

**Wednesday
12 October 2022**

**Volume 720
No. 51**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 12 October 2022

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: Before we start the business of the day, I want to mark a poignant anniversary. On 12 October 2002, exactly 20 years ago today, 202 people, including 28 Britons, were killed in the Bali bombings. These horrific bomb attacks were organised to cause maximum carnage, leaving hundreds of families and friends shocked and grieving. I know that today, 20 years since the Bali bombings, will be difficult for many people. I would like to express heartfelt condolences and best wishes from all of us here in the House of Commons to the survivors, families and friends.

I would also like to remind Members that the ballot for the election of the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee is currently taking place in the Aye Lobby. The ballot will be open until 2.30 pm. The side doors between the Chamber and the Aye Lobby will be locked until the ballot has been concluded.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Channel 4 Privatisation

1. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of Channel 4 privatisation on the television production industry in Scotland. [901579]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): I can assure the hon. Gentleman that my Cabinet colleagues and I are committed to ensuring the further success of Channel 4. The Government are determined to support the incredible TV production industry in Scotland, and we believe that in the long run the UK production industry will benefit from a sustainable Channel 4.

Jeff Smith: Channel 4 is a key commissioner for Scottish independent production companies. It spends about £20 million a year on Scottish productions, supporting about 400 jobs in Scotland. Analysis from Ernst & Young says that privatisation could result in £1 billion being lost from the UK's nations and regions, so for the sake of Scotland's creative economy, will the Secretary of State make representations to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to follow the evidence and keep Channel 4 in public hands?

Mr Jack: I have had discussions with the Culture Secretary and the previous Culture Secretary. The Government's position is that we are looking again at the sale of Channel 4, and we will have further details in

due course. We want Channel 4 to flourish, and we want independent production companies to flourish and thrive, because we recognise that we live in a challenging and changing media landscape.

Freeports

2. **Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on freeports in Scotland. [901581]

3. **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on when a decision will be taken on the winners of the bids for green freeports in Scotland. [901582]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): I have held a number of discussions with the Levelling Up Secretary and his predecessors on freeports. This Government are committed to delivering two new freeports for Scotland to boost economic growth. The UK and Scottish Governments will be making an announcement shortly.

Iain Stewart: Five high-quality bids for freeports in Scotland have been received. Only two can be successful in this round. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will work with partners in the unsuccessful three so that they can realise their ambitions through other means?

Mr Jack: Before I answer the question, I would like to thank my hon. Friend for his diligent and excellent work in the Scotland Office. He made a huge impact, and I absolutely thank him from the bottom of my heart.

In answering my hon. Friend's question, the Government are committed to boosting economic growth in all areas of Scotland. We will use all the levers at our disposal to do so, and we will do that in partnership with the Scottish Government, as we are doing with freeports. Hopefully, that will also include investment zones—discussions are ongoing between officials—and I hope that those who are unsuccessful in their freeport bids can apply for investment zone status, which will help them to increase their economic activity, so the answer is yes. Funnily enough, I do not exclude the freeport winners from going for investment zone status, as that is not identical, and there are advantages in their becoming investment zones as well.

Andrew Bowie: Of all the five excellent bids, I know that my right hon. Friend agrees that, given the focus on a North sea revival, the importance of the North sea transition deal to our future energy security, the dynamic and pioneering spirit of business and industry in the north-east of Scotland, and the fact that we will create 30,000 new jobs in my constituency and around the north-east of Scotland, the Aberdeen and north-east freeport bid will be one that he announces as successful.

Mr Jack: I admire my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for the north-east bid. He is right to be enthusiastic, as he represents that part of Scotland. It is a process, and we are following the metrics, as was done with the English freeports. It is important that we do not make a political

decision, and that we make the right decision based on the bids before us. As I say, for those that are unsuccessful, hopefully investment zones will be another route. I have not shown any preference for any bid, and it is right that we do not and do it properly according to the metrics that we set out, because we cannot leave this open to judicial review, which would lead to further delay.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I am glad to hear the right hon. Member say that the Government intend to consider repurposing Scottish green freeports into investment zones. What discussions have been about environmental protection concerns and the removal of EU environmental standards?

Mr Jack: There is a full prospectus explaining all that, which we agreed with the Scottish Government. We have put it out to bid. We have five bids, from Orkney down to the Forth and the Clyde, and they all understand the environmental impacts. A lot of it is about reclaiming brownfield land, which is part and parcel of the levelling-up agenda, and I think everyone understands what has to be done environmentally to reclaim brownfield sites.

Levelling-up Fund

4. **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of the effect of the levelling-up fund in Scotland. [901583]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): We have invested £172 million in Scotland in round 1 of the levelling-up fund, which is around 10% of the total UK funding. In March, we published a monitoring and evaluation strategy for the levelling-up fund. Further updates on the strategy will be published in due course, and results of round 2 will be announced later this year.

Caroline Ansell: That is wonderful to hear. In my beautiful constituency of Eastbourne, we are busy working to ensure that £20 million of Government levelling-up funding is energising and growing the visitor economy. [HON. MEMBERS: "Scotland!"] My question is: how is the levelling-up fund doing the same in Scotland—the land of my forefathers—to ensure that all parts of the United Kingdom can capitalise on and consolidate the staycation market so much born out of the pandemic years?

Mr Jack: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Levelling-up measures are all about delivering local priorities and pride in place, which go hand in hand towards creating a sustainable tourist economy. The £150 million community ownership fund is allowing us to put cultural and heritage assets back in the hands of local people across the whole United Kingdom.

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

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): What would the impact have been on levelling-up projects if the Scottish Government had followed the advice of the Scottish Conservatives to give these unfunded and catastrophic tax cuts to the wealthiest in our society? Will the Secretary of State now apologise to the Scottish Government for insisting that they follow this disastrous and reckless course of action?

Mr Jack: The hon. Member is conflating two issues. The reality is that the levelling-up funds, of which there are £200 million in the current round, are being well received across Scotland. That is real devolution in practice. All local authorities are engaging with the UK Government—and guess what? They are enthusiastic when it comes to applying for money to help local projects.

Devolution Settlement

5. **Allan Dorans** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on amending the devolution settlement with Scotland. [901584]

7. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on amending the devolution settlement with Scotland. [901586]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): The Scottish Parliament is one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world and we believe that the devolution settlement strikes the right balance. We continue to work collaboratively with the Scottish Government to implement the Scotland Act 2016. This includes passing secondary legislation to deliver the extensive welfare and tax powers granted by the Act.

Allan Dorans: The vast majority of people in Scotland support the continued existence of the Scottish Government. Despite the settled will of the Scottish people for greater autonomy and self-rule, some senior Conservatives—there are Secretaries of State among them—are becoming even louder in their calls for the UK Government to claw back powers from the devolved Assemblies. Will the Secretary of State today commit before the House that the UK Government will not under any circumstances attempt to revoke powers devolved to the Scottish Government?

Mr Jack: Absolutely. In fact, since we left the European Union, we have given more powers to the Scottish Parliament. Actually, whenever asked, not a single Member of the Scottish National party has come up with one power that has been taken away. It is quite the contrary. We have given more powers and will continue to do that, because, let us be clear, we are the party that is strengthening devolution and the SNP wants to destroy devolution.

Deidre Brock: I believe that the EU forecasts that the Irish economy will grow by more than 5% in 2022, showing the real potential for growth that exists for smaller nations that are part of the EU. Meanwhile, on the back of the UK Government's disastrous fiscal statement, mortgage payments for many Scots are rising dramatically and people will struggle to keep a roof over their heads, let alone to feed and keep themselves warm.

Today, the Office for National Statistics tells us that there was a slump of 0.3% in GDP in August in the UK, before that disastrous event. Why will the Secretary of State and his Cabinet colleagues not accept that their fiddling with devolution while the UK economy burns will never be enough to protect the Scottish people he

supposedly represents and accept that an independence referendum has to happen so that the Scottish people can protect themselves?

Mr Jack: You will not be surprised to hear, Mr Speaker, that I think that that is absolute nonsense. This is not the time. A vast majority of Scots do not believe that now is the time for an independence referendum and that is very clear. The constitution is reserved to Westminster—that is in the process of going through the Supreme Court to be determined now. To me it is very clear that the people of Scotland want this Government to get on. The support we gave during covid, with 900,000 jobs furloughed, the support we have given to households and businesses for their energy costs and our helping to grow the Scottish economy through freeports and investment zones: that is what the people of Scotland want.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Devolution is about Scotland's two Governments working together and we have seen the success of that with city and region growth deals and with the progress towards freeports. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that language is also really important? When the First Minister said that she “detests the Tories”, she was insulting—*[Interruption.]* Cheers are coming from the SNP. She is insulting hundreds of thousands of Scottish Conservative voters when she should be representing the whole of Scotland as First Minister.

Mr Jack: Of course I agree with my hon. Friend. Language is terribly important in politics. We saw the desperate death of David Amess and others before him, and people cannot incite people using words such as “detest”, which, as can be seen in the dictionary, is another word for hate. The irony is that the Scottish Government are bringing forward a hate Bill yet we have language such as “detest”. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to call it out.

Cost of Living

6. **Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the cost of living in Scotland. [901585]

10. **Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP):** What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on the cost of living crisis in Scotland. [901589]

11. **Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP):** What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on the cost of living crisis in Scotland. [901590]

13. **Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on the cost of living crisis in Scotland. [901592]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (David Duguid): The Government fully recognise that families, households and businesses are worried about rising costs. That is why we have taken decisive action to get families and businesses through this winter and next, and we are focused on growing the economy to raise living standards for everyone.

Janet Daby: According to Citizens Advice Scotland, the cost of living crisis is the “perfect storm” that risks sweeping tens of thousands of households across Scotland into poverty, problem debt, and destitution, and nothing could be closer to the truth. Scottish Labour has a plan and is calling for an emergency cost of living Act. Will the Minister raise with Scottish Ministers what both Governments could urgently do, using all the levers at their disposal, to help individuals and families in Scotland through this terrible crisis?

David Duguid: The UK, like Europe and other countries around the world, has been forced to respond decisively to the challenges posed by high energy prices resulting from, among other things, Russia's weaponisation of energy markets. Because of action taken by this Government, the most vulnerable households will get at least £1,200—some much more—of cost of living support this year on top of the benefit of the energy price guarantee. Of course, the hon. Lady is absolutely right that this Government and the devolved Administrations must work together to make sure that the most vulnerable get the most support.

Carol Monaghan: According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, if the Government do not uprate benefits in line with inflation, then claimants, many of whom are working, will experience the biggest ever real-terms cut to benefits in a single year. Is it not the case that the Minister's Government are prioritising growing the wealth of the richest while not doing enough for the vulnerable, including the elderly, in our communities in Scotland?

David Duguid: Again, it will come as no surprise that I do not totally agree with everything that an hon. Member said. The hon. Lady asked about raising benefits in line with inflation. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is looking at that—as she would do on an annual basis in any case—and will announce in due course the decision on benefits uprating.

Alison Thewliss: According to Joseph Rowntree Foundation figures, 15,378 people in Glasgow Central receive means-tested benefits such as universal credit, and many of them will be working in low-paid jobs. The Scottish Government have done their bit by introducing the leading Scottish child payment, but what representations has the Minister made to his colleague, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, to support the uprating of benefits? He has not been clear about what representations he has made for the people of Scotland.

David Duguid: The hon. Lady makes excellent points. On making representations to my ministerial colleagues, having been in this post for a very short time, I have not quite got there yet, but these discussions are happening. Under the agreed fiscal framework, the Scottish Government, through the levers that they have, will receive an estimated £340 million of additional funding as a result of just the basic rate tax cut. It is for the Scottish Government to use that additional funding as they want to, including on increased spending or tax cuts.

Alan Brown: In the policy decisions chapter of the so-called “Growth Plan”, line 9 on page 26 shows that reversing the corporation tax increase will cost £68 billion

over the next five years. Given the cost of living crisis, did the Minister and his Secretary of State argue for or against a £68 billion subsidy to the biggest, wealthiest companies in the UK?

David Duguid: The hon. Gentleman is probably aware that the Government have committed to reversing the planned corporation tax increase from 19%, so it is staying at 19%, which will attract businesses to Scotland and across the rest of the United Kingdom. It is often missed that the Government have delivered on top of the recently announced energy price guarantee. It means that typical households receiving means-tested benefits will receive £1,200 of support; those on disability benefits on top of that will receive £1,350; low-income pensioner households will receive £1,500 of support; and low-income pensioner households who are receiving disability benefits will receive £1,650 of support. As well as that, the energy price guarantee will mean that a typical household will pay no more than £2,500 on their energy bills.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), has a long-standing family commitment, which is why the privilege of asking questions falls to me today.

The UK Government's so-called mini-Budget has created a financial crisis—made in Downing Street but paid for by working people all over this country, including in Scotland. Has the Minister's Department made an assessment of how much worse off Scottish households will be as a result of the Chancellor's disastrous actions?

David Duguid: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place instead of the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray). As I said, the energy support put in place means that a typical household will not pay more than £2,500. That is on top of the additional benefits that were announced earlier this year and more recently and which will make sure that many households, including those on the lowest incomes, will actually be better off than they would have been.

Peter Kyle: The only long-term solution to this crisis is a more sustainable energy policy, which the Government have failed to deliver for 12 years. In 2017, Nicola Sturgeon announced a national energy company for Scotland. Five years on, we are in an energy crisis and that plan has been ditched, so does the Minister agree that the right way forward is through Labour's plan for Great British Energy, a home-grown, publicly owned company run for and by the people of this country and for the interests of people in this country?

David Duguid: The hon. Member is absolutely correct to point out the Scottish Government's commitment, made back in 2017, to have created a nationalised energy company in Scotland by now. That has not happened, and quite frankly I do not think that it should. I do not think that Labour's plans should be implemented either.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): The first mini-Budget from this Government required two Bank of England interventions just to stabilise the economy. It tanked the pound and it massively worsened the already brutal cost of living crisis that our constituents are facing. Will the Minister and the Secretary of State, as Scotland's representative in Cabinet, confirm that any future fiscal event from this Government will neither make further cuts to the Scottish budget nor introduce further cuts to our already crippled public services?

David Duguid: On top of the already record increased block grant of £41 billion that the Scottish Government have already received, measures announced in the Chancellor's recent fiscal statement mean hundreds of millions in extra money going to the Scottish Government. As I said to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), it is for the Scottish Government to decide whether to spend that on tax cuts or to increase spending.

Mhairi Black: After 12 years of austerity, which has caused in excess of 300,000 deaths in the UK, this Tory Government have cost the public billions. They have given dodgy covid contracts to their pals. They are scrapping the bankers' bonus cap. They have forced a hard Brexit on Scotland against its will. They are now helping the richest people in the country, on the backs of millions of people who are choosing between heating and eating. I ask the Minister: is it genuinely a surprise to him and his colleagues to discover why most people in Scotland detest the Tory party and its values?

David Duguid: I must say that I am disappointed that the hon. Member chooses to double down on the hate-filled language of her party leader. I repeat that the Scottish Government have received a record amount of block grant funding—£41 billion—since devolution began, and all the other measures from which people and businesses across Scotland will benefit. Those in the most vulnerable households and on the lowest incomes will particularly benefit from the measures that this Government have taken.

Domestic Energy Costs

8. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): If he will make a comparative assessment with Cabinet colleagues of domestic energy costs in (a) Scotland and (b) the rest of the UK. [901587]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (**David Duguid**): The Government's recently announced energy price guarantee will support households with their energy bills across the whole United Kingdom, including in Scotland. This decisive action will save the typical household at least £1,000 a year for the next two years.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): May I follow up on the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) asked about the Scottish Government's decision to abandon their plans? Will the Minister confirm what discussions he has had with his Scottish counterparts about ensuring that Scotland's renewable potential directly benefits the people of Scotland and the people of the United Kingdom, given that the cost to the consumer of renewable energy is so much lower?

David Duguid: As I have said, Ministers in the Scotland Office discuss such matters regularly with our colleagues in other Departments. Energy policy is reserved, as I am sure the hon. Member will understand, but we endeavour to work constructively with the Scottish Government on everything that can have an impact on the livelihoods of people and communities in Scotland, as well as businesses.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): One of the most critical ways of reducing domestic energy costs in Scotland is by supporting renewable energy generation and carbon reduction efforts. I have raised before at the Dispatch Box the fact that the UK Government chose to sideline the Acorn carbon capture and storage project in the north-east of Scotland. The Scottish Government have refused to provide financing either.

The Secretary of State may be interested to hear that Labour has put forward a fully costed plan to invest in Britain's infrastructure, which includes providing the funding for the Acorn project. Will the Secretary of State encourage his Cabinet colleagues—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I must ask the hon. Lady to start the question again, because I could not hear.

Liz Twist: I believe the Secretary of State and the Minister may have heard the first part of the question, so I will conclude by asking the Secretary of State to encourage his Cabinet colleagues to look again at how the carbon capture and storage project can be supported to enable it to get under way as a matter of urgency.

David Duguid: As the hon. Lady may be aware, the Acorn cluster looms large in my own constituency, so I have nothing but the greatest support for that project. I can also assure her, and the rest of the House, that this Government have stood firmly behind it: we have invested £41 million in the project directly, and it is also the reserve cluster in the Track-1 sequence. Track-2 sequencing for carbon capture and storage across the United Kingdom is coming soon, I am told, and I look forward to that announcement with great interest.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, let me point out that a British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— Engagements

Q1. [901529] **Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab):** If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 12 October.

The Prime Minister (Elizabeth Truss): This Saturday marks the first anniversary of the senseless murder of our friend Sir David Amess. David was a superb parliamentarian, who brought colleagues across the House together on a huge range of issues. He represented the best of Parliament as a devoted champion of his constituency. Our thoughts are with his wife Julia and

his five children, as well as with the people of Southend, which now stands tall as a city in testament to David's tireless work.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Graham Stringer: I knew Sir David, and I share the Prime Minister's sentiments completely.

Spooking the markets, increasing the cost of borrowing and mortgages, was almost certainly an act of gross incompetence rather than malevolence, but going back on the commitment to end no-fault evictions is an act of extreme callousness. Can the Prime Minister reassure the 11 million private renters in this country that she will fulfil that commitment?

The Prime Minister: I can.

Q2. [901530] **Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con):** During a recent visit to the children's ward at York Hospital, I was shocked to learn that paediatric waiting time targets were the same as those for adult patients. As we know, any delay in treatments for young patients can have a damaging effect on their development and prospects. May I ask the Prime Minister to look at this as a matter of urgency?

The Prime Minister: I am very sorry to hear about the situation of young people at York Hospital, but I am pleased to say that this is an issue on which my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary has focused in her plan for patients. We are making sure that people can access treatment as soon as possible: we are delivering record staff numbers and record levels of funding.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition, Keir Starmer.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I join the Prime Minister in her comments about Sir David? She spoke for the whole House when she made those comments. I know how deeply his loss was felt on the Government Benches, and we extend our best wishes across the House at this important time.

I also want to send my heartfelt condolences to the families of all those who tragically lost their lives in Creeslough last week. Donegal is a special place for my family and me, and across the House. The people there are in all our thoughts.

This morning the Business Secretary toured the television studios arguing that the turmoil in the markets had nothing to do with the Prime Minister's Budget. Does the Prime Minister agree with him?

The Prime Minister: We have taken decisive action to make sure that people are not facing energy bills of £6,000 for two years. We remember that the Opposition are only talking about six months. We have also taken decisive action to make sure that we are not facing the highest taxes for 70 years in the face of a global economic slowdown. We are making sure that we protect our economy at this very difficult time internationally. As a result of our action—this has been independently corroborated—we will see higher growth and lower inflation.

Keir Starmer: Avoiding the question, ducking responsibility, lost in denial—it is no wonder investors have no confidence in her Government. This is why it matters: a few weeks ago, Zach and Rebecca from Wolverhampton were all set to buy their first home. Then the Government’s borrowing spree sent interest rates spiralling and their mortgage offer was withdrawn. I met them last week. They are back to square one: unable to buy, devastated and sick to their back teeth with excuses and blame shifting. Does the Prime Minister understand why Zach and Rebecca are completely furious with her?

The Prime Minister: The fact is that when I came into office, people were facing energy bills of up to £6,000 per year—*[Interruption.]* Well, I am sorry; Labour Members are shouting, but the right hon. and learned Gentleman is opposing the very package that we brought in with the energy price guarantee. That was the major part of the mini-Budget that we announced. He has refused to confirm whether he backs our energy price guarantee for two years, which protects families not just this winter but next winter. We are seeing interest rates rising globally—*[Interruption.]* They are rising globally in the face of Putin’s appalling war in Ukraine. What we are doing is helping people with lower stamp duty, helping people with their energy costs, reducing inflation with our energy package and keeping taxes low. I notice that the right hon. and learned Gentleman had a Damascene conversion last night when he backed our cut to national insurance.

Keir Starmer: The economy is in turmoil. People are really worried. This is really not the time to descend into nonsense attacks about last night. There is no point in trying to hide it; everyone can see what has happened. The Tories went on a borrowing spree, sending mortgage rates through the roof—they are skyrocketing by £500 a month—and for nearly 2 million homeowners, their fixed-rate deals are coming to an end next year. They are worried sick, and everybody in this House knows it. They will not forgive; they will not forget; and nor should they. When will the Prime Minister stop ducking responsibility, do the right thing and reverse her kamikaze Budget, which is causing so much pain?

The Prime Minister: Last night, the Labour party supported bringing down national insurance. Is he really—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear the Prime Minister. I am sorry if her own party doesn’t, but I certainly do.

The Prime Minister: I am genuinely unclear about what—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We do not want an early bath at this stage. The rugby world cup is coming, but let us not start it too soon. Let us hear the questions and the answers.

The Prime Minister: I am genuinely unclear as to what the Labour party’s policy is on our energy price guarantee. It was the biggest part of our mini-Budget. Are the Opposition saying that they want to reverse it and that they want to see people facing energy bills of £6,000? Is that what the right hon. and learned Gentleman is saying?

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister knows very well that, on this side, we voted against the national insurance rise in the first place. She voted for it, so who is doing the U-turn? Honestly.

Last week, the Prime Minister was forced to U-turn on her unfunded tax cut for the super-wealthy. This week, she is beginning to realise that she needs to extend the windfall tax, one step behind the CEO of Shell, but she is still going ahead with £18 billion of tax cuts for the richest businesses, and they did not even ask for it. She has still gift-wrapped a stamp duty cut for landlords, just as renters feel the pinch, and she is still holding out tax cuts for those who live off stocks and shares. Why does she expect working people to pick up the bill for her unfunded tax cuts for those at the top?

The Prime Minister: I notice the Leader of the Opposition is still not saying whether he supports our energy price guarantee. This is very relevant, because it is the biggest part of our mini-Budget. The fact is that all the Opposition have said is that people should be supported for six months. Does he think that, in March, pensioners should be facing very high energy bills? That is what will happen if he does not support our energy price guarantee.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister is not even attempting to answer the questions now. I gently remind her that the idea of freezing energy bills was a Labour idea that she took on. During her leadership contest the Prime Minister said, and I quote her exactly:

“I’m very clear I’m not planning public spending reductions.”
Is she going to stick to that?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely. *[Interruption.]* Look, we have almost £1 trillion of public spending, and we were spending £700 billion back in 2010. We will make sure that, over the medium term, the debt is falling, and we will do that not by cutting public spending but by making sure we spend public money well. The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about our spending on the energy price guarantee, which he does not seem to support, but the reality is that he cannot criticise us, on the one hand, for spending money while, on the other hand, claiming we are cutting public expenditure. *[Interruption.]*

Keir Starmer: Conservative Members can cheer. I hope they listened very carefully to that last answer, because other people will have listened very carefully. Who voted for this? Not homeowners paying an extra £500 on their mortgage. Who voted for this? Not working people paying for tax cuts for the largest companies. Who voted for this? Not even most of the MPs sitting behind her, who know they cannot pay for tax cuts on the never-never. Does she think the public will ever forgive the Conservative party if it keeps on defending this madness and goes ahead with its kamikaze Budget?

The Prime Minister: What our Budget has delivered is security for families for the next two winters. It has made sure we will see higher economic growth, lower inflation and more opportunities. The way we are going to get our country growing is through more jobs, more growth and more opportunities, not through higher taxes, higher spending and his friends in the unions stopping hard-working people getting to work.

Q4. [901532] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): I want to see growth and jobs in east Cornwall, and I believe an investment zone could help. Will the Prime Minister back me and my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) in supporting an investment zone for the Liskeard and Bodmin area?

The Prime Minister: I want to see more jobs, more opportunities and more homes for local people in Cornwall, which I know my hon. Friend is working towards with her colleagues. I am delighted that we are bringing forward these investment zones, which will give those opportunities to local people.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the leader of the Scottish National party, Ian Blackford.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about the murder of David Amess a year ago? Our thoughts and prayers are very much with Julia and his family. Of course, we also think very much of those in Creeslough, who have been caught up in the terrible tragedy there.

I would have hoped that if the Prime Minister were making public spending commitments today, she would have said that those who rely on social security benefits will get their benefits uprated in line with inflation.

When the Prime Minister last stood at the Dispatch Box, the average two-year fixed-rate mortgage stood at 4.5%. It is now at 6.5% and rising, hitting average families with an extra £450 in mortgage payments every single month, over and above what they were paying. Thirty-seven days into the job, this is literally the cost of the Prime Minister's incompetence. It is the price households are paying, and all because of the Chancellor she chose. Will she now give up on her desperate plan to save her Chancellor's skin by scapegoating the Governor of the Bank of England?

The Prime Minister: The action we have taken has meant that families in Scotland and across the UK are not facing gargantuan energy bills. What the right hon. Gentleman and his friends in Scotland could do to help us out is build the nuclear power stations that are going to help our energy security and help us get more gas out of the North sea, to help deliver on a more secure energy future for all of our people.

Ian Blackford: If the Prime Minister wants to ask us questions, we can swap places. The reality is that she is ignoring the damage of the chaos of the mini-Budget. She is worrying about saving the Chancellor's job, but many families are now worried about not just heating their homes, but keeping their homes. The scale of this Tory crisis is frightening: 100,000 households a month are up for mortgage renewals; people cannot afford to pay an extra £4,500 a year in interest, and plenty are already falling behind. The Prime Minister and her Chancellor have completely lost control. The only things growing under this Government are mortgages, rents and bills. Is that what she really meant when she declared herself a "pro-growth" Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: We have taken action on helping families to heat their homes. That has been very important, and I would love to see more support on delivering the energy security we need. Interest rates are rising globally—

that is a fact—and interest rates are a decision for the independent Bank of England. But I want to do all I can to help families across Britain. The way we are going to help them is by delivering economic growth, and by making sure we have the jobs and opportunities in Scotland and right across the UK. What independent forecasters have shown is that, following our intervention, economic growth is going to be higher than it would have been if we had not acted. That is vital for jobs, opportunities and livelihoods, and helping to make sure that people are able to put food on the table.

Q8. [901536] **Angela Richardson** (Guildford) (Con): The Wey Navigation winds through the heart of Guildford and is a much-treasured part of our local environment. I welcome the announcement by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs last week that the Environment Agency will be able to increase fines on water companies for serious breaches of the rules to up to £250 million per breach. Will the Prime Minister confirm that no MP voted to discharge sewage into our waterways, and that it is beneath the Opposition parties and their activists to keep repeating that outright lie?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about our support for cleaner water. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) has asked from a sedentary position what we are doing about it. The Environment Secretary has increased the fines on water companies 100 times should they discharge sewage into waterways in an illegal way. We have acted.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): May I associate myself and my colleagues with the remarks made about the tragic events in Creeslough in County Donegal? Our prayers continue to be with that devastated community.

I welcome the renewed negotiations with the European Union about the Northern Ireland protocol. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that the outcome of those negotiations must reflect the objectives outlined by the Government in the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, and that that is the key to unlocking the door to political stability in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman; we need to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. That means making sure that we have free-flowing trade east-west as well as north-south, it means making sure that the people of Northern Ireland can benefit from the same tax benefits as people in Great Britain, and it means resolving the issues over governance and regulation. I would prefer to achieve that through a negotiated solution with the EU, but if we are not able to do that, we cannot allow the situation to drift; we have to proceed with the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill.

Q10. [901538] **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): Addressing health inequalities is a key part of levelling up, so I welcome this week's news of £50 million to fund research into health disparities. We know that poor health affects not only life expectancy but prosperity and, more widely, economic resilience and growth. Would my right hon. Friend therefore consider a future expansion of these research schemes to

other parts of the north and the Greater Manchester region, to encourage more healthcare research partnerships between our great universities and our local authorities?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this health research is vitally important. I know that my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary is looking at whether and where the scheme can be expanded, and we will be doing further commissioning rounds to look at that issue.

Q3. [901531] **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): Prime Minister, you have had a holiday, I think in Birmingham, where you were preaching to the choir—although a few MPs who were there appeared to be singing from a different song sheet. Prime Minister, your Government is now outrageously flirting with disaster, financially and socially. We have just heard that the increase in mortgage repayments will dwarf the rise in heating bills. How will you cope with the resultant increase in homelessness?

Mr Speaker: I do not think I am responsible, but I am sure the Prime Minister will take that on board.

The Prime Minister: What we have done as a Government is act decisively to deal with the very severe energy crisis we are facing. [*Interruption.*] We are facing a severe energy crisis. We are also facing a slowdown in economic growth globally due to Putin's war in Ukraine, and not acting is not an option.

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): The energy price guarantee is a key part of the growth plan, but too few businesses and households know about it, even if the Labour Party does not support it. Can I urge the Prime Minister to have a nationwide mail-out campaign to communicate what the Government are doing to assess people on reduction of energy and, more particularly, to have a reduction-of-energy campaign for public buildings, so that we do not go down the route of spending too much on consumption?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I know that the Energy Secretary is working on a plan to help companies and individuals use energy more efficiently. We are also working on this across Government. I was delighted to speak to my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) yesterday, and I hope we will be able to start this going in No. 10 straightaway.

Q5. [901533] **Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): During the lockdown we clapped them, and then we laid wreaths for healthcare staff who had died on the frontline. How quickly our nurses have gone from the country's heroes to this Government's villains—offered a derisory 72p a week pay rise and then painted as militants for daring to have the audacity to ballot for industrial action for the first time in a century. Claps do not pay the bills, and neither does a 72p pay rise. Nurses are leaving the NHS in their droves, feeling abandoned by this Government. Surely even the Prime Minister agrees that the Government have their priorities wrong when

they are uncapping the bonuses of the bankers and at the same time offering derisory pay rises to our treasured NHS staff.

The Prime Minister: First, may I say what a brilliant job our fantastic nurses do across the country? The figures the hon. Gentleman is quoting are simply wrong. The independent pay review body recommended a £1,400 rise on average, and that is what the Government are committed to delivering.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Following the loss of 27 lives last winter in the channel, the UK Government offered joint patrols to the French on the beaches. Can my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirm that she renewed that offer to President Macron when they met and, further, that there will be no new money and no fresh agreement with the French unless they agree to joint beach patrols and joint security across the channel to bring an end to the small boats crisis for good?

The Prime Minister: The Home Secretary is committed to dealing with this very difficult issue of the small boats in the channel. We do need to sort it out. We are committed to legislating and to getting an agreement with the French Government. I did discuss it with President Macron last week, and the Home Secretary is following up.

Q6. [901534] **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): This Friday, Christine Grahame MSP and I are hosting a community drop-in event on the cost of living crisis in Gorebridge. This will be a chance for local residents to meet with a range of partners to get advice and guidance on what they can do to survive the current crisis. I extend an invitation to the Prime Minister to come to this event on Friday so that my constituents can ask her directly what real-life experience means to her—so that she can address the cost rises that they are facing and apologise to them for the disastrous decisions that her Government are making.

The Prime Minister: I completely understand that families are struggling. That is why this Government acted within a week of coming into office to put in place the energy price guarantee so that people are not facing £6,000 bills. That is why we reversed the increase in national insurance and why we are cutting basic rate tax so that families are keeping more of their own money. We are also making sure that the most vulnerable households get an extra £1,200 of support. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will communicate that to his constituents.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her warm words about Sir David Amess, who is sorely missed in this place.

Small and medium-sized enterprises are the lifeblood of our economy and I warmly welcome the expansion of the small business threshold. Does my right hon. Friend agree that only the Conservative party is on the side of enterprise in its determination to unleash the full potential of our great country?

The Prime Minister: We in the Conservative party understand who pays our wages—it is the people who get up every day to go to work and the businesses that

are set up. Those are the people driving our economy and we will be unashamedly pro-growth, pro-business and pro-opportunity.

Q7. [901535] **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): My constituents were absolutely delighted that the fracking application in West Lancashire was withdrawn after a moratorium was declared. Since then, we have not seen any new scientific evidence that indicates that fracking would now be safe. Despite that, the Government have decided to reverse that moratorium, committing to granting fracking licences only in areas that have local consent. I would be grateful if the Prime Minister would reassure West Lancashire residents—my constituents—and please explain in detail how she will honour her statement that no fracking licences will be forced on communities that do not want them.

The Prime Minister: First, let me offer my best wishes to the hon. Lady on her appointment as chair of the Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust. I can assure her and colleagues around the House that fracking will only go ahead in areas where there is local community support.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Two weeks ago, a bomb in Afghanistan killed 35 girls and young women. They were Hazaras, from the country's second-largest ethnic minority, who are being massacred under the Taliban. Today, outside Parliament, Hazaras from across the UK, including from my constituency, are gathering to call for international support to stop the slaughter, and we are joined by representatives of the Hazara Committee in UK. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister support the Hazaras in trying to stop the killings and arrange for her Ministers to meet their representatives?

The Prime Minister: What is taking place in Afghanistan is extremely concerning, I am afraid, with the reversal of women's rights and women's opportunities. One of the things we have done is to make sure that we are restoring the aid budget for women and girls, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will be very happy to meet the group to discuss further.

Q9. [901537] **Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD): The Government's botched Budget gave unfunded tax cuts to some of the richest companies, while across the country there are hospitals worried that their roofs might collapse at any moment: Hinchingsbrooke Hospital, Frimley Park Hospital and Queen Elizabeth Hospital, which is in the Prime Minister's own local area. Those are just three of a number of hospitals that together need hundreds of millions of pounds, some of them urgently. Will the Prime Minister promise that every affected hospital will be given the money it needs to fix those dangerous roofs in the next 12 months?

The Prime Minister: I want to correct the hon. Lady, because what we are doing is simply not putting up corporation tax. It is not a tax cut; we are just not raising corporation tax. I feel it would be wrong, in a time when we are trying to attract investment into our country and at a time of global economic slowdown, to be raising taxes, because it will bring less revenue in. The way we are going to get the money to fund our

national health service and to fund our schools is by having a strong economy, with companies investing and creating jobs.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I fully support this Government's growth agenda, but would the Prime Minister agree that that can be achieved while also protecting and restoring our precious nature and ecosystems and working with our farmers, so that we meet our legally binding target to restore nature by 2030? I know she understands that; she has precious chalk streams in her own constituency. Will she agree that, if we get this right, there will be more jobs, skills and opportunities, because every nation in the world depends on its natural environment?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend did a fantastic job promoting the natural environment when she was at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We are going to deliver economic growth in an environmentally friendly way. This is about improving the processes and delivering better outcomes for the environment while making sure we have a growing economy as well. Those two things go hand in hand.

Q11. [901539] **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Prime Minister wants us to believe that fracking will reduce our energy bills, but it was not so long ago that her Chancellor said that those calling for fracking's return "misunderstand the situation", saying:

"No amount of shale gas from hundreds of wells dotted across rural England would be enough to lower the European price any time soon."

I ask the Prime Minister: is the Chancellor wrong about that?

The Prime Minister: We are pulling every lever to improve our energy supply in Britain, whether that is the North sea and opening up more opportunity there, which those on the Opposition Front Bench are against, whether it is fracking, whether it is more renewables, which I am very supportive of, whether it is more solar panels in the right place or whether it is more nuclear power stations, which are opposed by the SNP. We are doing everything we can, because we can never again be in a situation where we are dependent on authoritarian regimes for our energy.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): Over the past week, serious safeguarding failures by the children's charity Mermaids have come to light, with revelations that the charity sent breast-flattening devices to young girls behind their parents' backs, promoted harmful medical and surgical procedures to children and hired a trustee with links to paedophile organisations and a digital engagement manager who posted pornographic images online, including of himself dressed as a schoolgirl. For years, despite whistleblowers' raising the alarm, Mermaids has had unfettered access to vulnerable children. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it has taken far too long for these concerns to be taken seriously, and does she also agree that it is high time there was a police investigation into the activities of Mermaids and its staff?

The Prime Minister: It is very important that under-18s are able to develop their own decision-making capabilities and are not forced into any kind of activity. On the subject of the investigation that my hon. Friend raises, of course, those matters should be raised and looked at properly.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): For my Richmond Park constituents and communities across south-west London, from Wimbledon to Elmbridge, any expansion of Heathrow would be disastrous. A third runway would see over 6 million more tonnes of carbon pumped into the atmosphere every year, and 2 million households would be affected by increased noise levels. Last week, the Transport Secretary said that she supported Heathrow expansion. The Prime Minister has previously stated that she would support a fourth runway. Does she stand by her previous comments, or will she rule out Government support for the construction of a third runway at Heathrow?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with what the Transport Secretary said. We need to make sure that industries such as the air industry become more environmentally friendly. I support the development of low-carbon technology in those sectors. That is the way that we will help to grow the economy but also serve the environment.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I am delighted to hear that the Prime Minister is such a champion for

nuclear. When will the mission and plan for Great British Nuclear be announced? The market needs the confidence to invest in new nuclear, such as at Wylfa in my constituency of Ynys Môn, to help us to achieve net zero, for our energy security, and to get thousands of high-quality jobs.

The Prime Minister: I can tell my hon. Friend that Great British Nuclear will be set up this year, and it will bring forward new nuclear projects. I am delighted about her support for Wylfa and for making sure that we have nuclear power provided in Wales. I would like to see that right across the United Kingdom.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): May I welcome the Prime Minister to her place? I am not sure how to measure a good honeymoon, but after five weeks of a crisis conceived in Downing Street—a crash in pensions, interest rates rising, mortgage market turmoil and complete financial chaos—the country has been left wanting divorce. In two recent polls, 60% of those in this country want an immediate general election. The Prime Minister claims that she is listening mode; will she give way to the public?

The Prime Minister: I think the last thing we need is a general election.

Mr Speaker: That concludes Prime Minister's questions.

Economic Situation

12.38 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the current economic crisis.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Chris Philp): The Chancellor of the Exchequer is in Washington, having meetings with the IMF, and is—[*Interruption.*]—which have been—[*Interruption.*]—routine meetings, which have been long scheduled.

Mr Speaker: Order. I know it is the first Wednesday back; we are all excitable. Let us have a little calm, so that I can hear the Minister. Come on, Minister.

Chris Philp: Thank you, Mr Speaker. They are routine meetings that have been long scheduled, and are certainly not a cause for exuberance or over-excitement from the Opposition.

As we know, the world has faced surging energy prices since Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. We have seen very high inflation across the western world, and we have seen a cycle of increasing interest rates across western economies as well—across many western economies. But let me reassure the House that the fundamentals of the United Kingdom's economy remain resilient. Unemployment, at 3.5%, is the lowest it has been in my lifetime—and for the record, I was born in 1976. Economic growth last year, the calendar year 2021, was the highest of any G7 country—7.5%. Just yesterday the IMF forecast that economic growth—GDP growth—this current year in the UK would be at 3.6%—once again, for the second consecutive year, the highest of any G7 country. So our economy is in resilient condition.

But I know that many families are worried about the challenges we face, and that is why, just a few weeks ago—two or three weeks ago—we introduced the energy price guarantee. Families were genuinely fearful that they might face this winter energy bills of three, four, five, six or even seven thousand pounds per year, but that energy price guarantee will ensure that the average household sees energy prices no higher than £2,500 on average—not for six months, like the Labour plan, but for two years.

We also introduced a growth plan to get our economy growing, to see wages sustainably rising, to see good jobs created and to create a sustainable tax base to fund our public services. This Government have a growth plan; the Opposition have no plan.

We intend to do this in a way that is fiscally responsible, and that is why—[*Interruption.*]—and that is why, on 31 October, in less than three weeks' time, the Chancellor of the Exchequer will set out the medium-term fiscal plan, explaining to the House exactly how he will do that, and how we will continue the UK's track record of having the highest growth in the G7, not just last year but this year as well.

Rachel Reeves: People are facing insecurity, instability and deep anxiety and they deserve answers. Conservative economic policy has caused mayhem with financial markets, pushed up mortgage costs and put pension

funds in peril, and it has wiped £300 billion off the UK's stock and bond markets—all directly caused by the choices of this Government. The mini-Budget, just 19 days ago, was a bonfire made up of unfunded tax cuts, excessive borrowing and repeated undermining of economic institutions. It was built and then set ablaze by a Conservative party totally out of control—not “disrupters” but pyromaniacs. And that fire has now spread. Yet Government deny all responsibility.

So will the Minister tell the House, what guarantees will the Government give that the currency slide will stop, and that people's pensions are safe? How do they expect people to pay £500 more a month, on average, on their mortgages? How many more repossessions of family homes will there be if the Government do not change course? How much more are the Government spending on debt interest because of higher borrowing costs?

While Ministers desperately try to blame global conditions, why is it that no other central bank in the world has had to step in three times in less than three weeks to protect financial stability?

The country now faces a very serious situation. Ahead of the ending of the Bank of England's emergency operations this Friday, what action will the Government take to ensure that their Budget does not have further consequences for financial stability, or for people's pensions?

This is a Tory crisis made in Downing Street, but it is ordinary working people who are paying the price. It can be resolved only when the Conservatives put aside their pride and reverse this catastrophic mini-Budget, and they must do so now.

Chris Philp: The shadow Chancellor calls for a reversal of the growth plan, yet at the first opportunity—last night—the Labour party voted for it. She asks about mortgage rates, so let me point out to her that mortgage rates around the world have been on an upward trajectory all year. In fact, if we compare base rates in the United Kingdom with those in the United States, we see that in both countries, as she will be aware, the base rate started this year at 0.25%. In the UK the base rate is currently 2.25%, and in the US it is 3.25%, a full percentage point higher.

The shadow Chancellor referenced borrowing costs. I am sure she is aware that two-year Government bond yields are about the same in the US as they are in the UK—US bond yields have been going up over the course of this year as well. She referenced the currency: the dollar has shown strength against a basket of currencies throughout this calendar year. If she looks at the dollar strengthening against the euro, she will see that it strengthened about 15% this calendar year, and strengthened about 15% against sterling—very similar figures.

The shadow Chancellor also asked about the cost of living. We are very mindful of that, which is why we have introduced a £37 billion package to help people, disproportionately targeted at those on lower incomes, so that people on the lowest third of incomes receive £1,200. It is why we introduced the energy price guarantee on our second or third day in office, ensuring that people do not pay, on average, more than £2,500, instead of facing bills of £5,000 or £6,000—and not for six months, as the Labour party offered, but for two years. It is why the national minimum wage was increased by a large amount last April. It is why the national insurance

[Chris Philp]

threshold was increased to £12,500 in July, so people on lower incomes now pay virtually no national insurance or income tax. That is the package of measures that this Government have introduced, because we stand on the side of working people and have taken the steps needed to support them.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Treasury Committee, Mel Stride.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Chancellor was quite right to bring forward the date for the medium-term fiscal plan and the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast. He now has, of course, a huge challenge in landing those plans in order to reassure the markets. He has to get the fiscal rules right and come forward with spending restraint and revenue raisers that are politically deliverable. Given the huge challenges, there are many—myself included—who believe it is quite possible that he will simply have to come forward with a further rowing back on the tax announcements he made on 23 September. Can my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary confirm that that possibility is still on the table?

Chris Philp: I thank my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee for his counsel, which the Chancellor always listens to very carefully. The Chair of the Select Committee, along with others, suggested publicly that the date for the medium-term fiscal plan should be brought forward, and the Chancellor listened to him and responded by bringing the date forward from 23 November to 31 October.

There are no plans to reverse any of the tax measures announced in the growth plan. There is, I think, a measure of consensus—indeed, the Labour party voted only last night for the reduction in national insurance. We want to ensure that the UK is a competitive jurisdiction that companies and high-potential individuals who are internationally mobile choose to come to, to locate and grow. However, as the Select Committee Chair says, we of course need to do so in a way that is fiscally responsible, to ensure that debt over GDP falls in the medium term. The plan will lay out to the House in detail exactly how that will be achieved, scored by the OBR, on 31 October.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Alison Thewliss.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Minister talks about the IMF, but not about its criticism yesterday or the pathetic growth it has projected for next year of just 0.3%—funny that.

The Treasury Committee took evidence this morning from a range of economists, all of whom echoed the concerns of the public about the chaos that this shambolic UK Tory Government have created. I am not sure whether the Minister considers Deutsche Bank as part of his anti-growth coalition, but its chief economist, Sanjay Raja, was very clear this morning that the UK has particular characteristics that are making this crisis worse. He said, “you’ve got a sidelined fiscal watchdog, you’ve got the lack of a medium-term fiscal plan, one of

the largest unfunded tax cuts and package of measures since the early 1970s, and it’s sort of the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

This is chaos that the Minister and his colleagues have deliberately created, and it is impacting people and businesses across these islands, so I ask him: will he bring more money to the devolved institutions to help them tackle the chaos that he and his colleagues have created? Will he commit to uprating benefits by inflation and giving more support to those in the asylum system and those on “no recourse to public funds”? Will he bring certainty to businesses that do not yet know what will happen at the end of the six-month reprieve, because those bills have not gone away?

The Glasgow Centre for Population Health published some research that attributed about 330,000 excess deaths since 2010 to austerity—the Tory austerity by the Minister and his colleagues over the past 12 years—so will he cancel any further cuts, because they cost Scotland and our neighbours far more than we can ever afford? Scotland did not want this, did not vote for this and cannot trust in the financial stability of the UK, never mind this Tory Government.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have the greatest respect for the hon. Lady, but can I just say that she knows the rules give her one minute, not one minute and 45 seconds or two minutes? Please, let us stick to the rules of the House.

Chris Philp: The Scottish Government are of course receiving record levels of funding, and that will continue. The hon. Member asked about excess deaths. Well, I think the drug death record of the nationalist Government is, frankly, pretty terrible. She asked about the uprating to welfare. There is a statutory process that happens every year—every autumn—and that decision has not been taken. It will happen in the normal way, as it has been done for every year.

The hon. Member referenced the IMF’s growth forecast for next year. I have already pointed out that last year we had the highest growth in the G7 and this year we have the highest growth in the G7. If we take the three years together—last year, this year and next year—we will find that the UK, at 11.7% over those three years, still has the highest growth of any G7 country.

The hon. Member asked about institutions. The Chancellor and the Prime Minister have the highest regard for the OBR and the Bank of England. They are meeting both of those institutions regularly. She referenced the growth plan. Having a competitive tax system, supply-side reforms to unleash the productive potential of our economy and making our energy market function properly once again are essential prerequisites for growth, and I am proud that it is this Government who are promoting them.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I am disappointed at the shadow Chancellor, who is a very good economist. She is accusing the Government of causing problems for people’s mortgage rates, but my right hon. Friend will agree with me, I am sure, that one of the worst things that can hit any economy is a wage-price spiral as a result of huge inflation. Can he confirm to the House that the action the Government have taken to provide support to the

economy and to provide this huge input in relation to energy prices will bring down headline inflation, and specifically make mortgage rates better than they would have been otherwise, which is totally the opposite of what the shadow Chancellor is saying?

Chris Philp: My right hon. Friend, who of course has a very distinguished professional track record in financial services, is absolutely right. A range of independent forecasters have confirmed that the energy price guarantee will not only protect our constituents from high prices, but lower inflation by about 5% compared with where it would otherwise have been—a vital intervention. While we are on the subject of inflation, it is worth keeping in mind that inflation in many countries in continental Europe is considerably higher than it is in the United Kingdom. For example, in Germany it is 10.9% and in Holland it is 14%.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has made great play of supporting people with their energy bills, but businesses only get support until March. The Government also make great play of creating growth. Many of the businesses in my constituency, particularly hospitality businesses, with a guarantee on their energy bills only until March, are making decisions in the coming weeks about whether they will be able to stay open and continue to be employers. How does that help growth, and will he give them some guarantee from March onwards?

Chris Philp: The hon. Lady raises questions about timeframes. Of course, the Labour proposal was only for six months for consumers and businesses, and I did not hear her criticising that. The consumer offer is for 24 months—for two years. In relation to businesses, she is quite that the business scheme is for six months, but the Government made a commitment back in September that within three months of September—so within two months of now—further plans would be brought forward to explain to businesses, charities and, indeed, the public sector how they will be handled after March next year. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will announce that to the House in the coming weeks.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Growing our tax revenues in a way that is sustainable in every sense of that word is clearly massively important to pay for all the things we deeply care about, but will my right hon. Friend reassure us that he does get the significance of Government borrowing costs and that he will make sure that His Majesty's Government do nothing that pushes those up unnecessarily high compared with the United States and Germany?

Chris Philp: Yes, my hon. Friend is making a very important and very reasonable point. I have said this already, but he mentions comparisons with other countries, and our two-year bond yield is about the same as that of the United States at the moment. However, we are mindful of the need to ensure reasonable borrowing costs, which of course means financial responsibility. Our debt-to-GDP ratio today is the second lowest in the G7. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor will be setting out in under three weeks' time—on 31 October—precisely how he will be delivering fiscal stability and fiscal

responsibility in the years ahead, and I am sure that my hon. Friend, when he hears that statement, will be reassured and comforted by it.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Earlier today, the Treasury Committee was given evidence that was incredibly sobering. All five of the economic specialists agreed that the UK's Budget has contributed—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) come back and listen to another question? He should not just dash out.

Emma Hardy: As I was saying, earlier today we on the Treasury Committee heard evidence in which all five economists agreed that the UK's Budget has contributed to the current economic turmoil. With the Prime Minister earlier stating that there were going to be no budget cuts, and further to the point from the Chair of the Treasury Committee, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), does the Minister agree with Mohamed El-Erian, the chief economic adviser to Allianz, who said yesterday:

“I see no alternative but the government saying we will not cut taxes now”?

Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I have already set out how there have been global trends over the past six or nine months, with higher energy prices, higher inflation and a cycle of increasing interest rates around the globe. In particular, I set out how the monetary tightening in the United States, at 300 basis points over the past nine or 10 months, is one and a half times higher than the fiscal tightening in the United Kingdom, which has been 200 basis points over the same period.

In relation to the hon. Lady's questions about balancing the books over the medium term, the medium-term fiscal plan will set that out. We do intend to control public spending—[HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”] Well, just listen to the answer—for example, to stick within the spending review 2021 spending limits. I would point out to the House that those SR21 spending limits do see real-terms increases over the three years, but we are going to be sticking with iron discipline to those spending limits, not increasing them, and we will also show spending restraint in the years ahead. However, showing spending restraint is different from real-terms cuts.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is very welcome that, a few minutes ago, the Chief Secretary said that the effect of the statement on 31 October will be to show that the Chancellor is 100% committed to fiscal responsibility. That is very welcome to colleagues on all sides, I think, but can he confirm that that means all the previous unfunded tax cuts will now be funded in that statement?

Chris Philp: What the statement will set out in the round is how we will get debt as a proportion of GDP falling in the medium term. That is the critical metric, and that is what the medium-term fiscal plan will deliver.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Can I just offer the Chief Secretary to the Treasury some gentle advice? If he refuses to accept that the fiscal event on 23 September has had any effect on what has happened in the markets

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

since, that will not be reassuring for the markets. He needs to stop being in denial and admit that serious mistakes were made.

The Prime Minister said at Prime Minister's questions that there would be no public spending cuts, yet we know that, as a result of the fiscal event and the unfunded tax cuts, there is a £60 billion gap between expenditure and the money coming in. If there are no public spending cuts, that leaves only the reversal of the tax cuts to balance the books, does it not?

Chris Philp: I have explained in response to an earlier question that spending restraint is not the same as real-terms cuts. We do not plan real-terms cuts, but we do plan iron discipline when it comes to spending restraint. The answers to the hon. Lady's questions will be set out in full at the fiscal statement, which will be accompanied by a full Office for Budget Responsibility scoring and a set of OBR forecasts. That is when all those questions will be answered very clearly.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): The intervention of the Bank of England in both the gilt market and the corporate bond market has alarmed many in recent days. I would be interested in the view of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on the Treasury's assessment of the cost to the Treasury and the fiscal position following the interventions by the Bank of England in those markets.

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. It obviously depends on the prices at which the Bank and England buys and sells bonds or gilts in the market. It is worth observing that so far it has purchased considerably less by value of gilts than the limits that were set out originally. The volume of gilts that it has on its balance sheet is much less than the limits. On his question about fiscal cost, if there is any fiscal cost, that will depend entirely on market prices.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Two days before the Budget, a young constituent of mine hoped to buy her home through shared ownership. She was offered a mortgage at 4.28% interest by the Halifax. A day after the statement, the offer was withdrawn and a two-year fixed-rate deal has rocketed to 6.9%—that is £150 a month more overnight because of the Government's unfunded giveaways to people on over 150 grand a year. What is the Minister's advice to my constituent? Should she take the deal, or does he agree with the panel of experts at the Treasury Committee this morning that she should not go near it, because house prices are about to plummet?

Chris Philp: I am obviously not going to offer individual financial advice to constituents. What I would say is that there are about 2,300 mortgage products currently on the market. We are keen as a Government to help first-time buyers, particularly younger ones in their 20s and 30s, which is why stamp duty is being cut for cheaper purchases. The stamp duty threshold for first-buyers has been raised, from memory, to £425,000, which particularly helps with putting together a deposit, which cannot be mortgage-funded. In addition, we want to help people with the broader cost of living pressures,

which makes it easier to find money to fund mortgages. That is what the energy price guarantee is designed to do, and it is what lower tax rates in general are designed to do, including the tax reductions that the Labour party voted for yesterday. It is what the cost of living package is designed to do—the £37 billion. By helping with the cost of living in general, we are obviously making mortgage costs a little easier to meet.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Yesterday, the International Monetary Fund underlined the position of the UK economy as the fastest growing in the G7. Despite the noises off, it further stated that the recent fiscal changes would add further to growth projections. That is in addition to the record low unemployment data that has been highlighted this week. Does my right hon. Friend agree that further changes need to be made in terms of supply-side reforms, which will continue the momentum of a growing economy, resulting in real jobs in my constituency and across the country?

Chris Philp: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for mentioning the international comparisons again. The unemployment figure in the UK is 3.5%—inexplicably, Opposition Members have not asked about that—which is the lowest in my lifetime and compares favourably with that in France, where it is more than double, at 7.3%, and Italy, where it is 7.8%. Even in Canada, it is 5.2%, so our unemployment figures compare favourably internationally. As for the growth figures he asked about, if the three years are taken together, the figure is 11.7%, which heads the G7. That is nearly four times higher than Germany, at 3.9%, over double the figure for Japan, at 5.1%, and higher than the figures for France, Italy, Canada and the USA.

My right hon. Friend asked about supply-side reforms to help his constituents. He will hear a lot more about them in the coming weeks, both directly from Secretaries of State and from the Chancellor in the medium-term fiscal plan, to explain how we will get regulatory burdens off the back of businesses to help them to grow and create the jobs for his constituents that he rightly wants to see.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The mini-Budget fiasco has caused a material risk to the UK's financial stability, and the Bank of England has said that \$1 trillion could have been erased from UK pension fund investments if it had not stepped in after the mini-Budget turmoil. So the Minister needs to heed the advice of the Chairman of the Treasury Committee and others across the House, and junk the tax cuts in the Budget. They are unfunded and they are creating chaos in the markets. We need to restore confidence so that our constituents do not suffer. The Minister needs to stop being arrogant and take heed, listen to the expertise and take action.

Chris Philp: If the hon. Lady objects so much to tax reductions, why did she vote for them yesterday?

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Yesterday, I spoke with business leaders in my Crawley constituency. They welcomed both the near record low unemployment levels and the International Monetary Fund outlook of 3.6% growth. Does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree that that is a direct consequence of the policies that the Government are enacting?

Chris Philp: Yes, I do. The leading growth in the G7 and the lowest unemployment figures in my lifetime are testament to the sagacity of the Government's economic policies.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Today is another day when the Government's mismanagement of the economy is causing market turmoil, putting thousands of pensioners and mortgage holders at risk. Yesterday, the Governor of the Bank of England told pension funds to "sort it out" after announcing that the Bank's emergency bond-buying scheme would close in two days. The Government have 48 hours to save pension funds. Will they call the Chancellor back from Washington, hold an emergency Cabinet meeting and deal with the pension crisis?

Chris Philp: The Chancellor is in extremely regular contact with the Governor of the Bank of England, which, with its various agencies, has responsibility for systemic financial stability. We are working closely with it, and we have complete confidence in the Bank's management of this process.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): The Conservative party stands for low taxes, but also for fiscal responsibility and sound money. Given that the Prime Minister has just said that there will not be public sector spending cuts, may I ask the Chief Secretary to the Treasury whether the Government are considering deferring any of the tax measures recently announced by the Chancellor?

Chris Philp: We do not plan to defer the tax measures, because we think that having an internationally competitive tax system is important, as it will help to encourage businesses and successful individuals to locate here in the United Kingdom, rather than anywhere else. I used to be technology Minister, and tech businesses can choose whether they locate here, in New York, San Francisco, Singapore, South Korea or anywhere else in the world. We want them to choose the United Kingdom, which is why competitive tax rates and the right regulatory environment are important.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Ind): Britain has embraced globalisation arguably more than other nations over the past couple of decades. About half of our GDP is subject to international headwinds, but the world is getting more dangerous, not less. The Minister mentioned Ukraine. May I suggest that any future fiscal statement is run by the National Security Council for comment and perhaps recommendations, which might include organising a United Nations safe haven around the port of Odesa, so that the grain ships can get out, helping to reduce the price of food and inflation in this country?

Chris Philp: I thank my right hon. Friend for his suggestion about Odesa. I know that he is an expert in military matters and matters of international diplomacy, and that he has been to Ukraine in the past 12 months. I will pass his suggestion on to my colleagues.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I do not think that Ministers appreciate the gravity or urgency of the situation. We have a Prime Minister who committed to no spending cuts a few minutes ago, a Government still committed to tens of billions of pounds of unfunded tax cuts and

the Bank of England withdrawing its special support on Friday. What are the Government doing to avoid a market crash this Friday?

Chris Philp: The reason that, on the second day of the new Government's term in office, we brought forward the energy price guarantee was to protect consumers and in effect lower inflation by 5% compared with where it would otherwise be. We legislated at pace yesterday to alleviate the burden of the national insurance increase, which Opposition Members enthusiastically voted for. In terms of markets, as I said, we are in regular contact with the Bank of England and have complete confidence in its ability to manage systemic financial stability.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): The funds made available by the Bank of England to purchase gilts were described by the shadow Chancellor as taxpayers' money. I find that confusing. My understanding—I am not an economist—is that those funds are not taxpayers' money and that, in fact, the Bank of England may even make a profit from the actions that it takes on the markets. Different people will have different views about whether the Bank of England's intervention is appropriate action, but does the Chief Secretary agree that it is completely wrong for the shadow Chancellor to describe those funds as taxpayers' money?

Chris Philp: It is not taxpayers' money in the sense that the phrase suggests. There is a fiscal indemnity so that any profit or loss will end up flowing back to the Exchequer, but, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), whether that is crystallised depends on market prices. I point out that the volume of gilts so far purchased is considerably less than the limits that were set out.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Covid supply-side disruption and the war in Ukraine have obviously added to inflation, as has monetary policy in the United States and our own high levels of borrowing, added to the rate of interest here in the UK. That has put real pressure on households across the United Kingdom. Despite the fact that the Government have responded by putting more money in people's pockets through tax cuts and help with electricity bills, there is real public concern about the stability of our economy. Does the Chief Secretary accept that that is partly due to poor political decisions such as reducing the top rate of taxation, bad communication of his own strategy, open warfare on his own Benches and some of the careless remarks that we saw yesterday from the Governor of the Bank of England?

Chris Philp: I think the Prime Minister said a couple of weeks ago that, with hindsight, some of the pitch rolling or preparation could have been better handled, but I think that the package of measures is in the interests of the country. In addressing the cost of living pressures that the right hon. Gentleman referred to, we are protecting our fellow citizens, our constituents, from what could have been £5,000, £6,000 or even £7,000 annual energy bills. That is important. We are alleviating the burden of taxation at what is a difficult time. We are making sure that the households most in need of assistance get additional assistance, amounting to £1,200 a year for the one third of households on

[Chris Philp]

lower incomes. All those are measures designed to protect our constituents and I am sure that he will join me in welcoming them.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Of course, I welcome the energy intervention and help for the lower paid. However, does my right hon. Friend agree that, just as it is important to grow the economy, it is important to grow society and that, if we believe in trickle-down theory, we should also have trickle-up economics? By that, I mean that we need to invest in education and skills. Will he confirm that education spending will increase in real terms and incorporate rises in wages—whatever they may finally be—for the teachers, support staff and many other people working in education?

Chris Philp: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. As Chairman of the Education Committee, he is a tireless campaigner for education and skills. I agree that the purpose of economic growth is to grow all parts of the economy, to help people across the entire income spectrum—rich and poor alike—and to ensure that the burden of taxation on those people is as light as it can be. That is why we have increased the minimum wage by such a large amount—from £5.93 an hour when Labour left office to £9.50 an hour today—and why we have lifted so many people on lower incomes completely out of taxation through increasing the income tax and national insurance thresholds to £12,570. All that disproportionately helps people on lower incomes.

We are seized of the importance of ensuring that education is properly funded. It is an investment in our country's future and our children's future, and I assure my right hon. Friend that that is very much at the front of our minds as we think about the fiscal plan.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Like many others, I have listened with disbelief to much of what the Chief Secretary has said. While we have been in the Chamber, the Bank of England has again linked the economic turmoil to the Government's disastrous mini-Budget. Will he explain to us all and to the public why he is right and the Bank of England is wrong?

Chris Philp: As I have explained before, we are in a global cycle of interest rate increases and there has been global dollar strength. We have taken action in the energy intervention and in the growth plan to protect our constituents, get our economy growing and build on our record as the fastest growing G7 economy last year, this year and over the three-year period as a whole.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The whole world is facing a global inflation crisis, and the US, Germany and other countries are facing a worse situation. That is why I believe that the best way to deal with the situation is to get more people into better-quality jobs. I have already hosted two job fairs in Rother Valley and will have another one Friday week at Wales High School. I am pleased to see that 680 more people are in work this year than last year, and 40 more people are in work than were last month. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the most important thing is to get people into good-quality paying jobs and that the Government always stand by working people?

Chris Philp: Absolutely. I completely agree with my hon. Friend, whose work on jobs fairs is extremely commendable. The way out of poverty and to create prosperity is to get people into good jobs and see rising wages. That is how we will combat poverty. That is why it is so welcome that unemployment is at a 48-year low.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): With the greatest respect, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury does not seem to be inhabiting the same planet as the rest of us. It is clear to anyone that the Government's half-baked mini-Budget, sidelining of the Office for Budget Responsibility and lack of authority have caused chaos in the markets, and households are already paying the price. Should the Government not just accept that they could do something in the national interest to change that by reversing their disastrous mini-Budget that has sent us into chaos and calling a general election now so that the country can decide how they want to get out of this crisis?

Chris Philp: The hon. Member calls for a reversal of the growth plan, yet she voted in favour of its largest measure just last night. She talks about sidelining the OBR, yet it will be fully scoring the medium-term fiscal plan on 31 October. The right response is to protect our constituents from rising energy prices, and we did that on our second or third day in office. The right response is to get our economy growing, and that is what the growth plan will do.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Today, the Chief Secretary has made much mention of spending and pay restraint. During the cost of living crisis, the Government have repeatedly told workers that they must accept pay restraint to keep inflation in check while plotting to make further swingeing cuts to public services. Why do the pay restraint and cuts not apply to bankers, too? Is this not the same old Tory ideology of austerity for the oppressed many and luxury for the privileged few?

Chris Philp: If I may respectfully say so, that is nonsense. The tax reductions, including those that the hon. Gentleman voted for last night, apply to everybody in work earning more than £12,570 a year. The national insurance cut and the cut to the basic rate of income tax are tax cuts for everybody, rich and poor alike. The increases in the threshold disproportionately benefit people on lower incomes, and the people on the very lowest incomes now do not pay any national insurance or tax at all. Again, the significant increases that we have seen in the national minimum wage from £5.93 an hour under Labour to £9.50 an hour now most benefit people on low incomes. The Government stand on the side of people on lower wages but doing the right thing by working.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his attempts to reassure the UK economy, even though they are simply not working. Does the Minister agree with the former chief adviser to the Bank of England, who said that because of this Budget we can "say goodbye to growth"?

Chris Philp: Respectfully, no, I do not agree.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has commented on reports that the Government plan to increase benefits only in line with earnings instead of CPI September inflation, stating that this would amount to the biggest

“permanent deliberate real-terms cut to the basic rate of benefits” ever made in a single year. Can the Chief Secretary assure my frightened constituents today that, first, these reports are not true and, secondly, that he will uprate benefits in line with CPI inflation in September?

Chris Philp: I have already explained, as I think I said yesterday, that there is a statutory process that happens every single year when these decisions get taken. No decision has been taken on the question yet; indeed, the September CPI figure, which is relevant, has not even been published yet. When the decisions are taken, Ministers will of course have regard to the cost of living pressures and high inflation that we and many other countries are experiencing, although of course the energy intervention will make that inflation lower than it would otherwise be. We also, of course, must pay due regard to hard-working taxpayers who ultimately have to pay the benefit bills, and we will take all of that into account when we make the decisions.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Following the Government’s pretty disastrous mini-Budget, the hedge fund manager and Tory donor Crispin Odey is said to have made millions from shorting the pound. It has also been suggested that the Chancellor met Crispin Odey for lunch in the weeks running up to the mini-Budget. Is that true and, if so, what did they discuss?

Chris Philp: I am afraid that I have no idea who the Chancellor met. I am sure that if the hon. Gentleman writes to the Chancellor he will set that out, but I do not know.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I would like to ask the Chief Secretary about unemployment. How can he possibly crow about unemployment when there are fewer people in work than before the pandemic and when rates of inactivity because of long-term sickness are through the roof?

Chris Philp: I think having the lowest unemployment in my lifetime and having lower unemployment than comparable countries such as France and Italy is something that we can be proud of as a country. Of course, we are committed to working with people who have long-term sickness, working through the NHS and with work coaches at the Department for Work and Pensions to find ways to enable them to return to the workforce. Of course we are going to work with them, but ultimately having the lowest unemployment rate in my lifetime is something we should be proud of.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Listening to the Minister, I wonder what colour the sky is in his world. He talks about the energy price guarantee protecting families from energy bills of up to £6,000 a year, but as a direct result of the Government’s mini-Budget families in my North Durham constituency now face a mortgage increase of £6,000 a year not just this year but in future years as well. He can blame international markets when

it comes to energy, but is he actually going to admit that the mini-Budget has led to those families paying £6,000 a year extra, if not more in some cases, and what is his advice to them?

Chris Philp: I have explained already that there is a global upswing in interest rates—

Mr Jones: No!

Chris Philp: The right hon. Gentleman can say no and not want to hear it, but I will just tell him again. In the United States, in the last nine months, there has been a 3% increase in the federal reserve base rate. In that same period, the Bank of England base rate increase has been only 2%. It has gone up by one and half times more in the United States compared with the United Kingdom. We do understand that there are cost of living pressures and that is why we have stepped in with the energy price guarantee to protect families in his constituency and mine from the £5,000 or £6,000 bills that they would otherwise have faced. That is why we are alleviating the tax burden on their shoulders and why we will ensure that the economy grows.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): A few weeks ago, the Welsh Government warned that they face a shortfall of some £4 billion to their three-year funding settlement as a result of rising inflation. Will the Minister confirm that the Treasury will consider, in the statement at the end of the month, providing additional funding support to help mitigate the impact of inflation on the budget for public services in Wales?

Chris Philp: Public expenditure both in Wales and across the United Kingdom stands at record levels. It has never been higher. In relation to extra funding, we are going to have iron discipline when it comes to public spending so the spending plan set out at the comprehensive spending review 2021, covering this current financial year and the next two, contains the limits we are going to stick to with discipline because it is important that we make the numbers add up.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): A few minutes ago, in answer to the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), the Chief Secretary said that the costs to the Treasury of the Bank of England’s intervention was not known because it depends on pricing, which I would imagine is fairly blindingly obvious even to him. Does that mean that the Treasury has made no assessment of that cost? If they have, what is it?

Chris Philp: It depends on market prices, as I say. Lacking any clairvoyance about where prices may move in the future, it is not possible to make an assessment not knowing where prices will be in a fast-moving market. I repeat that the volume of gilt purchases by the Bank of England have so far been a great deal below the ceiling that was set out.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The Resolution Foundation’s chief exec, Torsten Bell, told the Treasury Committee this morning, “This is what happens when you are not paying attention.” He said that the Government’s proposals would not have been a good idea at any time but, “You definitely shouldn’t be doing it in the current climate.” Our constituents need the

[Holly Lynch]

Government to pay attention. Where is the plan to stabilise the economy now and stem the ongoing damage the mini-Budget continues to cause?

Chris Philp: The growth plan protected the hon. Lady's constituents and mine from what could have been £6,000 or £7,000 energy bills this winter. Frankly, I think they will welcome that. The growth plan will lay the foundations to continue the G7-leading growth we experienced last year and this.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I would like to dare the Minister to come to Newcastle and explain to my constituents, who are worried about their mortgage payments, their pensions, their benefits payments, their public services, their businesses and the cost of their supermarket shop, that this Government are fiscally responsible. They would laugh in his face, which is what the markets are doing. Why cannot he accept that the only way to address this crisis, made in Downing Street, is to withdraw the fiscal mini-Budget and put in place something credible, costed and competent?

Chris Philp: Once again, the hon. Lady calls for the withdrawal of the growth plan, yet she voted last night for the biggest measure contained in it. I would be quite happy to explain to anyone, whether in Newcastle, in her constituency, or in Croydon, south London, in mine, that we are protecting people from energy price rises, that we have plans to keep our record growth levels going, that we are cutting taxes on working people and that we have a plan to get the economy going. I would be happy to go anywhere in the country and explain that.

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Why does the Chief Secretary think that the Nobel prize winner Paul Krugman said that the mini-Budget was "stupid and cruel"? I know that that is how my constituents in Erdington, Kingstanding and Castle Vale think.

Chris Philp: I imagine that constituents in the hon. Lady's constituency, as much as in mine, are pleased that they will not face energy bills of £6,000 or £7,000 this winter, which the growth plan delivered on. I do not agree with the analysis she read out from Mr Krugman, or Dr Krugman—[*Interruption.*] Professor Krugman; I am happy to stand corrected. This growth plan will ensure that we continue with our G7-leading levels of growth.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The £60 billion of borrowing for the energy guarantee is to be paid back by bill payers, not the oil and gas producers who are making record profits on the back of the public's misery. That is not fair. Will the Minister consider raising not a temporary windfall tax but the basic tax rate for oil and gas producers, which in the UK is the lowest in the entire world? If he raised it even to the global average, he would raise an additional £13.4 billion every single year.

Chris Philp: I will make a couple of points. Extraction companies already pay about double the rate of corporation tax that other companies pay. In addition, we have imposed the energy profits levy, through which the rate of taxation on their profits increases to 65%. That is a

pretty significant rate of tax, even by Labour party standards, and it will raise about £23 billion over the relevant three-year period. The hon. Member will also have seen the announcement from my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary yesterday on ensuring that renewable companies provide energy to our constituents at reasonable prices. The suggestion that no contribution is being made by the energy sector in the circumstances is, frankly, not accurate.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Minister quoted IMF analysis but curiously not the part where it warns that rising prices will be worse in the UK, noting that the Government's tax cuts will "complicate the fight" against soaring prices, and where it expects higher prices to last longer in the UK than elsewhere. What is his analysis in relation to food prices and tackling food poverty in the next two years?

Chris Philp: The energy intervention will make sure that inflation in this country is about 5% lower than it otherwise would be. That is not a Government forecast, but the consensus of independent forecasters. Also, the inflation rate in the United Kingdom is lower than in some other countries, including Germany and Holland.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): No matter what the Minister has said today, the sums do not add up—that is a fact. The Government have lost control of the situation and shown a level of incompetence that has rarely been seen in British politics. As a result, we have seen increased anxiety and even terror about the cost of living and energy bills, as well as mortgages. On pensions, can the Minister give an absolute guarantee and assurance that people do not need to worry about the future of their pensions?

Chris Philp: If the hon. Member is asking about the state pension, the Prime Minister has been clear that we stand by the triple lock. If he is asking about the private pension system, yes, I have complete confidence in the Bank of England's responsibilities around financial stability. On his first comment, I think that having the lowest unemployment rate for 48 years and the highest economic growth in the G7 is something we should all be happy about.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): As well as mortgage costs, the cost of lending to businesses is going up. UK Finance said that small businesses have £240 billion in outstanding debt. What assessment have the Chancellor and his Department made of the impact that the rise in borrowing costs will have on businesses' ability to invest, and what will the Minister do about it?

Chris Philp: We are very mindful of the impact that rising global interest rates have on businesses. That is one reason why we will keep corporation tax at 19% rather than increase it to 25%. What I do not know is whether the Labour party support that.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I would like to relay to the Chief Secretary a message that I just received from one of my constituents who was watching Prime Minister's questions. My constituent said:

“The Prime Minister says she is unashamedly pro-growth and pro-business, but our local dry cleaner was in tears this morning at the news that their energy bill has gone up more than four-fold. They say they get it but they really don’t.”

What does the Minister have to say to my constituent and thousands more of my constituents who are simply terrified about how they will sustain their businesses or keep a roof over their heads in the context of the self-inflicted chaos and harm to our economy that his Government are causing?

Chris Philp: On the energy bills for the dry cleaner in the hon. Member’s constituency, she must be aware that the whole world has been experiencing the energy price crisis as a result of Putin’s illegal invasion. That is driving energy prices higher. The dry cleaner should be the recipient of the business energy guarantee scheme in relation to their bill. It should not see bills rising as high as she suggested, so if she writes to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy or to me about that case, I will be very happy to look into it to make sure that the business—like businesses in all our constituencies—is being properly protected.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg), will the Minister give us a few details of the Government’s back-up plan to protect people’s pensions, should the run on gilts continue when current Bank of England support ends, despite dire warnings from the pensions industry?

Chris Philp: As I said, the Chancellor of the Exchequer is in regular contact with the Governor of the Bank of England and his officials. The Bank of England has responsibility for financial system stability and I have complete confidence in its ability to manage that.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The energy price guarantee still means increases in costs for consumers. We know that disabled people already face higher costs, and the only support that thousands of unpaid carers receive from the Government is carer’s allowance. In many cases, that means that they have been excluded from cost of living support. In addition, carer’s allowance is effectively means-tested due to the earnings cap, meaning that carers cannot seek work, as the Chief Secretary seems very keen for them to. Will he commit to ensuring that we review the carer’s allowance situation and, if not, that we provide further support to carers, who do such valuable work?

Chris Philp: The hon. Lady is right that despite the energy price guarantee—the decisive intervention that has protected our constituents from £5,000 or £6,000 bills—bills this year are higher still than they were last year. That is why we have made the £37 billion intervention, which, for people on lower incomes, amounts to £1,200 a year. There is more money on top of that for people with disabilities for the reason that she mentions. As for reviewing various components of disability and caring benefits, those will get reviewed in the normal way along with the other benefits. The Minister with responsibility for welfare and the Chancellor of the Exchequer will lay all that out in the coming weeks.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I, too, am really concerned about the oversight of our pensions industry. When was the last stress test to see whether these funds

had sufficient liquidity to cope with market turbulence, and can the Minister explain in simple terms the regulation of pension funds right now? Our country needs pension stability, not ongoing, home-grown financial crises.

Chris Philp: We have excellent regulators overseeing our financial system and pensions in particular, whether we are talking about the Bank of England, the Prudential Regulation Authority, the Financial Conduct Authority or the Pensions Regulator. They are all rightly independent, but all of us in Government and Parliament can have every confidence that they are making sure that our system is operating safely and securely.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Minister said that the Government were being fiscally responsible. I am no expert, but fiscal responsibility does not usually result in the market and the wider UK economy being set ablaze in what can only be described as a bin fire. With the pound in freefall, pension funds on the brink, unfunded tax cuts for the rich, mortgage payments up by hundreds of pounds and the UK’s financial institutions—barring the Institute of Economic Affairs, obviously—utterly undermined, the Government are waiting another six weeks to show their working. That is not fiscally responsible; it is chaos theory-IEA style. Will the poorest pay for this or will benefits be uprated in line with inflation—yes or no?

Chris Philp: The hon. Member was obviously not listening to my previous answers in which I said that the decision has not been taken and the CPI figure, which is a critical input into the decision, has not even been published yet. I also explained how interest rates around the world are rising—they have risen more in the US than they have here—and how the dollar has been strong against a number of currencies. Its strengthening against the euro has been only about 3% higher so far this year than it has against sterling, so I do not accept the hon. Member’s characterisation at all. As for fiscal responsibility, we have the second lowest debt-to-GDP ratio in the G7. The Chancellor said that we will get the debt-to-GDP ratio falling over the medium term. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) has less than three weeks to wait, if he can contain himself, before the medium-term fiscal plan is set out in full.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): A local teacher and her partner wrote to me last week. Once their fixed-rate mortgage comes to an end, their mortgage will rise by £9,000 a year; that is an extra £750 a month. They are terrified and cannot sleep because they do not have that sort of money spare. I have listened to the Minister’s answers, but given that the IMF’s Tobias Adrian said yesterday that the announcements on 23 September triggered rising interest rates, will the Minister finally accept that the Conservative Government’s mini-Budget has caused this chaos for our constituents?

Chris Philp: We have every sympathy with people who are struggling. That is why we have the energy price guarantee. It is why we have had the £37 billion intervention. It is why we are cutting taxes, particularly for people on lower incomes. It is why the minimum wage increased by so much a few months ago. It is why we have increased the national insurance threshold to help people.

[Chris Philp]

On interest rates, I have explained more than once this afternoon that there is a global cycle that has been going on for about nine months. So far in this calendar year, interest rates in the United States, a comparable economy, have increased one and a half times as much as in the UK: by 300 basis points, compared with 200 basis points. It is very important that the House keeps that context in mind.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, when I asked the Chancellor, he could not tell me how private pension schemes will be protected since the Bank of England has confirmed that it is ending its refinancing scheme. The Pensions Regulator has a responsibility to ensure that pension schemes are viable. However, in the current economic situation, without making demands on employers and workers, those pension schemes will collapse. How is the Chief Secretary going to respond?

Chris Philp: I have to say that the speculation in which the hon. Lady is engaging is slightly reckless, if that is perhaps not too strong a word. We have extremely capable regulators: the Bank of England, the Prudential Regulation Authority, the Pensions Regulator and others. Their responsibility is to make sure that our financial system, including pensions, is safe and secure for our constituents. The Government have complete confidence in our regulators, and I think the House should as well.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): There has been growth since the mini-Budget: a growth in people stopping me on the street in Putney, Roehampton and Southfields to say how worried they are about their bills and rising mortgage costs. I met estate agents in Putney this week; they say that the stamp duty change will make absolutely no difference to the housing crisis in Putney. What does the Chief Secretary say to families who are looking at a £500 increase in the cost of their mortgage as a result of this failed strategy, or at having that cost passed on to them if they are renting?

Chris Philp: When the hon. Lady was stopped in the street, I presume that she explained the points about global interest rates increasing. When her constituents asked about energy prices, I presume that she explained to them that this Government took decisive action on our third day in office to protect our constituents from bills that could have gone up to £5,000 or £6,000 a year. I presume that she also explained that the Labour party's plan was good only for six months, but the plan that we have put in place lasts for two years.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): We have seen the crash of the pound. We have seen mortgage prices going through the roof. We are seeing the cost of living across the country getting out of control. There has been economic chaos since this new Tory Government took over from the last Tory Government. May I ask the Chief Secretary: on a scale of one to 10, how well does he think it is going?

Chris Philp: I do not call the lowest unemployment for 48 years, and the top growth rate in the G7, economic chaos.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Small businesses across my constituency are watching the news with utter dread. They have just about survived the pandemic, the Brexit uncertainty and the collapse of the tourist trade in London, which really affects my constituency—we normally have more than 3 million people going through Waterloo station alone. The spiralling costs, combined with the recession, will wipe out any existing benefits or support from the Government. These businesses simply do not have six months. The Chief Secretary has gone on and on about growth, but does he agree that growth will happen only if these businesses survive the winter?

Chris Philp: That is why we have offered the energy price guarantee to businesses as well as to consumers, and why we are keeping corporation tax low at 19% rather than putting it up. Of course, that helps businesses of all sizes: any business making £50,000 a year or more in profit will benefit from the freeze in corporation tax. We do not yet know, as far as I am aware, whether the Labour party supports that position. The shadow Chancellor is sitting impassively, not giving any indication whether she supports lower taxes; I think the House would love to hear at some point what her views are.

Those are the things that we are doing to help businesses. Last night, we voted—the Labour party voted for it as well—to reduce the national insurance burden on businesses. That is the plan that we have to help businesses, and I am very proud to stand behind it.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am very pleased to hear that the Chief Secretary has confidence in the Bank of England. The media are now reporting, for the seventh time, that the Bank of England has clearly linked the mini-Budget or UK-specific factors to the turmoil in the bond market. That includes, in the past hour, the Governor speaking to camera and to a room full of the world's top banking chief executive officers in the US. Can the Chief Secretary explain to me why the Governor of the Bank of England is wrong and why he himself is right?

Chris Philp: Obviously I am not in Washington and have not heard those comments. I am not going to speculate about what the Bank of England Governor may have said. We are working closely with the Bank of England Governor and other regulatory authorities to make sure that we navigate these globally volatile markets successfully, but in the long term what matters is continuing to grow our economy. That is what the Government's plan will do.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The energy price guarantee is doing some heavy lifting today, so let us look at it in more detail. Energy Action Scotland has produced analysis in the past couple of days that shows that the average bill in Scotland will be not £2,500, but £3,300, and that for someone who lives in a rural area it will be in excess of £4,200. What message does the Chief Secretary have for people living in energy-rich Scotland, where we produce six times more gas than we use and almost all our electricity comes from renewables?

Chris Philp: Well, if the nationalist Administration in Scotland were willing to support more natural gas and oil extraction or indeed nuclear power generation, that

would help the energy situation. Renewable energy use in the United Kingdom has increased from, I think, 7% to 42% over the past 12 years, which is very welcome. The energy price guarantee has protected families and businesses across the United Kingdom from bills that could have been £6,000 or £7,000 higher, which is a huge amount. The hon. Gentleman has not mentioned the £37 billion intervention, which particularly helps people on lower incomes, giving them an extra £1,200 a year to support them with bills. The fact that we are in such an economically successful Union means that we can offer things like the energy price guarantee and the £37 billion energy intervention.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It does not get more serious than this Tory-led crisis made in Downing Street. Only yesterday, a mortgage adviser in my constituency contacted me about offers that he is redoing for customers with increases of £300 to £500 a month. People are desperate for stability, but rates are changing by the day.

Commentators have said that sidelining the OBR in the recent mini-Budget and not having its assessment created more uncertainty. Does the Chief Secretary agree that sidelining the OBR was not helpful and was a mistake? Can we have a guarantee that it will not be sidelined on 31 October or in any future fiscal event?

Chris Philp: When the new Government came into office there was a need to act urgently on the energy price guarantee, and to alleviate the extra national insurance burden, which the hon. Gentleman's constituents and mine are paying right now, but—thanks to yesterday's vote—will not be paying from 6 November. That is why it was done quickly: to address the situation in front of us.

The OBR will be fully scoring the medium-term fiscal plan on 31 October. There is a statutory requirement under the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011 for the OBR to produce forecasts twice in every financial year. That commitment will continue.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Chief Secretary will be aware of the stress on mortgage holders as they have watched deals being withdrawn with the prospect of steep rises ahead. What assurances can he give them that the Government will act to undo the damage done and to ensure that mortgages remain attainable and affordable for homeowners?

Chris Philp: When I checked, there were about 2,300 mortgages available. Obviously the global cycle of increasing interest rates is affecting people in the United Kingdom, as it is affecting people around the world, including in the United States of America, as I set out earlier. We are trying to make sure that other cost of living pressures are mitigated as far as possible through things like the energy price guarantee, reductions in the burden of taxation and the plan to continue economic growth.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): A constituent has written to me to say that she and her partner are being priced out of the private rented sector. They recently secured a mortgage for a shared ownership flat, but the mortgage offer has now been withdrawn. She is desperately worried for herself, for her partner and for

their young son, who attends a local school. She says that the Government's mini-Budget has destroyed their dream. Will the Chief Secretary apologise to my constituent? Can he tell her what she should do and how the Government will end this mayhem that they have caused?

Chris Philp: The Government are keen to help everyone, including the hon. Lady's constituent, to get on to the housing ladder: that is something we strongly support. I have already explained about the global interest rate increase cycle that countries around the world are experiencing, but we are doing everything we can to help, and I believe that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will be laying out some plans relating to house building in the coming weeks. We have already reduced stamp duty for first-time buyers—stamp duty is a particularly challenging element of buying a first home, because it cannot be funded by a mortgage—and the Government will continue to do everything they can to support people who are trying to get on to the housing ladder.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): This is the question that my constituents want me to ask the Government: why is the Chancellor experimenting with their lives, putting their homes and pensions at risk, to test out his fancy economics? The Chancellor and the Prime Minister have no mandate to take the gamble that they are taking, so will the Chief Secretary urge his colleagues to ditch their disastrous Budget and put their new plans to the people in a general election?

Chris Philp: If the hon. Gentleman thinks it was all so disastrous, perhaps he could explain why he voted for it last night. The real gamble is having taxes that are too high. The real gamble is not having a plan for growth. This Government have a plan for growth; the Labour party has no plan.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister outline the specific help that is available to the working poor? They face not simply energy increases but mortgage increases, and increases in the cost of diesel and petrol just to get to work to actually earn some money, and the price of groceries is 15% higher. While those people's top-line income does not qualify them for universal credit, the present circumstances must surely call for assistance. Will the Minister tell me and the House where that help will come from?

Chris Philp: We certainly do stand with the working poor. That is why we have increased the thresholds to ensure that people on lower incomes pay very little income tax and national insurance. It is why we froze petrol duty, and, indeed, cut it by 5p earlier this year. It is why we have increased the national minimum wage by such a large amount, from just £5.93 an hour under the last Labour Government to £9.50 an hour today. So we do stand on the side of the working poor, and I will certainly continue to work with the hon. Gentleman to ensure that his constituents are looked after and protected in the years ahead.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Given that the UK Government, in the run-up to their fiscal statement, chose to ignore warnings from anti-poverty campaigners about the devastating impact that a lack of

[Deidre Brock]

targeted support for lower-income households would have on those households, will the Chancellor now be making some sort of assessment of the impact that that will have on levels of poverty in the UK?

Chris Philp: I dispute the claim that there was no targeting. I have already pointed out that the minimum wage has risen hugely under this Conservative Government, from £5.93 an hour to £9.50 an hour. When we made the first energy intervention this year with the £37 billion package, that was targeted: it was targeted, rightly, at people on lower incomes, so that those on the lower one-third of incomes received £1,200 per annum, and people with disabilities, and some pensioners, received even more than that.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Hard-working families are paying the price for this Government's reckless kamikaze Budget. Hundreds of families in my constituency depend on universal credit while being in full-time work. According to a recent Survacion poll, 38% of them fear being made homeless next year while 34% fear having to resort to food banks next year. Given that the Government have just committed themselves to no spending cuts, will the Minister also make a commitment to ensuring that benefits are uprated to keep up with inflation, so that those most in need in my constituency and throughout the country will not be forced from their homes and left to go hungry?

Chris Philp: As I have said, no decisions have yet been taken; that will happen in the normal way in the coming weeks. I have already explained how the minimum wage has gone up and how we have alleviated the burden of taxation on people on lower incomes, but ultimately what will help the hon. Gentleman's constituents is ensuring that we have a growing economy so that everyone's wages can go up, which is why we have a growth plan. I think the hon. Gentleman and his constituents can take comfort from, and be happy about, the fact that we have the lowest unemployment for 48 years and the highest growth in the G7. However, we would like to go further to help his constituents, and that is why we have a growth plan.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): My son currently pays £612 a month for his mortgage. Next year, when his fixed rate comes to an end, he will be paying at least £1,300 a month. My daughter, a hard-working junior doctor, cannot even look at buying a property on her salary of £23,000 a year. The stamp duty cut is no help to her.

What this Government are doing is not hypothetical; it is real, and it is affecting people like my son and daughter. The U-turns, tax cuts for the richest and a failed Budget are all signs of a Government who are out of ideas. Will the Chief Secretary tell me why any person in the UK should listen to a single thing they say?

Chris Philp: As I have already explained repeatedly, there is a global increase in interest rates, and as I have also pointed out, the increase in base rates in the United States this calendar year has been 1.5 times higher than the base rate increase in the United Kingdom. We know

that people are facing pressures, for the reason that the hon. Lady set out, and also because of energy prices. That is why we have helped with the energy price guarantee. It is why we have put £37 billion towards helping people. It is why we are alleviating the tax burden on people on lower incomes, and it is why we have a growth plan. That is what we are doing to deal with these global pressures, and our plan is designed to help people exactly like the hon. Lady's children.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And the last word comes from Alan Brown.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thought you were going to say "Last but not least", Madam Deputy Speaker, but thank you.

According to figures published in connection with the mini-Budget, not implementing the corporation tax increase is predicted to cost the Treasury more than £2 billion in this financial year alone, and in subsequent years £12 billion, £17 billion, £18 billion and £19 billion: £68 billion in total. We can split hairs about whether or not that is a tax cut, but is not the reality that the Treasury's own figures show that cosyng up to business has created a £68 billion black hole?

Chris Philp: I thought you were going to say that you had saved the best till last, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is important to have internationally competitive rates of corporation tax. Keeping it at 19% is not just for big businesses; it is for smaller businesses too, because any business with profits of over £50,000 will benefit. Many of these businesses have a choice about where to locate. They do not have to locate in the United Kingdom, but could go to America, to Geneva, Singapore or South Korea. Many of them are internationally mobile. We want them to choose to locate in the United Kingdom and to invest in the United Kingdom—including, of course, Scotland—and that is why we are maintaining a competitive rate of corporation tax. We still do not know what those in the Labour party think about this, because they will not tell us.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During Scottish Questions today the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), stated:

"I have raised before at the Dispatch Box the fact that the UK Government chose to sideline the Acorn carbon capture and storage project in the north-east of Scotland. The Scottish Government have refused to provide financing either."

However, on 14 January this year, despite this being a matter for the UK Government, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary Michael Matheson stated:

"That is why I am announcing today that we stand ready with up to £80 million of funding to help the Scottish Cluster continue and accelerate the deployment of carbon capture technology."

May I seek your esteemed guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how we can ensure that the record reflects the reality?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he intended to make that point of order. He will know, as the House knows, that it is not for the Chair to make any comment on the content of what hon. Members say

here in the Chamber. I am guessing that the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that what was said today directly contradicted something that was said some weeks ago. Is that the basic point?

Stephen Flynn *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I can only say to the hon. Gentleman that every Member who speaks in this House is responsible for the veracity of what they say, and I am sure that if the record requires to be corrected, the people concerned will go ahead and correct it.

I should have checked this with the hon. Gentleman: did he give notice to the Members whom he has quoted?

Stephen Flynn *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to him for doing that. I know that he normally does things properly.

BILL PRESENTED

ENERGY PRICES BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Jacob Rees-Mogg, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Thérèse Coffey, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Simon Clarke, Alok Sharma, Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris, Secretary Alister Jack and Mr Secretary Buckland, presented a Bill To make provision for controlling energy prices; to encourage the efficient use and supply of energy; and for other purposes connected to the energy crisis.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 159) with explanatory notes (Bill 159-EN).

Point of Order

1.59 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): On a point of order, and for the convenience of the House, it may be helpful if I give some advance notice of my business statement tomorrow. In tomorrow's business statement, I will announce that the business for Monday 17 October will be all stages of the Energy Prices Bill that has just been introduced. A motion appears on today's Order Paper that, if agreed, will mean that notices of amendments, new clauses and new schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted before the Bill has been read a Second time. I wanted to be able to advertise that fact, and I hope it is helpful to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order. It is indeed helpful to the House to know the intention of the Government on when this important Bill is going to come forward. I ought to add to that point of order and to the motion on today's Order Paper relating to the management of the Bill that, for amendments at Committee stage, I will be lenient about the timetable for putting down such amendments. Just as the Leader of the House is trying to help the House, I will also try to help the House to engage in a full and proper debate on the Bill.

Marine Activities (Licensing)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23, and Order, 22 September)

2.1 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to transfer responsibility for marine licensing from the Marine Management Organisation to local authorities; and for connected purposes.

I am pleased to be able to stand up for coastal communities today, particularly my own community of Clacton, a place I first came to in 1957 and have represented locally and nationally since 2007. I have seen at first hand what works locally and what, sadly, does not work. Our great coastline has evolved over millennia, and I hope to keep that track record going.

The Bill seeks to put in place a pilot to devolve many of the Marine Management Organisation's functions to local authorities, and I will put forward my reasoning now. The MMO is a group that I have increasingly come to see as not fit for purpose in its current form. As a Member for a coastal area, and a boating man for over half a century, I like to think that I speak with some authority on this subject. Few people know about the vital role of the MMO. It manages some 90,000 square miles of hugely diverse seas and coastal areas, which is roughly the same size as the United Kingdom's land mass. To give some context, 95% of our imports and exports come by sea, around 20 million tonnes of aggregates are taken from our seas for construction projects each year and the UK is working towards a third of our electricity being produced from offshore wind by 2030. Our seas are also home to 175 marine protected areas. At the same time, our seas and coasts are the backbone of our fishing and seafood industries, with a combined gross value added to the economy of almost £2 billion per year. This little-known group has tremendous control over all those activities.

The issues here are a lack of expertise in the subject, a deficiency in direction and oversight and, above all, thanks to our vast and varied coastline, a lack of local insight. In terms of real expertise, I have heard tales of faceless officials taking months and months to determine licences due to a lack of practical understanding of what they are looking at. Indeed, I was told that two officials from the MMO came to Walton-on-the-Naze in my constituency to take stock of a marine development in our backwaters. They seemed to be surprised about the tidal range and direction there.

Also, we recently had a serious issue with sea defences on the Naze, an area of land that projects out into the North sea. The sea wall that kept a sewage farm secure was deteriorating at a rapid rate. The local Naze Protection Society, with the assistance of landowners and local councillors, swung into action. After effecting temporary repairs, they made the plans, raised the money and ensured that the contractors were ready to go. All was in place, except for a licence from the MMO to carry out the necessary works. With every tide, and especially

every storm, making the job more difficult, urgent, and expensive, it was paramount that this licence was granted so that the works could commence, yet after 13 weeks, the MMO had failed to issue it. At this point I was approached and, after banging a few heads together, I managed to get the licence issued within an hour or so. Work began the very next day. It really should not depend on Members of this place calling Ministers and Secretaries of State to get these results. I pay tribute to the wonderful people involved in those vital works for raising tens of thousands of pounds and for keeping their patience with the MMO at that time.

Looking at the senior structure of the organisation, it is quite clear why we have an issue. The MMO's senior executive and non-executive leadership is comprised of laudable expertise from Government Departments—such as the DWP in this case—and externally from the private sector world of communication. However, a central body, no matter how well led, cannot be expected to understand the minutiae of local issues as well as a local council can. The experience in Clacton with the MMO is meeting officers who were unaware of the tidal area we have on our sunshine coast. It is my strong view that the central leadership of our great public sector is simply not delivering in this case. The MMO was created by the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, and it should have regular reviews every three years. I welcome its 10-year plan, but there is nothing in there about the role that it can and should play in the regeneration of declining coastal communities such as my own.

It seems rather odd that we allow the MMO so much centralised power. We have seen planning and licensing become core parts of local authorities' action plans. Councils are accountable and, by their very nature, have a deep understanding of local issues and their local scene. I think we need to look to a slimmer MMO with more devolution and with a non-executive directors board of experts with real-life experience holding it to account. I have held talks with my own district council in Tendring, the chief executive officer of which is the very capable Mr Ian Davidson, and it has expressed an interest in finding out how it could take on many of these functions—with, of course, centralised oversight. The council is prepared to carry out a pilot scheme and to spearhead this much-needed change. It is merely a case of local knowledge for local issues. You do not need to be a maritime expert to run the MMO, any more than you need to be a constitutional scholar to be a Member of this place. However, given the problems I have outlined, I feel it is time to say that localism has merit. We often speak about bonfires of quangos. Well, I think I have just found another log for that fire!

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Giles Watling and Stephen Metcalfe present the Bill.

Giles Watling accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 February 2023, and to be printed (Bill 160).

Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

2.9 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am delighted to speak to such an important Bill this afternoon, and I hope that hon. and right hon. Members will feel similarly about its gravity and weight. This legislation will go a long way towards recognising Northern Ireland's rich diversity in identity and language, bringing tangible benefits for Irish language speakers, Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition.

Before I turn to the Bill's provisions in more detail, I pay tribute to my predecessors as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friends the Members for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) and for North West Cambridgeshire (Shailesh Vara), who both championed this Bill. I am very pleased to continue their work.

However, I must temper my enthusiasm for the Bill with regret that it is we, as hon. and right hon. Members of this House of Commons, who are debating it rather than our counterparts in the Northern Ireland Assembly. To be frank, it was never the Government's intention to introduce the Bill in this Parliament. I explain to those who are not aware that the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly were both restored on 11 January 2020, when all five of Northern Ireland's main political parties came together on the basis of a very good document, New Decade, New Approach, which contained a balanced package of measures relating to identity and language. Draft legislation was prepared by the Office of the Legislative Counsel in Northern Ireland and published alongside New Decade, New Approach for the Assembly's consideration. It is therefore a matter of enormous regret that the package was not taken forward in a timely fashion by the previous Executive.

I do not intend to relitigate those arguments. Instead, I will use this Bill to look to the future. It will be the job of a newly constituted Northern Ireland Executive to take forward the implementation of this legislation. The provisions of this Bill are based on enshrining respect and tolerance for all of Northern Ireland's diverse identities, cultures and traditions, and indeed celebrating their contribution to Northern Ireland.

We introduced these provisions in the firm belief that Northern Ireland's rich diversity contributes immeasurably to the Union, of which we are proud and to which this Government hold a proud and fundamental commitment. We are also taking separate but linked steps when it comes to identity and language, steps that reflect this pride in Northern Ireland's cultural richness and diversity.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am very glad to learn that the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) met representatives of Conradh na Gaeilge yesterday, and I am sure that he and the Secretary of State will both be aware that the language groups An Dream Dearg and Conradh na Gaeilge were instrumental in organising a campaign that saw 20,000 people on the streets of Belfast in May to support language rights.

Given that a commitment to reflect Welsh language legislation was made in the St Andrews agreement 16 years ago, will the Secretary of State indicate whether he is minded to accept the amendments along those lines that were discussed in the House of Lords?

Chris Heaton-Harris: When I was on a treadmill in the gym this morning and last night, I read the debates in Committee and on Report in the other place, and I will answer in exactly the same language. This package is exactly what was proposed in New Decade, New Approach, and we are sticking rigidly to that. As the right hon. Lady will know from those discussions, we are very proud of all the identities and languages across the four nations. The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) was very pleased to have that meeting yesterday, and I believe it went particularly well.

Last year we announced £2 million in funding for Northern Ireland Screen's Ulster Scots and Irish language broadcasting funds to help deliver more high-quality Irish and Ulster Scots broadcasting in Northern Ireland. In May 2022, the Government officially recognised the Ulster Scots as a national minority under the Council of Europe's framework convention for the protection of national minorities.

At the same time, under the section of New Decade, New Approach entitled "Addressing Northern Ireland's unique circumstances," we made £4 million available to the Irish Language Investment Fund to support capital projects associated with the Irish language.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for moving Second Reading today. Does he understand that, when it comes to the Irish language, the focus is on the language, but Ulster Scots—I am very proud to be an Ulster Scot—is more than a language? It is the culture, the art, the poetry, the music and the words. It is more than just a language to the Ulster Scots. How will the Bill ensure that Ulster Scots has the central focus that the Irish language has, because it is bigger than just a language?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The former leader of the hon. Gentleman's party, Dame Arlene Foster, recognised in January 2020 that this is a "fair and balanced" package that has been agreed by all parties. I completely understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but I am delivering on the agreement, as the Government promised.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am listening intently to the Secretary of State, and he is right to quote the former First Minister but wrong to associate this Bill with what was agreed in January 2020. In this Second Reading debate, I hope he will listen with an open mind to the concerns that my colleagues and I will raise about the Bill's departure from what was agreed.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am always happy to listen to the hon. Gentleman's contributions in this House.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): I am glad to see the Secretary of State implementing these key parts of New Decade, New Approach. Of course, other commitments within that agreement could not be delivered even when we had an Executive. There was a key commitment for

[*Colum Eastwood*]

10,000 students at Magee University in Derry. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) agreed that we could have a medical school at Magee, which has now been delivered, but the real prize is a full-scale university for the people of Derry. Will the Secretary of State commit to getting that done?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The Government are committed to delivering on New Decade, New Approach and all its commitments. That has come forward at different stages, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, and today we are hopefully celebrating the Second Reading of this part of that delivery.

It will not have escaped right hon. and hon. Members that the Bill began life in the other place, where the debate was typically forensic. The Government will move a number of amendments to address issues raised in the other place, and I will shortly delve into their content in slightly more depth, but I hope right hon. and hon. Members will be able to support them when the time comes. I feel strongly that the amendments will improve the Bill.

I will briefly discuss the overall strategic intention of the Bill before running through its provisions in turn. Broadly speaking, the Bill delivers on the commitments detailed in annex (e) of New Decade, New Approach to “respect the freedom of all persons in Northern Ireland to choose, affirm, maintain and develop their national and cultural identity and to celebrate and express that identity in a manner which takes into account the sensitivities of those with different national or cultural identities and respects the rule of law.”

In practical terms, the Bill does this by broadly replicating the draft legislation on identity and language published alongside New Decade, New Approach. As I have already set out, the draft legislation was prepared by the Office of the Legislative Counsel in Northern Ireland at the request of the UK Government. We have done our utmost to stay as close as possible to the draft legislation. The Bill therefore provides for the delivery of a cultural framework, as set out in New Decade, New Approach, to the benefit of the whole community in Northern Ireland.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I concur with the Secretary of State that the Bill broadly reflects New Decade, New Approach. On reflecting the community, does he agree that it is important to think about both the Irish language and Ulster Scots as shared across the community, and not the sole attribute of one side or the other? They are something that we all have in common, and the different languages and traditions are part of a very rich history in Northern Ireland and across the island, which we should promote.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I believe that this can be celebrated across all communities and in all ways with the respect it truly deserves, so yes, I happily agree with the hon. Gentleman on that.

Secondly, the Bill provides for a requirement for public authorities to have due regard to the national and cultural identity principles, and the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression to oversee them, fostering mutual respect and understanding of Northern Ireland’s different national and cultural identities.

Thirdly, the Bill provides for the creation of an Irish language commissioner, providing official recognition for the Irish language, and a requirement on public authorities to have due regard to Irish language best practice standards when providing services to the public.

Fourthly, the Bill repeals the Administration of Justice (Language) Act (Ireland) 1737.

Fifthly, the Bill creates a commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition, who will be responsible for the enhancement and development of the language, arts and literature associated with the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition; and a duty on the Northern Ireland Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the use and understanding of Ulster Scots in the education system.

Finally, the Bill provides for the safeguarding of the delivery of these New Decade, New Approach commitments by giving the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—currently me—the ability to ensure that they are implemented.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that modern, 21st-century Northern Ireland is home to a large number of traditions, particularly the Polish community, who are a very valued part of Northern Ireland society? Does he agree that in everything he is outlining, which I welcome, it is important that those communities feel included, particularly when we are talking about an Irish language from which they might be excluded, as of course Polish is probably more fluently spoken in Northern Ireland than the Irish language at the moment?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my right hon. Friend for his wise counsel on this matter. I was having a conversation earlier today where I was reminded of the large number of Hong Kong Chinese who also live in Northern Ireland, contribute to the economy and are assimilated into different communities. So I completely understand the wise point he is making.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): As the earlier intervention pointed out, while we agonise over an Irish language commitment there are more Chinese speakers and Polish speakers in Northern Ireland than Irish speakers. The Secretary of State quickly glossed over the role of the two commissioners, which is one of the ways in which this Bill does not faithfully reflect what was agreed in New Decade, New Approach. The Irish language commissioner will have the power to direct other public bodies, which will have a significant impact, especially on some Unionist-controlled councils, depending on the decisions he makes. The Ulster Scots commissioner will have no such power to direct. How does the Secretary of State explain the disparity between the treatment of those who are looking for the protection of Ulster Scots, where there is no power to direct, and the treatment of those looking for the protection of the Irish language?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution. This serious subject was well debated in the other place and I am sure he will be tabling amendments to probe the Government further on these matters, which we will have a long time to discuss. I go back to what was said in the other place by the Minister, which was that we are trying to reflect honestly and

truthfully what was agreed at the time of New Decade, New Approach. As I have detailed, the two commissioners have distinct jobs—they are slightly different. I will be happy in Committee to go through with him in great detail where those levels lie and why exactly the level of detail is as it is.

Sammy Wilson: The Secretary of State is right to say that the two commissioners have distinct jobs, but the important thing is that we must make sure that both these people have the same ability to deliver what they are expected to deliver when they do their job. If we give a power of direction to one commissioner but not to the other, although they may have distinct jobs they do not both have the ability to respond and to deliver for the people they are meant to represent.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I would never like to disagree with the right hon. Gentleman, but I would like to think that when we get to debate the detail of the responsibilities of each commissioner and how those duties could be implemented, I would be able to allay some of the concerns he has just outlined. However, I will go into some more detail now, having I hope given the House a broad picture of what this Bill does. Let me go through the clauses and schedules in turn, to try to put a tiny bit more meat on the bone.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for taking so many interventions. As a former Northern Ireland Minister, I am pleased that this Bill is coming forward, even though I probably agree with some of my former colleagues that it might need a little tweaking, which we can discuss as we go through it. We have discussed Chinese, Mandarin and Polish, but one language we have not discussed is British Sign Language. It came into statute after the agreements we are talking about were done. How will BSL and the people who rely on it be affected by the Bill?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. BSL was briefly mentioned in debate in the other place and I believe a probing amendment was tabled on it. BSL is not reflected in this Bill, because BSL is, we hope, already well respected and widely used across Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales. He may like some more information or help, and perhaps he wishes to table a probing amendment on BSL. When I was a Member of the European Parliament, I tabled amendments to make sure that sign language was available in the different languages that the European Parliament used at the time, and I believe it is vital for us to be able to communicate with all parts of society. However, this package is purely about what was agreed back in January 2020 in New Decade, New Approach, and BSL was widely in use at that point in time.

Sir Mike Penning: The point I was trying to make is that since the agreement was made—it is the basis of this legislation—it has become law in these islands that BSL is an official language. It has been used extensively for many years, but it is now in statute that BSL is an official language of this country, which is why I am interested as to how the Bill will affect that.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I hear what my right hon. Friend is saying, but BSL is not reflected in this Bill at this point. I am sure he can add expertise and wise counsel as to whether this is the right place for any addition of that type.

Clause 1 amends the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to make provision for the national and cultural identity principles, and requires specified public authorities to have due regard to them when carrying out their functions. These principles affirm the freedom of everybody in Northern Ireland to choose, affirm, maintain and develop their national and cultural identity, and to express and celebrate that identity in a manner that takes account of the sensitivities of those with different national and cultural identities. Furthermore, public authorities should encourage and promote reconciliation, tolerance and meaningful dialogue between those with different national and cultural identities.

Clause 1 also establishes the new Office of Identity and Cultural Expression, which will be required to promote awareness of the principles, and to monitor and encourage compliance with them. It will, for example, be able to issue public guidance on best practice for complying with the new duty and to commission research into matters relating to national and cultural identity in Northern Ireland. Clause 1 was also amended in the other place, and I will tackle that when I talk about new clause 8, as inserted in the other place, a bit later in my remarks; further details are also contained on the proposed Office of Identity and Cultural Expression.

Clause 2 provides for the official recognition of the status of the Irish language in Northern Ireland and the appointment of an Irish language commissioner to enhance and protect its use by public authorities when they are providing services to the public. The commissioner, who will be appointed by the First and Deputy First Ministers acting jointly, will develop standards of best practice to which public authorities must have due regard. Those standards will have to be approved by the First and Deputy First Ministers before they can take effect. The commissioner will also monitor and promote compliance with approved standards and investigate complaints where it is claimed by a person directly affected that a public authority has failed to comply with its obligations.

Clause 3 makes provision for the appointment of a commissioner for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition. The commissioner will be required to promote awareness of services provided by public authorities in Ulster Scots or those likely to be of particular interest to those with an interest in the language, arts and literature associated with the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition. The commissioner will also be required to provide and publish advice, support and guidance in respect of such language, arts and literature, reflecting the Government's recent recognition of Ulster Scots under the framework convention, as I set out earlier. That advice will also cover the effects and implementation of that international agreement, the UN convention on the rights of the child and the Council of Europe charter for regional or minority languages. For Members who are interested in this matter, schedule 3 contains further details about the commissioner for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): To those on the DUP Benches, it is evident from the Secretary of State's explanation that there is a disparity

[Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson]

between the power of the two commissioners. One has the power to direct; the other has the power to issue advice. That is important, because I was involved in the discussions on the New Decade, New Approach agreement, and we were very clear. We have seen local council buildings in Northern Ireland stripped bare of any vestige of British identity. We wanted to protect the right to reflect our identity in public buildings and public spaces, yet I do not see any power for the Ulster British commissioner to direct councils where they are stripping out the Ulster British identity from their public buildings and public spaces. He can offer advice, but does that compel a council to act? For us, this is a key issue.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The right hon. Gentleman is correct; the duty is to give due regard to the items that I have listed. I would like to think that some of the measures that I have outlined would act as safeguards. The appointment of the commissioners must be made by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in agreement, and there will be a level of understanding at that point in time, but I completely understand the point that the right hon. Gentleman has been making.

Dr Murrison: My right hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. The fact of the matter is that the 2021 census showed that there is pretty much equality of facility, at least at some level, between the Irish language and Ulster Scots, at I think 12.4% and 10.4%. We also want parity of esteem between the two communities, yet it is not clear to me—I hope he can help me out on this—why there is such a difference between the commissioners in the legislation. It seems to me, on the principle of parity of esteem and given the more or less equal pegging between the two languages in the most recent census, that they should be dealt with equally.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my right hon. Friend for his contribution. I have some statistics that back up his point, from the 2021 “Knowledge and use of Irish and Ulster-Scots in Northern Ireland” report, which is published annually by the Department for Communities. It states that 17% of adults have some knowledge of Irish, 8% can read in Irish and 5% can write in Irish, whereas 16% of adults have some knowledge of Ulster Scots, 4% can read Ulster Scots and 1% can write in Ulster Scots.

I completely understand my right hon. Friend’s main point, but I hope he will understand that we have faithfully lifted from what was agreed at the time of the New Decade, New Approach agreement. That is what I am currently talking about, and I am quite sure that we can go into detail in debate in Committee about why that needs to remain as it is, but if he will allow me, I shall now move on a tiny bit.

Sammy Wilson *rose*—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will give way one final time.

Sammy Wilson: The Minister is being very generous. Does he understand the point that has been made? As far as the Ulster Scots community is concerned, the attack on that community, especially by Sinn Féin-dominated councils in the west of Northern Ireland, has meant the stripping out of any of the symbols

identified with the Unionist community. If the role of the Ulster Scots commissioner is to look at the whole remit of culture, and if there is already known to be a problem in Sinn Féin-dominated councils that ruthlessly try to stamp out any of the Unionist tradition, surely that is the most compelling reason to give that commissioner the ability to stop that kind of cultural destruction through the power to direct.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for making his point with strength and passion. I will not go any further on this particular point today, as I believe I have outlined the case that I would make, but as I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), I would be very happy to listen to, and hopefully explain and debate, various amendments that might be brought forward on the matter in Committee.

If the House will indulge me, I shall race through the final piece of my speech, because I do not want to take all the time, which is rapidly running out. Of the various other clauses, clause 8 is a new clause inserted by Members of the other place following a further set of amendments from the Government. That clause, alongside the amended clause 1, relates to the establishment of the Castlereagh Foundation. The Government are committed to fund the establishment of the Castlereagh Foundation, as Members will see from paragraph 25 of annex A to the New Decade, New Approach agreement. It was envisaged that the foundation would explore identity and the shifting patterns of social identity in Northern Ireland, and more detail will obviously come to the fore during further debates.

Taken as a whole, the Bill is a hugely important milestone when it comes to identity and language in Northern Ireland. Communities in Northern Ireland have long been awaiting progress in this area. The Bill celebrates Northern Ireland’s different identities and cultures, which contribute immeasurably to the strength and character of our Union, and demonstrates the Government’s commitments to all parts of it. Having followed the debate in the other place, I am cognisant of the fact that not all right hon. and hon. Members, from across all parties, will like everything in this Bill. I accept and respect that, and my door, and indeed that of my hon. Friend the Minister of State, is always open.

However, the Government are determined to see the Bill through this House in a timely fashion, given how long it has taken to get here. We owe it to all communities in Northern Ireland to do that. Indeed, it is our sincere and genuine hope that the parties in Northern Ireland will form an Executive in the not-too-distant future, to make the necessary appointments, oversee the implementation of this important package and maybe deal with some of the issues raised by hon. Members in today’s debate. Until then, the Bill is a reminder that the UK Government will always deliver on our commitments to Northern Ireland and care deeply about its people of all communities, and I commend it to the House.

2.38 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I would like to begin by passing on my condolences and that of the Labour party for the 10 people who were tragically killed last week in Creeslough. I would also like to thank the

emergency workers in Northern Ireland who provided help, working in partnership with their colleagues across the border.

I thank the new Secretary of State for setting out the measures in the Bill and welcome the new Minister for Northern Ireland to his place. The Bill broadly keeps with the identity and language commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement—I see the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), in his place—and the achievements of those on both sides of the Chamber who negotiated it are recognised across the House, and certainly by us in the Labour party. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be speaking, so that we can benefit from his insight into the deal at the time.

That deal led to the restoration of the Executive after an extended period of absence and had, at the time, the agreement of all parties. This legislation is a serious undertaking and I pay tribute to the officials who have worked on it. It combines three separate draft Bills, which were supposed to be taken forward in the Northern Ireland Assembly, where they would have benefited from the enhanced scrutiny of local representatives. The Bill creates the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression, recognises the status of the Irish language in Northern Ireland and provides for the appointment of an Irish language commissioner and a commissioner for the Ulster Scots. To effect these changes, the Bill directly amends the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Crucially, it adheres to the principles that underpin the Belfast/Good Friday agreement: equality, respect and parity of esteem.

As the Bill was introduced in the other place, it has benefited from a wealth of expertise from our colleagues there. I strongly recommend that Members read those insightful debates—whether they do so on a running machine is for them to decide; how the Secretary of State managed to read those contributions while running is something that I cannot quite comprehend. I pay particular tribute to Lord Murphy of Torfaen, who helped to negotiate the rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity section of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. The agreement recognises that the Irish language and Ulster Scots form part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland. These languages are part of our shared heritage, too, as the United Kingdom. Indeed, it was enriching to see the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan) recently swear allegiance to the King in Ulster Scots.

Other contributions during the Bill's passage recognise the wider history behind the identity and language issues. The Bill contains a clause that repeals the Administration of Justice (Language) Act (Ireland) 1737—very long awaited by Irish language groups. It includes an amendment passed in the other place establishing the Castlereagh Foundation, which will explore shifting patterns of identity in Northern Ireland. We welcome the provisions that create a clear, unambiguous legal framework, which will help and inform public authorities and Government Departments about their duties and responsibilities regarding language promotion.

Language and identity issues have clearly always been a part of the peace process. They have often featured in the agreements made to restore devolution in Northern Ireland, as happened during the St Andrews and the New Decade, New Approach periods. The Government have set out that they believe the Bill will help to take the sting out of these issues and to prevent

them from paralysing the institutions again in future. We also support the Bill on that basis, and we want to see the normalisation of language rights to take some of the politics out of them. Of course, it is a matter of regret that this legislation is not being discussed and passed at Stormont. Sadly, we are experiencing another period in which devolved government in Northern Ireland is not functioning. But the Government are doing the right thing by introducing this legislation here. We welcome that and that they are the honouring commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

There were repeated promises to proceed with this legislation following that agreement. It is remarkable that, in the written ministerial statement of 21 June 2021, the Government promised to introduce this Bill by October 2021. When the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) was Secretary of State, he repeatedly said from the Dispatch Box that the Bill would be introduced before the end of the last Stormont mandate. It should not be so easy for the Government to let slip their own deadlines and promises to Northern Ireland.

We should all be concerned that the Executive have not been functioning for more than 40% of the time since the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. People need a stable, functioning Executive to meet the enormous health and economic challenges facing Northern Ireland in the coming months amid the cost of living crisis that our entire country is facing. The Government are trying to prevent any further identity and language issues destabilising Northern Ireland by giving the Secretary of State new powers. This legislation would permit them to step in, if necessary, to implement what the Bill is trying to achieve.

I want to repeat that it should be for the Northern Ireland Assembly to discuss and debate legislation whose territorial extent is within Northern Ireland. However, the Opposition will scrutinise the Bill and suggest amendments in areas where we think it can be improved. We have concerns about how cultural expression on the basis of “sensitivities” is to be interpreted in practice. It might be more appropriate to use a human rights basis. I would be grateful if the Minister responded to that in his winding-up speech.

We would also welcome further clarification on the Castlereagh Foundation, and on whether the Government will publish the written advice available to the Northern Ireland Office before the Bill reaches Committee stage. It is positive that the Government are trying to uphold other commitments that they made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. We would be glad to hear an update from the Minister on the connected classrooms programme, which was another promise made by this Government. We could do with some clarification on when that will be brought forward.

There is also the question of whether the Bill needs to address the recent court ruling about the Executive being in breach of their legal duty by failing to adopt strategies on Irish language and Ulster Scots. Additionally, while the Bill gives the Secretary of State powers to step in, I know that there is concern that there are no timeframes or conditions for when they will take action. Assurances that there will not be undue delay would be welcome especially considering the history of this legislation and the delays that it has undergone. Overall, however, I reiterate the Labour party's support for the Bill and hope it receives swift passage through this place.

2.46 pm

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): May I add to the comments of the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) about the tragedy in Creeslough?

I welcome the Bill that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has brought to the House, although I echo and support the comments that have been made about how it would have been better if such legislation had taken place in a devolved space. None the less, I accept that it is great that the Bill is being brought forward. Language rights in Northern Ireland is an extremely emotive issue, and it was a very emotive issue during the negotiations over the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I genuinely believe that the Bill enhances the language provision, the culture provision and the rights that stem from the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, the St Andrews agreement and previous agreements, so I support the Government in moving forward with it.

There was a lot of talk at the time about the Irish language. Many campaigners, some of whom are in the House today, campaigned hard for clearer Irish language rights, despite the fact that councils in Northern Ireland can already conduct their business in the Irish language. There was some very strong campaigning on the issue here and by youth groups and other groups in Northern Ireland, so I hope that the Bill provides a good and balanced approach to what they have been wanting for many years.

The Bill will establish the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. It is worth paying tribute to the former MP for Belfast South who did a lot of work, along with other Northern Ireland colleagues, on the structure of aspects of this Bill, particularly the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. There is the provision for two commissioners: the Irish language commissioner and the commissioner for Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition. It had been difficult, during New Decade, New Approach, to get adequate balancing for the two commissioners. I accept some of the points that have been made today about duties: at the time, there were concerns about the commissioners having direction and directive powers, but further aspects have been raised today that may require more analysis.

There has been a huge debate about the Irish language that has resulted in this Bill, but, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, Ulster Scots is spoken, or at least understood, by an increasing number of people in Northern Ireland. It is not a fringe dialect but a growing language that is integral to many traditions across Northern Ireland, particularly in North Antrim and Strangford, as I am sure we will hear. That is reflected in the recent census, which showed that many people do not identify as British or Irish but have a Northern Irish identity and that Ulster-Scots is extremely important to them.

I note that concerns have been raised by the Ulster-Scots Agency, who I spoke to today, and I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will look at aspects of the powers of the commissioners. I recall that during that negotiation there was concern on both sides about directive powers of the commissioners.

The official recognition of Ulster-Scots as a national minority under the framework convention is a positive move, and I will speak a little about the vibrancy of Ulster-Scots. In Derry, Derry and Raphoe Action has

organised Ulster-Scots cultural evenings and runs initiatives to increase skills for young people in the Ulster-Scots community, including piping and drumming, singing and dancing classes. The Kildoag pipe band, made up of young people from Derry, was successful at the world championships in Glasgow in August.

The strong Ulster-Scots culture in Derry city and Strabane reflects the huge cultural diversity across Northern Ireland. The poet Angeline King, who is from Larne in County Antrim and is writer in residence at Ulster University—her work includes “A Belfast Tale”—focuses on Ulster-Scots and explores the complex and diverse culture in Northern Ireland. It is worth also reiterating the vibrancy of Ulster-Scots in the Republic of Ireland. Three Ulster counties of Cavan, Monaghan and County Donegal—particularly, although I might be corrected, in the Finn Valley area of County Donegal—have a significant amount of Ulster-Scots culture. The Frances Browne Ulster-Scots poetry competition in Donegal, which celebrates the legacy of Frances Browne, the blind poetess of Ulster from Donegal’s Finn Valley, runs competitions in Ireland’s three traditional languages, Irish, English and Ulster-Scots. It is obviously not appropriate to comment on the broadcasters of other nations, but I think I am right in saying that on RTÉ there is no broadcast programming in Ulster-Scots, which is something that might be looked at or considered in future campaigns.

When I was Secretary of State, I had the privilege of engaging with several groups dedicated to the Ulster-Scots tradition. Those organisations continue to be supported by the Department for Communities—there are more than 1,000 active Ulster-Scots groups. The Ulster-Scots writing competition will be hosted in the Linen Hall library, the oldest cultural establishment in Belfast. National Museums NI has introduced a new “Languages of Ulster” project, which offers people the opportunity to explore the rich and diverse language traditions associated with both Irish and Ulster-Scots.

There is a fantastic blogger and Tweeter called Lentil Pentil in Scotland—I do not think she is the sort of person who wants a push from a Tory MP, but she does an Ulster-Scots word of the day and is well worth having a look at. As we have heard, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan) recently swore his oath in the dialect.

I welcome the fact that the Bill proposes that the Department of Education will “encourage and facilitate” the use of Ulster-Scots in the Northern Ireland school curriculum. I note also that the Ulster-Scots Agency would like more support with grants and funding to make that happen. There is also the question of Ulster-Scots A-levels, university degrees and the creation of research institutes, and I hope those will be considered in the future. There has been a very good review of the Ulster-Scots tradition by the Department for Communities, and that report is well worth considering.

On the issue of funding, my understanding is that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport did cover funding for broadcast, but that has now come to an end. I hope the Government, with their sizeable budget, could have a look at that and continue to support broadcasting activities in Ulster-Scots.

This Bill is a significant step forward. The Good Friday agreement states:

“An essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society”.

The Bill delivers on fundamental rights for Irish speakers and Ulster-Scots speakers. As we approach the 25th anniversary of the agreement, the Bill follows its spirit and will ensure that the Ulster-Scots tradition thrives over the next decade and beyond.

I grew up in Scotland where there is a fantastic word, “scunnered”, which I think adequately reflects the sentiment on the Government side of the House today.

2.55 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): How do I follow that word?

I begin in all seriousness by echoing the sentiments expressed on both sides of the House about the appalling events in Creeslough. I send my personal condolences to all who have lost their lives, their families and all those who have been deeply affected by that awful tragedy.

The Scottish National party welcomes this Bill, although we, like others, very much regret that the legislation is being brought forward in this place rather than through the Northern Ireland Assembly. It deals with two languages that are clearly integral to the cultural heritage of Northern Ireland. As hon. Members have mentioned, both Irish and Ulster-Scots are languages with significant usage; the latest census shows that 12.5% of people in Northern Ireland have use or some use of the Irish language and some 10% have use or some use of Ulster-Scots.

Ahead of this debate, I happened across a publication online produced by the British Council on Ulster-Scots. Obviously, I was familiar with the strong cultural links and shared vocabulary between Ulster-Scots and Scots, but I do not think I had fully taken on board how similar they were. There was such similarity that, were I to live in Northern Ireland, I think I would be able to include myself in that 10%.

We have already heard the word “scunnered” from the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith); it is a word that frequently applies to how we feel when things in this place do not go our way. “Aye”—for yes—is a word that every hon. Member ought to be familiar with, along with blether—always more than a few of those about the place—boak, crabbit, eejit, flit, oxtar and thrawn. Then of course there is “sleekit”, although, were I to apply that word specifically to any hon. Member, I am sure I would be getting my knuckles rapped from the Chair, so I will not seek to do so. There may be an occasion where I want to push my luck, but it is not this afternoon.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. For the sake of clarity, I appreciate that a great many people in the House do not understand the words the hon. Gentleman has just used, but I do, and he is absolutely right about the way in which he might apply them. I will be listening carefully.

Richard Thomson: I am grateful for that, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I shall take care to ensure that the rest of my remarks are within the parameters of normal parliamentary debate.

A language Act has been promised from the Good Friday agreement through the St Andrews agreement and, most recently, the New Decade, New Approach agreement, so in our view the Bill is long overdue. Language, culture and identity matter.

Linguistic rights are human rights, as reflected in various international conventions that seek to uphold the ability of linguistic minorities around the world to practise and use their own languages. Citizens have a fundamental right to their identity and to cultural expression. Those linguistic rights are contained in the United Nations declaration of human rights, the international covenant on civil and political rights, the European convention on human rights and the European charter for regional or minority languages.

Across these islands there is an unhappy legacy of the suppression of some of those rights. Thankfully, we have left behind the dark days of physical and cultural barbarism where children had their native tongues thrashed out of them in schools, but that is not the only reason for languages being marginalised.

Mass media produced in a dominant language has been a key driver of that as well. Indeed, the correlation between the decline in the use of Scots Gaelic in the home and the rise and availability of television in the English language is marked. Without action to rectify that, indigenous languages are often left in a parlous state, with a diminished and marginalised status. Steps can of course be taken to remedy that through schooling, broadcasting in those languages and support for cultural activities—those are just some of the more obvious examples.

Although a language might be in fairly common everyday usage—it could be a language of conversation, a language of song and poetry, or even a language of print—if it is not in daily use as a language of law, commerce or administration, any existing lack of parity of esteem is reinforced. That is deeply regrettable, because our languages are an essential part of our culture and heritage. Even if we speak more than one language, we will default to the language that is our most natural form of expression. Whether or not we speak all the languages from the places where we live, we are shaped by them and the inheritance they give as part of a cultural wealth that belongs to all. I firmly believe that, just as the promotion, support and legal recognition of Scotland’s languages—particularly Gaelic—has threatened no one, promoting the Irish and Ulster Scots languages should pose no danger to anyone’s culture or identity.

The Bill clearly gives official status to the Irish language, giving citizens in Northern Ireland the right to register births, deaths and marriages in Irish and to request court proceedings to take in place in Irish; increasing support for Irish-medium schools and more; and giving official recognition to the Ulster Scots language and culture. I recognise, as others have, the disparity in that, but the Bill would create an identifiable and recognisable policy landscape similar—at least in part—to that of Scotland, where the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 gives Gaelic legal official status, while the Scots language, which is spoken by upwards of 1.5 million Scots, does not have the same legal status. The Scottish Government are currently consulting on ways to support the Scots language, and I hope that one of the outcomes of that consultation will be a similar language Act recognising and giving status to Scots. I would be the first to acknowledge, however, that whatever similarities there are, the issues at play in Scotland are somewhat different.

A language Act might be a necessary step towards ensuring that a language survives and thrives, but it is insufficient on its own. I fully take on board the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)

[Richard Thomson]

about the importance of the culture, music, song, poetry and everything else that supports a language and keeps it in daily popular use.

To draw my remarks to a close, giving official status to the Irish language and recognition to the Ulster Scots language and culture is a positive step, but I cannot help but feel that to enhance mutual respect not just between languages but between communities and traditions, there should also be parity of esteem in law, not just between the English and Irish languages, but between Ulster Scots and those languages, and that the institutions being created and the powers granted by the Bill should be equal. Both commissioners should have the same status in law with the same powers behind them. That would be hugely beneficial to what I think we would all like the Bill to achieve: parity of esteem and helping to work towards mutual respect.

3.4 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): On behalf of our party, I offer our deepest sympathies to the families who lost loved ones in the horrific incident in Creeslough—it is heartbreaking to see those scenes and the funerals that are taking place. Our thoughts are very much with the families.

It would be remiss of me not to point out at the outset that this matter is devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, and it therefore ought not to be a matter of decision for this place. The deliberate move by the Government to bring the legislation through this place is yet another example of how the devolution settlement is set aside at the whim of the Government of the day if doing so is deemed politically expedient. It appears that this Government increasingly believe that the Northern Ireland Executive are best suited to performing a management-board function rather than acting as a democratically elected decision-making body. That weakens local democracy and, indeed, the very reason for a return of devolution in already very challenging circumstances.

Sammy Wilson: Does my hon. Friend also notice a correlation between matters being brought to this House and out of the hands of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the demands made by Sinn Féin for that to happen? Even though Sinn Féin Members refuse to take their places in the House, they are quite happy to lobby the Government to get the things that they want through the House. In most cases, the Government simply ignore things that concern Unionists, such as the protocol.

Carla Lockhart: Absolutely—kowtowing to the demands of Sinn Féin is often the way that it goes. For those reasons, we will vote against the Bill on Second Reading and table amendments. Should those changes not be made, we will continue to oppose the Bill.

Many Members have referred to New Decade, New Approach. It is almost as if that document consists of one issue—namely, that of language and identity. It does not, and I could list a range of commitments that the Government have given that are yet to be fulfilled. One, of course, relates to the UK internal market and Northern Ireland's place in it. That remains unresolved, and I remind the Government that the Prime Minister

has given quite explicit commitments to the House on the essential components of any solution to the protocol issue. Those commitments must be delivered upon.

Language and identity are extremely sensitive issues in Northern Ireland because they mean a lot to sections of our population, whether they cherish the Irish language and identity, or their Ulster Scots identity and language is fundamental to who they are and how they express themselves. It is of deep regret that there have been times when language and identity—whether Irish or Ulster Scots—have been denigrated, abused by derision or abused by the weaponising of such language and identity by those for whom they are simply vehicles to pursue an overtly political goal.

It is my belief that, rather than addressing the facilitation and respect for language and identity, the Bill is, in fact, a reward for those who have weaponised the Irish language for decades. Those people have neither love nor learning when it comes to the Irish language; rather, their motive is to use it as part of a wider cultural war. Indeed, imposing the legislation on Northern Ireland society will only result in language and identity being a more potent weapon that causes greater damage to community relations and cohesion at a time when many of us wish to see a more united community focused on healing divisions, not aggravating them.

When talking about the political dynamic of Northern Ireland in this House, it is very rare that we do not hear words such as “consensus” or phrases such as “cross-community support”, which are deemed the cornerstone of the political process and progress made to date. Yet the legislation removes that cornerstone, and the self-proclaimed guardians of the Belfast Agreement are those behind its removal.

Colum Eastwood: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carla Lockhart: The hon. Gentleman will have plenty of opportunity to speak later.

Part 2 of the Bill is the very antithesis of cross-community consent. Specifically, clauses 6 and 7 provide *carte blanche* for the Secretary of State to do as he or she wishes in these deeply controversial policy areas—something that was not agreed in the NDNA. Clause 6 states:

“The Secretary of State may do anything that a Northern Ireland Minister or Northern Ireland department could do in the exercise of an identity and language function”—

anything; anything at all, regardless of the democratic mandate given to the Minister in that Department, regardless of the manifesto on which that Minister may have stood before the electorate and received his or her mandate. It is the power of direction taking precedence over the power of local voters: neither community consulted; rather, being instructed.

With increasing tendency, cross-community safeguards, at the heart of the Belfast and St Andrews agreement, are simply set aside when it suits the Government to do so. The word “disregarded” in the Bill stands out like a sore thumb. While Government figures and Members of this House may be ordering a birthday cake to mark the 25th year of the Belfast agreement next year, it is worth stating that the same people cannot have their cake and eat it—surely they cannot celebrate something while at the same time destroying it.

There is a deep-lying and justified suspicion within the Unionist community that such powers have only been taken, and will only be used, to appease the demands of the most vociferous and most divisive elements within the language and identity lobby. That being the case, it is not possible for us to support the legislation, in which there are no safeguards to address the concerns of Unionists and, indeed, those of a non-Unionist persuasion who do not subscribe to the radical agenda of the language and identity lobby. We rightly question whether the vast amount of public money set aside to satisfy those demands is the best use of finite public resources.

The data from the 2021 census of Northern Ireland shows that 228,617 people have some ability in Irish, with almost the same number—190,613—having some ability in Ulster Scots. On the basis of those numbers alone, it is hard to rationalise the disparity in this legislation between the status and powers of the Irish language commissioner, and that of the commissioner for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition. It is a matter of deep regret that amendments tabled in the other place that could have provided recourse for at least some of these legislative inequalities were not accepted. That further cements belief among Unionists that the Government are more concerned with the concerns of one community over the other. That is a dangerous mindset in the context of Northern Ireland.

If the Government are serious about providing some degree of balance in the Bill, they must look at a number of areas with reference to the powers of the commissioner for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition. The DUP believes that the functions of the commissioner should be extended to reference explicitly heritage and culture. Currently, the Bill provides only for language, arts and literature. If the ambition is to make this legislation as comprehensive as possible, such a change would be desirable to better reflect the extent and importance of the distinct traditions.

There are a series of shortcomings in the Bill relating to how the commissioners can respond to alleged breaches by public authorities of the requirements relating to Irish language and Ulster Scots. Should a public body face an alleged breach and is found to be culpable, the Irish commissioner can make recommendations on how a public body can

“remedy its failure and avoid future failures”.

In terms of the Ulster/British commissioner however, the remit is much more limited to giving advice only on how a body

“might have better regard to published facilitation guidance.”

That is insulting, to say the least.

Furthermore, the admissibility grounds for making merely a valid complaint are much weightier in relation to Irish. Even when it comes to devising an action plan on how a public authority will fulfil its obligations, there appears to be a requirement for Irish, but no similar requirement for Ulster/British. I ask the Secretary of State, in his summing up, to address that point specifically and to explain how such an imbalance is in the public interest and how it represents a balanced approach to both identities.

Let us not ignore the costs that will be associated with this Bill. If—and it is a big if—the Executive are restored, they will have an in-tray of issues that will come at unprecedented cost to the public purse: delivering

on the Bengoa reforms to our health service; investment in schools; addressing historic underfunding of special educational needs; road and rail investment; and tackling the problems associated with a crumbling water network. Yet this legislation will take money away from those priorities, which have an impact on us all, regardless of identity, and add further strain to the budgets of public authorities. What is more important: a bed for a cancer patient or an Irish or Ulster Scots translation of a public document that can be read in English by all?

I urge the Government to think long and hard about the core message that this Bill sends to those in Northern Ireland—not just around the lack of balance, as I have outlined—and fundamentally to consider the wisdom of cultural supremacy being enshrined in law.

3.15 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I had not intended to speak until perhaps the very end, so I am grateful to be called so early. I am delighted to follow in the footsteps of my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart). She very clearly and very fairly outlined some of the serious concerns that we have raised and will continue to raise, and which show the dangerous departure that the Government have adopted from what was agreed in NDNA.

There was an old television advert for Harp lager starring Colin Murphy, a comedian in Belfast. The question he posed in it was, “Is your glass half empty? Is your glass half full? Or more importantly, what’s in the glass?” It is through that prism that I shall approach my contribution this afternoon.

It is incredibly easy to be caught by arguments of the past around the Irish language and continue to stand in its way; and our most recent history will show what impact that had on good government in Northern Ireland, on progress in Northern Ireland and on showing respect for one another. I do not want to repeat that process; I am incredibly comfortable with what was agreed in NDNA.

The lengths and efforts that went into that negotiation were not only important in the wider context of social cohesion in Northern Ireland; they were important for our political progress at that time. Should somebody have an interest in the Irish language, which I do not, should somebody want to engage in a language that is of no interest to me, that is entirely a matter for them. If they want to take it further and build on the support that is there under the Belfast agreement for the Irish language and for Ulster Scots tradition—the Government support that is there, encouraging people to explore and build upon a flourishing language—that is entirely a matter for them. If they want to engage with Government Departments, if they want to write to a Government body and get a response, that is not something that will ordinarily trouble me; that is not something that I will be overly exercised by, and that is not something that I think we should be overly concerned about.

I think of the political aspirations that were outlined for year upon year, and government denied in Northern Ireland for these quests—they were not achieved in NDNA. In fact, Conradh na Gaeilge, one of the organisations that championed the cause of what it described as a “stand-alone Irish language Act” summarily failed, and Sinn Féin summarily failed in its negotiations at the time of NDNA. It wanted a stand-alone Irish language Act, but did not get it. It is not in New

[Gavin Robinson]

Decade, New Approach, and it is not in the Bill. It wanted a commissioner with unfettered powers; it did not get it. It was not agreed in NDNA, and it is not in the Bill. It wanted an imposition on what would otherwise be equality legislation in Northern Ireland to provide for quotas in employment; it did not get it. It was not achieved: it is not there in NDNA, and it is not in the Bill. It wanted the Irish language imposed on me, on my neighbours and constituents, and residents throughout Northern Ireland through road signs and everything else, but it did not get it. It was not negotiated in NDNA, it was not agreed in NDNA, and it is not in the Bill. From that perspective, I can take some comfort from what was agreed.

That is before we add in the counterbalances and the support for Ulster Scots and, for the first time, Ulster British. Why is it, if we look through the prism of a glass half full, that Unionists do not stand back and say, “For the first time, rather than being faced with having our culture and identity stripped out of buildings, civically or otherwise, throughout Northern Ireland, this is a legislative vehicle to enhance the Unionist and Ulster British tradition in Northern Ireland?” That is something that I support and welcome; it was secured through the NDNA negotiations, and through the provision of the commissioner for identity and the Ulster British commissioner. Those are good things. The provision of, and the agreement to provide for, the Castlereagh Foundation—providing Government-supported academic rigour to the case for the Union for the first time—is a great thing. It is something in the Bill that I welcome, and something that it was important for us to get agreement on at the time of NDNA.

But then, we get to the last part of the prism that I started with: what is in the glass? During the three years when there was no Government in Northern Ireland, I was incredibly frustrated by this faux argument about whether there was a stand-alone Irish language Act or not. It was totally irrelevant. The question is not, “Is it one chapter of a bigger book, or is it a book itself?” but “What does it say? What does it do?” However, that debate rarely featured in Northern Ireland society during those three years. Yes, the Scots have Scots legislation and the Welsh have Welsh legislation, so why can the Irish not have Irish legislation? That is a fair enough question, but the Scots legislation is not the same as the Welsh legislation, and neither is the same as the provisions in this Bill. They are different.

So, what is in the glass? What does it do? The fundamental error that Members will hear about from me and all of my colleagues this afternoon is that the Government have taken what was agreed through negotiation between parties in Northern Ireland, corralled, encouraged and spearheaded by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), and decided to deliver in a one-handed fashion through this Bill aspirations that were not agreed at the time of NDNA. That is a fundamental disaster.

Within the Office of Identity, as the former Secretary of State will recall, it was important that no commissioner could proceed with their agenda for the year, their budget-setting process, or what they intended to do in their annual reports without the consent of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister—the Executive Office. For the Secretary of State to assume

the power to do whatever he wants anyway, not just in the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive but even in the presence of one, is an incredibly foolish approach to Northern Ireland politics. When we have an agreement that has been painstakingly thrashed out for years, whether it was officials in the Northern Ireland Office or former Ministers who thought it was a good idea to assume that power themselves through this Bill, it was a fool’s errand. That point will be discussed in Committee.

Stephen Farry: Given the argument that the hon. Member is making, would he explain why it was that over a two-year period when the Assembly and Executive were functioning, no effort was made to bring forward legislation within the Northern Ireland Assembly at a time when all those issues could have been addressed in the correct forum, rather than them defaulting to Westminster?

Gavin Robinson: Coronavirus. I am not sure whether the hon. Member was aware, but there was a pandemic in our country and around the world, and normal government was set aside in the interests of public health and public safety.

The Bill even envisages a situation—I think it is one of the subsections of clause 6—where an issue has been raised with an Executive Minister and brought to the Executive, but agreement has not been found. Sorry? Leaving aside our own personal political aspirations for this or any other Bill, where the Executive collectively decide not to do something but the Secretary of State, at the request of a one-sided aspiration, can decide to supersede them, what is the point in devolution? The presentation of the Secretary of State’s powers in the Bill makes it incredibly difficult for somebody who can stand here and openly and honestly say that he thinks the agreement two years ago was worthwhile, and should have been reached. It is causing support to crumble, because what was agreed is being set aside for things that could not, and would not, have been negotiated or agreed at the time.

Sammy Wilson: Does my hon. Friend also accept that the Secretary of State then brings himself into the quagmire of disagreement in the Executive, and will increasingly find himself—as has happened on a number of occasions when legislation has come to Westminster—put under pressure by one particular political party, with all the threats of “If you do not act in the way that you are enabled to act and we want you to act, there will be consequences”?

Gavin Robinson: It is the antithesis of democracy; it has applied to a couple of other issues over the last number of years, and here we see it again. The Secretary of State and his colleague the junior Minister, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), will today—as they did yesterday and will do tomorrow—implore that devolution be restored in Northern Ireland. That is a laudable idea, and I would like to see it, but the Minister cannot stand up today with a straight face and say, “I would love to see devolution restored so that we can get on with these issues, even though I am proposing through this Bill provisions that would mean that when you do not do what we like, we will do it for you anyway.” That is not the way in which we should proceed.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I will deal with that point more fully later on, but I put on record on behalf of the Government that we have absolutely no intention whatsoever of behaving in that way, as is the long-standing position of the Government. We have no intention whatsoever of leaping in to use powers; they are all for the last resort, as I think the hon. Gentleman knows.

Gavin Robinson: If there was—and I cannot doubt the veracity of what the Minister says about the intention the Government may have—there is absolutely no need for the power in circumstances where the Executive is functioning. There is no need for the power in circumstances where the Ministers who are responsible for these issues are in office. If what he says is genuine, that should be an amendment that I trust he will engage with fully.

Sammy Wilson: Would my hon. Friend accept that, while it may not be the intention—and we accept the word of the Minister in his intervention—the reality is that once the power is in this Bill, there will be pressure, when somebody does not get their way, to go to the Secretary of State and demand that he or she exercises those powers, and if they do not then there could well be consequences? That is the whole point: put the power in the Bill and someone will expect it to be used.

Gavin Robinson: Now, and if not now, probably more purposefully in the future when circumstances change, personnel change and Government change. It is a road down which this Government should not have trod.

I started by indicating what I believe was right in the NDNA. I am culminating, having canvassed on the issues where I think the Government have erred in the presentation of the Bill, and it cannot have our support if it remains in this state. The Government have got themselves in a position where, having engaged with parties across the spectrum and with various aspirations, that is now crumbling, and I think that is hugely regrettable. I do not want that to be the end to this process, so I do hope that after Second Reading there will be a willingness to engage in a way that there has not been over the past four, five or six months, when officials and Ministers have ignored, baulked at or just fundamentally disagreed on what they think the Bill means and what we believe it means. We cannot proceed on that basis.

In asking whether the glass is half full or half empty, and highlighting the question of what is in the glass, I want to be in a position where we can raise a glass to the provisions in this Bill. It is the same position I was in when I stood in this Chamber, worked on and brought through—having brought in a private Member's Bill myself—the provision about the statutory duty for the armed forces covenant. I brought that forward myself, we got it into the NDNA and it was delivered by this Government. Similarly, other provisions were secured in the NDNA, and we want to see them delivered. So I hope that we will be in a position where we can raise a glass, with a fully functioning Executive, to the progress that has been made. However, given the way the Government have brought forward this Bill and are advancing the aims of it, I am sorry to say that I do not see that happening any time soon.

3.31 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I want, like others, formally to convey our condolences to and our solidarity with the people of Creeslough after the unimaginable tragedy that struck them on Friday. I know that the very sincere words from the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the King have been warmly received and felt by every community across the island. *Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha.*

I would like to speak about this important—overdue, but welcome—legislation. It has been a long road to get here at length, but credit is due to the lovers of the language throughout the decades for their persistence and to those who did campaign for this legislation. *Is fearr go mall ná go deo*—it is better late than never.

I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson)—I am sure he would like to clarify that other beers are available—who made a thoughtful contribution. If that is his party's position, it will be easier to engage with, because there are good provisions in the Bill and, crucially, these are provisions that the DUP agreed to in *New Decade, New Approach*.

The Bill provides for an Office of Identity and Cultural Expression for both Irish and Ulster Scots, with the aim of promoting pluralism and respect for diversity and shared cultural and linguistic heritage. It guarantees no diminution of the status of the English language, and yes, it does repeal the Administration of Justice (Language) Act (Ireland) 1737. It provides for commissioner oversight to promote and ensure best practice in the use of language by public bodies.

Just for clarity, Members will be aware of the Social Democratic and Labour party's approach to public bodies and public buildings. We believe in levelling up—to borrow a phrase of the time—on identity. We do not believe in expunging the shared history of this place, but it is just a fact that in many public buildings there will be no markers of identity for people of an Irish tradition, women, the LGBT community or trade unions. Buildings have been very much of a single identity for many generations, and it is appropriate that they will change. However, we stand by our shared history and seek to protect it, and this Bill will not undermine that.

We hope that this Bill will normalise and mainstream, and that it will remove a lot of the poisonous party politics that has thwarted the language. Language has of course been political on the island of Ireland for many hundreds of years. Unfortunately, party politicisation has not improved—in fact, it has deepened in recent years—and the SDLP is hopeful that this Bill will take the business of promoting and protecting language and culture out of such everyday thwarting and weaponisation. However, we do have very serious concerns about re-embedding it in the Executive Office, which over the last decade and more has become a place of veto and deadlock, where good ideas in Northern Ireland have been going to die. We will be seeking, by amendment, to address that to prevent delay and language provision being held hostage in future years.

Those provisions have to be put into legislation because of the commitment to protect language, on which there has been dither, delay and denial for decades of devolution. It is also correct that this should absolutely be done on the Floor of the Assembly. We would all wish that to be

[*Claire Hanna*]

the case, but it is also important to note that the Northern Ireland Assembly, to the best of my knowledge, has never delivered a piece of equality legislation.

Those who think that they are holding some imaginary line by undermining equality provisions should be aware that they are doing the opposite of what they think they are doing. They are making many people believe that the rights, lives and opportunities that they want are not available to them under devolution in the United Kingdom. Níor bhris focal maith fiacail riamh—a good word never broke a tooth—so I think it is appropriate that people find it within themselves to be positive about these provisions.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Claire Hanna: I would be delighted to do so—I would use my Ulster Scots and say, “Houl yer whisht, Jeffrey,” but I will let you speak.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Well, I will try not to be thrán about it.

I welcome the approach that the hon. Lady is taking. In her, I see someone who lives the Irish language, who values it and sees it as an important part of her culture and identity, and I have no difficulty with that. She spoke about the importance of words. Does she agree with me—and I quote the words of Danny Morrison, the former publicity director for Sinn Féin—that every word spoken in Irish is

“another bullet...fired in the struggle for Irish freedom”?

It is that kind of use of the language as a political weapon that causes concern. I am not for a moment suggesting that the hon. Lady is guilty of that in any way, but does she agree that we need to move beyond that and get away from politicisation? Language is a means of communication. It should not be used as a political weapon.

Claire Hanna: I will come on to address exactly that politicisation, but it is also about the collective punishment that is applied to children learning Irish in the nursery school. Of course the right hon. Member knows that I would not support language like that, but neither do I damn all protection of Ulster Scots and Ulster British identity because of some words of Ulster Scots or Irish that may appear on a loyalist mural or drum. That is why we need those protections, so that people cannot deny everyday provisions because of the perceptions that they have. I should be delighted to come on to that, and I want to discuss how we build up the confidence of everyone in these cultural provisions by implementing things that were agreed many years ago and which could take some of the heat, poison and damage out of everyday politics.

A fair and wise point was made earlier about the need for things such as a sign language Act as well. It is a fact that the stop-start stand-off culture in which the Assembly has been bogged down over recent decades has damaged the wider rights and entitlements of everyone in Northern Ireland to decent public services and economic opportunities. Those who have withdrawn governance, in this stand-off or the previous one, which was ostensibly

over the Irish language, are doing far more to undermine rights and entitlements than a Bill such as this will ever do.

The measure is far from perfect, and it has been a long time coming. I would like to mention two of my Gaelgóiri colleagues, Patsy McGlone and Dominic Bradley, who tried to bring forward private Members’ legislation in 2008 and 2016, before it was introduced. At least we are on the path now, even if it falls short of what was promised at St Andrews—an Irish language Act based on the experience of Wales and the Republic of Ireland. This legislation is not that, and it is fair to say that it is very far from radical. Language in the Republic of Ireland and Wales thrives in part because it is underpinned and financed by a strategy to focus on promotion, because those nations have been able to proceed without the toxification that language and identity have experienced in our region. I really, really regret that language has become zero sum—if they win this, we lose this—like a lot of other things in our region. That is not unique to Northern Ireland or the Irish language, but we all have to work to counter it.

Julian Smith: It was key during the negotiation that neither of the commissioners had the right to promote, and the hon. Member’s party and others—including the DUP—were correct in ensuring that promotion was nowhere near the focus of the Bill.

Claire Hanna: The right hon. Member is right to clarify that, but we do need a promotion strategy. As someone with an interest in the language and who is inspired when I hear names and place names, if I want to read a council’s accounts, I go and do it as Béarla—I will read it in the English. The promotion is what will allow the language to be transmitted and to thrive, and the Bill is not as expansive as many people would wish it to be.

I want to address the point made by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). I really regret the suspicion of Irish by many Unionists, but I do not pretend not to understand the roots of it. Some of that is just about the experience that we have all had in our lives. Few state schools, which the majority of Protestant, Unionist and loyalist children would attend, promote Irish, and trips to the Republic, where Irish-language signs are normal, were not as commonplace. They probably did not spend their summers learning Irish in Rann na Feirste or Machaire Rabhartaigh, as I and friends of mine did. I therefore appreciate that some of it is about cultural experience; that in many cases people perceive Irish language as something to be used for a buttressing phrase in a political contribution; and that some perceive it as a manifestation of aggressive Irish nationalism, but that is not what it is to so many speakers.

Yes, no doubt there has been weaponisation in the past, but some of that is about the failure of political parties over decades to internalise and sell the concept of parity of esteem where it applies to culture, and to tar and tarnish an entire community of people because of the phraseology of others. The reality of the long war and the long peace that we have had is that “their” and “our” cultural archetypes are reinforced all the time with all the decades of suspicion and baggage that many people have. But we have an opportunity, through

legislation such as this and more, to fly by those nets, particularly to a generation for whom “us” and “them” does not mean as much as “all of us.”

As the right hon. Member said, we can make language about the richness of communication and heritage and not about an identity marker. That is why so many take such inspiration from the work of Linda Ervine and Turas—Irish for “Journey”—the project that she set up with the east Belfast mission of the Methodist Church. Linda has not changed who she is—she has not changed her identity or her aspirations—but she is connecting many hundreds of people from a Protestant background with their own history and the Irish language. She received an MBE from Her Majesty the Queen for her efforts in that work, where she has taken such a mature approach to these issues. Her views on Irish, like Ulster Scots, are rooted in a real understanding of the entwined nature of nationalist and Unionist history. She said:

“I believe that the people of Northern Ireland have a rich cultural identity, a mixture of native Irish and of the many peoples who made Ireland their home. This rich ancestry influenced our surnames, our place names and our everyday language. Our vernacular of hiberno English reflects this mixed identity. We are native...speakers whose English is littered with beautiful Scots and Gaelic words. The syntax of our speech reflects that of Gaelic. As a people, we are culturally rich, yet instead of embracing that wonderful cultural mix, we separate it into narrow divisive boxes and deny ourselves.”

Many of us should take on board her approach to language and many other things.

I also acknowledge the work of people such as the much-missed Aodán Mac Poilín, who was the director of the Ultach Trust, a cross-community language promotion agency, and an inspiration to me as a late learner of Irish, which I picked up in adulthood. His posthumously published collection of essays, “Our Tangled Speech”, is one of the most nuanced and perceptive books that I have ever read on Northern Irish politics and culture. He argued that to get the sustainable transmission of language, it needs to be embedded in public bodies and have the support of Government and other interest groups. He was also clear about the need to shift our attitudes and learn from our past. He had theories about how nationalists and Unionists have believed each other’s propaganda over the years and found themselves reacting to both the position that they think is being ascribed to them and their opponent’s ideological position, which he believed was why our debate has often got so extreme. He always perceived the Irish language to have been a victim of that. I think the argument put forward by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) would probably concur with a lot of that analysis

I also want to mention the work of the recently deceased Dr Roger Blaney, whose work “Presbyterians and the Irish Language” was a revelation to many people about the work done by so many of that denomination in Belfast to preserve and protect the language because it was at its most vulnerable. It is a matter of fact and the politics that the rights component of language has been a product of the withholding of support. Many Gaeilgeoirs I know over the years were not as bought into the concept of an Irish language Act as they were into that of promotion and the living language. It is a fact that what are seen as small-minded approaches to language and the cancellation of programmes has made people believe that it needs promotion.

Organically, the community of Irish speakers is growing in number and in breadth and that is a win for all of us.

We believe that this Bill will help to grow that wider embracing of language. Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine—it is in each other’s shadows that we grow. We are better when we all work together, and I hope that that is something that Members will keep in mind when we vote on the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Stephen Farry.

3.46 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. At the outset, I want to join others in passing on my condolences and sympathies to the families of those who sadly lost their lives in Creeslough and to the wider community. The tragedy they are currently dealing with is unthinkable.

On this occasion, I think it is appropriate to say a few words in Irish followed by the English translation. Tacaím leis an reachtaíocht seo. Tá sé an-tábhachtach Tá oidhreacht roinnte ag an nGaeilge agus Ultais i dTuaisceart Éireann. Déanfaidh muid ceiliúradh ar an oidhreacht sin. That is, I support this Bill. The Irish language and Ulster Scots are part of the shared heritage of Northern Ireland. We celebrate that heritage. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) has just said, that heritage can be seen in the place names and surnames that are evident right across the community in Northern Ireland. That very much cuts across the traditional divide.

The Bill delivers on a key commitment of the New Decade, New Approach agreement. That agreement broke the deadlock that had seen the institutions of the Good Friday agreement cease operation for almost three years. As is the case with the current impasse, my party did not believe that there was any justification for that impasse. However, it is a matter of record that frustrations around the non-delivery of legislation and other measures related to the Irish language and other language issues was a key factor in that stand-off. The achievement of a package of measures on language and culture was a key element in the breakthrough. Commitments to legislate for the Irish language and Ulster Scots go back much further, to the St. Andrew’s agreement of 2006, and reflect the more general commitments made in the Good Friday agreement of 1998.

Indeed, we want to see all aspects of the New Decade, New Approach agreement being delivered and a key element of that deal was the rightful expectation that the culture and language package would be a priority for the restored Executive and Assembly. It is a major disappointment and concern that that did not happen. Whenever I asked the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) to explain why, he rather flippantly discussed the issue of covid. Of course, I am aware that covid was a major issue for the world, but government did not grind to a halt in other places. A lot of other legislation happened in this place and, indeed, other legislation happened in the Northern Ireland Assembly, including Bills taken forward by his own ministerial colleagues. Frankly, there is and was no excuse for this measure not being done in the Assembly in a timely manner and that would have provided an opportunity

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for a much more rounded discussion. That said, we will listen to and take on board the DUP's comments and reflect on them in Committee. We want to get this as right as we can in this place.

It is a matter of regret that it falls to the Government to take the Bill through Parliament. Generally, it would be far better if matters of equality and human rights were addressed in the devolved space. That would be a characteristic of a mature and responsible democracy. As has been said, that delivery has generally not been the case over the past 20 years. We have to ask why there is a constant blockage. Tension is already emerging over the powers that the Secretary of State may take in relation to the Bill. That reflects a lack of confidence in that, even if the Bill were passed without the powers, the implementation would be stymied back in the devolved space. That is a source of frustration and the pretext for why we are where we are.

Accusations are made generally about interference in the devolved space. I want to see the Northern Ireland Assembly addressing the full spectrum of issues under its remit, including equality and human rights. However, I think this legislation can be justified as a matter of political necessity to ensure that we have a more solid foundation for what will hopefully soon be restored political institutions. Moreover, this is also a matter of the Government ensuring compliance, in respect of Northern Ireland, with the UK's international human rights commitments, particularly on language.

I was disappointed by some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) about the weaponisation of the Irish language. We appreciate that some people have made uncalled-for comments, but I think that does a huge injustice to the vast majority of people who have been campaigning for Irish language rights over many years. In Belfast recently, we saw close to 20,000 people on the streets calling for those protections. People from all backgrounds and all walks of life want to see language protections in Northern Ireland extending both to Irish and Ulster Scots.

Carla Lockhart: Will the hon. Member give way?

Gavin Robinson: Will the hon. Member give way?

Stephen Farry: I will give way to the hon. Member for Belfast East first.

Gavin Robinson: I understand that my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) might like to intervene. She was not demeaning or dismissing anybody who has campaigned for Irish. In fact, many of the campaigners who have campaigned for Irish language provision will equally acknowledge that their aspirations have been dampened and harmed by the irresponsible and politically naive approach of those who have indeed weaponised the Irish language.

Stephen Farry: The comments that were made are on the record and people can see them. However, we are in danger of getting ourselves into difficulty if we over-focus on the particular points that have been made by some republican activists about the Irish language. That is not where the vast majority of people are. I note that the hon. Lady did not give way during her comments, but nevertheless, I am happy to.

Carla Lockhart: The hon. Gentleman did not ask me to give way and I have taken many interventions from him in the past. No one can deny in this House that the issue has been weaponised. That has been done by a small number of individuals, but it has been weaponised, and I think we can all accept that fact. He talks about equality. Will he go further and support the amendments that we will introduce on the fact that the Ulster Scots commissioner will not have the same powers as the Irish language commissioner? Our amendments will aim to bring that in line.

Stephen Farry: I will say two things. If we can all agree a self-denying ordinance, let us move past the comments about weaponising language and relegate those to the small minority of people who have said that. Let us focus on those who are generally asking for protections in Northern Ireland for the right reasons.

On the hon. Lady's second point, yes, I am happy to look at the DUP amendments. I am not prepared to give a commitment until we see them, but we will approach this issue with a genuine open mind in that regard. It is worth stressing that there is a different context relating to how Irish and Ulster Scots are recognised by the UK in terms of reference to the various international treaty bodies. It is not entirely a like-for-like comparison. None the less, we are happy to look at the points that she made about the powers.

That point leads me on to another point that is important to stress. There are those who would wish the Bill to go much further in its level of protection; the hon. Member for Belfast East referred to some issues that have been mentioned previously but have not been taken forward. Equally, there are some who may wish to dilute it. I think it is important that we reflect and respect the spirit and indeed the letter of what was agreed in New Decade, New Approach as far as practically possible, because we are conscious that that is the political agreement. Anything else, in terms of major amendments, would primarily be something for the Northern Ireland Assembly to take forward.

There are a number of issues that I think need to be teased out in Committee, in addition to some of the issues that have been mentioned. I note that Ulster Scots has been designated as an ethnicity by the Government. I think there needs to be some scrutiny of that, because there is some debate as to whether demand or the wider rationale warrants it. I am not sure that there is complete consensus among Ulster Scots activists on that line.

There is also concern about moving from having a single director of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression towards having more of a multi-member commission approach. Sadly, that brings up fears about a bit of a carve-up happening in relation to that office, given the history of other public appointments in Northern Ireland.

I agree with the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), that we need more transparency around what is happening with the Castlereagh Foundation. He also made a point about the use of the word "sensitivities" as a potential qualifier in relation to the exercise of language rights. I would perhaps suggest that we need to look instead at a more rights-based balance in taking that forward.

There are potential amendments to be considered in relation to the extension of what is meant by “public authorities”, moving from what at the moment refers entirely to those that fall within the devolved space. Reference was made to what happens with some applications within Northern Ireland, but with non-devolved functions, for example, Swansea offers bilingual driving licences in English and Welsh. There is a desire among some people in Northern Ireland to see them offered in Irish or Ulster Scots as well, so perhaps that could be addressed in an amendment.

I think that there needs to be some degree of sensitivity around the safeguards issue and that we should look at the issues around timescales for interventions. I do not relish the concept of Ministers intervening—I am sure that the Minister of State will confirm that the intention is not to be intervening all the time—but the contrary fear is that, if there is an impasse, it could become prolonged. It would be useful to have some timeline for when interventions should happen.

Finally, I want to respond to some comments about the background to where we are and the debate about culture and language in Northern Ireland. There has been a lot of misinformation, shall we say, and there are a lot of tropes out there about what this would mean for the fundamental reorganisation of society, from road signs through to employment quotas. None of those things has happened, because this was a negotiated package through the New Decade, New Approach system. That is where the value of negotiations came to the fore: in ensuring that there was a balanced package in that regard.

This is about public bodies responding to the needs of their client base in a proportionate way. It is not about a radical transformation of Northern Ireland society. To go back to what I said at the start, we have to accept that both Irish and Ulster Scots are part of the mixed overlapping fabric of what is our shared society in Northern Ireland, so whenever we talk about protecting what we have in Northern Ireland, protecting the language heritage and ensuring that we continue to promote those languages have to be very much a part of our shared and integrated future.

3.58 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): First, may I acknowledge the trepidation that I feel in standing up to talk about this matter? I hope that I can make a positive contribution about some of the lessons that we have learned in Wales over many, many years from addressing these issues.

I approach this matter today with a proper sense of humility. I have never been involved in Northern Ireland politics.

Stephen Farry: You are very welcome.

Hywel Williams: There is enough at home, actually! I do not really want to address the political aspects in any way, really; as I said, I want to share some of the fruits of our experience.

Obviously, no two situations are the same, and the situation with Welsh is very different from the situation with Irish, Ulster Scots or any other language used in these isles. What I think we can give, however, is a certain sense of reassurance that the language issue can be depoliticised to a degree, which, in fact, is liberating for all the parties involved. I am very much a glass-half-full

person. At the last election in Wales, even the United Kingdom Independence party managed to include some Welsh in its pamphlets, which says something about the degree of depoliticisation of the language there. We have developed a provision for all traditions, including the tradition of speaking Welsh.

By now, we have also avoided some of the pitfalls. I will say a little about language law, because I think there are pitfalls there which should be avoided—particularly in relation to the Welsh Language Act 1967—but let me first acknowledge some of the contributions made by Members sitting behind me, and the gut-wrenching emotional elements of language change. Writing in the 1960s, the Welsh philosopher J.R. Jones said something very interesting. He said that some people had experienced leaving their countries, turning their backs on their countries and perhaps not coming back, but he knew of an experience that was even more gut-wrenching: the feeling that you are not even leaving your country, but your country is leaving you—that change is somehow a threat. He was referring at the time to the decline in the number of Welsh speakers to about one in five. We are in a somewhat different situation now as we look forward to the census: it seems likely that the proportion will be one in three. Given our target of 1 million Welsh speakers, there is a long way to go and a great deal of work to do to take people with us.

One of the differences relating to Welsh is that it has always been a language for official business. Traditional Welsh law was codified as long ago as 950 by my namesake Hywel Dda—or Hywel the Good: that is something that has been thrown in my face for many years! However, in 1284 the Statute of Rhuddlan took away the Welsh criminal code and replaced it with the Norman criminal code. The civil code was replaced in 1535 and 1542 by the “Acts of Union”—the Laws in Wales Acts—including the penal clauses, one of which states that

“no Person or Persons that use the Welsh Speech or Language, shall... enjoy any manner Office or Fees”

in the King’s realm. That is the sort of exclusion to which the Welsh language was subject at the time. There was also a reference to “sinister Usages and Customs”. That illustrates some of the emotional elements surrounding a language that was seen as strange, dangerous and difficult. As a younger person, I used to glory in the fact that I had a “sinister usage and custom” in that I spoke Welsh, but those laws were finally repealed in 1993. That is the extent of their history.

The Welsh Language Act 1967, to which I said I would refer, introduced the concept of equal validity. One of the pitfalls that I mentioned is the provision that, in the case of divergence,

“the English text shall prevail”.

That sounds quite reasonable until we think about how it might be applied. If the Welsh law says “Mae dau a dau yn bedwar” and the English law says “Two and two are five”, it will be five, not four. That is the situation that pertained until the 1993 Act, which established the Welsh Language Board.

We have now reached a position in which all matters involving the Welsh language have been devolved. I do not think I should really be standing here talking about Northern Irish affairs—I think that this should have

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been decided in Northern Ireland—and I certainly do not wish to extend my contribution beyond this Second Reading debate.

In 2009, I was part of a Committee here that looked at devolving the Welsh language entirely by a legislative competence order. That Committee was made up of Members from Wales and we learned a great deal about co-operation across parties and the depoliticisation of the issue. The Committee was chaired by Professor Hywel Francis from the Labour party. I was a member, and I worked closely with him, with Mark Williams from the Liberal Democrat party and also with the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), who, although I disagree with him entirely on most things, is also my right hon. Friend. We were able to meet across the table and decide, after a great deal of careful consideration, that the language issue should be devolved entirely to the Assembly in Wales, as it then was. It is now the Senedd. That led to the current state of play in terms of language in Wales. The Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 gave official status to the Welsh language and set up the commission, along with various other things that hon. Members will be familiar with. That is the process that I would want to see in respect of matters in Northern Ireland. It should be decided in Belfast.

I want to say a bit about the practical outcome of having language—knowledge emancipates all languages and traditions—and to look at how things are in Wales now. I know that the use of language in courts of law is not part of this Bill, but in Wales—in the Crown court in Caernarfon, for example, which I am familiar with, and elsewhere—Welsh can be used in court without any special preparation. It is just a normal part of life; it has been normalised, which is a word I think the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) used. It is becoming unremarkable. In that respect, it allows people to address other issues that are of equal importance. We also have all-Welsh hearings with simultaneous translation, which has become normalised. It has a cost, certainly, but it enables people to use the language of their choice. I am in favour, as Conservative Members are, of people being afforded the greatest choice possible. That includes cases of the most serious kind. Murder cases are heard in Welsh in Caernarfon and elsewhere.

Turning to one entirely practical consequence, my interest is in social policy, social work and work with children, and the courts can now acknowledge that the language of the home might not be English and that children can be heard in the language that they speak at home. Again, that is not in the Bill, but I think enabling children to give their evidence in the most acute cases in the language of their choice is just a matter of good law and good practice.

In Wales, there has been a long process, not an event. There is always a temptation to see any piece of law or social development as the last barricade that must be defended at all costs. As I have outlined briefly in my speech, the process is best looked at by the people directly involved; but it is a process none the less. I hope that my speech will go some way towards reassuring the sceptical and giving hope to the optimistic.

4.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate. I am proud to be an Ulster Scots speaker. The hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) is no longer present, but he referred to instances of children in Scotland speaking Scots Gaelic—this probably happened in Northern Ireland with Ulster Scots as well—and how it would be beaten out of them. I went to Ballywalter Primary School—that was not yesterday, by the way; it was a long time ago, back in the '60s—and certain things stick in the memory when we look back over the history and the years. This is one of those things. Mr Whisker was the principal of the school, and he asked us some questions and we had to fill in the answers. I went home and spoke to my granny Hamilton, who came from Clady, outside Strabane in County Tyrone. I asked her, as you do when you are six or seven years old, “Granny, what are the answers to these things?” She filled them in, in Ulster Scots, because that is how we spoke at that time, and I took them into school the next day. Mr Whisker is now dead and gone, and I never speak ill of anyone, but he marked it and said, “This isn’t English.” I said, “This is Ulster Scots, Mr Whisker”, and he said, “That is not how we do it in this school.” It is the way things were in those days, and this is not a criticism, but I got a clip around the ear, which I took home to my granny or my mum and reappraised the situation. As the hon. Member for Gordon said, the Ulster Scots that I had as a child in Ballywalter in the 1960s was beaten out of me in every way.

I gave my oath in Ulster Scots a few weeks ago, and there is nothing quite like expressing yourself in that beautiful language. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan) also gave his oath in Ulster Scots. I have given mine in Ulster Scots on four occasions—2015, 2017, 2019 and four weeks ago. I am very pleased to do that, because it is who I am. I am an Ulster Scot, and I am proud to be an Ulster Scot. That is not a political statement; it is who I am. That is how I see language, and it is contained in every proposal I make on Ulster Scots.

The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) is not present, but he said he was scunnered—that is the word he used. Well, scunnered means fed up. I hope he is not fed up, but the word in Ulster Scots is gladsome or blithe. I am gladsome or blithe, but I am certainly not scunnered when it comes to speaking Ulster Scots. The hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) is also not scunnered in speaking the Irish language, as she did very well. She made an excellent speech, as did others.

I researched the census online, and the number of Ulster Scots speakers has gone up by 50,000 in 10 years—from 140,000 to 190,000. That is 10.4% of the population. I am not saying anything else, but it is a fact that the number of Irish language speakers was up by 1.7%, whereas we were up by a significant number.

I am an advocate for Ulster Scots, and I encourage schools such as Portavogie Primary School and Derryboy Primary School outside Saintfield to teach it. I love to delve into the poetry and history of the language, and the hon. Member for Gordon referred to the arts. It is the poetry, the stories and the flow of the language that I love.

I am for Ulster Scots, but I am not for this Bill unless changes are made. The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) knows that I have the highest respect for him. We came into this place together, and we hung about together on our first day. We got our photograph taken on the steps in Westminster Hall, and we had a good chance to talk and engage. I understand that he does what his heart tells him to do. That is the sort of person he is. I hope he will take on board our constructive points as we try to move forward.

The Ulster Scots language and culture is alive in my constituency of Ards and Strangford. I sat on Ards Borough Council a long time ago, having first been elected in 1985. I am not saying I am better than anyone else, because I am not, but along with others I was instrumental in bringing Ulster Scots names to many villages, with the agreement of the people. Greyabbey is Greba, Ballywalter is Whitkirk, Ballyhalbert is Talbotstoun, and Portavogie is St Andrews. Those names were added because people wanted it to happen. It is about moving forward in a constructive, positive way that brings people with us. I would love that to be our central focus.

When I was at Ards Borough Council, which is now Ards and North Down Borough Council, we had a sign saying “Fair fae ye to the Ards”, which means “Welcome to the Ards”. Those names and welcome signs, introduced way back in the 1990s and 2000s, are a simple expression of our language. Philip Robinson—or Robeinson, as we call him in Ulster Scots—lives on Hard Breid Raa in Greba. He speaks Ulster Scots with a fluency and flow, from a love of the language. He has written a number of books, which we are pleased to see. I make this point because it is important to do so. I have talked about what we did in the villages of Ballywalter and others along the Ards peninsula. I say gently to Newry, Mourne and Down District Council that political signs were put up in Irish in streets in Saintfield in my constituency when the people of those streets did not want them. The point I am making is: you have to bring people along with you. You don’t try to put this down their throats in a way that has the adverse and reverse effect. We have to engage with local communities and do this right.

It was always understood that the Irish language commissioner and the commissioner for Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition would not have the same functions. That was in order to meet the different priorities and needs of the Unionist and nationalist communities, so that each would be provided with a commissioner that was equally meaningful for the respective purposes. It is self-evident that in order for the functions of the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British commissioner, although different, to be of equal value to those of the Irish language commissioner, the functions must be equally robust and enforceable as those pertaining to the Irish language commissioner in order to provide something of equal value to the Unionist community. I want to make it clear that I want to see a language Bill that comes through here that respects other traditions and other languages. The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) spoke just before me—I hope I pronounced his constituency correctly—and we have seen the success he has had there; what they have done in Wales is incredible, and it has come about with the co-operation of the people. We need to do this with the co-operation of the people. It is really important that that happens in order to provide something of equal value to the Unionist community.

We are therefore deeply concerned that although the Bill requires a public authority to have regard to the Irish language commissioner no such obligation exists in relation to the Ulster Scots and Ulster British commissioner. I hope that the Minister will take that point on board, and try to understand where we are coming from, what we are trying to say and why it is important to get this right—I say that to him gently. That is what all my colleagues on our Benches are trying to say, including my hon. Friends the Members for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and for South Antrim (Paul Girvan), whom we are to hear from soon. They will all say this over and again.

This arrangement transparently violates the parity of esteem principle by giving the Unionist community something of less value. What sort of Bill brings in something that is of less value for the community that I represent? It is Ulster Scots, but some have different cultures as well and feel that this must be equal. In what other country would this blatant bias be not only accepted, but enforced? This is what happened through the House of Lords and it is where we are with this Bill today. I could mention certain countries, but Members would certainly not like the parallels. I also would not do that because I know that these are not the Government’s intentions. Little wonder we were shocked when in the Lords the Government sought to defend this violation of the principle of parity of esteem on the basis of three things. I will cite them and explain why, with respect, the Government need to get this sorted.

First, in the other place the Government suggested that this approach is required by New Decade, New Approach, but its text does not address the detail of enforcement with respect to either the Irish language commissioner or the Ulster Scots Ulster British commissioner. This does not make it wrong to provide an enforcement mechanism for the Irish language commissioner’s functions through a statutory duty to “have regard”. Indeed, one could argue that the requirement for this is implicit as it would be absurd—DUP Members believe this—to create commissioners and not to require the public authorities they engage with to have regard to them. However, in order to maintain parity of esteem, this provision must plainly also be applied equally to the Ulster Scots and Ulster British commissioner’s functions. It is very clear where we are.

Secondly, the Government Front Bencher in another place defended this arrangement by suggesting that, in addition to having different functions, it was appropriate for commissioners to have completely different powers in relation to these functions and that, for example, the bodies addressed by both commissioners should have a duty to have regard to only one of the commissioners, but not the other. I mean, really? Why has that not been understood by the Government? Specifically, as bodies that the commissioners address—to be clear, these are the only bodies that the commissioners address, as the Government confirmed on Report—public authorities are required to have regard to the Irish language commissioner but are not required to have regard to the Ulster Scots and Ulster British commissioner.

Secretary of State, that is a key issue, and that is where we are coming from. Such an arrangement is self-evidently indefensible and insulting to the community that I represent—the people of Ards and Strangford,

[*Jim Shannon*]

and indeed those across the Ulster Scots-speaking community in all of Northern Ireland—as is the suggestion that the Unionist community could be bought off with just the image of a commissioner, while the nationalist community is afforded the reality of a commissioner. We have the image, but they have the reality. How can that be?

Thirdly, the Government suggested that we agreed to have two commissioners engaging public authorities, which would be required to have regard only to the Irish language commissioner and not the Ulster Scots and Ulster British commissioner, on the basis of the draft legislation produced around the time of the NDNA. That is, however, incorrect. We agreed to the text of the NDNA, but not the draft legislation before us today. They are two different things. I do not know how this could happen. How can we have these talks and agree something, and then something else comes forward? It is completely wrong for the Government to try to deploy a constitutional sleight of hand against us all by trying to spin something that was not in the agreement as if it was. Even if the Bill were as much a part of the agreement as the agreement itself, simply asserting the text of the Bill would only serve to highlight the difficulty, in the sense that the agreement text and the draft text of the Bill at present are different.

In the absence of any statutory obligation on public authorities to have regard to the Ulster Scots commissioner, and while such an obligation does exist in relation to the Irish language commissioner, although we may have the form of two similarly important commissioners, in reality we have one, and one only. As though that were not enough, while the Government have recognised that the two commissioners' functions must be different in order to provide something that is supposedly of equal value to each community, the Bill treats Unionists as second-class citizens by giving them the right to complain to their commissioner about failures by public bodies relating to only part of their commissioner's function, while giving nationalists the opportunity to complain to their commissioner across the full spectrum of his or her functions.

Equal treatment does not start with this kind of Bill. Again, the Minister in another place suggested that we agreed to this bizarre arrangement on the basis that, in addition to agreeing to NDNA, we had also agreed to draft legislation that gives the Ulster Scots commissioner less authority in their functions than that accorded the Irish language commissioner, when we had done no such thing. The Bill before the House today is unequal and certainly does not treat us fairly.

The Unionist community is not stupid. Let us be quite clear: we understand what we see before us, and we have expressed that in this Chamber. I cannot stress enough the critical importance of Government amendments to restore parity of esteem on both these points. If the Bill is not amended to address that—something that we, our party and I, and the Ulster-Scots Agency have called for consistently over the years—it will entrench discrimination, shouting the message loud and clear that, while the nationalist community should be afforded the reality of a commissioner to address their priorities, the Unionist community, to which those of us on the DUP Benches belong, must make do with just the

image of a commissioner. We will be tabling amendments to correct these problems and will ask for an urgent meeting with the Minister between now and Committee to discuss the matter.

Mr Steve Baker: I would certainly be glad to meet the hon. Gentleman, and I am confident that he knows that I did write to offer meetings shortly after I took up my post.

Jim Shannon: I am not surprised that the Minister of State has replied so positively. Yes, I look forward to those meetings, and, obviously, my party will be more than happy to engage with them as well. All I say is just do these things before we get to the point that we are at right now. The Unionist people are tired of being treated as second-class citizens by a Government whom they respect and whom I respect as well. Can that respect not flow both ways? Apologies fly to the nationalists, and yet there is no apology for the massive mistake the Government made in the withdrawal agreement. People in my constituency of Strangford come back from work to a cold home, worried about how they will pay their rent or their mortgage as well as for the petrol to get them to work.

I have read the explanatory notes and estimated that the annual cost of the three new authorities will be some £9 million. In order to prevent these offices from being exploited for political purposes by one community—*[Interruption.]* I am coming to the end of my speech, Mr Speaker. Do you know what my constituents in Strangford want, Mr Speaker? They want the NHS sorted out. They want the waiting lists for cancer organised. They want to know when they are getting their cataract operations and when they are getting their dental treatment. They also want to know why, when they want to go to the dentist in Newtownards, they find that there are no dentists that will take on new customers. One of my constituents had to travel to Dundalk to get their teeth done. My constituents want to know why new builds in the education sector are not taking place. They want to know why the new building for Glastry College in my constituency will not be built when the £9 million would near enough build it. They want to know about the Ballynahinch bypass, which could be built for a lot less than that. I make these points because it is important to put down a marker. When it comes to spending money, my constituents want the money to be spent in a positive fashion.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes a good argument, advocating the fact that his constituents want investment in public services rather than in costly translation services for a second language. He will have heard the Government talking over the past few weeks about a bonfire of the quangos. Have we not heard about that before? Does he not find it curious and quite surprising therefore that this Bill would create yet another quango in the case of the office of identity and cultural expression? Does he think that that is good use of public money at the present time?

Jim Shannon: I greatly respect the hon. Gentleman's point of view and understand the reasons for it, but we hope to have a language Bill that respects our point of view. That is what we are about, but I thank him for his intervention.

Sammy Wilson: Does my hon. Friend accept that the hon. Gentleman has actually got it wrong? It is not one quango, but three quangos. There will be a commissioner for Irish language, a commissioner for Ulster Scots, and the office of identity and cultural expression. This will be a costly exercise.

Jim Shannon: I thank my right hon. Friend and colleague for his intervention. Yes, there is no doubt that there could be a number of bonfires, not just on 11 July, but at other times as well.

In conclusion, how do I look my constituents in the eye and say that all of this money is spent not to make a difference to the quality of their lives, not to make a brighter future for their children, but as a clear, blatant and horrifyingly expensive sop to a political agenda. I want to look them in the eye and know that I have done all that I can to bring the right legislation through this Bill at the right time and for the right reason. The promotion of culture and heritage is not a bad thing, but the politicisation of language and the use of it as a weapon must be prevented. In its current state, this Bill simply enables that politicisation and therefore requires urgent changes. I look forward to the Minister of State giving us that meeting so that we can make the changes that we all want to see for the people of Northern Ireland, and especially for the people that I represent.

Mr Speaker: I will now announce the result of the ballot held today for the election of the new Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. A total of 459 votes were cast, one of which was invalid. The counting went to three rounds. There were 441 active votes in the final round, excluding those ballot papers whose preferences had been exhausted. The quota to be reached therefore was 221 votes. The winner is Alicia Kearns elected with 241 votes. She will take up her post immediately and I congratulate her on her election. The results of the count under the alternative vote system will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and published on the internet.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, I thank the Clerks of the House, who ran a very successful election. I also thank all those who stood for election. I hope they know how much I respect them and how I hope to continue working with them as Chair, because I hope we can work together more as a House. I also thank Tom Tugendhat, who is now elevated to far superior places, but was a fantastic Chairman of the Select Committee. Most of all, I say a heartfelt thank you to everyone who gave their support to me. It means everything to me. I hope to do them proud; I hope I can represent all their interests and I am here now to do as they bid. Thank you ever so much.

Mr Speaker: Just a gentle reminder that it is not by name; he is the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). Do not worry about it. On that basis, let us go to Paul Girvan.

4.30 pm

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): It is with pleasure that I stand to speak on this Bill. I am glad to see that it is not a stand-alone Irish language Bill, as was being

peddled by those who wanted to have it as such. However, the identities issue within this Bill causes concern, because there is an imbalance in how things are dealt with.

I understand that both commissioners have certain powers, but one seems to have more power than the other. By that, I am saying that the Ulster Scots commissioner will really be there as a tick-box exercise, as opposed to somebody who can effectively take complaints forward and recommend that they be addressed by the public authorities that are being used. I appreciate that there are a large number of public authorities in Northern Ireland to be consulted—I think it is somewhere around 70-plus—but all of them have different interpretations of what they have to do.

I use this as an example: local authorities in Northern Ireland have off their own bat started to go down the route of language signage for street names. In doing so, they have created a problem. Many people may not understand the nuances of this, but it is seen as territory marking. If someone goes into a certain area and sees Irish language signs, they will say, “Well, that’s an area I will not be buying a house in, because being from my community I will not be happy or safe there.” That is another area where division is being driven into our community, and Irish-language signs are being used as such by councils.

There was mention made by Members from my own party of those who have removed emblems and pictures of our monarchs from our council buildings. All those things have been stripped out to try to make a neutral environment, yet some are still putting what I call some of their republican agenda and driving it forward. Those measures and the powers that are supposedly within this Bill, such as the language aspect, need to be addressed.

I will say a wee bit about the language aspect and bilingualism with Ulster Scots. That is not necessarily their priority. They have areas they want to focus on, and one of those might be looking not just at the art and literature aspect, but the culture and heritage aspect. Our heritage needs to be respected. I feel very much that we are under attack not only from this Bill, but from those who put in place the protocol and made those people who live in Northern Ireland—whether you believe it or not—feel like second-class citizens. That is what is being portrayed here, because we see our Ulster Scots heritage and culture being treated as second class, as I think my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned.

I also have concerns about the cost associated with the implementation of this legislation. There might well be money associated with setting up the office of the commissioners for both languages and the shared services in relation with that, but I have a problem with the cost impact on each Government Department of the implementation of aspects of what is put forward in this Bill. Some control needs to be put in to ensure that the Bill does not run away with itself.

I, for one, come from the Ulster Scots background, as many Members will know, but I know and am friendly with fluent Irish speakers who were brought up as Protestants in Donegal and had to learn Irish as part of the culture where they lived. Language was used not as a cultural identity issue in Northern Ireland but as a weapon, and it continues to be.

[Paul Girvan]

I appreciate that some people try to steer away from that, but as the leader of our party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), mentioned, Danny Morrison said way back in the 1980s that each word spoken in Irish is a shot fired in relation to Irish liberty and freedom, so I think we need to be very careful about how the law is interpreted by those within the Unionist and Protestant communities. They do not necessarily buy into Linda Ervine's approach on this whole thing. I do not discount that she is there for the right reasons, but let us be honest: a large section of the Unionist community do not buy into that agenda because they believe that it has been used as such.

I believe that we need to use the opportunity in Committee to table amendments that will make the Bill acceptable. I am not saying that it is not acceptable as it is, but our party's amendments should be listened to, taken on board and respected, as we feel very much that we are being treated as second-class citizens because of the Bill's imbalance. It does not necessarily take into account the so-called "parity of esteem" that is peddled by everybody. That term is used to suit an agenda on many occasions. On this occasion, we will use it because we do not believe that we have parity of esteem in how the legislation has been measured out. I want to ensure that that is taken on board.

I appreciate that the Minister of State has listened to us and agreed to have a meeting. We will have that meeting—we want to put our message across, and we will do so—and we will also table amendments to ensure that we get the redress that is required to make the Bill acceptable. It is wrong to say that we accepted this when NDNA was brought forward. This legislation is not what we agreed to, and we have fought it tooth and nail the whole way through the process. We will continue to do so until we get that redress.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call the Front-Bench speakers, if there is to be a Division, I would welcome the names of the Tellers for the Noes. I call Tonia Antoniazzi.

4.37 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank colleagues from across the House for their contributions to this interesting and lively debate. It is perhaps unusual to say that discussing a matter in Parliament should serve to depoliticise it, but that is what the Bill rightly aims to do, by creating structures and legal protections for these languages—not simply preserving them but promoting them to and for everyone in Northern Ireland. Protections for national and cultural identity principles should be welcomed, ensuring that the Irish language and the language, art and literature of the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition are recognised not as the property of one section of the community or one political outlook, but as an important part of Northern Ireland's rich and diverse cultural heritage.

I note some of the conversations that have been had in the debate about language and growing up with a language. My father's parents were first-language Italian speakers, but they never spoke Italian to him, and my mother did not speak Welsh because it was not the done

thing. We have heard people talk about Polish, Chinese and sign language in Northern Ireland—those are all very important.

Before coming to this place, I spent 20 years of my life as a modern foreign languages teacher who grew up in Wales and did not learn Welsh. I am very proud of my Welsh culture and heritage and am very embarrassed to say that I did not embrace learning the language as a child because I had the opportunity to do other things. However, as a language teacher in Wales, I embraced Welsh because it brings communities together. As a teacher, you look at the language, your history and all the links of multilingualism and bring them together to create a positive community; that is what needs to be done here. Open your eyes to the opportunities and celebrate languages and your history together. I emphasise that because it is so important in these times.

As a Member for a Welsh constituency, I cannot help but compare the Bill to the radical changes that we have seen over the past decade with regard to the Welsh language. Within my lifetime, what was an issue of fierce political division has become a normal part of day-to-day life. The words used by the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) were, "It is now unremarkable." Is not that how it should be?

Every child learns Welsh in school. It is my great regret that my son never went to a Welsh-medium school, because that opportunity to be bilingual is a genuine gift. The ability to access public services in Welsh is enshrined in law. Legislation is brought and debated bilingually in the Senedd. You will hear Welsh in the city centre of Swansea or the smallest village in north Wales. It is unremarkable. There is, of course, still debate around the language today.

Earlier we heard it said that finances could be used elsewhere. That argument should not be weaponised against language. We want to remove that aspect, because language is so very important. Will the Minister, with the Secretary of State, commit to a timescale for the Bill? I would be grateful if he also addressed the questions about resourcing for the sector that have been asked by the Ulster-Scots Agency.

As colleagues have said, the Bill was born from drafts that were due to be taken forward in the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is regrettable that this legislation is being debated here, rather than in Stormont, but the Government are to be commended for bringing it forward and ensuring that commitments made in the NDNA agreement are honoured.

The bringing forward of this long called-for legislation is, along with a marked change in attitude regarding renegotiation of the protocol, a welcome change in tone and action. I hope it represents an end to the culture of missed deadlines and broken promises that has characterised much of the Government's approach to Northern Ireland—an approach that has only added to political instability and uncertainty.

Colleagues have spoken of the Bill's foundations being rooted in the principles of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement but, as Lord Murphy of Torfaen astutely noted in his contribution to the discussion in the other place, the Belfast/Good Friday agreement is not something one can pick and choose from; it is a package. And the key part of that package is a functioning Assembly and Executive. Those are the institutions where this debate,

and the scrutiny of this legislation, should be taking place, but as that is not possible, the Government are right to uphold commitments made to people in Northern Ireland, and the Labour party supports this legislation's swift passage.

4.43 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): What a debate it has been. It has been really excellent—wide-ranging; at times hopeful and optimistic; at times reflective and reassuring; at times, it must be said, fearful and disappointed. But it is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to respond to such a debate on such a sensitive subject.

The Bill, as has been said, will implement the draft legislation associated with the New Decade, New Agreement deal, which all parties signed up to. I listened very carefully to the speeches and will return to them in a moment. I really share hon. Members' hopes that these measures will be implemented in full by a future First Minister and Deputy First Minister, in a dynamic and timely manner, to help take Northern Ireland forward beyond these debates.

Yesterday I engaged with a range of language groups, which I found extremely helpful. I particularly want to thank Conradh na Gaeilge, Foras na Gaeilge, Linda Ervine of the Turas language programme—who has already been mentioned—Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, and the Ulster-Scots Agency.

Before I get into individual contributions, there have been some points of general agreement among all Members: the necessity of carrying forward the agreement that had been reached through NDNA, a lament that this House must pass this legislation and, of course, agreement on the extreme sensitivity of it. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that I, like the Secretary of State and everyone else in the House, share the great sense of loss and sorrow about the explosion in Creeslough. It is an absolute tragedy, and I put on the record the Government's thanks to the Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service for all they did to help out.

As I hope to elaborate on, this is a conversation about the future, and the future that we are creating for ourselves. If the Front Benchers will allow me, I will begin by responding to what the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) said, because like him, I approach this subject with a degree of trepidation and humility. I originally come from Cornwall. The Cornish language has been resuscitated since I left; I do not know any Cornish, but of course I do not have to pursue my Cornish roots, because my parents come from Hampshire. Nevertheless, I can see the great merits of people wishing to pursue their roots, and I know that today will be a great day of celebration for many people—I saw that in particular with Conradh na Gaeilge—because they love the language, its roots and where it takes them. That is a point that I will come back to.

The hon. Member for Arfon made the point that this has been liberating in Wales. As the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) said, he used the word "unremarkable." He talked about depoliticisation, and that is my ambition. The hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) mentioned Linda Ervine. I hope that she will not mind me saying that I was really moved by the efforts that the Turas language programme is making to

teach Unionists Irish—Unionists who recognise that they do not have to go back too many generations to find that their ancestors, too, were speaking Irish. The hon. Gentleman acknowledged that, and I am grateful to him; that means so much. Look at the conversation we have had in the House—so much hurt; layers upon layers of hurt over decades. People have been insulted on both sides. I have listened to Ulster Scots saying that they have been demeaned, and Irish speakers saying that their language has been demeaned. This just cannot go on. We are the authors of our future.

I do not need to repeat the points that have been made about the weaponisation of language; I will just say that someone said to me yesterday, "We are building bridges; politicians are burning them behind us." That should be a challenge to us all. Of course, the sorts of politicians who weaponise language as advancing nationalism have let the public down. All of us face the challenge of working out what future we are going to write, so I am grateful for the opportunity to begin my return to the Dispatch Box by agreeing with the Opposition Front Bench.

The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) asked me some specific questions, including about human rights and the connected classrooms programme. That programme is an important commitment, and officials continue to explore avenues of progress to deliver that commitment and facilitate the establishment of the programme. I hope to be in a position to update the House on progress shortly.

On the Castlereagh Foundation, I thank the former First Minister Arlene Foster, who chaired the advisory committee, and the rest of the committee. The advice was requested by the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), and the advisory committee was unable to support the progress of the UK Government commitment to Castlereagh at the time within the powers available to the Secretary of State. That led to the amendment of the legislation.

Turning to our general approach and human rights, the approach we are taking is consistent with the draft legislation published alongside NDNA; it really is for OICE to implement this in practice. Although the First Minister and Deputy First Minister may direct OICE, this matter would be transferred to it, and would be for it to take forward.

I thought my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) made an extremely well-informed speech. He picked up on the point about the Ulster-Scots Agency. We have received a number of representations about amendments, including from the Ulster-Scots Agency, and if I may, I will on this point turn to the request for amendments from DUP Members.

I have to say that we have listened to people request amendments to go further on the Irish language side, and the DUP has made very strong representations today. What the Government have tried to do, recognising that this really should have been taken through in the Assembly, is to stay absolutely faithful to the draft legislation. I am just slightly conscious that, if we do open the Bill up to amendments, we will hear many calls for reciprocity and a whole series of amendments one way or another.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Baker: I will come to the hon. Gentleman, but I have to say that I hear what he says about the need for parity in powers. I absolutely look forward to meeting him and his colleagues, and going through in detail how they think there has been some shortcoming. It is vitally important that we carry people with us, because I think this could be a great moment for moving on and achieving what has been achieved in Wales—depoliticising language. I think that would be a very good thing, and I look forward to meeting him, but I will give way to him briefly if he wishes.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister of State for giving way. The thrust of our request to him—in a very kindly but also very firm manner—is about the fact that the Irish language commissioner has clout, but the Ulster Scots commissioner does not have that clout. It is a visual issue. I made the point earlier that for those who love the Irish language, it is the language that is the main thrust of what they are about, but for Ulster Scots it is about all the other things. It has the history, the art, the stories, the poetry and the music—pipe bands have been mentioned, for instance—and they are just some of those things. When it comes to the discussions we are going to have about those things, I hope we can have equality. Let us have a state of equality. I want to be as equal as anybody else. I do not want to be in George Orwell’s “Animal Farm”, where some people are more equal than others. Well, I am not, and neither is anyone else on these Benches.

Mr Baker: I am most grateful. On step-in powers, can I just say, as I said in an intervention, that the Government would not wish to intervene routinely in devolved matters? The use of the powers here and elsewhere in the Bill would require the most careful consideration. The Government’s decision to include these powers was not taken lightly, but progress must be made to ensure that political stasis in Northern Ireland does not further frustrate this legislation. As some of the people I met said to me, they have waited a very long time for this moment.

I do not wish to take up disproportionate time in this debate—I know Members have many matters to discuss with me in meetings subsequently, before we come to further stages—so I will conclude by saying that this has been an extremely good debate, and I am very grateful to all Members who have participated. If I could say one other thing it is this: let us please use this moment to have a new beginning for Northern Ireland on the issue of language—a new beginning that people from all parts of the communities can celebrate, and one that can help us all write a more positive future. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 380, Noes 4.

Division No. 56]

[4.52 pm

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel	Amesbury, Mike
Afolami, Bim	Anderson, Fleur
Afriyie, Adam	Anderson, Lee
Aiken, Nickie	Andrew, rh Stuart
Aldous, Peter	Ansell, Caroline
Ali, Rushanara	Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ali, Tahir	Argar, rh Edward

Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Daby, Janet
Atkins, Victoria	David, Wayne
Bacon, Gareth	Davies, David T. C.
Bailey, Shaun	Davies, Gareth
Baillie, Siobhan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Craig Whittaker</i>)	Davies, Dr James
Baker, Mr Steve	Davies, Mims
Barker, Paula	Davis, rh Mr David
Baron, Mr John	Davison, Dehenna
Baynes, Simon	Debbonaire, Thangam
Beckett, rh Margaret	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Begum, Apsana	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Benn, rh Hilary	Dines, Miss Sarah
Benton, Scott	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Berry, rh Jake	Double, Steve
Betts, Mr Clive	Doughty, Stephen
Bhatti, Saqib	Dowden, rh Oliver
Blackman, Bob	Doyle-Price, Jackie
Blake, Olivia	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Blomfield, Paul	Duddridge, James
Blunt, Crispin	Duguid, David
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Dunne, rh Philip
Bowie, Andrew	Eagle, Dame Angela
Bradley, Ben	Eastwood, Colum
Bradley, rh Karen	Eastwood, Mark
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Edwards, Jonathan
Brennan, Kevin	Efford, Clive
Brereton, Jack	Elliott, Julie
Bridgen, Andrew	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Brine, Steve	Esterson, Bill
Bristow, Paul	Eustice, rh George
Britcliffe, Sara	Evans, Dr Luke
Brown, Ms Lyn	Evennett, rh Sir David
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Everitt, Ben
Browne, Anthony	Fabricant, Michael
Bryant, Chris	Farris, Laura
Burgon, Richard	Farron, Tim
Butler, Dawn	Farry, Stephen
Butler, Rob	Fell, Simon
Byrne, Ian	Firth, Anna
Cairns, rh Alun	Fletcher, Katherine
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Fletcher, Nick
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Foord, Richard
Carter, Andy	Foster, Kevin
Cartlidge, James	Fovargue, Yvonne
Cates, Miriam	Fox, rh Dr Liam
Caulfield, Maria	Foxcroft, Vicky
Chalk, Alex	Freeman, George
Chamberlain, Wendy	French, Mr Louie
Champion, Sarah	Fuller, Richard
Charalambous, Bambos	Gardiner, Barry
Chope, Sir Christopher	Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Churchill, Jo	Gibb, rh Nick
Clark, rh Greg	Gideon, Jo
Clarke, Theo (<i>Proxy vote cast by Craig Whittaker</i>)	Glen, John
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Glindon, Mary
Clarkson, Chris	Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Gove, rh Michael
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Grant, Mrs Helen
Colburn, Elliot	Grayling, rh Chris
Cooper, Daisy	Green, Chris
Cooper, rh Yvette	Green, rh Damian
Coutinho, Claire	Green, Kate
Coyle, Neil	Green, Sarah
Crabb, rh Stephen	Greenwood, Lilian
Creasy, Stella	Griffith, Andrew
Crosbie, Virginia	Griffith, Dame Nia
Crouch, Tracey	Grundy, James
Cruddas, Jon	Haigh, Louise
Cryer, John	Halfon, rh Robert
Cunningham, Alex	Hall, Luke
	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
	Hammond, Stephen

Hancock, rh Matt
 Hanna, Claire
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollern, Kate
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howell, Paul
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Khan, Afzal
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Lightwood, Simon
 Logan, Mark
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lynch, Holly
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Maclean, Rachel
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mangnall, Anthony

Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, James
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nandy, Lisa
 Nici, Lia
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Norris, Alex
 O'Brien, Neil
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opperman, Guy
 Owen, Sarah
 Pawsey, Mark
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Roberts, Rob
 Robinson, Mary
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean

Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shah, Naz
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Royston
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spellar, rh John
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stevens, Jo
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sultana, Zarah
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomas, Gareth

Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Trickett, Jon
 Trott, Laura
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wiggins, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williams, Hywel
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Winter, Beth
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Young, Jacob
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Nigel Huddleston and
 Stuart Anderson**

NOES

Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Girvan, Paul
 Lockhart, Carla
 Shannon, Jim

Tellers for the Noes:
**Sammy Wilson and
 Gavin Robinson**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time.

IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE (NORTHERN IRELAND) BILL [LORDS]: PROGRAMME

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing
Order No. 83A(7)),*

That the following provisions shall apply to the Identity and
Language (Northern Ireland) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole
House.

Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and on Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee shall (so far as not previously
concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the
commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(3) Any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion five hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE (NORTHERN IRELAND) BILL [LORDS]: MONEY

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Bill [*Lords*], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State under or by virtue of the Act.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Penny Mordaunt relating to Voting by Proxy (Amendment and Extension) not later than one hour after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this Order, or at 7.00pm, whichever is the later; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, until any hour, and may be entered upon after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

Question agreed to.

Voting by Proxy (Amendment and Extension)

[*Relevant documents: First Report of the Procedure Committee, Proxy voting and the presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall, HC 383; and the Government Response.*]

5.7 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):
I beg to move,

That:

(1) this House

- (a) believes that Members experiencing serious long-term illness or injury should be entitled, but not required, to discharge their responsibilities to vote in this House by proxy, under a pilot scheme issued by the Speaker and reviewed by the Procedure Committee;
- (b) directs the Speaker to amend the scheme governing the operation of proxy voting in accordance with paragraphs 1-40 of the First Report of the Procedure Committee, HC 383, on Proxy voting and the presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall; and
- (c) directs the Procedure Committee to review the operation of the temporary amendment to Standing Order No. 39A no later than 17 March 2023.

(2) the following amendments to Standing Order No. 39A (Voting by proxy) be made:

- (a) in paragraph 2, delete “absence from the precincts of the House for”;
- (b) in paragraph 2, delete “childbirth or care of an infant or newly adopted child” and insert—
“*(a) childbirth;*
(b) care of an infant or newly adopted child; and
(c) complications relating to childbirth, miscarriage or baby loss”; and
- (c) delete paragraph 7.

(3) the following amendment to Standing Order No. 39A (Voting by proxy) be made, and have effect from 17 October until 30 April 2023: in paragraph (2) insert “*(d) serious long-term illness or injury*”.

It is a pleasure to open this debate on the proposals put forward by the Procedure Committee in its first report of this Session. This is a House matter that the Government have been very happy to facilitate time for so that Members can consider and debate the reforms in that report and associated changes proposed to the Standing Orders. The House has been asked to consider the expansion of the proxy voting scheme to cover long-term illness or serious injury under a pilot scheme lasting from 17 October 2022 to 30 April 2023, with a review to be completed by the Procedure Committee by 17 March 2023.

I think that all Members of the House will agree that Members should no longer hear the words “Could you have your chemo on another day?”, “We will send an ambulance for you so you can vote”, or “Thank you so much for delaying your c-section to vote in this critical debate.”

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): On reflection, does my right hon. Friend not think that it might be better to allow a longer period of time to elapse so that a fuller evaluation can take place, before the Procedure Committee is invited to make a further decision?

Penny Mordaunt: We want to get on with these measures. There has been careful consideration from a number of Committees in arriving at them. We want to get cracking with them, but the evaluation will be a matter for the Committee.

In addition, if agreed, this motion will make changes to the existing proxy voting arrangements by removing the bar on participation in proceedings while in possession of a proxy vote; providing equal rights in relation to proxy voting for parental absence for Members who are biological fathers, the partner of a person giving birth or an adoptive parent; and incorporating complications relating to childbirth into the main body of the Standing Order.

Any changes to the system of voting in the House of Commons should always be given careful consideration. I am grateful to the Procedure Committee and its Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), for their work on this issue over recent years.

In February 2018, the House agreed that MPs

“who have had a baby or adopted a child should for a period of time be entitled, but not required, to discharge their responsibilities to vote in this House by proxy.”

That was followed by the agreement of a pilot scheme in January 2019 that was made permanent in September 2020. Since then, we have taken further important steps to meet the needs of new mothers, fathers and adoptive parents. In January 2021, the House endorsed a Government-proposed Standing Order change to expand the scheme to allow MPs who have had a baby or adopted a child to be entitled, but not required, to cast votes in the House by proxy. That system is currently in place.

Members will remember that the scheme was expanded for reasons of the pandemic for long periods in 2020 to good effect. When the system of proxy voting for baby leave was introduced, the House discussed the scope of the scheme in great detail. It was felt, on balance, that the anonymity of slipping and pairing was preferable for Members who were ill or had caring responsibilities, rather than declaring personal circumstances to qualify for a proxy vote during a difficult time. I understand that some Members will retain that view. That is why I agree with the Procedure Committee that the expansion of the proxy voting scheme should not affect the pairing and nodding-through mechanisms, which will remain available to Members.

Pairing has been, and continues to be, a valuable practice that allows Members to be absent from votes, whether that is as a result of ill health or other reasons. The Whips Offices on both sides of the House work hard to ensure that the system functions as well as possible for individual Members.

Nevertheless, since the earlier conversations about the scope of the scheme, there have been growing calls for expanded proxy voting to include those suffering from serious illness or long-term medical health conditions. That was the overwhelming evidence in the Procedure Committee’s inquiry, and the Government have a great deal of sympathy with Members in that position.

The Government welcome the Procedure Committee’s consideration of the evidence relating to the expansion of the scheme. In establishing a pilot to trial the expansion of the proxy voting scheme, the House would be recognising

the importance of creating a more inclusive culture and working environment in Parliament and continuing the progress made in this area.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I hope, as I think we all do, that the pilot scheme will become a reality in its entirety, because society is changing. There is maternal leave and paternal leave, and other businesses understand that special conditions can be in place for people who are disabled. We as the mother of Parliaments—I say that collectively—should also move with modern changes in society and understand that we must have a workplace that endorses all the things that happen to our constituents out there in Strangford and elsewhere.

Penny Mordaunt: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I know that many Members of the House gave evidence to the inquiry. This is not about the merits of those individual cases but, clearly, this needs to be trialled and we want to ensure that that is brought forward as swiftly as possible.

It is important that all Members of this House can participate in our votes. Divisions here change people’s lives across the country, so the legitimacy of the system must be above reproach to ensure that we maintain the full confidence of our constituents. Proxy voting meets that test. It has worked well for Members who are new mothers or fathers, allowing them to continue to serve their constituents while dealing with their family obligations. We have confidence that extending its scope under these pilot arrangements will work well.

I do not wish to detain the House for too long. However, the motion proposes one or two other changes that hon. Members will wish to consider carefully. I am grateful to the House authorities for providing an explanatory note ahead of the debate.

I wish briefly to cover one proposed change. The motion removes the requirement that Members be absent from the House to exercise their proxy vote. That follows representations from Members who might wish, for example, to participate in an urgent question or statement for which the suspension of a proxy vote with notice is impossible. The House will note the concerns raised both by the Government and by the Procedure Committee that this measure is likely to be of most benefit to Members who are based relatively close to London, and that it could introduce pressure on Members to participate in proceedings while on leave for parental duties or because of matters of ill health.

As the Committee points out:

“Absence from the Estate serves a dual purpose: it explains why a Member is able to vote by proxy but also affords a degree of protection to Members taking care of very young children.”

Members will be able to make use of proxy votes on a voluntary basis and in the same spirit. It will be entirely voluntary, and it will be for each Member to determine whether they wish to participate in a debate at short notice. I assure Members that, in introducing this change, the Government do not envisage any change to the role of MPs, or how they perform in this place their duty to their constituents. Nevertheless, there may be circumstances in which this change will serve a helpful purpose by enabling Members to participate in proceedings without suspending their proxy. Of course, Members should not attempt to vote in person in those circumstances.

[*Penny Mordaunt*]

The Government believe that a pilot scheme in which the effect of this expansion is carefully measured is a sensible first step, as it is imperative that the voting process remains robust and transparent and that the personal accountability of each Member's vote is not lost. The review conducted by the Procedure Committee will be essential in determining whether the changes to the scheme are made permanent.

As Members of this House, we all have a duty to ensure that Parliament is inclusive for all Members and their circumstances, be they parental responsibilities or long-term illness, which the proposed pilot scheme would cover. The Procedure Committee found that the

“overwhelming balance of evidence...was in favour of an extension of proxy voting”

to include those areas. Ultimately, it is for the House to consider whether it thinks it right that the proxy voting system be expanded. For my part, I hope that the House will support the Procedure Committee's recommendations. I commend the motion to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Leader of the House.

5.17 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for moving this important motion. It is disappointing that we had to wait until after the summer recess for this debate; I can only hope that it has inspired her to press ahead with other important matters of House business such as the Members' code of conduct, which we will be partially debating next Tuesday—but that is for another time.

I thank the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), her Committee and its staff for doing such excellent work in pressing on with the issue and pursuing it so determinedly, and for the sensitive way in which they conducted their inquiries. I have already welcomed the publication of their report, read it carefully and noted its recommendations. The Committee clearly received an

“overwhelming balance of evidence...in favour of proxy voting being extended to include Members suffering from...long-term illness or injury.”

I am happy to assure the right hon. Lady that she has my full support in introducing this pilot scheme.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Members for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) and for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who both gave very personal evidence to the Committee about the difficult challenges that they faced with long-term illness. We all know at least one colleague who, despite being seriously unwell, has wanted to drag themselves in for a vote and carry out their most basic duty as a Member of this House at a time when it may have been unwise to do so.

I wish also to put on record my support for the counter to that. We also know of the really supportive work done by the Whips Offices. I was well supported by my Whip throughout the time that I was having treatment, so I was able to stay away and not have to think about it. That is a very personal choice and I fully recognise that there will be Members with different views and different needs, but I want to make it clear

that I am glad that the option of nodding through and pairing remains, and that this measure is therefore optional.

Parliament ought to be a model workplace at the forefront of rights at work and accessibility. I think that the motion strikes the right balance: it is proportionate and it is welcome.

As the Women and Equalities Committee has recommended, addressing outdated, entrenched, gendered stereotypes about childcare is essential. Members should have the option to take shared leave, and I am glad that today's motion could resolve that.

I also want to put on record my support for the decoupling of a proxy vote from restrictions on participating in other parliamentary proceedings. The Committee understood and recognised the need for “keeping-in-touch days”, as they may be called. Some Members will want, and feel able to, come in occasionally to make an intervention, but will not necessarily feel able to stay physically for votes or return the next day. I commend the Committee for recognising the benefits of such flexibility. I know that that range of choices will aid recovery and improve wellbeing, as, of course, will “nodding through” and pairing.

I am aware of the concern that has been raised over privacy for Members, which is, perhaps, why I am referring again to “nodding through” and pairing. There will be Members who want to make that choice for that reason. I was reassured to see no proposed changes in the mechanisms that exist as political agreements between Whips Offices, because respect for privacy is important. When they wish to do so, Members should be able to—and, under this proposed arrangement, they can—continue to choose that more discreet option.

I have a few questions for the Leader of the House, and possibly for the Chair of the Procedure Committee as well. Can the Leader of the House tell us what other considerations there have been about maintaining privacy for Members if that is what they wish? Can she, or perhaps the Chair of the Procedure Committee, give us a bit more detail about how the scheme might work in practice? What thresholds have been discussed in relation to the severity of illness or injury that will qualify a Member for a proxy vote?

Has thought been given to the possibility that the pilot may have to be extended if it is not used for the very legitimate possible reason that Members simply do not need it during the six months that we have allocated? I hope that no Members will need it, but they may, and it may be for a happy reason. There may be all sorts of reasons unconnected with illness. If Members do need it because of illness, we will be able to test the parameters of the pilot, but if they do not, I suggest that we will need to extend it. It would be wrong for the scheme to be dismissed because of low take-up, or not to go through some of the complications that may arise if we do not test it in practice.

Given that this is a pilot scheme, may I ask whether the Procedure Committee will have time to assess the way in which it works? Can the Leader of the House update us on her discussions with the Chair of the Procedure Committee about how the pilot will be assessed? What criteria will be used, and will this involve an assessment of Members who proactively do not want to be part of the scheme, but want their considerations to be heard?

This pilot of a very well-considered proposal has come at the right time. In fact, we could all probably say that its time was probably last year or the year before, but I am glad to be here at this point, when we can say that we are taking another step forward towards making our Parliament truly one in which all can serve, regardless of health, disability or childbirth status.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Procedure Committee.

5.22 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): Let me start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for finding time for the debate. It is very welcome that time is provided in the House for us to debate these matters properly. A habit had been developing of making such debates “nod or nothing”, which did not give Members an opportunity to have their say about the important matters which govern how we best represent our constituents.

As my right hon. Friend said in her opening remarks, proxy voting is a relatively new procedure for the House. It was initially introduced in 2018, but, as my right hon. Friend said, it was in May 2019 that that the pilot scheme for proxy voting during baby leave was introduced following a report from our predecessor Committee, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker). The current Committee, which I now chair, reviewed the pilot scheme and produced a report in September 2020, making the baby leave scheme permanent.

During that process, we were acutely aware of calls to extend proxy voting to other areas, but we wanted to ensure that the review focused on the way in which the proxy scheme worked for those on baby leave—a very “known” event which is very public. People are very aware that their Members of Parliament, or their spouses, are having babies. I think that that has improved this place, and made it a much more welcoming environment for new parents.

At the time we issued our report in September 2020 we were in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, and at that same time the House agreed that proxy voting should be extended for matters of illness or being unable to attend this place due to the coronavirus. At that point, it was a widely used measure. For very good reasons, Members were not expected to be in the Division Lobby. That was absolutely right, because it would not have been a safe place for them. A very difficult process of voting with social distancing was introduced, and it was quite right that proxy votes were available to pretty much anyone who wished to use them by the end of the pandemic. I think there was a point when only about 14 Members had not taken up a proxy vote.

I want to reassure any Members who are concerned that we are going to start down that route again that that is not what this scheme envisages. This will be a much more restrictive scheme which we do not envisage being used by more than a small number of Members at any one time. However, it was clear from all the evidence that we took that, for those Members who need it, the scheme will be the most valuable way to enable them to represent their constituents.

I see that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) is here, and I know she is going to contribute to the debate at some point. Hers was one of the most overwhelming pieces of evidence given to the Committee. She said that representing our constituents and being able to have our votes recorded was an incredibly important part of the democratic process, and that it cannot be right in a modern Parliament that wants to give open access to everybody if Members feel unable to do that or if they feel pressured to put their health in jeopardy in order to come into this place and vote.

I am pleased that the Government have tabled this motion. I want to make a point about confidentiality, because that is something that I am nervous about. I am not going to say that I am not concerned about it. We toyed with this issue on the Committee: how can we ensure that someone going through a deeply personal and private experience can have the confidentiality they need when taking up this scheme? It is clear that we have to ensure that there is transparency to constituents around voting, but that transparency could impact on people’s personal situations.

The first point is that nobody needs to take up the opportunity. If Members do not wish to take a proxy vote, they do not have to do so. I am pleased that pairing will still be available, even though it relies on trust and on the relations between the usual channels working. It is an important part of the way we conduct our business. For any Member who is away for just a short amount of time, pairing is a good way to deal with these matters. We heard evidence that if a Member was unable to attend for a few weeks, their constituents did not notice, but there was strong evidence that after a certain period of time, they did start to notice that their Member was not voting. It is a matter for each of us how we represent our constituents and what we are prepared to say in the public domain, but the evidence we received from the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and many others who had gone through or were going through long-term medical conditions was overwhelming: they said that the availability of this option, for those who wished to take it, was incredibly important. So I am pleased that that is going to be the case.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) asked about the consideration given by the Committee to eligibility—I feel like I am answering a statement here. We came to the view that a scheme should be designed to allow the Speaker the final say on the provision of medical evidence for someone needing to take time away from this place in order to get the treatment they need and have the best chance of recovery from whatever their condition may be. It should be noted that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority allows Members of Parliament an additional budget for staff if they are away for three months or more. I would have thought that is a very good example, as three months feels about the right amount of leave needed to qualify for a proxy. Clearly, it will be on a case-by-case basis. We did not want to dictate which conditions qualify and which do not, but we were keen to make sure there is flexibility for Mr Speaker.

The hon. Lady also asked about time for the review, and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), who is a previous Chair of the

[Karen Bradley]

Procedure Committee—I served under him—is right. I am slightly concerned about the timeframe for the review, because I would not want so few Members to take up these proxies that we do not have evidence on which to operate. The Leader of the House is extraordinarily pragmatic and helpful, and I am sure she will work with me if it is felt that the pilot needs to be extended slightly before the Committee reviews it. We will, of course, find time for whatever review is required.

Finally, we deliberately decoupled any parliamentary absence from the baby leave proxy when it was introduced, so that no new parent felt pressured to come to this place. They were allowed to have proper time with their newborn, in the way that all new parents should have, but we learned during coronavirus that there are many occasions when it is important for Members to be able to contribute to debates and then to exercise their vote via proxy, both for keeping in touch and for recovery. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford that being able to come in for a few days at a time, to be able to take part in debates while still receiving treatment, and still to be able to go home and recover, is incredibly important.

I finish by thanking the other members of the Procedure Committee and my fantastic Clerks, who worked incredibly hard on this report. Without them, we would not have had the superb report that is before the House today. I fully support the motion, and I hope the House will agree to it unanimously.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson, Deidre Brock.

5.32 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for moving this motion.

This appears to be one of those rare and happy occasions when agreement breaks out across this place, so I do not propose to speak for very long. I am conscious that many colleagues have been involved in exploring these issues in great detail for some time, and they will want to speak, so I will keep my remarks brief.

I begin by paying tribute to all the Clerks, as the convener of the Procedure Committee, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), mentioned, and all the Members who contributed to this report, through either their work or their evidence. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) for her tireless and determined work on this issue, and for her willingness to draw on her own very challenging experiences of serious illness to advocate for these important changes to this place's voting schemes.

The SNP firmly believes that politics and democracy belong to everyone, and we are committed to Parliaments being as open as possible. The Scottish Parliament is currently conducting an inquiry, launched by Holyrood's presiding officer, into parliamentary procedures and practices, and we look forward to its results. We welcome the progress made in this motion. It makes politics and Parliament more accessible to everyone, which can only be a good thing.

It was in September 2020 that this House agreed to make permanent arrangements for proxy voting for MPs who are absent from Westminster because of childbirth or caring for an infant or newly adopted child. It is certainly more than time for this to be extended to cover Members with serious long-term illness or injury. The case for extending the scheme was already strong before covid-19, but it is even clearer now, in our post-pandemic society, that as other industries adapt and modernise their work patterns and practices, the time has come for this place to do likewise.

As the Australian academic Dr Sonia Palmieri comments in the report,

“the changing membership of Parliaments and wider changes in society created a drive for greater flexibility in order to create greater productivity and diversity.”

Our Parliaments must reflect that. The overwhelming balance of evidence heard by the Procedure Committee was in favour of an extension of proxy voting to include serious long-term illness or injury. Some Members have touched on how the pairing scheme can work well in the case of short-term illness or injury, such as a bad bout of flu. However, pairing disenfranchises two Members and it is also difficult to explain this somewhat opaque system to constituents. Proxy voting is generally simpler and more democratic, and I have confidence that the protections suggested will protect confidentiality adequately and appropriately. We need to ensure that Members advised by their doctor to take a prolonged period off have better accessibility to still being able to represent their constituents. Pairing will still be available to those who prefer it, and will continue to be available to those with short-term illnesses or injuries.

Constituents should not be disenfranchised because their Member of Parliament has a long-term medical condition, a disability, caring responsibilities for an infant or newly adopted child, or complications relating to childbirth, miscarriage or baby loss. Furthermore, I was sorry to read that Members taking long-term absences have highlighted the abuse they have received on social media for missing votes through no fault of their own, because there was no system in place to use their vote.

I should state that I also support the Women and Equalities Committee's call for biological fathers to have an equal opportunity to take advantage of the proxy voting scheme. It is important we do not entrench gendered stereotypes about childcare, and I hope the House will return to this in the future. I also continue to favour the continuation of the electronic voting system introduced during the pandemic. Clearly, it is a step too far at this stage, but I hope that we will be able to come back to it.

I will leave it there, but I commend the progress made towards this pilot. It respects the needs of constituents and Members. As the academic Professor Sarah Childs from the University of Edinburgh noted in her contribution to the Committee's inquiry, the principle of presenting “‘role model’ inclusive workplace best practice, setting the standard at home and abroad”

is an important function for any Parliament. There is more to be done on accessibility, as I have mentioned. The UK still ranks very poorly on maternity provision, and I ask the House to note that the Scottish Parliament allows MSPs to take their babies into its debating Chamber, as it is considered essential that parents with babies are able to be fully involved in the business of

Parliament, which includes the Chamber. However, I am sure that is something this House will return to in the future, and I really commend the report and all the work put into it. This is a good day for the House.

5.37 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): As a proud member of the Procedure Committee, I rise to support the motion and to commend the excellent work that the Chairman does. The Clerks and staff are excellent, and we have seen her contribution and those of all the members in the report.

When I became a Member of Parliament in 2019, I was most intrigued from day one by the comparisons between the institutions in which I had served. As a military man for 27 years, I was proud to serve an organisation that got the job done. It was very efficient and slick. People knew their place and it was very output-focused. Coming to Westminster, I was struck straightaway by just how quirky and unique this place is, with the obsession with standard operating procedures, dogma and process. It has baffled me to this day, three years on, that we are not more efficient here in how we work. Adjusting to what one might call “antiquity” was not necessarily easy for me, which is probably why I joined the Procedure Committee, because I felt as though I could add some value to what we were doing. Today’s motion is a classic example of where we can add some value.

Parliamentarians should, by nature, be considering ways of becoming more relevant, entering the 21st century and bringing Parliament to the fore in terms of modern ways of working. I completely agree with the shadow Leader of the House that this is about modern ways of working to benefit any modern employer. We are and we should be modern employees. We are adults and we are paid to do a job; we serve our constituents. At least give us a say on how we do that business.

When we consider what an MP actually does, we see that the roles and responsibilities are huge. They are vast—we work around the clock, we work really hard and we believe in what we are doing—but if we analyse it and strip it down, the only non-discretionary thing that we have to do is voting. We have to come here and vote on motions and legislation, which is what our constituents expect us to do, so why would we not make that most fundamental priority fit for purpose? Why, as elected Members of Parliament, would we not make it easier for ourselves to do that? Why would we not do what is necessary to help ourselves in that important task?

So in a nutshell, it is absolutely right that we support the motion today and that we consider extending proxy voting. In my view, it is crazy that Members of Parliament—adults who are ill or injured, who are caring for loved ones at home, with the most desperate, compassionate circumstances, or who are similarly indisposed—cannot register a vote without physically being here. Those who were here before 2019 may recall the scenes of one particular Member being wheeled through the voting Lobby in a wheelchair, suffering from a brain tumour. It is absolutely outrageous that we demean ourselves and what we do here by forcing that to happen.

This is also about childbirth and complications arising from childbirth, and about maternity and paternity leave, and there are many other examples of where we could and should extend proxy voting. We did electronic voting during the pandemic, and my word, it worked so effectively, didn’t it? Why would we not be able to exercise a vote by electronic means? I understand why that is not with us now and why it is necessary to be here in person, and I am a great fan of that, but it was so easy to vote in 2020 using our phones, so why should it not be as easy for us all to vote in the same way or via alternative means if there is a legitimate reason why we cannot physically be here?

So should we remove the bar to participation in proceedings while in possession of a proxy vote? Yes. Should we incorporate

“complications relating to childbirth, miscarriage or baby loss”

into the body of the Standing Order? Yes. And should we temporarily allow Members experiencing long-term illness or injury to use a proxy vote? Absolutely, yes. This is what the military might call a no-brainer: it has to happen. Of course, as we heard earlier from the Chair, the devil is in the detail, and there will be work to define the exact qualifying criteria for a proxy vote. That will come from the pilot and through trial and error, but there is no question but that this is the right thing to do.

Finally, I commend to the House the work of the Procedure Committee more widely. It is an often forgotten Committee, but one that had real utility during the pandemic, in ensuring that we could continue working in that awful, difficult circumstance. Of course, we must challenge dogma and orthodoxy. We are not here to stand still as parliamentarians. We are here to force the agenda, move forward and make sure that this place is fit for purpose. Parliament must be relevant. I therefore look forward to many more such motions as we go forward.

5.43 pm

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for bringing this motion forward today.

“I’m not broken; Westminster is.”

I first uttered those words nine months ago, having launched a campaign to introduce the very measures that we are debating. They are measures to benefit our constituents, because let us be clear: they are the ones disadvantaged when their Member of Parliament cannot vote on their behalf. I must say that seeing three Leaders of the House over the duration of my campaign and the Procedure Committee’s inquiry really gave my campaign slogan a bit more credibility than I was initially hoping for. This place is broken; this place is exclusive; this place must enact more reforms. But today we can start to change that. Today, almost exactly two years since I walked out the door of the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital in Glasgow, we are starting to make this place just a bit more progressive. We can make this small but mighty change that will see no constituent disenfranchised due to the ill health of an elected Member.

I did not choose to fall ill; no one does. I did not choose four months of hospital stay and life-saving surgery, and I did not choose to live my life with a disability. It has been a hell of a long journey back to this place, but I would do it all again, because representing

[Amy Callaghan]

the people of East Dunbartonshire is an absolute privilege. It should not have to be this difficult. At a time when I needed my workplace to show compassion and understanding, the procedures were not there. This place legislates for equality but could not provide it for its own elected Members.

But this is not about me. If this is the struggle that I and many others across this House have faced, I shudder to think what rogue employers are doing to our constituents the length and breadth of these four nations; to people who just need some understanding and time as they recover from ill health. This place sets the tone for a society that enables those who are fully able and further restricts the vulnerable. Let us change that today.

This place can be so much more. Irrespective of politics and the constitution, this place should be a force for good. This place should act with courtesy, respect, equality and inclusivity—hallmarks of how we want our society to function, from the Commons to our communities. It is our communities that look to us to provide. We are servants of the public. Our constituents—the people of East Dunbartonshire—should look to this place for examples of good practice. Their voices should never be silenced.

Voting by proxy, promoting inclusivity and providing adjustments for those with a disability gives every workplace across these four nations the standard to strive towards. I am particularly grateful that, under this scheme, proxy voting does not hinder participation. I discussed this in my evidence to the Committee and also read it from others. This is what a phased return to work should look like and this will be a shining example to people across our constituencies.

The former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), gave me his time and let me nip his ear off on numerous occasions about this issue, and for that I am incredibly grateful. I also welcome the new Leader of the House to her role and wish her well. The issue of proxy voting has always been about people, not politics, and I would be very happy to meet her to talk about my experiences and how we can make this place better for future generations. My deep thanks go to the Chair of the Procedure Committee, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley). Lastly, I give heartfelt thanks to Mr Speaker for his unwavering support. He was generous with his time and advice and he gave me reassurance that the House was taking this issue seriously and that we absolutely had to get it right.

It is not lost on me that I have pushed boundaries and made some people feel uncomfortable, but I make no apologies for that. Disability, accessibility and making this place more inclusive sometimes means having awkward conversations. I hope that, after this debate, I feel proud and reassured that the next Amy Callaghan—am I allowed to say that?—will not have this battle on their hands. Let us make this a start: the start of a process of change where this place can become a beacon of light, shining by way of promoting equality for people right across our communities, and becoming the example of an inclusive Parliament.

When I walk out of the Chamber for the last time, I hope to do so proudly, leaving this place in a better state than when I joined it. With everyone's help today,

we can begin that process. Madam Deputy Speaker, I am not broken, and today Westminster might just get a wee bit better.

5.48 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): I think that there is only one Amy Callaghan, and the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire has just proven that with one of the most eloquent speeches that many of us will have heard in this House. I congratulate her immensely on everything that she has achieved.

I think the hon. Member alluded to the point that, if we started from scratch, we would not invent the current system for voting in Divisions in this House. Crowding into Lobbies to queue up for an individual headcount is a colossal waste of time and resources.

The card reader system has marginally improved things, but we still waste hours, if not days, each year simply queuing up to vote. Anything that improves the experience and accessibility of voting in Divisions, however marginal, is to be welcomed.

During the pandemic, the then Leader of the House—now, quite remarkably, the Business Secretary—made great play of the historic and

“absolute, unequivocal constitutional right of Members to attend Parliament”,—[*Official Report*, 16 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 1172.]

which, he repeatedly reminded us, dates back to at least 1340. Of course he was correct: we are privileged to have an absolute right to attend Parliament.

I completely agree with the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) that, ultimately, the purpose of attending is first and foremost to vote. We have an absolute right to vote in this House, but we do not have an absolute right to speak. We can do our best to get on the Order Paper or to catch the Speaker's eye, but there is rarely, if ever, an absolute guarantee of being called to speak, so ultimately it is through voting that we can be certain of exercising our mandates to represent our constituents.

However, there are times when attending Parliament is difficult, if not impossible. The House eventually recognised that, with a system of proxy votes for baby leave. Even in a few short years, that experience has been overwhelmingly positive and has evolved and developed. Anyone who would suggest rolling it back would find very little appetite at all for doing so.

Extending proxy votes to Members in other unavoidable situations that make attendance difficult is the natural next step. The Procedure Committee heard many important personal examples, and we have just heard one, incredibly powerfully, on the Floor of the Chamber. The broad consensus for today's motion is to be welcomed, as is everything in the Procedure Committee's report. I echo other Members of the Committee in thanking the Clerks for their outstanding work, as always, in assisting with its production.

Having served on the Committee from 2015 to 2017, it has been a fascinating experience to return to it in this Parliament. I agree with the Chair that perhaps there will be a little flexibility to let the pilot scheme breathe, given the delays in getting this motion to the Floor of the House in the first place, but I slightly disagree with her when I say that, in reviewing the operation of the scheme, I hope we can consider whether there is room to go further or do things a little bit differently.

The “proxies for all” system that existed during the pandemic operated incredibly successfully and removed any question of what the reason was, what the qualifications were or why people had to be absent at any given time. It also remained voluntary throughout the pandemic. Members did not have to sign up for a proxy vote; they could attend if they wanted to, or make an arrangement for pairing, or to have a slip or to be nodded through, using the other mechanisms that exist.

It is worth exploring how the system might evolve, and that includes looking again at remote voting, because it worked extremely well and ultimately that is where the future of a modern, 21st-century Parliament should lie.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my surprise and puzzlement that most people are not allowed to have a vote counted if they do not physically go through the Lobby, but there is absolutely no requirement on us to have listened to a single word of the debate? We do not need to know what it is we are voting on, as long as we turn up. Does he understand why my constituents, and possibly his, think that that in itself is something strange?

Patrick Grady: Yes, my hon. Friend makes a good point. The Chamber is maybe not quite as full as it ought to be for a debate of this importance, but I am sure that other hon. Members, wherever they might be, are following our proceedings live—as no doubt are the many thousands of people tuning in to the live stream and to BBC coverage and so on. There are a lot of different ways now to engage with parliamentary proceedings, both for members of the public and for those of us who, for whatever length of time, are Members of Parliament.

We only have to look at the Scottish Parliament to see how, when it was first set up 20 years ago, it went out of its way to become that kind of modern exemplar, adopting fixed decision times and electronic voting. Similar systems are in place in devolved legislatures and, indeed, local council chambers across these islands. In Holyrood they have continued to use remote voting since the pandemic, which is of huge assistance to Members of the Scottish Parliament who have remote constituencies, caring responsibilities or other kinds of accessibility requirements.

If Parliament—any Parliament, including the future independent Parliament of Scotland—is to be inclusive and truly representative of our modern and diverse society, then participation for its elected Members must be as straightforward and as intelligible to the outside observer as possible. Proxy voting means that Members are not forced into an opaque pairing system or the nonsense of nodding through, which is essentially a proxy voting system but means that Members—I have experienced this as I have had to nod people through in the past—have to stay somewhere else on the estate but are excused from having to go through the Lobbies. That does not help people who have difficult conditions for which they should really be at home recuperating and regaining their strength. The extension of the scheme will allow constituents to be represented even when a Member is indisposed through no fault of their own.

Karen Bradley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Patrick Grady: I am happy to give way to the Chair of the Procedure Committee.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is a valuable member of the Committee. I want to reassure him that many people who are not here are watching the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke), who is availing herself of the proxy vote for baby leave, has just texted me to say how pleased she is that the debate is happening and how much she wants the extension to go through, so there are Members observing who might not be in the Chamber.

Patrick Grady: I entirely agree. That exactly proves the point. Many Members are in their offices right now catching up on their constituency correspondence, but they will have the Chamber feed on and will be watching the debate out of the corner of their eye, if only just to find out when the Government will drop the Whip so they can all go home. That is exactly the point: we engage differently now. It does none of us a service when people see pictures of a full Commons talking about one thing and an empty Commons talking about another. That is not representative of how this job works. This point has already been made, but if we want people from more diverse communities, with broader life experience, and who want to raise a broader range of issues, we have to make the job as accessible as possible. That is what I think is happening today.

At this rate, we might manage to drag this House into the 21st century sometime around the start of the 22nd, but by then Scotland will be blazing its own trail as an independent country and, for us, Westminster will be merely a quaint historical curiosity.

5.56 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I commend the work of the Procedure Committee, its Chair—the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley)—and its Clerks. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) for sharing her experience in such a powerful way.

I support the motion and think that the changes are a positive step towards increased flexibility that will benefit constituents in the long run. Of course, it is important that the proposed amendments to Standing Order No. 39A are narrow enough that Members should attend when capable. In a parliamentary democracy, the communities that Members are elected to represent should feel confident in the knowledge that their MP will be present and will show up for the job that they have put us here to do.

I welcome the change to give proxy votes to those who are kept away from business as a result of serious long-term illness or injury. It is crucial that our constituents' voices continue to be heard and represented in this place through our votes, even when something beyond an individual's control has prevented them from attending. We are all human, and we are all susceptible to illness or injury.

The Committee's report, in reflecting the evidence given by colleagues, considered nuanced points about the current pairing system, the anonymity ensuring that absent Members do not need to publish personal or private medical information, and the perception of the public when they see that Members have missed numerous votes over an extended period—that is where a recorded proxy vote is key. Some, though, still believe that pairing through the Whips is the way we should continue.

[Margaret Ferrier]

In the case of Members who sit on these Benches as independents without party affiliation, that does not work, because the number of independents is consistently low in comparison. That position is very often overlooked in terms of how it might impact on our ability to do the job effectively. There is no option of pairing for independents, but we are no less concerned that our constituents should have adequate representation in this place.

Before I conclude, I have two questions for the Leader of the House. Generally, doctors will provide a fit note for employees who are absent from work for seven days or more. If a fit note is the criteria that will be used to determine a Member's eligibility for a proxy vote, will the same timescales apply so that a proxy vote could be granted when the Member cannot attend from seven days of illness onwards? There are situations where a Member may, for example, unexpectedly be admitted to hospital, but whether or not their condition will be limiting for the long term may not be immediately clear and they miss out on votes again.

Under the proposed amendment, the pilot scheme would need to be reviewed by 17 March 2023. Serious long-term illness or injury cannot be easily planned for and I wonder how the scheme could be assessed if eligible cases were very low between now and March. Will the Leader of the House share any criteria that would be used to inform a decision on that, and if numbers were too low to decide, could the pilot be extended?

The House is a unique and sometimes antiquated place of work that comes with a great sense of privilege, but it is right that we modernise where we can and where it would be advantageous. As long as a medical professional has deemed a Member unfit to attend, they should be given the space to recuperate without the pressure of feeling that their constituents have no voice.

6 pm

The Treasurer of His Majesty's Household (Craig Whittaker): I shall be brief. Like my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, I thank the Procedure Committee for its helpful report and recommendations. I also thank the Women and Equalities Committee and its Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), for their recommendations, which have really enhanced the other Committee's report.

As was set out at the start of the debate, the Government welcome the step of implementing the pilot scheme, which will offer greater assistance to Members with serious long-term illness or injury. I am grateful to the Committee for indicating that it will review this change to the scheme, and I think it is important that the pilot should be implemented permanently only if the Committee can reassure the House that it has worked well.

I welcome the thoughtful debate that we have had today. It was wonderful to see and hear the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) here today and have her endorsement that we are finally starting to take disability and accessibility for Members seriously in this place. I know how hard she has campaigned, over a very long period, for these changes and I must say huge congratulations to her on a personal level as well.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), the shadow Leader of the House, asked three questions. The first was around maintaining the confidentiality of the individual Member. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) said, although proxy voting is designed to be a transparent and open process for constituents, we do have the nodding through and pairing process from our superb and excellent Whips' Offices, which ensures discretion if preferred by the Member; and of course the Procedure Committee will consider confidentiality when it assesses the pilot scheme.

The hon. Member for Bristol West also asked about the threshold of injury or illness. That ties in with a question asked by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). This is a highly pragmatic scheme, for which the Speaker will have discretion. Mr Speaker will also publish updated guidance to the scheme in due course. I hope that answers that question.

Finally, the hon. Member for Bristol West asked about the assessment process for the pilot. My right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands said that the process used during the pilot conducted in 2019—assessment by those who actually used the scheme—would be applied here too. If more time is needed because of lack of use of the scheme, it will be for the House to decide whether to allow more time for that pilot scheme. I think that covers most of the questions that were asked.

Karen Bradley: It is wonderful to see my hon. Friend at the Dispatch Box. Could I ask for his commitment that the Government will facilitate that vote to allow the pilot scheme to be carried forward, and allow the House to make that decision?

Craig Whittaker: The straightforward and right answer to that is yes. We will make sure that gets facilitated.

There is much more we can consider when looking at how we adapt some of our proceedings in the House to make them fit for the 21st century and—as the wonderful hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire said—make it a more modern environment for Members, as well as those who are not Members who come into this place. There is no question in my mind but that we need to continue to make progress, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will reflect carefully on the points made in today's debate. I hope Members will support the motion, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That:

(1) this House

- (a) believes that Members experiencing serious long-term illness or injury should be entitled, but not required, to discharge their responsibilities to vote in this House by proxy, under a pilot scheme issued by the Speaker and reviewed by the Procedure Committee;
- (b) directs the Speaker to amend the scheme governing the operation of proxy voting in accordance with paragraphs 1-40 of the First Report of the Procedure Committee, HC 383, on Proxy voting and the presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall; and

- (c) directs the Procedure Committee to review the operation of the temporary amendment to Standing Order No. 39A no later than 17 March 2023.

Ordered,

That,

(2) the following amendments to Standing Order No. 39A (Voting by proxy) be made:

- (a) in paragraph 2, delete “absence from the precincts of the House for”;
- (b) in paragraph 2, delete “childbirth or care of an infant or newly adopted child” and insert—
“(a) childbirth;
(b) care of an infant or newly adopted child; and
(c) complications relating to childbirth, miscarriage or baby loss”;
- (c) delete paragraph 7.

Ordered,

That,

(3) the following amendment to Standing Order No. 39A (Voting by proxy) be made, and have effect from 17 October until 30 April 2023: in paragraph (2) insert

“(d) serious long-term illness or injury”.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Energy Prices Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Stuart Anderson.*)

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

PUBLIC HEALTH

That the draft Motor Fuel (Composition and Content) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 7 July, be approved.

SANCTIONS

That the Sanctions (EU Exit) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (No. 2) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 818), dated 14 July 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.

FINANCIAL SERVICES

That the Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (High-Risk Countries) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 782), a copy of which was laid before this House on 11 July, be approved.—(*Stuart Anderson.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

DWP services at Phoenix House in Barrow

6.6 pm

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I rise to present a petition recognising the importance of the work of the Department for Work and Pensions team

based in Phoenix House in Barrow and Furness. The staff there are specialists in industrial injury and disablement benefits. They act with speed and compassion, and hundreds of constituents, individuals and representative groups have called on the DWP to reverse its decision to close that office in pursuit of efficiencies. The petitioners therefore request

“that the House of Commons urge the Government to ensure that the Department of Work and Pensions services currently housed at Phoenix House in Barrow are not withdrawn.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Barrow and Furness,

Declares that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) services currently housed at Phoenix House in Barrow should not be withdrawn; further that the team at Phoenix House provide a specialist and essential service with industrial injury and disablement benefits; and further that the local community wants the Phoenix House team to remain in Barrow.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to ensure that the Department of Work and Pensions services currently housed at Phoenix House in Barrow are not withdrawn.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002772]

Cost of Living

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I rise to present a petition, alongside a corresponding online petition, signed by over 1,200 Cynon Valley residents. The petition sets out measures that residents wish enacted to alleviate the cost of living crisis. The petitioners request that the House of Commons

“urge the Government to hold consultations, ahead of the Autumn Budget, on fairer funding for Wales, inflation-proofed increases in pay, pensions and social security, controls on prices in essential household goods, increased taxation of wealth, increased emergency payments to households funded by a windfall tax, and a programme of mass home insulation.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Cynon Valley,

Declares that the economic hardship created by the cost-of-living crisis is incredibly concerning.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to hold consultations, ahead of the Autumn Budget, on fairer funding for Wales, inflation-proofed increases in pay, pensions and social security, controls on prices in essential household goods, increased taxation of wealth, increased emergency payments to households funded by a windfall tax, and a programme of mass home insulation.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002773]

Hedge End Train Station: Accessibility

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Stuart Anderson.*)

6.8 pm

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): From a debate about accessibility in our Parliament, we move to a debate that I am pleased to have secured about an issue that has been a long-standing concern for my constituents living in Hedge End, Botley, West End and Fair Oak: the lack of accessibility at Hedge End train station. I rise two years after having first outlined the issue in an Adjournment debate in October 2020, with the problems I will revisit not having been resolved, and the factors exacerbating those accessibility issues getting worse.

I place on the record my congratulations to the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), and welcome him to his place. I had the privilege of working very closely with him as his Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Home Office, and I know that his attitude at that Department will be borne out in his new Department. I say to him gently that with great responsibility comes great expectation, and he should know that there is great expectation in Hedge End and from the hon. Member for Eastleigh. We look forward to his summing up of this debate.

There is at this time a concerning gap in accessibility in provision in the region where my constituency is based. For example, I was concerned to learn that only 43% of stations in Hampshire have step-free access—among the lowest count among the counties of the UK. In addition, only 24% have an accessible ticket office and 32% have national key toilets. However, before I lay out the case for Hedge End and the need to improve station accessibility there, I want to address the context of this debate and provide the Minister with some of the details of the situation in my constituency.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Just before my hon. Friend lays out the context of the debate, he talked about the trains that go to Hedge End. Can I tell him that the most used station on that line is Raynes Park, and I have been campaigning for the last five years to get step-free access and accessibility there? It is the most used station, so the points he is making about Hedge End and Hampshire apply across the region, and I hope the Minister in his summing up will talk a bit about the new fund that might be available at some stage for these great schemes.

Paul Holmes: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. I will let the House into a secret. I was his parliamentary researcher, so I hold some of the responsibility for not managing to get that station in Raynes Park its accessibility grants, but he is a tireless campaigner for his constituency. In Eastleigh and at Hedge End, we obviously have some work to do to get the amount of people he has at Raynes Park, but he outlines a point that is very important and very similar to that in my constituency. I know Raynes Park station very well, having been around with him in his constituency. People have a choice there: they can get a taxi to Wimbledon if they cannot make the footbridge, or make the journey across the footbridge at Raynes Park. He has not been campaigning for this for

five years—I started working for him in 2011 and I know that it was an issue he brought up then. I know that he will continue to do that and I hope the Minister will outline in his response some good news for Wimbledon as well as for Hedge End and Eastleigh.

Going back to the case in Eastleigh, I am proud that the Eastleigh constituency is a thriving community. I have noted previously that the population in my patch has grown by 15% in the last 20 years, a clear sign that Eastleigh acts as a magnet for families and individuals seeking a great place to live. This has of course led to a corresponding, but in my view reckless increase in house building by the Liberal Democrat council, Eastleigh Borough Council, particularly in Hedge End, which I also regret has not been met with an increase in investment in suitable infrastructure locally to guide development in a reasonable and responsible manner.

The problem continues with speculative housing developments and large-scale developments being built in the borough, which historically has been caused by the failure of that local council to develop a local plan. The volume of new housing in Hedge End has been substantial. Between 2001 and 2011, new homes delivered at Dowd's Farm, a major strategic development in Hedge End North, increased the population in that borough council ward by 33.6%; that was in 10 years. Between 2011 and now, major new housing developments have delivered a further 450 new homes, with more housing delivered not only as part of Dowd's Farm, but at Kings Copse Road and St John's Road. But that is just the start of it.

Eastleigh Borough Council has either granted planning permission or allocated space for a further 738 new homes to be built in Hedge End in the next 10 years. Most damagingly, a new council-built development of 2,500 homes in the village of Fair Oak and Horton Heath will mean that infrastructure will be under immense strain, with no substantive contributions to the improvement of Hedge End station just down the road. In simple terms, families are moving into the area, but are being forced to use roads, not rail, to go about their journeys. Anyone with a disability, children or the elderly, when returning from London to my constituency at Hedge End, has to alight at Eastleigh or Southampton Airport Parkway station, 6.4 miles away from Hedge End, which is now the second largest settlement within my constituency of Eastleigh.

Towns and villages such as Hedge End, Botley, Bursledon and Hamble are served by small stations that lack the facilities required to serve growing settlements. Many of my constituents choose to live in Hedge End because of the railway connections to London, the great sense of community and excellent local schools. That explains why Hedge End station is well used, with more than 522,000 entries and exits before the pandemic. That was up from 506,000 in 2017. However, for some people in my constituency entering the station is not as easy as exiting it, and I hope that the Minister can assist with that. Parents with disabled children, disabled adults and parents with pushchairs or prams cannot use Hedge End station to travel, because there are no lifts or wheelchair or pushchair-accessible facilities at the station. Travellers and commuters with mobility issues are left, as I have mentioned, in the unacceptable situation of being able to take the train to London from Hedge End—a journey of about 70 miles—but being forced to

alight at Southampton Airport, Eastleigh, Fareham or other stations towards Portsmouth on their return journey. At Hedge End station, there is an even worse situation, as the car park is on the side of the station adjacent to the line that goes to London. Anyone returning from London cannot get to their car easily—they may have to take a taxi or make a long walk to get to the other side of the station. That is not suitable for people with disabilities.

The small sum of money required to upgrade the station would mean that pressure points at Southampton Airport Parkway and Eastleigh would be reduced, giving better access for communities in the southern half of my constituency while relieving the burden on the pressured road network. Journeys from Southampton Airport Parkway and Eastleigh, which are the closest stations to Hedge End and over 6 miles away by car or taxi, naturally incur additional costs and inconvenience. The lack of access to the station means that people in the southern half of my constituency are forced to travel to Southampton Airport parkway, which is used annually by 1.7 million passengers, or to Eastleigh, which is used annually by 1.6 million passengers. They can only access those stations by driving through the towns of Fair Oak, Horton Heath or Bishopstoke, or by driving down the M27. With the extension of the runway at Southampton airport, which I completely support, those two stations will only become busier, becoming pinch points in that section of the network.

That creates another problem. Our towns and villages, such as Eastleigh, Bishopstoke and Fair Oak, are struggling with a lack of investment in road infrastructure caused by housing overdevelopment. That means that the roads around Eastleigh and Southampton airport station are often blocked in the rush hour and are inaccessible. There is a wider point, in that the Government quite rightly—I completely support them—argue that we need greener and more sustainable forms of travel. I agree, but the current facilities at Hedge End station do not facilitate that, and in many respects actively discourage it. That is, of course, bad for passengers, bad for the environment and bad for our local transport networks.

If the Minister cannot respond tonight on funding provision, I urge him to return to the Department and look at a wholesale review of the funding processes for accessibility to local train stations. There is a bid in at the moment from South Western Railway to secure accessibility funding for Hedge End, but the periodic nature of the funding process and the lack of clarity from central Government on the process for applications mean that we need to look at a wholesale review of the British rail network across all four countries in the UK to see whether the Government can do more to alleviate some of the problems that my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) and I have outlined.

The Minister will know that levelling up is not just about solving a geographical problem between north and south. It is about equal opportunity and better outcomes for those who are disadvantaged. Quite frankly, in this context, that is not happening in my constituency when it comes to travel. I firmly believe that with the installation of either a lift or wheelchair-accessible facilities at Hedge End station, we can achieve exactly the sort of results that are at the heart of this Government's agenda. We can give disabled people the opportunity to travel for work and enjoyment, and we can make life better for

families and parents with young children. We can improve our environment by getting more cars off the road—something that my constituents want to do, but which they cannot because of the type of development that has taken place and the lack of accessibility at Hedge End and stations further on, such as the one at Botley in the southern half of my constituency. We can make sustainable travel alternatives a sensible, viable option for my constituents and the wider community.

Now is the time for the Government to put their money where their mouth is and finally deliver infrastructure improvements that my constituents are desperately seeking and which they quite rightly expect. Given the excessive development and a growing population, the disabled, the ageing and the parents in my constituency need to have this sorted, and they need to have it sorted very quickly.

6.19 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Kevin Foster): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) on securing this debate on rail accessibility at Hedge End station in his constituency. This might be my first trip to the Dispatch Box as Rail Minister, but I know that it is far from the first time that the issue has been raised on the Floor of the House. Thanks to his determined campaigning efforts, this is, I think, the second such debate since his election in 2019. The debate is a good opportunity not only to reply to his points about Hedge End but to set out the Government's continued work to make our rail network more accessible for all passengers.

Transport is at the heart of how we go about our daily lives. It gets us to work and places of education, allows us to run our businesses efficiently and enables us to build connections with people all over the country. More than 14 million people in Great Britain identify as having a disability, and even more people will find that they have struggled to access a railway station due to a mobility issue. The Government recognise how inaccessible transport is a barrier to unlocking their potential, as my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) outlined. However, while our railway's heritage is magnificent, it means that many stations date from a time when the needs of disabled customers were simply not considered, and the infrastructure available reflects that.

While we estimate that 75% of rail journeys are made through step-free stations, we recognise that only about a fifth of all stations have full step-free accessible routes into the station and, crucially, between each platform. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh highlighted this with Hedge End, and I can think of a station in my constituency where access to one platform can be achieved only via two flights of steps. For some, that situation at their local station is the barrier preventing them from using rail at all, and that is fundamentally unfair.

Making rail fully accessible for all—whether for a person with a disability or, for that matter, for a person struggling with a heavy pushchair or a suitcase—is of great importance to the Government. The inclusive transport strategy published in 2018 set out our ambition for all disabled people to have equal access to transport by 2030. Where physical infrastructure remains a barrier, assistance may also play a role in making access equal.

[Kevin Foster]

Good progress is being made on the commitments set out in the strategy. In 2021, we published the plan for rail, which set out how the railway specifically must evolve to meet the needs of its customers. As part of the plan, the Government announced the development of a national rail accessibility strategy: a step change in rail network accessibility for disabled passengers and those with accessibility needs.

The plan also committed to a comprehensive accessibility audit of rail network facilities to provide us with a complete understanding of what stations in Great Britain look like today and to set us in the direction of change. The benefits of that are twofold. The data generated will be made publicly available, enabling passengers to plan their journeys better. It will also equip the Government and the rail industry to better target future investments to bring stations into the 21st century. The audit is progressing well, with more than 85% of Great British mainline stations already audited and the remainder to be completed by spring 2023. That will give us a really complete picture of what accessibility looks like at each station beyond whether it is step-free.

The Government will continue to push the rail industry to comply with its legal obligations to meet current accessibility standards. The Department also requires train operating companies to set out in their accessible travel policy how passengers can book assistance or alternative accessible transport in advance where accessible infrastructure is not yet available. The passenger assistance programme is in place to make accessible journeys easier, providing support to disabled passengers in planning their journeys with confidence and in safety.

I am very aware that accepting and adapting to current accessibility infrastructure is not enough. We must invest in transforming our rail infrastructure to ensure that it meets accessibility needs for years to come. The Access for All programme does just that. Since launching in 2006, the programme has provided step-free accessible routes at more than 200 stations, including at Southampton Parkway in 2010. It has also provided about 1,500 smaller-scale improvements such as accessible toilets and improved customer information systems—all things that make it easier for someone to make their journey.

The inclusive transport strategy extended the programme to 2024, providing nearly £400 million of additional funding. That will deliver accessible routes at more than 100 additional stations, with 24 already completed since 2019. To accelerate delivery of further step-free accessible routes, we recently closed nominations for stations during the next railway funding period, which begins in 2024. Any station in Great Britain without full step-free access was a potential candidate. I am pleased to say that more

than 300 stations were nominated and to confirm that Hedge End was one of those stations. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh for endorsing the nomination. I suspect that another nomination might also have come in from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon. The Department will now assess the nominations with Network Rail, using the same criteria as for previous tranches.

All inaccessible stations deserve funding—we want a network that is accessible for all—but it is essential that the Government allocate Access for All funding fairly, with consideration of a wide range of criteria. The selection process takes into account annual footfall, the incidence of disability in the area and, sometimes, proximity to particular facilities that those with mobility issues might need to access, such as a local hospital. It also considers the availability of third-party funding and the operational views of the rail industry. We will look to continue to ensure a fair geographical spread of projects across the country. I expect to be able to make an announcement on shortlisted stations next year.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh for securing this debate on rail accessibility at Hedge End station. In responding, I wanted to demonstrate the work that the Government are doing to improve rail accessibility, despite the limitations historic buildings and infrastructure place on us. We are improving our knowledge of the accessibility picture on our rail network through the stations accessibility audit. We are setting out our plans for improvements in the upcoming national rail accessibility strategy along with delivering infrastructure improvements through successful programmes such as Access for All.

I am committed to improving rail accessibility for all passengers, so I am grateful for the representations made today by my hon. Friends. They strengthen the case for the work we are doing. I know that my hon. Friends are both constant and active advocates for the needs of their constituents and I know that if there is not a commitment forthcoming in the future this will almost certainly not be the last time we discuss step-free access at Hedge End station on the Floor of the House. I know my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh will realise why it would not be right for me to give him a firm commitment today ahead of the wider announcements on the Access for All scheme, not least given the wider interest among many Members from both sides of the House who have supported and promoted schemes, but I know he will be on my case until he gets what he wants for his constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

6.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 12 October 2022

[SIR GARY STREETER *in the Chair*]

New Developments on Green-belt Land

[Relevant document: e-petition 600577, Ban developments on Green belt and Greenfield sites across the country.]

9.30 am

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of new developments on greenbelt land.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and I thank every single Member and my hon. Friends who have chosen to participate in this important debate and represent their constituents' concern. The impact of new development being imposed on our treasured green belt is a burning issue for many of my constituents in Coventry North West, so I welcome this opportunity to highlight their frustrations.

From Eastern Green to Allesley, Keresley and Holbrooks, communities in my constituency have seen vital green spaces lost to new housing developments in recent years, with more of our local green belt threatened with the same fate if we do not change course. Campaigners in Coventry want to see a bold change of direction concerning planning and development policy, so I hope that securing this debate will force the Government to listen and take note.

I want to start by examining the process by which houses are built and how it favours big developers, who are not accountable to local communities and often ignore local housing needs. We all know that Britain has long faced a housing crisis. Waiting lists for social housing continue to grow to record lengths, while home ownership in the UK has fallen to 65%, with many struggling to get on to the housing ladder. It is a plight that stretches across all our constituencies, and it has been left unaddressed by the Conservative Government for over a decade. The Government have also failed to introduce any meaningful reforms to planning and development since I became the MP for Coventry North West in 2019. Serious change in this area is long overdue. The lack of action means that we are left living in a planning and development free-for-all, and the impact on our local communities is clear for all to see.

As things stand, it is private developers who hold the balance of power. They decide which type of houses are built, where they are built and the prices that they are sold for. They are not accountable to anyone but themselves—not to communities, not to local people, not to local government and not even to national Government. For years, my constituents have told me that the current planning rules are not fit for purpose. They serve developers' greed and do nothing to allow local voices and those most impacted by new development to be heard.

We need to be able to hold developers to account. Developers will claim that they are helping to fix Britain's housing crisis by building new developments, but the

truth is that until they start listening to the needs of local people, they will only make the problem worse. Indeed, the new Prime Minister's suggestion that we should simply hand more power to property developers risks permanently changing our communities. The voices of residents and their elected representatives will be virtually wiped out of the planning process if the Prime Minister ignores their objections and presses ahead with these changes.

But is it any wonder that this Conservative Prime Minister wants to hand even greater power to wealthy developers when property developers were responsible for 20% of all donations—more than £60 million—to the Conservative party between 2010 and 2020? While Conservatives in Coventry conveniently pretend to care about saving our green belt from development, the same political party is lining its pockets with donations from the very housing developers that they claim to be standing up to. This is unacceptable. We need our Government to stand up for local people, not those seeking to maximise their profits at the expense of our precious green belt.

Our planning system is completely broken, and the answer cannot be to hand more power to a few greedy developers. Instead, a complete overhaul is required, with local communities and local government in the driving seat. That way, they can set the direction of travel concerning new development in their neighbourhoods, delivering affordable homes for families exactly where we need them.

A survey of my constituents that I carried out recently unsurprisingly revealed that a clear majority wanted more affordable homes to be built in Coventry, but that they wanted those homes to be built on the existing brownfield sites across the city instead of on our treasured green spaces. The survey also showed that residents were overwhelmingly against any proposed changes to planning laws that would make building on green belt easier. A majority of residents were also worried that the rule changes would mean local people had even less say when a new development was proposed where they live. I call on the Government to take action to ensure developers are accountable to local people, communities and elected representatives.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate, and I apologise for the fact that I will not be here later on, because I have another thing to go to. Does she agree that in urban and rural development, as with much in life, there is a delicate balance to be found? Current planning does not find the common-sense balance, and community planning takes a back seat to the interpretation of the law. We need to ensure that future planning is flexible enough to protect both urban and rural development, and that communities have a full say in what happens. I know the rules are different in Northern Ireland, but in many cases back home I find that local people do not have the input that they should.

Taiwo Owatemi: The hon. Member makes an important point, and he is absolutely right that local people need to be able to have a local say on developments in their area. Developers should not be dictating to people in Coventry North West, who have often lived in the area for generations, what is in their best interests.

[*Taiwo Owatemi*]

I will take a moment to look at the statistics, which are often used to estimate how many homes should be built and where. With the 38 new investment zones that have recently been announced, Whitehall is taking more and more control over the planning processes in our towns and cities. This approach is often predicted using census projections, but in Coventry the predictions have turned out to be way off. Our population has not grown anywhere near as quickly as was anticipated. The Office for National Statistics estimated Coventry's population would be over 379,000, but recently released census results show that our city's population actually stands at just 345,000—more than 30,000 less than predicted. This means that green-belt land may be torn up unnecessarily for houses that are not actually needed. It is now clear that the Government projections were plain wrong, and that top-down imposed house building targets are widely inaccurate.

The outcome in Coventry is that some of the most beautiful green spaces in my constituency have been needlessly taken away from green belt and allocated for house building instead. The figures do not stack up. For the short term, I would like to see a halt to building on any green-belt land around Coventry while accurate figures are calculated. I have repeatedly joined campaigners across Coventry in calling for these figures to be reviewed, but our pleas are falling on deaf ears. The Government have refused to take any action to remedy the situation, so the decimation of our green belt is poised to continue. Plans are still ongoing to build new developments that few people want. An overwhelming 92% of residents who took part in my survey thought that those elected to represent them on the city council must have a proper say on new development proposals in our city, but local government has little power over the matter.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for her excellent speech. In my constituency, Weaver Vale, more than 2,000 units are being built on green-belt land as we speak. This former green-belt land was purchased by the Government agency named Homes England, yet the national planning framework talks about building on green belt in exceptional circumstances. There are huge contradictions, and the direction of travel seems to be towards further liberalisation. I agree with my hon. Friend that there need to be strengthened protections in the green belt.

Taiwo Owatemi: I thank my hon. Friend for his important point. He is right that we must continue to strengthen the protection of our green belt.

An overwhelming 92% of residents who took part in my survey thought that those elected to represent us on the city council must have a proper say on new development proposals in our community, but local government has little power in the matter. Instead, Whitehall is able to impose house building targets based on its faulty figures. I want to see a real shift in power away from Whitehall and towards local government. That would mean that local elected representatives, accountable to their residents who live and breathe their community, had the final say on new development. That way, we could abandon the inaccurate house building targets imposed by Whitehall and get on with meeting local housing needs.

In contrast to the Conservative Government, who have consistently sided with wealthy developers over local people, the Labour party has set out a different vision for planning and development policy. Labour would hand power to local communities to build the affordable housing they need and give councils the ability to build much-needed social housing—the houses we need where local people want them to be built. When new developments were built, Labour would give priority to first-time buyers and prevent new homes from being bought up by foreign investors before local people got a look in. That would put the dream of home ownership within reach of many people who cannot get on the housing ladder and reverse the decline in home ownership under this Government.

While the Conservatives are in the pocket of their property developer donors, a Labour Government would be on the side of local communities and would deliver the housing that Britain needs. Far too often, the houses being built are in opposition to what people need and want. Across the communities in Holbrooks, Allesley, Keresley and Eastern Green in my constituency, many have real and heartfelt anxieties about the impact of large-scale new development and its devastating impact on green-belt land. That is because the wrong type of housing is being built, and those houses are being built in the wrong part of the city. Eventually, they are going to be sold at an unaffordable price. From start to finish, this is a mess caused by a broken system. Those communities are already changing because of overdevelopment, and there is a great deal of frustration owing to the fact that communities can have large-scale development imposed on them without receiving the investment that is needed.

Too frequently, when homes are built in the wrong part of our city, the additional local services and new infrastructure required to support them are not put in place. Greedy developers must not be allowed to profit from building hundreds of expensive new houses against the will of local people and then walk away, doing nothing to provide much-needed services and infrastructure. New developments in Coventry North West are often built far from the nearest GP surgery, schools and shops, and without a proper broadband connection. Those developments often have neither public transport nor adequate roads. Everyone is fed up with massive developments being allowed to go ahead without proper thought and consideration being given to the infrastructure needed and the availability of public services. It is just not good enough.

It is morally bankrupt to build homes without also ensuring access to vital services, and it makes no practical sense either, as extra pressure is piled on already overstretched services. Developers will always want to turn a profit, but they must be made to play their part in delivering the services and infrastructure required to support the new homes that they build. In my constituency, too many homes are being built on green-belt land, and they are simply too expensive for local people to afford. I have repeatedly met with big developers to insist that they build affordable, family-sized homes for first-time buyers in the right part of our city, but those calls have repeatedly been dismissed. We must build homes that are affordable for families living in Coventry. Otherwise, what is the point of those homes?

Overpriced homes and out-of-reach mortgages are not what my constituents need. In Coventry, there are brownfield sites and similar land suited to redevelopment.

That must be used first, before developers start destroying our precious green belt. Rather than building on the green belt at the behest of developers, I want houses to be built on brownfield sites, on disused land and in empty buildings, because that is what local people have asked for.

Lastly, I will highlight some of the specific local concerns that affect my constituency. Too often, developers earmark popular open spaces in our towns and cities for new homes, depriving communities of much-needed open spaces. That is certainly a problem in my constituency. Take Coundon Wedge, a beautiful spot that is enjoyed by people from across our city. Developers have been eyeing up Coundon Wedge for some time and, as homes are proposed on nearby Browns Lane, many people are understandably anxious that the Wedge will be next.

The local council has made it clear for decades that it does not want to build homes on Coundon Wedge. However, many people fear that because inaccurate house building targets are being imposed on Coventry by Whitehall, the hands of the local council may soon be forced. That is totally unacceptable. Coundon Wedge must not be put up for sale, and as the local MP I will oppose any future plans for new development on this vital green space.

Although local Conservatives in Coventry have been cynically campaigning to save Coundon Wedge for their own political gain, their party has been in power for the last 12 years and has failed to deliver long-overdue reforms to our planning law. The Conservatives are overseeing the very same planning and development free-for-all that threatens the future of the Wedge. Indeed, when the Conservatives last led Coventry City Council, they proposed thousands of new homes on green-belt land in Keresley, which is also in my constituency. People in my constituency will not be so easily fooled, and the hypocrisy will not go unnoticed.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I support many of the arguments that the hon. Lady has made, and I share her concern about greenfield development. However, one issue in my constituency is the absence of a local plan that sits with local government. I wonder whether that is the case in her patch, too, because I understand that in her area, as in mine, there is a very long waiting list for social housing.

Taiwo Owatemi: I thank the hon. Member for making that important point. Yes, in my constituency there is a long waiting list for housing, and local government needs more control over that.

I have covered a number of issues today, including how house building favours large developers, how the statistics that are used are often inaccurate and lead to undesirable outcomes, and how the houses that are built are often not what local people want or need. I am sure that many Members here have similar issues in their own constituencies and that, like me, they have heard from concerned constituents who oppose the current development free-for-all. It is seriously concerning that the new Prime Minister appears determined to make the situation even messier. We have seen reports in the media just this week of Government Ministers scheming to hand over yet more power to developers. At the same time, they want to scrap rules that ensure new homes

are affordable, and they want to remove wildlife protections. This Government want to create a developer wild west, which is completely out of order.

I believe that the only way to deliver for our constituents is to listen to their concerns. It is overwhelmingly clear to me that they want good-quality, family-sized homes that are for sale at an affordable price, and they want those homes to be built on empty brownfield sites, alongside good-quality infrastructure and local services. They do not want homes to be needlessly built on green-belt land—they do not want that to be imposed on them by an out-of-touch Whitehall and developers looking to make a quick buck.

With reform in development and planning rules high up on the Government's agenda, I call on the Government to do the right thing: listen to my constituents and take action as soon as possible.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Colleagues, there are nine of you trying to catch my eye, and we have about 50 minutes in which you can all make your excellent speeches. If you can contain yourselves to five minutes each voluntarily, that will be most helpful.

9.49 am

Sir Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) on securing the debate and leading it so well.

Some 91.4% of my South Staffordshire constituency sits within green-belt land, and the largest number of signatories to the petition—616 in all—are South Staffordshire residents. That indicates the real passion, concern and desire to protect the green belt in South Staffordshire.

There are a number of things that the Government can do to make a material difference to protect the environment, nature and conservation—all things that every one of us in this House values and wants to protect so very much. At the moment there is a real lack of clarity in the Government's approach to the duty to co-operate. That puts enormous pressure on many local authorities, especially ones that neighbour large urban, metropolitan areas.

The Government have said that there will be changes to the duty to co-operate, but they have not come up with the clarification that authorities need to be in the best position to proceed with local plans and understand what the new rules will be. I hope that the new Minister will take the opportunity to set out clearly what the new rules on the duty to co-operate, or its abolition, will mean. If he is not able to do so, will he give a date for when that clarification will come about?

It would also be useful if the Minister could speak to local authorities that are in the process of developing their local plans. In South Staffordshire, we are in a terrible situation. We are having thousands of houses imposed on the green belt by Black Country authorities and by Birmingham as a result of the Government's saying that they are going to abolish the duty to co-operate but not clarifying what they will replace it with. This is urgent. Will the Minister say whether authorities that are proceeding with local plans are able to pause those plans and make sure that they have protections so that they are not vulnerable to unscrupulous developers

[Sir Gavin Williamson]

coming forward with plans? Authorities cannot properly proceed until the Government clarify what the replacement for the duty to co-operate will look like. I hope the Minister will be able to do that today.

The simple reality is that the duty to co-operate system is causing many local authorities to build the wrong types of houses in the wrong areas. It is a blight on our countryside and our green belt. The Minister needs to act on the Government policy to abolish the duty to co-operate and stop imposing thousands of housing units on the green belt when it would be more appropriate to use brownfield sites and inner cities in order to regenerate.

The hon. Member for Coventry North West made a very important point about how the housing numbers that local authorities are required to use are simply wrong. It is widely known in the industry, by planning authorities and in communities that they are wrong. The 2014 figures, which are currently the basis for plans, are leading to the incorrect numbers being used by local authorities, which puts an even greater burden on councils to provide numbers that are not required. That needs to be urgently addressed. The figures are eight years out of date.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that coupled with that is the uncertainty regarding the five-year land supply? Does that not also need urgent clarification?

Sir Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is spot on. I know that our hon. Friend the Housing Minister has great ambition and drive. He has many predecessors whom he can far outshine by showing great leadership. He can be known as the finest Housing Minister out of many by giving clarity on these issues. Making reforms to the housing market and to housing supply would not only benefit people who want to buy a home, but protect the green belt, our countryside and nature. I urge him to seize the day and do that.

9.54 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) on securing the debate.

Before asking what is being built on the green belt, we have to ask what is being built on brownfield sites. In York's case, it is assets for investors rather than homes for families and communities. CPRE estimates that more than 26,000 hectares of UK brownfield land are available for development—enough to build a million homes. Between 2006 and 2016, the proportion of brownfield land used for residential development dropped by 38%, whereas building on greenfield land increased by a staggering 148%. Public money is invested in the remediation of brownfield sites, while the owners land bank before declaring the unviability of any affordable or social housing. It is a complete scam.

Until the Government turn planning on its head, landowners and developers will continue to game the system, using every means possible to derive huge profits from urban brownfield sites by delivering high-priced investor units that do not meet local need and exceed

local affordability. In York, again and again, this has meant that scarce land is used for the development of properties for the investment market, student accommodation or hotel rooms, leaving local housing need unmet and pressure to develop the green belt—a developer's paradise.

Just last week, the Lib Dem-Green York Council agreed yet another multipurpose development, including an 88-room aparthotel and 153 new apartments, more than half of which will be bedsits and will immediately flip into holiday lets. There will not be a single affordable unit. That mirrors a long succession of planning decisions in our ancient city. In York Central, Government agencies are planning to use 45 hectares of brownfield land for the delivery of 2,500 units that are unsuitable and unaffordable for local families, thereby wasting the land and pushing vital economic and housing development to the green belt.

Every hectare of brownfield land that is squandered for extractive profits puts another hectare of green belt under threat. On each of these new developments, large swathes of properties move to the second home market immediately after completion. Some are never occupied, and many turn into Airbnbs. The revenue pays the mortgage while the asset gains value, pushing up house prices even more and making them completely inaccessible to local people.

Meanwhile, in York, thousands of families are waiting for a home that they simply want to call their own. We cannot pretend that there is any gain for local people; demand is outstripping supply, driving up property value but never delivering the homes people need. They are being driven out of their city to some greenfield site miles away. That impacts the local economy too, with people on the lowest incomes having to make the longest commutes, involving costs they cannot afford.

Greenfield demand is a consequence of failed planning, and I fear that greater liberalisation is on its way. The Government are going in completely the wrong direction. Unbelievably, Dartmoor, the North York Moors and the New Forest are set to fall within the boundaries of freeports and urban centres' investment zones, free from planning restrictions. The developers' charter is back, but without a people's charter for public land for public good, we will never meet housing need. The economic crisis has made things worse.

The only politician to make real inroads in this area was Nye Bevan. In a famous speech, he said that only municipal control could ever develop the housing needed. He was right, and he delivered it. York is plagued with applications for green-belt development, but brownfield land must not be squandered at the expense of our green belt. We cannot stand by when people have nowhere to live. This is not an urban versus rural debate, but one between those who extract profit and those wanting to protect communities. Working together to ensure that brownfield sites are developed for local need will protect the green belt. The Government need to decide which side they are on.

9.59 am

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the Chair, Sir Gary. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) on securing this important debate and giving us the opportunity to discuss this issue.

My constituents in East Hampshire were among the top 10 by number of signatories to e-petition 600577, which is explicitly linked to this debate and is about green-belt and greenfield sites. It is important to make a distinction between the two: “green belt” is a particular land designation and a particularly important natural asset, but “greenfield” is also an important part of nature and amenity, whether for resident constituents or people coming from further afield. People often use the two terms interchangeably.

Realistically, I do not think we can say that we will never build on a greenfield site. Whatever type of dwelling we or our constituents live in, it is built on what was once a greenfield site. The reality is that the population has been growing for many years, for many reasons, including the positive fact that people are living longer, as well the tendency towards smaller households. However, we can make sure that we prioritise brownfield sites, and we need to give meaning to that. It is an easy phrase to throw out, but it has to mean something and to be enabled, through initiatives such as the facilitation of high-quality, amenity-enhancing estate redensification, town centre concentrations and city centre revitalisations.

The situation in my constituency is almost unique because the constituency is bisected by the boundary of a national park. Some 57% of the area is in the national park and 43% is outside it. Unusually, there is a sizeable town—Petersfield—inside the national park. Although the housing numbers were assessed on the basis of the whole district, effectively almost all of them have to go in the minority area, outside the boundary of the national park. That potentially puts a great deal of pressure on places just outside the boundary, such as Alton, Four Marks, Whitehill, Bordon and parts of the village of Liphook. In practical terms, East Hampshire District Council’s emerging local plan sets out that 632 homes a year will have to be built, but 532 of them—some 84%—will have to be delivered in the 43% of the area that is outside the national park.

The system nominally allows local authorities to use what is called “an alternative approach” to assess housing need where the strategic policy-making authority’s boundaries do not align with the local authority. However, there is a big risk in taking that route; authorities know that if they pursue it, they can expect challenge when the local plan is examined by the Planning Inspectorate. The consequences of the plan failing at that stage, in terms of speculative development and lack of infrastructure delivery, are potentially so great that local authorities are naturally reluctant to consider an alternative approach. We found it difficult to find examples of local authorities in a similar situation that have adopted such an approach.

I thank the Minister’s officials at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for meeting officials from my local council earlier this year to discuss these difficult circumstances, but the situation essentially remains the same. The “Planning for the Future” White Paper of 2020 contains proposals to look at land constraints right at the start of the process of assessment of housing need, but we are not clear about the status of those proposals. Is the Minister able to give us any further detail about that? That would be welcome.

In common with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson), I am also keen to urgently understand the meaning of the “more flexible alignment test” that is intended to replace

the duty to co-operate. Finally, in a situation such as mine, where the boundary of a national park cuts across the constituency and the local authority area, it would be preferable if numbers could be assessed separately inside and outside the park.

10.4 am

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) on securing the debate and leading it so well.

I grew up in a little village in Cheshire, in between Chester and Warrington, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury)—probably only a political nerd would describe the area they grew up by its constituency. We were always sensitive about the need to maintain the green belt. There was pressure from new towns in Warrington and Runcorn, which were providing overspill, but the green belt is there for a reason: to prevent both urban sprawl and urban decay. Hon. Members have already talked about the fact that if development must take place in city and town centres, it revitalises them.

The green belt must be there for everybody. There cannot be an assumption that it is only there for the people who are lucky enough to live in it. The countryside should be enjoyed by everybody. We talk about rural poverty and rural deprivation. It is true that that happens, but getting people into rural areas would make a difference to that. The green belt should be there for all to enjoy, and it needs to be defended.

Despite the name of my constituency—City of Chester—almost three quarters of it is green belt. In the last few years, I am afraid that we have seen developments in green-belt areas, which were opposed by the local community and the council but overturned on appeal and granted by the Government.

I am currently battling development of a greenfield site on Sealand Road. The clue is in the name: it is in part next to the River Dee, which has flooded in the past. These are floodplain areas, and there are fields there used as sinks during floods, but they have been built on. The local council opposed that development, but speculators bought the site, took it to appeal and won. There are existing houses on Sealand Road. The new houses have had to be built raised up behind them, because of the threat of flooding. I can say now that when the first floods happen in that area—because they will; as I say, the name is something of a giveaway—all that water will go to the existing houses. The Government must understand that they cannot keep granting green-belt developments in entirely unsuitable locations over the heads of local authorities.

There is a difference between planning regulations in England and Wales: when new residential developments are built in England, particularly on the green belt, there is no requirement for the developers to deal with surface water, whereas in Wales there is such a requirement. That contributes to drains being inundated when there is heavy rain. The drains cannot cope, so water is diverted into the sewers; then the sewers cannot cope, so water is diverted into open water such as rivers. There has to be a change in planning rules in England to make sure that developers have a responsibility to build suitable

[*Christian Matheson*]

drainage. Otherwise, the water falls on stone, concrete and tarmac; it does not go anywhere, and it inundates the sewerage system.

My hon. Friends have already said that the wrong type of housing is being built for the wrong reasons. The current housing policy in England suits the needs of the developers, not the housing needs of communities. The developers get the most profit from building big, executive-style country houses in nice locations. I do not blame the developers—they are there to make a profit, and good luck to them—but that should not dictate our housing policy. Our housing policy should meet the needs of the community, and that means building lots of different types of housing, and in cities. There should be a presumption against spreading out and an aim to maintain vibrancy in city centres.

Finally, there is still reluctance among local councils, which are under severe financial pressure, to stand against development proposals even if there is strong community opposition, because they know that they would have to pay the costs of an appeal. That is unfair and wrong, and it skews local councils' planning judgments and their ability to fight against green-belt or any other developments, because they have to be very cautious about costs. I would be grateful if we could look at that again.

10.9 am

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) on securing this debate and clearly setting out many of the challenges we face in our constituencies. I want to focus on one particular planning application in Willingdon, which sits in the constituency of Eastbourne, because it reflects all that is wrong and all that needs reforming in the planning system, and it also reflects my constituents' many concerns.

On the need for reform, I echo the comments that have been made about the five-year land supply. The planning authority currently has 8,000 approvals that have not been built, and yet it is held hostage by speculative development because there is no local plan. That powerfully demonstrates the very weak voice of local determination, because this has happened despite the wishes and desires of the local community.

The planning application also reflects some of the faultlines in the calculation of housing need. This greenfield site, so cherished by the local community, represents probably the final green space between Eastbourne and Willingdon. The application essentially changes forever the character of the local area, which was once a village but is increasingly part of an urban fringe, and takes important agricultural land out of use. It is well recognised that there are concerns about flooding in the area, and I am absolutely mystified that Southern Water has given its support and endorsement to the planning application, based on the use of storm overflows. That cannot be right.

Congestion and road safety are also in the mix, but I want to focus on due process, and I know that my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), shares my concerns. On

6 September, I spoke at the appeal inquiry and outlined the fundamental and fatal flaws in our local transport models, which were exposed in a 2019 report by the highly regarded AECOM. I argued that if the models are unfit for purpose, the findings based on them cannot be considered in any way safe or sound. Highways are clearly central to the decision to grant or reject this deeply unpopular proposed development, and are the reason it was previously thrown out.

Of most serious concern is the obvious chilling effect that the threat of costs has had on local government bodies and the democratic process. Wealden District Council twice refused the application. Days before the appeal, it withdrew its objection, not because its concerns and principled objections had been answered and satisfied, or because the local residents it had been representing had been otherwise persuaded, but because it had been warned by its legal representative that continuing courted the risk of substantial cost. Willingdon and Jevington parish council, which had likewise stood against the application at every turn and contributed strongly at every stage of the process, was similarly forced to withdraw. That is a damning indictment of the system and a clear democratic faultline.

The decision has now been made, and the appeal has been successful. I urge the Minister to meet me and my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes, to look at the application and call it in. I also ask him to look at levelling up as it relates to VAT. New build and greenfield attracts a 0% VAT rating, but conversion, restoration and renovation of my Victorian town centre carries a 20% VAT penalty. It is clear where the balance of interests lies. Finally, I ask him to consider the brownfield-first strategy mentioned today.

10.15 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) on securing the debate and on her excellent opening speech. In July I attended a public meeting in Greasby community centre organised by local people who are determined to protect the green belt. The hall was absolutely packed, and it is abundantly clear that my constituents feel passionately about protecting the green belt, and I support them.

The green belt is incredibly important for our health and wellbeing, to supporting wildlife habits and to allowing nature to flourish. It has a vital part to play in our response to the climate and ecological emergency, so we need housing to be built on brownfield sites. In recent months there has been a spate of applications from developers to build homes on green-belt land in Wirral. In Wirral West, Leverhulme Estate currently has plans to build up to 260 homes in Pensby, 290 in Irby and 240 in Greasby.

There was great concern among Irby residents at the news that another developer—Richborough Estates—has come forward with a proposal that could see up to 190 new homes built across 31 acres of green-belt land on either side of Mill Hill Road. On their website, the developers say the site

“will be promoted for Green Belt release through the emerging Wirral Local Plan”,

so it seems they will be lobbying for these green fields to be released for development. I have voiced my concerns, and according to the local press the company has said it will not proceed with these plans until the site is successfully removed from the green belt and has status within the Wirral local plan. That is hardly reassuring, and the developers' intentions remain clearly stated on their website. Local people are angry and upset, and I support them as we stand together in our opposition to Leverhulme Estate and Richborough Estates' proposals to build houses on precious green belt.

CPRE, the countryside charity, publishes regular reports on the state of the green belt, which, among other things, track the number of submitted and approved applications for development on green-belt land. According to the most recent report, in February 2021, 793 applications were submitted on green-belt land between 2009-10 and 2019-20, of which 337—just over 42%—were approved. That resulted in the building of more than 50,000 housing units, so clearly there is not the level of protection for the green belt that there needs to be. The situation looks likely to become worse because the Government's Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill could further weaken protections. The Bill would introduce national development management policies, which would have primacy over local development plans, meaning that those plans could be easily and rapidly rendered out of date by changes to national policies.

I would like to look at the implications for Wirral West. Wirral's draft local plan states:

"Sufficient brownfield land and opportunities exist within the urban areas of the borough to ensure that objectively assessed housing and employment needs can be met over the plan period... The council has therefore concluded that the exceptional circumstances to justify alterations to the green belt boundaries do not exist in Wirral."

However, an NDMP could overrule that. I fear we are facing a power grab by central Government, so it would be helpful if the Minister could rule out a situation where, on the one hand, a council says that any new housing in its area will be built on brownfield sites and the green belt will be protected but, on the other hand, the Government set a national development management policy that overrules the local council position.

It is a matter of real concern that the current Secretary of State has previously called for the release of green-belt land for new homes and has described the green belt as "an arbitrary and increasingly damaging holdover from seventy years ago".

He has said:

"The green belt is not part of the problem, but is the problem. As currently constituted, it has become the central obstacle to enabling the building of the volume of houses we need, where we need them."

It is also concerning that, back in 2019, the now Prime Minister said that the Conservatives should build 1 million homes on the green belt. No wonder people in Wirral West are concerned by the threat the Conservatives pose to the green belt. I urge the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State to think again, and I ask the Minister to speak to them directly about this matter because it is clear that people value the green belt and want it protected.

We need more homes in Wirral and right across the country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West so eloquently described. Such homes need

to be affordable for first-time buyers and private renters, they need to be in locations where infrastructure such as roads, public transport and services is already in place, and they need to have high levels of energy efficiency and to be built on brownfield sites. It is a matter of real concern that, just as it has damaged the economy, the Government's policy now threatens to further damage the environment too. The Government really must come forward with strong protections for the green belt as a matter of urgency.

10.20 am

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) on bringing forward this debate on issues affecting Coventry, which have an impact on my constituents—particularly those who live in the village of Bulkington, within the ambit of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council. My constituents there are having to accept a 27.3% increase in the size of their village, with the number of houses moving from 2,794 to 3,558.

That is a massive increase and proportionally much more than other areas are being asked to take, but there is an opportunity to hold back on consent for 196 homes on one site if the Secretary of State grants a moratorium on strategic site approvals in the way the hon. Lady has asked for. I have written two letters to Secretaries of State asking for that to be done. Regrettably, the response was not positive, but I will make the case for action to the Minister today.

The challenge in Bulkington arises because, in 2015, a memorandum of understanding—a duty to co-operate—between Warwick District Council, Coventry City Council and Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council included provision to promote the release of land that was previously in the green belt. This arose from the need for additional housing in the city of Coventry, which, as the hon. Lady drew attention to, arose from the Office for National Statistics population estimates in 2014.

The challenge for Coventry is that it is an established urban area and there remains a shortage of land in that urban area to meet those housing numbers. As a consequence, Warwick was brought into the mix, along with Nuneaton and Bedworth, to provide additional land as part of their duty to co-operate. I support the contention of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) in asking for some clarity on this particular role.

In her remarks, the hon. Member for Coventry North West unfairly criticised Conservative councillors for their approach to these matters. In this case, the issue arose because Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council, which was Labour led at the time, chose to declassify part of its green belt to enable this development to take place. It is important to note that, at the time that that action was taken, it was opposed by the Conservative group on the Council. Significantly, without that declassification, my constituents in Bulkington would not be facing the challenges and problems they currently face.

The hon. Lady referred to the inaccuracy of the numbers, and that was picked up by CPRE, the countryside charity. A review has now taken place and was published in May 2021. It found that the population estimates

[*Mark Pawsey*]

“for some cities such as Coventry did seem to be inconsistent with local evidence. This appeared to be the case in some other smaller cities with larger student populations”.

The hon. Lady and I are both proud that Coventry has two universities—Coventry University and the University of Warwick—but that results in some confusion around the number of houses needed.

The hon. Lady pointed out that, in a further development, we now have actual data—the 2021 census figures—and do not need to work off projections. In Coventry’s plan, its population is projected to grow by in excess of 89,000 between 2011 and 2031. The actual growth in the first half of that period, according to the 2021 census, was 28,300. That is substantially less—almost half—of what was projected. That is why the numbers—on which the housing development that the hon. Lady referred to and that is affecting my constituents was based—need to be looked at. If the Coventry population figures had been more accurate, the need for adjacent local authorities to help meet Coventry’s housing need would have been diminished. The development in Bulkington would not need to take place.

So what is our ask? What happens next? Conservative-controlled Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council—the Conservatives have controlled it in recent years—and the people of Bulkington would like the Secretary of State to impose a moratorium on new housing while Coventry City Council and Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council review their local plans. As I mentioned, one site in Bulkington was previously green belt but has now been declassified and has not yet been consented. It is known as HSG7, and it would accommodate 196 homes to the east of the village. Developers currently have a window of opportunity, and we wish to stop that development taking place by asking the Minister to consider the moratorium to which the hon. Member for Coventry North West and I have referred.

10.30 am

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I commend and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) for her excellent speech and for securing the debate, and I concur with many of the points raised by Members on both sides of the Chamber. In the time available to me, I would like to raise three points: first, the pressure on green land in and around Reading and the neighbouring town of Woodley; secondly, the importance of protecting green spaces and historic streets within towns; and thirdly, the need for the Government to rethink their planning proposals and to have a new planning policy.

First, the pressure on green land in our part of the Thames valley is already significant, as colleagues may know. We have a growing population in our part of southern England, and there is a lot of pressure from speculative developers trying to build on the outskirts of existing towns. Reading does not have a green belt, but it does have a lot of green land. The Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty is a short distance away from the northern boundary of the town. In other directions there are protected sites and interesting landscapes that need to be preserved for local amenity use. As other Members have said, it is so important for local residents

to be able to go out and enjoy the countryside, whether that is walking their dog, looking at the countryside or enjoying the green space. That is important for people’s wellbeing and mental health, and everyone should have access to our wonderful countryside.

Sadly, in our area we have a specific problem with speculative developers, and I would like to mention one case that indicates just how appalling this can be. On one site on the edge of Emmer Green, a small village that is now part of Reading, a speculative developer wanted to build a large number of executive homes. That would have started to join up Reading with the neighbouring south Oxfordshire village of Sonning Common, which is completely against the wider thrust of planning policy and the importance of maintaining separate settlements. It was an unsuitable, unsustainable site that would have led to a large amount of extra traffic in both directions, which no residents in the area wanted. I and neighbouring MPs and parish councils campaigned against it, and we were successful. However, I am concerned that the Government’s proposals could unleash a wave of similar applications on the outskirts of existing towns and cities in my constituency and neighbouring parts of southern England.

The strange contrast is that, in Reading, there is a large amount of brownfield land. We actually have enough brownfield in the borough of Reading, let alone the neighbouring suburbs, to provide almost all the housing that is needed until 2036, and that is from Reading Borough Council’s local plan. I urge the Minister to listen to that point, and I hope he will consider rethinking the policy.

Secondly, preserving historic streets is a related issue for many people living in towns and cities; my colleagues from two historic cities—my hon. Friends the Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for City of Chester (Christian Matheson)—mentioned it, and others have hinted at it. Reading is a Victorian, Georgian and arts and crafts town, with a huge amount of really attractive architecture. Sadly, as a university town with many new residents coming in, we already face a lot of pressure, with houses being converted into bedsits, which causes all sorts of issues for neighbouring residents, such as overflowing bins and parking problems. The Government’s proposals would allow what could, in many cases, be quite ugly extensions under permitted development, such as unwanted large rear extensions and loft conversions that are out of keeping. That aspect needs to be rethought, and there should be an emphasis on maintaining the attractive visual appearance of historic areas, whether or not they are conservation areas, for the benefit of all residents. I hope the Minister will consider that point about our wonderful urban environments in many towns and cities, which is related to the issue of preserving the green environment.

I appreciate that there is pressure on time, so I will move on and highlight a potential future policy. As many Members have rightly said, there should be much greater emphasis on redeveloping brownfield. We have some interesting and positive examples of that in our town, in which attractive, red-brick terraced houses or low-rise flats have replaced industrial sites near the town centre, often reusing land that had been derelict for some time and providing a benefit to local residents by removing an ugly site. Also, the environment is protected by the reduction in traffic and the increase in

cycling, walking and public transport use. All those are for the greater good, at a time when we are trying to address the serious challenges of climate change and other related environmental challenges. That, surely, should be the way forward.

I hope the Minister will focus on that point and look again at the balance in the planning system between brownfield and greenfield, which seems to be out of kilter. Sadly, the Government proposals, from what I understand of them, would take that much further and allow developers far more leeway to build in areas where local residents clearly do not want development and where there would be unfortunate environmental impacts such as increased car pollution and traffic jams and, indeed, an economic impact owing to transport delays.

I shall conclude, as I appreciate that there is time pressure. I hope that the Minister will think again and listen to the concerns raised by Members on both sides of the Chamber.

10.30 am

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) on securing this important debate, although I shall start by disagreeing with her slightly.

In the Lewes constituency, we had a good system. We had a local plan in place, and nearly every town and parish in the Lewes district had neighbourhood plans, which were voted on by local people and put together by parish councillors. That was delivering our housing numbers in the right place and delivering the right type of accommodation, which enabled older people to stay in their communities by downsizing and young families to begin their life in their community with a starter home.

Our issue is that in 2019 the Lib Dem-Greens took over the district council and let that local plan go out of date, and with it the five-year land supply. With that, all the neighbourhood plans have fallen, and since then we have been inundated with applications from developers, who seized the opportunity to target every greenfield site in the constituency for housing development.

The local planning authority has refused most of those applications on the principle that they are not in the local plan and not in the neighbourhood plan, but those refusals are being overturned almost daily by the planning inspector, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) suggested, and there is inaction from our local council, which is squabbling over housing numbers. Meanwhile, not having a local plan in place means that our communities, parishes and town councils, which worked so hard to accommodate the housing numbers they were given, are being left to face the consequences.

Rachael Maskell: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will not because there is little time left.

That is not fair because the housing being built on those sites is not affordable for local families. It is £400,000 or £500,000 for a starter home, and those are three-bedroom or four-bedroom homes that do not

allow our older residents to downsize and stay, or our new young families to start their life in their community. This is not the right housing. We were trying to build communities, not just homes, and the system has failed us.

I have seven key asks of the Minister. Many Members have raised the brownfield first strategy, which was highlighted by the previous Prime Minister and hinted at by our current Prime Minister. We need clarity on that. In Lewes town, we had the Phoenix quarter, which would have delivered thousands of new homes. The Government gave the council £1 million to start that scheme, but not a brick has been laid on the site. Meanwhile, our green fields are being concreted over.

We need to be able to force local councils to get their local plans in place. It cannot be right that we had a plan in place that delivered the housing numbers and the housing that our communities wanted, but that the local plan is not happening because the council is squabbling over housing numbers. All that is now a hostage to fortune. It is the same in the Wealden district of my constituency, which I share with my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne. There has never been a local plan and the district is holding out for the Government either to scrap housing numbers or to deliver a different housing strategy. Meanwhile, every greenfield site is open to challenge from developers.

The standard method was touched on by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson). I have received letters from the previous Housing Minister saying that it is not a target, just an indication, but local councils do not feel confident enough to take matters to appeal, because when they do so the planning inspector does not uphold that view. The 2014 housing numbers, which form the standard method, as has been highlighted, are inaccurate and out of date.

We need to take the heat out of the south-east. Members across the Chamber might not agree with me, but we are talking about applications in their thousands, not their hundreds. We have GPs who have closed their lists because they cannot cope, schools that are full and roads that are congested. At the end of the day, we are just not building the housing that helps our local communities, and residents have had enough.

On the land banking issue, Oliver Letwin did a review a couple of years ago and said there was no problem—“Nothing to see here, folks.” Actually, I agree with the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne. Wealden district has 8,000 units that have planning permission, but because they are mainly on brownfield sites, it is cheaper, quicker and easier for developers to challenge the council, win at appeal and build on greenfield sites instead.

We absolutely need to support our local planning authorities. In the case of the proposed Mornings Mill development, the council has refused it twice and it has gone to appeal. I am concerned not about the cost but about the principles behind that decision. What is the point of having planning authorities? We might as well give the decision to planning inspectors in the first place. We have tried to build the housing that we are required to build, we did our local plan and our neighbourhood plan, and it cannot be right that decisions by democratically elected councillors are overturned. Developers have the money and legal expertise to be able to win every single case.

[*Maria Caulfield*]

Finally, I will address the issue of local plans and five-year land supplies going out of date. Does it really need to take years? They were good plans, and there are only a couple of sites that did not come to fruition. It should take months to revamp that, and we should be able to keep those local plans and the legal protections they provide for our constituencies.

The odds are stacked against our communities at the moment, and we need the Minister's help. We want to build housing, but it must be the right type of housing for our communities, and we want to build communities and not just homes.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I thank all of you for your co-operation this morning.

10.36 am

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Gary. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) not only on securing a debate that is clearly of great importance to the communities that she represents, but on her willingness to tackle at length a subject that is controversial and has arguably failed to receive the attention it deserves in this place. I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part this morning in what has been a lively, interesting and thoughtful session.

In opening the debate, my hon. Friend outlined with her customary forcefulness her concern about the large-scale green belt release that has been authorised on the fringes of her Coventry constituency. The individual cases she mentioned are complex and I do not intend to comment on them in detail, other than to say that, more than anything, they illustrate the difficult position in which individual local authorities are placed in the absence of effective sub-regional frameworks for managing housing growth.

My hon. Friend was also at pains to situate the general issues arising from green-belt development in her city within the context of Britain's housing crisis, and she was right to do so. After all, the point at issue here is not whether green belts have value and can provide for public recreation, contact with nature and habitat maintenance, which they do. Rather, it is whether green-belt land should be released to meet the significant housing need that now exists across England and, if so, how much and under what circumstances.

When it comes to the green belt, what should be in many ways a relatively dispassionate debate consistently provokes intense emotion and polarisation. That is partly because housing development, by its very nature, will always be a contentious issue, but that fact alone cannot account for the strength of feeling generated by this issue.

I would suggest that at least two other factors underlie the passions provoked by the green belt. The first is that any consideration of the green belt as policy labours under a series of misconceptions. Chief among them is the falsehood, which was mentioned by the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), that green belt is always and everywhere green fields, as opposed to the reality, which is that, at least on the edges of most

major cities, green belts include abandoned industrial buildings, petrol stations, scrubland, motorways, farmland, golf courses and nature-rich green fields.

The second misconception is that, more often than not, any debate about the future of the green belt is framed as an irreconcilable choice between two flawed options—namely, the complete abolition of green belts or rendering their present boundaries entirely sacrosanct. A more honest and nuanced approach is long overdue—one that recognises that the green belt has served England's towns and cities very well over many decades, in terms of its original aim of preventing unlimited urban sprawl, and that it must be retained for that purpose but one that also accepts that the green belt's existence has come at a cost, in terms of constrained housing supply, growing problems with affordability and problematic development displacement, and that there is a strong case for looking again at how the policy should operate in the years ahead.

The Labour party fully supports the prioritisation of brownfield development. We remain committed to preserving the green belt and would resist any attempts to abolish it, as per the long-held wishes of those for whom nothing short of total planning deregulation will suffice. Not only are green belts not to blame for all the country's housing shortage ills, but their removal would without question trigger a tsunami of land speculation and an increase in low-quality, high-cost and infrastructure-deficient development of the kind that, as we have heard, is already far too commonplace.

However, we are equally opposed to any attempt, along the lines mooted by the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) in the recent Conservative leadership contest, to prevent green-belt land from being released for development under any circumstances. The truth is that there are certain types of land within green-belt boundaries—for example, brownfield land within green belt or poor monocultural farmland next to key transport hubs—that are ideally suited for development. Politicians who argue that every inch of green-belt land should be forever off limits are doing the public a disservice.

Sir Gavin Williamson: I wish to respectfully correct the hon. Gentleman. He is referring to already developed land—he talked about petrol stations and industrial areas—but actually that sits outside the green-belt designation. Green-belt designation does not include previously developed industrial land.

Matthew Pennycook: I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman; I think he is wrong on that point. It includes brownfield land and land that has previously been developed. That is part of the problem: there is a misconception that green belt always equals greenfield, but it does not. I will talk about the distinction in a minute, because it is important for how we might go forward.

The debate we should be having is not a rehash of the stale exchanges between those who wish to abolish the green belt entirely and those who wish to render it inviolable. It should instead focus on what the Government need to do to ensure that more of the right bits of the green belt are released for development, that land-value capture is maximised on those sites so that the communities in question can benefit from first-class infrastructure

and more affordable housing, and that green-belt land with the highest environmental and amenity value is properly protected, enhanced and made more accessible. The selective release of green belt should increase, rather than decrease, the opportunities for urban communities to benefit from green space and nature.

In our view, any approach to green-belt development must be premised on the involvement of local communities. We believe that more needs to be done to ensure that local authorities routinely review green belt land as part of the local plan-making process and that they have the freedom to take a balanced view of how green belt land within their boundaries is managed, but we also want to see a more meaningful role for the public in determining which areas of local green belt land are permanently protected; which are improved and made more accessible; which might be added to the green belt as part of a swap; and which might be appropriate for new homes.

Perhaps most importantly, any green-belt development must deliver tangible benefits for local communities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West ably outlined, the problem is that in far too many cases today, green-belt land is being transformed into ill-planned neighbourhoods full of overpriced executive homes with the inevitable community backlash that that results in. That point was also made by my hon. Friends the Members for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and for Reading East (Matt Rodda), and by the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield).

Ensuring that green-belt development leads to beautiful and well-serviced neighbourhoods with good access to improved green open spaces and homes that are genuinely affordable for local people would require reform, not least to enable local authorities to acquire the land at a reasonable price, but that is entirely feasible if the political will exists. We can debate the precise delivery mechanisms, but Labour believes that the case for more effectively facilitating very limited development on poor-quality land within green belts in areas where it is most needed, in a way that meets local housing need, while at the same time protecting and enhancing high-quality green-belt land for the benefit of the public, is unarguable.

The alternative—here I take issue with the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson)—is to accept what is already taking place: namely, the progressive loss of all kinds of green-belt land, including greenfield and high-quality green-belt land, via haphazard and speculative fringe development, often of poor quality and via appeal. Doing so also sets aside a potentially valuable means of boosting housing supply, simply because it is too politically sensitive.

In the face of a housing crisis that is our country's most pernicious iniquity, blighting the lives of millions, the notion that every part of the green belt is sacrosanct cannot be justified. It is high time for a serious debate about the role that a reimagined green belt can play in tackling the crisis. I look forward to hearing from the new Minister, and I once again welcome him to his place. I hope he can clarify not just what the Government intend to do to prevent the ongoing release of high-quality, nature-rich green-belt land of the kind we have heard about, but what the Government's thinking on the green belt now is more generally, given that in the space of just three years the present Prime Minister has called both for a million homes to be built on green-belt land and for no green-belt development whatsoever to take place.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I remind him to leave two minutes for the mover of the motion to respond at the very end.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): Thank you, Sir Gary. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I am grateful to all colleagues for attending today, and I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) on securing this debate. In this my first debate as housing and planning Minister, it is good to get into the important issues that hon. Members have raised. I am sure that they will be brought back regularly throughout my time in post.

A significant number of different issues, both specific and broad, has been raised about the green belt. I will try to answer and address as many of them as I can in the time available. There are two things that mean that I will be unable to answer some questions or to directly address some specific points. First, as hon. Members are aware, due to the quasi-judicial nature of the planning system I am unable to comment on large aspects of individual local plans and specific planning applications, given that they could be called in and dealt with at ministerial level. I apologise to hon. Members for being unable to do so, but I hope they will understand the rationale behind it. Secondly, as a number of hon. Members have indicated, there is a set of questions that are open at this time, and that is because we have a new Government—a new Administration, Prime Minister and Secretary of State. We hope and aim to close and clarify many of those questions as soon as possible, but I hope hon. Members will understand that I am not able to do so in this debate.

With those points in mind, and before turning to the individual comments of hon. Members, I will restate the Government's clear position that the green belt is a hugely important part of our planning system. For many decades, this much loved and historical feature has protected our landscape. The national planning policy framework makes clear that the green belt has a specific purpose, that it should be released only in exceptional circumstances, as has been clear for a number of years, and that, where possible, local authorities should take into account other ways in which development can take place before looking at green belt, including a requirement to consider brownfield development.

Margaret Greenwood: I refer back to the countryside charity CPRE's research. It examined a 10-year period of the release of green-belt land and found that about 41% of applications to build on the green belt had gone through. Does the Minister believe that the protections are sufficient and strong? The research suggests that that is not the case.

Lee Rowley: That is a very important point. I will come to it, but it is important to highlight that the amount of green belt in this country has increased in recent years. The overall amount has gone up substantially. That is due in large part to the introduction of a green belt in the north of England, but it is also the case—we should always stand back and consider this—that, in terms of pure hectareage, the amount of green belt

[*Lee Rowley*]

has increased. The hon. Lady makes a very important point, and ultimately we have a decision to make on green belt.

The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) on the Opposition Front Bench made the important point that some parts of the green belt do not have the same aesthetic quality as others. Moreover—this has been in the NPPF for a substantial amount of time—there will be exceptions. In certain instances, buildings will need to be built for farms and for forestry, and consideration will have to be given to elements that most hon. Members and people out there will accept are reasonable. My point is that there has to be flexibility. The NPPF provides flexibility while making significant statements about the importance of the green belt, which is absolutely vital.

Mr Robertson: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I will conclude my point, if I may. If the process for at least some scenarios needs to be flexible, as is the case here, we need to consider who is best placed to determine that flexibility. In my view, that decision has to be made locally because, in those very small instances, it is the localities and the local councils that will be able to make the best decision about what should or should not happen with this designation of land. That is within the wider context that, ultimately, the green belt should be released only in exceptional circumstances where there is a clear and compelling case to do so and when other things such as brownfield have been considered first.

Mr Robertson: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. In my constituency, 10,000 houses are being built on green-belt land. That does not seem to me to be an exceptional circumstance. It seems like riding roughshod over the green-belt policy.

Lee Rowley: As I have indicated, I cannot talk about individual cases, but I understand his point and the strength of feeling that he shares with other colleagues about the issue of appropriateness.

The hon. Member for Coventry North West made a substantial number of important points. Again, I congratulate her on securing the debate. I am not sure I agree with some of her slightly more partisan elements, but I will disregard them in the spirit in which this debate has largely been pursued. The reality is that everything in planning is a challenge. There is a balance to be struck and a set of trade-offs. There are no easy answers. We all share the same desire. I have a substantial proportion of green belt in my constituency, which I want to enhance to protect our natural environment. I want it protected so that everybody can enjoy it in future, as the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) indicated in his remarks.

We also want to ensure that people can get on the housing ladder—a point that was highlighted by the hon. Member for Coventry North West. The proportion of home ownership is not as high as it used to be, although it is starting to rise again. We have to balance these things, and that requires a nuanced and mature debate, which we have largely had today, with a recognition that there has to be flexibility in the system, as well as the great protection that is necessary.

Matthew Pennycook: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I really must make progress.

The hon. Member for Coventry North West talked about a failure to address issues in planning. I accept that there are always challenges in planning, but I wish to put on the record the importance of the 2 million new houses that have been built over the last 12 years—2 million families have had the opportunity to realise their dream of home ownership. Some 600,000 of those are affordable homes, and 242,000 were built in 2019 alone. Billions of pounds, whatever our views on whether that is sufficient, will have come forward in infrastructure to support communities.

The hon. Member for Coventry North West also highlighted the challenges in how the system works. I absolutely accept that there are challenges in how the system works, but ultimately this is a process where local authorities—I will not mention specific councils—have the power to bring forward a plan at the time that they wish. They should understand the context in which local plans are brought forward. They have the ability to both include and exclude locations, and they can set the overall framework in which development happens in a local area.

There is then clarity that allows developers, communities, individuals and those who are affected to understand what will and will not happen. Some authorities do that well. Some of those that perhaps do it less well could learn. I am unable to comment on Coventry specifically, but I hope the hon. Lady and her colleagues from the city will reflect on that.

Matthew Pennycook: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I need to make progress—I have only a few minutes. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) talked about the duty to co-operate, and I hope we will be able to make further announcements on that in due course. I am happy to discuss it with him separately if that helps, given his interest in it.

Colleagues from various constituencies, including the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) and my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), talked about brownfield land. I absolutely accept the huge importance of developing on brownfield land. As I highlighted, the national planning policy framework indicates the importance of that. A substantial amount of taxpayer subsidy has already been brought forward for brownfield land. There was only one announcement, back in July. I hope that, if hon. Members' local authorities had the opportunity to bid into that brownfield land fund between July and August this year, they did so. Should it be appropriate, it is important that local authorities take opportunities to bid to build on brownfield land, and that they think through what they can do locally to bring forward additional brownfield land.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about investment zones. I place on the record that the expression of interest guidance for investment zones is clear on the environment: mitigation would be required of any environmental impacts of proposed investment zones. If local authorities that apply do not

concur with that, their application would be failed. That is publicly available in the guidance on expressions of interest.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) made strong points about the importance of a diversity of approaches to ensure that we support housing need in local areas. I am happy to talk to him more about the land constraint point that he highlighted.

The hon. Member for City of Chester talked about the importance of green belt, which I have already talked about. I wholeheartedly concur with him on that point. He also highlighted water and storage facilities. Paragraph 160 of the NPPF covers that, but if there is a specific point he thinks I should be made aware of, I would be happy to talk to him separately.

My hon. Friends the Members for Eastbourne and for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) talked about specific applications. I am afraid that I am unable to talk about those, but my hon. Friends have noted them. I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes about the importance of neighbourhood plans and the involvement of local areas in them. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) for raising the issue about his locality. Within the bounds of appropriateness, I am happy to receive further representations on that and to talk about it. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Reading East for highlighting the brownfield element.

In the 30 seconds that remain, I again thank all colleagues for their comments. It has been a useful and helpful debate, and I look forward to further discussions. If there were simple answers on this issue, I am not sure that we would be here today. If there were easy ways to resolve the very difficult trade-offs, I am sure that my many predecessors would have done so years ago, as I

have been told on a number of occasions. However, it is good to talk and to understand the concerns in local areas. I am grateful both to the hon. Member for Coventry North West for securing the debate and to everybody for their contributions to it.

10.57 am

Taiwo Owatemi: I thank all hon. Members for participating in the debate and for speaking so passionately. The hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) and the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) spoke about protecting the green belt and giving more power to local people, so that they have a say in the development process. My hon. Friends the Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Reading East (Matt Rodda) focused on the importance of building on brownfield sites and protecting the democratic process. We all agree that building affordable houses, with proper infrastructure that meets the needs of the population, should be a priority for the Government. I hope that the Minister takes back all the issues that hon. Members have raised today and takes urgent action.

Will the Minister also meet me to discuss Coventry's plan, and will he put on hold any green-belt applications currently put forward to Coventry City Council, so that the council has the time to review local plans and make decisions based on current ONS figures? Lastly, I thank all the activists who have campaigned to protect our green spaces, both in Coventry and across the country. They understand the impact that the issue has in their communities.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of new developments on greenbelt land.

Procurement of Evusheld

[*Relevant Document: e-petition 611884, Fund Evusheld the preventative COVID19 antibody for immunocompromised.*]

11 am

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): There has been a lot of interest in this debate. I will call Daisy Cooper to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to have the final say, as is the convention for a 30-minute debate.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the procurement of Evusheld.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Gary. I am pleased to have secured this important debate on behalf of the forgotten half a million immunocompromised and immunosuppressed patients in England, and the 18,617 people who have signed the parliamentary e-petition calling on the Government to fund the preventive covid-19 drug Evusheld. I pay tribute to the extraordinary campaigning work of Evusheld for the UK, Blood Cancer UK, Kidney Care UK and many other charities that have given their members a voice. There is clearly significant interest from colleagues across the House, and I will endeavour to take as many short interventions as possible.

Let me be blunt: the Government have got this badly wrong. Some of our most vulnerable people are now in an impossible position, or, as some of them have said, they have been left to rot. People with blood cancer, vasculitis, kidney transplants, multiple sclerosis, long-term conditions and rare diseases and those on immunosuppressant drugs are crying out for the preventive drug Evusheld. Why? For them, the covid infection is just as deadly—in fact, more so—than when we first went into lockdown two and a half years ago. They do not mount a response to covid through the vaccines like the rest of us. Covid is not just a bad cold or an inconvenience, but a killer disease. In a society where people are allowed to walk around with that killer disease without being required to wear a mask, test or isolate, nowhere is safe for the immunocompromised—not inside or out.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I share the passion with which the hon. Lady speaks. Does she agree that it is incredibly important that the clinicians and scientists take this decision through the usual rigorous methods, and not us as politicians?

Daisy Cooper: I welcome that intervention and I do agree. I will outline all the scientific evidence that backs the decision to procure Evusheld and roll it out right now, this side of Christmas.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this timely debate. I was contacted by a constituent ahead of it, who reiterated that as autumn and winter approach, we are even more vulnerable and isolated. Given what we face, I am sure the hon. Lady agrees that it is urgent for Ministers to listen to this debate and set out plans to support immunosuppressed patients and people during the difficult winter ahead.

Daisy Cooper: The hon. Lady is right. I will set out not only that the scientific evidence backs up the case for Evusheld, but that there is strong political consensus for it. Of course, the voices of those affected must be heard.

There is nowhere that is safe for these people: not shops, not schools, not supermarkets, not buses, not even the very GP surgeries and hospitals that they need to visit to manage the conditions that make them vulnerable. They are at extreme risk of hospitalisation and death, and they have been left with no choice but to lock themselves away from family and friends for two and a half years. Many now face a third winter of shielding.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I agree with the hon. Lady's sentiments. I have a constituent who has been shielding for 30 months—a 26-year-old who is the son of Mrs Rehana Patel. Along with the hon. Lady, I plead that the Government continue to give serious consideration to the use of Evusheld to help those thousands of clinically vulnerable people across my constituency and the rest of the UK.

Daisy Cooper: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention.

Let us move on to the facts. Is Evusheld safe and effective? Yes, it is. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency approved it in March, seven months ago. Is there enough scientific evidence? Yes, there is ample evidence.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The hon. Lady and I have had conversations about this issue and about my own constituents. What I cannot understand is that the RAPID C-19 committee has looked at this 11 times. These are supposed to be experts that are looking at it. She is quite right to want evidence that proves that the committee is wrong. How come we have got into a situation where Government scientists are saying one thing and the rest of the scientific community is saying something completely different?

Daisy Cooper: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. That is exactly the question I would like the Minister to answer.

There are two significant problems with the most recent report published last week. First, it effectively says that the RAPID C-19 group looked at the results of a trial run on actual people in December 2021 and concluded that the evidence was so good that they were going to recommend that Evusheld be rolled out to patients. However, in May of this year, they looked at non-clinical data—test tubes, petri dishes and the like—and decided that the results were not good enough. It does not take a rocket scientist to work out that high concentrations of a virus in a petri dish do not translate to tests in real human beings.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I understand that 33 other countries have approved the use of Evusheld, including every G7 member apart from the United Kingdom. What do you think we can learn from the other parts of the world that have approved this important treatment for the immunocompromised?

Daisy Cooper: I am grateful for that question. In fact, Evusheld is now so effective that not only has it been rolled out in 33 countries, but a number of countries,

including Japan, Italy, Spain and Israel, have actually put in repeat orders for Evusheld, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US has even launched a public drive to increase uptake. In private discussions, both the Minister and his predecessor have indicated to me in meetings that there was some evidence that countries had bought the drug but were not using it.

Let us be clear: the failure of any Government to identify clinically vulnerable patients and distribute the medication to them has nothing to do with the effectiveness of that particular drug. Before we throw stones in glass houses, we should remember that of immunocompromised patients in England who caught covid and were referred for treatment, only 17% actually got it. That failure to distribute is more to do with the fracturing of our health systems; it is not about the effectiveness of this drug.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing forward this vital debate on behalf of the many constituents who have contacted me and in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary health group. Does she agree that when people feel they are being left to rot, it is not only their physical health that is impacted; their mental wellbeing is crippled in the stage of recovery where they need the most support possible?

Daisy Cooper: The hon. Member is absolutely right. Many people are clinically vulnerable because they have a health condition, and their physical health is getting worse, as it would when someone is stuck at home for two and a half years, but the mental health impact is also incredibly profound. We know that many of our constituents have experienced suicidal thoughts.

I turn now to the advice of the RAPID C-19 oversight group, which has been mentioned. The Government refused to share this advice for some time, and many of us were asking for it. I was pleased to see that this advice was finally published last Thursday on 6 October. I was pretty shocked for two reasons. First, the report actually says that the group looked at real-world data and the impact on people and that data was very strong. Then it looked at the data in a non-clinical setting and decided not to roll it out. That seems absurd to me.

There is a second problem with the evidence that was published last week. It lists the evidence that the group reviewed, and it leaves out one very critical scientific study by the Francis Crick Institute—a study that I believe the Government commissioned themselves. That study was commissioned to look at the effectiveness of a different drug: sotrovimab. That report concluded that sotrovimab was effective, and the Government are using that report to justify why they continue to use Evusheld. However, the report also concluded that Evusheld was even more effective. So why not buy Evusheld too? Perhaps the Minister can enlighten us.

On the same day the Government published this RAPID group report, *The Lancet*—the world's highest-impact general medical journal—carried an article by 19 experts calling on the World Health Organisation to update its guidance on Evusheld, based on the study the Government commissioned. In the article, those experts say that Evusheld should be used for not only preventative, prophylactic use, but treatment. The UK Government are really trailing behind. Can the Minister tell us why the RAPID study ignores this vital piece of research, which they must have known about?

Many of the people we are talking about have already had five or six vaccine jabs, even though they will mount very little, if any, response. The Government say it is important that these people get those vaccines, because they say some response is better than none. Why does that same test not apply to Evusheld? Why is it being singled out and held to an impossible standard?

Let us look at what the Government are proposing, instead of following the science. Ministers have referred Evusheld to NICE for further clinical and cost-effective assessment; apparently, we might hear back in April 2023. That is another delay—another six months of isolation—even though every other covid treatment and vaccine was urgently procured before being appraised. I ask again, why is the Government's treatment of Evusheld so inconsistent?

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): My constituent Helen Nash asked me to be here to support the case that the hon. Lady is making. She makes the key point: while the Government did a lot of great work to accelerate the availability of vaccines for the population at large, this particular cohort seems to be subject to a very different set of criteria. That is the great concern. While we must rely on clinical advice, we must also have the same situation for all people, regardless of their status.

Daisy Cooper: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. One of the big concerns that has not been answered by the Government so far is why their approach to this drug is so inconsistent with their approach to others. As I say, Ministers have referred Evusheld to NICE, and it is not at all clear why their treatment of it is so different.

Meanwhile, the Department of Health has proposed that immunocompromised patients have an antibody test, and that those who do not respond well enough could join an Evusheld trial. Let us be clear what that trial would mean in real life. It would require some of the people who have been shielding to stay alive for two and a half years to come out of shielding like the rest of us, but without any protection from covid vaccines, knowing that they might only be given a placebo. It would be like taking lambs to the slaughter. I would be astonished and appalled if that proposal passed anyone's ethics test. I do not know if the Minister would support one of his loved ones taking part in such a trial, but I certainly would not. Can the Minister therefore tell us why his Department wants to take this dangerous approach instead of the approach suggested by the Drug Safety Research Unit, which has called on the Secretary of State to roll out Evusheld now, for this winter, and to run an observational study of the impact?

Another question that has arisen is whether there are problems with supply. The answer is no. AstraZeneca has dismissed that claim.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The hon. Lady is presenting a powerful case; I congratulate her on securing this important debate. Max Johnson is a 14-year-old heart transplant recipient. He was the key figure in the organ donation campaign that was supported by Members right across the House. Max and his family are being supported by their local MP, the hon. and learned Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), but we have kept in close touch. Max's life has been turned upside down since the start of the pandemic, with no

[Dan Jarvis]

light at the end of the tunnel of isolation. Does the hon. Lady agree that Max, along with thousands of other people across the country, has the right to a better life and should be allowed access to Evusheld without any further delay?

Daisy Cooper: I completely agree.

I do not know how much a dose of Evusheld costs. I hope that, when the Government enter into negotiations with AstraZeneca, they will get a good price for the taxpayer. However, all Members of this House know what the cost is to our constituents who are affected. They have given up jobs, caring responsibilities and vital moments in their lives—they could not go to weddings, funerals or births. Some of them no longer run vital volunteer-led community services. Some have lost their life, and some are suicidal; they are thinking of taking their life because the psychological torture of prolonged shielding is too much for them to bear.

Those people are getting even more ill, because no one can be locked up for two and a half years without getting problems with their back or knees, or experiencing extreme loneliness and mental ill health. Those are all problems that are piling up for our already overstretched NHS. If those immunocompromised patients get covid, they are far more likely to end up in an intensive care unit, which we know will cost us thousands and thousands of pounds. There is also a risk of variant escape, because several studies show that new variants and virus mutations are more likely in immunocompromised patients. Against that backdrop, Evusheld is the cheap option.

Two years ago, Members stood in this room and begged Health Ministers to change their minds on care home restrictions, which were supposed to protect people but were so tight that some people started dying of neglect. We are at risk of that happening again. The Government changed course after that debate and can do so again today. The people affected by this feel that they do not have a life; it feels like a life sentence. Ministers have it in their gift to give those people their life back, and on behalf of the half a million, I urge the Minister—I beg him—to do it today.

11.17 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Robert Jenrick): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) for securing the debate, and the many hon. Members from across the House who have either intervened on her, or whose presence on behalf of their constituents speaks to the concern and interest across the country.

I come to this debate not merely as a new Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care, but as the Minister who established the shielding programme in spring 2020. I have been involved in these issues, in one way or another, for two and a half years, and care deeply about the individuals who have been shielding since then. Having met many of them, both as a Minister and as a constituency MP, I understand their distress, and the psychological harm that living a cloistered life places on them and their loved ones.

I also approach the issue with the view that the Government should make decisions on covid-19 treatments based on the available evidence and the recommendations of the medical experts at our disposal. That has been the case for all covid-19 treatments, and is, and should be, the case for Evusheld. It is imperative that we deploy only those drugs that we are content are effective. We would be doing a disservice to the public if we deployed drugs through the NHS that, in this grave situation, gave them a false sense of security.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con) rose—

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) rose—

Robert Jenrick: I will make one further point, then I will come back to my hon. Friends. That does not mean that there is not a role for Ministers in interrogating the evidence, listening to the voices of those with the contrary view—both in the House and in the public domain—and ensuring that we get all the information that we need before we make informed decisions. That is the approach that I have tried to take in the three weeks in which I have been in post, and will take going forwards.

Caroline Ansell: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. On behalf of the half a million, and of one very special lady in my constituency, I wanted to ask a question. I have carefully considered the Government's response. It talks about the risks outweighing the benefits of deploying Evusheld at this point, but I have not really been able to understand what those risks are; I understand the risks of not deploying it, which have been outlined. Could the Minister could speak to that? As the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) described, my constituent is fighting for her career, mental health and relationships, and this debate is very important to her.

Robert Jenrick: I hopefully will answer as many of those points as I can in the time available. I will go to my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) next, and then make some progress.

Dr Luke Evans: I entirely agree with the point about making sure that we have clinically robust evidence. We saw during covid with ivermectin how poor data influenced a debate that was sparked across the world. That said, one thing we do have control over is how quickly we look at the regulation. Is there anything that the Minister can do to speed up the decision making? That is within his gift.

Robert Jenrick: Yes, there is, and I hope I will be able to shed further light on that in my remarks, but given that there is relatively little time, sadly, for this debate, let me set out first the process that we have been through; I hope that that will give some comfort to those in the Chamber and listening to the debate that the issue has been handled in a very rigorous way.

Our regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, gave conditional marketing authorisation to Evusheld in March 2022, but—this is an important point to note—it did so noting a lack of data regarding how it responds to the omicron variant. The lack of supporting data has been noted by other respected regulatory authorities, including the European

Medicines Agency and the Food and Drug Administration in the United States. Although the MHRA licenses drugs, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence assesses the clinical and cost-effectiveness of them. The normal process would therefore be that NICE proceeds to investigate Evusheld, and that is happening as we speak. As the hon. Member for St Albans said, that process is due to conclude in April next year, but yesterday, I met NICE's chief executive, Sam Roberts, to review her work and to seek reassurances that her work could proceed at a faster pace, and she has committed to reverting to me as soon as possible with a new timetable.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I welcome that development. I want to place it on the record that of course the devolved Governments also depend a lot on the advice of RAPID C-19. I am sure that the Welsh Government, along with the others, will welcome an accelerated timetable, if it is possible. I congratulate the Minister on doing that.

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to the hon. Member for that comment. Given the urgent need—we all agree on that—to protect lives during the pandemic, we also expedited processes by creating RAPID C-19 as a multi-agency initiative made up of the UK's main healthcare agencies. It was established in 2020, in response to the pandemic, to get treatments, such as Evusheld, to NHS patients quickly and safely. Therefore we did not simply leave the matter in the hands of NICE; we asked RAPID C-19 to review the evidence base for the use of Evusheld and to consider whether the evidence merited patients having access to it ahead of the normal NICE appraisal. The evidence has now been published and is available on gov.uk; any emerging evidence will continue to be kept under review. That includes the Crick data that the hon. Member for St Albans mentioned, which was published in May and in August and is now being reviewed by RAPID C-19, and also the *Lancet* study that she referenced, which was published on 6 October, relatively recently.¹

Three types of evidence have been considered. The clinical trial data is generally the strongest source of evidence. However, in this case, the trial was carried out before omicron became dominant, so it does not confirm efficacy for omicron variants. It would be, I think, concerning to deploy a drug on the NHS that had not been considered in the light of omicron.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Robert Jenrick: I will, but given that I have only five minutes remaining to me, this is the last time I will be able to take an intervention.

Vicky Foxcroft: The Minister is making an interesting speech, but I am really inquisitive as to how we are still using vaccines that have not been tested on omicron, yet we are using the excuse of Evusheld not being tested on omicron for those people who are immunocompromised.

Robert Jenrick: Before we deploy Evusheld on the NHS and give members of the public the sense of security that comes with that, it is clearly sensible for us

to investigate its efficacy in the light of the dominant variant. Otherwise, we would be giving people a false sense of security.

We have looked at in vitro neutralisation studies, which can be completed much more rapidly than clinical trials, that have measured in the lab how a new variant changes the binding efficacy of the therapeutic. These studies show reduced binding with different omicron variants, which means that the clinical efficacy against these variants is expected to be reduced. We have also reviewed the published clinical experience of the use of Evusheld, including the studies emerging from the United States and Israel. There can be difficulties in interpreting some observational studies if, for example, there is not an appropriate control group. The conclusion of the evidence review is that there are uncertainties about efficacy, so a clinical trial has been proposed to look at that. We are working with AstraZeneca on the practicalities of creating an urgent trial that can inform the debate ahead of NICE's ultimate decision in early 2023.

As was noted, other countries have introduced Evusheld, including, in some cases, before omicron was dominant. Many have decided to double the dose to try to counter the drug's reduced ability to neutralise the omicron variant. Our experts consider that even at this increased dose, the evidence is still insufficient to demonstrate efficacy, so individuals could be at risk if they changed the protective behaviours that they have undertaken for many months.

The Government recognise that an effective pre-exposure programme for immunosuppressed people would be valuable, but the scientific evidence does not support emergency deployment of Evusheld at this time. To boost the evidence base for future decisions, clinical advisers in the expert groups and my Department have recommended a clinical trial, which could help us to answer outstanding questions on dose, efficacy and duration of protection against different variants. We are working through the practicalities of that trial. We will update colleagues and members of the public as quickly as possible.

We have had great success in generating evidence in clinical trials; last week, initial results from the PANORAMIC trial indicated that early treatment with one drug significantly reduced recovery time, and we will now work in the same way to understand what this evidence means for patient access to the drug. I appreciate the difficulties that immunosuppressed individuals face, particularly if they are concerned about not having protection from covid-19 vaccinations, and so continue with behaviours to avoid covid-19. We all recognise the impact that that has on individuals' lives and want to improve their quality of life. The Antivirals and Therapeutics Taskforce has ensured that UK patients have the earliest access to antiviral, antibody and anti-inflammatory COVID-19 treatments. NHS patients were often the first in the world to receive safe and effective treatment, both in clinical trials and following regulatory approval of treatments.

Colleagues here and those listening at home have my personal assurance that I will continue to work with expert advisers in the Department, and with RAPID C-19, to ensure that they review all emerging evidence, and to ensure that the NICE process is carried out as swiftly as possible, while ensuring that it is safe and

1. [Official Report, 13 October 2022, Vol. 720, c. 1MC.]

[Robert Jenrick]

efficacious; we want to ensure that members of the public, who may ultimately receive this drug, have confidence that it does what they think it does.

I am holding a meeting for Members of this House with our expert advisers tomorrow at 11 am. It will give Members the opportunity to ask our experts, including those who have been part of RAPID C-19, any questions and seek further assurances.¹ I am grateful to the hon. Member for St Albans for securing this debate, and for the passionate way in which she expressed the strong feelings of members of the public; I hope to work with her productively in the months ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Sewage Discharges

[JULIE ELLIOTT *in the Chair*]

[*Relevant Documents: e-petition 582336, Ban Water Companies discharging raw sewage into water courses.*]

2.30 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered sewage discharges.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I thank all colleagues who are here to debate this important issue. I also thank the public and the e-petitioners for driving us to seek this change. I welcome the Minister to her place, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), the Chairman of the Environmental Audit Committee, for everything he has done on this matter. Many hon. Members wish to speak, so I will try to limit interventions. I recognise that there is a Minister here—my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman)—who cannot make a speech, and I hope some of these words will apply to him.

Let me illustrate why I sought this debate. As of 16 September, on nine out of the 16 days of the month Bexhill's beach had been issued with a pollution risk warning and signs warning against bathing because of the risk of sewage discharge. On 18 August, a fault at a pumping station at Galley Hill caused a discharge of waste water, and sewage was pumped into the Bexhill coastline. It lasted for two and a half hours, starting at 2.59 pm, and bathers were not warned about what was occurring until early evening. In the settlement of Heathfield, residents at the bottom of the hill are up to their knees in discharge when heavy rain comes. That has led to rat infestations, illness for children and pets and contamination of homes and gardens.

Our sewerage system is not fit for purpose, and yet we keep building homes in these areas and making the situation worse. Much of our nation is covered by combined sewerage systems comprising hundreds of thousands of miles of sewers. When those systems cannot cope with the volume, rather than back up into properties, they discharge into our seas, our rivers and our waterways from approximately 15,000 combined sewer overflows. The practice is disgusting. Last year, there were more than 370,000 monitored spill events. Every discharge impacts our environment and our marine life, and our ability to enjoy it and make a living from it. This can no longer be tolerated.

Successive Governments have failed to tackle the issue, going back to the 19th century when much of the combined sewerage system was installed, although I welcome the Government's latest steps to tackle the problem. Our job is to find solutions. With that in mind, I have four issues that I wish to touch on, and I will ask the Minister a number of questions.

The first issue is the storm overflow discharge reduction plan. I welcome the concept, but we could be more ambitious with the deadlines to eradicate storm overflows. The plan relies on data being correctly and fully recorded. Many citizen scientists, for whom we should all be very grateful, believe that the discharges are not fully recorded. I therefore ask the Minister the following questions. Given concerns about under-reporting, is she confident that the discharge data is accurate?

1.[Official Report, 13 October 2022, Vol. 720, c. 2MC.]

The event and duration of overflow discharges is monitored, but not the volume and impact. The Environmental Audit Committee recommended the installation of volume monitors on overflows. Will the new Minister explain why the Department rejected that recommendation?

Given that the 2035 and 2050 targets have been criticised for lacking sufficient ambition and urgency, will the Minister consider allowing Ofwat to permit sewage companies to deliver their improvement plans earlier and to higher standards? Southern Water, in the area I represent, aims to meet the storm overflow targets, but it would hit 80% by 2030, rather than 75% by 2035, which is the Government's target.

The second issue is bathing water testing and quality. To use an example local to me, Bexhill's bathing water quality is rated sufficient. There was a concern recently that it would drop to poor. The town comprises 40,000 people, and that number swells during tourist season. To assess water quality, testing occurs weekly between May and September. It is tested at different times of the day, but always in the same place in the sea. I am told that the water is tested in the busiest part of the beach, but our beach has no focal point and surely a wider area of bathing water should be tested. We are adjacent to excellent bathing water at St Leonards, so swimmers cross from excellent to sufficient in one stroke.

Every day—I am sure it is the same for other colleagues—the Environment Agency sends me pollution risk warnings. However, for many days, Bexhill has been the only beach where signs advising against bathing should be displayed. When I asked what made Bexhill unique, given that it rains across the Sussex coast, I was told that there was something particular about Bexhill and heavy rainfall. In Bexhill's case, the testing place is adjacent to an outlet coming from a stream, which is the responsibility of the Environment Agency. In three years in which the agency has tested sub-optimal bathing water, Southern Water's own testing in the immediate vicinity has come up clear on the same day.

Many suspect that heavy rainwater is coming from the highways into the stream and then entering the sea. That may or may not be the cause of the low bathing water quality. However, the fact that we do not know why our bathing water is only just sufficient tells us that we do not know enough about what is going on and therefore we do not know how to clean things up.

Does the Minister believe that it would be more optimal to test water quality on different parts of the beach and on a continuous basis? Given that the bathing water testing regime is some 30 years old, does she believe that the Environment Agency's testing takes into account the latest pollutants, such as plastics, and gives an adequate reading of our bathing waters? Will the storm overflow discharge reduction plan prioritise busy bathing areas, such as Bexhill, which have bathing quality status below excellent or good?

The third issue is the impact from roads and house building. I will refer to the experience of residents in Heathfield, who have been blighted by sewage and flooding, and they still are when heavy rain comes. This is not just about the sewage companies, but about highways agencies ensuring that their drains can take heavy rainfall rather than it ending up in the combined sewer and causing a discharge or backfill. Despite this, Heathfield has more house building on top of the ridge below which these other roads sit.

On house building and roads, does the Minister believe that it is right to put the onus mainly on water companies to deliver fixes in the storm overflow discharge reduction plan, when many of these assets and the responsibility for them rest with the highways authorities? Has she considered giving the highway authorities a statutory duty to act and to maintain these assets after action has been taken, along with the funds that are to be generated for the plan? Alternatively, would she consider a prohibition on surface water from the highways entering the sewerage system? Either would reduce the chances of the combined sewer becoming overwhelmed in inclement weather. Next, will the Government commit to implement the plan for sustainable drainage systems—or SuDS, as it is known—thereby removing the automatic right to connect to the public sewer system, in order to prevent new developments from adding more surface water to the combined sewerage network?

Highways authorities can refuse to allow connection to their water courses. Will they be required to provide this access in order to avoid a situation in which developers connect to the combined sewers? Will the planning provisions in the forthcoming Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill enable further action to ensure that development takes place only where it will not put further pressure on the combined sewerage system, or will it provide local planning authorities with a justification for saying that further house building cannot take place without the establishment of separate drainage systems? Will the new planning rules allow for sewage companies to be statutory consultees on new planning applications rather than on just the local plan? My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow has a fine amendment in mind for that, and I would fully support it.

The final piece is the role of all of us—the role of the public. With more understanding of the combined sewer system and a demand that we end discharges into our waters, the public stand ready to play their part. However, many householders just do not know whether they are putting the heavy rainwater from their gutters into the sewerage system. If they did, many of them would take action to halt the flow and thereby halt the number of discharges when the system is overwhelmed. It might be cheaper to provide water butts to homes for free than to cope with an overwhelmed drainage system.

Will the Minister consider a requirement for householders to be informed if they have a combined sewerage pipe from their homes? Will she consider further financial incentives for householders to ensure that their rainwater goes into a water butt or tank, to help to reduce volume and to help when water is scarce in drier times?

I am so pleased that we are having this debate. I will end my remarks there because so many people wish to speak, and I am grateful to the Minister for the response that she will give.

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): As everyone can see, this is a highly subscribed debate. If everyone gets to speak—I want to try to get everybody in—they will have a minute and a half. I will have that limit informally for the first couple of speakers, but I will quickly introduce it formally if people do not stick to it.

2.40 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Thank you, Ms Elliott. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle

[Navendu Mishra]

(Huw Merriman) for securing this important debate. I am speaking quickly because of the 90-second limit that has been set.

We must be clear: we are in a dirty water emergency. Only 14% of English rivers meet good ecological standards, and water companies discharged raw sewage into English waterways more than 1.2 million times between 2016 and 2021. In my own constituency of Stockport, the Rivers Trust has reported that there have been 1,089 sewage spills for a total duration of 3,487 hours. This is shocking. As water bills have increased by 40% since privatisation, £72 billion has gone to shareholders, and yet investment in improving infrastructure has decreased by 15%. People are rightly angry.

The shameful frequency of sewage discharges and the resulting damage to our most valued, delicate river habitats is wreaking havoc on our natural environment and ecology, notwithstanding the public health issues it is causing. In the north-west, recent data from the Labour party shows that our tourism and leisure spots have been devastated by 253 years' worth of raw sewage discharge. We also know that across the region there has been a 62% increase in the number of monitored discharge hours between 2018 and 2021. That is why I was so disappointed to learn last week from a report in *The Guardian* that the Environment Agency knew that raw sewage was being pumped into our rivers in the north-west of England 10 years ago in 2012. I must add that the Environment Agency has had a significant funding cut over the last few years, and we must talk a lot more about that. My local company, United Utilities, has been dumping raw sewage into rivers while failing to treat the required amount of sewage stipulated in its permits.

I am conscious that other people want to speak, so I will make my last point. Between 2002 and 2018 Scottish Water, which remains publicly owned, invested on average nearly 35% more per household than private English water companies did. Meanwhile in Germany, only 5% of the water supply leaks, but in England that figure is 20%. Additionally, by the admission of the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in 2018, nine regional water companies had paid out 95% of their profits to shareholders between 2007 and 2016. The simple solution to this crisis is public ownership of water.

2.42 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I have public sewage discharge meetings concerning my rivers. I get the water companies, the Environment Agency, the district council and the county council together, and we take verbatim minutes and agree action points. One of the key things we heard in the last meeting was that British water bills are among the lowest in Europe. If we wish to clean up our rivers, there is therefore scope to increase our water bills. The Environment Act 2021 was a wonderful piece of legislation introduced by the Government, and let us make it work. We have already heard about monitoring above and below discharges so we can see where the problem is. Publish the data so the Government get the plans and send them off to Ofwat, which can allow more investment to stop storm discharges. The worst discharges do not occur during storms, however; they happen most of the time.

The other half of this problem is farmers, and I declare my interest as a farmer. Under environment land management schemes, we have new soil quality plans to stop farmers using fertiliser in unsuitable conditions, when nitrates and phosphates run off into water. Over the 30 years for which I have been a Member of Parliament, our precious limestone rivers in the Cotswolds have become more opaque, and there are more weeds in those rivers. Our plans under the Environment Act and under the sewage reduction plan over the next 25 years, costing £56 billion, need to be sped up. That is what our constituents demand.

The only other ask I make of the Minister is to give the Environment Agency enough resources not only to police discharges, but to make prosecutions quicker and easier. That is what we need so that polluters, whoever they are, know they will be caught out and stopped. The public are demanding it and Members of Parliament, who are here in such numbers, are demanding it. We must get on and get these plans into action more quickly.

2.44 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this excellent debate. It is really important, and I thought he made an exceptional start.

I want to make three points. It is not really possible to articulate an argument in the time available, so I will just go through the motions. I want to mention the problem, the impact and the fundamental flaw in the water industry. The excellent Rivers Trust sewage monitoring data for 2021, which is available on the website, highlights 5,115 hours of sewage discharges in my constituency alone. That is the equivalent of 213 days of continuous sewage discharges. When sewage is dumped on 213 days out of 365, that is not an exceptional event but a persistent problem.

My constituency is fortunate because we have the east Durham heritage coast, and east Durham is home to a thriving wild swimming community. Seaham Seaside Swimmers is a local network with many hundreds of members who are passionate about health and wellbeing. Those who participate in that activity are aware of the Safer Seas and Rivers Service app, and last year there were more than 119 pollution alerts from the three combined sewage outlets in my constituency. We really must do better, and we look to the Government and the regulator to do so.

2.46 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for securing the debate.

My Gosport constituency is a peninsula surrounded by Portsmouth harbour and the Solent's waters, so we are a coastal community. We are also proudly protective of the ecology of the Solent. From the seagrasses to the seahorses, the flora and fauna of our coastal waters is vital to their health and sustainability, which is threatened by sewage pollution. In Stokes Bay, Lee-on-the-Solent and Hill Head, we have avid swimmers and lovers of water sports all year round, not just in the summer months.

We know that several targets have been set out for storm overflow reduction, and I welcome the new measures, but I have to express my frustration at the implied lack of urgency. The timescales are simply insufficiently ambitious. I know that storm overflows are a Victorian sewer system design feature, and I know that achieving the targets will require large and complex infrastructure projects, but water companies have made staggering profits for decades. In some cases, they have paid eye-watering fines while not sufficiently investing in infrastructure. Enough has to be enough.

Unfortunately, we regularly experience sewage outflows around our local beaches in Gosport. They do not always coincide with heavy rainfall, but the Environment Agency is only funded to deliver the requirements of the bathing water regulations by testing the waters between May and September. Therefore, if discharges occur in the winter months, the water quality is not known. I say to the Minister that our coastal ecology is affected all year round and people use the waters all year round. Can she please tell me what thought has been given to asking, and funding, the Environment Agency to check the waters all year round?

2.48 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott.

Over the summer, we saw multiple news stories reporting that water companies were pumping sewage into the sea. There were numerous reports of people being warned to stay out of the water at popular beaches because of pollution risks and unsafe conditions. It is an issue that my constituents are very concerned about, particularly as I represent a coastal community. In August, the Government published their storm overflows discharge reduction plan, which requires water companies to reduce discharges into designated bathing water and high-priority nature sites by 2035, and into all sites by 2050. That simply is not good enough.

The Rivers Trust has criticised the Government's lack of ambition and said that the plan is too little, too late, adding that it was appalled to see that the plan had not taken into account the thousands of responses to the draft consultation, which called for much more ambitious targets. It is very clear that the Government's plan to tackle discharge just does not show the level of ambition that we need to protect and enhance the quality of our coastal waters and waterways.

2.49 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott.

We have too much sewage going into our waters. This is not a new problem—everybody in the various political parties is agreed on that. I was a supporter of the Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill promoted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), and I am a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on chalk streams. I also have the great Letcombe brook project in my constituency, so this issue matters a great deal to me.

A lot of nonsense has been written about MPs voting to allow sewage into our waters. As the independent fact-checking website Full Fact said, that is not true: whichever way that vote last year had gone, sewage would have continued to go into our waters, because

our systems are very old, we cannot change them overnight and the alternative is sewage backing up into people's homes, which is even worse.

I welcome the Government's Environment Act, which places a legal duty on water companies to reduce the harm from sewage discharges, and the storm overflows plan, which will unlock £56 billion to help fix the problem. I probably most welcome the increase in the maximum fine from £250,000 to £250 million; that is the sort of thing that will help the water industry to take the issue seriously. There is a whole range of problems, from leaks to sewage. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) said, the public see a water industry that is

“slow to stop leaks, slow to repair them, slow to stop pollution and slow to say sorry.”

That has to change—the sooner, the better.

2.50 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Thank you for chairing this debate, Ms Elliott, and I also thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for securing it.

We hear that there will potentially be an increase in the maximum fine. There have been only 11 prosecutions in the last four years, so we know that the real cause of anger is the failure to deal with legal discharges of sewage into our waterways, lakes and rivers. The collective profit of the water companies last year was £2.7 billion—£1 billion in shareholder dividends. The choice is not having sewage back up into people's houses or letting it flow into our waterways, rivers, lakes and streams. The alternative is to invest those obscene profits in holding tanks to ensure that we do not get sewage outflows in the first place. *[Interruption.]* I hear Conservative Members muttering from sedentary positions. I wish they were as angry about sewage as they are about people campaigning against sewage.

In Windermere, the largest lake in England, there were 71 days last year when sewage was discharged legally. In Coniston, there were 112 days when sewage was discharged legally. In the River Eden, in Kirkby Stephen, there were 2,500 hours of sewage being discharged legally. In Morecambe Bay, there were 35,000 hours of sewage being discharged legally. The option here is obvious: to force the water companies to invest their profits now—not over a 20-year period—to ensure that the water in the lakes of the Lake district, the dales and the rest of the country are not polluted by sewage, so that this environmental health risk, public health risk, risk to animal welfare and risk to our economy is not allowed to continue. The Government have the power to force the water companies to take the action that they should take. We know that the water companies have the money to do it. Why are the Government not forcing them to do it now?

2.52 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman).

I have 90 seconds to make three points. First, water is not like other products; it is the single most critical resource for any society. Without it, human civilisation,

[Alex Chalk]

even existence, is impossible. I make that point because there is a special duty on water companies to act in the public interest, and I am afraid that too often they have deliberately shielded themselves from scrutiny or used complex structures to avoid paying taxes. They have appeared more interested in financial engineering than in the civil engineering that is required.

Secondly, combined sewage overflows are not new or unique, as has powerfully been pointed out. The reality is that there are more per capita in Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark. However, times have changed, and expectations have rightly changed, too. Progress is required, and it is required now.

Thirdly, the River Chelt, in my constituency, matters very much. I grew up near its source; it flows through my back garden, as it happens. I am pleased that Severn Trent Water have said to me—have given, in their words, a cast-iron assurance—that they will reduce overflows into the River Chelt by 85% by the end of 2024. That is welcome—it is essential—but if it does not deliver, I am afraid that my constituents, and constituents around the country, will take the view that the water companies are the unacceptable face of capitalism.

2.54 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I am proud to represent the River Lea as part of my constituency, but in 2021 there were 27 instances of sewage discharge into the Lea—184 hours in total. That is not new: in 2019 overall the River Lea was classified as bad, failing on both chemical standards and ecological health. It is one of the most polluted rivers in the UK. Research from Thames21—an excellent charity that does work to keep our inland waterways clean—and University College London shows that the amount of faecal *E. coli* bacteria in the river regularly exceeds international standards. That is not a sentence that I ever thought I would have to read out, because it is shocking that that is the case. Hackney, my local council, has established the London Lea Catchment Partnership with other local councils and Thames21, to try to improve biodiversity, increase the cleanliness of the river and work to discourage swimming. Sadly, that has to be the case when we are still getting that level of discharge.

I have two key asks for the Minister. As other Members have highlighted, the sampling system has been unchanged for 25 years. It covers the May to September period. We need better and different sampling. Secondly, the Canal & River Trust does not get information or data in real time from the Environment Agency, so when it does monitor water quality there is a time lag and delay. If that could be done in real time, the Canal & River Trust and other partners such as Hackney Council could at least warn users not to use the river when it is dangerous. As other hon. Members have said, it is shocking that we have got to this stage, and we need real action now.

2.55 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): May I start by pleading with colleagues about the tone of this debate? We are legislators, not pollsters. When we vote, it is not an opinion poll on whether sewage is good or bad; it is about making good law that we are able to enforce.

I want to place it on record that I was proud to vote for the Environment Act. We know about the scale of the problem because we voted to put monitoring in place for the first time. We are investing £56 billion to change the infrastructure. Of course it could be done quicker, but we are making a start. We are seeing record levels of fines. Southern Water in my patch was fined over £90 million last year. I welcome the maximum possible fine being increased to £250 million—that cannot come soon enough.

I violently agree with my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), that we also need to look at our highways, house building, the concreting of driveways, and the impact that they all have on water. I would like to see the expansion of reservoirs so that they can cope with rainfall. Finally, fixing the leaks is not just about saving water, but about making sure that water is not adding to the rainfall and adding to the problem. Given the number of Conservative Members present, I hope the Minister acknowledges the importance of this issue. We want to see enforcement action taking place.

2.57 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for securing this important debate. In Salford, we have had numerous incidents of sewage discharge. For example, in 2021 a sewer storm overflow at Pomona docks spilled 289 times for a total of 1,733 hours, discharging into the Manchester ship canal. It will take more than regulation and fluffy reduction targets to fix the problem.

Sadly, years of chronic underfunding of the Environment Agency and inaction by water regulator Ofwat means that there are few legal teeth to stop water companies flagrantly discharging sewage into our waterways. In my own constituency, the Court of Appeal sided with a major water company in the north-west, United Utilities, in a case brought by the Good Law Project over the legal routes available to people to challenge its discharging of sewage into the Manchester ship canal. That case means that any water company can dump sewage into waterways in England and Wales without fear of being sued in a civil court by any group—whether that is an angling club, a swimming club, a wildlife group or local residents. There is plenty that the Government can do to address the issue: properly fund environmental agencies, give environmental agencies real legal teeth for enforcement, and set more ambitious legal targets to clean up water quality. Finally, they should bring water companies into public ownership. It cannot be morally right that dividend extraction trumps investment in infrastructure.

2.58 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. We need to be absolutely clear: nobody wants to see untreated sewage discharged into our rivers and seas. To suggest otherwise is quite frankly nonsense. I have the privilege of representing the wonderful constituency of St Austell and Newquay. It has two coasts, and hardly a week goes by when a constituent does not contact me about this issue.

To suggest that Conservative Members do not take this matter seriously, and at times are not angry about what is going on, is quite frankly wrong. This is the first Government to put in place a deliverable plan to address the issue and hold water companies to account. That is what we voted for, and that is what we are delivering. Yes, it could be quicker—and I know that because I had the privilege of being the Minister who launched the combined sewage discharge reduction plan. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who did most of the work on that; I just got to do the glamorous bit and launch it. It contains a review date of 2025 to look at whether the delivery of the plan can be sped up. I urge the Minister and whoever is in the hot seat when the review takes place to continue to do that.

The Government are looking at planning reform, and if there is one thing we can do to help it is to speed up the planning process for water companies that want to upgrade their sewerage systems. Removing the red tape would help deliver the plan much quicker.

3 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. For my constituents, this issue is of significant local concern. In fact, last year, the very first visit I made as an MP was to see with my own eyes the impact of a sewage discharge at Latimer Park in my constituency.

Chesham and Amersham is home to two of the nation's chalk streams: the River Chess and the River Misbourne. They are globally rare and locally precious, but despite their ecological significance, in 2020 and 2021 the River Chess saw a total of 175 discharges from Thames Water's treatment works in Chesham—one of the worst figures in the country.

My constituents clearly share my disgust, as more than 1,000 of them signed the petition to ban this damaging practice, and I want to give voice to their concerns. Fortunately, I have been assured that something is about to change at a local level. This summer I met Thames Water, which outlined its plans to expand the capacity of the Chesham sewage treatment works by 40% to prevent future sewage discharges. However, as we know, storm overflows do not only take place due to a lack of capacity. Discharges frequently occur during particularly rainy periods when the rainwater run-off makes its way into the sewerage system through leaky pipes and loose manhole covers. Thames Water is looking to counter that in my constituency, and is undertaking a project to replace or reseal 750 manhole covers. I welcome that investment, and I look forward to seeing the results of its efforts, which it assures me will be completed by the end of 2023. I know I will not be the only one locally keeping a close eye on whether it meets that target.

If we are to protect our country's rivers, similar action must be taken across the country, and quickly. The Government have assured us that such improvements will take place, but I am concerned that, under current plans, a portion of the price of the works will be paid by the public in the form of increasing water bills. The discharges occur in large part as a result of years of underinvestment and neglect by water companies. They must be held to account for the failure to maintain essential infrastructure to a functional standard. They should pay to fix it.

3.2 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I will get straight to the point. For the record, this Government did not vote to allow raw sewage to be discharged into rivers. On the contrary, it was this Government, through a whole range of processes—in particular, six pages of clauses in the Environment Act 2021, which I was proud to bring through with the support of many hon. Members here—who put in place a comprehensive system for dealing with our sewage once and for all. We also set targets to reduce storm sewage overflows via the storm overflows discharge reduction plan, announced by the other former Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). We hope the current Minister—I welcome her to her place—will make sure we keep to the targets. In 2025, the Government have to report on progress. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman): I think we can bring forward the 2050 target and get rid of the impact of these overflows quicker.

We have to make sure that Ofwat, the independent regulator, does its job. It has had new guidance from the Government through the strategic policy statement to put the environment at the top of the agenda and reduce storm sewage overflows. It has to use its tools better than it did before. Water company executives should not be taking large salaries unless they reflect environmental improvement.

I welcome the new fines for polluting—that is great—but please could we make that money available, via a third-party organisation such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund, to communities and farmers in the catchments where the pollution occurred? I think that would be very popular.

Finally, this is much bigger than just sewage; we have loads of other things to deal with. The cocktail of pollution in our rivers is shocking, but the Government are on it. We have set new targets for nitrogen and phosphorus soil run-off. The Minister has to report back on those targets by 31 October, so no pressure. We agreed as a Government to publish those targets, and we would like to see them come to the fore.

Can we please deal with fatbergs and bring through mandatory clear labelling on what things are flushable? The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) will probably comment on that. Finally, we need a more holistic approach to dealing with water: supply, demand, abstraction—bring it all together, Minister.

3.5 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Elliott. I thank all the 111,000 people across the country who signed the petition, and the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for introducing this important debate.

Last year, 370,000 discharges of untreated sewage flowed into our English waters, including the Wandle, in my constituency, for three and a half hours on 25 August. That followed 81 sewage leaks into the Wandle in 2021. People are shocked by these sewage overflows, but the situation can be changed.

I have three points to make. First, the reason for that leak was that the storage of the Beddington sewage works overflowed, going out into the sewers. Water companies need to fast-track storage to stop overflows happening.

[*Fleur Anderson*]

Secondly, my campaign to ban the use of plastic in wet wipes has had support cross-party, including from former Ministers. A consultation closed in February. Plastic is the reason why wet wipes do not disintegrate but flow through the sewers and out into the riverbed. Just yesterday, I was on the bank of the River Thames and saw all these toxic ropes formed by wet wipes that have not disintegrated because they are made of plastic. Will the Minister confirm the next steps on that public consultation, whether she supports banning plastic in wet wipes, and when that ban will be put in place?

My final point is about urgency: 2035 and 2050 are far too late. We have the worst-quality rivers in Europe. It does not have to be this way. I urge the Minister to take more action, more urgently.

3.7 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): My constituency of South Cambridgeshire is home to many beautiful chalk streams: the Mel, the Shep, the Rhee—I played in them as a kid. That is why the issue of sewage discharges is so important to me and my constituents. It is clear that sewage discharges are completely unacceptable. We must do everything we can to tackle them.

I fully support the measures that the Government took in the Environment Act 2021 to tackle them. I note that the Opposition parties all voted against the one piece of legislation to reduce sewage discharges—we will have to ask them why they voted that way. I welcome the fact that the Government have increased the maximum fine from £250,000 to £250 million, but I have a suggestion to go further, and I have made this point previously in the Chamber.

Ofwat is doing a consultation on financial resilience, which includes looking at dividend payments and tying that to environmental performance. I have written to the chief executive of Ofwat, David Black, to suggest that he goes even further and considers tying bonus payments of senior managers and dividend payments to environmental performance. In particular, if a water company is fined for illegal sewage discharges, it should not be able to pay dividends to its shareholders that year or to pay bonuses to its senior manager. Bankers lose their bonuses for breaking the law, and so should senior water executives. I urge the Minister to consider taking that forward.

Finally, the constituency of South Cambridgeshire is among the highest levels of house building in the country. That has been massively pushed by the local Liberal Democrats, who are trying to build far more than the Government think is necessary. All those houses produce sewage, and all that sewage increases discharges into our local rivers.

3.8 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for introducing this debate. I share the anger of many constituents, Members and the petitioners at the actions of water companies as they continue to pump sewage into our rivers and seas.

As another riparian MP, I know how important the Thames is—it gives space for rowing, paddleboarding and kayaking. It helps local businesses such as boat companies to thrive and it supports wildlife and our natural environment. Thames Water pumps raw sewage into the Thames every time it rains more than a drizzle. Last year, over two days it pumped 2 billion litres into the Thames. It came from Mogden sewage treatment works in my constituency, which has released raw sewage 45 times already this year.

I have challenged Thames Water about odour, mosquitos and sewage discharges over the 25 years that I was councillor and the seven and a half years I have been an MP. On 31 January 2021, my constituency saw at first hand the impact of a chronic lack of investment in sewage infrastructure. When the brick wall of the sewage inlet at Mogden collapsed, sewage spilled into the pristine Duke of Northumberland's river, then into surrounding homes and parks in Isleworth, and then into the Thames.

We have seen a decade of failure from successive Conservative Governments. When the Prime Minister was Environment Secretary, she had a near puritanical obsession with cheese and pork, but what about sewage? She did not have a single meeting with water companies to discuss their performance on sewage spills, but she found time to push through savage cuts to the Environment Agency and to its enforcement and monitoring work, which is a disgrace. People across the country are rightfully angry. This has been a systematic failure, a failure by Ofwat and a failure by successive Conservative Governments over a decade.

3.10 pm

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), and the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) for their superb campaigning on this issue. This is a hidden scandal, and it is frankly deeply shocking.

In South West Surrey last year, we had nine sewer storm overflows in Godalming, nine in Grayswood, 12 in Bramley, 29 in Farnham and 76 in Chiddingfold. Taken together, they amount to 24 hours a day of sewage storm overflows for 65 days in a row—two whole months. It is morally indefensible to pollute our environment in that way.

We know the answers, which have been spoken about eloquently today. In particular, we need investment in more wastewater and rainwater capacity, the proper measuring of phosphate levels, the banning of plastic wet wipes, which I support absolutely, and changes to the planning rules. The Government have done a great deal on the issue, and it is a shame that we were not able to do more when we were in coalition with the Liberal Democrats a decade ago.

Two thousand people responded to my survey on the issue, and 94% of them signed a petition to the water companies. What all of us want is a timetable, so that we can see tangible progress on cleaning up our rivers, saving our fish and boosting biodiversity in our precious countryside.

3.11 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this important debate.

I pay tribute to everyone who took to beaches across the south of England this weekend in protest at the deplorable condition of our beaches and rivers. At Bexhill beach, in the hon. Member's constituency, wild swimmers came together to form a human wave. Meanwhile, in Whitstable, local campaigners cordoned off Tankerton beach and declared it a crime scene. They were distinctly British protests, and people had the right to be angry.

Even if Ofwat is content to turn a blind eye, a crime is being committed—not just against our precious natural environment, but against all those who depend on our nation's waters for their livelihoods, leisure and mental wellbeing. For far too long, the water monopolies have been allowed to treat our rivers and coastal waters as open sewers. Since 2016, more than 1 million sewage spills have been recorded, which is one every two and a half minutes. That is the equivalent of more than 1,000 years of raw sewage. Britain is once again the dirty man of Europe.

In my constituency, more than 650 sewage spills were recorded last year, with thousands more along the length of the Mersey. That is dealing a grievous blow to the decades-long effort to improve water quality in our region and undermining the ability of working-class families in Birkenhead to enjoy some of our borough's best beauty spots.

The blame for the unfolding ecological catastrophe lies squarely with the water monopolies which, since the privatisation of the water industry in 1989, have hiked up bills by 40% on average in real terms while paying £57 billion in shareholder dividends that could have gone towards making much-needed improvements in infrastructure. However, we must not forget the essential role that this Government have played as an accessory to the crime.

Water companies such as United Utilities in my region would surely never have acted with such disregard for their obligations towards our natural environment had they not been guaranteed that successive Conservative Environment Secretaries would simply look the other way. Indeed, the Prime Minister served for two years as Environment Secretary—

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): Order.

Mick Whitley: Sorry. The last thing I will say is: bring the water back into public ownership.

3.14 pm

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): My congratulations to my office neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). I will make a few quick points, because I agree with virtually everything that has been said—apart from what the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) just said.

The Minister, in her response, needs to reassure us that she will be looking at the water quality target work done over the past year. That is due to be published shortly. She needs to ensure that it dovetails with what is

in the Environment Act 2021, in order to ensure that the results of the self-monitoring called for by many Members upstream and downstream of the storm overflows are made available to the water companies, the Environment Agency and the public, so that we can all know the quality of the water we are visiting.

Secondly, I hope the Minister will speak to her colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities as the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill goes through, so that we can ensure that the necessary measures, as highlighted by the former Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who has done so much work on these issues, can be properly brought into effect in legislation as required. That includes, for example, making water companies statutory consultees for large developments that might impact on a treatment or supply location. At present they are not, other than through the local plans.

Finally, when the Minister looks at the implementation of drainage management plans by water companies, I urge her to recognise that there is the possibility for some companies to go further and faster with those plans? Will she encourage them to do so, as Severn Trent did when it decided to replace the main sewer in Mansfield as part of the green recovery plan funding last summer?

3.15 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I congratulate my constituency next door neighbour and parliamentary colleague my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). This debate shows that there is a clear need for action, and it has more than done justice to the issue. I want to echo the call for an informed, responsible debate.

I represent the beautiful coastal community of Eastbourne, and tourism is our mainstay. Genuinely, this last summer, local people said to me that they would not take their lives in their hands by swimming in the sea. However, they are stunned when I tell them of the reality around our situation—that our bathing water quality is actually good, touching on excellent, and that a live Government-funded and county council-delivered project called Blue Heart is going to get us to that excellent rating.

People are equally surprised to learn, having looked at the social media discharge on this subject, that 95% of our discharge is actually rainwater. They are also surprised to learn that, since 2017, Southern Water has redirected any dividends back into the business and has not paid out those profits. They are equally surprised when I say that, while the international standard for “good” is set at 70, the UK sits at 74. That is better than Germany and France, and we are chasing the Scandinavian countries, which do these things rather better.

It is really important for communities such as mine that this debate is grounded in responsible, informed discussion. I echo the sense of urgency. I asked the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in May whether the bathing season could be extended all year round, and I very much hope that that will be the case and that monitoring will likewise be all year round.

3.17 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I wish to put on record the deeply felt frustrations of many residents in Hastings and Rye, who rightly expect clean rivers and seas, as we all do. I strongly welcome this debate, secured by my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who spoke passionately and persuasively about the sewage discharge issues facing local people in East Sussex and about the responsibility of Government, water companies, highways organisations and the Environment Agency in dealing with them.

While some try to use the issue to score political points, this Government have taken extensive steps to ensure that we have clean water and a fully costed, affordable plan. After all, it is measures introduced by a Conservative-led Government that mean that the true extent of this issue is now better understood. Comprehensive measures have been put in place, and I urge the Government to do what they can to ramp up the pace of change. It is easy to play student politics with an issue such as this, and to shout and demand action without having a real plan, but working with all stakeholders—local, regional and national—is a pre-requisite to progress.

We can all do our bit by helping to reduce surface water, meaning rainwater, from entering the sewage pipes and to reduce what we put down our loos and kitchen sinks—cooking fat, wet wipes and such. Local solutions are key, and we should make greater use of nature-based solutions to reduce water surface run-off: water attenuation plans, swales, tree-planting, household water butts, permeable paving, grey water storage tanks in new developments and so on. If we work with all stakeholders and put local solutions into practice, that will, alongside central Government action through the Environment Act, begin to make a real, positive and long-lasting difference to our ability to reduce our reliance on sewage discharge.

3.20 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for bring this important debate to the Chamber. Over 1,200 of my constituents responded to the petition—the third highest number from any constituency—but I would argue that that is a drop in the ocean compared with the feeling on the ground.

I welcome the excellent work done by various Ministers and former Ministers; it is this Government who are driving forward this agenda, which for many years has been ignored. As someone who has been closely involved locally in this issue for the last two years, working with the community, Thames Water and the Environment Agency, I know that a lot of people on the ground are willing and able to significantly improve the quality of life of my constituents. I urge the Minister to continue to build on the work of the excellent new Secretary of State by putting the feet of Ofwat and the Environment

Agency to the coals to ensure that they understand how important this issue is on both sides of this House and, more importantly, to our communities.

In South West Hertfordshire, I have the Grand Union canal and the River Chess, which are unfortunately frequent flyers in this respect. Comments have been made about illegal sewage treatment releases, but there have consistently been legal sewage treatment releases, which have caused even more offence to my constituents. Hopefully the Minister will appreciate my emotion; all I am doing is sharing what my constituents feed back to me.

3.21 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliot. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for securing this speed debate. I will make four points. One, which has already been alluded to, is that the impact of storm overflows on coastal communities must be recognised and prioritised by the Government and water companies.

In Southend we have seven miles of beaches, which attract 7 million visitors a year, although the most important visitor every single day—I am stealing a line from my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell)—is the sea. We have the Thames, which is the lifeblood of our local economy and supports our thousand-year-old fishing and cockle industries. We also have one of the most environmentally protected foreshores in the country, and, of course, our local economy.

That is why it is so outrageous that, last year, in Southend alone, sewage was pumped into the sea 48 times, for more than 251 hours. That is more than 10 whole days. On top of that, being at the end of the Thames, we get the 39 million tonnes of sewage dumped into the Thames every single year. Coastal communities are a special case.

Point No.2 is that the water companies need to do far more. Of course, I recognise and welcome that the Government have taken steps to tackle the problem through the storm overflow reduction plan. However, Southenders cannot wait until 2035 for the use of storm overflows to be eliminated in Southend West. Most importantly and immediately, Anglian Water must better inform residents when there has been a recent pollution incident from one of our five storm overflows. The data and technology are there; the water companies must use them.

Thirdly—I may not get to my fourth point—we can all do our bit, as has been said very fluently this afternoon. One of the main causes of storm overflows being used is blockages caused by non-flushable wet wipes. There are 370,000 blockages a year, which cost bill payers £100 million to sort out. Will the Minister agree to support the brilliant Conservative Environment Network campaign for a mandatory clear labelling system for commonly flushed items such as wet wipes? Just because things might be biodegradable—and wet wipes are not—that does not mean they are flushable. I will not carry on with my fourth point.

3.24 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for securing this debate; it is

clearly much needed. I thank the 278 of my constituents who signed the petition and helped to bring this debate here today.

Last Saturday morning, hundreds of residents gathered at Gyllyngvase beach in Falmouth to attend an anti-sewage pollution protest. In Falmouth, we have had enough. This is affecting people's lives and businesses, and it is not just in Falmouth; it is happening all over my constituency. In Cornwall, we do not just look at the waterways—we use them for recreation, we use them to fish for a living, we use them for exercise, and we swim in them. I have one of the world's most sustainable fisheries on the River Fal, and we have a duty of care to protect that fishery and give it the best chance of life.

One of the most shocking figures I saw was that one storm overflow spilled 355 times, for almost 7,500 hours in our River Fal. Some simple maths shows that that particular outlet was discharging sewage for the equivalent of 312 days. Just imagine for a moment that sewage was being discharged all day and all night for 312 days in a calendar year. That did not literally happen, but it kind of did.

I recently met South West Water on site in Portloe, a beautiful, picturesque fishing village, to talk about the raw sewage overflow there. When the system overflows, as it often does in the summer, it squirts sewage up into the air and on to the foreshore, which is horrendous. It should not take the intervention of the local MP before something is done about that. Something has to change.

I have had the great privilege of sitting on the Environmental Audit Committee, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), and we have done some great work on this. I pay tribute to the work he has led—I have only been a small part of it. I work locally with people and stakeholders to do what we can to clear up the River Fal, in particular, and it is not just about the storm overflows; all sorts of other things go into the river. After two and a half years as an MP and much longer campaigning on this issue, I believe we really must do better. I have run out of time, so I will sit down.

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): We have managed that on time. I call the SNP spokesperson, Alan Brown.

3.26 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I commend you on getting so many speakers in, and I commend the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for securing the debate.

We have heard about the key issues regarding sewage discharges. I am in a unique position, in that I am the only MP in the current Parliament who is a sewerage civil engineer. I have designed combined sewer overflows and sewer flood alleviation schemes, so hopefully I can add some insight. I worked in the water industry from 1993 until my election in 2015. In my early days as a graduate engineer, I saw at first hand how the Tories resisted implementation of EU legislation, which left the UK with a massive catch-up in terms of cleaning up the beaches and getting rid of the “dirty man of Europe” moniker. I hope we do not see a return to that south of the border.

In those early days, as with the privatisation of the railways, the Tories argued that privatising the water companies had magically created investment and improved performance. The reality is that it was nothing to do with privatisation, but resulted from the requirement to comply with the EU bathing water directive and urban waste water treatment directive and allowing the water companies to borrow money. The fact that Scotland maintained public ownership of the water companies that would eventually become Scottish Water is proof that compliance and investment can be achieved without the need to privatise.

Since privatisation, English water companies have paid out nearly £60 billion in dividends. That money should be reinvested into upgrading infrastructure. It is effectively a £2 billion-a-year subsidy from water bill payers to hedge funds and asset management companies. It is also worth pointing out that bills in Scotland are lower than those in England and Wales.

It might not be popular or widely understood, although some Members did touch on it, but combined sewer overflows are required to protect the sewer system and prevent widespread flooding of roads and buildings. Nothing can be worse than houses being internally flooded by sewage, with people having to move out of their houses—which are left stinking and needing clean-up—and fearing that the same will happen every time it rains. The reality is that combined sewer overflows are required. Combined sewers are designed to take a one in 30-year storm so, by default, any storm greater than that will exceed the capacity of the system. That is why relief is required, but due to developments over the years, we need combined sewer overflows to provide relief from storms with return periods of much less than one in 30 years.

We have heard talk about elimination of storm overflows altogether and about a 2050 target. All the water companies are saying that they can do it. I do not think that is a realistic proposition. To eliminate CSOs altogether, we would need to completely separate surface water from the combined sewers. That means disconnecting all the road drains that are connected. It means disconnecting roof drainage. Hon. Members have suggested butts to deal with that, but they would still have to be disconnected from the sewers. Private surface water connections would also have to be identified because people drain their driveways or gardens and connect them into their own combined drain. All that needs to be identified and eliminated, so I would urge the Minister to think carefully about the practicalities of what is required. We would need massive new surface water sewers and pumping stations and, as I say, there would be disruption in many roads and streets throughout the country.

I have said that CSOs are a requirement, but they need to be well designed. They need to be designed so that they do not have a detrimental impact on water quality. From what we have heard today, that is not happening, so that needs to be addressed. It is obvious that this has not been the case in practice by private water companies over the years. *Private Eye* has long highlighted exemptions that were applied to discharges post privatisation. It was a “get out of jail free” card for a lot of companies. It is obvious that there is insufficient operational maintenance, and the reason is clear: they are making profit by cutting running costs. Not enough

[Alan Brown]

is spent on maintenance, and that is why we have heard about pumping stations failing and then discharging into rivers and seas.

The worst company, according to the *Financial Times*, was Southern Water. Historically, it was close to defaulting on its loans and now with Macquarie at the helm, debt has risen to £6 billion and Southern Water's risk profile is deemed to be at risk of a credit rating downgrade as a result of poor operational performance. It should be pointed out that Macquarie was allowed to take over Southern Water despite Ofwat highlighting poor performance at Thames Water, so there are serious questions about that ownership.

While the focus rightly has been on the shocking discharges of sewage into rivers and coastlines, and obviously on criticism of the performance of water companies, there is one big issue that I want to touch on, which it seems the Tory Government have been blind to. The elephant in the room, which was touched on slightly by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle, is the right to connect for developers in England and Wales. This means that a statutory water company cannot refuse a developer permission to connect to a sewer. It is effectively a right for a housing developer to pollute the environment, which is disgraceful.

The issue goes back to failings in the Water Industry Act 1991 and was confirmed in a Supreme Court case between Barratt Homes Ltd and Welsh Water in December 2009. Welsh Water had tried to prevent a developer connecting to an overloaded sewer, but Barratt effectively forced its right in law to connect to that sewer, and that has now been put down in law. It means that any responsible water company that is implementing improvements to a system can see all that good work and all the environmental benefits wiped out because a developer can, in theory, connect hundreds or even thousands of houses to the sewer, which obviously will then destroy any upgrades that have happened.

A key question for Back-Bench Tories to consider is, why have the UK Government not acted to resolve this loophole, which was put in law in 2009? Is it because they are too cosy with house builders? Is it because they fear it will impact house-building targets? It needs to be addressed soon. In Scotland, the law is clear via the Sewerage (Scotland) Act 1968. Any developer has to apply for permission to connect to the sewer system. If the assessment deems that a new connection will cause detriment to the sewer system, that developer has to pay for the remedial works to ensure there is no detriment to it. That means that housing developers have to take it on the chin and pay for upgrades. Quite often, they have to fund large volumes of storage, but they know that is the process and they deal with it. That is a process I have been involved in. I know how well it works, and that makes it even more incredible that it has not been adopted in England. I urge the Minister to think carefully about the right to connect.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle touched on sustainable urban drainage. Again, Scotland has led the way in that regard; such drainage has been part of regulations for the best part of 20 years. Not only does a developer have to apply for the right to connect to a sewer; they have to implement sustainable urban drainage schemes, so that there is not additional surface water

going into our combined sewer system. Once more, that should be in the regulations. In Scotland, Scottish Water is a statutory consultee in the planning process, which is something else that the Minister should consider, as the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle suggested.

The Minister and the Secretary of State can demand drainage improvement plans and they can talk tough on fines, but the reality is that if the right to connect issue is not resolved, all that talk counts for nothing, because developers will continue to connect to sewers, overloading them and causing problems. Hopefully the Minister can address that point as well as the other points that have been made.

3.35 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): First, I congratulate you, Ms Elliott, on the way that you have chaired this debate and on getting everybody in, which has been excellent. What a task!

Secondly, I welcome the Minister, because this is the first time I have debated with her. She is the third Minister I have shadowed since I became the shadow Minister last December; I am quickly running through Ministers. However, I would not say that I am a veteran, because the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), has spent many more years on this subject than I have, as we just found out.

I thank the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) for reminding us that section 1 of the Environment Act 2021 legally requires the Secretary of State to set long-term targets for air, water, biodiversity, resource efficiency and waste reduction, and that section 4 requires the statutory instrument to be laid by 31 October. I reinforce her question about whether that requirement will be met in the next 19 days. I would welcome an early opportunity to sit in a Committee to consider that SI with the Minister. Perhaps some former Ministers would like to be on that Committee too.

I come now to the pressing issue of the day. Again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on bringing this matter to Westminster Hall. It is such an important and timely debate. He rightly said that Sussex beaches regularly see sewage being discharged into bathing water, as do coastal communities up and down the country.

Something that has not really been explored in the debate before now is how coastal businesses are affected, particularly leisure and tourism businesses. I was formerly the shadow Minister with responsibility for tourism and I have seen directly how badly coastal discharges and poor water quality can wipe out a day's business in the summer, and businesses have already had so many shocks recently.

There is clearly wide interest in this issue right across the country, as can be seen from the number of speakers in this debate, who come from every region and nation. That shows how widespread the problem is. So many Members have cited shocking sewage outflow and spill figures. This is an issue that we probably need to explore further in other debates.

The Secretary of State says that we need our watercourses and beaches to be safe and sewage free. Although I of course agree with him wholeheartedly, the reality is that the Government's policies will be no more than a drop

in the ocean when it comes to dealing with what the media—not we in the Opposition, but the media—are now calling “a Tory stink”.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will know that the Environment Act 2021 does not apply to Wales, where his party is in government and where there is no equivalent legislation forcing Welsh Water Dŵr Cymru to act. The Government are taking action in England. Will he tell me why his party is not taking equivalent action in Wales?

Alex Sobel: Of course, there are not any shareholders in Welsh Water; it is owned by the people of Wales. On some of these issues, Welsh Water is performing exceedingly well as a water company. The hon. Lady knows that this is a devolved matter, so I will not comment any further on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) made an excellent point about faecal *E. coli* and how that affects human and animal health. In my constituency, people have basically had to swim through sewage and dogs have unfortunately passed away because of exposure to it.

Over the last six years, Tory Governments have allowed a million discharges of raw human sewage into our watercourses. Last year, they were given an opportunity to place legal duties on companies to reduce discharges. It was just that—legal duties to reduce discharges. I know that there has been a lot of heat in this debate about this matter. The Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), was involved in that and he made an excellent speech today, as usual. Most of the MPs on the Government side voted against it, but I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle and others present for being among the 22 Conservative MPs who voted with us for the amendment. There will be future opportunities to bring in that legal duty—if not in this Parliament, I certainly hope in the next one, when we will have a change of Government.

It is naive to think that these watered-down policies will be enough to end the epidemic that we currently face—an epidemic in which there is a sewage spill every two and a half minutes. We have been in this debate long enough for at least 30 spills. Crucially, if a spill is not monitored, a fine cannot be issued. Water bosses will continue to get off scot-free, with no incentive to install comprehensive monitoring. Yes, some discharges come as the result of storm overflows, but we know that others are a deliberate corner-cutting exercise by water companies that prioritise profit over the natural environment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) said that our rivers are now open sewers, and he is right. He made the excellent point that water companies are monopolies, but the Government treat water like a market. By contrast, the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), has clearly outlined Labour’s strategy for cleaning up our waterways. Under a Labour Government, there will be no hiding the problem. We will ensure that there are mandatory monitors on all outlets—every sewage works—and introduce automatic standing charges where this requirement has not yet been met. We will ensure that we get the real-time data

that a number of Members have called for, and give the Environment Agency the power and resources to properly enforce the rules.

Again, I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle for securing the debate, and I urge him to consider whether the current Government and his party are genuinely committed to dealing with the crisis. Are they serious about stopping more sewage releases on to Sussex beaches, Bexhill beach and beaches around the country, or are they simply rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic while water bosses laugh all the way to the bank? Some £72 billion in dividends has been given to those water bosses over the lifetime of the companies. These are the bosses who fail to properly invest in our water infrastructure yet still receive enormous payments and bonuses, all paid for by the customers—our constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) made the point that many of our sewage treatment plants have insufficient storage. The current minimum storage that the Environment Agency stipulates is probably insufficient and, in many cases, is being breached. We need to see significant infrastructure investment in that storage, which will reduce overflows. My hon. Friend has also been a doughty champion of banning plastic wet wipes. When will we see that legislation introduced? I hope the Minister responds to her on that.

The Government make grand environmental claims, yet the Prime Minister did not bother to meet a single water company to discuss sewage spills during her time as a DEFRA Minister. Instead, she allowed water bosses free rein while cutting the DEFRA budget by £24 million, which could have been used for monitoring raw sewage. We saw sewage-dumping events skyrocket into the millions during that period. When Labour comes back into government, we will hold water bosses personally accountable. We will strike off directors who fail, and even introduce prison sentences for the most serious crimes. The Government have increased the fines, but we will introduce unlimited fines and cap bill increases to protect our most vulnerable citizens.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) made an excellent point when he said that we are seeing dividends being given out, debt being built up and our constituents’ bills going through the roof. I know that his water company has increased them significantly. Labour will ensure that any failure to improve is paid for by eroding dividends, not by adding to customers’ bills or cutting investment. We will fix the broken system whereby water companies rake it in while neglecting their customers and the environment.

Which plan will better protect beaches from sewage spills: ours or the current Government’s? How can we trust the Government to clean up our water, when their track record is one of allowing our rivers and beaches to be treated as open sewers? Only Labour can clean up our water. We will introduce a legally binding target to end 90% of sewage discharges by 2030, taking every necessary step to ensure a fairer, greener future for everyone.

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister to respond, I remind her to allow time for Huw Merriman to wind up at the end of this extensive debate.

3.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time in my position in DEFRA, Ms Elliott. I thank all colleagues for showing such interest in and passion about a subject that I know we all care deeply about. Most of all, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for securing the debate.

I also pay tribute to the two Ministers who were unable to speak in the debate but have listened intently: the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) and the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman). I am very grateful for support.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the two previous Ministers who have done so much in this area: my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and, of course, my wonderful predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebeccab Pow), to whom I pay particular thanks. They have not only taken up this issue professionally as Ministers, but campaigned pretty much their entire lives on it. That hard work has paid dividends: I am able to stand here today and talk about the improvements that this Government have made, and the pragmatic steps that enable monitoring. It is uncomfortable to hear the results of that monitoring, but without it we would not know where or how much we need to improve. To put some numbers on that monitoring, we have improved the systems from 5% in 2016 to 90% today—a tremendous improvement.

We are absolutely clear that we will not tolerate the failure of water companies to reduce the amount of storm sewage discharges. It is completely unacceptable. When it rains heavily, as has been discussed today, rainwater lands on roofs and impermeable surfaces. It is uncharacteristic of me to agree so much with the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), but he has experience in this particular sector. We recognise that combined sewers are part of the problem, particularly during heavy precipitation, when all of that run-off from non-permeable surfaces flows with the foul water into the sewage treatment plant. We hold water companies to account for improving that situation, for splitting those systems and for a whole raft of other infrastructure changes, but that will take time.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) raised the possibility of water companies being statutory consultees when planning applications that add pressure to existing sewerage systems are made. Had they been so, developments in Weston, in my constituency, that will put unbearable pressure on the existing drainage and sewerage system would not have gone ahead.

Trudy Harrison: My right hon. Friend raises an excellent point. Reforms are taking place in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to look at the plethora of opportunities for speeding up some of those planning processes, with no regression in environmental

protections. He raises the issue of nitrogen and phosphates in our water system. Nutrient neutrality has caused significant delays—in fact, entire blockages—for many house builders across the country. That is exactly why we are coming up with systems to ensure that those developers contribute to environmental processes that improve the reduction of nitrogen and phosphorous in water, and enable those developments to go ahead.

I have talked about the challenge of combined sewers. The options are both intolerable as long-term solutions: either to allow water, including foul water, to back up the system, flooding into people's homes and businesses—I was flooded, and I agree with other Members that it is an incredibly unpleasant situation to be in—or to discharge sewage into watercourses. Neither of those options is acceptable or tolerable.

In August, the Government published the storm overflows discharge reduction plan, which found that achieving complete elimination could cost up to £600 billion and increase annual water bills by up to £817 by 2049. It would also be, as suggested by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun, highly disruptive and complex to deliver nationwide. Our storm overflow discharge reduction plan will see £56 billion in capital investment by 2050—the largest infrastructure programme in water company history. By 2035, water companies will have to improve all storm overflows discharging into or near every designated bathing water, and improve 75% of overflows discharging into high-priority nature sites. By 2050, that will apply to all remaining storm overflows covered by our targets regardless of their location.

There has been some talk about the Environment Agency being resourced to be able to carry out that role. DEFRA and its agencies received £4.3 billion in the 2021 spending review to do more to tackle climate change and protect our environment for future generations. In terms of the response to Ofwat, Ofwat's investigations will consider how overall companies operate, manage their sewage treatment works and report on their performance where the investigations can find failings on obligations. Ofwat is responsible for enforcing; it will use its full range of powers accordingly to hold companies to account for their failures, and to require them to put things right in short order.

The subject of sewage also brought to the fore the Thames tideway tunnel, which is a £1.9 billion investment. Once operational and taken together with the other improvements, it will achieve a 95% reduction in the annual volume of untreated waste water entering the tidal Thames.

Ruth Cadbury: Could the Minister please remember that tideway starts downstream of Mogden sewage works, which is the second largest sewage treatment works in Greater London and, I believe, in the country. None of the sewage discharges from Mogden will be captured by tideway.

Trudy Harrison: I am happy to pick that up separately. I have not got time to go into the detail now, but I would be delighted to have a meeting with the hon. Member to go into that in the future.

The Secretary of State made our commitment to tackling sewage discharges absolutely clear on his very first day in office. He held a call with water companies' chief executives, and we are now working with them to

explore the acceleration of infrastructure projects. Water companies are investing £3.1 billion to deliver the 800 storm overflow improvements across England by 2025, but if we can go further and faster we will. The Secretary of State and myself are challenging those water companies to come up with acceleration plans to clean our water system and ensure we have the infrastructure and the supply for the future. We have also recently announced that we will bring forward plans to increase the amount that the Environment Agency can directly fine water companies that pollute the environment by a thousandfold, from £250,000 up to £250 million.

Alan Brown: Will the Minister going to invest in the right to connection issue because at the moment, as an outline, housing developers can connect a sewer, overload it and cause pollution; that must be cleaned up and paid for by other billpayers instead of the housing developer, which is making money and moving on. It is a critical issue that needs to be addressed.

Trudy Harrison: There was also reference to privatisation. There has been over £30 billion of investment in the environment by the water industry since privatisation. The improvements in sewage treatments since 1995 have secured significant environmental benefits, such as a reduction in leakage by a third since 1990. Some 70% of UK beaches are now classed as excellent, and customers are now five times less likely to suffer from supply interruption since privatisation. In the 1990s, water and sewage companies were responsible for over 500 serious incidents per year; in 2021, that number was reduced to 62. Of course, that is 62 too many, but it is a significant reduction. Sewage treatment works are now discharging much lower amounts of harmful chemicals into our rivers, including 67% less phosphorus and 79% less ammonia than in 1995.

The more rainwater that can be captured before it goes into a drain, the better. That has been echoed by Members in Westminster Hall today. The more we can separate the run-off and foul water in the network, the better. When one in 10 people does not have access to clean water close to home, access to the purest quality drinking water is something to cherish every single time we turn on the tap. However, average water use is around 145 litres per person in England and Wales, compared to 121 litres in neighbouring countries. We can all play our part by using water more efficiently in our homes, such as by harvesting rainwater with water butts, as has been mentioned, and reusing grey water, which can reduce the risk of flooding, reduce water bills and, ultimately, limit the amount of water added to the system. We can encourage our families, friends and constituents to be mindful of the impact that incorrect disposal down the drain can cause.

The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) referenced the subject of wet wipes. I agree with her, and I would be delighted to meet with her to explain

some of the progress that my Department is making on reducing or banning plastics in wet wipes. I thank her for the work she has done in this area.

I have created a gravel garden at home on what was previously non-permeable concrete. After core drilling down, adding organic matter and planting the right plant in the right place, it is now a beautiful area, attracting pollinators and invertebrates. It has also reduced the likelihood of my house flooding.

These ideas are just some of the simple steps that can be taken in addition to the £56 billion that this Government are requiring water companies to invest. We will not hesitate to use all options for robust enforcement action against breaches of storm overflow, which can include criminal prosecution by the Environment Agency. Water companies must clean up their act, and this Government will not hesitate to hold them to account. I will now conclude my remarks to allow time for my very effective and hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle to respond.

3.57 pm

Huw Merriman: Thank you, Ms Elliott, for chairing us so efficiently. I thank the Minister for the responses she has given. I thank the other two Front-Bench speakers, the hon. Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), and all the other colleagues who have come forward with their ideas. With so many ideas having been put forward, would it be possible for the Minister's Department to collate those in its response, so that we get a full response?

The hon. Member for Leeds North West asked whether we in East Sussex are satisfied. We are never satisfied in East Sussex! That is what keeps us here. My neighbours—my hon. Friends the Members for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) and for Lewes (Maria Caulfield)—and I are in a car. It is the East Sussex car and we will continue to drive it.

I will say this to the hon. Member for Leeds North West: I could give him £56 billion-worth of reasons why I am happier, because this Government are the first to do something about it. No other Governments have. We should all encourage the Government for that.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West is right that I did vote with him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne). However, we were not voting to end discharging, as has been put out on social media—not at all. It was just discharge at certain levels. Nobody who voted the other way was doing anything but voting for improvements for the first time. It pains me to see some of the abuse that goes on. We are not campaigners here. We can work effectively together for all of our constituents' sake to make a better environment. All I would hope is for us to stick with the facts and the ideas and be nicer to each other and to our waterways.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered sewage discharges.

Rural Healthcare

4 pm

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): I will call Anne Marie Morris to move the motion and then I will call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention in a 30-minute debate.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered rural healthcare provision.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I have already provided the Minister with a copy of the report by the all-party parliamentary group on rural health and care, which followed a three-year inquiry that we undertook with the National Centre for Rural Health and Care. It contains a lot of detail about the issues and suggested solutions. It looked far and wide across the world, not just across the United Kingdom, and I certainly hope that the Minister will give it more time than I suspect he already has in preparing for this debate.

The number of people living in rural settings is not small—9.7 million people live in rural England—and they have very different needs, so the current one-size-fits-all approach simply does not work. We have a different demographic. Generally, our constituents are older, they have complex comorbidities, they live in isolation, and many are in severe deprivation, but much of that is often hidden because the data collected is at such a high level that the issues are simply not identified. If levelling up, which is a commitment of the Government, is to mean anything, that has to change.

Covering everything in the report would take me more than the time available, so I will limit myself to the Government's alphabet. Let me go through A, B, C and D. On ambulances—A—I absolutely applaud the Government's position that the current situation is unacceptable and that we need shorter response times, particularly for category 1 and category 2 emergencies, but I am sure the Minister is well aware that the data shows that rural and coastal areas have some of the worst response times across the country, often because it is simply not possible to reach particular parts. In Devon, there are some areas where it really does not matter how many ambulances there are and how fast the roads might be—they are not—as there comes a point where it is not possible to get further.

We have not looked at a different approach. We have not looked at how we triage this differently so that we improve, rather than reduce, health outcomes. A one-size-fits-all approach means that those in rural areas are at much greater risk than those in urban areas. There is not a specialist centre of excellence for strokes that people can get to very quickly by being popped into an ambulance.

Money is clearly an issue, but if we properly integrated our use of fire services, police, ambulances and first responders, we would get a better outcome. Let us triage the calls as they come in differently, and then let us use those individuals and organisations better. Currently, the barriers are different pay for different forces and the fact that those organisations—fire services, police and

ambulances—have different lines of accountability to different Departments, which means that they do not work together.

We could find a much better and more efficient way of doing this. Fire services are vital, because they are often physically located in some of these very rural areas. There is not a lot of point trying to get an ambulance in every rural village; that would be completely inappropriate and unaffordable, and it would not work. Let us look at how we can deal with those blockages and do this differently.

B is for backlogs. The Government's aim to reduce the backlogs is commendable, and the plan to get waits down to one year by 2025 is fabulous. However, those of us who have rural constituencies know that the resources right now are simply not available, and rural areas have a real challenge to recruit. They are seen as unattractive. Youngsters want to be near the nightlife and the fun when they are off duty. The idea of coming to a rural area is not attractive. That is well known to the Government, because there have been various planned pilots and initiatives to pay individuals more to attract them to rural areas. It simply does not work.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an important point. When it comes to waiting times for cancer treatment, 41% of cancer patients in south Cumbria and 59% in north Cumbria are waiting more than two months to get their first treatment after diagnosis. We know that is certainly costing lives. Does she agree that tackling the cancer backlog has to be the absolute priority for this Government?

Anne Marie Morris: More than that, we need to look at the different pathways in rural communities for heart, cancer and stroke treatment. I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but there is a lot more than just cancer, and the rural pathway to care has to be reviewed to see what is realistic in a rural area.

All of this has been made worse by a funding formula that is not fit for purpose. Although there is provision to uplift for rurality, it is not enough and it has been done without any real understanding of some of the challenges.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Cornwall has more visitors outside of London than anywhere else in the country, so we have our winter pressures and then there is no respite in the summer months for our staff. We have issues with housing so we cannot recruit staff. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a case to be made for extra funding for places such as Cornwall, and perhaps the wider south-west, to ensure that we have enough funding to treat all our visitors as well as our residents?

Anne Marie Morris: That is an exceptionally fine point. I have no issue with it because we have a similar problem in Devon. The solution is not just about more recruitment and doing things in the same way, because the people to be recruited do not exist. We need to look at doing things differently, by creating new career paths with shorter training periods and trying to train, so we can then recruit, locally. Generally, people will follow a career where they are trained. We need more rural training for doctors and nurses, and that training needs to be not in the local city, but in the rural areas. For example, in Plymouth we have a fine medical school—

Peninsula Medical School—but the challenge is that the experience that the individual trainee doctors and nurses gain is not rural, and it needs to be.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a fine point. From my experience, there is an opportunity: young doctors who are becoming GPs tend to be between the ages of 27 and 35. At that time, most people are looking to set up their family, go to school and get married. If we extend some of the career opportunities by extending training in those areas, they are more likely to bed down roots and gain a skill to become a GPSI—a GP with a special interest—in those areas. Does she believe that is a formula that the Government should look at?

Anne Marie Morris: I absolutely agree, and it is an excellent suggestion. In a similar vein, when we are asking primary care networks and others to deal with the backlog, it is important that we try to give them much more freedom in how they address the problem. I talk to many of my local commissioners, and they say that they are having to make decisions that they know are right, even though they are not currently in the guidebook as best practice. We need to give them that trust to be able to do the right thing.

C is for care. Members will not be surprised to hear that the adult social care discharge fund, although welcome, is not going to be enough. The reality is that the bed count is often low in rural areas. In the south-west, we have the lowest bed count per head of population; I think it is the lowest in western Europe, although I am happy for the Minister to correct me. It seems to me that we used to be moving towards saying, just in time, “Let’s have care in the community.” However, because of the shortage of care in the community, and the lack of proper validation that it works other than whether people are readmitted, we need to put a halt to closing community hospitals and to look at how they can be used. Some could be repurposed. Perfection can often be the enemy of the good.

Teignmouth Community Hospital in my constituency is on the closure list, but to me that is not a wise decision. There are no nursing care homes in the area. Without that residential care, and without adequate care in the community, removing the only other source of beds is not the way to solve the backlog problem.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and this important conversation. I also thank the Minister for the community diagnostic centre announced for the Isle of Wight this week. That is great, but we still have a problem similar to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris): unavoidably small hospitals. There are dozens of those in England and Wales, of which St Mary’s is the most isolated. We were able to work with the Government to improve the funding formula in 2019, so unavoidably small hospitals have got some more money. My concern—the same might be true for hospitals in my hon. Friend’s area—is that that is not enough to cope with the health needs and the demographics in our communities. It would be great if the Minister could meet some of us to discuss the future of unavoidably small hospitals in places such as Devon, Cornwall, Cumbria, Northumberland and the Isle of Wight to see what more we can do to support these important community centres.

Anne Marie Morris: A point very well made, which I support.

Care, as we all know, is one of the biggest challenges. If we fix care, we will fix the backlog, so we also need to look at how we train and professionalise not care on its own, but care with health. We need to give care professionals the same respect as we give others—and, frankly, for the same sort of skill, we need to pay the same salary. That is crucial if we are ever to get this to work.

D for doctors is the last letter in the Government’s alphabet. The Government are looking for the GP appointments system to improve, so that anyone who needs to see a GP can do so within two weeks. They want to provide data so that individuals may choose which doctor they go to see, and they want to increase the use of pharmacies.

Now, all that is very worthy, but unfortunately, when it hits reality, it becomes the problem. In rural areas, there are too few doctors. If we had data, choice would be great, but there is no choice, because there is not another GP practice. The problem in rural areas is not the level of data, and it is not choice—there is none. It is recruiting the doctors we need. Recruitment in rural areas is in crisis. Yes, we should make more use of pharmacists—that would be fabulous—but in many rural areas pharmacies are closing because they cannot get enough pharmacists. We have a real conundrum, and that is crucial.

If we are to address the issue, we need proper rural medical schools, shorter career courses, and proper training for new routes into medicine and care. Physician associates are a great start, but the reality is that that is only one route, and it is still quite a long training period. More broadly, primary care is mission critical; we know that training in generalist skills across the doctoring profession, if I can put it like that, is done very early but not continued. We need those skills so that we have a much broader range of doctors who, when we have something like the pandemic, are able to cope with the issue. We also need more geriatricians.

D also stands for dentists. The new contract is welcome, but it has been discussed for eight years, I think. It needs to get done. Doctors and dentists need a fair return for the work done and they need to be incentivised to provide the best treatment for the patient. As I understand it, under the existing contract, dentists are in effect encouraged to sub-optimize. They are only paid a relatively small amount, so they will do the minimum rather than what is in the patient’s best interest. We need fairness for the dentist and for the individual patient to be at the forefront of the contract.

We need to step up recruitment, we need to create rural emergency hubs, and I think we need to appoint school dentists. In the same way that a GP is in charge of a particular care home, I see no reason why we should not have a dentist who is responsible for a particular school. I am not suggesting that they should go in and do fillings, but they would at least go in and do regular checks.

Cherilyn Mackrory: My hon. Friend is being very generous with her time, and I appreciate that. I remember—she may too—that, as schoolchildren, we had somebody come into school to check over our teeth, just to see if there was anything going on. It is my understanding

[Cherilyn Mackrory]

that someone does not have to be a dentist to be able to tell whether something is going wrong; dental technicians, hygienists and others can do this work. Does she agree that it would be worth doing pilots around the country, particularly in rural areas, to see whether that could cut down some serious dental issues with our children?

Anne Marie Morris: That is an excellent suggestion. There is quite a lot for the Minister to take away and think about.

Having gone through the alphabet, I think there are a number of things that we need the Minister and his team to do, including recognising that rural really is different and that the way we look at it now simply does not work. We need to properly understand and investigate the need in different rural communities, and then we need proper funding. We need to look at how we train locally, which will improve recruitment and retention. We need to create new, shorter courses and new professions—and we need to do that now; otherwise, we are never going to get on top of the backlog. Waiting for degree-qualified nurses and doctors will simply take too long.

We need to equalise the professionalism and pay across health and care, and we need to integrate emergency response across all resources—police, fire, ambulance and first responders. I am happy to volunteer the south-west, which I think would be up for it, as a pilot area. I hope that the Minister will go away and think about that, and that he may be willing to meet those who have raised issues today to see if we cannot find some solutions and to discuss the other issues in my rural report.

4.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. Before I start, let me pay tribute to the work of those in the NHS and social care services across England, who are delivering excellent care now and have done so throughout the pandemic. The country is rightly proud of each and every one of them.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), who has been a champion not only for her constituency but, more widely, for the importance of improving health services in rural areas. I thank her for securing this important debate, and I pay tribute to her work and that of the APPG, whose report I read with interest.

Although my constituency of Colchester, a relatively new city, does not share the rural characteristics of Newton Abbot, I am committed to excellent healthcare outcomes for all people in rural and urban areas across our country. I probably cannot cover every single aspect of the report, or even all the issues raised by my hon. Friend today, but I will certainly try to cover as many of them as I possibly can. Of course, I am very happy to meet her and any other colleague who would like to meet. I am proud never to have turned down a meeting with a colleague, and that is a record I intend to keep.

We certainly recognise many of the challenges caused by rurality, including the distinct health and care needs of rural areas and the challenges of access, distance and ensuring a sufficient population to enable safe and

sustainable services. I assure my hon. Friend that this Government will remain committed to improving health services in rural areas, as we are committed to doing across all of England.

Tim Farron: The Minister alludes to GP surgeries in rural areas, which the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) also mentioned. Generally speaking, they serve smaller numbers of people over much larger areas. They were supported in their sustainability by something called a minimum practice income guarantee. That disappeared a few years ago, leading to many closures. In Ambleside and Hawkshead in the Lake district in my constituency, some surgeries are facing potential closure because of the removal of that funding. Will the Minister consider introducing a specific rural surgeries subsidy fund to help ensure that surgeries in rural communities in Cumbria and elsewhere are sustainable?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Member for his question. I am not going to make policy on the hoof, so I will not say yes now, but we are fast approaching the next GP contract, which will run from April 2024, so we have an opportunity to look at all these things in the round. I am passionate about securing access to GPs in rural and remote areas. Perhaps we can double-tag our meeting, make it twice as long and discuss that issue too. I will respond to some of the issues raised about GPs in a moment.

I reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot that we are in full agreement that the NHS needs to be flexible enough to respond to the particular needs of rural areas. That is vital, and that is why we passed the Health and Care Act 2022. The Act embeds the principle of joint working right at the heart of the system, promoting integration and allowing local areas the flexibility to design services that are right for them. Integrated care boards and integrated care partnerships give local areas forums through which to design innovative care models, bring together health and social care, and, importantly, prioritise resources to ensure that they best align with the needs of individual areas.

We are also enabling the NHS to establish place-based structures covering smaller areas than an integrated care system. That could match the local authority footprint, for example, or in some cases it could be even smaller—a sub-division based on local need. That is fully in line with the view expressed in the APPG report that the NHS should foster and empower local place-based flexibility. I think that is at the heart of the report.

As my hon. Friend knows, in establishing those models for the NHS to follow, we have set the framework but have left it to individual areas to tailor them to local needs. I think that is the right approach, because local areas know better than Ministers. We do not always hear Ministers say that, but I think local areas often know better than I do, sitting here in Whitehall, how best to organise themselves, and how to design and, importantly, deliver the best possible care for patients. While we in Westminster can support, guide, hold accountable and occasionally chest prod, it is right that we also protect local flexibility.

Bob Seely: When the Minister talks about local flexibility, I interpret that through the guise of funding. Does he accept that there is a funding issue for the 12 unavoidably

small hospitals in England and Wales, and will he look at the funding mechanism that was established in 2019? It gives more money to unavoidably small hospitals, but arguably only about 50% to 60% of what is needed.

Will Quince: I have made a note of my hon. Friend's question and I am going to come to it in a moment. The answer is no, but only because it is not my responsibility. It is the Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who has responsibility for hospital funding, and in the next seven minutes I intend to commit him to lots of meetings with every single Member present.

Let me turn briefly to the question of resources, about which I know a number of Members are concerned, and which has just been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely). It is vital that we allocate resources fairly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot mentioned. That is why NHS England asked the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation to consider the issue and provide a formula for allocations to integrated care boards. That formula took into account various factors, including population, age and deprivation—but we changed it.

In 2019-20, we produced a new element of the formula, recognising the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot makes, to better reflect the needs of some rural, coastal and remote areas, which on average tend to have a much older population. With an older population very often comes complex health needs. NHS England is using that formula to make allocations accordingly, but we recognise that some systems are significantly above or below target, and NHS England has a programme in place to manage convergence over several years. We also recognise the important challenge in ensuring that rural areas have the workforce—another point rightly raised at length—to provide the integrated patient-centred services that we all want to see.

We know that doctors are more likely to stay in the places where they trained, as my hon. Friend said. That is why, as part of a 25% expansion of medical school places between 2018 and 2020, we opened five new medical schools in rural and coastal locations that historically have been hard to recruit in: Sunderland, Lancashire, Chelmsford, Lincoln and Canterbury. I am conscious that my hon. Friend would want far more; that is perhaps a conversation to have at a later date. We hope—in fact, we expect—that graduates from those schools will stay in the area and will have a far greater understanding of the lives, needs and challenges of the people they serve in the locality.

My hon. Friend mentioned ambulances. As part of our plan for patients, which we launched in July, there is an extra £150 million for 2022-23 to address issues relating to ambulances. I hear what she says about differential pay rates, particularly in rural areas, between different blue light services, and I will take that away. Ambulances fall under the remit of my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark, and I know that he would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot to discuss that issue.

On backlogs, I completely understand the points that my hon. Friend makes about recruitment challenges. I will take away her point about incentives not working,

and I will look at other measures to attract people to rural and coastal areas, because we know that is a particular challenge.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) raised cancer wait time variance. As the Minister with responsibility for cancer, that absolutely concerns me. We are opening new diagnostic centres, but we have to look at more.

Tim Farron *rose*—

Will Quince: I am conscious of time, so I will have to come back to the hon. Gentleman. We are going to meet, and we can discuss that at length. I know it is a concern of his.

Tim Farron: This is about treatment, not diagnosis.

Will Quince: Yes—absolutely right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) raised seasonal visitors. I know that is an issue across Cornwall and Devon, and I would be very happy to look at that. My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) raised the issue of GPs, and extending training and career opportunities in rural areas. I totally agree, and we will soon have a date in the diary to meet and discuss that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot was right to raise community hospitals. Again, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark will be delighted to meet to discuss that at great length, as he would be to discuss unavoidably small hospitals, which I know my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight has raised with the Secretary of State.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot and others mentioned doctors. I entirely hear what she says about data. Data is important for choice, but I completely understand that in some rural, remote and coastal areas, there is no choice; there is just one GP, pharmacist and dentist, so we have to look at it differently. But data is important, because it allows the local integrated care board to identify where there are challenges and which practices are struggling. From November, for the first time, we will be publishing practice-level data on appointments and missed appointments. That is important because the patient deserves to see how their tax money is being spent. It also enables us to hold the integrated care board to account for how it is holding to account the practice and ensuring it modernises, is more efficient, and addresses the issues that its patients face. As part of our plan for patients, we are looking at that at great length.

Dentists are a real passion of mine. Dentistry is not looked at in the depth that it should be as part of wider NHS services. My hon. Friend rightly pointed out a number of reforms that were put in place in July. They are starting to take effect, and she will see more as they come to fruition. It is a top priority for me, and I am looking for areas for potential further reform. I encourage my hon. Friend to talk to her integrated care board about what more can be done on centres for dental development.

We absolutely recognise the importance of giving rural areas special consideration. They face a different range of challenges to the NHS in urban and suburban

[Will Quince]

areas, and it is right that we give local systems the flexibility to respond to that. I hope I have reassured my hon. Friend and others that the current system does that. I am sure she will want to continue her work and the important work of the all-party parliamentary group. I certainly look forward to working with her.

Question put and agreed to.

Trade Deals: Parliamentary Scrutiny

[*Relevant Documents: First Report of the International Trade Committee of Session 2022-23, UK trade negotiations: Scrutiny of Agreement with Australia, HC 444; Second Report of the International Trade Committee of Session 2022-23, UK trade negotiations: Agreement with Australia, HC 117; First Special Report of the International Trade Committee of Session 2022-23, UK trade negotiations: Scrutiny of Agreement with Australia and Agreement with Australia: Government Response to the Committee's First and Second Reports of Session 2022-23, HC 704*]

4.30 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered parliamentary scrutiny of trade deals.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I am delighted that I have been able to secure this debate, and I am particularly grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting me the opportunity to talk about trade deals and the scrutiny process that goes with them. I am also very grateful to right hon. and hon. Members, who have heard me pontificate on this subject at great length on a number of occasions over the last two years. I should say that I am a member of the International Trade Committee.

I welcome the Minister back to his position as a Trade Minister. He is a friend and an extremely able Minister, and we are all delighted to see him back in his position, where he so rightly belongs. We very much look forward to working with him, both in Committee and in the main Chamber, where we will, I hope, have more opportunity to debate our trade deals.

I should start by saying that I am universally pro free trade and in favour of the Government's agenda in the trade deals that they are signing. Our trade agreements have been an absolute litany of successes. Not only have we rolled over 70 trade agreements since our departure from the European Union, but we have signed deals with Australia and New Zealand. There are discussions under way about joining the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, and signing deals with the Gulf Cooperation Council, India and Canada. We have successfully signed a trade agreement with Singapore on a digital partnership basis, which is viewed as the gold standard in digital trade. We have signed a trade agreement with Japan, which is already opening up new markets and setting benchmark rates around digital concepts.

Those are all incredibly important agreements, and they matter because they make a huge difference to our economy, to how the Government interact with their allies around the world and to the businesses in our respective constituencies. They offer each and every one of us the opportunity to trade, to create global harmony and to open up opportunities for those who live and work in the United Kingdom, and those with whom we have signed trade deals. This is an important part of what was promised when we left the European Union, and I believe that we are being extremely successful in tackling the new trade agreements, although there have obviously been a few pitfalls along the way.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Anthony Mangnall: I would be humbled and delighted to do so.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The hon. Gentleman and I sit on the International Trade Committee, and he is making a very good defence of the Government's work. We heard in the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill Committee only an hour or so ago—it finished only 20 minutes ago—that British firms bidding in Australia will have disadvantageous terms compared with those of French companies, because the Australian deal weakens the global baseline.

These things are probably technical errors. They are things that were probably overlooked and that I hope are great mistakes; if they are not, someone in the Government should be hanging their head in shame. I think these mistakes would have been picked up with proper parliamentary scrutiny during negotiations, before the deal was signed or even ratified—just as happens in America and the European Union, and just as the French, Germans and most developed countries get in their national Parliaments. The International Trade Committee should be involved in the detail of the work on the negotiations before the text is published in camera, but this Government continue to refuse to allow that.

Anthony Mangnall: I agree with the hon. Gentleman on literally nothing apart from this point about scrutiny. I thoroughly enjoy working with him on this issue, because there is genuine cross-party consensus about the need for scrutiny. I say in response to him that trade deals are not static. We should not view them as static, because they can evolve and improve. To the point he just made, where there are pitfalls we should look to improve them, and to see how we can develop the agreements in the future. He is absolutely right; had we been given due process when we signed the free trade agreement with Australia, Parliament would have been able to debate this issue at length and we could have rooted out some of the issues before we ratified the agreement.

As we sign all the trade agreements, there is good news to be told, but a cloud has hung over all the excellent work. I want to raise four points—I am conscious that a number of Members of Parliament want to speak—that the Minister might consider and respond to. First, we must ensure that there is a long-term strategy for trade negotiations. We need better clarity. It is clear that the Government have a big appetite to sign new trade deals, and therefore they must consider how they will convey to Members of Parliament, trade bodies and the general public an understanding of their ambition. If we have a long-term strategy, we can at least understand the Government's direction of travel, and we can scrutinise it to better effect to see whether the goals have been met. I really cannot think that any Member in this room is against the United Kingdom signing trade deals, but we need to understand whether we are meeting those goals and whether the Department for International Trade is improving or worsening in its ability to take on new trade agreements.

My second point is about issues on which our provision would not change in any circumstance, such as human rights. It is essential that there is a standard level of human rights clauses in our trade agreements. There is a moral obligation for us to do that.

My third and perhaps most lengthy point is about something that came into being in 1924, the whole premise and purpose of which was to give us a say over international agreements that were signed. It was updated in the late 2000s by the Labour Government in something called the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, which basically said that we would have 21 days to ratify a new trade agreement. Within that, Members would be given time in Parliament to debate and vote on the issue, with a votable motion at the end of the debates. If it were rejected, there would be an extension of a further 21 days before ratification.

The previous three International Trade Secretaries have all affirmed the existence and the importance of CRaG and the need to use proper parliamentary scrutiny to get into the weeds of our trade agreements. In fact, the previous Secretary of State for International Trade said that CRaG provides a sound framework to scrutinise treaties that is less than a decade old. That is of real importance. Successive Ministers, including the Minister who is here today, have talked about the value of CRaG in ensuring that we, as Back-Bench Members of Parliament who are not in Government, can justify the agreements that we are passing and ensure that due process has taken place.

To the point made by the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) just a moment ago, the scrutiny has taken place; the value is there for British taxpayers, businesses and residents; and we are signing good deals. Ultimately, if we get these agreements right, we will only get better at this. If Members from all parts of the House are given due process to scrutinise trade agreements, we will only make better and more successful ones.

On 9 February, the Minister said that we have a robust scrutiny arrangement that allows Parliament to hold the Government to account. Let us take the Australia-UK free trade agreement, for which we were not given due warning of the CRaG process starting. There was not enough time for Ministers to come before the International Trade Committee to discuss the terms of the Australia free trade agreement. In fact, the previous Secretary of State was invited eight times and did not attend. When the CRaG process was started, the International Trade Committee had not even had time to publish its report. That is not the way it should be.

Let me make it crystal clear that the International Trade Committee should be given the right to publish its report before the start of the 21-sitting-day CRaG period, to ensure that due process is followed and that Members from across the House can read the report, digest it and prepare to debate and vote on the trade deal in Parliament. Can the Minister guarantee that a Secretary of State will appear before the Committee to discuss a trade deal ahead of our publication of any report on it? It should not be hard for us to secure a Secretary of State to discuss these trade deals of which we should, rightly, be so proud.

The important point, from my perspective, is that I am not asking for a veto. In fact, a vote to delay ratification does not change the terms of an agreement. It just delays it, and sends a very clear message that, should we sign another trade agreement, certain principles and concepts should be thought about again. We have to take that into account. I am not an extremist about the need for Parliament to come in, rip up trade agreements

[Anthony Mangnall]

and decide what goes in or out of them. I am simply making the point that we must ensure that we have a say. We must have an opportunity to be constructive in a way that allows us to justify the creation of our trade deals and scrutinise their components.

Compared to other countries, we are behind the times on this issue. America has a more rigorous system. In Canada, Parliament has an opportunity to debate and—in some instances, although not in statute—to vote on trade agreements. Let us catch up with them. Let us justify it, because it will only improve the process.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument, with which I entirely agree. The UK has not done trade deals for many years, and there seems to be a slight lack of expertise out there, which is no fault of Government or Ministers. Does he think that that is a reason to have extra time for scrutiny? Also, there is plenty of expertise in the international businesses and industries that operate in the UK. Does he think that the Government should use that expertise more readily?

Anthony Mangnall: I thank my hon. Friend for his incredibly helpful intervention. Yes, I do. The International Trade Committee has sizeable limitations, and a number of trade deals are being signed. If we are able to discuss such matters with more people, open this up, and allow people to debate and scrutinise, we will be able to improve the actual process. If hon. Members were to ask anyone in the Department for International Trade whether they had learned lessons between the signing of the Australia trade agreement and the signing of the New Zealand trade agreement, they would clearly see that lessons have been learned: the situation has improved, and we are getting better and better. From the officials that have come before the International Trade Committee, it is clear that the Department is doing a fantastic job in tackling international trade agreements. It is learning each day how to do it, in a way that we have not had to for the last 40 years. It is right that we use the expertise in both Parliament and trade bodies across the country.

My last point is around the International Trade Committee's resources. An extraordinary, dedicated group of people works to help us, as Members of Parliament, do our duty on that Committee. We have found it incredibly frustrating to see their hard work sometimes ignored and sometimes rubbished, because we have not had the access and due process—which was always promised to us, I hasten to add—to ensure that our reports can be produced, read and valued by Members of Parliament. We must change that system; otherwise, the International Trade Committee is completely redundant. I ask the Minister to listen carefully to what we are asking for. We are asking for access to Ministers and for time to produce our reports. We are asking for CRaG to be amended to include debates and voteable motions, so that we, as Members of Parliament, have opportunities to debate trade agreements.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I invite the hon. Gentleman to offer a view on whether there might be a fifth point for consideration. What has come out of the India discussions shows us that we

must have a domestic politics that mirrors the approach in international trade. Otherwise, we will not have successful trade negotiations.

Anthony Mangnall: The right hon. Gentleman caught me from a surprise angle here. I do not know exactly what is in the India trade agreement, other than the rumours that have been reported. Our discussions about it have very much been on the basis of speculation rather than the reality of it. In all seriousness, if that is the case, it is something that we need to look at further.

There is value in ensuring that we get this issue right. We can improve the system, improve the value of trade agreements and ensure that there is greater buy-in from Members of Parliament. I hope the Minister will understand where I am coming from. I am not attacking the Government's agenda, and I am not attacking the trade deals we are signing; I am merely asking that Back Benchers are given an opportunity to have their day in Parliament to discuss these very important trade agreements.

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): Before I call Back Benchers in to speak, I am hoping to bring Front Benchers in by eight minutes past the hour, if you can bear that in mind while you are speaking.

4.45 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for securing the debate. Members will know that I have a very specific interest in ensuring there is ample scrutiny of these trade deals—notably, any one with India. My constituent Jagtar Singh Johal has been arbitrarily detained in an Indian prison for almost five years, and the authorities of the Republic of India seem unable or unwilling to address the allegations of torture, abuse of process and arbitrary detention that have dogged the case and my constituent.

Quite simply, as the Minister may or may not agree, this is a case that really gets to the root of both this debate and the UK Government's ongoing attitude to pursuing these trade deals. This is a case where we see the power of the unstoppable force—namely that one of the largest supposed benefits of Brexit was the ability of the UK Government to gain unfettered access to the world's fastest-growing economies—meet the immovable object, namely the UK Government's clearly stated aim, articulated so well by the sadly departed Minister at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), that

“We will not pursue trade to the exclusion of human rights”—[*Official Report*, 7 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 258.]

It is a matter of some considerable record, because I speak about it quite a lot in both the Chamber and Westminster Hall, as hon. and right hon. Members will know.

The human rights failings in the case of Jagtar Singh Johal are manifest and egregious. Despite this, we continue with a policy where a UK-India FTA has now become probably the greatest prize in the view of the Government, as long as the US-UK FTA remains unachievable. What can the Minister say to us to demonstrate consequences for the Republic of India for its continued mistreatment of my constituent or, alternatively, what it

would have to do for the UK to threaten to pull the plug on these talks? Either way, it appears unarguable that in continuing to pursue this trade agreement, the Government are setting a precedent for future deals that human rights, and the rights of individual UK citizens, are placed below the pursuit of growth. In that sense, those who seek to defend human rights can probably join that distinguished list of those that the Prime Minister has labelled “the anti-growth coalition”. We see plenty of evidence in other areas that the UK Government’s pick-and-choose attitude to human rights and free trade agreements is making any claims to democratic accountability and oversight seem quite ridiculous.

Take the glee with which the Prime Minister trumpets the UK’s determination to sign a free trade agreement with a host of Gulf states, while speaking about preventing authoritarian regimes—such as Russia and, rightfully, China—from having any leverage in the UK economy. It is a truly bizarre situation. While I and other members of the Scottish National party have long called for the UK to wean itself off Russian and Chinese investments that have made so many people in this city and this Parliament enormously wealthy, the Government seem to be seeking to replace those investments with ones from regimes whose human rights and democratic records are essentially the same, and that—as demonstrated by recent OPEC decisions—do not share our broader geopolitical agenda. While we can correctly cite Russia’s assassination of dissidents by regime-loyal criminals as a reason to sanction it, we do not apply the same rationale to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia when it invites dissidents into one of its embassies and chops them up with a bone saw. While China is rightly criticised for its debt-trap diplomacy in places such as Sri Lanka, we rarely use the same rationale when we allow Emirati sovereign wealth funds to buy critical pieces of UK economic infrastructure, only for them to sack thousands of staff and threaten the Government with the closure of that infrastructure.

Quite simply, parliamentary scrutiny of these trade deals starts and ends with hard and fast rules, which this Government can use to build confidence in the House. Otherwise, I have to say: what is the point?

I would hope that my colleagues in the SNP and I—and, I am happy to wager, the vast majority of Scottish voters—would never stand for swapping the largest democratic free trade agreement and single market in human history for a series of piecemeal agreements that are, from my perspective, of dubious value. We will never stop shouting about the absurdity of leaving that single market, composed as it is of democracies with whom we share so much, in exchange for a sugar rush of cheap money and dealings with authoritarian regimes that share so few of the values that we here in Europe hold very dear.

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): I am introducing an informal time limit of less than four minutes to try and get everyone in.

4.51 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott, I believe for the first time. I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing this debate.

Much of the political energy of this generation of politicians has been consumed by the fallout from the Brexit referendum in 2016. I remember visiting Washington with a cross-party delegation prior to the referendum. Ms Elliott, I believe that you were part of that delegation, so you may correct me if I am wrong, but nobody in that delegation believed that the UK would vote to terminate its relationship with the European Union. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that prior to the result of the referendum, not much serious thought had gone into what Brexit actually meant.

Following the vote, there was a political breakdown, as decision makers scrambled to interpret the result. Do people remember the period between the referendum and the 2019 general election? This place was consumed with debating different interpretations of the referendum result. I argued for the UK to stay within the European Union’s economic frameworks, for reasons that have become plain for all of us to see, as the dream of splendid economic isolationism from Europe in return for a mythical global Britain has turned to ash.

I suppose that if sensible voices had prevailed during that period, we would not be having this debate, because we would be safely within the single market and the customs union. However, the debate was won by the Brexit ultras, and the prize that they cherished above all was an independent trade policy.

We could have a long debate about how truly independent the UK’s trade policy has turned out to be. It seems to me that the British Government have been rolling over previous EU-negotiated trade deals. With the Prime Minister having admitted that there is no prospect of a trade deal with the US, I think that many of us will wonder what the point was of burning down those bridges with the European economic area.

Perhaps because we have been faced with these economic realities, we have seen the Prime Minister, in her first few weeks in power, endorse a strategy of thawing relations with the EU. To avoid being petulant in this debate, I welcome that. It is far from where the UK should be, but it might be the start of a journey back to reality.

May I therefore first associate myself with the comments of everyone who has spoken about the need for improved scrutiny of trade policy? The Great Brexit slogan of “taking back control” clearly did not mean bringing back power to Parliament. Instead, returning powers have been concentrated at an Executive level.

Each trade deal should be subject to a binding yes/no vote in the Commons; Parliament should agree the terms of negotiation before the British Government begin talks; and the International Trade Committee should—

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for 15 minutes for a Division in the House.

4.53 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.7 pm

On resuming—

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is resumed. The debate will now continue until 5.45 pm. I remind Members to keep their contributions to around four minutes.

Jonathan Edwards: Diolch, Ms Elliott. I believe I was about to make the point that the International Trade Committee should have a stronger role during negotiations.

On another visit to Washington with an all-party group to investigate the transatlantic trade and investment partnership between the US and the EU, I recall a meeting with representatives of the US food industry. At the time, there was some dispute in relation to genetically modified organisms and hormones in food products. During that meeting, we were left in no doubt that nothing would make its way through Congress unless there was movement on the EU side in the negotiations on those specific points. The point I am trying to make is that increased scrutiny would actually strengthen the hand of UK negotiators, as opposed to weakening it.

What I really want to highlight is the need for Wales and Scotland to also be involved in that scrutiny. Trade policy will impact on devolved policy areas, so it is completely unacceptable and unsustainable that the Welsh and Scottish Governments and Parliaments are excluded from decision making. From my perspective in Carmarthenshire, agriculture is extremely important. Agriculture is a devolved matter. For coherent policy, therefore, surely the Welsh Government and Senedd Members should play a full role in trade policy, including through a binding vote on deals in the Welsh Senedd, full scrutiny by the relevant Senedd Committees and a formal role for the Welsh Government in the negotiating process.

Belgium provides a good example. Its central state cannot ratify European trade deals without the support of its so-called sub-national Parliaments. As it stands, therefore, Wallonia has more power over EU trade deals than Wales has over UK trade deals. That is not a very good look for the British Union.

5.9 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing today's debate and on his excellent speech.

The Australia free trade agreement set a precedent. Unfortunately, when it comes to parliamentary scrutiny, it demonstrated what not to do. Select Committees were given insufficient time to prepare their reports; parliamentarians and key stakeholder organisations were given insufficient time to digest and scrutinise those reports; and, crucially, elected Members of Parliament were denied a meaningful debate and vote on the agreement.

It is worth repeating what the hon. Member for Totnes alluded to earlier. The relevant Select Committees were denied sufficient time to scrutinise and advise on the agreement. There were just seven sitting days between the Government publishing their section 42 report on the free trade agreement and triggering the CRAg period. At that time, the International Trade Committee had been able neither to take oral evidence from the Secretary of State nor to finalise its report on the agreement.

That evasion was facilitated by the vague language in the Government's commitments. For example, they said that they would "endeavour" to share the signed free trade agreement with the International Trade Committee prior to publication, "where time allows", and that they would ensure that Select Committees had a "reasonable amount of time" to scrutinise free trade agreements and produce reports.

This is easily fixed. The Government must replace these vague commitments with stronger ones containing concrete guarantees and well-defined timelines, which provide Committees with the time they need to undertake full and proper scrutiny of agreements.

My biggest concern, however, is the failure of the Government to facilitate a meaningful debate and vote on the agreement. That cannot happen again. A desire to hurriedly chalk up deals has left farmers and fruit producers feeling sold out by the Australia trade deal, with the services industry raising concerns over the India trade deal, which none of us has seen. The Government must ensure that they do not repeat their mistakes. I urge the Minister to strengthen the Government's commitment to the parliamentary scrutiny of free trade agreements and to focus on the quality, rather than quantity, of the deals that his Department strikes.

5.11 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), whom I have the pleasure of serving alongside on the International Trade Committee, on securing this important and timely debate. I declare an interest as a member of Unite the union. The hon. Member and I undoubtedly have major points of disagreement when it comes to not only the Australia free trade agreement, but trade policy more broadly. He has, however, raised a number of important issues and speaks for the entire Committee in expressing his frustration about Government conduct on this issue.

The UK has embarked on the most dramatic overhaul of its trading policy since its accession to the European Economic Community in 1973. The implications of the decisions that the Government make in the coming months and years for our labour rights, environmental standards and businesses the length and breadth of the country could not be more significant. It is essential that any new trade deal is subject to rigorous and comprehensive scrutiny both by the Select Committee and by Members of the House more widely. That is the model employed by our Commonwealth partners, including Canada, Australia and New Zealand. That is exactly what the Prime Minister committed to when she promised a "world-leading scrutiny process" when she was International Trade Secretary.

I am afraid that Ministers are failing to listen to the concerns of Members, businesses and civil society in their frantic dash to conclude new trade deals. In March, our Committee Chairman warned that the Government are failing to do enough to enable timely and appropriate scrutiny of trade agreements and accused Ministers of ignoring legitimate concerns and riding roughshod over Parliament. Yet the 21-day CRAg process for the Australia free trade deal had begun before our Committee had the opportunity to publish our report and even before the International Trade Secretary had bothered to come before the Committee to defend the agreement. When we

requested that the CRaG process be extended to allow time for adequate scrutiny, our request was flatly denied. That was an unacceptable assault on the rights of Parliament and the people we are here to represent. I urge the new Secretary of State not to allow that deeply flawed process to set a dangerous precedent for future trade negotiations.

Finally, I want to raise an issue that I have spoken about a number of times in the Committee. Meaningful engagement with civil society and the inclusion of key stakeholders in the negotiation process is essential to achieving a trade policy that works in the interests of British workers, industry and our environment. However, the Trades Union Congress has also accused the Government of a lack of continued stakeholder engagement during trade negotiations and says that a failure to meaningfully engage with trade unions has resulted in the Government agreeing trade deals that lack adequate protections for workers' rights. Yet again, Ministers are hiding from robust scrutiny because they know that the deals they are agreeing are simply not delivering for the British people. This is simply not good enough.

5.14 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Elliott.

I pay huge tribute to the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for securing this debate and for his excellent speech, much if not most of which I agreed with. Like him, I am a free trader. Free trade is massively important, and not just for prosperity; if we had more free trade with the markets on our doorstep, the cost of living crisis would not be as bad as it is.

Free trade is important for fairness and prosperity, but also for peace, because it integrates countries and makes conflicts between them seem much less plausible and more unthinkable. Let us remember that the European Coal and Steel Community, in its first few years in the 1950s, was about knitting together countries that had been at war. The accession of the eastern European states through the '90s and noughties was about knitting together countries that had been enemies on either side of the cold war.

Free trade is dead important, and my criticism of the Australia and New Zealand deals is a criticism not of free trade but of deals that are not free—if they are not fair, they are not free. It is absolutely right that, as a country that has taken back control as a sovereign nation, we should be able to dictate the negotiating terms on which we go about setting up trade deals. How could Parliament have dealt with this better or be given the power to deal with it better? Most MPs on both sides of the House wanted Parliament to do its job better than it was allowed to, particularly on the New Zealand and Australia trade deals.

Better scrutiny means that Parliament should be able to sign off the negotiating mandate, and then sign off the deal itself. Surely, as the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) said, we have a right as a country to dictate the terms on human rights, animal welfare, environmental issues and carbon reduction. They should surely underpin the negotiating mandate of any trade deal. Then, when a vote is taken, it must not be taken after the damage has been done.

The Conservative party's 2019 manifesto stated:

"In all of our trade negotiations, we will not compromise on our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards."

That is not true. That manifesto commitment has been broken.

Let us look in particular at the deal with Australia. The average suckler beef herd in Britain is 30 cows. In Australia, it is hundreds upon thousands of cattle. It is not that Australians are brutes and terrible at animal welfare, but the nature of farming in Australia means that it is cheaper per unit and crueller in practice. The same animal husbandry cannot be done for 1,000 cattle as for 30.

Anthony Mangnall: The hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech, but I urge a bit of caution on that point, because we would never sign trade agreements with other countries if we expect them to have exactly the same standards. As he rightly pointed out, we have the highest standards in animal welfare around the world. The hope is that, if we sign trade agreements with places such as Australia, they can start seeing how they can match our standards and rise up to them, rather than us lowering ours, because there is absolutely no intention of us doing that.

Tim Farron: Well, that is the theory, but the Government's own figures and modelling show that the Australia trade deal, for the very reasons I was just setting out, will give a £94 million hit to British farming. There is no doubt that the deal has sold out and—in the words of Minette Batters, the excellent president of the National Farmers Union—betrayed British farmers. The impact of the trade deal undermines British farming and the standards and ethics of the United Kingdom in general—in particular of the way we farm. That is added to a set of assaults on British farming.

The transition to the new farm payments scheme is in complete chaos. The removal of direct payments—20% by this Christmas—will plunge many farmers into poverty. Meanwhile, many farms are trying to engage with the new environmental land management system. Two years down the road, they will change their businesses, and now they do not know what to do. The Government have sort of part-listened and have thrown everything up in the air; it is total chaos. There is chaos in farming and in the market.

The greenest thing that the British Government could do is keep Britain's farmers farming, because without farmers we cannot deliver the environmental goods. Likewise, we cannot deliver the food that we all rely on. If we become less and less self-sufficient, that has a moral impact as we push up the price of commodities for the poorest counties in the world. The failure to conduct fair and transparent trade deals with the scrutiny of this Parliament undermines British farming in general and puts at risk our environmental imperatives, our food production and, by connection, the poorest people in the world, whose food prices will go up because we cannot feed ourselves. That is why we must get it right next time. Free trade is important, but we must not throw our farmers under the bus in the process. Free trade that is not fair is not free in the first place.

5.19 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I hope that this is an opportunity to reset our relationship. It is no secret that the relationship between the International Trade Committee and the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), was toxic. It was bad. She held the Committee in disregard and, frankly, the Committee held her in disregard. Let us be honest about it. The officials around her gave her bad advice. They gave her arrogant advice, and she encouraged it by responding and goading them to give her that advice. That needs to end, and it needs to end now.

The advice needs to be that the new Secretary of State has to make time in her diary to make sure that we are seen in a timely manner. The promises have to be fulfilled. The Secretary of State cannot expect to get away with what has been done in the past, because it was quite frankly embarrassing for everyone. Of course, it does not have to be like that. There are many other Departments that have very good relationships with their Secretary of State. I have sat on many other Committees in this House, and I have never seen such a dysfunctional relationship.

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): Order. It is usual that if a Member is going to directly criticise or mention a Minister, they give them advance warning. I am not sure whether that has been done, but if it has not, I would certainly be putting that right after this meeting.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: None of this is new or not on the record. I think I have been even franker to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed to her face in Committee meetings, including about her officials, but I will alert her to this because it is a speech that has come from my contemplation today.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): I hope that the hon. Gentleman was not impugning officials at the Department for International Trade in that regard. I am not sure whether he was, but I am sure that he would not want to be questioning the integrity of the officials in the Department. Maybe I misunderstood him and maybe that was not the case.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: No, I think their advice to her was bad. That is my honest feeling. It was not good advice on how she should conduct her relationship with the Committee. It does not need to be like that, because other Committees that I have sat on—and I have sat on many—have had very good relationships with officials. I do not think that the relationship with the officials and the previous Secretary of State was good. I am afraid it is not just about the Secretary of State on this matter.

When I was on the International Development Committee, the relationship was such that we had private discussions and briefings with the Secretary of State every month. They were private, off the record and totally in camera. We would discuss confidential issues relating to development spending—sometimes where it had been misspent or where there were problems. The Committee would then rally around the Secretary of State, the Department and their officials when things

were happening. That is the kind of relationship that we need now, and it is the kind of relationship that I think we can have now.

We need to review CraG, and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which I also sit on, is doing that now. We need to strengthen CraG and we also need to have the following things, which I will list quickly and then finish. We need to ensure that heads of terms are presented to the Committee and signed off by the House, just like in America, the European Union and most other advanced democracies. We need to have private briefings at every single stage and on every single chapter. That is what the EU and the US get. If it is good enough for them, it needs to be good enough for us. We need to have embedded people in some of the key negotiations. Again, the US Senate has that, and that is what we should be expecting. It is not good enough for Ministers or the Department to tell us that these are confidential discussions. They are in the national interest and they must include the Committee. It is unacceptable for them to think that the Committee is not trustworthy.

We need a proper set of trade commissioners who give impartial advice to the Committee. The Committee needs to be given the resources for a set of sub-committees and staff. The Committee could then look at broad issues and the sub-committees could look at trade-by-trade issues. It is not good enough that the Committee is having to do all the trade-by-trade issues, which means that we are not looking at any of the broad issues in our scrutiny.

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): May I remind Opposition spokespeople that in one-hour debates, the convention is five minutes? I call the SNP spokesperson, Anum Qaisar.

5.24 pm

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Elliott, I believe for the first time. I thank the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for securing this important debate and for his reasoned contribution.

I agree with the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) about the importance of ensuring that Parliament can scrutinise trade deals. After exiting the European Union, the UK finds itself negotiating trade deals for the first time in over 50 years, yet with minimal scrutiny by this House.

Trade deals are no longer simply focused on tariffs and border crossings, as the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) said. They touch on every element of our daily lives, from jobs and environmental protection to food safety and public services. Given that these trade deals will have a lasting impact on our constituents' lives, the lack of scrutiny is disappointing.

The measures that do exist to scrutinise trade deals are simply not up to scratch. Recent trade deals with Australia and New Zealand exemplify the disregard for proper parliamentary scrutiny, with those deals effectively signing away the livelihood of Scottish farmers. Under the current CRAg procedure, Parliament is granted little power in the scrutiny of trade deals. It cannot block or amend deals, but simply delay them. Despite the Government promising that this Parliament would

have a full debate on the impact of the Australia trade deal, that has not taken place. It appears that the new Government wish to continue with this lack of proper parliamentary scrutiny.

On the topic of India, my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) spoke incredibly eloquently about his constituent Jagtar Singh Johal, and I associate myself fully with all his concerns.

As the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) said, scrutiny of trade deals by legislators is not uncommon. From an international perspective, the UK is an outlier in its lack of parliamentary oversight of international agreements. Our EU counterparts require parliamentary ratification for any deal negotiated, effectively giving them a veto over trade deals. A similar system is also in place in the US, with Congress outlining the objectives that the Government must follow in any negotiations. By allowing Parliament greater scrutiny over deals, we would be strengthening our system of oversight to match that of our international counterparts.

As has been said by hon. Members from across the House, parliamentary scrutiny matters. There was a refusal to enshrine basic animal welfare and environmental standards in the Australia deal negotiated by our current Prime Minister. As I have said, that effectively signed away Scottish farmers' livelihoods. There is much concern in Scotland. Trade deals would greatly benefit from consultation with the devolved Administrations. The agreements have completely disregarded devolution and eroded the powers of the Scottish Parliament.

Scotland has its own legal jurisdiction over the environment, procurement, farming and health, yet it was not properly consulted about how the trade deals would impact those areas. It is vital that the Scottish Parliament has a greater role in scrutinising and approving agreements. It is unacceptable that the Scottish Parliament is effectively being ignored and lacks the power to delay or amend the terms of a deal that has huge ramifications for Scottish agriculture and industry.

The UK should follow the approach adopted in Canada in its recent negotiations with the EU. The Canadian Government consulted each of the provincial administrations and involved them at every stage of the negotiation. Similar systems, involving regional and devolved Administrations, are commonplace internationally, and the UK should look to emulate that by involving the Scottish Parliament in all future negotiations.

It is vital that we get the negotiation of trade deals right. Parliament must have a greater say in all trade negotiations, and the devolved Administrations must be involved. Once a trade deal has been ratified, it is incredibly difficult to amend the terms. We must therefore ensure that the negotiations are done correctly the first time. That can be done only if better mechanisms are put in place to ensure that the UK Government are properly scrutinised in their negotiation of trade deals.

5.29 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the second time today, Ms Elliott. I thank the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for securing this important debate on scrutiny of trade deals.

The Government have simply failed to ensure that parliamentarians, businesses, non-governmental organisations, sector representatives, devolved Administrations—as the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar), said—and civic society can scrutinise our trade policy adequately. Trade can and should be a force for good: it supports well-paid jobs here in the UK and overseas, it can reduce poverty around the globe and it can be a vehicle for tackling the evils of our world, from human trafficking to environmental degradation, to name but two.

Effective trade, however, needs effective scrutiny, as all other equivalent nations have. We in the UK could learn a lot from those nations, but for this Government “scrutiny” avoids engagement. The whole process they operate avoids scrutiny and engagement and actively harms the development of effective trade policy and trade deals. We are not dealing in abstract facts. When I met NFU representatives in Wales this summer, they told me about their concerns and worries about the deal, particularly for red-meat farmers. Moreover, when they did meet Ministers and civil servants, they felt that they were being ignored.

To top that off, we have seen the sordid spectacle of the Government hiding from a debate in the Commons. Before recess, the then Secretary of State tried to deflect one and to claim that no parliamentary time was available for a debate on the detail of the UK-Australia deal. As the answer to a written question that I tabled suggested, that was not true.

Why does this matter? This is not an abstract parliamentary topic; it is about ensuring that consumers, farmers, businesses, civic society, NGOs and Members of both Houses are involved in matters of national importance. With his US example, the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) showed why engagement strengthens trade deals. That is why virtually every other modern developed nation has much stronger scrutiny requirements—not just parliamentary scrutiny—for trade deals, including the US, the EU and South Africa. I met parliamentarians in South Africa to discuss this very issue, and we could learn a lot from South African transparency in negotiating trade deals.

Effective scrutiny makes for effective deals. It increases support for trade deals if consumers, workers and businesses feel that they have been listened to as well as just consulted, yet the free trade deal with Australia has a climate-shaped hole in it. The president of the NFU has warned that

“this deal simply serves to heap further pressure on farm businesses at a time when they are facing extraordinary inflationary pressure”.

That happened because key stakeholders such as farmers were not included in the process.

As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) said, trade is not free if it is not fair. On the agreements with the Gulf, there are serious human rights issues in countries there, whether on the right to protest or the rights of women, migrant labourers or many others. We now know that the Government stripped human rights and the rule of law out of their objectives for a Gulf deal.

The FTAs with India and the Gulf would have huge implications for our climate commitments. My first question to the Minister is, what assurances will he give

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

that human rights will now be raised as part of the process and that there will be proper scrutiny for any free trade agreement with the Gulf?

The Secretary of State has been critical of the Government's own net zero pledge, calling it "arbitrary". Perhaps that is why they might wish to avoid any scrutiny. When the Prime Minister was Secretary of State for International Trade, she selectively released partial polling data, only to be rebuked by the British Polling Council. We saw her ignore officials' advice about the impact of the UK-Australia deal on UK farmers.

In the past year, the former Secretary of State dodged the International Trade Committee multiple times, as we have heard today. The Department was even issued with an enforcement notice by the Information Commissioner for delays to freedom of information requests, further suggesting a fear of scrutiny and openness. That suggests that the Government are avoiding scrutiny and debate in both Houses.

I have focused on the Government's attitude to the parliamentary process, but we need assurances that Ministers are meeting, and actually listening to the concerns of, other stakeholders. The stakeholders we met feel there is too little consultation, and even when there is they feel like they are being talked at rather than listened to.

Will the Government grant a debate on the Floor of the House on the UK-New Zealand trade agreement before it is ratified? If the International Trade Committee requests a debate on the FTA with India, will the Government grant it?

Finally, the Labour party is a pro-trade party. We want to see the Government striking ambitious trade deals. We want to see trade deals that support British business, British values and economic growth. To do that, trade deals need to be accompanied by proper scrutiny.

5.35 pm

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. It is great to be back at the Department for International Trade after a one-year gap. It is good to engage on a huge number of the issues that I used to engage on—I have had a quick crash course to bring myself up to speed after the last year.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing the debate. He is a genuine champion for global Britain and brings great energy to the International Trade Committee—something I remember from when I appeared before the Committee a number of times. The Committee is extremely important to the work of the Department for International Trade, as is the Lord's International Agreements Committee. Many important points have been raised during the debate, and I will strive to cover as many as I can. First, I will lay out a little context, but most of my speech will deal with the points that have been raised.

For the first time in nearly half a century, the UK is free to negotiate its own free trade agreements with the world's fastest-growing economies. The rewards will be significant: higher wages, more jobs and more growth,

with agreements specifically tailored to the needs of the United Kingdom. However, given that our free trade agreements equate to a significant shift in trade policy and in how this country does its trade policy, it is right that Parliament has the opportunity to fully examine them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes rightly says that the CRaG process came in during the last days of the Labour Government, in 2010. CRaG ensures that Parliament has 21 sitting days to consider a deal before it can be ratified. Only once that period has passed without either House resolving against the deal can it proceed towards ratification. The Government believe that CRaG continues to provide a robust framework, but we have added, in addition to CRaG, some important parts to this process. In both respects, the need for parliamentary scrutiny and the Government's constitutional right to negotiate international agreements under the royal prerogative—

Anthony Mangnall: I am sorry to interrupt, but the Minister is making the point that Parliament has the ability to consider these things under CRaG. Parliament only has that ability if the Government allow time for us debate and vote. We did not have that for the Australia agreement. I think most of us want the Minister to say today that, on the New Zealand agreement and the subsequent trade agreements, we will have that time allocated, as outlined under CRaG.

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Of course, I have only been back at the Department two days now, but I will carefully consider the representations that he has made on parliamentary scrutiny. As I am laying out, CRaG is a process that, I believe, works well overall. We have added elements to CRaG, on top of the situation we inherited in 2010.

I should stress that no international treaty—we saw this in the House earlier in the Committee stage of the Trade (Australia and New Zealand) Bill—can of itself change the UK's laws. That can be done only by Parliament. What is more, it is the long-standing practice of successive Governments to ratify treaties only once relevant domestic implementing legislation is in place. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes knows, the Australia free trade agreement is not actually ratified yet, because the domestic legislation is not yet in place.

My hon. Friend made an excellent speech. He rightly praised a litany of successes and the importance of our trade policy in making a difference to businesses, exporters, and consumers. Having read through quite a few of these free trade agreements and international trade agreements, I can say that there is no point negotiating just for the sake of producing a doorstep-style document. The point is to have an agreement that works for our exporters, consumers and producers, as rightly pointed out by various hon. Members.

May I give some praise to my officials? I was a little perturbed by the points raised by the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle). Whatever officials may or may not have advised Ministers in the past, it is unfair to attack them if Ministers chose not to follow that advice or did something else. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will want to think about that and perhaps intervene on me to clarify what he meant.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: What I should have said is that the Secretary of State hid behind her officials, claiming that it was their advice that she was following. I hope that that was not the case and I that officials were giving her good, broad advice—I am sure they always do.

Greg Hands: Let me take that in the spirit in which it is meant. I think we will agree to move on, but the hon. Gentleman has made his point. I am just saying that Ministers are always responsible for the decisions and actions of their Departments. That is a very good rule for how our constitution works.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes made various excellent points about better clarity and better comms. In my experience, there can always be better communication in the world of trade. There is always a huge amount of misunderstanding in relation to trade in general and free trade agreements in particular.

My hon. Friend mentioned outreach, which I will come back to. He also mentioned human rights clauses. The UK has an incredibly proud record—not only on our own human rights, but on the engagement we do around the world. Free trade agreements are not always the best way to engage on human rights—there are often better ways to do that—but we do make sure that, wherever appropriate, human rights are included in free trade agreements. We will certainly engage with all our trade partners on the issues that matter to the British people and the Government, be they human rights or trade union rights.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: Let me deal first with the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes raised and the specific case he mentioned. I will talk about CRaG in a bit more detail, but the other part of his speech was about respect for the International Trade Committee. I know from the times I have appeared in front of that Committee how important it is. It is ably chaired by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—I have mutilated the pronunciation of the Western Isles, but I have done my best. I say to my hon. Friend that our system of scrutinising international agreements and trade deals is at least as good as that in other Westminster-style democracies, such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Unless something major has changed in the year I have been out of the Department, I think the UK shapes up at least as well as those equivalent systems.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), who is no longer in his place, talked about a lack of expertise in the Department, but I would say

quite the opposite. I was there at the foundation of the Department in 2016, and we deliberately made sure that we had the expertise and the right people in place.

I am already overshooting on time, Ms Elliott. I have not done justice to a lot of the contributions that have been made, but I think that I have dealt with human rights. There was mention of China and Russia. Of course, there are no plans to make a free trade agreement with the likes of China or Russia. Trade policy is reserved, but we engage with and consult the Scottish Government and Welsh Government through the ministerial forum for trade, which I used to chair and which I think I will be chairing again.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) talked about meaningful debate. The Department for International Trade always has meaningful debate, and we always have outreach to stakeholders. People have specifically mentioned farmers. I cannot tell you the number of outreach sessions that I did with the NFU, NFU Scotland, NFU Cymru, the Farmers' Union of Wales and the Ulster Farmers' Union. The number of Zoom and Teams meetings that I did with them all during the pandemic was absolutely extraordinary. We did a huge amount of outreach.

I say to hon. Members that it has been a helpful and interesting debate. It has been useful for me to get back up to speed on parliamentary scrutiny. I appreciate that Members want to see more scrutiny and more debate. I am open-minded on that, and I will have a look specifically at some of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes raised in relation to current free trade negotiations.

5.44 pm

Anthony Mangnall: I thank the Minister for his response, and I will write to him with the points that I have raised. Hon. Members might like to feed into that.

I might just say to the hon. Gentleman from Scotland that if he wants to come and talk to—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: West Dunbartonshire.

Anthony Mangnall: I beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon. If he wants to come and talk to the International Trade Committee about human rights, we will raise it when we discuss the India trade agreement. I am trying to work on a cross-party basis, and we will raise that point.

When the Minister compares us with other countries—

5.45 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 12 October 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Post Office Historical Shortfall Scheme: Late Applicants

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Dean Russell): The Post Office Horizon IT scandal, which began over 20 years ago, has had a devastating impact on the lives of many postmasters. Starting in the late 1990s, the Post Office began installing Horizon accounting software, but faults in the software led to shortfalls in branches' accounts. The Post Office demanded sub-postmasters cover the shortfalls, and in many cases wrongfully prosecuted them between 1999 and 2015 for false accounting or theft.

In May 2020, the Post Office launched the historical shortfall scheme, and applications were received over the following months of that year. The scheme was designed to compensate postmasters, without convictions, and outside of those who brought the group litigation order, for the financial shortfalls that they had to make up and the losses accrued as a result. The Government have supported the Post Office in wanting to put right these historical wrongs and are therefore providing financial support to ensure that those affected receive the compensation they deserve.

I am pleased to update the House on the positive progress that has been made to deliver compensation for those currently in the scheme. Since the Government's last update to Parliament, a further 388 further postmasters have received a compensation offer. As of 30 September, in total 82%—1938—of eligible claimants have now received an offer, meaning that £52 million has now been offered. To date, 1,628 claimants have accepted their offers, and compensation payments totalling over £33 million have been made to them, helping to address the historical wrongs suffered by these claimants. It is the stated target of the Post Office to issue 95% of offers to existing claimants by the end of the calendar year. The Government's ambition remains for the Post Office to have issued 100% of offers in this time.

In addition to those claimants who are currently part of the historical shortfall scheme, the Government are aware that there are individuals who, for a variety of reasons, were unable to apply for the scheme while it was open. Today, I can announce that the Government will extend their financial support to the Post Office so that it can accept eligible late applications into the historical shortfall scheme.

The Post Office will be writing out to all individuals who have contacted it about making a late application to the historical shortfall scheme to inform them of this.

The Government encourage any other individuals who may have been eligible to claim compensation under the historical shortfall scheme to contact the Post Office to discuss their position. Further details will be set out on the Post Office website.

These late claims will be managed through existing historical shortfall scheme processes, including an assessment by the independent advisory panel, to ensure claims are considered consistently with those already submitted.

[HCWS314]

TREASURY

Update on Recent Bank of England Asset Purchases

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Kwasi Kwarteng): The Bank of England decided to carry out temporary purchases of long-dated UK Government bonds (gilts) from 28 September through the asset purchase facility (APF) on whatever scale is necessary to restore orderly conditions. These interventions will be strictly time limited, with auctions taking place until 14 October.

I have therefore authorised an increase in the total size of the APF by £100 billion. This will bring the maximum total size of the APF from £866 to £966 billion.

On 11 October, the Bank decided that that it will widen the scope of its daily gilt purchase operations to also include purchases of index-linked gilts. This was designed to act as a further backstop to restore orderly market conditions by temporarily absorbing selling of index-linked gilts in excess of market intermediation capacity, the purchasing of index-linked gilts was already covered by the existing indemnity for the APF.

The amendments to the APF that could affect the allocation of credit and pose risks to the Exchequer have been discussed with Treasury officials. The risk control framework for the APF previously agreed with the Treasury will remain in place, and HM Treasury will keep monitoring risks to public funds from the facility through regular risk oversight meetings and enhanced information sharing with the Bank.

The Government will continue to indemnify the Bank and the APF from any losses arising out of, or in connection with, the facility. If the liability is realised, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

A full departmental minute has been laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS319]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Contingent Liability Notification: Ukraine Guarantees

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Leo Docherty): Today, I have laid a departmental minute that describes two liabilities that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is undertaking to support the economic stability of Ukraine following Russia's invasion in February 2022.

It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the statement, except in cases of special urgency.

This departmental minute sets out details of two new liabilities undertaken by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The first is a guarantee to support lending by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to Ukrenergo, Ukraine's state-owned and sole electricity transmission system operator. This guarantee has an expected maximum exposure of €54 million—£47 million. The second is a guarantee to support lending by the World Bank to the Government of Ukraine directly. This guarantee has an expected maximum exposure of €527 million—£460 million. The guarantees will be denominated in the currency Ukraine decides to borrow in. Due to the urgency of the situation in Ukraine and unexpected disruption to Parliament's schedule in September, we notified the Public Accounts Committee instead of Parliament before signing the first of these two guarantees. We are now presenting a written ministerial statement and departmental minute to the House for information.

The FCDO is guaranteeing both principal and interest repayments on the EBRD and World Bank loans. A UK pay-out would be triggered if either Ukrenergo or the Government of Ukraine miss a repayment by 180 days.

The World Bank and EBRD are both well respected multilateral development banks that benefit from preferred creditor status. The UK is an active shareholder at both institutions.

The exact length of the liabilities is linked to the terms of the agreed financing between the World Bank, EBRD and the Government of Ukraine. The EBRD guarantee has a maturity of five years. The World Bank guarantee has a maturity of 18 years.

HM Treasury approved both of these guarantees and the expedited notification process. Chairs of the relevant parliamentary Committees did not raise any objections. If any Member of the House has questions, do get in touch.

A copy of the departmental minute has been placed in the Library.

[HCWS315]

Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Review Conference

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Leo Docherty): The House may welcome an update regarding the 10th treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons review conference, which was held at the United Nations in New York from 1 to 26 August. The conference reviewed progress and sought to reach consensus on future actions under the treaty's three pillars: disarmament, non-proliferation and peaceful uses of nuclear technology. While the

conference was unable to achieve its overall goal of a consensus outcome document owing to Russian actions, it advanced discussion on each of the treaty's three pillars, and agreed to establish a working group on further strengthening the review process of the treaty, open to all states parties.

We were deeply disappointed that, despite the progress made in many areas, Russia blocked the adoption of a consensus outcome document over references to Ukraine, in order to defend its unprovoked, illegal war on Ukraine. Russia's betrayal of the security assurances it gave through the Budapest memorandum when Ukraine joined the treaty, and its responsibility for the unfolding situation at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, were both referenced obliquely in the President's consolidated text. Russia's aggression poses grave challenges to the international nuclear security architecture. The UK, and many other states, raised these concerns consistently throughout the conference, and the UK issued a joint statement with 56 countries explaining how Russia's aggression and behaviour in Ukraine impacted the treaty.

The UK played an active role both in the preparation for the conference and at the conference itself. As part of its preparations, the UK published a revised national report setting out the action being taken to support the treaty and fulfil the UK's commitments across all three pillars of the treaty. At the start of the conference, former Minister of State at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Graham Stuart MP, set out the UK's approach and progress against the treaty's objectives, and led a side event on the UK's national report. The UK's positive agenda for the conference focused on our track record on disarmament, including reductions in stockpiles and delivery systems and thought-leadership on risk reduction, verification and transparency. The UK also highlighted our leadership in establishing the "Sustained Dialogue on Peaceful Uses", a new effort to increase access to the benefits of peaceful nuclear technologies for development, including through meeting the UN sustainable development goals. We engaged constructively in the negotiations throughout, seeking to reach agreement and to make progress across all three pillars of the treaty.

The lack of a consensus outcome neither undermines the treaty nor changes states' obligations. Of the nine previous review conferences, which have taken place almost every five years since the treaty came into force in 1970, only three have adopted a comprehensive final document by consensus. Throughout, the treaty has remained vitally important for the UK and for the international community as a whole, playing an unparalleled role in curbing the nuclear arms race and keeping the world safe. The action plan adopted at the 2010 conference remains valid as a comprehensive road map for all states party to the treaty to follow to take forward action on disarmament, non-proliferation and peaceful use of nuclear technology, as do the consensus outcomes from 2000 and 1995. The UK will continue to work closely with our partners to strengthen the treaty and make progress against this roadmap, while also building on the successes of this conference.

In particular, we look forward to contributing to the working group on strengthening the review process and we will continue to work with Norway on our initiative to clarify and apply the principle of irreversibility. We

will also be launching, with the United States and 30 other partners who have joined so far, the sustained dialogue on expanding access to the peaceful uses of nuclear technologies.

The UK's commitment to the treaty and to fulfilling our obligations, including under article VI on disarmament, remains undiminished. As a nuclear weapon state that takes our responsibilities seriously and an original party to the treaty, the UK remains committed to creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons. We have approximately halved our nuclear stockpile since the cold war peak and we continue to drive research and discussion on risk reduction, verification and transparency. We remain committed to working internationally to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict and enhance mutual trust and security. The UK will continue to play its part in bringing about a safer world for all and achieving the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons.

The treaty is and will remain the fundamental cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and is the irreplaceable foundation and framework for our common efforts on advancing nuclear disarmament and the peaceful uses of nuclear technology. The conference decided to hold the 11th review conference in 2026 in New York, with preparatory committees to take place in 2023 in Vienna, 2024 in Geneva and 2025 in New York. The UK will continue to work alongside the international community at all of these meetings to strengthen the regime and to promote international stability, peace and security and will keep Parliament updated.

[HCWS316]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Vaccine Supply

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Caroline Johnson): It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to make a gift of a value exceeding £300,000, for the Department concerned to present to the House of Commons a minute giving particulars of the gift and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from making the gift until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

I am writing to inform you that while Parliament was in recess the Department of Health and Social Care has started to donate approximately 30,000 doses of surplus covid vaccines to Barbados and Antigua & Barbuda. The combined value of these donations exceeds £300,000 and the donations will be accounted for as gifts since both countries are not eligible for official development assistance (ODA).

I want to take this opportunity to explain that we proceeded with these donations as a matter of urgency. The doses were surplus to the requirements of our domestic vaccination programme and were requested urgently by the recipient countries, including to vaccinate children before schools returned during September. Donating these doses with maximum available shelf life meant that they could be used rather than expiring and having to be destroyed.

The Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health and Social Care has written to the Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee to notify them of these gifts. This statement provides retrospective notification to the House of Commons.

HM Treasury has approved the decision.

[HCWS318]

JUSTICE

Criminal Legal Aid

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Brandon Lewis): Since I became Lord Chancellor, I have been keen to resolve the dispute with the Criminal Bar Association, in order get the criminal justice system working again. To that end, my officials and I have been holding constructive discussions on a package of proposals with the Bar Council and the CBA. This package was agreed as part of our overall response to the criminal legal aid independent review consultation.

I am pleased to announce that the CBA membership has now voted in favour of my offer on criminal legal aid, and has agreed to come back to work.

As a result, my Department laid a statutory instrument on 11 October which will mean the recent fee uplift for new cases claimable by litigators and advocates will also now apply to the vast majority of existing cases in the backlog where the main hearing takes place after the commencement of the instrument on 31 October 2022. This equates to an additional investment of £28 million in the fee scheme for advocates and £14 million in the fee scheme for litigators over the spending review period.

My Department will also make an additional £3 million of funding available for case preparation, such as written work and special preparation, as well as a further £4 million for defence barristers involved in pre-recorded cross-examinations, which are used to reduce the trauma of a trial for vulnerable victims and witnesses by early 2023.

The Ministry of Justice is proposing a further £5 million uplift per year for fees in the youth court, from the 2024-25 financial year, which is expected to particularly benefit both solicitors and some junior barristers.

A new criminal legal aid advisory board on criminal legal aid reform will also be created and hold its first meeting in October. This board will discuss the operation of the criminal legal aid system and make recommendations to the Lord Chancellor.

In addition to this, the Government will respond to the remaining elements of the above consultation by the end of November, including further reforms directed at solicitors. As was made clear by Lord Bellamy in his review, the profession of criminal legal aid solicitors requires immediate attention, and I am keen to work to provide further reforms and support.

I look forward to working constructively with criminal legal aid practitioners on criminal justice issues, including working to drive down court backlogs and resolve cases sooner.

After all, we share the same aim: putting the criminal justice system on a more sustainable footing for the future, to support victims and everyone who relies on our justice system.

[HCWS317]

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