure agreements or confidentiality agreements between those listed on the Bill and a higher education providers does not inhibit the freedom of speech for those concerned, save where it is agreed to protect intellectual property.

Government amendment 1.

Amendment 17, in clause 1, page 2, line 14, at end insert—

- “(c) to conduct research,
- (d) to engage in intellectual inquiry and contribute to public debate,
- (e) to criticise any institution,
- (f) to be affiliated to any institution, and
- (g) to be a member of a trade union body,”

This amendment would widen the definition of academic freedom.

Government amendments 2 and 3.

Amendment 20, in clause 1, page 2, line 32, after “views” insert “or to share experiences”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 19.

Government amendments 4 to 10.

Amendment 18, in clause 8, page 9, line 32, at end insert—

“(3A) In reaching a decision as to the extent to which a free speech complaint is justified, the OfS must be mindful of the following—

- (a) the right of students to feel safe on university campuses, and
- (b) other legal duties of governing bodies and students’ unions, such as but not limited to those under the Equality Act 2010 and section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015.”

This amendment would ensure other competing freedoms as found in the Equality Act and the Counter-Terrorism Act and Security Act 2015 are considered in relation to complaints lodged under the Free Speech Complaints Scheme

Government amendments 11 to 16.

Michelle Donelan: I thank all Members for their important contributions throughout the Bill’s consideration. More than two thirds of the world’s population live in countries where academic freedom is severely limited. For decades, people have travelled across the globe to study in the UK because we are one of the few nations in which free, fair and lawful speech at university is truly valued. It is no coincidence that the most academically free countries in the world are also the most socially progressive, the most democratic, the most peaceful and, of course, the most prosperous.

Free speech is as fundamental to what academics and students do on university campuses as it is to what we do in the House. However, as we saw on Second Reading, the Opposition chose to deny that there is a problem at all, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. In fact, since we last debated the Bill, the UK has become the only country in the top tier of academically free countries to be significantly downgraded by the academic freedom index. A report published by the Varieties of Democracy Institute determined that despite the UK’s status as a historic bastion of academic freedom and scientific excellence, not only is academic freedom in the UK declining but that decline appears to be accelerating.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Alliance of Pro-Life Students says that more than 70% of pro-life students face situations in seminars or lectures where they feel unable to speak openly, and one in three students surveyed had seen events cancelled due to the no-platforming of pro-life students and speakers. Will the Minister make it absolutely clear that whatever people’s views on pro-life issues, those who take that stance have a right to be heard in our universities?

Michelle Donelan: I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend. Of course, they deserve and have a right to be able to air their views and debate that subject.

In oral evidence, Dr Arif Ahmed spoke about how his fellow academics told him that they supported his campaign for free speech but were concerned that their careers would be impacted if they aired that publicly. We also heard from Professor Kathleen Stock, who has been the subject of the most grotesque and sustained campaign of threats and abuse, which compelled her to resign. Is it therefore any wonder that, in 2019, a King’s College London survey found that, chillingly, one in four students believed that physical violence was justified to shut down views that they deemed to be hateful?

The following year, a report by Policy Exchange found widespread self-censorship among university staff, but students and staff did not need to wait for those damning studies or for oral evidence to be published to know that there was a problem. The students forced to self-censor know that there is a problem. The academics bullied off campus, excluded by colleagues or forced to censor their lectures know that there is a problem. Legitimate organisations, speakers and guests who have been no-platformed or physically and verbally abused on campus know that there is a problem. It is just the Opposition who have their heads in the sand.

5.45 pm

The Government not only understand that there is a problem—we have a plan to solve it by requiring providers to not only protect but promote free speech and academic freedom, by placing freedom of speech duties directly on student unions and by introducing effective enforcement mechanisms through the Office for Students. We all know that a law with no enforcement mechanisms is toothless. The new director for freedom of speech and academic freedom on the OfS board will be able to force improvements and impose penalties, including fines, if the new duties are breached.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the Secretary of State will maintain the ability to direct the director to further inquiry, should he have concerns that the OfS is not investigating an issue suitably?

Michelle Donelan: Of course, we work hand in hand with the OfS and if there were concerns, we would be able to direct.

We are introducing a new complaint scheme, operated by the OfS, for students, staff and visiting speakers who have suffered loss as a result of a breach of those duties. On top of that, we are introducing a new statutory tort as a legal backstop. The Government tabled amendments in Committee to ensure that new strengthened freedom of speech duties apply directly to constituent colleges of registered higher education providers. That will ensure that appropriate institutions must comply with the new duties in universities such as Oxford, Cambridge and Durham.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Michelle Donelan: I will, and then I will make progress.

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful. I am sure the Minister will be aware that institutions such as the University of Cambridge are concerned about the extra bureaucracy that may well create—particularly for commercial partnerships, which are completely unrelated to freedom of speech issues. Will she clarify what is meant by “constituent institutions” and the intent in new clause 2? Is she really putting a general monitoring duty on the OfS to require pre-emptive reporting?

Michelle Donelan: The hon. Gentleman raises a few points. In new clause 2, “constituent institutions” mean colleges. It is right that we should not have a potential loophole in the Bill. When forming new clause 2, I worked very closely with the university sector, including the University of Cambridge, so I ask him, respectfully, to talk to it again.

A number of important issues were raised in Committee. Opposition Members expressed concerns that the Bill would protect hate speech on campus. I have been clear throughout the passage of the Bill and will make the point once again: the Bill is only about lawful free speech. Let me be clear that this cheap shot has no actual validity. It is the Opposition’s attempt to discredit the Bill. It is a strong signal that they are content for an intolerant minority to silence those they disagree with, content for academics to feel the need to self-censor, content for students to miss out on the ability to debate, to critique and to challenge, and, ultimately, content to stifle debate. The Bill does not override the existing duties under the Equality Act 2010 regarding harassment and unlawful discrimination, nor the public sector equality duty and the prevent duty. Nor does it give anyone the right to be invited to speak at a university.

There were also questions from Members on both sides of the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), on whether junior researchers and PhD students will be covered as academic staff. That was laid as an amendment by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings

(Sir John Hayes). To clarify, the Bill uses the term “staff” to broaden the existing reference to employees, as not all those who work for a higher education provider have an employment contract or employee status. I can confirm that it will include those on short-term, casual contracts and PhD students undertaking teaching.

I now turn to the Government amendments tabled in the name of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. New clause 2 and Government amendments 13 and 14 will impose a duty on the Office for Students to monitor the overseas funding of registered higher education providers and their constituent institutions, so as to enable it to assess the risk from such funding on freedom of speech and academic freedom. The duty will include a requirement to consider this in the context of a finding of a breach of new section A1 in clause 1. Higher education providers will be required to supply to the OfS information about overseas funding from certain individuals and organisations, with the details to be set out in regulations. The funding will cover not only the income that providers receive, but that of their constituent institutions, their members and their staff in their capacity as such. Similar provision will also apply to student unions. The OfS must include a summary of the information in its annual report, along with relevant patterns of concern.

Our amendments are proportionate, but we must ensure that our higher education system remains world leading, safeguarding an environment in which freedom of speech and academic freedom can thrive.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The Secretary of State was escorted off the premises by security following his attendance to give a speech at one of our leading universities, after he was hassled. That was shameful behaviour, but that level of security is not available to everyone at all times. We need not just legislative change but a culture change, so that we accept that everyone with a different view is not a bad person and that there is not necessarily a right or wrong answer. What wider work are the Government are doing to instil that in younger children before they get to university?

Michelle Donelan: My hon. Friend is right. We need a cultural change, and legislation of this nature can spur such change. In our schools, we also need an environment of openness and frankness, and to grow that throughout the education system. I know that my colleagues in the Department are looking at this and will provide further guidance to support teachers shortly.

I know and understand the concerns raised by hon. Members, including my right hon. Friends the Members for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) and for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), and my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), which is why the Government are acting on new clause 3. I can confirm explicitly that the Government amendment will include educational partnerships, including Confucius institutes, and that the OfS will be able to impose a wide range of proportionate remedies as specific conditions of registration. That could include requiring a provider to make available alternative provision, or even to terminate a partnership if necessary to protect free speech. We will ask the OfS and its new director to make it clear that those are possible remedies in the guidance that will be published.

We of course continue to welcome foreign investment and donations to higher education as a key part of supporting innovation and development, but the amendments will increase the transparency of overseas income by requiring granular data to be reported to the OfS. Our intention is to proscribe countries for the purpose of the amendment by mirroring the countries listed in the academic technology approval scheme, which will exclude countries such as our NATO and EU allies, as well as countries such as Japan. We also intend to set a threshold of £75,000 in regulations. Hon. Members should be assured that in each case the ability to make provision by way of regulations will allow us the flexibility to amend as appropriate.

Alicia Kearns: I thank my right hon. Friend for the significant time that she has invested in speaking to my colleagues and me about this. Can she confirm clearly that Confucius institutes will fall within the remit of the organisation she is discussing because of the grave concerns about their strangulation of freedom of speech and thought on British campuses?

Michelle Donelan: I can confirm that Confucius institutes fall within the scope of these proposals, as I have outlined, and I urge all universities to increase the choice that they provide to students in this regard.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Following the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), I wish to be assured on one point. Do the Government genuinely believe that the Confucius institutes pose a threat? Other Governments in the free world have banned the institutes from campuses, not only because they limit free speech, but because they have been involved in spying on Chinese students, especially those who show any kind of disregard for what China does. The institutes are very dangerous, and the issue goes wider than just the ability to shut down free speech: they are also reporting back about Chinese students, many of whom live in fear.

Michelle Donelan: Many countries have worked with their university sectors to enhance the choice on offer. For the first time, the Bill will give the OfS the power to act if free speech is in question, so it is radical in that sense.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I appreciate that the provision is mainly about free speech in UK universities, but does the Minister share my concern about the proposed £155 million gift from the billionaire chairwoman of a Vietnamese company to Linacre College, Oxford, a distinguished graduate college, on condition that the name of the college is changed to that of the chairwoman? Her company is extremely close to the Vietnamese Communist Government, where there is certainly very little freedom of speech. The Privy Council has to approve the change. Are the Government taking a view on the matter?

Michelle Donelan: I have recently been alerted to this issue and I am actively investigating it. I will update my right hon. Friend in coming days.

Government amendments 3 and 4 and 6 to 10 make provision on the payment of security costs for events. The amendments place a duty on higher education

providers, colleges and student unions not to pass on security costs unless in exceptional circumstances to secure freedom of speech within the law. The Government want to put an end to the practice of no-platforming by the back door, raised by many Members in Committee, including my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings.

I said then that I was listening, and the amendments address the concerns. We have seen reports that a student society faced a £500 security bill from Bristol University student union to allow the Israeli ambassador to give a talk, while charging nothing to allow his Palestinian counterpart to do the same. The Union of Jewish Students has reported to me that some Jewish societies have even been billed for security costs for having stalls at freshers' fairs. That is outrageous. If a university has a culture on campus in which security is required for inviting routine speakers, it has a culture in which intimidation, threats and violence are seen as acceptable. That does not constitute promoting free speech. The solution is to stamp that unacceptable culture out and stop student societies paying the price for those who break the law.

Government amendment 5 will change the coverage of college student unions, often called junior and middle common rooms. It makes it clear that the Bill does cover the activities of JCRs and MCRs, thereby clarifying the position.

Government amendment 11 will make it clear that the OfS is not required to make a decision as to the extent to which a free speech complainant is justified if that complaint is then withdrawn. Government amendments 12 and 15 set out how publication under the scheme will work in relation to the more general publication provisions recently inserted into the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 by the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022. In particular, the Bill provides for absolute privilege against defamation claims arising from publication of OfS's decisions under the complaints scheme, whereas the general provisions give qualified privilege to other publications. The absolute privilege matches the approach taken by Parliament to the complaints scheme run by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education.

Government amendments 1, 2 and 16 will remove the express limitation on the definition of academic freedom that it covers only matters within an academic's field of expertise. Once again, the Government have listened carefully to Members who raised issues in Committee, including my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings.

The Bill marks the Government delivering on our manifesto pledge, while listening and strengthening the Bill throughout.

6 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Before I discuss the amendments in my name, I will briefly reflect on the Bill Committee. Over three weeks, we debated some 80 amendments in a constructive spirit; I commend right hon. and hon. Members across the Committee who participated and contributed to what was at times an abstract debate, but an important one, about academic freedom and freedom of speech.

[Matt Western]

Since the end of the Committee stage, some 300 days have elapsed and—nothing. Despite constant speculation about whether the Bill would fall victim to the Government's own internal politics, it is finally on Report. The Opposition welcome that, but if I may say so, the Bill's fragmented and bumpy ride through Parliament is emblematic of what observers widely consider a shoddy piece of legislation, at best unnecessary and at worst divisive.

I wish to address the amendments in my name—new clause 4, on the director for freedom of speech and academic freedom; amendment 17, on the scope of academic freedom; amendment 18, which aims to recognise the competing freedoms in debates around freedom of speech; new clause 5, our proposed sunset clause; and amendments 19 and 20, which my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and I tabled on the prohibition of non-disclosure agreements—and the Government amendments.

New clause 4 would ensure that the director for freedom of speech and academic freedom has not donated, and cannot donate, to a political party while in post. It would ensure that both Houses of Parliament and the relevant Select Committee have a say on the person appointed. It would also provide for the Secretary of State to set up an independent advisory panel to suggest a suitable candidate for appointment.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I very much hope that when the Minister responds to new clause 4, she will acknowledge that the Government's track record on appointments has not been strong of late. The High Court has ruled that the then Health Secretary did not comply with the public sector equality duty when he appointed the head of a new public health quango. The chair of the Charity Commission resigned just days after being confirmed in post. The search for the chair of Ofcom was rerun after Ministers' recommendation was unsuccessful. Does my hon. Friend agree that the checks and balances in new clause 4 are vital to this important appointment?

Matt Western: The hon. Member is right. A pattern is clearly emerging, which I will describe and examine in due course.

Having an Orwellian director for freedom of speech sounds like a contradiction in terms, but the appointee will certainly have sweeping powers. They alone will be responsible for making sure that universities and student unions are upholding their freedom of speech duties. They will act as judge, jury and executioner in free speech complaints and will potentially monitor overseas funding of universities and student unions. As job descriptions go, it is unprecedented. Incredibly, the job description is already out there, for anyone who is interested, with a £100,000 salary and a four-year term—I am not sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it could be on your horizon.

New clause 4 should not be necessary, but in the context of this Government's record on appointees, it most definitely is. Let us start at the very top of the tree. In February last year, Lord Wharton, a Conservative peer, was appointed as chair of the Office for Students. His appointment was something of a surprise to many; he himself admitted that he had no experience in the

higher education sector. It seems that the only criterion for his appointment by this Government was that he had run the Prime Minister's leadership campaign.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The standardisation provided by allowing a body such as a Select Committee to interview a person before appointing them to a role such as chair of Ofsted is common. The Minister knows that, because she was on the Education Committee with me when we did pre-appointment hearings, so it seems a little unusual that scrutiny is not seen as being as important in this aspect of education as in other areas.

Matt Western: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need more process, more transparency and an honest approach if we are to clean up our politics. I absolutely believe that that is what I would want any organisation to have. We must move away from what appears to be an increasingly transactional approach to these appointments.

In return for his being appointed, Lord Wharton's company GBMW Ltd made what is now referred to as a golden thank you for being handed the job by the Prime Minister: a donation to the Conservative party of £8,000. That is small change for him, given that he gets paid £60,000 for just two days' work per week.

Last month, we discovered that Lord Wharton had chosen to speak at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Hungary. It was a sell-out. In his speech, he endorsed Viktor Orbán's far-right, autocratic regime—the regime that had forced George Soros's Central European University to leave Budapest in 2019. So much for our champions of academic freedom! He also shared a platform with Zsolt Bayer, a television talk show host in Hungary who has been widely denounced for his aggressive racism; his grotesque comments do not bear repeating in this place.

Despite widespread condemnation from student groups here such as the Union for Jewish Students, and cross-party calls for the Government to take action against the chair, it is telling that Ministers have so far refused to do so. That is important, because independence, propriety and accountability in public life absolutely matter. That is the point of new clause 4.

It seems that the politicisation of the Office for Students has not stopped there. Three months ago, the Secretary of State appointed Rachel Houchen, the wife of the Tory Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen, as a non-executive director on the board of the Office for Students, despite her having no direct experience in the higher education sector.

In that context, the comments made in Committee by one of the Government's own witnesses, Professor Nigel Biggar, especially alarmed the Opposition. He agreed that

“the Government...given the legislation...wants a director who has a certain partiality of that kind.”—[*Official Report, Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Public Bill Committee, 7 September 2021; c. 22, Q40.*]

Even the Government's own witnesses fear that the appointment will not be impartial: Dr Arif Ahmed and others made the point that the person “has to be impartial”.

In Committee, the Minister responded to a series of Opposition amendments by stating:

“There is no need to set up the bureaucracy of a non-statutory advisory body, as suggested by the amendment. The OfS is independent of the Government, so to do so would simply duplicate its role as set out in the statute.”—[*Official Report, Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Public Bill Committee*, 22 September 2021; c. 343.]

Well, clearly not. If the appointments to the OfS are meant to reassure us that the director will be impartial, they have lost all credibility. I dare say that the Minister will repeat the same line today, as she has done—blind to any suggestion of improvement, not least because this morning her Department advertised for the position even though the Bill has not even had its Third Reading.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is right that we had a useful, productive and positive exchange in Committee. I just want to correct the record for him because, knowing him well, I know that he would never mislead the House except inadvertently. Dr Ahmed—Professor Ahmed, I should say—is an enthusiastic supporter of this legislation and an enthusiastic supporter of the idea of having someone to oversee it. What he emphasised in his evidence and subsequently is that there should be impartiality in the exercise of that person’s work. This was not, as the hon. Gentleman suggests it is, about Dr Ahmed in any way questioning either the custom or practice associated with this legislation.

Matt Western: The right hon. Member was very involved in the Committee, and I thought that his contributions were robust and helped the debate along. I do not mean to misrepresent what Professor Arif Ahmed may have said, and he did say that this should be impartial. However, it was clear from what was said by Professor Biggar that that will not be possible if the Government want to do what they have set out to do. This is the point that I was trying to make, and if I did not make it clearly I apologise, but I have certainly tried to put it back on the record now.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Is the shadow Minister suggesting that by previous political association, someone can never be impartial in any possible future appointment?

Matt Western: I do not want to suggest that all people come from a position of partiality, but some are more partial—and overtly partial—than others. That was the whole point of what I tried to illustrate in the case of the chair of the Office for Students, who was clearly appointed according to the preference of the Government at the very highest level and the Prime Minister. I think that that surprise appointment, along with the appointment of the board member with no previous experience, is a further illustration of just how rabid this has become in our politics.

Emma Hardy: The issue of impartiality in the appointment process was debated in detail in Committee. We had a long debate about the job specification, the requirements, the importance of previous experience and the need to appoint someone with previous understanding of legislation and law, and the fact that the process needs to be impartial. When we appoint the

new chair of Ofsted, we do so not on the basis of whom the Prime Minister of the day particularly likes, but on the basis of whether that person has the competencies that the job requires, and that is the point of our amendment. If such a person is to be appointed, we need the best person for the job, not the person who is most popular with the current Prime Minister.

Matt Western: My hon. Friend made some telling and constructive contributions in Committee, and I entirely agree with her. If we want the best from any system of higher education and its regulation, competencies must be at the heart of that.

Have a look through the job description for the director for freedom of speech, Madam Deputy Speaker. Four or five specified qualities are sought. It is worth a read, and indeed I am thinking of possibly putting in for the job. What is most surprising of all—this arose both in the Bill Committee and during our witness sessions, as my hon. Friend and others will doubtless recall—is that despite the overriding impression that, given the sensitivity and importance involved and given how delicate some of these cases will become, legal experience would be a necessity, there is no requirement for that legal expertise. We must make the process involved in any public appointment much more robust, but that applies particularly to the appointment to a position as sensitive and delicate as overseeing freedom of speech on our campuses.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The hon. Gentleman just came out with the throwaway line that he was thinking of applying for the job. Well, good luck to him, but do his own words not rule him out? If he is a member or supporter of any political party, he is by definition no longer impartial. I find that a ludicrous statement, by the way, as I would happily see members of the Labour party chair things because I would consider that they would be impartial, but the hon. Gentleman obviously does not.

Matt Western: Of course it was a throwaway line, but the job does pay £100,000. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman has a second job, but I do not, unlike so many on the Government Benches who may have second jobs. It goes without saying, in my book, that that person should resign if he or she is a member of a political party—that a person in such a sensitive role should be seen to be unalloyed by association, because perception is so important in this context. Of course I made that remark in jest, but it does seem to be a staggering amount of money that the Government are throwing at this post.

6.15 pm

Let me now move on. The sector expects those leading the Office for Students to be credible. If we really are to have a director for free speech, a person tasked with the job of settling contentious cases, it is in all our interests for that person to have a broad understanding of the sector, the legal framework around free speech to which I have referred, and the sector’s regulatory framework, but those elements are apparently not included in this job description. Such considerations would endow the director with greater legitimacy and authority, especially if he or she is to command the confidence of the Select

Committee and both Houses. In short, new clause 4 is a common-sense amendment prioritising independence, accountability, and authority over top-down, partisan decision making.

Amendment 17, also tabled in my name, touches on one of the central tenets of the Bill, namely academic freedom. This can clearly be a fluid concept that has different meanings for different people in different contexts. Before I speak to that amendment, however, I want to address Government amendments 1, 2 and 16, which would remove the words

“and within their field of expertise”

from the definition of academic freedom. Although, both on Second Reading and in Committee, we expressed our concerns and those of the sector about how the Bill in its current form would in fact curtail academic freedom, only now have the Government moved on this. It is a shame that it took them just shy of 400 days to sit up and take note. Perhaps that demonstrates not just the disdain that Ministers show to academics and teaching staff, but their failure to appreciate the nature of our rightly admired, polymathic academic environment. Amendment 17, however, gives Ministers and the Conservative party an opportunity to demonstrate the extent of their support for academics.

Labour’s second amendment is partly inspired by part VI of the UNESCO definition of academic freedom. In the UNESCO definition, the concept of academic freedom is broken down into five parts: freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom to research and publish the results thereof, freedom for higher education teaching staff to express their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship, and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies.

Let me briefly address the issue of research. Evidence submitted to the Public Bill Committee, notably by Professor Stephen Whittle, highlighted instances in which some universities have blocked research that they deemed too controversial. While such cases are few and far between—partly owing to the Government-encouraged marketisation of the sector and the promotion of students as customers—I see no reason why the research interests of academics should not be protected under the definition of academic freedom. That said, academics are employees of higher education providers, institutions that will always require an academic to deliver teaching and research that satisfy the needs of students.

It is also important to link academic freedom to internationally recognised standards, given the Government’s stated desire to rip up the Human Rights Act. Before the Minister tabled an amendment to remove the words

“and within their field of expertise”,

coupled with plans to repeal the Human Rights Act, that would have left academics less protected than those in Europe. Nothing can be more important in this Bill than the scope of academic freedom, and that is why Labour’s amendment is so vital. Protecting academic freedom goes beyond partisan political lines, as it provides a solid basis on which academics feel secure enough to test and challenge perceived wisdom. I urge Conservative Members to consider the interests of academics, and to support our amendment this evening.

I now want to turn to amendment 18, which recognises that in many cases where freedom of speech is called into question there are competing freedoms at play. It would therefore require the director to consider the right of students to feel safe, along with other legal duties of the provider when reaching a decision about a particular case. The Minister herself acknowledged on Radio 4 that the Bill emboldens holocaust deniers and other purveyors of hate speech by giving them the power to make vexatious complaints against universities. Invariably, there are competing interests at stake when speakers are invited on to our campuses.

Freedom of speech is not a trump card. Students also have a right not to be harassed, a right not to be subjected to hate speech and, perhaps most importantly, a right to protest. The right for students to feel safe on campus sometimes requires greater protection than that afforded to them under the Equality Act, especially in instances of reprehensible but lawful speech, such as holocaust denial. Professor Stephen Whittle from Manchester Metropolitan University acknowledged as much in the Bill Committee, recognising that the Equality Act would afford protection only if the speech were directly addressed to the complainant. That is important because front groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is not a proscribed organisation but which often espouses antisemitic views, could come on to campus under the guise of freedom of speech. That point was not lost on the director of the Antisemitism Policy Trust, Danny Stone, who views it as a “real concern”. In such cases, the right of students—in this example, Jewish students—to feel safe on campus clearly must be considered. The Minister’s approach to the sensitive issues reported in the press overlooks those competing freedoms. It is perhaps a symptom of the Government’s singular desire to

“create political and cultural dividing lines mainly for”—

their—

“advantage”.

Those are not my words but those of the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman).

I want to turn briefly to new clause 5. It would introduce a sunset clause to the Bill, ensuring that it expired after three years, and provides for clauses to be removed if they are not working. The new clause does not deny the importance of freedom of speech or academic freedom, or our commitment on this side of the House to both. It addresses the flimsy evidence base underpinning the Bill. Last week at the Higher Education Policy Institute annual conference, the Minister struggled to provide concrete evidence to show that there was a freedom of speech crisis in our universities, other than anecdotes and what she believed to be true.

Michelle Donelan: You were not even there.

Matt Western: I read every word. I read them with interest.

Only last week, the HEPI student academic experience survey revealed that a majority of students—64%—either agreed or agreed strongly with the statement:

“I feel comfortable expressing my viewpoint, even if my peers do not agree with me”.

Only 14% disagreed.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the legislation is totally unnecessary and divisive, with little evidence to support the Government's position that there has been a rise in intolerance and a creeping culture of censorship? The Office for Students' own data showed that out of 10,000 events with external speakers, only six were cancelled.

Matt Western: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. Yes, there are issues out there, but that is about the scale of it. That is what has been uncovered in the surveys and analysis done by the Office for Students and by others. The scale is being exaggerated by the Government in order to make this legislation. It would be nonsensical to ignore shifting attitudes, and new clause 5 would allow for well-informed public policy guided by evidence rather than by Ministers' latest lightning rod of choice.

Our amendments 19 and 20 would ensure that non-disclosure agreements or confidentiality agreements between those listed in the Bill and higher education providers did not inhibit freedom of speech, save where it was expressly agreed to between the parties to protect intellectual property. I will defer to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley, with whom I have tabled amendment 19, to explore that further. She is a tireless campaigner on the issue and I commend her work in bringing it to the House's attention on Report. I hope that the Minister, who has previously stated her commitment to stamp out that practice, will take on board our suggestions.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to push the Minister on some of the finer points of the Government amendments. The illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russia has rightly thrown a spotlight on the source of foreign investment and money in our public institutions. The misguided "golden era" ushered in by David Cameron and George Osborne in 2015, in which foreign nation states acquired substantial control over key parts of our national infrastructure, must come to an end.

The Government's new clause 2 is much preferable to new clause 1, tabled by Conservative Back Benchers, particularly on the risk-based approach of the Government's suggestion, but I have some concerns about new clause 2's practical effect. The Minister suggests that it is her stated aim to reduce the data burden in the higher education sector. It is for that reason that I am interested in ascertaining how the new clause will be both proportionate and balanced. For example, the threshold at which providers have to report foreign donations is set to be determined by the Secretary of State in regulations, so it is disappointing that once again the Minister seemingly chose to brief it to *The Times* that the threshold would be set at £75,000—as she mentioned earlier—rather than allow the House to have a meaningful debate on what is appropriate. This is not on the face of the Bill. Interestingly, when we contrast this to the reporting threshold in the United States, which is \$250,000—just over the equivalent of £200,000—the Government seem at risk of disincentivising foreign investment by implementing additional bureaucratic burdens.

I am also concerned about the scope of new clause 2, and I would be grateful if the Minister could expand a bit more on what is meant by "constituent institutions." How much direct control does a higher education provider need to have over a constituent institution for it to fall under the remit of the new clause? For example, would

Cambridge University Press be covered? My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) referred to that earlier. Relatedly, some of the requirements in the new clause are quite technical and may require fine judgment. It is likely that the value of non-monetary benefits—human capital and access to data, for example—will be difficult to ascertain. Could the Minister therefore detail what steps she is taking to ensure that universities are supported in determining the value of the partnerships they sign?

The Government's proposal hands the responsibility for the new clause to the director for freedom of speech, making the director's appointment all the more important. This adds further justification to our new clause 4, and I hope that Conservative MPs will consider that when they go through the Lobby later. Given that the regulator has limited prior experience of dealing with research partnerships or commercial arrangements, what additional resources will be provided to the OfS to handle this new responsibility?

Labour has tabled some important amendments in the same manner and spirit as we did in Committee. Let us remember that we debated a staggering 80-plus amendments in Committee at that time—it is a 19-page report—and now we have these few. Such a number would seem to underline just what a big dog's breakfast the legislation is, and I am sure that those in the other place will spend many an hour realising what poor quality red meat lies at the bottom of it.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am grateful to be called to speak so early, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to focus my comments on new clause 3, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) and signed by myself and others. The issue that I wish to touch on is the behaviour of some universities with regard to funding from countries that have the exact opposite view from ours on how freedom of speech should work. It was suggested earlier that we should be very careful about trying to insert ourselves into the funding of universities, but I think to the contrary to some degree, and I shall raise a case relating to that. I believe that when money is accepted from countries whose purpose is to undermine the nature of how we live our lives—including in regards to freedom of speech—that helps to pervert the processes of the institutions and universities.

One important question is whether there is a weakness in the Bill in one particular area, and that is to do with the Confucius Institute. I do not apologise for naming that particular organisation, because countries such as Germany, the United States and others that are quite close to us have already decided that that institute is not based around learning and academia and that it is in fact set up for an ulterior purpose, which is essentially to bully Chinese students in particular, but even other students, and to report back on the behaviour of many Chinese students studying in British universities. This has been evidenced in a number of countries. I would therefore have liked to see the UK Government, in line with this amendment and national security, take the power to stop such organisations where there is clear and compelling evidence that their purpose is not the stated purpose of delivering Chinese language and cultural instruction but enabling the Chinese Government to understand who is saying the right things and who is saying the wrong things.

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

To that extent, the Confucius institutes have even inserted themselves into schools. Many Confucius institutes have developed strong ties with local schools, and their provision of language assistance is seen as a very high-value contribution. It starts early now, and it extends.

6.30 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is educating me. I have similar concerns in my constituency and across Birmingham. In recent weeks and months we have seen a huge resettlement of people from Hong Kong, and I want children to feel completely and utterly safe in their school environment.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The hon. Lady is right that a lot of Hong Kong citizens have come to the UK, and I embrace them all. I set up the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, which has co-chairs on the left and right from 25 countries and many other members from Parliaments around the world, all of whom agree that the Confucius institutes pose a genuine threat. The fear factor means that many students of Chinese origin will not take part in debates because they genuinely fear the repercussions for themselves and their families when they go home. We cannot overestimate the power of organisations that represent a Government as intolerant and dictatorial as the Chinese Government. The UK Government have been slow to act on what is now clear evidence.

My right hon. Friend the Minister said the Bill will deal with the situation, and that the Office for Students will be able to take action where necessary, but I would like the Government to reserve that power to themselves as they understand the security issues in this narrow but very particular area.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My right hon. Friend slightly understates the position in universities. He will be aware that Chinese students now account for some £2 billion of revenue for British universities, nine of which, mostly in the Russell Group, get 20% of their revenue from Chinese students.

There is now clear evidence that, through 30 Confucius institutes and beyond, undue influence is being exercised by Chinese students at the behest of China's communist Government. The CGTN television station, which was fortunately taken off air by Ofcom, targeted British universities and offered students the chance to win thousands of pounds by becoming pro-Beijing social media influencers. Chinese students turned out to overturn freedom of speech and other motions in student union debates at China's behest. Dangerous stuff is happening under our nose. We need complete transparency about exactly what is happening, and we need legislation to make sure it does not continue as it is.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. He and I are both members of IPAC, and we have seen all this ourselves. Colleagues on both sides of the House are involved in IPAC, and there is compelling evidence of the Chinese Government's growing influence on British academia through various organisations. Many do not recognise it. We have had meetings with Russell Group universities and individual colleges—I will address

one in particular—in which we have explained this. Many had not really thought about it but, on reflection, realised there was a problem and that they had to start diversifying. One or two arrogantly refused point blank to admit or even accept the situation.

Jesus College, Cambridge has been incredibly deliberate and arrogant, which is why the Government need to go further. The Jesus College Global Issues Dialogue Centre received a grant of £200,000 from the Chinese state in 2018 through its National Development and Reform Commission. The Jesus College China Centre also has close financial and organisational links with the Cambridge China Development Trust, which is funded by the Chinese state. The CCDT donated £80,000 to the Jesus College China Centre over three years, and they share the same director. CCDT funding has been used to fund the Jesus College China Centre's doctorships, scholarships, administrative support and seminars.

Jesus College received £155,000 of funding from Huawei in 2018. We have banned Huawei from our telecoms system because it is a security risk, yet it has set up a huge centre in and around Cambridge. For what purpose? To get in through the back door.

The GIDC's white paper on global technology governance claimed an equivalence between the Chinese Government's mass online censorship regime and the UK Government's attempts to eradicate child abuse online—that is the key. The same paper falsely claimed that Huawei had freely shared all its intellectual property on 5G technology, leading the college to be accused of "reputation laundering."

To those who say that money does not have an impact, I say, "Oh yes it does." When money is repeatedly on offer, it tends to bend institutions towards the idea of having that extra money. I understand their concerns and their need for financial support, but the Government need to take this seriously.

The Chinese Government are committing genocide and using slave labour to produce goods in Xinjiang, and technology derived from UK universities is being used to spy on those slave labour camps. China is also using slave labour in Tibet, and it is imposing itself and locking up peaceful democracy campaigners in Hong Kong.

We rightly talk of free speech and the importance of our young people developing an instinct for argument, debate and balance, but these are lost to China and Chinese students, who are fearful when they come here. I accept that the Government think they have this covered, but I wish they would look again.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton enormously on tabling new clause 3. If the Bill is not tightened up to that degree, many of us on the left and the right of politics will ensure in the other place that these abuses cannot happen. The lives of Chinese students and Chinese people more widely remain our responsibility. If freedom of speech is the subject of our debate, we should cry for how damaged and destroyed it is elsewhere.

Jess Phillips: It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). I fear that Cambridge University will not come out well from my speech either.

The debate is about freedom of speech on campus. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) pointed to six cancellations—in my view, that is six too many—but I am going to talk about the silencing in non-disclosure agreements, which thousands of people are suffering from.

We know that the data on violence and abuse, and certainly on sexual violence, is a tiny fraction of the reality, but even that data shows that millions of pounds are being spent on this issue. The amendment tabled in my name and that of my hon. Friend and near neighbour the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), would stop young men and women—including university staff—being prevented from speaking about their experiences on campus. That is what this is all about, isn't it? It is about people being able to talk about their lives, experiences, beliefs and freedoms on campus. Currently, we are all sitting by while that section of the community, who may have been raped on campus, bullied, harassed or racially abused, can be silenced by that very institution and cannot speak about it at all. I am going to talk about those people.

Horrendous examples of silencing have been reported in the press. Brave women have spoken out even though they know the risks. According to one student, her university imposed a “blanket gagging order” on her after she alleged she was violently raped by another undergraduate. The victim claimed she was warned she would be expelled if she went to the press to report this violence or to talk about the college procedures. That gives you a clue as to where some of these people are from, because I said the word “college”; most other universities do not say that. The non-disclosure agreement was imposed. Apparently, the college had tried

“desperately to convince her not to complain”

and she had

“lost count of the members of staff who tried to silence, scare, threaten and undermine”

her.

According to an investigation by the magazine *Elle*, a student alleged she was sexually assaulted and then endured terrible treatment from the university relating to her claim of violence. Post-graduation, she complained to the university about how it had handled her situation. She was eventually offered £1,000 compensation, without any admission of wrongdoing, and with a non-disclosure agreement to prevent her from talking about it. The student, exhausted by her experiences, signed the NDA.

Dr Lewis *rose—*

Alicia Kearns *rose—*

Jess Phillips: It does not seem very feminist, but I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Dr Lewis: I have not heard of this case before. Did the student not go to the police? If she did, what happened?

Jess Phillips: I almost wish for the right hon. Gentleman's sake that I had taken the other intervention. Has he seen the figures on police rape recording and reporting? In the first instance that I was talking about, the individual absolutely went to the police. Of the 66,000 women—I am speaking only about women now; there will have been more—who came forward and said that they had been raped last year, a charge will have been faced in

about 600 of those cases; and then look at the number of convictions. Are we expecting our institutions, our workplaces, our university institutions not to have a role to play in supporting people when that has happened? As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman know, the balance of probability has a different relation to civil law than criminal law, so the idea that if a woman did not go the police she should not be allowed to complain to her institution is not one that I recognise and it is not one that this House recognised when we set up an independent complaints system. However, what often gets said to women when they come forward to their employer, to their institution, is, “Why didn't you tell the police?”

6.45 pm

Alicia Kearns: I rise to urge the hon. Lady to name the institutions, because this Bill is about freedom of choice and of speech. I know that if I were a 17 or 18-year-old girl choosing university again, I would actively choose not to attend colleges or universities where I knew they might force an NDA on me if I was raped.

Jess Phillips: I will absolutely come on to naming some of those institutions. As I said, this was found by *Elle* magazine, which is collecting this data, unlike the Government at the moment. The article said the student claimed this arrangement felt

“worse than the assault—Dealing with this abuse of power was far more traumatic. It was emotionally exhausting and humiliating.”

Earlier this year, the *Express* took a day off from talking about Princess Diana and its investigation revealed that more than 3,500 cases of assault were reported in 78 institutions in the UK in the last five years. The figure consists of confirmed cases of sexual violence and disclosures made by both staff and students pending investigation. The 135 freedom of information requests sent to every university in the UK also revealed that many do not record figures of sexual assaults, so the overall number is likely to be much higher. So it is, “Just don't record it and then it doesn't happen.”

In 2020, a BBC investigation found that over 300 NDAs were used by universities in student complaints between 2016 and 2020, and that almost a third of all universities in England had used such deals in these circumstances. The probe discovered that universities had paid out £1.3 million on these deals, although the true scale is thought to be much larger. The campaign Can't Buy My Silence was started by the brilliant and formidable Zelda Perkins, once an assistant to Harvey Weinstein and someone who had an NDA imposed on her related to his crimes, and Professor Julie Macfarlane. Their campaign has survivors' testimony reporting that NDAs had gagged them from speaking of their experiences with family or loved ones, or even their therapists. I pay tribute to them and the work they are doing alongside the Minister, whom I know speaks to them. However, like me, they agree that legislation is necessary to tackle this.

So far, 66 universities have signed the Government's pledge. I made this speech on Second Reading and since then the Government added “looking at non-disclosure agreements” into the violence against women and girls strategy, which was published late at the end of last year. I stand here in complete respect for the Minister. She has sought to do what she can to improve the situation.

[Jess Phillips]

She has worked with the campaigns that I have talked about to get universities signing pledges. She is working with the Office for Students to look at regulation and at what needs to happen if these things are breached. Every Member of Parliament will have had to try to get a regulator to do something about their bad cases, and we are here with universities signing “pledges”. I do not know how we are going to know whether they are breaking their pledge if people have been gagged.

So far, 66 universities have signed the Government’s pledge. That is great, but why haven’t the others? I encourage every university to do this. There are over 130 universities in the UK. What about those students? What about their right to speak out? As the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) pointed out, she would want to hear about this. I am not going to list all the universities that have not signed it, but here are some: the University of Cambridge, King’s College London, the London School of Economics, the University of Wolverhampton and the University of Sunderland. That is just to name a few. Perhaps it is taking time and perhaps they are getting around to it. I very much encourage them to do it.

Just to show the House what I am talking about, I have an example here of one of these NDAs. This is the kind of thing that students are asked to do. It is not necessarily called a non-disclosure agreement, and that is a way out of this; the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) and I often challenge organisations when they say they do not have NDAs, because we have them in our inboxes and they call them something else. They will call them a “confidentiality agreement”. In lots of cases in universities we have seen the growth of “no contact arrangements”.

I will read this agreement out—this is from the university. It says, “We recognise the sensitive nature of the allegation involved. In consideration of our duty of care to both parties, we have therefore concluded that in the interest of both parties a non-contact arrangement is required.” This young woman who had been raped was told, exactly as the person accused of raping her was told, that she had to stay out of certain places; she could not go to certain things at certain times. She was told that she, “Is not to enter the building”, that her, “Fob access will be disabled” and that she is, “Not to enter the building unless for tutorials and classes notified in advance.” She is told, “Fob access will be disabled unless we have had advance notification”—this is a rape victim being told that she has to report to a guard so that she can go to her classes. She is also told, “You are asked not to make any information about these allegations, the police investigation or the safeguarding arrangements that we have made available on any form of public media”—so she should not talk about this document. Finally, she is told, “Evidence of repeated breaches of this arrangement and/or a serious breach of conditions—entering an embargoed building or publishing material in the press—will result in your expulsion.” That is from one of the finest universities in the world.

This is about people’s silence, but not just their silence; it is about their movement, their freedom and every element of their freedom of expression being stopped. Yet there is nothing in the Bill about freedom of speech,

freedom of expression or freedom to study. There is nothing that the Government are proposing to do or to put in legislation. I simply do not understand why they would not have taken this opportunity to do something.

I met the Minister last week and, as I said, I do not doubt her total and utter commitment. Incidentally, she said earlier that “legislation of this nature can spur culture change.” Yet she told me last week that legislation is not always the answer—[*Interruption.*] I will take the intervention, by all means. No? Okay. She also explained to me that the Office for Students is looking at regulation to, for example, take away the status of a university if it is guilty of a breach. I responded—and I say again—that the idea that a rape victim who has signed a non-disclosure agreement will take down Cambridge University is the stuff of cinematic hopeful glory. I will believe that when I see it, which everybody in this building knows will be never. Why would we want to push universities and victims into that position? Why would we not legislate to stop the use of non-disclosure agreements?

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I do not want to spoil the flow of my hon. Friend’s incredibly eloquent speech, but non-disclosure agreements not only apply to students but are used extensively with staff. When we have discussed this issue before, the argument has been that there is sufficient employment law to deal with these matters. There clearly is not, because it does not reflect the balance of forces between employer and employee and the delays that take place. Surely we must legislate to scrap NDAs altogether, and the first step could be the inclusion of my hon. Friend’s amendment in the Bill.

Jess Phillips: I absolutely agree, and the amendment clearly covers staff being able to talk about their experiences. The Minister cited a member of staff who felt compelled to leave their employment because of what the Minister rightly pointed out was bullying. Had that member of staff signed a non-disclosure agreement, the Minister would never have been able to talk about them, and nor would that particular employee of that particular university. We would not even know what had happened. Had a non-disclosure agreement been signed in that case, which was, I believe, at the University of Sussex, the Minister would not have had her helpful example.

I took part in a debate on the television the other day about freedom of speech. A Government Member of Parliament, who I like and respect, turned to me and said, “The thing is, Jess, that no one can be forced to sign a non-disclosure agreement”—I just said my own name. Is that allowed? I don’t have to refer to myself as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley?

Dr Lewis: It was a quote.

Jess Phillips: Yes, that’s right.

That Government Member said, “You can’t be forced to sign”, but that is to totally misunderstand the power imbalance. Someone might have worked hard and be the first in their family to go to university. They might have studied and done everything they could, because they wanted to go and make something of themselves. They might get into an institution that they are proud to say they are from. The fact that they could be raped on that campus by another student and complain, but then be threatened that they will be expelled if they

speak out points to an enormous power imbalance. It is something that this House should legislate on for the sake of freedom of speech.

I welcome the Minister saying that she will take the proposals away, listen and perhaps do something in the House of Lords later in the process, but under this Bill, without our amendments, if a woman or a man, whether staff or student, is raped on campus, that person's freedom of speech will be completely and utterly denied on campus and outside, and we would do nothing about it. Freedom of speech surely has to mean freedom of speech for all.

Sir John Hayes: Benjamin Disraeli said:

"Upon the education of the people...the fate of this country depends."

That greatest of Conservative Prime Ministers went on to say:

"A university should be a place of life, of liberty and of learning."

However, if the flame of liberty is to burn brightly, and if the university sector is to be a beacon of learning, we must face up to the fact that, in many of our universities, freedom of speech is in jeopardy, censorship is happening as we speak tonight, and academics and students feel intimidated by that censorship.

We know that from the evidence that the Bill Committee heard from academics on the frontline of that struggle. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), quoted Professor Arif Ahmed, who was clear that there is a series of means by which universities restrict and limit freedom of speech. He said:

"what I mean is universities placing formal obstacles in the way of people saying things that are perfectly legal."—[*Official Report, Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Public Bill Committee*, 7 September 2021; c. 13, Q22.]

He went on to say, quoting the Universities and Colleges Union survey of 2017, that

"35% of academics self-censor"—[*Official Report, Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Public Bill Committee*, 7 September 2021; c. 16, Q27.]

because they are nervous about saying what they truly believe; the number of students doing so is probably even greater. The truth is that there is a tyrannical minority in universities, among the academic staff and in the student body, who do not believe that universities are places of light, liberty and learning; instead, they think that universities should limit free speech.

I find it hard to understand why Opposition Members such as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), whom I respect greatly, and the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington, with whom I have—I was going to say "collaborated", but that makes me sound rather like a fifth columnist—co-operated in this place on many subjects, oppose a Bill designed to reinforce precisely the freedoms that are essential to an open society. I thought about that and cogitated on how it could be that such decent and honourable people—I include the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) as well—could do this.

In doing so, I should draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in respect of higher education, as I did perpetually and—some people felt—relentlessly during the previous

stages of our consideration of the Bill. By the way, I stimulated a number of others to do the same, and I have no doubt that they will want to chip in on a similar basis this evening.

The conclusion I drew, having thought about it, was that those decent people on the Labour Benches who certainly believe in free speech and the exchange of honestly held opinion find that hard to reconcile with a zeitgeist that is preoccupied with a fear of causing offence. We are perpetually told now that because we must not make people feel uncomfortable, we must not offend them. We in this House know, do we not, that the ability to alarm is closely associated with the ability to inspire, that the ability to disturb is intrinsically linked with the ability to enthral, and that even the capacity to shock is necessary in the development and exposure of new ideas and fresh thinking?

Emma Hardy rose—

Sir John Hayes: Having said such nice things about the hon. Lady, it would be extremely impolite of me not to give way.

7 pm

Emma Hardy: I say to the right hon. Member that, as Bill Committees go, it was a very enjoyable one. I thank him for being one of the few Conservative Members who listens to the contributions. On the point he is making, it is not about disagreeing with this idea of shocking people or of having different opinions; the fundamental problem, as I have said repeatedly, is how this piece of legislation interacts with existing legislation already in place. How does this interact with equality legislation? How does this interact with other existing pieces of legislation? My concern is further developed when I see the person who is making the decision on how these different pieces of legislation interact with each other. It is, as has been mentioned—and this is the reason for new clause 4—somebody appointed by the Prime Minister of the day, which then leads to all those issues around impartiality of process. We have a situation here where we have a piece of legislation that almost butts up against existing equality legislation, but it is not quite clear how their processes will rub together, yet there is no specification that the person making the decisions has to have legal experience or knowledge; they are instead a political appointment. That is where we have the difficulty—it is not with freedom of speech, but with the legislation itself.

Sir John Hayes: At the risk of putting our professional association in jeopardy, I say to the hon. Lady that I agree with her. I agree that the Government need to look at the equality legislation. I note the Attorney General's recent comments that, as well as unpicking the Human Rights Act 1998, which we certainly should do without delay, we need to revisit the Equality Act 2010 and the rest of the long tail of Blairism. The hon. Lady is right that some of that unfortunate legislation on the statute book is inhibiting much of the very good work that the Government are trying to do. In particular, she is right—that this was raised in Committee by me and others—that the Government need to be very clear that this legislation can be squared with other statute and, so the means by which it might be challenged.

Emma Hardy: I think it might also be worth the Government having a look at the recent legislation that they have already passed on the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and the issues around protest and free speech. We could end up with a situation where free speech is the preserve of students who attend university, but those outside university will have their free speech limited unless they are very, very quiet and do not protest too loudly. We could end up with more conflict, with one part of the Government saying one thing in terms of restricting protest, and another part of the Government saying something else about supporting free speech. It is fair to say that having this Bill along with existing and proposed legislation will create a muddle.

Sir John Hayes: We are dealing with a complex subject. Free speech by its very nature means people saying all kinds of things in all kinds of ways about all kinds of subjects. The hon. Lady is right that there will be tensions to be settled, which is precisely why the Government have put in place mechanisms to do that. They are going to appoint, as was said earlier, an office with responsibility for ensuring that this Bill's intentions and provisions are applied consistently. The Government acknowledge the difficulties that she has highlighted, which is precisely why they are putting in place a person and team to do exactly that.

Dr Julian Lewis *rose*—

Sir John Hayes: I can see that my right hon. Friend is about to make an erudite intervention.

Dr Lewis: You can always hope, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Does my right hon. Friend not feel as I do that the interventions that he has just taken show that perhaps the diminutions on free speech have already spread into other areas of legislation rather further than he and I would like them to have done?

Sir John Hayes: I agree entirely, which is precisely why this Bill is so welcome, but it needs to be part of a bigger programme of work by the Government to do what I described earlier, which is to unpick some of the legacy of the dark days of Blairism and the impact that that has had on all kinds of aspects of our wellbeing. My hon. Friend is right. This Bill is significant, but modest, so let it be the beginning of a crusade to establish freedom as the default position across all our legislative considerations in exactly the way—with erudition and diligence, matched by experience—that my right hon. Friend illustrates.

Free speech is complex and, in the words of the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington, may be seen as an abstraction, but if it is an abstraction, it is one that is essential for the wellbeing of our free society, for it is at the very heart of what an open society is all about. The ability to say things which, as I said earlier, alarm, disturb, or even shock, and hear things with which we disagree is the very nature of what good universities are all about. I fear that that is jeopardised by some of the thinking that permeates universities, particularly university leaders and managers. For example, Professor Ahmed also spoke of

“issues to do with race, with transgender, and with Israel and Palestine on which they were simply unwilling to say what they thought”—[*Official Report, Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Public Bill Committee*, 7 September 2021; c. 13, Q22.]

people fear the consequences of doing so. It is not just those issues, although those are notable among the list of things that people now regard as beyond the scope of free and open debate.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he not agree that much of the controversy surrounding this Bill comes from a conflation of physical safety with emotional and intellectual safety? Although students should have the right to be physically safe on campus, there is no right to feel safe and, as he rightly says, universities are the place where we should feel emotionally and intellectually challenged and, perhaps, unsafe at times.

Sir John Hayes: Burke said, as you well know, Mr Deputy Speaker:

“He that struggles with us strengthens our nerves, and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper.”

Part of developing intellectually and personally, particularly for young people at university—we should not assume that only young people go to university—is exactly that. It is being stimulated, sometimes being excited, sometimes being challenged and, yes, sometimes being offended. I am often offended in this Chamber by all kinds of things, and not always things that I hear from those on the Opposition Benches.

Emma Hardy: Even if the right hon. Gentleman is offended, he is never offensive, so I always enjoy debating with him. On the issue of the need to challenge and to shock, there is always a line to be drawn somewhere. In Committee we talked about the offensiveness of holocaust denial. Okay, there is not a physical threat from holocaust denial, but I think that we would all agree that it is very offensive and it is therefore very hurtful. A line will always have to be drawn when it comes to free speech, but we have the difficulty, which I keep going back to, of who makes the decision on where that line is drawn—what experience do they have, what criteria is set, what is their knowledge, and what is their understanding of the subject. Having the right person at the top is important. I am sure that the right hon. Member will accept that, yes, someone might want to offend, to shock or to stimulate discussion, but there is always a point at which we say, “No, that is not intellectual stimulation. That is just offensive and rude and not part of an intellectual debate at university.”

Sir John Hayes: Yes, but the problem is that that line moves with the times, with fad and fashion, with what I described earlier as the zeitgeist. Perhaps the most chilling example of that is the case of Kathleen Stock. The hon. Lady will remember that Kathleen Stock gave evidence to the Bill Committee of which she was part. Within a few weeks, Kathleen Stock was driven out of her job as a distinguished professor at the University of Sussex by the mob, a group of students who pursued her and intimidated her and her family.

Kathleen Stock received scant support from many of her academic colleagues, although latterly the university authorities claimed they were supportive, and she was so affected and so damaged by all that that she ended up leaving the job she loved. I thought how chilling and ironic that she should have been one of the people who

came to us, as Members of this House, to a Bill Committee debating this Bill, and yet just weeks later found herself a victim of the very problem she highlighted and emphasised in her evidence.

I will move fairly rapidly on to the amendments that stand in my name, Mr Deputy Speaker, because otherwise you will claim that I am making a Second Reading speech—and with some just cause.

Dr Lewis rose—

Sir John Hayes: But before I do so, I will happily give way to my right hon. Friend.

Dr Lewis: My right hon. Friend is so kind. He has just given a terrible example at the extreme end of the spectrum of intimidation and restriction on free speech, but does he share my concern about the paranoid issuing of so-called trigger warnings or alerts, which are meant to protect students from hearing anything that they might find in the least discomfiting or disturbing? How does that prepare them for going out into the real world, where they are, whether they like it or not, going to hear things that are not to their liking? They will be under-prepared for that terrible ordeal.

Sir John Hayes: Almost every part of the canon of our great literature now seems to come with a health warning. From “Moby-Dick” to “Jane Eyre”, we are told that books are desperately dangerous for young people to read. That this is happening in schools and, amazingly, in universities is almost beyond belief. Snow has turned to ice: they are no longer snowflakes, they are in deep freeze, those people who dare not even read Austen, the Brontës or George Eliot—of those three, I strongly recommend George Eliot, by the way, but let us move on before I get into any more literary considerations.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: No, no—Austen!

Sir John Hayes: I thought my right hon. Friend was going to challenge my literary knowledge, but let us move to the amendments.

The Government have moved a considerable way since we debated the matter in Committee, and I congratulate and thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for Universities for her earlier words and especially for what she has done. She listened carefully in Committee. Often, when Ministers in Committee say, “I’ll take that away and think about it.”, we know they are going through the motions, but not this Minister, any more than I did when I was a Minister.

I think it is important that Bills metamorphosise through scrutiny and that Governments listen to argument—including arguments from those on the Opposition Benches, by the way. When I was a Minister, I would often go back to my civil servants and say, “Well, what the shadow Minister said seemed to make a lot of sense to me. Why aren’t we doing that?”. That is a very effective way for Ministers to challenge their own officials when they hear cogent and sensible arguments put from all parts of the House. That is precisely what this Minister did, and the Government amendments, on which I will not comment in any detail, reflect her consideration of the strong arguments that we used to strengthen this Bill, which she has now done in a number of respects.

7.15 pm

Having said that, I want the Minister to go further. She will have seen the new clauses and the amendment in my name, and I will deal with them very briefly. The first deals with the matter of staff beyond those who are full-time employees of the university. That point was made by hon. Members across the House, because the character of employment at universities has changed. Very often, universities now employ temporary staff, visiting staff and so on, and it is important that everyone associated with the university is protected by the provisions of this legislation. The purpose of new clause 6 is to include,

“any academic staff (however engaged or employed), honorary, visiting and emeritus academic members”,

and providers of academic expertise.

New clause 7 and amendment 21 deal with exactly the point that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle raised: the relationship between this legislation and the Equality Act. We received assurances from the Minister about that in Committee, and I have made further representations to her since then. Of course, I have no doubt that the upper House, the other place, will return to those matters, but the hon. Lady is right that it is important from a legislative perspective that the Bill works with other statute and that its provisions are not successfully challenged by recourse to other laws. I hope the Minister might say a word or two more about that in respect of the new clause and amendment in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt).

In summary, I believe this Bill is an appropriate, apposite and sensible response to growing concerns in universities about free speech being inhibited. I am disappointed with the Opposition—I say that with some distress—that they voted against Second Reading. I thought they would not as I thought they would try to improve and amend it. They were caught on the horns of a dilemma, because in Committee they did just that, and again today I see amendments, some of which I have some sympathy with, in the name of the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington and others. Their amendments are designed to improve the Bill, yet simultaneously they deny that there is a problem.

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) has said that we should not “pick fights with students”. If we have to pick a fight with the tyrants among students, then so be it; there are people among student bodies who do not believe in freedom in the way that most people in this Chamber do, who want to see that freedom restricted and inhibited. I am worried that the hon. Lady has described an emphasis on free speech as a distraction. How can the advocacy of freedom, how can the pursuit of open debate ever be a distraction? The Government will not be distracted, and neither will Conservative Members in our campaign to ensure that, in the words of Disraeli and Cardinal Newman, universities remain places of “light, liberty and learning”.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I rise to speak to new clause 1, which stands in my name and in the names of my colleagues, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) and my right hon. Friends the Members for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and for Ashford

[Jesse Norman]

(Damian Green). I thank Professor John Heathershaw and his colleagues at the University of Exeter for their input.

This Bill is a very serious one, and the issue I raise of transparency in our universities is a very serious one. It has been much publicised of late in the newspapers in relation to some very distinguished and famous universities that have been alluded to already in this House, and rightly so. It is often misunderstood or underappreciated in the higher education sector how important the issue of undue influence and non-transparency is to the reputation of that sector, which is one of the crown jewels of our country both economically and culturally.

Universities exercise a wider influence not only over the young people whom they educate, but more widely in our public life, yet no standard approach has existed to date for handling foreign donations. No single standard has been created to allow donations to be made transparent, to be made public and to be properly tracked, and, therefore, for students and other donors and the public at large to understand whether there are pressures of a financial nature, and if so what pressures there may be, on the institutions with which they may have to deal.

Instead of this panoply of different approaches and different thresholds, and this lack of transparency and culture of non-disclosure, it is important that the Bill addresses those matters and brings some order to the situation. That is what my new clause and the other new clauses, which I am delighted to see have been tabled in a similar spirit, are designed to address. In my case, the measure is aimed not at any specific country or individuals, but generally so that there should be a wide understanding of the lack of transparency and a wider solution to it. I take my hat off, metaphorically, to the Minister, her Secretary of State and her officials, because the Government have substantially accepted my new clause, and indeed—dare I say?—arguably even improved it in relation, for example, to politically exposed persons. I thank her and other Ministers for the very constructive attitude that she and they have taken in relation to this important issue.

I will make a couple of small points in passing because this is still a live matter and officials will wish to think about the implementing regulations. The first is about the enlarged role for the Office for Students and the need for it to be given a role that it can dispatch rapidly and effectively as well as impartially. More widely, I note the essential importance of the higher education sector and of our universities being zealous in themselves, as institutions, in preserving freedom of speech and the culture of a deeper freedom of speech that, as so many Members have said, they have sought to defend in their treatment of students and colleagues. That remains vital.

I am delighted to support the Government amendment and withdraw my new clause 1 as a result.

Alicia Kearns: I rise to speak to new clause 3, but I wish first to welcome the significant work done by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), which has had an implication for that which I sought to achieve, and to touch briefly on new clause 19, tabled by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), with which I have

enormous sympathy. When you are an alumnus of a university, you have a great ability, you would hope, to influence it, so I place on record that if Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge is using NDAs, it can expect this not to be the last it will hear of it. I will work with the hon. Lady to call it out if it is doing it, but I am sure that there is absolutely no way that the place that gave me an incredible three years would be doing that.

New clause 3 was tabled to solve a series of problems that we face in our education system. We exist in a state of hybrid warfare where we do not necessarily know that we are at war. Indeed, more often than not our enemies do not tell us that we are at war—the most effective manner to attack us. In this war they use every possible lever of influence to attack us. It is naive, sadly, but our universities are failing to accept that they are being weaponised and used against us in a state of hybrid warfare. The Chinese Communist party is at war with us, because between now and 2050 it expects there to be a war between two world orders—theirs and ours, ours being the one that believes in the rule of democracy and standing up for freedom of speech, which this Bill so focuses on. We might not realise that we are at war, but we are, and for decades now we have failed to recognise that. It is not enough to say, “Bad Chinese Communist party—stop doing what you are doing in trying to achieve your goals and the continuance of your power.” We have to take the fight to it in terms of standing up for what we believe in, standing up for our world order, and, most importantly, building resilience within our system.

That is what my new clause focuses on doing—tackling the unintentional ignorance, or potentially wilful deceit, of those who do not recognise the seriousness with which our education system is under attack. Everyone plays a role in protecting freedom of speech. That is why I am so grateful to the very many colleagues who over the past few days have spoken in support of the new clause and given support on the issue across the House. I also thank the Department for Education, and particularly the Minister, who has been in constant dialogue with me and has adopted the ambitions of the new clause completely. I know that in coming months we will work together to make sure that we build the resilience that is needed in the education system.

My new clause particularly seeks to focus on Confucius institutes, which play an enormous role in the teaching of Mandarin and all that comes with learning that language—cultural understanding, historical understanding, debates about the present day, and debates about the entire concept of the country and how it feels, breathes, lives and sees itself. We have 30 Confucius institutes in this country. Nowhere else in the world has anywhere near 30. One might ask why Scotland has the highest number of Confucius institutes in the entire world. There is a reason why the Chinese Communist party has chosen to infiltrate Scottish education and to try to force its own narrative within those areas. More concerningly, almost all UK Government spending on Mandarin language teaching in schools, which is £27 million from 2015 to 2024, goes through Confucius institutes.

Our students and our kids—our under-18s—are being taught Mandarin by Confucius institutes, which are an arm of the Chinese state. Confucius institutes are supervised by the Chinese Communist party through the Ministry of Education. They are not allowed to hire teachers

unless they have been vetted by the Chinese Communist party. I have recently discovered that Edinburgh University's Confucius institute has representatives of the Chinese Government's embassy on its board. This is absolutely outright political intervention. Teachers are not allowed to cover issues such as Taiwan or Tibet, which are apparently sensitive. This is deeply concerning. Lancaster University and Edge Hill University rely on CIs to provide teaching for undergraduates. We cannot allow a hostile power to capture our education provision. That is why we need transparency.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire because his new clause has allowed us to bring in the requirement to report when universities take in foreign funding. These safeguards bring us into line with the US, Germany and the Netherlands, all of which discourage their universities from using Confucius institutes or introduce mandatory financial disclosures, because British students deserve a choice. They should not be forced to learn a language through the prism and narrative of a genocidal regime. That is all we are trying to do. We are not anti-China; we are trying to create resilience within our system. I am pleased that the Government are taking action and that under their amendments universities and student unions will be required to register funding arrangements. The Office for Students will have the power to force universities to provide alternative Mandarin education or to terminate Confucius institutes' contracts.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her new clause. I understand that the Government have moved on the matter, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister. However, does my hon. Friend agree that there is one other element to this, which is that if the Government are in possession of clear evidence that there is a threat to the security of the state through interventions by things such as the Confucius institutes, they should retain the power for the Secretary of State to deal with that directly without necessarily going to the Office for Students?

Alicia Kearns: I thank my right hon. Friend, who has been enormously supportive of the new clause. I agree. I would have preferred to see these powers sit with the Secretary of State, but the Government are not willing to give on that. However, they have made it clear—I challenged the Minister in her opening remarks and she confirmed this—that the Secretary of State for Education will have the ability to direct the Office for Students if required.

I would argue that it is impossible for Confucius institutes to operate in this country without undermining our national security. They are an instrument of the Chinese Government and their propaganda wing with one sole goal. It is therefore critical that the Secretary of State directs the OfS where needed, and I urge him to regularly review its progress. I believe that the message going out from this House today is clear—that we have the power to terminate hostile states' programmes and we must protect academic freedom.

On next steps, this is about not just building resilience but offering alternatives. As China's role on the world stage grows, we have an amazing emerging pool of talent of Chinese speakers and China experts. We must provide alternative opportunities for the learning of Mandarin. I can think of no better way to do that than

through our friends in Taiwan, whose track record in providing language courses is exemplary. They already work with our Foreign Office and intelligence services in providing these language lessons. We must also fund Mandarin education.

I thank the Minister for working with me to adopt these measures and for safeguarding academic freedom. My new clause provides a duty on financial disclosures, and it offers an alternative in the ability to terminate Confucius institutes and the power of the Secretary of State to direct, but I will not press it to a vote. We should be proud of British universities and proud to stand up for liberty and academic freedom. Without academic freedom, there is no open dialogue; without dialogue, there can only be division. It is important we use this Bill as the first step in sending a clear message to the entire education sector and the Chinese Communist party that we will not give them a back door to undermine our country and our national security through our universities.

7.30 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): Unlike all the other speakers in this debate, I was not on the Bill Committee, which is a shame, because it sounds like it was very lively, and I have not tabled my own amendment. I rise instead to speak in support of Government amendments 1 to 4, 6 to 10 and 16. I am absolutely delighted that this Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill was carried over from the last Parliament.

We have heard today that over the past few years, there has been a growing and concerning trend to stifle free speech on UK university campuses. Since this Bill was published last year, we have seen: the attempt to shut down and harass the Israeli ambassador at Cambridge University; the vicious and, as we have heard, ultimately successful campaign to remove Professor Kathleen Stock from her post at Sussex; and, just last month, the efforts of an angry mob to silence my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education at Warwick University. It is no wonder that he has prioritised the return of the Bill.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for the stance she has taken in this House and in every role of her life. She will probably be aware of a petition signed by 15,000-plus organised by the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children. It supports the Bill because it gives its members the freedom that they do not have. She will be aware of calls for pro-life students to be given a voice. Pro-life students are often the recipients of that discrimination. Does she agree that freedom of speech must be upheld for all students, and especially those who take a pro-life position and stance?

Miriam Cates: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The belief that human life starts at conception is a scientifically valid belief, and one that I hold myself. Students and staff should absolutely be protected in reflecting that view. He leads me on to my next point, which is that for every high-profile case we have discussed in the House today, many more never make the headlines. Underneath these incidents lies a culture where students and academics alike are becoming afraid to discuss and share their views. Last October, the University and College Union published a report showing that 35% of UK academics had undertaken self-censorship for fear

[Miriam Cates]

of negative repercussions, such as the loss of privileges, demotion or even physical harm. The report's authors commented:

"Self-censorship at this level appears to make a mockery of any pretence by universities of being paragons of free speech and...the pursuit of knowledge and academic freedom."

The evidence is clear: free speech and academic freedoms in our universities are under threat, so I welcome the Government amendments that will strengthen the Bill further. Amendments 1, 2 and 16 extend protections to academics by removing the express limitation that academic freedom covers only matters within an academic's field of expertise. They are important: first, because in many disciplines it would be hard to define exactly where the boundaries of a particular field lie; and secondly, because it is right to recognise that research and ideas do not exist in silos. There are obvious crossovers, for example, between science and ethics, politics and economics, philosophy and history. We need our greatest minds to be free to write, to speak and to conduct research in an unrestricted way for the benefit of our whole society.

Sir John Hayes: As ever, my hon. Friend is making a compelling case. University authorities are often either complicit in this, or in denial. The Bill will send a signal to them that it is simply not good enough to brush the attacks on freedom under the carpet. I hope that she will press the Government to go still further, as I have done, in ensuring that the Bill has all the provisions needed to ensure that freedom is maintained.

Miriam Cates: My right hon. Friend is right: this Bill is an important marker for universities, which will be forced to recognise that these are not specific isolated issues, but that there is a culture change that needs to be addressed across our whole country. We are also seeing it in other countries in the world, particularly America.

I support the amendments to remove the restriction on field of expertise, and I also support Government amendments 3, 4 and 6 to 10, which will ensure that higher education providers cannot require visiting speakers or hosting bodies to bear some or all of the costs of security. This will prevent no-platforming by the back door. As my right hon. Friend the Minister has already said, if universities have a physical safety and security issue on campus, they should urgently address the root of that.

On safety, amendment 18, in the name of the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), would compel the Office for Students, when considering a free speech complaint, to be mindful of the right of students to feel safe on university campuses. I have no doubt that the amendment is well meant, and I listened carefully to his arguments, but I fear that it would further embed the culture and attitudes that have led to the chilling effect on free speech and that have made this Bill necessary.

In the amendment, as on campus, we see the conflation of physical safety with intellectual and emotional comfort. Students should of course be physically safe, and higher education institutions have a duty to follow health and safety law, like all other organisations, but I suspect that is not what the amendment is getting at. Universities should absolutely not be cultivating an atmosphere on campus where students believe they are or should be

free from emotional and intellectual discomfort. Just as our bodies must go through training, challenge and discomfort to become physically fit, so our minds must experience challenge, discomfort and sometimes even offence to become stronger, more resilient and more wise.

In the recent book, "The Coddling of the American Mind", the authors describe "anti-fragility", the idea that young people's brains must be exposed to challenges and stresses, or they will fail to mature into strong and capable adults able to engage productively with people and ideas that challenge their beliefs. Nowhere is it more important to understand the concept of anti-fragility than in our universities, where institutions are cultivating minds that will become the thought leaders of tomorrow. Since our universities act as an incubator for wider public culture, we will fail to uphold freedom of debate in this country if we fail to uphold it on campus.

Freedom of speech is the bedrock of democracy. As a recent *New York Times* editorial put it:

"Ideas that go unchallenged by opposing views risk becoming weak and brittle rather than being strengthened by tough scrutiny."

We saw the impact of that cancel culture in political and social debate during covid, where damaging, un-evidenced, ineffective and wasteful policies went unchallenged. If we value the kind of rigorous debate that upholds democracy and ensures the best policies are produced, we must not allow this concept creep of the term "safety" on campus.

Despite levelling up, Brexit and enormous economic challenges, this is possibly one of the most important Bills making its way through Parliament, because our ability to unite and level up in this country is threatened by the culture on campus. The starkest division in British society—not only in voting behaviour, but in social values—is between graduates and non-graduates. The trend towards a homogenous worldview in our higher education institutions is exacerbating this division. Instead, we need our universities to be places where it is the norm for competing ideas to co-exist and to be openly interrogated and challenged by evidence.

Jess Phillips: I want to challenge the idea that university students will all be walking like lemmings into the light unless we do something about it. At my university, the right hon. Jack Straw, who was then a Labour MP, was banned from the student union—I forget why. He was the only person it banned, and I walked through that door past the plaque banning him, and I am a Labour MP now. I think the students are probably going to cope with some of this.

Miriam Cates: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She gave a passionate speech, and I fully support the many things she is doing to uphold women's rights, but this is needlessly being made a left/right issue. Many of the incidents we have talked about today are about those on the right being cancelled, but it is much wider than that.

Jess Phillips: I have been cancelled many times.

Miriam Cates: I am very sorry to hear it. The hon. Lady absolutely should not be. What I am trying to say is that this is a much wider issue than the particular incidents that have made the headlines, and some deeper culture changes need to take place. That will take time, and we need to do a lot in schools as well.

I very much support the Bill. Hopefully it can narrow the divide that we see in society. I very much support the Government amendments, which will do a lot to protect freedom of speech.

Michelle Donelan: With the leave of the House, I will speak on the non-Government amendments. New clause 1 seeks to improve transparency, especially in relation to foreign donations, and new clause 3 would place a duty on higher education providers as part of the promote duty to report information about foreign language, culture and exchange programmes and courses to the Office for Students and the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State would then be empowered to direct them to terminate the partnership or offer an equivalent if there were concerns about freedom of speech.

My hon. Friends are absolutely right to promote the importance of transparency of overseas financial arrangements, and we agree, which is why Government new clause 2 addresses those concerns. New clause 2 also requires the reporting of funding from certain overseas educational partnerships, including Confucius institutes, which addresses new clause 1 and the first part of new clause 3.

New clause 3 would have unintended consequences and place an unnecessary burden on the sector. Under new clause 2, there would be a financial threshold and countries such as NATO allies would be exempt. New clause 3 has no exemptions, which would mean that every single kind of partnership would be covered from the Turing scheme and third-year language students studying abroad with partner universities to important international research exchange programmes. The burden on providers to deal with that information would be disproportionate and would stifle the ability of our world-class universities to work with global partners on important research programmes.

The Government take the concern regarding foreign interference extremely seriously, however, which is why we developed a cross-Government programme of work to counter those threats, and we are continuing to work with providers to help them to understand the threats and respond. Government new clause 2 will help us to do that, and the Office for Students could utilise a range of enforcement powers to issue fines, close programmes such as Confucius institutes, or mandate universities to offer alternatives to students if that was necessary to secure free speech. As I said, however, new clause 3 would have unintended consequences.

Amendments 19 and 20 would provide that a non-disclosure or confidentiality agreement with the governing body of a provider did not mean that members, staff or students and visiting speakers could not speak freely. I stress that I fully support the spirit of this amendment; it is almost unimaginable to think of anything worse than suffering sexual assault and then being pressurised into being silent. I have been very vocal about the fact that our universities should never use NDAs to silence victims of sexual harassment, which is why I launched a pledge in January to end the use of NDAs. Some 66 universities are now signed up, 62 of which are in England, and three Oxford colleges.

We have a long way to go, which is why I am constantly talking to universities and working with Can't Buy My Silence to call out those who have as yet failed to sign the pledge, but I know that a number will sign imminently.

When it comes to the use of NDAs and sexual assault, the higher education sector has an opportunity to lead the way and show others what can be done.

We have also asked the Office for Students to impose a binding condition of registration on universities to ensure that they properly tackle sexual misconduct, which we intend to deal with that sort of behaviour. This would have teeth and it would mean that universities could be fined up to half a million pounds; they could even lose their degree-awarding powers. The ramifications would be big, and it would mean that the lawyers who developed those NDAs would be breaching the registration condition by doing so. We are the first Government who are prepared to tackle this issue, and I shall continue discussing with colleagues on both sides of the House all the ways in which we can tackle sexual harassment in universities, because that issue is very important to me and we will be doing more.

Amendment 17, which would widen the definition of academic freedom, is not necessary, because all the proposed new paragraphs are already covered by Government amendment 1, which will remove the requirement for academic freedom to be within an academic's field of expertise. New clause 6 would add a new definition of academic staff, which I outlined in my opening speech.

New clause 7 and amendment 21 would change the definition of harassment in the Equality Act 2010 and under the Bill. I fully agree that there are occasions when universities have misapplied the Equality Act and have relied on it to wrongly shut down lawful free speech. There is both a subjective and an objective element as to whether harassment has taken place, and that should not be based on the views of just the complainant. Indeed, we saw a case last week where the University of Essex had to amend its policies following welcome pressure from the Free Speech Union. I assure hon. Members that once the Bill has passed, the new director of the Office for Students will ensure that providers are complying with the Equality Act as it is written, rather than overreaching.

Sir John Hayes: I am grateful that my right hon. Friend is addressing the amendment that stands in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt). Part of the problem is that universities are drawing up policies for dealing with complaints about free speech and its protection that are themselves faulty; they are often based on advice from individuals and organisations that have a skewed view about the relationship between free speech and the Equality Act. Will she look at those policies and their sources, and the advice that universities are receiving?

Michelle Donelan: My right hon. Friend is correct. As I said, some universities have misinterpreted the Equality Act, which is why comprehensive guidance will be produced by the new director that will be the main source that they should refer to, rather than external agencies.

John McDonnell: On the point about advice, we are dealing with what has obviously become a contentious issue that often relies on subjective judgments. The advice that universities will take will come from the director for freedom of speech and academic freedom. Does it not behove the House to ensure that that person has the absolute confidence of those universities? New clause 4 simply says that that person will not be associated with

[John McDonnell]

a political party and will be appointed by an independent panel, and that a Select Committee will have a role in confirming that appointment. That will hopefully take the director who provides such sensitive advice out of the political melee and give universities more confidence in them.

Michelle Donelan: If the right hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will get to that point later; he may intervene again if he is not satisfied with the response.

Amendment 18 would require the Office for Students, when considering a complaint, to be mindful of the right of students to feel safe on campus, and of other legal duties such as those under the Equality Act 2010 and the Prevent duty. But the duty in the Bill to take “reasonably practicable” steps to secure freedom of speech and academic freedom will allow for relevant considerations to be taken into account. In particular, it will allow for other legal duties, such as those under the Equality Act and the Prevent duty, to be considered.

“Reasonably practicable” is a commonly understood term used across the statute book. It means that the relevant body can take into account all the other legal duties on a case by case basis. If another legal duty requires or gives rise to certain action, it would not be reasonably practicable to override that. As for the Office for Students, it will be required to take into account all the relevant facts. It would not be appropriate to try to set out all the considerations that it should take into account, so the Government do not support the amendment.

New clause 4 concerns the appointment of the director for freedom of speech and academic freedom to the board of the Office for Students. It relates to the appointee giving a donation to a political party, and it would require the appointment to be made by an independent advisory panel. We have in this country a robust public appointments process that, rightly, does not bar people who are members of political parties from serving in such roles.

The Commissioner for Public Appointments sets out that every year numerous public appointments are made of individuals who declare political activity, and in many years more appointees have declared an affiliation to the Labour party than to the Conservative party. This rule is such that, if applied generally, it would have prevented individuals such as Alan Milburn, Baroness Falkner and John Cope from serving.

On who will appoint the director, this will be carried out in the same way that the other members of the Office for Students board are appointed under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017—by the Secretary of State—and this will of course be done in accordance with the public appointments process. It would not be consistent to treat the director under this Bill differently. The Government therefore do not support this amendment.

John McDonnell: As this now goes to the other place, could I just ask the Minister to think again on that particular issue? This is an incredibly contentious area, and it requires someone who is above any form of suspicion of party political linkages. More importantly, it requires someone who has the confidence of an

independent panel, but also, I believe, of one of our Select Committees. I urge her to think again, at least about the appointments process and the engagement of a confirmatory vote by a Select Committee on this critically important post, which I think is so important that the legislation will stand or fall on this appointment.

Michelle Donelan: I am a little taken aback by the comments of the right hon. Member, who refers to the relationship between political parties as suspicious—quite something given that we are all related to political parties. The Government will not be thinking again on that one.

New clause 5 would introduce a sunset clause, meaning that unless a report is made to Parliament and regulations are made, the legislation would expire three years after the date of enactment, and it would give Ministers the power to discontinue provisions in the Bill after one year. The fact that the Opposition have tabled this amendment demonstrates very clearly that, whatever they say, Labour Members do not support free speech. They have consistently opposed the need for this Bill despite the very clear evidence, and they now are seeking to dismantle it before it has even started. The Government wholeheartedly oppose this amendment, and we will never falter in our determination to safeguard free speech.

With the assurances I have given, I hope Members will not press their amendments to a vote, and I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 2 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 4

APPOINTMENT OF THE DIRECTOR FOR FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

“(1) A person may not be appointed as the Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom (‘Director’) if the person has at any time within the last three years made a donation to a political party registered under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.

(2) The person appointed as the Director may not whilst in office make any donation to a political party registered under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.

(3) The appointment for the Director shall be made by an independent advisory panel to be established by regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(4) The appointment of the Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom shall be subject to a confirmatory resolution of the relevant Select Committee of the House of Commons.

(5) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (3) may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by resolution of each House of Parliament.”—(*Matt Western.*)

This new clause would ensure that the Director of Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom has not and cannot whilst in office donate to a political party and ensure they are only appointed subject to confirmation of an independent advisory panel, the Select Committee of the House of Commons and a resolution of each House of Parliament.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 150, Noes 282.

Division No. 11]

[7.52 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Carden, Dan
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, Maria
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Farry, Stephen
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glendon, Mary
 Green, Kate
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hardy, Emma
 Hayes, Helen
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine

Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, Liz (*Proxy vote cast
 by Pat McFadden*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewis, Clive
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorris, Anna
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Owen, Sarah
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Shah, Naz
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily

Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick

Whittome, Nadia
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jessica Morden and
Taiwo Owatemi

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Lee
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey

Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca

Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David

Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Neill, Sir Robert
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pursglove, Tom
Quince, Will
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, rh Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tracey, Craig
Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin

Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig

Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Miss Sarah Dines and
Michael Tomlinson

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 1

DUTIES OF REGISTERED HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS

Amendment made: 1, page 2, line 11, leave out “and within their field of expertise”—(*Michelle Donelan.*)

This amendment removes the express limitation that academic freedom covers only matters within an academic’s field of expertise.

Amendment proposed: 17, page 2, line 14, at end insert—

“(c) to conduct research,

(d) to engage in intellectual inquiry and contribute to public debate,

(e) to criticise any institution,

(f) to be affiliated to any institution, and

(g) to be a member of a trade union body,”—(*Matt Western.*)

This amendment would widen the definition of academic freedom.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 152, Noes 284.

Division No. 12]

[8.6 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Ms Lyn
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Carden, Dan
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Clark, Feryal
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Davies-Jones, Alex
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dodds, Anneliese

Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Evans, Chris
Farry, Stephen
Fletcher, Colleen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Green, Kate
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hamilton, Fabian
Hardy, Emma
Hayes, Helen
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran

Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz (*Proxy vote cast
by Pat McFadden*)
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewis, Clive
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McKinnell, Catherine
McMorrin, Anna
Miliband, rh Edward
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Norris, Alex
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Owen, Sarah
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget

Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, rh Angela
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Sarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Wakeford, Christian
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Wilson, Munira
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Jessica Morden and
Taiwo Owatemi**

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob

Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman

Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, rh Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, Vicky
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffiths, Kate
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark

Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie

Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian

Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tracey, Craig
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Miss Sarah Dines and
Michael Tomlinson

Question accordingly negated.

Amendments made: 2, page 2, line 28, leave out
 “and within their field of expertise”.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 1.

Amendment 3, page 2, line 29, at end insert—

“(9A) In order to achieve the objective in subsection (2), the governing body of a registered higher education provider must secure that, apart from in exceptional circumstances, use of its premises by any individual or body is not on terms that require the individual or body to bear some or all of the costs of security relating to their use of the premises.”

This amendment would place a new duty on governing bodies of registered higher education providers to secure freedom of speech for certain persons by requiring such providers to secure that use of its premises is not conditional on requiring the person wishing to use them to bear the costs of security - unless there are exceptional circumstances.

*Amendment 4, page 2, line 39, leave out “duty in section A1(1)” and insert
 “duties in section A1(1) and (9A)”*

This amendment is consequential on the changes made by Amendments 3 and 6.

*Amendment 5, page 2, line 46, after “provider” insert
 “and any students’ union for students at the provider”.*

The duties on registered higher education providers and constituent colleges to secure freedom of speech extends to taking steps as regards the activities of its students’ unions (which will include JCRs and MCRs of colleges). Expanding the matters which must be included in the code of practice is to reinforce this.

Amendment 6, page 3, line 9, at end insert

“(which must include its criteria for determining whether there are exceptional circumstances for the purposes of section A1(9A)).”—
(Michelle Donelan.)

This amendment requires the code of practice maintained by a registered higher education provider to set out the provider’s criteria for deciding whether there are “exceptional circumstances” which will enable it to require a person wishing to use its premises to bear the costs of security.

Clause 3

DUTIES OF STUDENT UNIONS

Amendments made: 7, page 4, line 36, at end insert—

“(4A) In order to achieve the objective in subsection (2), a students’ union for students at a registered higher education provider that is eligible for financial support must secure that, apart from in exceptional circumstances, use by any individual or body of premises occupied by the students’ union is not on terms that require the individual or body to bear some or all of the costs of security relating to their use of the premises.”

This amendment would place a new duty on certain students’ unions to secure freedom of speech for certain persons by requiring the students’ unions to secure that use of premises is not conditional on requiring the person wishing to use them to bear the costs of security - unless there are exceptional circumstances.

Amendment 8, page 5, line 13, leave out “duty” and insert “duties”.

This amendment is consequential on the changes made by Amendments 7 and 10.

Amendment 9, page 5, line 32, leave out

“duty in section A5 is”

and insert

“duties in section A5 are”.

This amendment is consequential on the changes made by Amendments 7 and 10.

Amendment 10, page 5, line 33, at end insert

“(which must include its criteria for determining whether there are exceptional circumstances for the purposes of section A5(4A)).”—
(Michelle Donelan.)

This amendment requires the code of practice maintained by a students’ union to set out the union’s criteria for deciding whether there are “exceptional circumstances” which will enable it to require a person wishing to use its premises to bear the costs of security.

Clause 8

COMPLAINTS SCHEME

Amendments made: 11, page 10, line 22, after “complaint” insert

“which is referred under the scheme and not withdrawn”.

This amendment is to make it clear that the scheme can provide for complaints to be withdrawn and that the OfS is not required to make a decision about a withdrawn complaint.

Amendment 12, page 11, line 34, after “publication” insert “under section 67A”.—(Michelle Donelan.)

This makes it clear which power the OfS is acting under when it publishes information covered by this paragraph.

Clause 9**DIRECTOR FOR FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND ACADEMIC
FREEDOM**

Amendment made: 13, page 12, leave out lines 17 to 21 and insert—

“(b) its functions under sections 69A to 69E and Schedule 6A.”—(*Michelle Donelan.*)

This amendment gives the Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Function responsibility for oversight of the functions conferred on the OfS by the proposed new clause relating to overseas funding.

Clause 12**COMMENCEMENT**

Amendment made: 14, page 12, line 36, at end insert—

“(aa) section [overseas funding], so far as is necessary for enabling the exercise on or after the day on which this Act is passed of the powers to make regulations conferred by section 69D of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (inserted by section [overseas funding]);”—(*Michelle Donelan.*)

This amendment allows the regulation-making powers conferred by the proposed new clause relating to overseas funding to come into force on Royal Assent.

Schedule**MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS**

Amendments made: 15, page 14, line 23, at end insert—

‘4A (1) Section 67B (publication of decision to conduct or terminate investigation) is amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (3), for “Section 67C does not apply” substitute “Neither section 67C nor paragraph 13 of Schedule 6A applies”.

(3) After subsection (3) insert—

(3A) In the application of this section to publication of a decision under the scheme provided by virtue of Schedule 6A (free speech complaints scheme)—

(a) references to an investigation (however expressed) are to a review of a free speech complaint under the scheme;

(b) for the purposes of subsection (2)(a), the OfS terminates an investigation without making a finding if it—

(a) (i) does not make a decision as to whether a free speech complaint is justified because the complaint is withdrawn, or

(ii) dismisses a free speech complaint without considering its merits;

(d) for the purposes of subsection (2)(b), the findings of an investigation do not result in the OfS taking any further action only where—

(i) the OfS decide that a complaint is wholly not justified, or

(ii) the OfS decide that a complaint is justified (wholly or partly) but do not make any recommendations about the person about which the complaint is made.”

4B In section 67C (protection for defamation claims) after subsection (2) insert—

“(3) This section does not apply to the publication of—

(a) a decision or recommendation made by the OfS under the scheme provided by virtue of Schedule 6A, or

(b) a report under paragraph 12(1)(b) of that Schedule.

(See instead paragraph 13 of Schedule 6A.)’.

Section 67C of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (inserted by the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022) provides for qualified privilege to defamation claims arising from publication

by the OfS of decisions etc. The free speech complaints scheme inserted into the 2017 Act by the Bill provides for absolute privilege for defamation claims arising from publication of OfS decisions etc under the scheme. This amendment modifies the application of section 67B so it is clear how it applies in the context of the free speech complaints scheme and removes the overlap between section 67C and the provisions of Schedule 6A by providing that section 67C does not apply to decisions etc under the free speech complaints scheme.

Amendment 16, page 16, line 25, leave out

“and within their field of expertise”.—(Michelle Donelan.)

See explanatory statement for Amendment 1.

Third Reading

8.17 pm

Michelle Donelan: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge all who have contributed to the Bill’s passage. The nature of the problem and the intensity of those opposed to academic freedom has made even acknowledging the issue an incredibly brave act in many cases. I thank the many right hon. and hon. Members who have raised the issue and contributed to the discussion over the years. In particular, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) have played an important part in scrutinising and strengthening the Bill. I thank my right hon. Friends the Members for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) and others for raising the important subject of international donations transparency. I also thank the research institutes and think-tanks who have shone a spotlight on the scale of the problem, such as Policy Exchange, Legatum and the policy institute at King’s College London. Together with the support of the Russell Group, Universities UK and other sector organisations, we on the Government side have been able not only to understand the scale of the problem but to shape the solution.

I was personally moved by much of the oral evidence given in the Public Bill Committee, so I struggle to understand how the Opposition sat there, heard that and yet still failed to back this robust action. Individual academics, such as Professor Kathleen Stock, Professor Nigel Biggar and Dr Arif Ahmed, have also played a fundamental role, raising awareness of the problem and advocating for change, sometimes at significant cost to themselves.

Members from across the House made valuable contributions during the debate and during the passage of the Bill. Some, in fact, highlighted areas of good practice in our universities. Despite pressure to limit free speech, in April Reading University vice-chancellor Robert Van de Noort published a strong, principled defence of academic freedom and freedom of speech that echoed many of the issues the Bill intends to address. The University of Cambridge rightly rejected proposed guidelines that all opinions must conform to the requirement of being “respectful”. Frankly, that would have been absurd.

[Michelle Donelan]

However, that type of good practice is not always representative of the sector. As just one example, the high rates of self-censorship that numerous surveys and studies have documented show that the problem is widespread. The very nature of self-censorship means that the actual rates are likely to be much higher than reported. Students arriving at university today join an environment where one in four of their peers believe physical violence is justified to shut down views they deem to be hateful. We see that some are too ready to levy the charge of “hateful” at any view they disagree with. Staff are teaching at universities at a time when 200 of their colleagues recently reported receiving death threats and abuse with no support from their universities.

The UK has become the only country in the top tier of academically free countries to be significantly downgraded by the Academic Freedom Index. We are now ranked 63rd in the world. This is at a time when a university professor expressed lawful opinions and ended up needing police protection to visit a university campus. That is the culture that has been embedded in too many of our universities. It is not about lawful, peaceful protest, which of course should be celebrated; it is about a culture in which a small number of students and academics believe they have the right to act with impunity to harass, intimidate and threaten those whose views they disagree with until they are silenced and driven out. Again and again we have seen that occurring, while university authorities stand by and do nothing. No individual should have to fear for their personal safety, or rely on the good will of their colleagues to go about their job safely.

We will not let that continue, so we are taking action and delivering on our manifesto commitment, unlike the Opposition who continue to bury their heads in the sand. Madam Deputy Speaker, indulge me for a moment. Let me remind Opposition Members of some of the comments they have made during the passage of the Bill. One said there was:

“no evidence...of a free speech crisis”. —[*Official Report*, 12 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 114.]

Others said it was

“tackling a problem that does not really exist.”—[*Official Report*, 12 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 106.]

and that the legislation is “not necessary” and “manufacturing a problem”. Even the shadow higher education Minister called this a “virtually non-existent problem”. But I fail to believe that the Opposition do not recognise the wealth of evidence that they, too, have heard and seen. It is time that they were honest: they are simply anti-free speech.

This Government will always stand up for free speech, which is why our Bill confirms that it is not acceptable for students, staff or visiting speakers to fear repercussions for exercising their right to lawful freedom of speech and academic freedom. The Bill will also ensure that individuals have routes to redress if their rights are not secured due to breaches of the duties placed on higher education providers and student unions. Under the existing legislative framework, those clear routes of redress do not exist. They are essential to ensure that freedom of speech and academic freedom are protected to the fullest extent. The Bill is about changing the wider culture on university campuses so that everyone

has an equal right to be heard and peacefully challenged. That should be done with tolerance of different opinions and in a constructive way. It does not grant any protection to unlawful speech.

Whether some Members realise it or not, change is needed. As we have seen historically on issues such as gender equality, race discrimination and human rights, such cultural change occurs more readily when backed up by appropriate legislation. At present, we have a duty without proper means of enforcement. The Bill is therefore a vital piece of legislation that will lead to the cultural change necessary to tackle the issue at the core. I therefore challenge the Opposition to show the world of higher education that we value freedom of expression the same as we value it here in this place, and to be on the right side of history—the side that stands for free expression, free speech and academic freedom. I commend the Bill to the House.

8.25 pm

Matt Western: I extend my thanks to all those involved in the passage of the Bill in Committee and on Second Reading, as well as this evening. I join the Minister in thanking Government Members, as much as those on the Labour Benches. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and others. They made constructive comments and contributions to the process in Committee, and I place on record my thanks to them.

As we come to the end of the Commons stages of the Bill, just under a mammoth 400 days since it was first introduced, it is clear that it has been something of a distraction from what really matters to the sector and students. We have just heard, in the urgent question on the Government’s failure to address the dreadful GDP figures, that the UK economy is in a dire position. We are in the midst of the worst cost of living crisis since the 1970s. Three out of every four students are currently worried about managing financially. One in four have less than £50 a month to live on after rent and bills, and 5% of students are using food banks to get by. On the doorstep in Wakefield, when I was talking about some of these issues, someone said to me, “What on earth has that got to do with the price of fish?” She is right. What has this got to do with the price of fish? Put simply, students are not exceptions to the rules of this crisis. The challenges faced by students are a reflection of what is going on in wider society, for sure. The Minister has responded by uplifting student maintenance by just 2.3% this year—2.3%—against a backdrop of an inflation rate pushing 10%, while at the same time ignoring any of the reforms to student maintenance proposed by the Augar review.

Meanwhile, the Government have imposed this piece of unnecessary legislation on the House, expending 30 hours of parliamentary time on this Bill, a Bill primarily searching for a problem—and I will come on to the point of what we would do. Seemingly, despite finding little time to tackle the cost of living crisis, the Government can find time to protect antisemites and people who, in the Ministers’ own words, are aiming to cause deep hurt

and offence. Never mind that the Joint Committee on Human Rights' report into freedom of speech at university in 2018 found there was

"no major crisis of free speech on campus",

or that research conducted by the Office for Students found that out of over 62,000 requests by students for external speaker events in 2017-2018, only 0.01% were rejected by student unions or university authorities. The Minister seems determined to pursue divisive legislation to stoke culture wars for her own political agenda. Last week, when she addressed the Higher Education Policy Institute conference, she could not substantiate her claims in support of the Bill.

The Government like to present themselves as defenders of freedom of speech, but their actions tell us differently, including their plans to arrest noisy protesters and limit others, to restrict the right to vote through voter ID and their outright attacks on the BBC and plans to privatise Channel 4. The Government are interested in freedom of speech only if that speech is framed in their own image. The Minister says that Labour's position is absurd. Free speech on our campus but no right to free speech on our streets is utterly absurd. I need not remind the House that Labour has always championed free speech. Indeed, it was a Labour Government who introduced the law guaranteeing freedom of expression.

The issue here is all about evidence, and the point I have just made about the Minister. That is why Labour has deep reservations about the unintended consequences of the Bill. Its top-down, one-size-fits-all approach demonstrates the weakness at the heart of the Government and their misplaced lack of trust in the academic community. When that happens,

"Governments lose faith in academics to protect freedom of speech and step in with legislation. It is what happened in 1986 and it is what is happening again".

Not my words, but those of one of the Minister's esteemed predecessors.

Conservative Members cry, "Well, what is Labour's plan?" That is easy. We believe in adopting best practice off the shelf whenever we can. Our universities and the academics and teaching staff who work within them are world leading. It is no surprise, therefore, that there is a vast array of really good practice out there if the Minister only chose to look—the Manchester guidelines, the Chicago principles or Robert French's independent review of freedom of speech in Australian higher education, to name but three. Countries around the world have similar issues, but the point is how they go about addressing them. If the Minister were really interested in promoting and protecting freedom of speech and academic freedom, she would encourage this approach across the sector. Such approaches would go a long way to fostering the healthy culture of debate on campus we all want to see. Sometimes institutions and student unions will get it wrong. That is the nature of debates on the parameters of free speech, but it is a small price worth paying for a collective, more consensual approach to protecting freedom of speech on campus.

The Bill will expose universities and student unions to potentially lengthy civil proceedings brought by anti-vaxxers, holocaust deniers or hate preachers. Debates about freedom of speech are complex enough without Ministers creating a legal route open to abuse by vexatious claimants—suppression of debate through what is termed

and recognised as lawfare. Despite the Minister repeatedly claiming that this new statutory tort would be an important backstop, there is no reference to that in the Bill. She has failed to put in place any mechanisms to prevent providers, including the 165 further education colleges that fall under the scope of the Bill or student unions, from falling victim to costly litigation. Today the Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned that Government spending on adult education and apprenticeships in England will be 25% lower in 2025 than in 2010. I need not remind the House of how costly lawsuits are. Every 1p spent by institutions defending such claims in the court will be 1p less spent on the student experience, on hardship funds, on new library facilities and on research and development. Those potential legal costs are not even included in the £50 million the Minister's Department estimates the Bill will cost the sector over the next 10 years.

The public are desperate for the Government to focus on the immediate and very real priorities—the cost of living crisis, energy bills doubling in a year, 40% of households in energy poverty, demand on food banks rocketing and the worst performing economy in the G20 bar one. That country, Russia, is burdened by massive international sanctions. The Government want to spend precious time on pursuing this blatantly ideological legislation that will do nothing for the great British public. It is self-serving, and another demonstration of just how out of touch the Government are. Change should come from the ground up rather than the clunking fist of an embittered Government.

In terms of legislation, the Bill is about as big a Big Dog's breakfast as it is possible to get. As it progresses to the other place, I very much look forward to many peers taking note of some of our suggestions for improvement. Other than Lord Wharton of Yarm, I believe there will be widespread opposition to the Bill from all parties and indeed the Cross-Bench peers. Given that we have had almost 100 amendments in total to this Bill, and it is only 19 pages long, they will have a lot of areas to choose from. Before it returns, I very much hope that the Government will have started to treat universities as a public good rather than a political battlefield.

8.34 pm

Sir John Hayes: I will speak very briefly, making only three points in two minutes.

First, it is disappointing that the Labour party is opposing the Bill. By its nature, it is a party whose Members are elected to a Parliament that has as its foundation the exchange of honestly held opinions. Even at this late stage, I feel that Labour Members might be persuaded to change their mind. I implore them to do so, because it is entirely specious—as the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), who is a thoughtful person, knows—to compare the cost of living with the price of freedom. The price of freedom is the capacity to disarm, to disturb, sometimes to make people feel uncomfortable and certainly to challenge the status quo. That is the nature of academic discourse, yet it is at risk.

Secondly, the evidence is clear. In Committee, Trevor Phillips said that

"in the last three to five years we have seen example after example of where university authorities have essentially abdicated their responsibility to protect their own academics and students."—[*Official Report, Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Public Bill Committee*, 7 September 2021; c. 23, Q42.]

[Sir John Hayes]

Professor Biggar said:

“My view is that the Bill would protect lawful free speech.”—*[Official Report, Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Public Bill Committee, 7 September 2021; c. 24, Q44.]*

He went on to say why that was necessary. Professor Ahmed said:

“With regard to self-censorship, my own experience has been that it has changed drastically over the last 10 years...I know that there are people who bite their tongues in the sense that they will not object to certain things that are pointless and stupid, simply because they are afraid of the consequences.”—*[Official Report, Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Public Bill Committee, 7 September 2021; c. 15, Q26.]*

The consequences for academics and students can be dire: they are isolated, they are persecuted and in some cases, as we have heard, they are even driven out of their job.

The Government have got this right, and the Opposition have got it badly wrong. As Members of this House know, I am not a person who thinks that a single party or a single side of the House has a monopoly on wisdom, but on this particular occasion all the wisdom lies with the Government Front Bench. I implore the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington and other Opposition Members to change their mind, look to their conscience and defend freedom of speech, as I know the Minister is doing and the Bill does.

8.36 pm

Jim Shannon: It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). Unfortunately, I could not make a speech on Report because I was attending a meeting with the Foreign Secretary about the Northern Ireland protocol, but I want to contribute on Third Reading. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief.

The Bill is critical. I commend the Minister for how she has delivered it and for her speech on Report, which I was able to hear. The Government have delivered the very legislation that I, personally, wish to see. I believe that my constituents and those who write to me—my mailbag is very substantial—also wish to see it. The Government have done a good job today; I am absolutely in favour of the Bill.

I could give examples of Christian conferences not having their dates renewed at universities, or of young Christian unions being pigeonholed by activists into expressing an opinion based on their sincerely held belief, only for it to be cited as hate speech. That is ridiculous, and that is why the Government have introduced legislation, which I very much welcome, to address the matter. The Bill will make a difference and protect Christians and other religious groups. I never thought that we would be in a place where we needed to take these steps, but the fact is that we have to, and the Government have done so.

A minority of people in influential places have been gift-wrapped the ability to halt freedom of speech in our universities, which, instead of being a place of open thought and debate, are now closed to anything that is not of a certain agenda and persuasion. I thank the Minister and our Government for the steps that they

have taken to bring the Bill to completion. The Government have ensured that there will be no loopholes that could be used by those who wish to exercise their freedom of speech but who cannot afford others the same very basic right, which the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings referred to on Report and just now.

I am given to understand that reforming the Human Rights Act may have led to the more restrictive definition of academic freedom in the original wording of the Bill, which included a caveat that academic freedom exists only within an academic's field of expertise. This was expressed to me in a briefing by Universities UK. UUK has subsequently welcomed amendments 1, 2 and 16, which remove the express limitation that academic freedom covers only matters within an academic's field of expertise, and I agree: a teacher of mathematics should still be able to express his belief about biology in a considerate and kind manner, should the need arise. UUK understands that the Government intend to provide guidance for universities in respect of the new duties in the Bill. That is particularly significant given that duties can often appear to overlap or sit in tension with one another. An example is the Prevent duty, which has legal protection. The Government have enshrined in the Bill protection for the people whom I represent, and, indeed, for people throughout this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I support the Bill in the hope that we will have freedom of speech, freedom of religion or belief and the freedom to choose no belief, if that is what people want, and that that will be enshrined in our universities rather than this seemingly insidious desire by a select few to shut down debate and oppose anyone who cannot agree with their “enlightenment”. My goodness me, what a poor world it would be if everyone were like that! Jews deserve the right to practise their religion in so far as it does not harm others, as do Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists. They deserve the right to express their beliefs—as they still do—in a way that does not harm anyone. This is about respect, and I am browned off with seeing so much disrespect for people.

We must also legislate, increasingly, to ensure that those who wish to speak of Christ and His teachings have the right to do so in the halls of their university student unions, and not just in their churches or chapels.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

ADJOURNMENT (SUMMER, CONFERENCE AND NOVEMBER RECESS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 21 July 2022, do adjourn until Monday 5 September 2022; at its rising on Thursday 22 September 2022, do adjourn until Monday 17 October 2022; and, at its rising on Wednesday 9 November 2022, do adjourn until Monday 14 November 2022.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS)

Motion made and Question proposed,

That Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 15 July, 9 September, 16 September, 28 October, 18 November, 25 November, 9 December 2022, 20 January, 3 February, 24 February, 3 March, 17 March and 24 March 2023.
—(Mark Spencer.)

8.42 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is good of the Leader of the House to arrange a debate lasting nearly, but not quite, one and a half hours on private Members' Bills. It may be helpful to Members who are staying for the debate to have copies of the current Standing Orders. I draw their attention particularly to Standing Order 14 (8) and (9), on page 19.

Private Members' Bills are the only way in which Members who are not in the Government can get legislation through the House and also through the other House, and enable it to become an Act of Parliament. Last year I did that myself, removing some unwanted EU regulations, and I have done it on a number of other occasions. The problem tonight, Madam Deputy Speaker, lies in the dates that have been announced. You will tell me that the Government have to produce 13 sittings in which private Members' Bills have priority, and that is correct: Standing Order 14(8) says so, and the Government have listed 13 Fridays on today's Order Paper. I find it regrettable that we do not have a business of the House commission to decide this, but at the moment it is the Government's privilege.

By the way, before the Whips panic, let me say that I am not seeking to divide the House, so if Members wish to leave—although I am sure they will want to stay and listen to this—they can do so. However, I will ask the Leader of the House to clarify the position. He may have some very good reasons for what the Government have done, but if not, I should like him to think again.

During covid, there have been occasions when the dates for private Members' Bills have been moved, quite rightly, because of problems with sittings of the House, and I am going to ask the Leader of the House to look at some of these dates again. We also had the absurdity of a Session that went on for two years when only 13 days for private Member's Bills were listed; the Government eventually had to give us some more. Perhaps I should ask this question straight away. If the current Session goes on for much longer than expected, will we be given extra days for private Members' Bills?

The crux of the matter, the important part, relates to Standing Order No. 14(9). It is not until after the seventh sitting Friday—in other words, on the eighth sitting Friday—that anyone can bring a Bill that has had its Second Reading back to this House for Report and Third Reading. Once they have succeeded in doing that, it has to go off to the House of Lords. It has always been the Government's position that they bring forward the private Member's Bill days early enough so that that process can happen. I am very concerned that, because this is back-loaded, many people who get their Second Reading through will struggle to get the whole process through, because the Bill has to go to the Lords.

This Wednesday, the Members whose names have come up in the ballot will be able to list their private Members' Bills, and they will do so for the first seven

sitting days that are listed. I will apply for maybe one or two—or 20 or 30—private Members' Bills the following day, as other Members will. However, we are going to be very restricted, even if we can get support from both sides of the House, and the Government and the Opposition, and we might not have enough time to get our Bills through.

Let me point out what the effect of the Standing Order No. 14(9) will be. Looking at the list of dates, we see that no one will be able to bring a Bill back to this House for Report and Third Reading any time this year—in fact, the date is 20 January next year. This has never happened before. For the benefit of Members who might not have been following what is happening on the Order Paper, private Members' Bill days are listed for 15 July, then two in September, one in October, two in November, one in December and that one in late January. Then there are two in February and three in March. Well, what if we finish in April? That does not give us enough time.

The Leader of the House might have a very good reason for doing this, and I would be happy with that. I hope it is not because some of the names that came out of the ballot were those of Opposition Members who might have nasty Bills that the Government do not like but that the House does like. Could the Leader of the House explain, in his response—if he is able to respond—why he has scheduled six of these Fridays for next year? We have always had them earlier so that we had time to get the Bills through this House.

After Second Reading, we have to get the Bills into Committee—and by the way, we can have only one private Member's Bill in Committee at any one time, so there will be a delay there—but then we will not be able to bring them back until 20 January. If we bring them back on 20 January, they will not automatically get through. We might get one Bill through, but if my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) and I do not like that, there will be a bit of a problem on 20 January.

We are actually making the private Member's Bill process difficult. I know that the Government love private Members' Bills, because so many went through last year, so could the Leader of the House put me at ease and assure me that this is not some Machiavellian thing that has been thought up in the Whips Office or anywhere in the Leader of the House's office? Perhaps he could look at bringing forward some of those dates so that we could have more time for private Members' Bills.

This is an important aspect of what we do in this House. Some private Members' Bills go through. Mine did last year, which was important but minor. However, some are massive Bills—I mean, gosh, there might be one on assisted dying or something like that this time. I am just guessing, but there are huge issues that this House wants to debate, and it seems to me that this small motion before us tonight is hindering that process.

8.49 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): I am disappointed by the lack of optimism from my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). Thirteen colleagues got private Members' Bills through both Houses last year, despite covid affecting their

[Mark Spencer]

progress, so it was a great success. It is constructive to work with the Whips Office, which can assist and advise Members on both sides of the House.

My hon. Friend says the Government might be motivated by trying to stop Opposition Members' Bills that we do not like, but I suggest there is far more danger that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) will block the progress of those Bills.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough says we will not get through all the private Members' Bills. He might be able to enlighten the House on the date of the next Queen's Speech, but I am not in possession of that information. I encourage him to be optimistic and to work with the Government, Back-Bench colleagues and the Whips Office. I am sure right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House will have huge amounts of success.

Question put and agreed to.

Falklands War: 40th Anniversary

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Scott Mann.)

8.51 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): On 1 April 1982, the Argentine junta launched a full-scale invasion of a then little-known archipelago 8,000 miles from Britain in the south Atlantic ocean. The following day, their forces were in control of the entire islands and so began the Falklands war.

The Argentine dictatorship believed that Britain would be unwilling to liberate the islands, and the US navy believed any effort to do so would be a "military impossibility." Despite the received wisdom, the UK assembled a taskforce at breakneck speed—the first since the second world war to use all elements of our armed forces. What followed were 74 days of extreme hardship, intense violence and unspeakable bravery. It is right we remember that collective sacrifice, 40 years on.

Thirty thousand sailors, royal marines, soldiers, airmen and merchant mariners took the long voyage south. Tragically, 255 of them did not make the return journey home. Many thousands more still live with the mental and physical effects of that bloody struggle. No matter what we think of the decisions that sent our people into conflict down the ages, whether to Gallipoli, Goose Green or Gereshk, we have a duty to support the men and women who step forward to serve in our armed forces and a duty to bear witness to their sacrifice.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We are all indebted to the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I have been contacted by two constituents in particular, one lives in Carrowdore and the other in Comber, who served in the Falklands—there are others, too—and who live with the trauma 40 years later. Last night's television programme gave an example of that.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important to note this anniversary not simply for the families of the 258 British personnel who were killed and the 777 who were wounded but as a reminder to the residents of the Falkland Islands that they were and are worth our support? We will continue to support them for as long as they wish to be considered British and entitled to our defence support. We stand as strongly with the Falklands today as we did 40 years ago.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I completely agree with the important point he has made, as I am sure all Members of this House will. Further to his point, and in deference to him as a good friend and colleague, I wish to take this opportunity to say that the contribution from our friends in Northern Ireland cannot be understated. I recently read about Sue Warner, a Belfast nurse who received a peace prize in Buenos Aires 40 years after serving on the SS Uganda, where she treated both British and Argentine personnel who had horrific injuries. That is a reminder of just how collective the Falklands effort truly was and of course of the contribution made by those from Northern Ireland.

There have been considerable recent efforts to ensure that the Falkland Islands conflict is properly commemorated, and I commend everyone who has contributed to that

important process. I had the honour of attending a commemoration at Sheffield cathedral to mark the loss of HMS Sheffield and all those who perished aboard it. I was particularly pleased to see that Mr Speaker braved the south Atlantic ice and snow to take the opportunity to remember all of those who fought and died at the battle of Goose Green.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He mentions the events being held at the moment to commemorate the Falklands war. Will he join me in paying tribute to all those who have been taking part in the Falklands 40 bike ride, which came through my constituency last week, particularly my constituents Gus and Angela Hayles?

The ride is 255 miles long and is going from Cardiff to Aldershot. Gus was a Royal Engineer Paratrooper, and Angela served in the Royal Army Nursing Corps. Gus has been a committed campaigner, not just for Falklands veterans, but for veterans' mental health. Knowing the hon. Gentleman's experience, I wondered whether he would join me in congratulating them on their achievement.

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. Of course I take the opportunity to congratulate all of those who have been involved in what sounds like an epic bike ride. Further to the contribution she has just made, I wish to say something else. I will go on to talk about the character and fighting spirit of all of those who deployed down to the Falklands. That was a very significant element in enabling our being able to secure a victory in very challenging circumstances, but another element underpinned that victory: training. Much of that training will have been conducted in her wonderful constituency, which, as she knows, I hold in the highest regard. I have mostly, though not exclusively, happy memories of my time on the Brecon Beacons and on Sennybridge, in good and bad weather. I am grateful to her for her contribution and for the work she does representing our armed forces community.

I was just reflecting on the various attempts and contributions that have been made by different organisations to ensure that we properly commemorate this important milestone, not least by the Royal British Legion. It has, in customary fashion, gone to great lengths to organise a service to mark the end of the conflict, and that will be taking place at the national memorial arboretum tomorrow. On Wednesday, Parliament will come together in a remembrance service. I know there have been hundreds of services, tributes and pilgrimages conducted over the past few weeks, both here and on the Falkland Islands.

Many of us will have our own memories. I think particularly of Brian Hanrahan's legendary quote:

"I counted them all out and I counted them all back".

That will stay with me forever. However, we reach this milestone when the Falklands is at some risk of becoming a forgotten war, as research from Help for Heroes has recently revealed. Such an outcome would represent a collective failure to ensure the sacrifices made on both sides stand for all time. I truly hope that efforts over the past months will rebuild public awareness.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Once again, I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the House. I spent a fair bit of time in the Falklands and I am very familiar with the environment, having served down there. Those who have been to the Falklands know that it is a very austere, difficult, tricky environment, particularly in the winter. It is appalling under foot. Madam Deputy Speaker, we can both recall the images on the screens back in 1982, when I was 12 years old.

I want to make two points. First, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should pay tribute to the 255 members of Her Majesty's forces who were killed, the three islanders who lost their lives and the Argentine fallen, who were just doing what they were ordered to? Secondly, does he agree that the demands we made of our armed forces in 1982 are as applicable today as they were then and that, as we have seen over the years in Afghanistan, Iraq and all the other theatres we have asked our people to serve in, we need to maintain our forces at the very highest readiness, with the best kit and the best training, so that if the Falklands or anything like it happens again, we are ready?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman has made some incredibly important points, and done so very eloquently. Of course I agree with everything that he has just said.

There are many chapters of the Falklands story that need to be told. There is the bravery of the Royal Marines on the ground, and that of the pilots and aircrew in the skies above them. There is also the determination of the sailors, without whom no operation, let alone victory, would have been possible.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The success of our Royal Navy and Royal Marines would not have been possible if not for the work of the civilians supporting the fleet, including the dockyard workers at Devonport, in the constituency I represent. They do not always get their story told in the commemorations, so will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute not only to the Devonport dockyard workers but to all the civilians in dockyards throughout the United Kingdom who supported the fleet in preparation and on the way back?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The great ocean city of Plymouth has an important story to tell in the context of the Falkland Islands conflict, and he makes an important point about the huge contribution made by civilians. Those who step forward to serve in the armed forces do so knowing that they are backed by the outstanding efforts of the hundreds of thousands of good men and women who serve as civilians. My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for them and makes an important point, and I am grateful to him for doing so.

We should also reflect on the terrible suffering endured by the Welsh Guards on the Royal Fleet Auxilliary Sir Galahad, and on the hard-won victory of the Scots Guards on Mount Tumbledown. I am always enthralled by what the Gurkhas, recruited from south Asia, made of their deployment to the south Atlantic. The Special Air Service and the Special Boat Service played a crucial role, but much of their heroism remains untold. As the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) rightly said a moment ago, we should also remember and commemorate the hardship experienced by Argentine forces, who lost 649 personnel.

[Dan Jarvis]

I hope the House will understand why I now wish to speak primarily about the legacy left by the forefathers in my own regiment—a legacy that my generation and those that followed attempted to live up to. The Paras who went down south occupy a legendary place in the annals of airborne history—none more so than the platoon sergeant of 4 platoon, B company, 3 Para, Sergeant Ian McKay.

Sergeant McKay was born in Wortley, Barnsley, and his story is still recounted and learned by every single fledgling paratrooper to this day. Marica McKay, Ian's widow, remembers that it began when her late husband sat down for dinner one evening in their home and the phone rang:

"I put his dinner in a Tupperware container and he went straight away. He just said, 'I've got to go.'"

With that, Ian and his comrades prepared to set sail. Intensive training was conducted on the voyage: signals, weapons, fitness, medical and fieldcraft over and over again until the battalion arrived six weeks later at Port San Carlos.

After assuming defensive positions, 3 Para were ordered to move to Teal Inlet—the first leg of a 60-mile gruelling march under brutal conditions. They would then advance to set up a headquarters for the assault on Mount Longdon—part of a three-phase plan to capture Port Stanley and end the war.

The battle for Mount Longdon was ferocious, chaotic and bloody. The accounts of close-quarter combat are among the most violent ever recorded. The ground had been occupied for weeks by Argentine forces. They were dug-in and well-defended by machine guns, mortars and artillery. All approaches had been mined. Despite the threat, it was an era when body armour was not issued. The only protection provided was parachute helmets—great when a soldier smacked their head after a heavy landing, practically useless in a gun fight or mortar strike. If they did get hit, wounded soldiers might have to wait 10 hours for evacuation. One Army surgeon from the campaign later compared the casualty evacuation procedure of the Falklands to the first world war and even to the Boer war.

It was not just the enemy with which 3 Para had to contend. The June South Atlantic weather is an unforgiving, unrelenting beast, as Mr Speaker will no doubt recently have observed. The second-hand winter clothing that was issued belonged in the bargain bin of an Army surplus stores, not on the backs of some of our most elite troops. Icy rain and biting wind swept across the barren landscape, quickly forcing temperatures well below zero. Some of the most robust collapsed with exposure and exhaustion. As times go, they were tremendously hard. None the less, overcoming such adversity is what is demanded of those who wear the coveted maroon beret.

It is impossible to put into words the courage, selflessness and valour displayed by Sergeant McKay in the dark, cold early hours of the morning of 12 June 1982 on Mount Longdon. His citation is as close as we will get, so I would like to take the opportunity to share part of it with the House:

"The enemy fire was still both heavy and accurate, and the position of the platoons was becoming increasingly hazardous. Taking Sergeant McKay, a corporal and a few others, and covered by supporting machine gun fire, the platoon commander

moved forward to reconnoitre the enemy positions, but was hit by a bullet in the leg, and command devolved upon Sergeant McKay.

It was clear that instant action was needed if the advance was not to falter and increasing casualties to ensue. Sergeant McKay decided to convert this reconnaissance into an attack in order to eliminate the enemy positions. He was in no doubt of the strength and deployment of the enemy as he undertook this attack. He issued orders, and, taking three men with him, broke cover and charged the enemy position.

The assault was met by a hail of fire. The corporal was seriously wounded, a private killed and another wounded. Despite these losses, Sergeant McKay, with complete disregard for his own safety, continued to charge the enemy position alone. On reaching it, he despatched the enemy with grenades, thereby relieving the position of the beleaguered 4 and 5 platoons, who were now able to redeploy with relative safety. Sergeant McKay, however, was killed at the moment of victory, his body falling on the bunker.

Without doubt, Sergeant McKay's action retrieved a most dangerous situation and was instrumental in ensuring the success of the attack. His was a coolly calculated act, the dangers of which must have been all too apparent to him beforehand. Undeterred, he performed with outstanding selflessness, perseverance and courage. With a complete disregard for his own safety, he displayed courage and leadership of the highest order, and was an inspiration to all those around him."

Sergeant McKay was an inspiration not just to all those around him, but to every paratrooper who came after him, myself included. The war was over two days later. He was subsequently awarded a Victoria Cross, one of only two recipients in the campaign. The other award, also posthumous, went to Lieutenant Colonel "H" Jones, commanding officer of 2 Para, for his valour at Goose Green days earlier. There were, of course, countless acts of extraordinary bravery that were not formally recognised, not least the actions of Corporal Stewart McLaughlin, also killed in action on Mount Longdon. My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), who is not able to be with us this evening, has long championed ending that oversight.

Yesterday marked 40 years since Sergeant McKay relinquished his chance to go home so that others could. On the memorial erected at the spot at which he fell are inscribed the immortal words from the Gospel of John:

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Never were those words more fitting. While at sea, Sergeant McKay wrote a letter to a friend to say:

"I have no intention of taking any risks and getting killed. If I do, then it will be to protect my men, to save lives."

To write such a thing is one matter; to act when the moment arrives is quite another, but that is exactly what Sergeant McKay did.

Today, 40 years on, we recognise Sergeant McKay's sacrifice and the sacrifice of everyone who fell during the Falklands conflict. We pay tribute to all those who went down south, and we stand with the many who still bear the scars of the conflict. It is a debt we can never repay, but one that we must always remember.

9.11 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this debate and his excellent exposition of the conflict.

The Falklands war touched every part of the UK, including people in my Meon Valley constituency. I was a student during the Falklands conflict and followed it closely, not least because several of my parents' friends, whom I had known for most of my childhood, were deeply involved. Sir Robin Fearn was head of the South American desk at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; General Sir Richard Trant was land deputy commander, and Captain Lyn Middleton was captain of the HMS Hermes.

Meon Valley, with its closeness to Portsmouth, has many connections to the Royal Navy. Two of my constituents, Captain David Hart Dyke and Ian Young, served on HMS Coventry; many will remember hearing of its attack and sinking. Another friend, John Troy, was in his first year in the Royal Navy, and was also on HMS Coventry. It was hit by two bombs and rapidly flooded, capsizing within half an hour with the loss of 19 lives. What they saw must have affected them for the rest of their lives but, typically, they rarely talk about it. Some 22 ships were hit, with 82 lives lost and many more physically affected.

I have since met many others, such as Chris Purcell and his wife Louise, who do so much for other Falklands veterans and raise huge amounts for the Poppy Appeal. They also raise awareness of the mental health of many of those returning. So many young men returned with physical scars, but also mental ones.

I was privileged to know Lieutenant Commander Brian Dutton, who died a few years ago. He was a Royal Navy diver, who defused many mines and bombs, including one 1,000 pound bomb on HMS Argonaut. Another friend, who has sadly died of ovarian cancer, was Vikki. She was married to John Hamilton, who got the Military Cross and died in a firefight on West Falklands, allowing his troop to escape. Recently, his extraordinary part in the war as part of the special services has been released.

There are many more heroes whom I have not met, but my trip to the Falklands as part of the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme helped me to understand what it must have been like on the ground, and those names that we were to hear many times in 1982, such as Goose Green, Bluff Cove, Mount Tumbledown and Stanley, became real.

I pay tribute to the sacrifices of our service personnel and their families. Even 40 years after the events, I understand the pain and grief that the relatives of those who lost their lives must feel, but I have also seen the deep gratitude of the people who live there, who have been honouring our forces and those who worked with them.

We must not allow unprovoked aggression to pay, and the Falklands conflict should be a lesson to anyone who tries. We will not forget.

9.14 pm

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): It is a singular honour for me to have the privilege to respond to the debate. The House is moved by and very grateful for the contribution made by the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and I am glad that we also had contributions from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friends the Members for Brecon and Radnorshire

(Fay Jones) and for Bracknell (James Sunderland), the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), who reflected on themes such as the important role of the Royal Navy and the remarkably austere conditions in the Falkland Islands. I was also pleased to hear about the Falklands bike ride to Aldershot by Gus and Angela—something that I will look out for this week.

Let me pick up some of the themes considered by the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central. First, there is the theme of commemoration. We are all making a collective effort to ensure that this is not a forgotten war. I am pleased that over the past 74 days there have been some very significant commemorative events. Back in April, I was honoured to commemorate the start of hostilities in St Paul's cathedral with members of the South Atlantic Medal Association. You yourself, Mr Speaker, held a magnificent beating the retreat last week. All those various activities will culminate in the national moment of commemoration at the arboretum tomorrow. I will be privileged to attend that very significant event, and Members from both sides of the House will also attend. Of course, all Members will attend events in their own constituencies. It will be my particular privilege to meet a large group of Parachute Regiment veterans at the home of the British Army in Aldershot for a very special moment this coming Saturday.

The fact that 255 men were killed in action, seven ships were sunk, three Falkland Islanders were killed and 30,000 men and women served and received the South Atlantic medal gives us some sense of the scale of all this. We must put on record very clearly our sincere thanks to all those forces in all three domains, whether land, sea or air. In commemoration of the important role played by the Falkland Islands civilians, we are very pleased that city status has been granted to Stanley by Her Majesty the Queen in this jubilee year. That is a fitting addition to the programme of commemoration and celebration.

I think we were all moved by the reflections of the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central, particularly about Sergeant McKay VC. That has a broader relevance—what I would describe as the remarkable airborne ideal. The example shown by and the reputation and commitment of Ian McKay VC had an impact on this generation like no other. Like the hon. and gallant Member, I am sure, it was reading accounts of Mount Longdon, Goose Green and Tumbledown that first drew me to an interest in the Brigade of Guards and subsequently airborne forces. The airborne ideal had a very fine expression during the Falklands conflict, but it is broader than just the Parachute Regiment. It applied to the remarkable men of 3 Commando Brigade, 40, 45 and 42 Commando, the 5th Infantry Brigade, the Welsh Guards and the Scots Guards. It applied to the 1st and 7th Gurkhas, who performed so valiantly on Mount William. It applied to all attached arms of Royal Engineers, gunners, air defence, artillery, Royal Navy, Fleet Air Arm and Royal Air Force. It was a remarkable feat of combined arms, because no one arm would have been successful without the contribution of the other. In a simple metaphor, we might see the land forces—the Army—as the fist that was launched by the Royal Navy to liberate the Falkland Islands while being protected by the remarkable heroics in the air of the Fleet Air Arm and the Royal Air Force.

[Leo Docherty]

We were pleased as a House that the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central was able to read in complete length the citation of Sergeant Ian McKay. I thought that was a very important moment. I should mention, in parallel, a source of inspiration for me, one which many people who have come into the military in the past 20 years have. On my first day at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, I saw my first company sergeant major, Mark Cape, who was there in his Blues jumper, wearing his South Atlantic medal. It was the sight of that medal and hearing later about his experiences as an 18-year-old guardsman, fighting his way victoriously up the scree and crags of Tumbledown, that at that point provided such a deep source of inspiration. After my very short and entirely undistinguished military career, it has nevertheless continued to be a source of deep inspiration. I am therefore grateful for the hon. and gallant Gentleman's similar reflections on the role of Ian McKay in his military career, and I am sure that all those who have served would have similar experiences and similar points of reference because of the formational nature of the Falklands war.

Drawing to a conclusion, I want to touch on two other enduring lessons of the Falklands conflict that are particularly in our minds during this 40th anniversary. The first is the legacy of human cost. I mentioned the South Atlantic medal, and we have some 30,000 awarded. As Churchill said:

"A medal glitters, but it also casts a shadow."—[*Official Report*, 22 March 1944; Vol. 398, c. 872.]

That is the case for the 255 British service personnel and the three Falkland Islands civilians killed, but also for the 649 Argentinians who were killed, because behind every casualty statistic, there is a family. For that family, their experience and their burden started in 1982, and it did not end. Earlier last month, I was privileged to meet the families of those killed in the Falklands conflict in St Paul's, and I am looking forward to seeing some of those airborne families again in Aldershot this Saturday. That is a very significant, enduring impact. We must always remember the human legacy and the human cost of war. That theme will be reflected in events over the next week.

The last lesson I want to draw is a simple one, which is very relevant today, about the power of resolve in military affairs, and the power of what we can achieve when we conduct combined arms warfare properly. The Falklands conflict demonstrates all that is good and best about the power of British military determination and what it can do when it is combined with a very clear and resolute foreign policy in the interest of freedom and as a guardian of freedom. In 1982, our Prime Minister at the time said:

"peace, freedom and justice are only to be found where people are prepared to defend them."

We have heard about the men and women who were prepared to defend them in 1982. That is still the case, because they set an example to us all, for which we are eternally grateful.

Mr Speaker: It was a long time before a Speaker visited the Falklands—in fact, I was the first to do so. I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for making the point about the conditions: I had never seen snow or frost like it. When I got there and saw the moving situation of where Colonel H. Jones fell defending democracy, it was unbelievable. I will never be moved in that way again, and to lay the wreath was so important for me. On my previous visit, I went to Mount Longdon and saw where Sergeant McKay fell as well. There is nothing more moving than seeing, in the worst weather conditions ever, what we had to do to fight for the rights of the people and the Falkland islanders. John David Stroud, my constituent—well, he was not at the time; I am not old enough—died on HMS Glamorgan, so we all have a connection, we all know somebody, and we all want to unite. There is no better time for the House than when we are brought together at times such as this—a very important 40th anniversary. I remind hon. Members that the service for the Falklands will be in St Margaret's after Prime Minister's questions. I want as many hon. Members as possible to turn up and take part.

Question put and agreed to.

9.25 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 13 June 2022

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

Transgender Conversion Therapy

4.30 pm

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): Before I call Elliot Colburn to move the motion, it will help if I say that as this is a heavily subscribed debate, I might have to impose a five-minute time limit. The more Members keep their contributions brief, the more likely I can avoid doing that.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 613556, relating to transgender conversion therapy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I will heed your words and try to keep my remarks as brief as possible.

The petition, entitled “Ensure Trans people are fully protected under any conversion therapy ban”, states:

“Ensure any ban fully includes trans people and all forms of conversion therapy. It’s shameful that the UK intends to deliberately exclude trans people from a ban in contrast to the approach taken by many countries, despite trans people being at a greater risk of experiencing the harmful & degrading practices. The government’s own figures show that trans people are nearly twice as likely to be at risk of experiencing the harmful & degrading practices of conversion therapy. A ban needs to ensure all forms of conversion therapy are banned.”

The petition remains open, and as of this morning when I checked as I wrote this speech, there were more than 145,000 signatures, including over 220 from my own Carshalton and Wallington constituency. I thank the petition creator and the organisations and charities that helped to brief me in advance of today’s debate, and indeed colleagues around this packed Chamber, which has got even busier since I last looked up from my notes. It is great to see the Public Gallery so full as well.

There is no doubt that trans issues have caused polarisation in the United Kingdom, with threats, intimidation and even violence from both sides of the debate. No doubt today will amount to much of the same, particularly with the horrible things being said on social media.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I apologise for not being able to miss a meeting that I have at five o’clock. My hon. Friend has talked about the vile way some people are treated, which probably includes the way Kathleen Stock and Helen Joyce have been treated. They have given very fair descriptions of trans issues and yet have experienced a great deal of bullying and online harm from people who ought to say, “Can’t we try to work together to do sensible things?”

Elliot Colburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, which highlights the fact that we do need to have respectful debates on both sides of the argument.

It might help, for the purposes of today’s debate, to narrow down exactly what the petition asks for and what this debate is all about. To be crystal clear, it is not about reforming the Gender Recognition Act 2004, nor is it about access to single-sex spaces, trans women in sport, trans women in prisons, or any of the other issues that have caused such a stir in this place, in the media, in academia, and beyond. This debate and this petition are specifically about the harmful practices of so-called conversion therapy and whether we, as a House and as a country, think it is acceptable for anyone, regardless of who they are, to be subjected to such things with no recourse to justice. I will argue that nobody should be denied access to justice if they are being subjected to the abhorrent practices encapsulated by so-called conversion therapy.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there are enough laws already in place to cover the abhorrent practices that he talks about? We will be creating a problem with freedom of speech and people being able to talk to their children about the way they feel about themselves.

Elliot Colburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, but I am afraid I do not agree. There is nothing in the proposals and the consultation that the Government set out to suggest that there would be an impact on freedom of speech. Although a lot of the practices—a point that I was going to come on to in a minute—are already outlawed, there are many forms of conversion practices that are not, which is why a ban is necessary.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): In relation to the previous point, does my hon. Friend agree with me the fact that so many respondents to the Government’s survey said that they had either been offered, or been subject to, conversion therapy shows that conversion therapy does exist for trans people?

Elliot Colburn: I totally agree. The national LGBT survey in 2018 showed that trans people were twice as likely as LGB people to be offered, and to undergo, conversion therapy. Those practices can take many forms, but the evidence that has been presented shows that they all have the same aim—and all are harmful. That aim is to suppress or change someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is true that many of the harrowing stories we have heard about things such as corrective rape and physical assault, which many survivors have come forward to share, are already illegal.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I apologise for missing my hon. Friend’s opening remarks, but rape is already illegal—an offence. Can he identify an offence that will be included in the Bill that is not already an offence? What is the offence that is going to be created?

Elliot Colburn: I will gladly identify that offence. As I just said, rape is already illegal. However, it is the pseudo-psychological and spiritual so-called talking and behavioural therapies—exorcisms, deliverance prayers and other such things—that are not currently illegal and are included in the proposed ban. Indeed, the ban makes those things aggravating factors when prosecuting. That is currently not in law, but it is necessary.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that there is ample evidence to show that transgender people submitted to any form of that conversion therapy potentially suffer greater psychological impacts, including harmful outcomes and lifetime suicide attempt risks?

Elliot Colburn: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. I have had the privilege of listening to many survivors who have come forward to share their stories—I am sure many people in this place have—and those stories demonstrate just that fact.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): The practices my hon. Friend has just described are basically exorcisms and witchcraft, frankly. Does he agree with me that we are dignifying such abhorrent practices by calling them therapies?

Elliot Colburn: I absolutely agree. That is why language is so important—that is going to be the theme of my speech. The tight wording of the ban is very important. Conversion practices is a much better description than conversion therapies. I only used conversion therapy for today's debate because it is the go-to term.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that part of the concern about a ban—wrongly, I think—is that it would catch people who are engaged in legitimate therapy aimed at relieving emotional and psychological distress?

Elliot Colburn: That concern has been brought forward, but as I hope to say later, there is a way that we can alleviate those concerns and still pass an inclusive ban.

I thank the survivors who came forward to share their stories. It is true that conversion practices are happening in the UK right now. It is not something that happened decades ago but has now stopped; those kind of practices still happen in the UK today. Nor is it only happening here; the threat or action of sending people overseas to undergo such practices is still happening.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I commend the hon. Gentleman for listening directly to those who have been affected by this issue. It is often the voices of trans people that are missing from this debate. I was contacted by a constituent who said,

“as a trans woman, surely I deserve to feel safe, have some dignity and live my life in peace without being demonised?”

Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the way that the exclusion has happened serves to further demonise an already demonised group?

Elliot Colburn: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. I want to talk about some of the concerns that have been brought forward about a trans-inclusive ban, particularly those focused around unintended consequences—the potential of criminalising legitimate conversations between trans people and, for example, their parents, doctors or religious leaders. Those concerns are legitimate, and it comes down to us as legislators to ensure that we pass good legislation that does not catch those out.

I and many other hon. Members have seen the legal evidence provided to the Government Equalities Office that shows that it is perfectly possible to pass a ban

without such unintended consequences. What is important is having a tightly worded Bill with clear language, as well as an extensive list in the legislation about what is and is not intended to be caught by a ban on conversion therapy. Let us be very clear: campaigners who have been fighting for this say that a ban is not intended to capture legitimate conversations, questions or even disagreements between individuals and their parents, doctors or religious leaders, for example. Legitimate explorative therapies, the teaching of scripture or even the ability to say that they do not agree with a person's identity is not intended to be covered within the scope of a ban, and that should be explicitly stated within it.

The argument is also made that to exclude trans people is the right thing to do because sexual orientation and gender identity are different and so should not be covered by the same legislation. However, although they are different parts of a person's individual identity, separating them would create big problems for the Government in law, as many trans people are also LGB, and vice versa. Plus, I believe that it would allow conversion therapy for LGB people to continue through the back door, because it could be claimed that it was being done because of their gender identity. We have seen that happening already. I have heard of cases of survivors who have come forward—for example, camp gay men and butch lesbians who have undergone conversion therapy because of their gender identity, not because of their sexual orientation. I believe that that is the reason why all leading medical, psychological and therapy organisations back an inclusive ban. Twenty-five organisations have signed up to the memorandum of understanding on conversion therapy in the UK, and more than 370 religious leaders from around the world are also calling for a ban on conversion therapy.

However, I do not think that I can put the need for a trans-inclusive ban much better than by referring to this perverse situation, which I would just like colleagues to consider. It is based on a real-life example of a set of twins—one gay and one trans. Both are forced to undergo hours of talking therapies to get them to change their identity. They are taken for exorcisms, with people shouting over them. They are monitored to ensure that they are not meeting anyone who might be considered “wrong”. They are unable to seek out accredited counselling and support and they have to endure treatment that is degrading and shaming.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, because I genuinely have come to this debate to learn about the issues. I thought the most important word that he just uttered was “forced”. I think everyone could agree that no one should be forced into any sort of therapy. The question is whether we would be banning people from seeking this therapy if, for whatever unaccountable reason, they wished to do so. That is where a line needs to be clarified.

Elliot Colburn: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that intervention. Indeed there is a consent clause in the Bill. That is an entirely separate debate. I know that many colleagues on both sides of the House do not agree with that—I am one of them.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I think we are missing the point. Actually, the therapy in itself is the issue. It is

likened to torture by many leading organisations. On the issue of sexual violence and LGBT survivors, 24% of the people that Galop spoke to had experienced sexual violence, but that figure leapt to 32% for the non-binary and to 35% for trans men. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that we should not be creating spaces that are safe for people to perpetrate sexual violence against individuals?

Elliot Colburn: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention and I absolutely agree with her. Again, it comes back to the general theme of the debate—for me, at least—which is that this is about harmful practices and whether we think anyone, regardless of who they are, should undergo harmful practices. My answer is no.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this really important debate; he is making an excellent speech. The United Nations report in 2020 called for a global ban on conversion therapy. The UN said:

“Such practices constitute an egregious violation of rights to bodily autonomy, health, and free expression of one’s sexual orientation and gender identity.”

Does he agree with me that there is real clarity in that statement and that it is very useful for this debate?

Elliot Colburn: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention and I absolutely agree with her. I am conscious of time, Sir Graham, so I will start to wrap up my remarks so that we can get on to other people’s contributions.

Going back to the example of a set of twins where one twin is gay and one is trans, as the proposals stand, the law would only protect one of those two individuals. The other twin would be left open to continually being subjected to the kind of practices that we have been discussing, with no legal protections. By deliberately excluding trans people from the ban, I believe that the message that we would send is that it is acceptable to inflict such behaviour on someone because of who they are, which just cannot be right.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): There seems to be a bit of confusion about exactly what this so-called “therapy” entails. It is perhaps worth saying that these coercive and “abhorrent practices” do not work. By the way, “abhorrent practices” are the words of the Conservative Government, although they have done a reverse ferret on this, of course. Perhaps for those who have come to this debate to listen with an open mind, the hon. Gentleman might explain what those “abhorrent practices” involve and why they are not voluntary.

Elliot Colburn: Absolutely. This comes back to the issue of consent. Can someone actually consent to having harm done to themselves, even if they have all the facts? For me the answer is no. Again, that comes back to the core point, which is that these are “abhorrent practices”—harmful practices and that cause people to have to undergo years of psychological therapy to try to get over what has been done to them, which is why they need to be banned in law.

Sir Graham, I am coming to the end of my remarks. What this issue boils down to is that achieving a trans-inclusive conversion therapy ban without any unintended consequences is, frankly, what we should be doing anyway—in other words, we should be producing good, tightly worded legislation. That has already been achieved in multiple countries and territories with no unintended consequences whatsoever, so we already have international working examples to draw upon when it comes to the drafting of this legislation.

All sectors of UK society, from health to religion, have supported calls for a trans-inclusive ban. That, after all, is what this debate is all about. It is not about the noise around trans issues, which I mentioned at the start of my remarks; it is about protecting people from harm, no matter who they are. We have a duty as parliamentarians to protect the people who we serve from harm, so I urge colleagues to join me in exercising that duty.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, let me say that I will start with an informal five-minute time limit. If Members can keep to that, I will not have to impose a formal time limit.

4.47 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Sir Graham, for calling me to speak so early in the debate.

It was a privilege to listen to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) as he described what needs to be a debate in which we dial down the hate and dial up the understanding. I am here to speak on behalf of trans and non-binary friends and allies in Plymouth, 482 of whom have signed this petition. I am proud to be Plymouth’s first ever out Member of Parliament and I take that responsibility seriously to provide a voice for LGBTQ+ people, to call out hate and extremism, and to say proudly, “Love is love, whoever you are”.

I have spoken in this place before about my view on trans people. We may be in a debate, but trans people themselves are not up for debate—they exist. The only question is whether or not the Government will recognise their existence and the rights that should go with that existence. My view on this subject is clear: trans men are men; trans women are women; and being non-binary is valid. In that space, however, we need to educate and inform people, and not just hit each other over the head with sticks. It is important that we conduct the debate in that way.

It is very welcome that at long last we have proposals to ban conversion therapy for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. This is a huge victory. It is the result of an awful lot of work and I am grateful to the campaigners from Stonewall, MindOut, the LGBT Foundation and many other organisations for their tireless work in making the positive case for how stopping this harm to people will make a positive difference to society.

This legislation has taken too long to be brought forward, but it is better late than never. Conversion therapy is abuse, and it is because it is cruel and abhorrent that young lesbian, gay and bisexual people face the humiliation and violence that comes with it. It is right that such therapy is banned. However, if we are banning

[Luke Pollard]

it because we think those practices are vile, we need to ban it for everybody and not make an artificial distinction between people.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and he is making a very cogent case, as did the previous speaker, the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn). However, is it not the point that in a free, democratic and liberal society this process of so-called “conversion therapy” smacks of the Soviet Union, and surely it is not something that we should condone in a society such as ours?

Luke Pollard: I think the cultural reference might work better on someone from a different generation, but I understand what my right hon. Friend is trying to say. In the spirit of generosity that I am trying to advocate for, it is important that we make the case that everyone, regardless of who they are and who they fall in love with, should enjoy protections. That is a British value that we teach in our schools.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Luke Pollard: I will make some progress, if I may, because I do not want to run out of time. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington said that if trans and non-binary people are excluded from the ban, that would be a loophole that would allow these practices in through the back door. It would not be a back door; it would be a trapdoor, through which young LGB people would be pushed. That is why we need to be absolutely clear on this. Intersectionality exists; a person can be both trans and a lesbian, or both trans and bisexual. That intersectionality creates a grey zone in the law, and more people will fall into it if trans and non-binary people are excluded from the ban. That is not right.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Luke Pollard: I will make some more progress, if I may. When I was a spotted, closeted teenager, there were not an awful lot of LGBT role models in society—no professional footballers or Olympic athletes. There are now. We have visibility in our society. I am pleased with all my heart that young people can now see LGBT people both in the public eye and on screen.

As some Members will know, I am an unapologetic fan of Netflix’s “Heartstopper”. I remember being both Nick and Charlie at school. Yasmin Finney, who plays Elle, is epic in her acting; however, for me, it is her class and visibility as a trans actor, and her transfer to the “Doctor Who” universe, that has inspired not only me but young trans people across the world. That visibility and legitimacy has saved lives.

It is that world, as Alice Oseman wrote in “Heartstopper”—where our diversity is celebrated, not excluded; where people are drawn together in a broad hug, not with a big stick—that we should aim for with this legislation. That is why I want every Member in this place to know

that this message should go out to young LGBT people: regardless of who you are and who you love, you have the right to be loved, safe and valued, not just by society but in law. That is at the heart of today’s debate. Let us say to young LGB, trans and non-binary people that they are enough, we have listened to them, and we will value them.

4.52 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak so early, Sir Graham. I rise to speak with a heavy heart, because I do not think we should be here. This issue is not something we should have to debate. I am furious, but my fury is nothing compared to the deep-set harm that this announcement has already caused to the transgender community, which has been harmed by us saying that trans people do not deserve the same rights and protections as their LGB brothers and sisters. Shamefully, the entire ban was almost cancelled; were it not for the actions of Conservative Back Benchers to ensure the ban was protected, it would have been.

The entire manner of the debate should shame us all. We need more compassion on all sides—there should not be any sides in this issue. So much of this debate has been misrepresentative and bears no relation to the reality of what such a ban would do. The ban is about preventing those who use so-called therapy as a smokescreen for their homophobic and transphobic exorcisms, and who claim that LGBTQ+ people do not deserve to love, be loved or live their life as they truly are.

Today, rather than explaining why we need an inclusive ban, I want to focus on the claim that any ban on conversion therapy would allow for only one form of therapy: the so-called affirmative model. It is usually accompanied by the claim that the ban on trans conversion therapy is designed specifically to push so-called gender ideology. I would like to know how the groups making such claims have seen the legislation, because I know that no Members present have. The Minister probably has not either, because it has not been drafted.

Conversion therapy often takes the form of one-directional talking therapies conducted by quacks in unregulated settings. There can be only one outcome for someone from such therapy: rejecting their trans self. Regulated psychotherapists and those from similar professions have always insisted that exploratory therapy should have no set outcome, but that outcome is what conversion therapy produces. What our children—indeed, trans people of any age—deserve and need is fully explorative and challenging conversations with accredited and regulated individuals who adhere to ethical tests, are regulated and would not push any pre-determined outcome. A regulated therapist would never say that someone must act on their attractions or feelings, or that they must eliminate them, and surely no one here can disagree with that.

Some claim that gay and lesbian people are being forced to convert to being transgender. There are always isolated cases—we can never say never—but let us not suggest that this is some widespread conspiracy. Even if someone did ascribe to such a belief, the legislation could help them, because it would ensure that the critical conversations took place with professionals, not the well-meaning.

Let us take on the claim, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), that a ban on CT would criminalise health practitioners. If it would, why do the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the British Psychological Society, the Albany Trust, the British Medical Association, Mind, Relate, the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Association of Christian Counsellors and many more stand behind a ban? The psychiatric and psychological professions reject conversion therapy because it is the opposite of open-ended exploration; it is a therapy with only one stopping point. It is not about keeping choices, but eliminating them entirely, and that is why mental health practitioners back the legislation. It will not criminalise them, or teachers, or parents who want to have conversations with their children. I know that, because I have worked since my election to secure a ban on conversion therapy. I came to this place saying that I would help deliver one.

The discussions have been methodical, serious and cautious. Licensed bodies want to get this right, and to have serious safeguards in place. Given that search for safeguards, I want to make it abundantly clear that psychological professionals have been clear and unequivocal that trans conversion therapy is a definable concept. They might have different views about many other things, but they are agreed on that.

The Cass review, which many cite as a reason to exclude transgender people from a ban, is unequivocal. It calls for expanded support for trans healthcare and better service provision. Hilary Cass has said that her work does not impede the bringing forward of a conversion therapy Bill that includes trans people, and that any Bill does not need to wait until the end of her work, so why is her work being appropriated in arguments against a ban? Her work is well under way.

I wish to clear up some misunderstandings about the Bill, and I am sorry that I will slightly run over. Despite how hard others are pushing to misrepresent it, the ban is not about transgender people in sport or prisons, any medical interventions or procedures, or gender-neutral toilets. The Government do not propose that the ban defines gender identity in legislation; they note that we already have the Gender Recognition Act 2004, and hate crime legislation that acknowledges transgender people. Nor are LGBT community groups asking for gender identity to be defined or introduced in law, so why are so-called lobbying organisations saying that we are trying to do that?

I want to make it very clear that an inclusive ban on conversion therapy is not some woke frontier for those who want to suppress freedom of speech. It is not some new frontier for politicians to weaponise in a culture war that they think is vote winning. My standing up for my rights—I hope that colleagues would agree that I have fought for the rights of women since I came to this place—is not incompatible with fighting for the rights of others. Women are people with cervixes. We are women. I do not chest-feed; I breastfeed my baby. Of course biology matters, but these positions are not at war with one another.

If we can come together, we can find mutual understanding. This is not a back-door effort to have a battle about rights, or to criminalise dissent from gender ideology. It is about punishing practices that leave real and enduring psychological scars, and about holding to

account those who cause the misery. The only people who should fear the ban are those quacks and charlatans who profit from bigotry and torture, and who believe that their views are so superior to others’.

Let us protect our children and leave the professionals to do their jobs. Let us include transgender people in the ban, in order to protect them from those who are so divorced from decency and compassion—so hellbent on their world view and brand of torture—that they would cause people to end up depressed, with severe mental suffering or committing suicide. I will not stand for a ban that devalues my transgender friends, and I will amend the legislation if, when it comes forward, it does not include trans people. I will not stand for the division of the LGBT community—division that would give bigots a green light to continue torturing our trans friends. I call on the Government to do what is right and bring forward the work on transgender rights and inclusion in the Bill that they have promised. I ask them to stand by trans people, and give protections to those who urgently need them.

4.59 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Graham; thank you for calling me so early. I commend the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on an excellent speech. I also warmly commend the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on a passionate and genuine speech, and I am very pleased to follow her.

I was struck by the fact that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington had to start by defining what this debate is not about. That is probably testament to just how poor the wider general discussion has become. This is not about infringing on anybody else’s rights. It is not about infringing on the rights of women in general, or their right to safe spaces; it is not infringing on the right to free speech; and, crucially, it is not about limiting the right to seek advice and help, or the right to have an honest conversation. It is about conversion therapy and the harm that it does, about the need for action against it, and about the need, from my perspective and my party’s perspective, to include trans people within that protection.

The hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) says that existing laws already cover this. No, they do not. That is why we are here, and why the petition exists—because of the harm being done right now to hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens—the most vulnerable people in society, who need action and our support. If the existing legislative framework covered this, we would not need to be here.

There is huge consensus on the need for action. The Scottish Human Rights Commission has said:

“It is well documented that the injury caused by practices of ‘conversion therapy’ are grounded on the premise that LGBT+ people are sick, diseased, and abnormal and must therefore be treated.⁴ Some practices can potentially amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment towards specific LGBT+ people, while the very existence of ‘conversion therapy’ practices in our society promotes a culture in which LGBT+ people are seen as needing to be fixed, thereby undermining the dignity of all LGBT+ people.”

There is also consensus among religious organisations that the matter needs to be tackled. Ahmed Shaheed, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or

[Alyn Smith]

belief, is in favour of a ban, along with the general assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Church of England, the Methodists, the Quakers, the Hindu Council UK and many others. Any reputable psychotherapy organisation is in favour of a ban, because they know what the harm perpetrated by these quacks—I was struck by the mention of witchcraft by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price)—does to their own reputation.

According to the UK Government's own figures, the scale of the problem is considerable. The UK Government's 2018 survey of 108,000 LGBT+ people showed that 2% have undergone therapy and 5% have been offered it. For the trans community, the figures are even higher: 9% of trans men have been offered this therapy, which is odious. The question for us legislators surely boils down to: where do we draw the line? How do we draw up legislation? In Scotland, we are doing that. In Scotland, this is a devolved competence, and the Scottish Government are committed to bringing forward a trans inclusionary ban. I trust MSPs to draw the line in the right place, in a way that looks after everybody's rights, because these rights are not mutually exclusive.

I make a plea to the English, Welsh and Northern Irish parliamentarians present to work with us. Nobody has a monopoly of wisdom on this subject. We should listen to people's experiences and to what they say about the harm done, which is very real and genuine. Hundreds of thousands of our citizens right now are suffering as a result of this practice, and many hundreds of thousands more are living with the consequences of having undergone it. There is a clear need for legislation on it.

Nick Fletcher: It is great to hear such a good debate on this issue. Many people have written to me saying that if a young person who thinks they are trans came to them, they would be scared of saying, "Well, why don't you just watch and wait? Let's give it six months," or "Let's see how you feel in a year, or two years." People will be scared to say that, because they do not want to be called transphobic, or to be prosecuted under legislation that may come later. That is where I am coming from—from the point of view of parents, teachers, men of the cloth and others who want to be able to say, "Just watch and wait," or to ask why.

Alyn Smith: I will take the intervention at face value as a genuine expression of concern. This is not an easy subject—I would be the first to acknowledge that—but that is why we need to make sure that the legislation is right. That is why we need to ensure that the line is drawn at the right place. I said in my opening remarks—I have them here—that this is not about infringing the right of anyone to seek advice and have an honest conversation, but there is a world of difference between that and the quackery and harm perpetrated by people who set themselves up in business doing this stuff.

Jacob Young: I draw the attention of my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who talked about forcing someone to change their gender identity or their sexual orientation. Is this not all about the intention behind the conversation? There is no problem with a parent having a conversation

with their child, but if someone enters a conversation wanting to force someone to do something that is contrary to what they are, that is crossing the line.

Alyn Smith: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. I am a solicitor, if we go back far enough. The law is well used to dealing with shades of grey. In many other situations—aggravated hate crime; discrimination; words that mean one thing in one context and a different thing in another—it is perfectly possible to come up with a proper legislative framework to protect people and the honest conversations that he is rightly concerned to see protected. I share that concern and would work with him on it.

Alicia Kearns: The hon. Gentleman will correct me if I am wrong, but on the point about waiting to see, there is currently a wait of at least two years to have those conversations with a professional, so there is no rushing into this. I may be wrong, but someone cannot have surgery if they are under 18, and they cannot get access to puberty blockers for at least a couple of years. I may be misunderstanding the timeline; if so, he will advise me.

Alyn Smith: The hon. Lady makes a powerful and apposite point. On saying, "Just wait," well, people are waiting, including all the legislators in this Chamber—we have waited far too long to act, and too many people are suffering. The concerns that are raised need to be dealt with and respectfully discussed, but to my mind there is a clear need to act. Too many people are suffering. We have a duty as legislators to keep our citizens safe from harm. Let us act together. Let us work together to keep safe the people whom we need to protect.

5.6 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on leading this debate. I also congratulate Sammantha Harris, whom I met last week, on starting the petition.

As Sammantha told me, the exclusion of trans people from a conversion therapy ban would imply that they did not count. Well, trans people matter to me, speaking as a member of the LGBTQ community. They matter to me as members of my family, and as members of the community I represent, as do the 208 people in Darlington who signed the petition.

This debate is somewhat premature, given that draft legislation is yet to be published, but I can well understand the shock, disappointment and dismay of the trans community and their allies at learning that the abuse they face may not be included in legislation, while the abuse faced by their gay, lesbian and bisexual brothers and sisters will be. Since being elected in 2019, I have had the privilege of working with great people on the issue of conversion therapy. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who we have heard from; she is an absolute champion. I also record my thanks to Jayne Ozanne from the Ozanne Foundation for her incredible and tireless work on this issue. Jayne, please know that your efforts are appreciated. Keep doing what you are doing.

Our country has come a long way on LGBT issues—further than I ever would have imagined. Banning conversion therapy—or, to call it what it really is, abuse,

control and coercion—is the next logical and rational step on that journey. To seek to do that for only part of the LGBTQ community is divisive and irrational. Sadly, there are some who do not believe that such practices exist, and some who believe that the law already provides enough protection. These abuses do exist, and the law does not currently provide a framework to protect the most vulnerable members of the LGBTQ community. The upcoming legislation is a great opportunity to right that wrong. I firmly believe that a ban on conversion therapy that includes all members of the LGBTQ community is essential. This abuse has no place in a civilised society, and I am personally committed to seeing all forms of abuse of LGBTQ people banned.

Conversion therapy encompasses a wide range of practices, which all share the belief that someone's sexual orientation or gender identity can and should be changed. It relies on the erroneous belief that LGBTQ people are sick and in need of a cure. These practices are cruel and harmful, and there is no evidence of them working. Having recently met members of the local LGBTQ community in Darlington, I know that they share my concerns about the potential exclusion of trans people from a future ban on these practices.

Today's debate is not about women in sport, safe single-sex spaces, or the appropriate age for treatment for a person experiencing gender dysphoria.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I am so glad that my hon. Friend and other Members have made that point. Even as a member of the LGBTQ community myself, I recognise that there are some real challenges in those areas, but that is not what this is about. This is about something very simple—that someone cannot force someone to change their gender identity or sexual orientation, and that trans people need to be protected in the same way as other members of the community.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful for that intervention, and I could not agree more. This is a difficult topic, and it is important that we are having this debate now; it is important that all politicians are able to have an open, frank and honest discussion about this.

This debate is about sending a signal to the most marginalised in our society, who already experience prejudice and discrimination: "Your lives matter, and you should be protected from abuse, coercion and control just as much as the next person." To not include trans people in a ban on conversion therapy—to allow loopholes in the legislation that allowed these abusive practices to continue to ruin people's lives—would be a great wrong. Trans people already face more discrimination than gays, bisexuals and lesbians, and seeking to divide the L, G and B from the T will only marginalise trans people further.

This issue is very close to my heart, as a gay man with friends and family who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans. I can see just how much this issue affects real people's lives, in my own family and in my constituency. I know that the Minister is a good man and a strong member and ally of the LGBT community. I know that he will be listening very closely to this debate and I hope that he will do all he can to ensure that a conversion abuse ban covers trans people too.

5.12 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I thank the 145,000 people who signed the petition, ensuring that today's debate would go ahead.

As politicians, we should always ask ourselves which side of history we are on. When the gay liberation movement started, it had almost no support in the House of Commons. When queer communities came under attack from homophobes and the police, it was left to us to defend ourselves. Now, once again, this Government seem to want the House to be on the wrong side of history. Well, I stand on the side of history that has learned lessons from the past—from when queer communities came under attack from homophobes and the police, and when AIDS arrived and its victims faced stigmatisation. I have seen those failures of Government in protecting the LGBTQI+ communities at first hand, and I am steadfast in my belief that conversion therapy must be banned for all, including transgender people.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Carolyn is a trans woman in her 70s. Recounting trans conversion therapy that she underwent in her youth, she said:

"When I remembered it...I would physically shake. It made me hate myself. 40 years later...I'd still have flashbacks."

Does my hon. Friend agree that these practices are abusive and must be banned, and that the Government's refusal to ban them is part of a cruel, cowardly and cynical tactic to distract us from their failings, stoke division, and target one of society's most marginalised and disadvantaged groups?

Kate Osborne: I agree with my hon. Friend; we need this ban to come in without delay, without loopholes and without exclusions.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, particularly with the historical references. Those of us who were here during the grim days of section 28 remember just how horrible it was, and how brutally the media then treated LGBT communities. The proposal to not include trans people in the conversion therapy ban is unbelievably wrong, divisive and short-sighted. We need to be very clear, and when this legislation comes along, I hope there will be a majority in this House that says, "We need a total ban on conversion therapy," as the Scottish Human Rights Commission and others have proposed, as the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) said earlier. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Kate Osborne: I do agree. My right hon. Friend referred to section 28. Interestingly, the first march I went on as an activist many years ago—more than I care to remember—was in opposition to section 28.

Jacob Young: It is touching to hear the hon. Lady make those historical references. Does she agree that the rights of LGB people were only won by LGBT people, and that it if were not for the T people, she and I would not have the rights that we enjoy today?

Kate Osborne: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. There should be no division, as the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) said.

[Kate Osborne]

We know from numerous studies and polls that transphobes are in the minority, but unfortunately, that minority is hardening and seems to have this Government's ear. As casual prejudice fills the airwaves and column inches, the Government's failure to deliver a ban on conversion therapy for trans people sends a terrible message. Conversion therapy causes serious mental health problems for those who undergo it, and it has driven people to suicide. Trans people are twice as likely to have been offered conversion therapy as those who are cis, gay or bi, but the Government seem to exclude them even though they are the very people whom the ban would help the most. In Britain today, around half of trans people attempt suicide before the age of 26. Many face harassment, bullying and discrimination daily.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) mentioned, trans people and their very existence are not up for debate. Under the Prime Minister, this Government's strategy is to harness prejudice and stoke a culture war, pitting communities against each other. It is not surprising that the Tories are undermining trans rights. If the Conservative party had a motto, it would probably be, "Never let basic humanity get in the way of a potential vote winner." If the proposed legislation does not include trans people, it will not go far enough. It is essential to close all loopholes to prevent the possibility of this abuse continuing.

The Government know and have clearly acknowledged that conversion therapy is abuse, yet they seem willing to allow an entire community to continue to be subjected to it. History has judged how wrong some of our politicians have been in the past, and it will judge those who fail to protect our trans community now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): Order. I am grateful to Members for the brevity of their contributions. There are not quite as many Members standing as had indicated earlier that they wished to speak, so we can relax the time limit to seven minutes. I call Jackie Doyle-Price.

5.17 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): Thank you, Sir Graham. It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate. As legislators, our starting point must be to eradicate harms, but in doing so we must not create new ones. It is in that spirit that I will address the proposals in—well, we do not have a Bill yet, so we are flying a bit blind.

My concern is the use of the term "therapy" in this space, which has been discussed. We are talking about coercive and harmful practices based on an ideological opposition to being trans, gay, lesbian or bisexual, and those are the practices that we need to eradicate. The term "therapy" implies something that is benign and designed to alleviate distress, which is clearly not something we want to outlaw in this space—for sexuality as well as gender. My plea to the Government is to re-examine that language.

In respect of transgender identity, when an individual wishes to undergo medical transition or surgical intervention, a therapeutic pathway is essential to establish informed consent. We must not allow any law to be

passed that would get in the way of those conversations and clinical interventions, which are designed to alleviate distress.

Alicia Kearns: In the spirit of the point that I made in my speech that there are no two sides, I agree with my hon. Friend entirely. I suspect that she will find much unanimity in the Chamber that a ban should be about conversion practices. I am sure that the Minister, who campaigned for a ban for many years before he became a Minister, will be well aware of that and will be doing everything he can to ensure that the right Bill comes forward. I agree with my hon. Friend entirely, and I am sure others in the Chamber do as well.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am grateful for that intervention. Indeed, although I have been outspoken on these issues, I have had this conversation with Jayne Ozanne, who shares this view. In terms of getting to a good law, I make this plea to everyone: we have heard lots of rhetoric today, but if we focus on creating a law that eradicates harm but gives support where it is needed, I think we can generate consensus. Notwithstanding the heat and noise on social media, there is much consensus in the Chamber.

I come to this matter having been the mental health Minister, with responsibility for gender medicine, when the General Synod of the Church of England passed the motion in favour of a conversion therapy ban. It is worth remembering that at that stage it was only about sexuality, and not about gender, which was added subsequently. At the time, however, I made it my business to look into exactly what the evidence was on the practices that we were trying to outlaw.

Notwithstanding some of the experiences we have heard about, I could find no evidence of anything happening in a clinical setting after 1970. It became very clear that we were talking about practices that were often based in religious institutions, and very much based on an ideological belief against same-sex attraction and transgender. That is why we need to hammer down on outlawing exactly those things. That is the harm that we are trying to eradicate.

We have ended up with this vanilla term, "therapy", for fear of alienating those people for whom these are issues of religious belief. Frankly, the risk of outlawing legitimate interventions should not get in the way of that. We need to be clear about what we are banning and that any therapeutic intervention designed to alleviate distress will not be eradicated by the legislation. I look forward to hearing words of comfort from my hon. Friend the Minister, with whom I have had many discussions about these things.

It is also worth noting that the term "trans" can mean any number of things, from declaring oneself non-binary to wanting to go the whole journey of medical and surgical transition. This is where the therapeutic care pathways are so important, because for some people gender dysphoria is a permanent condition that needs to be alleviated with treatment, but for others it can be a symptom of something else. This is not a straightforward condition that has the same pathology in all the people who experience it. We know that it is prevalent among people with autism and that it is very commonly experienced by girls going through puberty.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): May I ask the hon. Lady and any other Members in the Chamber thinking of making that connection between trans and autism to be more thoughtful about how they express it? A number of people watching and listening to the debate will find it particularly unhelpful. I think that we can probably be a bit more nuanced in our language.

Jackie Doyle-Price: It is important that we understand what we are talking about with gender dysphoria. It can also be a symptom of trauma. It is very important that we have the therapeutic care pathways—*[Interruption.]* Members may shake their heads, but I am talking about this from experience, having looked deeply into this area of medicine when I was responsible for it. We need to ensure that we are not putting people on to irreversible care pathways that will do them harm. For example, at the Tavistock, where the care pathway is based on therapy, as many as 40% desist. That is why it is important that people are given the space to explore what they believe to be their gender, because it can often be about something else.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Does the hon. Member acknowledge the fact that puberty blockers—I think that is what she is referring to when she speaks about “irreversible” treatment, because they are the only medical treatment that under-18s can have—are not irreversible? The point is to pause puberty, which can be done for many reasons, such as premature puberty. The whole point of the blockers is that they are not irreversible.

Jackie Doyle-Price: Puberty blockers are not irreversible—the hon. Member is right. The fact of blocking puberty may mean that the individual does not subsequently go through it, but she is right in the sense that puberty blockers were invented for a different purpose than the treatment of gender dysphoria. They absolutely should be dispensed where appropriate, but they should not be used as a way of treating gender dysphoria without someone’s having gone through the therapeutic care pathway.

The real issue here is the provision of hormone treatment, which is now routinely dispensed to people from the age of 16. Again, the impacts of those things are irreversible. We see a generation of trans men who have desisted and will now have a loss of sexual function, permanent facial hair and male pattern baldness. A more sophisticated way of allowing them to explore their gender would mean that they do not go through such things.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Is the hon. Member not making a mistake by confusing what we are here to discuss banning? We are here to discuss banning pseudo-practices. We are not aiming to ban NHS therapies and practices that are conducted by professional medical experts; we are looking at banning conversion therapy, which is pseudo-scientific, often takes place in private settings and is not controlled.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I think the hon. Member is actually agreeing with my general thesis, which is that we should not use the term “therapy” in the Bill. Legitimate care pathways are exactly the things we should be ensuring that people can access, so that they get the right decision for them. As we know, if people cannot access those pathways through the national health service, there is a

wild west out there on the internet, and people will start getting very harmful interventions that are not properly supervised.

Dr Mullan: Is not the key to all this the intention of whatever is going on? Conversion therapy sets out with a predetermined objective of stopping someone being something or forcing them to be something else. All the other therapies that my hon. Friend talks about are an exploratory process that may or may not, through the choice of the individual, lead to their taking puberty blockers or other things. The therapists themselves will not be entering into it with the intention to force them to do that, or to stop them being something else.

Jackie Doyle-Price: Again, I think my hon. Friend is agreeing with me. It is the term “therapy” that I am objecting to in the legislation because we are dignifying these practices with that description. Therapies are exactly the things that I have been describing. There is no doubt that we need better care pathways for people to explore their gender. My hon. Friend the Minister will probably have something to say about that as well.

That is really as much as I want to say. We must make sure that we call this practice out for what it is, we must make sure that the Bill only eradicates those harmful practices, and we must make sure that good, benign and positive therapeutic interventions will not be outlawed by the legislation.

5.28 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): At last the Government have proposed, and will bring forward, a conversion therapy Bill. I welcome that—it is progress. After all, I tabled a private Member’s Bill to ban conversion therapy in the last Parliament. However, the detail of the Government’s proposal is more than disappointing. The ban will protect people from therapies aimed at changing their sexual orientation, but therapies aimed at changing people’s gender identity will not be banned. If the Government recognise the harm that these cruel and medieval practices cause one group of people, why do they exclude the group that is the most harmed?

Trans people are twice as likely as the rest of the LGBT+ community to be subjected to conversion practices. A recent survey found that gender conversion practices, far from working, create lifelong, deeply traumatic consequences for survivors. Nearly half of respondents said that every aspect of their life, from their mental health to peer and family relationships, had considerably worsened. We all know that, all too often, the catastrophic mental ill health that is suffered leads to loss of life.

Gender conversion therapy is purposefully harmful and repressive. It targets already vulnerable people, and does so overwhelmingly at a very young age. Three quarters of those who have undergone conversion therapy were under the age of 24. Some began as early as the age of 12. These so-called therapies or practices include verbal abuse, isolation, physical abuse and, perhaps most disturbingly, “corrective” rape. For the exclusion of any doubt, we are not talking about professional medical treatment and therapy.

Hywel Williams: Does the hon. Lady agree with me that therapeutic and counselling interventions in these situations have to be non-directive, and that that per se excludes anything that has a predetermined purpose, as we are discussing?

Wera Hobhouse: I totally agree. What is damaging about all these practices is that they have an outcome before they even start. That is why they are so damaging.

Layla Moran: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that if we end up not banning all forms of conversion therapy, all it will do is encourage families to go further underground to seek practices, particularly through their churches? I know of a family whose church reached out to them. They were then referred to a quack in America who performed abhorrent practices on a young teenager who immediately said to their parents, “This is making me feel like who I am is less than I am.” Is my hon. Friend concerned that if the Government do not act, parents will not know where to turn?

Wera Hobhouse: I totally agree. We have to say this again and again: this is not about professional medical treatment and therapy. The conversion therapies that need to be banned are pseudoscientific practices, often conducted in private settings and, most crucially, they do not have an open outcome, but are aimed at changing what a person is.

Legal advice recently published by the Good Law Project makes it clear that the Government risk getting embroiled in legal challenges by breaching article 14 of the European convention on human rights. The advice states that

“the difference in treatment between sexual orientation and gender identity would need to be justified and proportionate.”

So far, the only justification that the Government have provided is to say that the issue is complex.

Why are we even having this debate? Opposition to a trans-inclusive ban is entirely built on stoking fear and division, based on deliberate misinformation. By the Government’s own admission, NHS gender identity services will not stop people having exploratory conversations with their doctors. Legal services will not be affected by a ban. There is no evidence of any negative impact in the countries that have already introduced a ban. Let us be clear: we are talking about preventing the abuse of LGBT+ and gender non-conforming people—our fellow human beings. We need to prevent abuse.

Furthermore, neither would religious freedom be affected by a change in the law. Religious freedom is the freedom to worship without discrimination. As a Christian, I have the right to practise my religion without discrimination. I do not have the right to cause harm. The Church of England has acknowledged that, stating that conversion practices have

“no place in the modern world”.

Nearly all countries that have banned gay conversion therapy have also banned gender conversion therapy. Canada, France and New Zealand, to name a few, have yet to encounter problems with freedom of speech or religious belief. It is baffling—I disagree that it is about getting votes—that the Conservative Government are not committed to banning trans-inclusive conversion therapy, even though their own voters are largely in favour of such a ban. Northern Ireland has moved a motion to ban conversion therapy in all forms. Scotland hopes to ban it by the end of 2023. The Government must follow suit.

The Equalities Minister called this country a global leader on LGBT rights, but it seems the Government have forgotten what the letter T stands for. How can we possibly call ourselves global leaders if we knowingly

and purposefully fail to protect trans people from abhorrent practices? I plead with the Government to listen to what is overwhelmingly a consensus in this room—and outside—and make sure we ban conversion therapy in all its forms.

5.34 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I speak very much in support of a trans-inclusive ban on conversion therapy.

I want to start by giving some context on what is happening in Northern Ireland, where the Assembly recently passed a motion on a ban on conversion therapy. It was carried overwhelmingly, with the opposition of only two parties: the Democratic Unionist party and a smaller political party. It never occurred to anyone supporting it that there would be a carve-out against the inclusion of trans people. If that is possible in a society that is perceived to be conservative and has had a reactionary approach to a whole range of equality issues over a number of years, it gives encouragement that it is possible throughout the UK and further afield. That needs to be pursued. The reality is that it was only a motion passed by the Assembly. In practice, although some initial work has been undertaken by Northern Ireland Departments, a large degree of credence will be given to what happens with any legislation in England and Wales. It is therefore important that action happens here quickly and that it is got right—and by “right”, I mean it must be fully trans-inclusive.

Same-sex sexual orientation and transgender identity should be considered—and are—perfectly normal situations. They are a part of the human variation. They are something to be celebrated and embraced, and we should treat everyone with equality and dignity for exactly who they are without question. The practices of so-called conversion therapy say far more about those who seek to engage them than they do about the subject. They are not about the welfare of those they seek to impose the practices on; they are about the hang-ups, bigotry and prejudice of those who seek to engage in them. Because they cannot accept people for who they are, they force people to conform to their narrow-minded approach to what the world should be, in denial of the broader reality.

I want to emphasise how vulnerable trans people are in our society. They are not aggressors, seeking to impose upon other people or to make life difficult. There is a much wider debate about gender recognition in that regard, which is distinct from today’s debate; however, it is worth stressing that in addition to people with trans identity being much more likely to subject to so-called conversion therapy practices, they have probably grown up marginalised in society. They are likely to have been subject to bullying, harassment and marginalisation and to have had difficulty with friendships.

A constituent got in touch with me recently to express concern about how isolated their child feels because they have a trans identity, and how difficult it is to find people to engage with. They were trying to build some sort of support network for that person. We should acknowledge that that is the daily reality experienced by people and do all we can to help them—not continue a situation in which people can be abused and punished through what is, in effect, a form of torture.

5.38 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I want to speak in support of a trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices to represent the views of the 287 people in the City of Durham who signed the petition.

The Ban Conversion Therapy coalition defines conversion practices as those directed towards a person on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity and for the purpose of changing or suppressing the sexual orientation or gender identity of the person. Proposals to ban gender conversion practices would not affect legitimate clinical practices that are outcome-neutral, nor would they outlaw exploratory therapies or discussions, or limit religious beliefs or private prayer.

The main reason I oppose conversion practices in all forms is because they are harmful and do not work. Not only has a UN report found that conversion practices can amount to torture, but the UK Government have stated that

“There is no justification for these coercive and abhorrent practices and the evidence is clear that it does not work: it does not change a person from being LGBT and can cause long lasting damage to those who go through it.”

I could not agree more.

There is clear consensus on this issue across the medical community, with all the leading medical, psychological and therapy organisations, including the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Royal College of Psychiatrists, backing a trans-inclusive ban.

Last but not least, conversion practices are centred on the belief that certain gender identities or sexualities are the worst possible outcome for that person. There is acceptance that it is wrong to try to convert someone from their sexuality, because we believe that no one sexuality is more normal or moral than any other, so why should it not be the same when it comes to gender identity?

Before I finish, I will touch on the flawed concept of consent. This morning, I was in contact with Action for Trans Health Durham, which asked me to stress in this debate that there are countless avenues for someone to coerce a trans person into undertaking conversion therapy. It could be through the withdrawal of financial support, the withdrawal of access to loved ones, or the withdrawal of accommodation. The fact that trans people are also more likely to suffer from poor mental health and homelessness makes them more vulnerable to exploitation. Even if we set aside the fact that these practices should be banned outright due to the harm they cause, the fact that we can never be certain that anyone is undergoing such practices willingly means we must reject any consent loophole.

I support a trans-inclusive ban on conversion therapy for trans and non-binary people because allowing such practices to exist not only puts people at risk of harm but legitimises the idea that being trans is wrong, which is something I completely reject. I hope that one day basic rights for trans people will no longer be the subject of debate. Trans people should not be used as a political football. This Government could show that they are on the side of the LGBT community by banning these practices, but they refuse to do so. Instead, they would rather light up buildings with rainbows than make any meaningful change. Let me absolutely clear: there is no LGB without the T, and I will always stand in community with the LGBT community and their right to be who they are, enjoying the right to love whoever they love and the right to exist.

5.42 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I filmed a conversion therapy once for a BBC documentary—I was a journalist before I became an MP—and that was when I first encountered a conversion therapist. He advertised himself as offering the last chance of a normal life, which of course lured young and vulnerable people who were terrified of their identity. I watched as this untrained pastor told a vulnerable and distressed young man that he had parted company with God and that was why he was anguished about his sexuality. Clearly distraught, the young man told me that he would commit suicide if the pastor failed to “cure” him.

I discovered that the pastor’s background was deeply disturbing, which is why I want some hon. Gentlemen and hon. Ladies present to be keenly aware of who we are talking about when we consider who is offering this so-called therapy. They are not experts who can help anyone. This pastor’s own son had committed suicide some years earlier because he, too, had a “dearth of masculinity”—or so his father had persuaded him. The pastor showed me the suicide note that his son had written him. The lad had connected up the exhaust pipe of his car to the family garage. His handwriting on the suicide note had trailed off as he lost consciousness and then lost his life, as the fumes filled his lungs. His dying wish was that his father would understand that the love he felt was real. He asked his father to meet his boyfriend and deliver him a note that he had written and left for him. The pastor told me that he had torn up that note and recommitted his life to the conversion therapy that had led his own son to suicide. This was the man who was offering conversion therapy to the vulnerable, with no controls under the law—conversion therapy, which the UK Conservative Government, breaking a manifesto commitment, appear now to be choosing not to outlaw.

We cannot allow this Government decision. If we believe the intelligence briefings from Conservative Back Benchers, the decision has already been made. It is our duty to do all we can to protect young people from the unrepentant cruelty of the pastor and his ilk, wallowing in prejudice and ignorance, for they are the reality of so-called conversion therapy. They take the most vulnerable in society, aiming to convince them that their nature can be altered. It is the cruellest of all deceptions.

Once upon a time, the Conservative Government agreed:

“There is no justification for these coercive and abhorrent practices”.

That was from a Conservative Government document, and I agree. The UK Government’s own research has found that trans people are twice as likely to experience conversion abuse as gay non-trans people. Galop, the anti-abuse charity, found that 11% of trans people have been subjected to conversion therapies by their own families. Just imagine the cruelty: the very people who should be looking after you and affirming who you are taking you off to the place of greatest danger.

Stephen Doughty: I totally agree with my honourable friend. He will know that Galop also found that trans and non-binary people face a higher level of sexual violence than other members of the LGBT+ community, and it was designed to convert them from their gender identity. That is the reality of what we are dealing with, and why it has to be a fully inclusive ban.

John Nicolson: Indeed, because some of these sordid people, as my honourable friend will know, rape those who are sent to their so-called care, in order to “cure” them of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

In the past year, Canada, France and New Zealand have all made the decision to ban trans conversion therapy. Scotland will shortly do so as well, I am proud to say. Some Members, as we heard earlier, say they have come with an open mind to learn. I believe in evidence-based policy making, so let us see what the experts say about this issue and who they are. The United Nations independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity, the national health service, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Psychological Society, along with dozens of health, counselling and psychotherapy organisations across these islands, are all calling on the UK Government to end these practices for both gay and trans people. I would say that they are the experts—wouldn’t you?

Just in case anybody is trying to hide behind some kind of religious veil, only a few weeks ago the ancient Kirk, the Church of Scotland—my own Church; the Church in which generations of my family were ministers—lent its voice to the growing chorus of organisations that support banning trans conversion abuse. It is not a religious issue; it is cruel, it is damaging, and it does not work. It is surely our duty, as parliamentarians, to stand always on the side of the vulnerable. Let us do so on this.

5.48 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I want to acknowledge the opening remarks of the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), because he framed this debate in the right way—[*Interruption.*]

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate on behalf of the many people in Newport West who have written to me with their stories, experiences, fears and hopes. This is an important subject for so many in this House and in the country, and I speak in an attempt to bring people together, to do away with the toxicity and inflamed passions and to speak about people—our children, our grandchildren and our neighbours.

I am conscious that this is not a day for long speeches or pontificating; if it was a day for long speeches, we should be listening to those outside this House who have had to experience the horrors of conversion therapy. I want to be clear: I completely and utterly refute any argument that conversion therapy works or is fair, decent or right. It is a disgraceful attempt to destroy the very essence of who a human being is and how they see themselves. I note the letter from the Women and Equalities Committee to the Minister, in which the Committee said:

“We have heard that the term ‘therapy’ is unhelpful, overly broad, misleading and confuses ethical, professional treatment with harmful practices.”

I absolutely echo those sentiments. If it is not right for some people—colleagues here today know that—then it cannot be right for anyone. It is as simple as that.

Before I was elected to this place in 2019, I spent my career working in our national health service across England and Wales. As would be expected, I know a

little bit about health and wellbeing, which is why I wanted to speak in this debate. This is about safety and security for all. If we are, as we hear so often, committed to the health and wellbeing of our people, we simply must ensure that conversion therapy is outlawed for trans people and, indeed, all people.

In recent weeks and months, I have spoken to and engaged with representatives across our community in Newport West. Those discussions were held with a range of folks, from faith leaders to mental health charities and organisations. I met the Dean of Newport Cathedral, the Very Reverend Ian Black, and Adam Smith of LGBT+ Newport—they both agree completely. People want decency not division, respect not rage.

I hope the Minister will be able to provide some real clarity. I refer to a letter from the Petitions Committee that said:

“It was welcome to see the Government recommit to its plans for a legislative ban on conversion therapy practices intended to change a person’s sexual orientation in last week’s Queen’s Speech. However, concerns have been expressed that—contrary to the Government’s commitments when it launched its consultation on banning conversion therapy last year—transgender conversion therapy will not now be included in the scope of the Conversion Therapy Bill, but will instead be the subject of ‘separate work’.”

Can the Minister be clear about what “separate work” means? Can he tell us when we will finally see conversion therapy banned for all people?

A number of constituents wrote to me ahead of the debate to ask me to speak, and although they asked not to be mentioned, I know they are watching our discussion. To all of them, I say thank you. Thank you for speaking up and for standing firm despite the many obstacles in your way, and for sharing your stories and experiences with me as your Member of Parliament and your voice in this place.

5.52 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on the sensitivity of his opening remarks. He set the scene incredibly well. He talked about access to justice. Justice as a concept means something different to each of us. I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price): to do this work properly, we must extinguish the term “therapy” in any legislation, because it sanitises a practice that is absolutely not therapy. That is something I think we should approach with real sincerity.

Perversely, in some respects I am glad that the Government made the decision to withdraw the trans community from the Conversion Therapy (Prohibition) Bill—not necessarily because of their position on that, but because that led to the petition, which led to this discussion. Discussion has been absent for so long, and the absence of sensitive discussion has been deeply damaging. To really understand how we move forward, we must listen to some of the messages and understand them with sensitivity, rather than getting on our high horse and take a polarised position. We must harness our experience and insights, wherever they come from, to ensure that we make the right decision. Our job as legislators is to interrogate the legislation and ensure that it is fit for purpose and will deliver on its intent.

My perspective comes down to information. When I grew up in the '70s and '80s, and started my nursing career in the '80s, Scotland was not the beacon of equality that it has become. It was a tough gig, to say the least. One of my first placements was on a surgical ward. A bus driver was brought in with abdominal pains and was rushed to surgery for a laparotomy. Surgeons opened him up and discovered that he had extensive cancer, before stitching him back up and sending him back to the ward. That was the end of the discussion with him. He was not told; his family had decided that he should not be told the truth, and everybody was quiet about it. Back then, it was not abnormal for the patient not to have that information.

That has fundamentally changed. We now have the concept of informed consent. When I worked in adolescent psychiatry, we did not affirm that the dysmorphia of dysmorphic anorexics was real; we gave them therapy to help them resolve the challenges that they faced.

Nadia Whittome: The hon. Member will correct me if I am wrong, but it sounds as though he is suggesting that being trans, which is to do with somebody's identity, is as harmful as anorexia—the most deadly psychiatric condition.

Neale Hanvey: Absolutely not. I am not making that parallel at all; I am talking about information and consent.

During my clinical practice and academic research, I conducted primary research into the supportive care of adolescents as they went through their cancer journey. That grounded theory framed supportive care as care that maximises personhood by considering all aspects of that individual, maximising who they were as they went through that journey and ensuring that they were supported to be the best version of themselves despite the trauma of intensive treatment.

Informed consent is something that children and young people are incredibly capable of dealing with. I have had conversations with young people about how and where they would like to die, and whom they would like to be there with them. I have had conversations with young people who have come in at the start of their cancer journey about sperm and ovarian tissue cryopreservation. [*Interruption.*] I do not know why that is funny; it is quite a serious issue. Those conversations have been handled in an incredibly capable way by young people, who are absolutely able to deal with difficult and complex information. They could be guided through that process in an absolutely natural and capable way. Certainly, in my experience, young people's ability to deal with such information should humble everyone in this place.

Many of the late effects of cancer are a rich gold mine that we should look at when considering the impact of puberty blockers, because there are parallels. When somebody makes the decision to detransition, what impact will it have on later life? When somebody has high-dose chemotherapy, all their rapidly replicating cells can be deeply damaged, so they can completely lose their fertility. That is why sperm and ovarian tissue cryopreservation are really important and one of the important questions that we need to ask ourselves on this important matter.

The next part of consent is when it is not possible.

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, who has already gone slightly over our informal time limit. I have just been advised that there is a problem with the sound on the broadcast. Any Members who have spoken while there has been a problem can be reassured that their words will be recorded in *Hansard* but may not be available on the broadcast. I have been advised to suspend the sitting for five minutes to allow the engineers to reconnect the sound.

6.1 pm

Sitting suspended.

6.6 pm

On resuming—

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

David Mundell (in the Chair): I am told that the technical issues have been resolved, so we can resume. Mr Hanvey, please start where you left off.

Neale Hanvey: It is now a pleasure to serve to under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I was making a point about the provision of information to assist in decision making in complex situations. Encouraging somebody down a path that could lead to irreversible medical decisions without the provision of such information and the opportunity to consider all possibilities is an unforgivable dereliction of professional duty. In her interim report, Dr Cass states that:

"Primary and secondary care staff have told us that they feel under pressure to adopt an unquestioning affirmative approach and that this is at odds with the standard process of clinical assessment and diagnosis that they have been trained to undertake in all other clinical encounters."

I agree with that fundamental principle.

I should make it very clear that I am drawing a distinction between someone who has arrived at a clear, considered position of a trans identity and someone who is embarking on the exploration of that. Those are two entirely different things. We have a duty of care to understand that the therapeutic need within that process must be supportive. I agree with every point that has been made that that process should not be coercive on either side. It must be balanced and therapeutic, and it must always be patient-led. Patients must lead the direction of conversation. They should not be influenced in either direction to arrive at a particular position.

Many Members have made the point today that we are talking not about therapeutic interventions from professionals, but about quackery. This debate has satisfied some of my deep concerns about what the legislation would mean. As I remarked at the beginning of my speech, I am glad that the Government have made this decision and that the petition has been raised, because we are having this conversation. My experience of asking questions about this legislation, based on my considerable clinical experience, is being accused of being a transphobe and even a homophobe—that would be a surprise to my husband. We have been together for 28 years, so it would be news to him.

I have gone on a little bit longer than intended, so I will wrap up. I cannot imagine what it must be like for someone to be told that their identity is wrong when they know deep in their heart and soul that that is who

[Neale Hanvey]

they are. Conversion therapy is an absolutely abhorrent practice and should be ruled out, but we must make it clear what therapy is and what quackery is. These are the fundamental questions I have asked myself about what the legislation means. What we must not do is come down on either side, where there is coercion against trans identity or unquestioning affirmation. It is vital that young people who are questioning their identity have the kind of support and guidance that was denied me as a young gay man growing up in the 70s and 80s.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I call Dame Nia Griffith, and I add my congratulations on her inclusion on Her Majesty's birthday honours list.

6.11 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on their excellent opening speeches. I will try not to repeat too much of what they said.

I have been saddened that it has taken the Government so long to address the issue of banning conversion therapy, which was promised back in 2019, and I am absolutely horrified that the Government are retreating from including trans people in the ban. This is a shocking broken promise. I would like to give apologies for my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), who cannot be here owing to another speaking engagement. I remind hon. Members that back in 2014 he introduced a private Member's Bill to ban gay conversion therapy, which included protecting trans people, so this legislation is long overdue.

Let us be clear: conversion therapy is abhorrent. It sets out to direct an individual to one intended outcome. As has been made clear by many Members, a ban on conversion therapy does not affect legitimate clinical consultations with medical professionals. The effects of conversion therapy are devastating, from negative self-image to suicidal thoughts, with potentially tragic consequences that are every bit as devastating for trans people as they are for LGB people.

By retreating from making this a trans-inclusive ban, the Government are not only sending a message to trans people that they are not prepared to protect them and leaving trans people exposed to the appalling damage that conversion therapy causes; they are also sending a very transphobic message to wider society. That is a serious matter, indeed. At a time when trans people face appalling abuse, bullying and discrimination, and when we should all be taking a strong stance against transphobia in all its forms, the Government should be setting a strong example and making it clear that trans people are valued every bit as much as other members of society.

The UK has, in the past, been a leader and champion of human rights on the international stage, but now we are in danger of sully that reputation and falling badly behind. Other countries, as has been mentioned, such as New Zealand, Canada and France, have recently introduced trans-inclusive legislation and, of course,

it is perfectly possible to draft appropriate wording. It is high time the UK Government acted immediately to introduce a fully trans-inclusive conversion therapy ban.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I am afraid that some of the issues with the sound have re-emerged, but I propose that we continue the debate. *Hansard* is taping and transcribing every word that is being said, so whatever contributions that have or will be made will be fully recorded.

6.14 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I too congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on opening the debate. I want to approach this debate by speaking as somebody from the Christian faith. Over the past five years, I have tended to avoid talking too much about faith in the Chamber, partly because I do not want to be pigeonholed as some sort of mad Ned Flanders. One of the first times I spoke in the House, I quoted from Micah 6:8, in which we Christians are commanded

“To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly”.

The pledge that I made five years ago was that, when considering issues in this place, I would try and approach everything I do by applying those principles. I confess that I hummed and hawed about whether to take part in this debate, because what people have seen as the trans debate has become incredibly toxic. Some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people on the face of the planet have sadly been used as a political football, and we have seen elements of that today.

I want to bring a focus on faith in how I approach this subject. As many Members have already outlined, the vast majority of conversion therapy takes place in religious settlements. For that, I am deeply sorry and incredibly embarrassed. I think it is absolutely appalling and would condemn it in every form. The form of Christianity that I believe in subscribes to a view of compassion; it does not subscribe to the idea of using a very vulnerable group of people as some sort of wedge issue or political football, as is so often the case. I think that the Government, in choosing to remove trans people from the ban on conversion therapy, are doing exactly that. This is being used as a wedge issue, and most of us in this Chamber know that.

When anybody tries to approach this debate, it suddenly gets boiled down to who can use toilets and what kind of genitalia they have. That does a massive disservice to the issue, and it gets away from the fact that trans people are subject to some of the worst mental health issues—some are contemplating suicide. The idea that this issue can be boiled down to some pathetic radio phone-in, asking who can have a penis, is deeply distasteful.

Going back to the Christian theme, when the Bible talks about the good Samaritan, the good Samaritan did not stop and ask someone what their pronouns were; whether they were male, female or non-binary. The good Samaritan stood there and tried to help people. So I would ask Christians to approach this debate with compassion, because far too often, in my view, the Church has become absolutely obsessed with people's sexual orientation and gender, and it has done so at the expense of social justice and equality.

We are commanded in the Bible to talk about faith, hope and love, but it says that the greatest of those is love. As a Christian, I do not believe that we can talk about practising love to other people while pursuing a ban on conversion therapy that excludes trans people. I very much support the ban on conversion therapy, but it must go further and include trans people. We must try to have a much more grown-up debate that focuses on compassion, and not the nonsense that we see far too often.

6.17 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell, and to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who made a powerful speech. I congratulate and thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing the debate, and also the creators of the petition, along with the 145,000 people who signed it, for ensuring that it was debated here today.

LGBTQ people do not need to be fixed or cured. There is nothing wrong with who we are; what is wrong is how society treats us. Mind, the mental health charity, has said that

“all forms of conversion practices can result in poor mental health”.

People have reported suicidal thoughts, self-harm, and feelings of guilt, shame and self-hatred. The United Nations has said that conversion practices can amount to torture. The Government’s 2018 national LGBTQ survey found that 5% of LGBTQ people had been offered, or threatened with, conversion therapy, and one in 50 had been put through it. Trans people are twice as likely to have been offered conversion practices than those who are cisgender and gay or bi.

The Government have now been promising for four years that conversion practices for LGBTQ people will be banned. Now that a ban has finally made its way to the Queen’s Speech, in which conversion therapy was described as “abhorrent”, the proposals it puts forward are discriminatory and unacceptable. If the Government truly believe that conversion therapy is abhorrent, why do they intend to ban practices aimed at changing a person’s sexual orientation but not those aimed at changing their gender identity? Mind has described that differentiation as “deeply disappointing”.

I am extremely concerned that trans people’s exclusion is yet another cynical attempt by this Government to create a culture war between these different groups—that they are scapegoating trans people, who already face a tirade of violence and discrimination, with the aim of stirring up so-called anti-woke sentiment. We have seen it all before. The Government do the same to migrants, refugees and people of colour. We saw Thatcher’s Government whip up the same moral panic against gay people in the 1980s. I believe that, just as society looks back with disgust at how gay people were treated in decades gone by, we will hang our heads in shame at trans people’s treatment in decades to come.

It is also deeply worrying that, even for sexual orientation, the ban covers only under-18s. That means that adults can consent to non-physical forms of conversion practices. People cannot consent to their own abuse—and that is what conversion therapy is. It should be banned without caveats. I urge the Minister to listen to LGBTQ

organisations, mental health experts, MPs here and our constituents, and ban conversion practices for everyone, in all circumstances.

6.21 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for the way he introduced today’s debate. The way he pinned down the specifics of what we are meant to be discussing was really helpful. I also thank the 145,000-plus people who signed the petition, including all those from East Renfrewshire who signed and the many who have been in touch to let me know of their deep concern at the gap in the Government’s proposals. I also thank the many organisations that have kindly been in touch with briefings on this issue.

I think the tone of today’s debate has been interesting. I always wonder what these debates will actually be like. I have to say, it has been really interesting to hear the groundswell of feeling from MPs across this Chamber saying that we are not okay with the gap and we think that conversion therapy should be banned in all circumstances. That is really important, because we need to be clear that nobody’s identity should be up for debate. Nobody’s identity should be a political football; nobody’s rights should be diminished or compromised. It is always important that we bear these things in mind when we consider the language we use in this discussion, because what we say here has a significant impact on those outside the Chamber.

So what are we talking about here? Conversion practices—I take the point that the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) made about the use of the word “therapy”; I think that is right, and I believe the Scottish Parliament uses the term “conversion practices”—are practices or conducts that are targeted at an individual with the intention of changing or suppressing that person’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) described very vividly the terrible reality of what that can mean. The UK Government themselves have stated:

“There is no justification for these coercive and abhorrent practices”.

That being the case, I wonder why we are here, particularly when, again, the UK Government’s own research found that trans people are twice as likely to be subjected to or offered conversion practices as non-trans lesbian, gay or bi people.

I think it was the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) who outlined the fact that banning conversion practices does not criminalise outcome-neutral explorative conversations or therapy. It is only practices that have a targeted focus on directing someone towards a more “acceptable”—as the convertor would have it—outcome that would be criminalised. That is because the bottom line here, which we need to be clear about, is that conversion practices are abusive and deeply harmful, for which there is no excuse, and nobody should be left at risk of these practices.

How did we get to this point? We had a commitment from the UK Government that they would ban conversion therapy, but in April they performed a series of quite extraordinary U-turns. First, they said that they planned

[Kirsten Oswald]

to drop the ban on conversion therapy. Then, predictably and correctly, they U-turned on that after a significant outcry, including from a number of Members on the Conservative Benches. However, that U-turn was only partial. I find it inexplicable that we would suggest that it is okay to ban conversion therapy yet somehow miss out this very vulnerable group.

I thought that the speeches today by the hon. Members for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) and for Darlington (Peter Gibson) were particularly important in that regard, and we need to remember that a significant number of voices are having nothing to do with the UK Government's position, because it is completely unjustifiable. Indeed, this is a disgraceful way for the UK Government to conduct themselves, with no thought, as far as I can see, for the people directly affected. That is really disappointing, because of the damage it will cause to people's lives.

It has been reported that the UK Government think that this is the correct course of action because there could be unintended consequences. We really need to be clear here—I think that there will be very predictable consequences if this gap remains, and the consequences will be that people's lives will continue to be harmed and people will continue to be put into the most difficult situations, which will cause their lives to be significantly damaged.

John Nicolson: Does my hon. Friend recognise that one of the consequences is the fact that the international conference Safe To Be Me, which the UK Government trumpeted so keenly, has been cancelled? I know that she and I are both deeply concerned about the UK's reputation, and this cancellation highlights just how far the UK has slipped on this issue, such that people no longer want to come to our shores.

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that important point. If we look at the UK's standing, in terms of the league table of places with a positive environment for people to be safe in their identity as members of the LGBT community, we see that it is slipping, and slipping fast.

Members have made points today that we should reflect upon. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington talked about the fact that the UK Government's own survey pointed out the harms that are being caused, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire has just done. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West said that there is ample evidence of the harms that are caused to trans people by conversion therapy. The hon. Member for Darlington basically pointed out—I am paraphrasing here—that it is simply not okay to treat trans people as if they are ill and need to be cured.

However, it is not just we here today who are saying these things. We have heard that Mind, Relate, the Association of Christian Counsellors, the Scottish Human Rights Commission and many other organisations have also spoken out. The British Medical Association has spoken out, and it does not mince its words. It says of conversion therapy:

"It must be banned in its entirety."

The BMA says that it is extremely concerned that the ban on conversion therapy has not been extended to transgender and non-binary people. It points to the UK Government's own analysis of the impacts on the mental health of trans people, who, it notes, are

"already most vulnerable to being subjected to so-called conversion therapy, with one in seven trans people reporting that they had been offered or had 'conversion therapy'".

It is not just the BMA saying this kind of thing. The Royal College of Nursing's annual congress voted overwhelmingly to support a total ban on conversion therapy; the British Psychological Society has made its views clear, too; and the Church of Scotland passed a motion at its general assembly calling for a ban on conversion therapy. I have increasingly heard from constituents with a strong religious faith who are also deeply concerned about the potential harm caused by not implementing a full ban.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said that he "hummed and hawed" when considering whether to speak in this debate. I have to say that I am very glad that he did. I already knew that he is a thoughtful and compassionate man, but he demonstrated that again today in what I thought was a very important contribution. That is because there is a groundswell among those with a strong religious faith. We have heard about the large numbers of religious leaders who have spoken out on this subject already. There is no justification for a gap in the ban, and religion is not a justification either.

That recognition, from all angles, of the immense harm, is borne out by the people who are directly affected. Their voices are perhaps a bit missing today, but they are who we should be listening to. I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) speak, because I thought she pointed that out very well. The experience of trans people who have already been harmed by conversion therapy is what we must consider when we think of the fact that that is somehow being left out of the proposed provisions.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith), I am very glad that the SNP Government in Scotland are clear about their commitment to ensure that everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, is safe from conversion practices. It is notable that they have taken steps to include in their process voices of people who are directly affected. They have an expert advisory group on ending conversion practice, which will look at support for victims and survivors—something that we must not let slip as we move forward because, while I and many others in this room are pushing for a ban on conversion therapy that includes trans people, there are many people whose lives have already been irreparably damaged.

Scotland is only one of a number of countries taking that approach; we have heard about Northern Ireland, and I understand that Wales is looking at this too. In the last year, Canada, New Zealand and France have all gone down this road, and nothing terrible has happened—of course it wouldn't. However, the way that the UK Government are approaching this issue is making life particularly difficult for trans people; this conversation in itself is making life harder for people who are already vulnerable.

Hywel Williams: In this case, Wales is actually “Wales and England”, but many of us would welcome the opportunity for Wales to legislate on this matter. That might be a point that the Minister will respond to when he gets up.

Kirsten Oswald: I am sure that the Minister is taking note and has heard the voices in Wales, as I have, who are talking about this.

The reason that this matters is that leaving trans people out of a ban on conversion therapy waters down the impact of the ban for everyone else. It allows conversion therapy to come in by the back door—or the trap door, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said—and, of course, many trans people are LGB. It just makes everyone’s identities that little bit less secure, and everyone loses as a result. Fundamentally, there is nothing wrong with being trans; that is what this all must come back to. Nobody needs to be cured, or converted away from being themselves; legislation here must reflect that fact.

I make no apology for having criticised the UK Government for U-turning repeatedly on this issue, but there is an opportunity for them to U-turn again and do the correct thing—I would certainly welcome that—to ensure that this is an all-encompassing ban on conversion therapy. I know that the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) is a very thoughtful Minister on this matter. The only question I have for him is: what steps is he taking and what conversations is he having with his colleagues to ensure that this ban is a ban for all?

6.33 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. I am grateful to the petitioners, and I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for opening this debate in what has been universally acknowledged as a sensitive and careful manner.

I think we are all aware that this discussion is taking place during the Pride Month—the 50th year since the first Pride march took place in London. This should be a month of celebration for LGBT+ people and their allies, after their history of struggle that was ably described by my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne). It should be a time to celebrate the wonderful diversity of our country and for all of us in this House to recommit to doing what we can to ensure that every person in the UK is treated with dignity and respect, including LGBT people, and that they will always have the ability to love and live as they need to. The calls from my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) were extremely strong in that regard.

The Government had ambitious plans to mark the 50 years of Pride through, as was mentioned, their flagship Safe To Be Me: A Global Equality Conference. However, the resignation of Iain Anderson, and the withdrawal of more than 100 LGBT+ organisations and charities from Safe To Be Me in April, was a consequence of the Government’s decision to reverse their plans to ban trans conversion therapy, which is of course the subject of today’s debate.

The policy process has been chaotic. On 30 March, the Minister told the House that the Government were taking forward plans to ban conversion therapy in all its forms “on an urgent basis”. Just one day later, the news broke that the Prime Minister intended to ditch plans to ban all forms of conversion therapy, and one day after that the Government had to U-turn on that intention, only then to exclude trans conversion therapy from their plans. It appeared that no one covering equalities issues on the Government Benches, from the Foreign Secretary and Women and Equalities Minister down, was informed of No. 10’s intentions, as they changed from hour to hour.

At no point before April had the Government suggested that they were treating trans conversion therapy practices differently from those targeting sexual orientation. Their consultation was in fact explicit that an attempt to change a person from being attracted to the same sex to being attracted to the opposite sex, or from not being transgender to being transgender, would be treated in the same way as the reverse scenario.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) made clear, a ban on conversion therapy in all its forms is long overdue, so I have to ask, as so many have during this debate, why have the Government changed their mind on this subject when so many expert organisations hold a different point of view? The BMA has called conversion therapy

“an unethical and damaging practice that preys on victims of homophobia, transphobia, discrimination, and bullying.”

The Royal College of Psychiatrists says,

“Conversion therapy causes severe physical and psychological suffering”.

Many others have been mentioned in this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) mentioned the comments of Mind, the mental health charity. The NHS Confederation and the British Psychological Society were mentioned. I could go on and on. The issue is at not just a national level, but a local one, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) rightly said when she mentioned the organisation that she has been in contact with.

Many of the organisations that I have just listed have acknowledged, as has the Labour party, the need for clarity when introducing legislation. Labour is clear that a trans-inclusive ban must not cover psychological support and treatment, non-directive counselling, or the pastoral relationship between teachers and pupils or religious leaders and worshippers. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) made that particularly clear.

Alex Sobel: My hon. Friend is giving a customarily excellent speech. When I went to see one of my oldest and best friends Imran last year, his child was coming out as trans—as Hope. I want to share Imran’s and Hope’s words. Hope told me,

“I’m Hope and I’m 16. I’ve decided to live my life as female. My home has been very supportive and my parents have done everything they can for me. At school it has been supportive, especially my friends and teachers who have been respectful. Some students have been unkind. The attitude that most people have shown me should be the norm. Trans People are treated differently and we need to educate people.”

Imran said to me,

“It doesn’t matter what your child does or says but it’s your job to unconditionally love and support them.”

I hope we can carry their positivity, do our best for trans people and bring forward the ban.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point and sharing that experience. Let me say clearly in response to the comments of the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher): of course, a ban must not cover discussions within families, which are based in the need for love and support, as has rightly been mentioned.

It is imperative that a trans-inclusive ban must not have an impact on the provision of services for children and young people. Indeed, the interim Cass review has highlighted the extent to which there is a disturbing lack of support and healthcare for children and young people with gender dysphoria, especially when it is accompanied by an additional diagnosis that requires care. Much more support and counselling is needed, not less. I agree the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington that any ban must be carefully, tightly and clearly worded, and appropriately implemented and assessed. The Government's own consultation on their initial proposals made that very clear. As my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli said, this is not beyond the wit of man or woman in this place; it is surely what we do every day as legislators, and what we would do in respect of this ban too.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that we have to be inclusive when we are talking about issues of coercion and control, and of safeguarding, and that there is therefore no rationale behind the exclusion of one particular group in our society over another?

Anneliese Dodds: I thank my hon. Friend for that important comment. Indeed, there is no rationale for exclusion. Ministers have had almost four years to work up a ban on all forms of conversion therapy that does not inadvertently restrict access to legitimate, non-coercive forms of treatment. As so many Members have said, the Government could have looked to the examples of other countries that have managed to produce bans without any evidence of such unintended consequences. The majority of countries that have introduced some form of national restrictions against conversion therapy have done so including trans people, and more propose to follow suit.

I have some direct questions for the Minister. Will he please explain whether he and his Government have gathered: any evidence on the impact of such a ban on the provision of legitimate talking therapies; any evidence or statements from medical bodies suggesting any concerns about chilling effects after conversion therapy bans; and any evidence to suggest that a trans-inclusive ban would put such treatments at risk? I have been unable to find any such evidence. I believe that is because it does not exist.

I anticipate the Minister will argue that the complexity of issues I have mentioned will require his Government to consider the issue of transgender conversion therapy further. If, according to his Government, further information on how a trans-inclusive ban will work must be sought, I hope that he will use his remarks to set out in explicit detail a timetable for such a period of consideration and how that process is to be undertaken. When do the Government intend to make a final decision on the issue? Are we going to back here in another year, asking exactly the same questions? If so, I genuinely fear for the impact in the interim on trans people, who surely only want to live their lives in dignity and free from abuse, just like everybody else.

6.43 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Mike Freer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the petitioner for securing the debate and the 145,000 people who signed the petition. On a personal note, I would like to recognise the 50th anniversary of Pride, and to thank those who went before me to secure the rights that I have today. We can get caught up in the heat of the debate around the issues we have to address, but it is sometimes important to look back and remember that we have made progress. Let us not lose sight of the progress we have made, while agreeing that we still have further work to do. I have to say that I welcome this debate, because I have spent considerable time and energy on the legislation, not least trying to myth-bust much of the nonsense going around regarding what is and is not conversion practice.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) not only for securing the debate, but for what I thought was a powerful and thoughtful speech. It was a speech that he could have made from the Minister's position—perhaps one day he will.

I have to say that the debate saddens me; I am genuinely sad that we are having this debate yet again. It saddens me that we have yet to achieve a consensus on many of the more thorny or heated topics that people disagree on or choose to misunderstand. It is a real regret that, having spent so much time trying to explain what is and is not a conversion practice, we continue to have this debate. From that point of view, since taking up the position of looking after LGBT issues in the equalities brief, I have genuinely tried to seek consensus, to pursue the debate with a degree of honesty and respect, and to remove the toxicity from the debate.

Many of us do not have direct experience of trans issues, although some of us do. I get deeply frustrated when colleagues make comments—from what I believe to be a position of ignorance—about the trans community, which also hurt colleagues in this House. The trans community is not some invisible, amorphous blob that people cannot recognise. Trans people are our friends and our colleagues. Members of this House have trans siblings and trans children. We have our first trans Member of Parliament. It deeply saddens me that hurtful comments are still being made, even if they are not designed to hurt.

I have taken time to speak to many of the survivors who have been through conversion practices, some of them decades ago. From speaking to them, it is clear that they still live with that trauma today. I have also spoken to people who have survived conversion therapy more recently. When people say that conversion therapy no longer exists, that is absolute, utter nonsense. They just need to go out and talk to people who have survived it, whose partners have committed suicide, or who have seen children taken abroad to conversion camps or to be married off.

It deeply saddens me that people continue to deny the existence of conversion practices. Yes, many of the more abhorrent physical acts are illegal. However, the pernicious, insidious, coercive so-called therapies are what we are trying to address, and they are still present today.

Colleagues have talked about rape being used as a tool to correct people's behaviour. Part of the Bill that is being drafted will ensure that, while rape is obviously already an illegal act, using rape in the way Members have described would be an aggravating factor. That is the difference. People ask what the Bill will change in law that is not already illegal—that is one example. The use of corrective rape will be an aggravating factor. That is not currently the case.

I recognise people's strength of feeling for ensuring that the Bill includes trans people. I want to make it abundantly clear that the Bill will protect everyone from coercive attempts to change their sexual orientation. We do not agree with attempts to change someone's gender, but we wish to ensure that any action that we bring forward on transgender conversion practices does not have wider implications, such as affecting access to legitimate therapies.

At the start of my speech, I referenced the sadness I felt that we have not been able to reach a consensus. I am disappointed that we have not brought forward a fully inclusive Bill, as is fairly obvious from my previous statements, but in terms of where we go from here, I want to use the piece of work that is currently being scoped out, hopefully at pace, so that we can have an informed process as the Bill proceeds in its passage through Parliament. We must try to address the issue of how to ensure with cast-iron clarity, if one can have cast-iron clarity, that clinicians are protected in questioning someone's gender discomfort—I will be corrected if I get this wrong, but dysphoria is the clinical end of the process. When someone is suffering from gender distress, a clinician needs to have absolute clarity that they are protected, and that their ability to explore why their client is feeling that way is not a conversion practice.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I think a lot of people will be very reassured by the tone of the Minister's comments, because there is genuine fear that legitimate practices would be outlawed. However, one of the issues we have is that campaigners are looking at other laws elsewhere, which has perhaps led them to conclude that things will be included in the Bill that might not be. Could the Minister say what the timescale for a draft Bill will be? No one can predict what will be in the legislation, because we have not seen it yet.

Mike Freer: I thank my hon. Friend for asking for clarification. It is certainly my intention that the draft Bill, which is expected to be narrow in scope, clearly setting out what is and is not a conversion practice so that we have that clarity, will be brought forward in—I hope—September or October of this year.

Luke Pollard: I have a lot of time for the Minister, and I think his heart is in the right place, but he has just mentioned a narrow scope. Is it the Government's intention that the scope of the Bill will be so narrow that an amendment to include trans and non-binary conversion therapies and practices within a ban would be excluded, so that the will of the House could not be tested and MPs would not have the chance to vote for such an amendment?

Mike Freer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I know he spends a lot of time on this issue, and we are probably of a similar mindset about where we want to get to.

I am straying into parliamentary draftsmanship, but I think it is possible to draft a Bill that ensures that attempts to reopen the Equality Act 2010 or the Gender Recognition Act would be out of scope. That is one of the dangers: if we write a Bill that is open to being repeatedly amended, there is a risk of the debate widening beyond conversion therapy, which is why I am trying to ensure that the Bill is narrow. However, the way I see it—I cannot give that cast-iron guarantee, because I am not the parliamentary draftsman—is that a Bill about conversion practices would be amendable. Of course, that is a debate for another time, but our purpose is that the Bill remains narrow, so that it is limited to conversion practices and does not get hijacked and caught up in debates about other issues. I hope that we can keep it very, very narrow.

The extra work of scoping out, which I hope will be done at pace, is about ensuring that legitimate clinicians and therapists are protected in being able to explore all the reasons why somebody might be suffering from gender distress. It is also to make it abundantly clear that parents can have robust conversations with their children. There is nothing wrong with a parent disagreeing with their child's trans status or sexual orientation—that is not a conversion practice.

Wera Hobhouse: We are having a good debate, but can the Minister confirm that conversion practices are those that are aimed at a certain outcome? What he is describing—an open conversation to explore a person's gender identity—is of course not something that a ban should include, but all practices with a closed outcome should be banned, and that ban should include trans people.

Mike Freer: A conversion practice is clearly defined as where a person has the predetermined objective of taking someone away from being trans and pushing them towards not being trans. Being straight and being gay would be symmetrical. Key to the additional work that I am seeking to get undertaken at pace is the clarity that we need to ensure that clinicians, parents and teachers are protected, to ensure that the chilling effects, which some clinicians and therapists have expressed concern about, are equally mitigated.

The Cass report mentions how affirmative therapy could be abused. We will always find a rogue practitioner with any practice, but it is legitimate to consider how affirmative therapy should be performed. Again, it is about achieving clarity so that people are not caught and made to feel that they have practised conversion therapy by simply being a good therapist or clinician. That is why the work that we have scoped and done at pace will, I hope, allow us to achieve a consensus and put to bed many of the fears and concerns that people have legitimately expressed. Although I am clearly disappointed that we are having this debate again and that we are where we are, I feel that it is not unreasonable to take some extra time to try to build a consensus, so that when a Bill comes forward, we can make it as inclusive as possible. I cannot guarantee that we will get there, but that is my aim and objective, and I do not think it is wrong to spend some extra time trying to ensure that we can build as much consensus as possible.

Let me turn to a couple of points that have been raised. We have talked about trans healthcare. I have spoken to Dr Cass a couple of times, and she has clearly

[Mike Freer]

put a lot of thought into how we need to reform the healthcare system for trans people—not just for under-18s, but in general. The idea that people wake up on a Monday, decide that they want to change their gender, and have been banged through surgery by Friday is clearly nonsense. Anybody who has spent any time looking at the whole trans journey knows that it is cumbersome, it is not patient-centred, and it does not work. It forces too many people to opt out and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) said, to buy things on the internet—the wild west—where we do not know what they are doing and what they are being exposed to. That is an important piece of work, alongside the work we are doing on conversion practices.

I want to reiterate that the call for the ban on conversion practices to wait until Dr Cass has reported in full, and the Government have responded, is missing the point. Dr Cass has said that our work is complementary—we are not sequential—and that her work is not a reason not to bring forward the legislation. She has made that abundantly clear. In fact, she has gone as far as publishing a Q&A on her website, which clearly says:

“The Cass Review was commissioned as an independent review of NHS gender identity services for children and young people. Its terms of reference do not include consideration of the proposed legislation to ban conversion therapy.

No LGBTQ+ group should be subjected to conversion therapy. However, through its work with clinical professionals, the Review recognises that the drafting of any legislation will be of paramount importance in building the confidence of clinicians working in this area.”

That is what Dr Cass said, and she is absolutely spot-on.

I want to put a couple of other things on the record. Hon. Members raised the victim support service, which is already operating and is run by Galop. The service is fully inclusive and available to anybody who believes they have been subject to conversion practices or believes they have been at risk of those practices, regardless of their sexuality, gender or non-binary identity. Galop is the leading LGBTQ+ anti-violence charity and has significant expertise in that area of work.

To conclude, I remain wholly committed to delivering our commitment to ban conversion practices and to protect victims and survivors. I know many colleagues in this Chamber, from across the House, are equally

committed to realising that goal. We have to work together to ensure that the legislation is right and that we are seen to be supportive of people's right to be who they are. It is not our job to interfere in how people see themselves; it is a matter of autonomy and dignity. I thank all colleagues for their contributions and I look forward to working together to make the Bill a success.

7 pm

Elliot Colburn: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell, at the end of this debate. I join my hon. Friend the Minister in thanking all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions today. I put on record my thanks to the petitioner, Sammantha, and the Petitions Committee staff, who have done such an excellent job with public engagement in the run-up to today's debate.

I thank the Minister for his carefully considered response. We are lucky to have him, and I am not just saying that because of the kind words he had to say about me. It is true that we are shooting a little bit in the dark with today's debate because the Bill has not been published. Indeed, I was heckled earlier by an hon. Member who is no longer in their place to say, “Well, that's the title of the Bill.” Well, no one knows that yet, so I hope they come back and correct the record.

I welcome the fact that the Minister used the phrase “conversion practices” rather than “conversion therapy”. Indeed, the Bill that has just been passed in New Zealand is the Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022, and I believe we should replicate that phrase. While there are complexities, I have never been one to believe that complexity means that we should not do what is right. At the end of the day, as we have heard and as set out by all the evidence, conversion therapy is harmful and degrading, and does not work. No one should go through it, and we have the opportunity to make sure no one does.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 613556, relating to transgender conversion therapy.

7.2 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 13 June 2022

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

UK Digital Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): I am pleased to lay before the House the UK's Digital Strategy, a wide-reaching and inclusive statement of the Government's vision for the future of the UK's digital economy. The digital strategy harnesses our strengths in knowledge and R&D-intensive industries to further our position as a global science and technology superpower, and support the UK's future prosperity and security.

This is a cross-Government strategy which aims to bring cohesion to the various important digital policies being driven by different parts of Government. Bringing these initiatives together in one place enables us to take the Government's vision of the digital economy and turn it into reality by exploring new technological frontiers and delivering tech innovation on a scale the country has not previously seen.

This Government champion the UK as a global hub for digital talent and growth. Data suggests that, last year, a new UK unicorn was created every 11 and a half days, with £27.4 billion of private capital flowing into UK tech in 2021. That is more than any other European country. We are committed to continuing to support our fantastic venture capital investment initiatives such as the enterprise investment scheme and the seed investment scheme to ensure that UK companies continue to grow and raise capital to scale up.

The UK is presented with an important opportunity to draw on our position as a world leader in emerging fields such as AI, advanced semiconductor design and quantum computing to become a force for digital good on the global stage. The digital strategy makes clear our intention to work toward a global consensus with like-minded partners and allies to shape a system of digital standards and trade that enables UK businesses to innovate and thrive. We have the opportunity to build on our status as a science and technology superpower, to take advantage of our regulatory freedom, and to champion the dynamic businesses and start-ups that have helped make Britain a focal point for digital skills and innovation.

As well as championing the UK as a global digital hub, the Government also recognise the power of digital technology to transform our own economy, boost jobs and help to level up regions across the UK. Britain's digital might has given us the flexibility to adapt to unprecedented challenges, such as the covid-19 pandemic, and will be vital in our fight against climate change. Indeed, the UK's economic future, our security, our standard of living and our place in the world are all reliant on our continued success in digital technology. We can take steps now to futureproof our economy, to invest in developing world-class expertise, to build our evidence base, to boost innovation, to grow employment opportunities across the UK and to strengthen transnational ties.

The future of our economy, of UK jobs, of every region of the country, is digital. Over 80% of all jobs advertised require digital skills, and the rate of tech gross value added has grown on average by 7% per year since 2016. It is vital that we equip businesses and citizens with the skills and tools they need to navigate this rapid change. That means not only rolling out world-class digital infrastructure across the UK, but also ensuring that the benefits of the digital economy are felt by all members of society.

A copy of the UK Digital Strategy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS90]

EDUCATION

Student Loan Interest Rates Reduction

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): I am announcing today a temporary reduction in student loan interest rates to come into effect on 1 September 2022. This unprecedented action brings student loan interest rates in line with the forecast prevailing market rates for comparable unsecured personal loans.

In accordance with the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, when the Government consider that the student loan interest rate is higher than the prevailing market rate for comparable unsecured loans, we will take steps to bring student loan interest rates in line with the prevailing market rate.

The Government regularly monitor the interest rates set on student loans against the interest rates prevailing on the market for comparable loans.

Student loans are set with reference to the RPI for the month of March prior to the start of the academic year, as published by the Office for National Statistics. Following a significant increase in RPI in March 2022, I am announcing today—13 June 2022—a cap on the post-2012 undergraduate income-contingent repayment and postgraduate income-contingent repayment student loan interest rates in line with the forecast prevailing market rate for the 2022-23 academic year. Subject to the will of Parliament, the cap will come into effect from 1 September 2022 and last for a period of 12 months.

The post-2012 undergraduate income-contingent repayment student loan interest rate and the postgraduate income-contingent repayment student loan interest rate will be 7.3% between 1 September 2022 and 31 August 2023.

This intervention by Ministers means that in September 2022 post-2012 undergraduate student loan borrowers and postgraduate student loan borrowers face a maximum interest rate of 7.3% rather than 12%. This is the largest reduction of its kind on record.

No borrower will be paying more per month as a result of this change. Monthly student loan repayments are calculated as a fixed percentage of earnings above the relevant repayment threshold and do not change based on interest rates or the amount borrowed.

Subject to continued monitoring of the prevailing market rate, from 1 September 2023, the post-2012 undergraduate income-contingent repayment student loan interest rates will revert to variable rates of standard rate to standard rate plus 3% and postgraduate income-contingent repayment student loan interest rates will revert to the standard rate plus 3%.

Should the confirmed prevailing market rate turn out lower than forecast, a further cap will be implemented to reduce the plan 2 and the postgraduate loan interest rates accordingly.

Further caps may be put in place should the prevailing market rate continue to be below student loan interest rates.

[HCWS94]

Qualified Teacher Status in England: Overseas Teachers

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): In early 2023, the Department for Education will change the way teachers who qualified overseas can have their teaching qualifications recognised. The new Apply for Qualified Teacher Status in England service will mean that those with high-quality teaching qualifications can come to work in England, wherever they are from. This will include teachers from Ukraine.

Current legislation means that teachers from some countries can get qualified teacher status (QTS) through a simple process, but for others it is more difficult, even if they are equally well qualified. We are committed to ensuring that the best teachers from around the world can come to teach in England and that there is consistency and fairness for all suitable applicants, regardless of where they are from. Apply for Qualified Teacher Status in England will award teachers QTS based on an assessment of their qualifications and experience against set criteria.

Further details of our proposed criteria and the new service can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/awarding-qualified-teacher-status-to-overseas-teachers/a-fairer-approach-to-awarding-qts-to-overseas-teachers>.

We are continuing our engagement with the sector so that it has time to understand and prepare for these changes ahead of their introduction in 2023. We will lay the necessary regulations in the autumn.

[HCWS95]

Social Work England: Closure of Emergency Register

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince): In response to the covid-19 pandemic, to support local authority children's services and adult social care providers, the Government enabled Social Work England to establish a temporary emergency register. Social Work England maintains the emergency register using powers conferred to it under the Coronavirus Act 2020. The circumstances to justify the continuation of the emergency register are reducing as the impact of the pandemic reduces. I am today announcing our intention that the emergency register will close on 30 September

2022. This will provide those social workers who are practising on the basis of emergency registration sufficient notice to allow them to take up full registration if they so wish. Prior to the closure of the emergency register, the Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), will notify Social Work England that the emergency conditions no longer apply, and the register will close.

[HCWS96]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Government Food Strategy

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Today I have published the Government's first ever food strategy, outlining our plan to transform our food system to ensure it is fit for the future.

The Government food strategy follows the independent review of the food system led by Henry Dimbleby last year, which set out an analysis of the challenges facing the food system. The food strategy takes on several of the independent review's recommendations, and I would like to thank Henry Dimbleby and his team for their work examining our food system and the vital role it plays in all our lives.

Food security sits at the heart of this Government's vision for the food system—boosting food production, job creation and the wider economy with a focus on skills and innovation, to level up across the country.

We want to create a sustainable food system, from farm to fork and catch to plate, seizing on the opportunities before us and ensuring that everyone has access to nutritious and healthier food.

To do this, our objectives for this strategy are:

A prosperous agri-food and seafood sector that ensures a secure food supply in an unpredictable world and contributes to the levelling up agenda through good quality jobs around the country.

A sustainable, nature positive, affordable food system that provides choice and access to high quality products that support healthier and home-grown diets for all.

Trade that provides export opportunities and consumer choice through imports, without compromising our regulatory standards for food, whether produced domestically or imported. This strategy builds on work that is already underway across Government.

Significantly, it confirms that we will:

support farmers to broadly maintain levels of domestic production through productivity gain and our new farming schemes,

support our farmers through our new farming schemes and innovation programmes and boosting production in key sectors, including horticulture and seafood,

release the additional provision of 10,000 visas under the seasonal worker visa route, including 2,000 for the poultry sector,

work with industry to support the upcoming Migration Advisory Committee review of the Shortage Occupation List, and commission an independent review to ensure the quantity and quality of the food sector workforce,

work with the food and drink industry to review existing skills programmes, identify improvements, and tackle barriers that currently prevent uptake, helping to drive up completion of skills training, pay and productivity in all areas of the UK to support levelling up,

publish a land use framework in 2023 to ensure we meet our net zero and biodiversity targets, and help our farmers adapt to a changing climate,

launch a Food Data Transparency Partnership, bringing together Government, industry and civil society to drive a real transformation in health, animal welfare and environmental outcomes through our food,

consult on Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services (GBSF), including whether to widen the scope of GBSF mandatory organisations to cover the whole public sector and introducing an aspirational target that at least 50% of food spend must be on food produced locally or certified to higher environmental production standards, while maintaining value for money for taxpayers,

harness the benefits of new Free Trade Agreement (FTAs) made possible following Brexit, while maintaining our world-leading domestic standards, by using a range of levers within our bespoke trade agreements.

The levers influencing the food system are dispersed. We will work collaboratively across UK Government Departments, as well as closely with the devolved Administrations, industry and civil society to achieve our ambitions. We will report on our progress against the food strategy goals alongside the next UK food security report.

[HCWS92]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Health and Social Care Update

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): I would like to inform the House that the final version of “Data saves lives: reshaping health and social care with data” has been published today. It builds on the groundbreaking use of data during the pandemic and sets out ambitious plans to harness the potential of data in health and care, while maintaining the highest standards of privacy and ethics.

When facing this country’s greatest public health emergency for generations, one of the most effective tools at our disposal has been the power of data. Now, as we look to live with covid, we must apply those same tools as we tackle the most pressing challenges facing the country including elective recovery and integration of health and social care.

Earlier this year, I made a speech setting out my four priorities for reform in health; prevention, personalisation, performance and people. We cannot deliver the change we need to see, and our 10 year plans for cancer, dementia and mental health, unless we embrace the opportunities from data-driven technologies. Last week, Sir Gordon Messenger and Dame Linda Pollard published their review into leadership of health and social care, and I accepted their recommendations in full. Today’s data strategy is the next step in our plans to modernise the NHS.

This strategy shows how we will use data to bring benefits to all parts of health and social care; from patients and care users, to staff on the front line, to the pioneers driving the most cutting-edge research.

It is backed by a series of concrete commitments, including investing in secure data environments to power research into new treatments, using technology to allow staff to spend more quality time with patients, and giving people better access to their own data through shared care records and the NHS app. The strategy will support NHS providers to tackle the covid backlog, providing them with the means to monitor and optimise capacity through improved data sharing and the development of advanced analytics. This is all on top of the huge investment that we have already made; for instance investing £200 million in our data for research and development programme.

It is vital that, as we deliver these benefits, we work in a way that maintains the high level of public trust in how the NHS uses health and care data. That means maintaining the highest standards of privacy and ethics, investing in secure data environments and cyber security, involving the public in decisions about how data is used in the future, listening and responding to their views and concerns.

We published a draft of this strategy in June 2021, and I would like to thank the hundreds of people and organisations who provided feedback which was invaluable in shaping this final version of our strategy for the future.

I would also like to thank Dr Ben Goldacre for his work on the Goldacre Report, which was published in April, and made a compelling case for how data can drive innovation and improve healthcare. I fully support his recommendations and this strategy shows how we will take them forward.

I will deposit a copy of the draft strategy in both Libraries.

[HCWS98]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme: Launch Pathways 2 and 3

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): My noble Friend the Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Home Office, Lord Harrington of Watford, has today made the following written ministerial statement:

I am pleased to announce to the House today the opening of the two remaining referral pathways to the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme.

Last August, as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated rapidly, this Government worked at great speed to evacuate more than 15,000 people from Afghanistan within a fortnight. This was the biggest mission of its kind in generations and the second largest evacuation carried out by any country and we are rightly proud of what we achieved.

The evacuation included British nationals and their families, Afghans who had loyally served the UK, and other vulnerable people. Since the events of last August, we have continued to support those at risk with over 4,000 more people being brought to safety.

In January 2022, the then Minister for Afghan Resettlement announced the launch of a new Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), which will resettle up to 20,000 eligible

people over the coming years. This is in addition to those who have been relocated under the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP).

There is no application process for the scheme, instead eligible individuals will be referred for resettlement via three referral 'pathways'.

The first of these referral pathways offers a place on the ACRS for some of the individuals and families who were brought to safety in the UK under Op PITTING. We will honour our commitments to eligible people who were called forward or specifically authorised for evacuation, but who were unable to board flights.

Today, I am pleased to announce the opening of the two remaining referral pathways onto the ACRS.

Firstly, under pathway 2, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will refer for resettlement to the UK, refugees who have fled Afghanistan. UNHCR has the global mandate to provide international protection and humanitarian assistance to refugees. We are pleased to announce that we are now ready to begin receiving referrals. We anticipate receiving referrals from UNHCR for up to 2,000 refugees during the first year of this pathway, although this number will be kept under review. We will continue to receive UNHCR referrals to the scheme in coming years.

Under pathway 3, we committed to considering eligible at-risk British Council and GardaWorld contractors and Chevening alumni. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) will refer up to 1,500 people from Afghanistan and the region to the Home Office for resettlement, including any eligible family members. The FCDO will launch an online system on Monday 20 June, where eligible individuals will be able to express interest in UK resettlement.

Expressions of interest will be considered in the order they are received, although some groups will be prioritised because the role they performed or the project they worked on mean they are particularly at risk, or because there are exceptionally compelling circumstances. Expressions of interest will be accepted until Monday 15 August 2022, when the online system will close. Guidance on the expression of interest process is available on www.gov.uk, from Monday 13 June.

Any offer of resettlement under the ACRS will be contingent on security screening, including checks against security and other databases, and provision of biometric information. In the interests of public safety, it is right that individuals who are found to have committed war crimes, crimes against humanity, terrorism or other serious crimes will not be eligible for resettlement.

While we recognise the plight of many vulnerable individuals who remain in Afghanistan and the region, the capacity of the UK to resettle people under this scheme is not unlimited and difficult decisions have had to be made on who will be prioritised for resettlement. Nevertheless, we will continue to be committed to supporting the people of Afghanistan and after the first year of the third referral pathway, we will continue to work with international partners and NGOs to welcome wider groups of Afghans at risk.

Resettlement is just one element of the UK Government's response to the situation in Afghanistan, in addition to our diplomatic efforts and international aid in the region, working alongside like-minded states and as part of the international community.

Through the ACRS, the United Kingdom continues to offer safe and legal routes to those in need of protection. The scheme provides another demonstration of our New Plan for Immigration in action.

We are proud to provide those affected by events in Afghanistan with a route to safety and look forward to warmly welcoming individuals and families into our communities across the UK.

[HCWS91]

PRIME MINISTER

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: Appointment to UK Delegation

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Lord Wharton of Yarm has been appointed as a substitute member of the United Kingdom Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of Baroness Foster of Oxtou.

[HCWS97]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disability Update

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Chloe Smith): The aim of this Government, as set out in our manifesto commitment, is to transform the everyday lives of disabled people across the country.

We are also working towards equality on the global stage, through both the example we set here in the UK and our international co-operation. On 13 June, as the UK Minister for Disabled People, I will travel to the 15th session of the conference of states parties to the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. Participating in bilateral meetings and wider debates, I will meet my global counterparts with the aim of strengthening the international political commitment for the rights of disabled people.

Our ambition is clear: to deliver long-term change through practical actions and wide-ranging policies across Government which enable disabled people to live full and independent lives.

We are delivering on this ambition. We have seen 1.3 million more disabled people in work than in 2017—delivering a Government commitment five years early. And since 2013, the general trend in disability employment has been positive, with strong growth in the number and rate of disabled people in employment and a narrowing of the disability employment gap. Over the next three years, the Government will invest £1.3 billion in employment support for disabled people and people with health conditions. We have supported the introduction of the British Sign Language Act 2022 and the Down Syndrome Act 2022 in the last Parliament, and we will be publishing our health and disability White Paper later this year which will set out more important work.

In July 2021 we published the national disability strategy, which set out our ambition to improve the lives of millions of disabled people. It was a turning point in Government commitment to co-ordinate disability policy, setting out in a high-level framework document over 100 cross-Government initiatives driving change in all parts of society.

However, in January 2022, the High Court declared the strategy unlawful because the UK Disability Survey, which informed it, was held to be a voluntary consultation that failed to comply with the legal requirements on public consultations. We strongly disagree with this finding and are disappointed that the declaration prevents us from taking forward some of our important work. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my right

hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), has therefore sought permission to appeal this decision from the Court of Appeal.

While awaiting a decision on permission to appeal from the Court of Appeal, we are required to take steps to comply with the Court's declaration. The Secretary of State wants to minimise the risk of acting inconsistently with the Court's declaration, without compromising on the ambitious agenda we are delivering for disabled people. As such, we are pausing a limited number of policies which are referred to in the strategy or are directly connected with it.

We remain committed to improving opportunities and outcomes for disabled people as we await the outcome of the appeal.

Our intent remains to create more opportunities for disabled people to participate and thrive; to protect and promote the rights of disabled people; and to tackle the barriers that prevent disabled people from fully benefiting from, and contributing to every aspect of our society. Ensuring the voice of disabled people is properly heard remains a priority for Government. We wish to continue to engage closely with disabled people and disabled people's organisations.

We are committed to disability policy that supports all areas of life and taking action to create a society that works for everyone.

[HCWS93]

Ministerial Correction

Monday 13 June 2022

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

The following is an extract from the Second Reading of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill on 8 June 2022.

Caroline Lucas: I wonder if there is a page missing in my copy of the Bill, because I was looking for the net zero test, which I am sure the Secretary of State would agree ought to be applied to all planning decisions, policies and procedures, yet it is conspicuous by its absence. Does he agree that if we are serious about using this Bill to really level up, then we need to have that net zero test? Can he commit to that now?

Michael Gove: I will say three things as briefly as I can. First, the national planning policy framework that will be published in July will say significantly more about how we can drive improved environmental outcomes. Secondly, there is in the Bill a new streamlined approach to ensuring that all development is in accordance with the highest environmental standards. Thirdly, as the hon. Lady knows, under the 25-year environment plan

and with the creation of the Office for Environmental Protection, the non-regression principle is embedded in everything that we do. The leadership that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has shown, not least at COP26, in driving not just this country but the world towards net zero should reassure her on that front.

[Official Report, 8 June 2022, Vol. 715, c. 822.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas).

The correct response should have been:

Michael Gove: I will say three things as briefly as I can. First, **a document setting out how we intend to change national planning policy** that will be published in July will say significantly more about how we can drive improved environmental outcomes. Secondly, there is in the Bill a new streamlined approach to ensuring that all development is in accordance with the highest environmental standards. Thirdly, as the hon. Lady knows, under the 25-year environment plan and with the creation of the Office for Environmental Protection, the non-regression principle is embedded in everything that we do. The leadership that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has shown, not least at COP26, in driving not just this country but the world towards net zero should reassure her on that front.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 13 June 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DEFENCE	1	DEFENCE—continued	
Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy.....	12	NATO Effectiveness.....	3
Ajax Programme.....	10	Support for Defence Jobs.....	16
Ajax Programme.....	15	Support for NATO Allies: Ukraine.....	14
Armed Forces Housing Accommodation.....	15	Support for Ukraine's Military.....	7
Cost of Living: Armed Forces Personnel.....	1	Support for Veterans.....	11
Dreadnought Programme.....	14	Topical Questions.....	16
LGBT Armed Forces Personnel: Courts Martial ...	6	UK Nuclear Deterrent.....	7

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 13 June 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	1WS	HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	5WS
UK Digital Strategy.....	1WS	Health and Social Care Update.....	5WS
EDUCATION	2WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	6WS
Qualified Teacher Status in England: Overseas Teachers.....	3WS	Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme: Launch Pathways 2 and 3.....	6WS
Social Work England: Closure of Emergency Register.....	3WS	PRIME MINISTER	8WS
Student Loan Interest Rates Reduction.....	2WS	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: Appointment to UK Delegation.....	8WS
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	4WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	8WS
Government Food Strategy.....	4WS	Disability Update.....	8WS

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Monday 13 June 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	1MC
Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill.....	1MC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Monday 20 June 2022**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Monday 13 June 2022

List of Government and Principal Offices of the House

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Defence

UK Gross Domestic Product [Col. 25]
Answer to urgent question—(John Glen)

Asylum Seekers: Removal to Rwanda [Col. 35]
Answer to urgent question—(Tom Pursglove)

Government Food Strategy [Col. 47]
Statement—(George Eustice)

Northern Ireland Protocol [Col. 62]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill [Col. 64]
As amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

Falklands War: 40th Anniversary [Col. 124]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Transgender Conversion Therapy [Col. 1WH]
E-petition Debate

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Ministerial Correction [Col. 1MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
