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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 19 October 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

MATERNITY AND NEONATAL SERVICES IN EAST KENT
Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, That he will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of a Report, dated 19 October 2022, entitled “Reading the signals: Maternity and neonatal services in East Kent—the Report of the Independent Investigation”.—(*Jacob Young.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Freeports

1. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the development of freeports in Wales. [901664]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Sir Robert Buckland): I am honoured to take my first questions as Secretary of State. I ask the House to remember that Friday will mark the 56th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster, which, even with the passage of time, remains searingly painful. We will never forget, and we will still mourn, all those who lost their lives.

My Department has worked alongside the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that the freeport offer works for Wales. Over the summer, we successfully agreed a prospectus for Wales with the Welsh Government, which was launched in early September. This takes us one step closer to investment, growth and long-term prosperity.

Jerome Mayhew: May I be the first to welcome my right hon. and learned Friend to his place and to align myself with his comments about the Aberfan disaster? I remember being taught about it in school as a child of roughly the same age: it made a deep, profound and lasting impression on me.

By making it easier and cheaper to do business, freeports drive not only local and regional growth, but national growth—growing the pie, as we have learned to call it. Will my right hon. and learned Friend give further details on how freeports in Wales can help to level up local areas and help their prosperity?

Sir Robert Buckland: We are committed to establishing at least one freeport in Wales by the summer of next year, with £26 million in seed funding. The bidding process is still open; I am sure that we will see some

excellent bids. The estimates for the Teesside freeport and Freeport East initiatives are that they will both create more than 18,000 jobs and provide a £3.2 billion boost to their local economy. I anticipate a similar boost to the Welsh economy.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I have just returned from the World Trade Organisation in Geneva as a rapporteur for the Council of Europe. There is some concern there about how freeports might undermine internationally agreed labour standards and might be a safe haven for carbon-intensive production. What meetings has the Secretary of State had with the WTO about the matter? Will he meet me about it? Can he give an assurance that there will be no reduction in labour standards and no dirty production in these freeports?

Sir Robert Buckland: I am always happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, with whom I have enjoyed lively exchanges over the years. I assure him that in the prospectus he will see a specific reference to the Senedd’s Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Along with giving assurances as to our UK Government’s standards, I can assure him that the sort of concerns that have been outlined are unfounded and that he will find encouragement in the green initiatives that I am sure will thrive with the freeports project.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): May I say on behalf of the Labour party, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), that we are all thinking of the community of Aberfan this week?

I welcome the Secretary of State to his new role. He must be very pleased, following his summer U-turn, that the Prime Minister has been taking daily lessons from him. The Welsh Government’s Minister for Finance and Local Government, Rebecca Evans, is now dealing with her sixth Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Can the Secretary of State explain how it is possible to progress the Welsh freeports prospectus with such an appallingly chaotic and unstable UK Government ahead of the 31 October Budget announcement?

Sir Robert Buckland: I assure the hon. Lady that the time that I have had as Secretary of State has been time well spent. Throughout the summer, I made sure that the prospectus process for the freeports initiative was maintained. I worked with the then Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), to make that so.

I assure the hon. Lady that we have not lost a beat in my time in office. The fact that there may be changes in personnel does not change the Government’s growth strategy, which remains on course and which I think deserves the support of hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Jo Stevens: The Budget has been ripped up and the manifesto has been ripped up, but there we go. The UK Government’s original approach was to ignore devolution and impose a freeport on Wales; the Welsh Government put a stop to that and to the harm to the environment,

to workers' rights and to Wales's finances that it would have caused. The UK Government's latest version of freeports appears to be investment zones. Has the Secretary of State actually seen any evidence that proves his Government's claim that they create growth, rather than just displace it?

Sir Robert Buckland: I find it concerning that the hon. Lady does not share my enthusiasm for freeports and investment zones. I think of examples from the past in Wales, when inspirational Secretaries of State such as the late Lord Crickhowell, Peter Walker and Lord Hunt of Wirral demonstrated that, through enterprise zones and, for example, the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation, the economy could be transformed and regenerated. I am confident that our approach to investment zones will ensure that Wales shares in the growing prosperity that we want to see throughout our United Kingdom. I believe it will generate more investment and grow that economic pie, which is the aspiration of this Government.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): This Government have been forced to U-turn on their fundamental ideology that slashing taxes magically leads to economic growth. That same ideology underpins freeports and investment zones. Both will shrink the UK Government's tax revenue and, in turn, the Welsh Government's budget, which is already facing a £4 billion shortfall. With inflation now over 10%, what is the Secretary of State doing in the Cabinet to protect Wales's budget?

Sir Robert Buckland: I yield to none in my admiration for the right hon. Lady, but she has just laid bare Plaid Cymru's ideological approach. Her party believes that there should be an ever-shrinking share of wealth, which means that our public services would decline. We on this side of the House believe that the way in which to pay for public services is to grow our economy, and it is through initiatives such as the freeports and investment zones that we will do just that. I hope that the Welsh public will note Plaid Cymru's ideological opposition to growth.

Liz Saville Roberts: The Secretary of State is on record as saying that he believes it is right to make cuts in public spending—and that was before last week's multiple U-turns. According to the Glasgow Centre for Population Health, the last Tory austerity experiment led to 335,000 excess deaths. How many excess deaths is the Secretary of State prepared to justify this time round?

Sir Robert Buckland: I am sorry, but hyperbole from the right hon. Lady does not help her case at all. We are not talking about so-called austerity; we are talking about ensuring that the money allocated in the public spending round that was agreed last year is spent efficiently and wisely. I said that it was right for each Department to look carefully at its priorities to ensure that frontline services—the sort of services in which I know she and I believe—are maintained for the benefit of the citizens whom we serve.

Cost of Living Crisis: Devolved Budget, Households and Businesses

2. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the cost of living crisis on (a) the devolved budget, (b) Welsh households, and (c) businesses in Wales. [901665]

5. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the cost of living crisis on (a) the devolved budget, (b) Welsh households, and (c) businesses in Wales. [901668]

11. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the cost of living crisis on (a) the devolved budget, (b) Welsh households, and (c) businesses in Wales. [901674]

15. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the cost of living crisis on (a) the devolved budget, (b) Welsh households, and (c) businesses in Wales. [901678]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): We have taken action to support households and businesses across Great Britain, including Wales, through schemes such as the energy bill relief scheme and the £400 energy bill rebate. The Welsh Government have been very well funded to deliver their devolved responsibilities, with the largest ever block grant of £18 billion in the 2021 spending review.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Secretary of State's U-turn during the Tory leadership election was indeed truly eye-catching, but the U-turn about which people in Wales are most concerned at the moment is the Government's U-turn on properly protecting benefits and pensions against skyrocketing inflation. Will the Minister be U-turning on that commitment as well, or will he fight the good fight in favour of proper uprating?

David T. C. Davies: This Government will always be committed to supporting the least well off, which is why we have come forward with schemes such as the £650 payment for those on benefits, the £300 for pensioner households and the £150 for those who are disabled. If the hon. Gentleman is really worried about the cost of living, perhaps it is time he persuaded his Government to start supporting new nuclear and the new oil and gas fields that we so desperately need for the energy that people want.

David Linden: I have just come from chairing the all-party parliamentary group on poverty, which has heard that the cost of living crisis will exacerbate the digital divides experienced by so many people in poorer communities. Will the Minister agree to meet the APPG to discuss how that affects people in Carmarthenshire, in Carmyle, and throughout these islands?

David T. C. Davies: I meet stakeholders who are dealing with poverty all the time, but if the hon. Gentleman is interested in dealing with poverty, perhaps he will be able to find out from his own Scottish National party

Government why poverty levels in Scotland are rising, and why even the Labour party in Wales is making a better job of dealing with child poverty than his Government.

Patricia Gibson: The Secretary of State loves to tell a good story, does he not? The UK Government have already slashed devolved budgets by billions this financial year, and on Monday the Chancellor announced that plans for the millions of pounds that were meant to go to devolved nations for cost of living support were now to be abandoned. How does the Secretary of State think that slashing devolved budgets supports the supposed levelling-up agenda?

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Lady gave me a bit of a promotion there; I am the Minister, not the Secretary of State. I am not telling stories. The figures about child poverty in Scotland come from Audit Scotland, which is responsible to the Scottish Government. I suggest that she takes a look at the other figures, which show that far from cutting Wales's devolved budget the UK Government have increased it every single year, and did so by £2 billion in the last financial year.

Martyn Day: Hundreds of thousands will find themselves in fuel poverty should average energy costs rise next April to the estimated £4,347 a year, as a result of the Government rowing back on their own proposals. How can the Minister claim that his party is fighting the cost of living crisis, when his Government are cutting back on the few measures that they have announced before they are even implemented?

David T. C. Davies: I am afraid that I did not hear all of the question, but I believe the hon. Gentleman mentioned fuel poverty. I remind him again that the Government are doing everything possible to ensure that people in this country can access the cheap gas, cheap electricity and cheap petrol that they need. It is members of his Government in Scotland who are doing their best to prevent that from happening.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): In welcoming the contributions from our friends from the Scottish National party to Wales questions, may I politely remind them that in March 2020 the Government stepped in to save thousands of businesses in every single one of our constituencies, protecting hundreds of thousands of jobs? Does that not demonstrate the value of staying part of a strong United Kingdom, and that the Government do not walk away from serious challenges but meet them head on?

David T. C. Davies: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I could not put it better myself. The Government will stand up for the Union, and for the least well-off in society.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Nearly 60% of my constituents on Ynys Môn rely on off-grid energy for heating. The average cost of filling an oil tank has almost doubled in the last year. On behalf of my constituents, will the Minister look at more targeted support for those on off-grid heating and liquefied petroleum gas?

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The Government have already come through with a £100 payment for those who are off-grid, but I believe that there are genuine issues there, and she makes a very good point. I am sure that our colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Treasury will look carefully at what she has said.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The Minister referred to the significant increases in the Welsh block grant over the past 10 years, which equate to £120 for every £100 spent in England. In spite of that very fair settlement, accepted and recognised by the Welsh Government, health waiting lists are longer, education standards are falling compared with the rest of the United Kingdom, and the economy is growing at a much slower pace. Does he agree that the Welsh Government need to focus on the right priorities: investing in public services and getting value for money?

David T. C. Davies: My right hon. Friend was responsible for ensuring that the Welsh Government got a more generous package than they had previously—£1.20 for every £1 spent in England. It is therefore very hard to understand why, under a Welsh Labour Government, health service waiting lists and ambulance response times have got longer. People have lower standards of healthcare in Wales than they do under a Conservative-run NHS in England, and Welsh Labour needs to take responsibility for that.

Rail Infrastructure Funding

3. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on funding for rail infrastructure in Wales. [901666]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The Secretary of State and I regularly engage with Cabinet Ministers on a range of transport measures. Over £340 million has already been provided for rail enhancements in Wales, including at Cardiff Central station and for the electrification of the Severn tunnel.

Sarah Green: Will the Minister explain why Wales is not receiving the £5 billion of consequential funding from HS2 that it is entitled to under the Barnett formula, and will he review that decision, as the Welsh Conservative party is also calling for?

David T. C. Davies: HS2 is of course a UK-wide project, which is partly being brought forward in order to enable the maximum number of people to get out of their cars and on to the trains, to use public transport, which I hope the Liberal Democrats would fully support. At the same time, the UK Government have been spending money to improve not only the rail service in Wales but rail services for travellers who go from Wales into England, such as through the Severn tunnel electrification. The UK Government have an extremely good record on supporting railways in Wales.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Avanti trains sometimes trundle along the rail infrastructure of north Wales, but these days it is an increasingly infrequent occurrence. Avanti has provided a shockingly poor service to the people of north Wales, and many of my constituents

were deeply unhappy when the Department for Transport decided to extend its franchise for a further six months to give it a further chance. Will my hon. Friend please urge his counterpart in the Department for Transport to make sure this is Avanti's last chance?

David T. C. Davies: A number of colleagues from north Wales have discussed Avanti's performance in colourful terms, and I am sure Avanti will have listened to what my right hon. Friend has had to say, as will the Department for Transport, which I can confirm will be assessing Avanti's performance before any further contracts are given out.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Gerald Jones.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It seems that rewarding failure is this Government's guiding principle, and even Conservative Members agree. Avanti West Coast is the worst performing operator on the rail network, but Ministers spent an eye-watering £4 million of taxpayers' money on bonuses to company executives for

"customer experience and acting as a good operator."

Does the Minister agree that this is simply not good enough for the businesses and people of north Wales?

David T. C. Davies: I have already said that I accept many concerns have been raised about Avanti's performance, but it all goes to show why it is important to modernise the rail network across the whole of Wales. That is exactly what the UK Government are doing at the moment.

Mortgage Interest Rate Rises

4. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the impact of rising mortgage interest rates on households in Wales. [901667]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Sir Robert Buckland): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a range of topics. Of course, interest rates are rightly a matter for the independent Bank of England. We have announced unprecedented support for households and businesses. Through our cut to stamp duty, the Welsh Government are expected to receive £70 million, enabling them to follow suit with cuts to land transaction tax in Wales.

Chris Elmore: At the weekend, I met a young couple in their early 30s who are coming off a five-year fixed mortgage rate. Their mortgage is going up by more than £300 a month, and they squarely blame the Government and the Prime Minister's poor mismanagement of our economy. It is the Conservative Government's U-turn that caused economic chaos, it is the Conservative Government who caused mortgage rates to go through the roof and it is the Conservative Government who are causing mortgage firms to withdraw all their support. Will the Secretary of State now apologise to my constituents and people across the land who are being crippled by huge mortgage increases every single month due to this Conservative failure?

Sir Robert Buckland: It is a Conservative Government who, through Help to Buy, have helped more than 361,000 first-time buyers on to the housing ladder. It is a Conservative Government who led to unemployment

at record lows. It is a Conservative Government who have increased the national living wage to £9.50 an hour. And it is a Conservative Government who will lead to interest rates being controlled, which will help mortgage holders, too. The hon. Gentleman's hyperbole does not serve him well.

Domestic Energy Costs: Differential Between Wales and Rest of UK

6. **Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the differential in domestic energy costs between Wales and the rest of the UK.

[901669]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Sir Robert Buckland): Most recent data demonstrates that households in Wales pay a price broadly on par with the average across Great Britain for variable unit costs and standing charges for gas and electricity. Our energy price guarantee will save households hundreds of pounds this winter compared with current wholesale cost projections.

Dame Nia Griffith: My constituent Mr Evans in the town of Kidwelly cannot benefit from a lower tariff for the electricity he uses in off-peak times because, as the engineers have explained to him, the smart meter he needs will not function owing to the almost non-existent mobile phone signal in the area, which is due to the UK Government's failure to roll out mobile phone technology, while allowing smart meters that work only on mobile phone signals. Will the Secretary of State now have urgent talks with ministerial colleagues to put it right and end this discrimination?

Sir Robert Buckland: I will be interested to take up that case in more detail with the hon. Lady. However, the Government, in acting radically on energy price intervention and with our Energy Prices Bill, which seeks to break the link between electricity and gas prices, are taking the sort of action that is absolutely necessary to help households such as her constituent. Of course, I will be happy to talk further about the particular disadvantage that her constituent faces.

Cost of Living Rise

7. **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on helping people in Wales with the rising cost of living. [901670]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): I have frequent discussions with ministerial colleagues on a range of matters, including the cost of living. As I have previously said today, we are supporting households and businesses across Wales with the cost of living challenges, including on energy costs.

Jonathan Edwards: People in Carmarthenshire who are off the gas grid have seen huge increases in heating costs—for oil, LPG and solid fuels. The alternative fuel payment of £100 does not seem to be equivalent to the cap for gas. Will the Minister write to Welsh MPs outlining the methodology used by the British Government to calculate the AFP rate?

David T. C. Davies: I am sure that my Treasury colleagues will be able to help with that, but there is one thing that the hon. Gentleman could do as well if he wants to support people on the cost of living challenges in Wales: persuade his Plaid Cymru colleagues to vote against Welsh Labour's proposals to revalue council tax bands in Wales, which are going to be catastrophic for the finances of hundreds of thousands of people across Wales.

Police Funding

8. **Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of levels of police funding in Wales. [901671]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The four Welsh police forces are adequately funded and will receive combined funding of up to £826.7 million in 2022-23, an increase of up to £45.1 million on the previous financial year. Gwent's funding will be up to £159.1 million, an increase of £9.1 million on the previous financial year.

Wayne David: South Wales police's area contains Cardiff, the capital city of Wales, yet it gets no extra resources for the extra responsibilities that comes with that. Will the Secretary of State make representations to his Government colleagues to address this anomaly?

David T. C. Davies: South Wales police's funding will be up to £352.5 in 2022-23, an increase of £19 million on the previous financial year. If the hon. Gentleman wants to do something to support police forces in Wales, may I suggest that he talks to the Welsh Labour Government about their failure to hand over the apprenticeship levy, which is being held back by them and should be passed on to police forces so that—
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. When somebody is answering the question, will Members please wait until it has been completed? Mr Davies was answering Mr David's question. I call Selaine Saxby.

Floating Offshore Wind Locations in Celtic Sea

10. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential merits of establishing floating offshore wind locations in the Celtic sea. [901673]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Sir Robert Buckland): Floating offshore wind projects in the Celtic sea will contribute to our net zero ambitions and our energy security, and will generate economic growth and create highly skilled jobs in our coastal communities. I regularly meet the Crown Estate to discuss progress on bringing forward the ambition of 4 GW of projects by 2035.

Selaine Saxby: In order to realise the full potential of the Celtic sea, we need a timely consenting process from the Welsh Government. What discussions has my right hon. and learned Friend had with his Welsh counterparts on the consenting process for the development of floating offshore wind sites?

Sir Robert Buckland: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her consistent advocacy for projects in the Celtic sea as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Celtic sea. The necessity for securing timely consents is an imperative, and I will continue to work with the Welsh Government and all stakeholders to ensure that the huge opportunities that this presents are capitalised upon.

North Wales Growth Deal

12. **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help deliver the north Wales growth deal. [901675]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The Wales Office has been fully supporting the north Wales growth deal as it begins to deliver projects on the ground, and my officials will work closely with all partners in north Wales to ensure that the deal continues to deliver growth and investment across the region.

Dr James Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Perhaps inevitably, not all projects initially identified for delivery through the north Wales growth deal can be progressed, and that applies to the Bodelwyddan key strategic site. Will he encourage a flexible approach to diverting the £10 million of funds that had been earmarked to Bodelwyddan to other economic development projects within Denbighshire?

David T. C. Davies: Obviously, it is for Ambition North Wales to bring forward projects for the UK Government and the Welsh Government to approve, but we have taken a very flexible view of the whole thing. I assure my hon. Friend that despite the international financial problems, which all countries are facing at the moment, this Government remain absolutely committed to support jobs, driving growth and levelling up across the whole of the United Kingdom, including in his constituency.

Investment Zones: Impact on Welsh Economy

13. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of investment zones on the Welsh economy. [901676]

Sir Robert Buckland: Investment zones will be created right across the UK, and our intention in Wales is to design and deliver the policy by working with the Welsh Government and local agencies to increase growth.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that answer. Is it not incumbent on the Welsh Government to co-operate fully with the UK Government in order to ensure success for all the people of Wales?

Sir Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend puts it extremely well. We have a good example with freeports. I very much hope that the Welsh Government step up to the plate on investment zones.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to 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. [901714] **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 19 October.

The Prime Minister (Elizabeth Truss): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Justin Madders: When the penny dropped for the Prime Minister on Monday and she realised that her Budget was responsible for crashing the economy, she should have come to this House to explain herself and to apologise to the millions of people who will now be paying hundreds of pounds extra a month on their mortgages because of her mistakes. Now that she is here, can she tell us, given the absolute chaos that her Government have created, why the previous Chancellor lost his job but she kept hers?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear that I am sorry and that I have made mistakes, but the right thing to do in those circumstances is to make changes, which I have made, and to get on with the job and deliver for the British people. We have delivered the energy price guarantee, we have helped people this winter, and I will continue to do that.

Q3. [901716] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that local people and local councils are best placed to decide how many houses they need and where those houses should go? If she does, will she end the top-down approach to housing targets and reduce, or preferably remove, the powers of the Planning Inspectorate?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; we will abolish the top-down housing targets. We want decisions about homes and infrastructure to be driven by local people, not by Whitehall, and that is why we are setting up new, locally driven investment zones.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Leader of the Opposition, Keir Starmer.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): A book is being written about the Prime Minister's time in office. Apparently, it is going to be out by Christmas. Is that the release date or the title?

The Prime Minister: I have been in office for just under two months, and I have delivered the energy price guarantee, making sure that people are not paying £6,000 bills this winter; I have reversed the national insurance increase; and I have also taken steps—and we will be taking steps—to crack down on the militant unions. I think that is more of a record of action than the right hon. and learned Gentleman in his two and a half years in the job.

Keir Starmer: Last week, the Prime Minister ignored every question put to her. Instead, she repeatedly criticised Labour's plan for a six-month freeze on energy bills. This week, the Chancellor made it her policy. How can she be held to account when she is not in charge?

The Prime Minister: Our policy is to protect the most vulnerable for two years. I had to take the decision, because of the economic situation, to adjust our policies. I am somebody who is prepared to front up. I am prepared to take the tough decisions, unlike the right hon. and learned Gentleman, who has not done anything on businesses and who has done nothing to say he will protect people after one year. He has got no plan.

Keir Starmer: Last week, the Prime Minister stood there and promised absolutely no spending reductions. Conservative Members all cheered. This week, the Chancellor announced a new wave of cuts. What is the point of a Prime Minister whose promises do not even last a week?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that spending will go up next year and it will go up the year after, but of course we need to get value for taxpayers' money. The Labour party has pledged hundreds of billions in spending pledges, none of which it has retracted. He needs to reflect the economic reality in his policies.

Keir Starmer: Those spending cuts are on the table for one reason and one reason only: because the Conservatives crashed the economy. Working people will have to pay £500 more a month on their mortgages, and what is the Prime Minister's response? It is to say that she is sorry. What does she think people will think and say: "That's all right; I don't mind financial ruin, and at least she apologised"?

The Prime Minister: I do think that there has to be some reflection of economic reality from the Labour party. The fact is that interest rates are rising across the world and the economic conditions have worsened. We are being honest and levelling with the public, unlike the right hon. and learned Gentleman, who simply will not do that. What is he doing about the fact that train workers are again going on strike? The fact is that he refuses to condemn the workers. We are bringing forward policies that will make sure our railways are protected and that people going to work are protected. He backs the strikers; we back the strivers.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister is asking me questions because we are a Government in waiting and they are an Opposition in waiting. There is no getting away from this. Millions of people are facing horrendous mortgage repayments and she has admitted that it is her fault. She should not have conducted an economic experiment on the British public. But it is not just her; Tory MPs put her there. They are keeping her there. Why on earth would anyone trust the Tories with the economy ever again?

The Prime Minister: I notice that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is not actually objecting to a single economic policy that the Chancellor announced on Monday. He is refusing to condemn the strikers. We are

on the side of working people. We will legislate to make sure that we keep our railways open. The right hon. and learned Gentleman refuses to do anything.

Keir Starmer: The only mandate that the Prime Minister has ever had is from Government Members. It was a mandate built on fantasy economics and it ended in disaster. The country has nothing to show for it except for the destruction of the economy and the implosion of the Tory party. I have the list here: 45p tax cut—gone; corporation tax cut—gone; 20p tax cut—gone; two-year energy freeze—gone; tax-free shopping—gone; economic credibility—gone. Her supposed best friend, the former Chancellor, has gone as well. They are all gone. So why is she still here?

The Prime Minister: I am a fighter and not a quitter. I have acted in the national interest to make sure that we have economic stability—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am going to hear the Prime Minister. I suggest that all Members need to hear the answer.

The Prime Minister: I am a fighter, not a quitter. We have delivered on the energy price guarantee—*[Interruption.]* We have! We have delivered on national insurance. We are going to deliver to stop the militant trade unions disrupting our railways. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has no idea. He has no plan and he has no alternative.

Mr Speaker: I call James Grundy. *[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]* Order. I must say he is obviously a most popular choice. Come on, James Grundy—you have a future.

Q4. [901717] James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend congratulate Leigh Centurions rugby league team on their recent promotion to the super league, bringing millions to the local economy? Furthermore, will she guarantee that our excellent women's Euros team, including Ella Toone from Tyldesley in my constituency, will receive the No. 10 reception that they so deserve?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Leigh Centurions on their return to the super league. I had the huge privilege of meeting the Lionesses last week—a fantastic team who won a major tournament for us—and we will host a Downing Street reception as soon as their training programme makes them available.

Mr Speaker: I look forward to a rugby league invite as well.

Let us now come to the leader of the SNP, Ian Blackford.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): After 10 U-turns in two weeks, we are left with a Prime Minister in office but not in power, and families are paying through the teeth for her mistakes. Her latest broken promise has put pensioners in the frontline of Tory cuts. Can she perhaps turn to her Chancellor right now, get permission to make another U-turn and commit to raising the state pension at the rate of inflation?

The Prime Minister: I honestly do not know what the right hon. Gentleman is talking about. We have been clear in our manifesto that we will maintain the triple lock. I am completely committed to it and so is the Chancellor.

Ian Blackford: It is not surprising that the Prime Minister's approval ratings are collapsing with an answer like that. She has the worst polling result for any Prime Minister in history. She has just thrown 12 million pensioners under the Tory bus, and it is not just pensioners feeling the pain. In the last week alone—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I also want to hear Mr Blackford.

Ian Blackford: It is not just pensioners feeling the pain. In the last week alone, inflation has risen to a 40-year high, mortgage rates are at the highest level since the financial crash and people's energy bills are about to rise to more than £5,000. Can the Prime Minister answer one simple question: why does she expect everyone else to pay the price for her failure?

The Prime Minister: I do not think the right hon. Gentleman can take yes for an answer. I have been clear that we are protecting the triple lock on pensions. If he is concerned about the economy, why does he continue to advocate for separatism, which would plunge the Scottish economy into chaos?

Q5. [901718] Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Over the last couple of years, thousands of homes have been proposed or built in the Birmingham, Northfield constituency, putting a huge strain on GP and dentist appointments. Does my right hon. Friend agree that more needs to be done in the planning process to ensure that, when we have large-scale developments, we have more capacity in those vital services?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When we build new houses, we need to make sure there are GP surgeries, schools and infrastructure. That is why we are introducing a new infrastructure levy to make sure that more of the money from developers goes on supporting local communities.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Millions of family carers have been forced to cut back on food and heating. One told Carers UK:

"My son is incontinent... if we don't wash him in warm water several times a day this will cause him to physically decline. So how do we pay for the gas to heat the water if we are currently at max budget?"

Vulnerable people and carers are struggling enough already in this cost of living crisis, so will the Prime Minister guarantee that support for the vulnerable, including carer's allowance, will rise by at least today's inflation rate of 10.1%?

The Prime Minister: People are struggling. It is difficult at the moment. That is why we put in place the energy price guarantee to make sure the typical household is not paying more than £2,500. It is why we have supplied an extra £1,200 of support to the most vulnerable. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will always support the most vulnerable. They will be our priority.

Q7. [901720] **Fay Jones** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Brecon and Radnorshire has a proud military footprint, not least the Cambrian Patrol exercise, which I visited last week. It is considered the Olympic gold medal in infantry training, attracting teams from across the world to compete in a 60 km march over two days in the Brecon Beacons. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating all who took part, not least the team of Gurkha soldiers from the Infantry Battle School in Brecon, who took home a coveted gold medal, further cementing Brecon's special place in the UK armed forces?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in thanking everybody at Brecon barracks, which organises Exercise Cambrian Patrol each year. It is a world-class training exercise. I congratulate Brecon's Gurkha soldiers on their fantastic achievement of a gold medal—well done!

Q6. [901719] **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It took just five working days for the Prime Minister to crash the pound, damage pension funds and send people's mortgage costs spiralling. Her new Chancellor may have reversed almost all of her policies, but the damage has been done, and we now face yet another round of Tory cuts and austerity. I would like to ask the Prime Minister and those sitting behind her: why is she still at the Dispatch Box, and when will voters get their say on this disastrous Government?

The Prime Minister: We are facing very, very difficult economic times. I took the decision I had to in the interests of economic stability. What is important is that we work together, including with the SNP, to get through this winter and grow the economy.

Q8. [901721] **Mr David Jones** (Clwyd West) (Con): The Prime Minister is to be commended for securing the passage of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill through this House without amendment before the summer recess. Can she confirm that it is the Government's intention that the Bill should remain unamended, and, in particular, that the European Court of Justice should have no jurisdiction in any part of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I am completely committed to the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. It deals with the very specific issues we face in Northern Ireland, the free flow of trade and making sure that the people of Northern Ireland are able to benefit from being part of the United Kingdom. I can tell my right hon. Friend that any negotiations will reflect the same position that is in the protocol Bill.

Q11. [901724] **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): We understand that this afternoon's vote on fracking is deemed a confidence vote in the Prime Minister. Can she give us any reason why her own Back Benchers or anyone in this country can have confidence in her after her policies have caused chaos in the markets and wrecked the economy?

The Prime Minister: We do face very difficult economic times. I have been honest about the mistakes I have made, but what I do not apologise for is the fact that we have helped households through this winter with the

energy price guarantee, the fact that we have reversed the national insurance rise and the fact that we are taking action to get our railways running rather than being disrupted by the militant trade unions that the hon. Lady supports.

Q9. [901722] **Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): There have been a number of low points recently, including the Republic of Ireland's football team singing pro-IRA songs in the changing room. We should never forget the sacrifice of those who paid the price to maintain the peace during the troubles. Closer to home, recent events have meant that spending will be more constrained than originally thought. May I encourage the Prime Minister to ensure that we retain compassion in politics in these decisions, including maintaining the link between benefits and inflation? Will she do that?

The Prime Minister: We are compassionate Conservatives. We will always work to protect the most vulnerable, and that is what we did with the energy price guarantee. We are going to make sure that the most vulnerable are protected into year two, and I am sure that the Chancellor has heard my hon. Friend's representations on the contents of the medium-term fiscal plan.

Q13. [901726] **Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): Like the public at large, I have supported the Government in the actions they have taken to support Ukraine, not least because of what is at stake there, but right now, as the public deal with rising prices, inflation, mortgage costs and much else, Ukraine fatigue is a real and present danger. I am afraid to say to the Prime Minister that she is now an active driver against the public support that has so unified many of us to do what needs to be done. In a time when resolve needs to be steered, will she commit from the Dispatch Box that the economic, military and political support for Ukraine will not be another casualty under this Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: One of my first acts in office was to make sure that the military support we give to Ukraine equals the military support we gave this year. We must make sure that Ukraine wins. It can win, it will win, and it must win.

Q10. [901723] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for sticking by her words and giving communities in Fylde the final say on fracking, but as always the devil is in the detail. Will the Prime Minister assure me that local consent will be measured independently and transparently, that in no circumstances will fracking companies be directly engaged in assessing local consent, and that if people in Fylde say no, that view and that decision will be respected and acted on by this Government?

The Prime Minister: I agree very strongly with my hon. Friend. I know he cares deeply about this issue. I assure him that we will consult on a robust system of local consent and give clear advice on seismic limits and safety before any fracking takes place. The consultation will consider all the relevant people—the regional Mayors, the local authorities and parishes—and the concerns of those who are directly affected. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will say more about this later today.

Q14. [901727] **Kate Osborne** (Jarrow) (Lab): Privatisation does not work. It does not work for our national health service—we have another amber alert in the NHS blood service, which this week's Chancellor sold when he was Health Secretary. Nor does it work for our postal service—Royal Mail Group took £758 million in profit last year, yet our universal service obligation is at risk, and workers' pay and conditions and 10,000 jobs are under threat. Will the Prime Minister continue to let obscene amounts of profit be made while services are cut and stamp prices rise, or will she launch an inquiry into the gross mismanagement of Royal Mail?

The Prime Minister: What we need is an efficient postal service that delivers for people across this country. That is what I am focused on, not making ideological points.

Q12. [901725] **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): When I was in business, it was a real privilege to employ many talented, bright young people. I always found that when we believed in somebody and gave them opportunity, they went on to thrive in their career. That is why tomorrow in North Norfolk, I will be launching my new scheme, the 100 Apprenticeships Challenge, to drive 100 new apprenticeships all over my rural constituency. Will the Prime Minister please thank not just my Department for Work and Pensions office and Julia Nix, who has been fantastic, but district councils, county councils and the many stakeholders who have worked for more than six months to deliver this fantastic scheme to drive growth and jobs for young people across my constituency?

The Prime Minister: I thank Julia and her team for the fantastic job that they are doing, and my hon. Friend as the local Member of Parliament. Apprenticeships are a fantastic way for people to learn and gain experience, and I am proud that we have created 5.1 million apprenticeships since 2010.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Prime Minister's chief of staff is in hot water after lobbying on behalf of a Libyan warlord and big tobacco. It turns out that he has also lobbied for personal protective equipment giants Sante Global. Is it wise to have a lobbyist at the centre of Government?

The Prime Minister: All appointments in Downing Street are properly checked through the propriety and ethics process. That is the way that we do it in a completely impartial way.

Q15. [901728] **Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): When my right hon. Friend was Foreign Secretary, I know that she was acutely aware of the importance of British soft power acting in our national interest. Will she confirm today the promise we both made in 2010, when the Conservative Government first came into office, that she will not balance the books on the backs of the poorest people in the world?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for the fantastic work that he did as International Development Secretary. I am proud that we have rebalanced our international development budget to focus more on humanitarian aid and more on women and girls. No doubt more details will be set out in due course.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): The last Tory Prime Minister was forced out after a series of dodgy dealings and failing to take responsibility for any of it, so what is this Prime Minister getting the boot for—her plan that crashed the economy or forcing fracking on communities that do not want it? Will she do the decent thing and go, and call a general election?

The Prime Minister: I have taken responsibility and I have made the right decision in the interest of the country's economic stability.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Every single Member of this House will have constituents waiting for treatment in the covid backlog. The Health and Social Care Secretary's priorities are absolutely right, including her B—tackling the backlog. Can the Prime Minister reassure me that the Government are committed to the series of elective hubs that we have promised, including at the Royal Hampshire County Hospital in my Winchester constituency?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Health and Social Care Secretary has set out her plans to deliver on dealing with the covid backlog. She will continue to work on that and make sure that we deal with what was a massive pandemic that created a backlog. We will deal with it.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Since the mini-Budget, thousands of my constituents have been in mental anguish and despair. I recognise that the Prime Minister has faced a week of mental anguish and despair herself. People have been angry with her and people have mocked her. Having had that experience, what will she now do to improve the mental healthcare for people in this country, so that the anguish that they face in the coming months is properly responded to and dealt with?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Health and Social Care Secretary has set out a clear plan of how we are going to deal with the backlog created by covid, how we are going to make sure that people get timely GP appointments, and how we are going to improve the services in our hospitals, including mental health services.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The Government are facing tough choices, but people living with dementia face unlimited care costs, and that is not a choice. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that she is committed to social care reform to end that worry and relieve pressure on the NHS?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we are committed to social care reform. We need to deal with those issues.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is always better to see a Prime Minister at her desk rather than underneath it. Now that she is here, can she tell us why, next week, this House will discuss legislation that will abolish vital protections on pension payouts, our right to watch the Olympics free of charge and airline consumer laws? How is any of the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill in the British interest?

The Prime Minister: I think we have yet another example of somebody who does not want to support the British public's decision to leave the European Union

in 2016. Is it not quite incredible that, six years after people voted to leave the European Union, there are people who object to taking EU law off our statute books? Now, I am a democrat. I respect what British people voted for. I suggest the hon. Lady does the same.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Thirty years ago, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy was created out of the war in Bosnia so that democracy could flourish, and freedom and prosperity come with it. This evening, in your rooms, Mr Speaker, we celebrate that anniversary by hearing directly from our country representative in Ukraine, the chair of the Taiwanese foreign affairs committee and the leader of the opposition in Uganda—a good example of the range of contacts that this great cross-party body, funded by Government, is working with. Does the Prime Minister agree that this

is a vital contribution by our Government and our people to democracy around the world, and will she encourage Members around the House to join us this evening?

The Prime Minister: The Westminster Foundation for Democracy does a fantastic job, and I think we know from what has happened in Ukraine—the appalling war perpetrated by Vladimir Putin—just how precious democracy is and how much we need to do to work with our friends and allies to protect democracy around the world. I do encourage colleagues from all sides of the House to attend the event tonight.

Mr Speaker: That now completes Prime Minister's questions, and I will let the House clear.

Points of Order

12.32 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for catching your eye on this, and I seek your guidance. Yesterday, the Minister for the Americas and the Overseas Territories was, in a way, dragged to the House to answer a question about what the Government would do over the brutal attacks that took place inside a consulate in Manchester, in which Chinese representatives were assaulting an individual, and also tearing things down and creating vandalism outside.

The Minister said that the officials would be called to the Foreign Office to meet a Minister of the Crown, instead of which we discover today that they met an official, who simply rapped them over the knuckles by saying they should stand by the freedoms we have in this country. Can I therefore ask whether it is feasible for us to get the Minister back to the Dispatch Box to ask why they were not told that, if they do not follow our rules, they will get expelled, and to say that all those responsible for the assault in Manchester will be expelled from this country?

Mr Speaker: Obviously, it is not a direct matter for me, but what I would say, and I think there are many avenues that could be pursued, is that an urgent question could possibly and likely be submitted. I am not saying it would be accepted, but it could be looked on favourably, because I think we were all appalled by those images and, quite rightly, action needs to be taken.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This morning, the Transport Committee heard from the Transport Secretary that the Government will axe their commitment to create Great British Railways in this parliamentary Session. There has been no written statement to announce the decision, and I am not aware that an application has been made to you for an oral statement by the Secretary of State. We were expecting a transport Bill in this Session to facilitate the transition of the operations of rail to Great British Railways and to create a controlling mind for the railways out of the chaos that has existed since the Conservative Government fragmented and privatised rail in 1993. As part of the process, the former Transport Secretary launched a competition with huge fanfare for a future headquarters of the railway. Some 42 locations applied, and six were shortlisted and have expended huge amounts to win this—

Mr Speaker: Order. A point of order is meant to be a point of order, not a full statement about Government policy and everything. I am sure you will come to the end quickly.

Rachael Maskell: Thank you for your guidance, Mr Speaker. Thousands of jobs could be at stake as a result of this matter, so could you please advise me on how I can take it forward, since the Secretary of State seems to have failed either to issue a written statement or to bring forward an oral statement to the House?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving me notice of her point of order. She has put her point on the record, and I recognise that it is a very important issue, including for other Members. If there

is an important policy development on this issue, I would expect it to be announced to this House first. I am sure that those on the Government Benches will have heard this exchange, and that the hon. Member will pursue the matter through the different avenues available to her.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On a point of order, On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On a procedural matter, yesterday morning I was successful in securing a debate in Westminster Hall on the motion

“That this House has considered British passport ownership by Northern Ireland residents.”

I have taken this matter up over many years and it remains unresolved. On every other occasion that I have taken the matter up, Home Office Ministers responded, and I had hoped that the words “British passport ownership” might have given the Home Office a clue, and ensured that a Home Office Minister replied to the debate. While I was glad to have a reply from a Northern Ireland Office Minister, can you ensure, Mr Speaker, that the appropriate ministerial Department responds to such debates in future?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. The decision about which Minister should respond to a debate is unfortunately a matter for the Government rather than the Chair. I am sure, however, that those on the Government Benches will have heard those comments and will bear them in mind. I know the hon. Member will also pursue the matter through different avenues.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You may be aware, Sir, that today the Government Deputy Chief Whip, the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), has written to Conservative Members telling them with regard to the debate this afternoon on fracking that:

“This is not a motion on fracking. This is a confidence motion in the Government.”

Will you give guidance to all sides of the House, and to the Prime Minister in particular, about what would happen in the event that the Government were to lose that vote this afternoon? If the Government have lost the confidence of the House, surely—and I would be grateful for your guidance, Mr Speaker—that would mean that the Prime Minister must then go to the palace, see His Majesty the King, and ask for a dissolution of Parliament and a general election. Am I right? Will you give clarity on that?

Mr Speaker: First, I am not going to enter into a debate on internal communications. I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman will have had some communications of his own. That happens within in all parties, and if it doesn't, I would be shocked. Let us not pre-judge the decision that may take place later. You asked the question because you knew the answer.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In response to some of the questions today, the Prime Minister claimed that no household would pay more than £2,500 a year. That £2,500 is an average, and therefore almost half of households will pay more. How do we go about getting the Prime Minister to correct that on the record? She said that no one would pay more, and that is incorrect.

Mr Speaker: I am not going to continue the debate. It is not for me to answer, but the hon. Lady has certainly put the point on the record. Let us come to—

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: No, we have one more important point of order. I call Angus Brendan MacNeil.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Clearly, UK politics now more resembles Germany, with a Chancellor effectively in charge. So why was the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) answering for the Government during Prime Minister's questions, when in fact the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) is in charge?

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order, as you well know. That was a poor effort; you are better than that normally.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is further to the point of order made by the former leader of the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). You are, of course, quite right that it is not for you to comment on internal communications among Conservative MPs. However, by tradition, when a motion is declared a motion of confidence by the Government, the Prime Minister makes that announcement at some point during the debate. Is there any means whereby the Prime Minister could do so today? That is how I understand it and, as I look across to the faces on the Conservative Benches, they all seem to think that it is a motion of confidence.

Historically, lots of different things have been made confidence motions, including the conduct of war and various Bills. Traditionally, every single time that happened and the Government lost, that led to a general election. Is that not just factually correct?

Mr Speaker: You have certainly put that on the record. I would say, once again, let us wait and see what unfolds this afternoon. We will see where we go from there.

Energy Costs (Pre-payment Meters and Social Tariffs)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.40 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to abolish higher standing charges for customers with pre-payment meters; to require energy companies to provide social tariffs for low income customers; and for connected purposes.

Energy costs are the social and economic issue of our time, yet the steps taken to mitigate the pain of rises are far from adequate. Fuel poverty is soaring and winter is nearing. That Scotland, which is energy rich, should find over half its people fuel poor is absurd. The pain is likewise felt south of the border, even if the climate is less severe and the natural bounty less kind. Additional action is therefore required across the country, and urgently, especially for those most desperate and most vulnerable.

The £2,500 figure is not the cap but the average cost. Past support has provided modest finance, but it has been inadequate for most to keep pace with soaring costs. As bills escalate, fear is turning to horror in the knowledge that even that support is there only until April. Beyond the Government soundbites, hardship remains, and the cost of energy will bite many severely, if not devour them. Anomalies and injustices remain, which must cease. The most appalling is the perversity of prepayment meters having higher standing charges. A social tariff for those poorest and most vulnerable, as exists in many other countries, must also be introduced. That is what lies at the heart of the Bill. It is supported by both Energy Action Scotland and National Energy Action, who know the fuel poverty faced by those whose interests they represent, as well as by Age Scotland, which advocates on behalf of older people. I am grateful for their endorsement.

Scotland, with some 500,000 prepayment meters, is disproportionately affected, but the numbers across Britain are still significant with 4 million households having higher costs imposed by PPMs. Action to address these injustices is both right and necessary as fuel and energy are not luxuries but necessities. Their implications in our modern society go far beyond heating a home. Power and energy are required for so many basic aspects of life. The inability to provide them undermines the ability to function in our society or to maintain dignity and self-respect.

Of course, a new euphemism has entered our lexicon: the phrase “self-disconnection.” It is misleading and it is insidious. It is akin to those other phrases that are meant to hide horror or injustice such as collateral damage when what is meant is the killing of innocent civilians.

What does self-disconnection mean in reality? It is not someone who simply chooses not to switch on the heating, nor does it refer to the past generational—though no doubt fast-returning—parental demands to switch off lights or turn off the shower. Instead, it is the situation in which many now find themselves where they simply cannot afford either to buy a power card or to turn on the heating or any other powered appliance.

It is not voluntary. It may not be imposed through any law or enforced at the barrel of a gun, but it is forced on them through circumstances over which they have no control. That is why the Bill and the actions that it requires are necessary.

Disconnection, or more likely self-disconnection, has widespread implications that are horrific yet masked by benign euphemisms. It is not simply the horror of choosing between heating and eating this winter, although that alone is bad enough. The implications of being unable to access power go far beyond that. It is the mother who wishes to wash her children's clothes for school, so she can keep them clean and smart. It is the youngster who needs to charge their phone to access employment opportunities they desperately seek. It is the parent who wants to power up the iPad given by the school, so that their child can improve their education and hence their life chances. It is the dialysis patient who requires to switch on the machine that they require for life itself, never mind others suffering from cancer or sick from other illnesses and who feel the cold more, yet are unable to provide, or are even denied, that modest comfort during convalescence—or even, shamefully, at end of life.

Compounding that injustice are accrued standing charges even when users have been sparing in their consumption. Many will find that their power card or savings are immediately consumed by paying debt before they get even a modicum of power. As I said, fuel and energy costs are about more than just heating or eating. They are about dignity, they are about opportunity, they are about life itself. This has not come about through some climatic disaster as has tragically afflicted Pakistan. Nor can it be blamed solely on Putin and the war in Ukraine. These are policy issues overseen by the UK Government where injustice and iniquity have been allowed to take root. Much of that can be addressed by the ending of higher standing charges for pre-payment meters, and through the implementation of a social tariff for those with the least and who are most vulnerable. After all, it is not just unjust but perverse that those with least should pay most for energy, especially when those with most are paying least in their tax burden.

I accept that some have found pre-payment meters helpful for budgeting, although the strength of that argument has been sapped, if not ended, by the arrival of smart meters. There is also the situation of private landlords who wish to ensure that they avoid costs if a tenant should depart without paying their bill. Again, smart meters offer some solution, but again the issue is not the meter itself but the tariff charged. Some 13% of smart meters are on pre-payment tariffs. Technology is meant to liberate us, not perpetuate injustice. Pre-payment meters, whether smart or otherwise, can remain. What must end are the higher standing charges and tariffs. They are simply unacceptable anytime, but most especially now.

Both Ofgem and energy suppliers testify to the technical capacity to make that change. What is required is the political will, which is why I have proposed this Bill. It has widespread support within and without Parliament. It would, of course, require a very modest tariff increase for those paying on credit, but the numbers involved, and the amount of energy consumed through PPMs, make it a very small burden upon those of us more fortunate. Likewise, a social tariff is a concept whose

time has come. Ending the burden on the poorest and most vulnerable through changes to PPM tariffs must be matched by the availability of a social tariff, one where the poorest and most vulnerable can access energy and at affordable rates. It is a concept that has the support of the organisations I mentioned earlier with regard to action on pre-payment meters—Energy Action Scotland, Age Scotland and National Energy Action—and is also argued for by the Fuel Bank Foundation and Fair By Design, organisations working for those at the heart of the fuel and energy crisis who are being hit hardest.

It is not impossible, let alone unheard of—even before the current energy crisis and emergency measures being invoked, other countries provided for the poorest and most vulnerable. A federal law in Belgium

“protected residential consumers with low income or precarious situation”.

That social tariff saw almost 10% of electricity users pay 34% less and a similar number of gas users pay between 38% and 48% less. Those were the poorest and most vulnerable and certainly those facing the most acute need and difficulties. In Belgium, the social tariff covers people receiving minimum income benefits; people receiving an income replacement benefit; people with disabilities receiving integrated support; and people in receipt of an income guarantee benefit. Who would quibble with those priorities or dispute that those people have additional need for fuel and energy that requires them to be charged on a tariff that recognises that?

Belgium is not alone in operating a social tariff. Again, even before this crisis, Spain provided a social bonus scheme whereby a 25% discount was available on electricity bills for vulnerable energy customers, including disabled customers, with a 40% discount for severely disabled consumers. Other countries also take the appropriate action, even if criteria, eligibility and amount may vary. However, the urgent need remains that, in this time of crisis, the poorest and most vulnerable require the most support and should pay the lowest tariffs. That and the injustice of higher charges being imposed upon them must end.

That is why the Bill is necessary. Energy, fuel and power are fundamental—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a ten-minute rule Bill. The hon. Member has gone beyond 10 minutes, so I hope he can sum up quickly.

Kenny MacAskill: Indeed. The fact that Scotland is energy-rich yet Scots are fuel-poor is absurd, and it is shameful that that should be replicated across the UK. Worse than that is the perversity that the poorest and most vulnerable pay the most. That must end, and this Bill will ensure that.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Kenny MacAskill, Neale Hanvey, Richard Burgon, Angus Brendan MacNeil, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Liz Saville Roberts, Margaret Ferrier and Alison Thewliss present the Bill.

Kenny MacAskill accordingly presented the Bill

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March 2023, and to be printed (Bill 166).

Opposition Day

5TH ALLOTTED DAY

Economic Responsibility and a Plan for Growth

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have not selected the amendment.

12.52 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House regrets the long-term damage to the economy as a direct result of the mini budget, where mortgage rates for households have risen and the stability of pension funds has come under threat; notes that despite substantial U-turns in policy since the mini budget, the Government's funding position has deteriorated, the cost of borrowing is expected to be higher for many years and the UK's fiscal credibility has been undermined, all while many energy producers continue to make record windfall profits; therefore calls on the Government to take all necessary steps to stabilise the economy and make it work for ordinary working people and business through a plan for growth that puts them at its heart; and further calls on the Government to publish the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts immediately alongside Government estimates of windfall profits for the next two years from energy producers in the UK.

We are here because of a Tory crisis made in Downing Street but paid for by ordinary working people. The Conservative mini-Budget of 23 September will go down in history as the day that the British Government chose to sabotage their own economy. We saw the Conservatives hurl unfunded tax cuts towards the wealthiest, with excessive borrowing and yet more Government debt. The Government set our economy ablaze and, as a direct result, in the past four weeks we have experienced chaos in financial markets, repeated emergency interventions from the Bank of England, warnings from the ratings agencies and rebukes from the International Monetary Fund. Those costs are passed directly on to working people.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for being generous in giving way so early. Does she join me in welcoming last week's employment statistics, with the highest rate since 1974? In my constituency alone, 920 extra people were in work compared with 12 months ago.

Rachel Reeves: The truth is that a million people are missing from the labour market and half of those have long-term health conditions. We need to do much more to get those people back to work. One reason why unemployment is low is that so many people are not even looking for work because they are waiting for NHS operations, with waiting times at an all-time high.

Today, we learn that inflation has gone above 10% again; food inflation is at more than 14%; and in the last year alone, electricity prices are up 45% and gas prices have doubled. Despite all the extraordinary and unprecedented U-turns in recent days, the damage has been done. This Conservative Government have wrecked people's finances and snuffed out the dream of home ownership for millions. Some 1.8 million people across the UK will pay higher mortgage bills by the end of next year—on average, they will pay £580 extra every single month—because of the reckless actions of the Government. In my Yorkshire constituency, the cost will be £360 extra a

month. In the constituency of the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith)—who is about to respond to me—it will cost people £640 extra every single month in higher mortgage payments. Families cannot afford to pay those higher mortgage costs, and they certainly cannot pay them with apologies from the Prime Minister. The public will not accept that the arsonists who inflicted this damage can put out the fire. The Tories can never be trusted with our economy again.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the motion that she has tabled. It seems utterly unarguable that the crisis being wrought upon our constituents is to be laid squarely at the feet of the Government. It would appear that the Government agree, because according to briefings on Twitter, they do not intend to vote against the motion. Does my hon. Friend agree that the fact that the Chancellor has not turned up to defend the record and that Conservative Members do not even seem to disagree with the motion means that we can all agree that this is the Government's fault?

Rachel Reeves: I agree that it is a shame that October's Chancellor is not in his place today. This crisis has been co-written by every single member of the Cabinet and every single member of the Government. The Minister for the Armed Forces and Veterans was crystal clear yesterday in pointing out that all Cabinet Ministers had approved and are responsible for Government decisions, including the disastrous mini-Budget. There is no credibility or stability with this Government, just a shambles. All the time, businesses are looking at the state of the Government and deciding where and whether to invest. The Tories' recklessness and enduring incompetence will cost jobs and investment here in Britain. The Conservatives should not be put in charge of a tombola, let alone the British economy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for what she is saying. Let me back up her comments on economic growth. We need small and medium-sized enterprises to be able to survive and to get through this period. In my constituency, a business—a Japanese restaurant—opened some two months ago. It is doing really well and it employs staff, but its bills are going up from £900 to £3,000. It is clear that unless something happens soon for businesses that are productive and create jobs, they will no longer be there. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to have a process that helps businesses?

Rachel Reeves: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Small businesses, such as the restaurant that he mentions in his constituency, are the backbone of all our constituencies and our economy more widely. An energy bill increase from £900 to £3,000 is not affordable for small businesses. The Government need to do more to help.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I know that the hon. Member takes economic issues very seriously. Protecting pensioners will obviously be a key priority. Does she join me in welcoming the Prime Minister's confirmation that the triple lock will be protected, and can she set out Labour's policy on that vital area?

Rachel Reeves: On Monday, the Chancellor said that he could not rule out breaking the triple lock, and on Wednesday, the Prime Minister said something else. We do not know which one speaks for the Government, but Labour is clear that we support the triple lock. It was in our manifesto and, unlike the Conservative party, in government we would stick by what we promised.

Strong and independent economic institutions are essential for making Britain a great place to invest. That is why undermining the Bank of England, sacking the respected permanent secretary at the Treasury and gagging the Office for Budget Responsibility have all added to borrowing costs for Britain—for Government and for families.

On Monday, we saw yet again the ridiculous spectacle of a Conservative Chancellor coming to the House of Commons to announce huge changes in Government economic policy without any sort of independent forecast. Failing to publish a forecast was a significant contributor to the lack of market confidence when the Government unleashed their mini-Budget three and a half weeks ago, yet no lessons have been learned.

The Government cannot build confidence in Britain by flying blind. That is why we are asking all MPs to vote today to publish immediately the current assessments and forecasts from the Office for Budget Responsibility. For the sake of our economic stability, they must not remain hidden for a further two weeks. If the Chancellor refuses, the country will rightly ask, “What have they got to hide?”

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend touched on the point that one of the new Prime Minister’s very first decisions was to sack the permanent secretary to the Treasury. Can my hon. Friend shed any light on why that decision was made? Was it, as appears very likely, because he was set to warn the new Chancellor about the consequences of the policies that he wanted to announce?

Rachel Reeves: As a former Treasury Minister, my right hon. Friend knows how things are supposed to be done. We cannot ask September’s Chancellor why he sacked the respected permanent secretary, because he is no longer in his place, but a Labour Government would respect the Bank of England, respect the independent civil service and remove the gag on the Office for Budget Responsibility.

Today’s inflation numbers show the impact that higher gas and electricity bills are having on family finances. The Government’s mistake when they announced their package a month ago was putting its entire cost on Government borrowing. Under Labour’s plans, energy producers—including the oil and gas industries, which have said themselves that they have more money than they know what to do with—would have been asked to pay their fair share. Our plan did what a responsible Government should: it put forward a fully costed and fully funded package to freeze bills this autumn and winter.

The Conservatives have left tens of billions of pounds on the table and have pushed all the costs on to current and future taxpayers for years to come. Now, because of their irresponsible and reckless approach, they have gone back on their word. According to the Resolution Foundation, that could mean that a typical bill will rise to at least £4,000 from next April.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): The hon. Lady is being very generous in giving way. Can she confirm that whatever her policy on windfall tax is, the overwhelming majority of her energy support package would have been paid for by borrowing?

Rachel Reeves: The point is that the Government are leaving billions of pounds of unneeded and unnecessary borrowing on the table. Why leave that money on the table when even the energy giants are saying that they have more money than they know what to do with? All that money has been put on borrowing and debt to be paid back by current taxpayers. Tens of billions of pounds have been left on the table by this Tory Government.

It has always been a question of who pays for support with bills. The Conservatives always put it on the never-never, but in the end it is working people who pay the price. In August, Bloomberg reported that the Government’s estimates of energy company windfall profits in the UK over the next two years could be £170 billion. The last Chancellor disputed that and so did the one before, but neither of them confirmed the actual figure. Why not?

Labour’s fiscal rules would protect the economy and protect families. We should not borrow a penny more than is absolutely necessary. That is why our motion

“calls on the Government to publish the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts immediately alongside Government estimates of windfall profits for the next two years from energy producers in the UK.”

Doing so is in the public interest. Refusal to publish will only confirm that the Government are again putting the profits of energy giants ahead of the sky-high bills for families, pensioners and businesses.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government have still not learned a single thing? If they had learned anything from their mismanagement, the Prime Minister and the new Chancellor would have committed to using the profits of energy companies. That is what they should be doing: as my hon. Friend says, the companies want to be taxed to pay for the Government’s failures, rather than the Government cutting public services and hiking mortgage interest. Does she also agree that the Government need to get their priorities straight when it comes to getting rid of the cap on bankers’ bonuses?

Rachel Reeves: As a member of the Treasury Committee, my hon. Friend understands the issues well. The chief executive of BP says that his company is like a cash machine at the moment. We should be ensuring that companies pay their fair share. The war in Ukraine and the illegal invasion of Ukraine mean windfall profits that they could never have dreamed of, but they also mean the highest bills ever for families and pensioners, so the energy companies should pay their fair share.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Professor Sinha, the author of the Institute of Health Equity’s report on fuel poverty, has said that there is no doubt that children will die this winter. In July alone, 12,000 more people phoned the Samaritans. Those are the dire consequences of these political actions, yet our energy companies are taking the profits.

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend leads me on to the important issue of public services, which the Chancellor has been quick to put in his sights. This week, the respected Institute for Government gave its assessment of the state of public services after 12 years of Conservative Governments:

“Public services are in a fragile state...Patients are waiting half a day in A&E, weeks for GP appointments and a year or more for elective treatments. Few crimes result in charges...Pupils have lost months of learning”.

What an absolutely devastating verdict on the Government’s stewardship of our public services.

Even the Home Secretary, when she is not arguing with tofu, admits that police forces are so stretched that they cannot respond to the victims of crime. The Tories are living on another planet if they think that after a decade of imposing austerity they can come back with season 2, wildly swinging the axe over the country’s already struggling public services.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is spot on and Conservative Members should be listening to her speech. We have seen 12 years of cuts to our public services and facilities, but one small glimmer of hope for people in my city was the successful levelling-up bid for a leisure centre in the outer west of Newcastle. However, the project has now been undermined because of the disastrous economic outlook and soaring inflation costs, which are partly a result of the mini-Budget. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must not backtrack on their promises? They must support such projects despite the rising inflation costs that are now undermining local government’s ability to deliver them.

Rachel Reeves: Levelling up has truly been replaced by trickle down, and my hon. Friend’s constituents are paying the price.

We need strong public services focused on early intervention and prevention, reducing greater demand with better outcomes for people. We need the Government to stick to their manifesto commitments, including uprating benefits and pensions in line with inflation. It should not be working families, pensioners and the most vulnerable who pay the price for these Tory mistakes.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Reeves: I will make a bit more progress.

Labour will get value for every pound of taxpayers’ money. That is why I announced last year that a Labour Government will introduce an office for value for money, tackling the endemic waste that we have seen under the Tories. Under the Conservatives, £11.8 billion of public money was handed to fraudsters and organised criminals because of a refusal to include the most basic security checks for covid support. That is before we get to the £7 billion spent on unusable personal protective equipment, the £13 billion wasted on failed defence procurements and the millions and millions flushed down the drain by this Government’s outsourced Serco test and trace system.

This week, we have read reports that the Treasury is shutting down the taxpayer protection taskforce that it belatedly set up in March to try to retrieve the money

that the Government gave to the fraudsters. The taskforce should not be shut down; it should be empowered to get taxpayers’ money back.

As for the £3.5 billion handed out to friends of and donors to the Conservative party, many of whom failed to deliver on those contracts, in business if you award a contract and it does not deliver, you claw the money back. The Government must now strain every sinew to get that money back, because taxpayers demand it, and that comes before the cuts and the austerity that this Government are about to unleash.

The Government say that working people now have to put up with eye-wateringly difficult decisions, but there are so many easy decisions that the Government could make to stop families feeling the pain. Why keep in place an outdated and unjustifiable non-dom tax status loophole which means that some of the wealthiest pay no tax on their incomes while ordinary working people face the highest tax burden in 70 years in this low-growth, high-tax economy? Labour’s principle is clear: if you make Britain your home, you should pay your taxes here. Research carried out at the London School of Economics and Warwick University has shown that the UK’s non-dom system costs us £3.2 billion a year.

Look at the tax break for private equity managers, which was cooked up in the 1980s by a Conservative Government—a tax break of nearly £200,000 each for 2,000 private equity bosses every single year! It is not right that bosses pay a lower rate of tax on their bonuses than workers do on their wages. It is indefensible, so Labour will abolish it. At present, private schools enjoy charitable status which makes them exempt from both business rates and VAT at a cost of £1.7 billion every year, but here is the truth: private schools are not charities. We will end that exemption, and put that money back into our state schools.

That is what a fair tax system looks like, and that is what Britain will get with a Labour Government: fiscal responsibility, and a fair tax system that puts working people first. Labour will stabilise the economy by being responsible with public finances through our strong fiscal rules. It is on that foundation that our green prosperity plan will invest in the jobs and industries of tomorrow as we meet our climate obligations and secure our energy supply here in Britain. There are great opportunities for the industries of the future, and opportunities for Government to partner with industry and invest in, for instance, domestic renewables such as wind, hydrogen and carbon capture, and nuclear as well. Labour will create a national wealth fund so that when we build British industry, the public will have a stake and receive a return on those investments. The next Labour Government will buy, make and sell more here in Britain, with an industrial strategy that is pro-worker and pro-business. We will breathe new life into our high streets by calling time on the outdated model of business rates. That is a real plan for the future, not lurching from crisis to crisis like the Conservatives.

Mr Holden: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Reeves: No. I have almost run out of time. I have been speaking for 20 minutes, and I have taken a great many interventions.

So much damage has been done to our economy by the Conservatives' reckless mini-Budget, but the Government can prevent things from becoming even worse. Today they can show that they have listened, and publish the OBR forecasts and assessments that they are sitting on so we can know the true state of our public finances and our economy. They should publish the assessments that they already have of the windfall profits of the energy giants in the next two years, and then set out clear steps to introduce a proper windfall tax. It is a sign of how far off the road of competence and responsibility this Conservative Government are that they have not already done those basic things.

People can no longer afford the cost of Tory failure. We need a stronger and fairer economy from a Government committed to financial responsibility, and a serious plan for growth that puts working people first. The very least the Government can do is publish the numbers, and I urge all Members to support this motion to ensure that they do exactly that.

1.14 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): Our constituents are worried about what the current global turbulence in the economy means for their jobs, their prospects and their families. They want to know that they can afford to get by, and that once the economic storm clouds have passed—which they will—they can thrive. It is these concerns, those of our constituents, that we are thinking about, rather than—I say this in all due seriousness to the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), because I think she knows better—misrepresenting global trends. We are focused on protecting the most vulnerable and looking after our economy.

Mr Holden: I wonder whether my hon. Friend noted, as I did, how little was said about the real cause of the current issues in the global markets: Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, driving energy prices up across the globe, driving inflation up across the globe, and driving interest rates up. There was no mention of that from the Opposition. Whose side are they on when it comes to these situations? It is clear to me that they are not paying attention to the real issues underlying the global markets, and they do not understand what is going on.

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend has made a very important point. I think the whole House will want to acknowledge not only the impact on our economy of covid and the measures that Members on both sides of the House supported, but Putin's invasion of Ukraine. It does us a great disservice to try to be over-partisan about the impacts of global trends that are happening in every western economy.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has a strong track record of being knowledgeable about finance in the private sector, so will he acknowledge that the mini-Budget caused huge chaos in the markets? Notwithstanding the international issues which are a backdrop to this, this Government have scored an own goal by making the position a hell of a lot worse. Surely the Minister, with his financial background, will acknowledge that.

Andrew Griffith: The Chair of the Public Accounts Committee has made some fair points. We have acknowledged that mistakes have been made—the Prime

Minister herself has said that—and I am happy to say it in the spirit in which the hon. Lady acknowledges that there are wider factors at work in the economy. It ill behoves the House to make those over-partisan points when our constituents are looking to us collectively for what we are able to do.

Mr Perkins *rose—*

Rushanara Ali *rose—*

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) *rose—*

Andrew Griffith: I will make a little progress and then come back to hon. Members, if I may.

The most important thing we can do now, in the national interest, is cement that financial and economic stability. That is what is vital for all those who are concerned about their jobs, those who have to pay their mortgages, and those who are saving for retirement. It is essential for businesses investing for the future, and for society as we get through the bout of rising prices.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Last month the Bank of England had to step in with a promise to buy up to £65 billion of Government debt after pension funds managing huge sums on behalf of retired people across the country came close to collapse amid an unprecedented meltdown in UK Government bond markets following the Government's mini-Budget. Last week the Bank had to step in again. BT's pension scheme has revealed that the value of its assets has plummeted by an estimated £11 billion in recent weeks. Will the Minister apologise for the chaos that his party has brought to the pensions sector, and what can he say to my constituents to reassure them that their pensions are actually safe?

Andrew Griffith: I think we all have constituents who are rightly worried in these times of global turbulence and increasing interest rates in every part of the world. The hon. Lady will forgive me, I hope, if I do not comment on the specific operations of the Bank of England, which I think would be inappropriate—other than thanking hard-working officials for the intervention that they have made over the last couple of weeks.

Mr Perkins *rose—*

Andrew Griffith: I will give way one more time, and then, if Members will forgive me, I will make some progress.

Mr Perkins: I am grateful to the Minister.

Of course global factors meant that the situation was dangerous, but will the Minister acknowledge that it is precisely because of those global factors that the new Prime Minister and Chancellor had to tread very, very carefully? That is why what they did was so reckless and so damaging.

Andrew Griffith: I am not sure that I can fully accept what the hon. Member says, but the Government are committed to the independence of our institutions. It is very important that people understand that. Both the Bank of England and the Office for Budget Responsibility have a valuable role to play, which is why when the Chancellor presents his forecast to the House in just

[Andrew Griffith]

eight parliamentary days' time he will ensure that it has been fully presented to, and signed off by, the Office for Budget Responsibility.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I recognise the value of stability and predictability. Given the changes to the corporation tax rate, and given that under the previous Administration my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) was going to reduce the bank corporation tax surcharge from 8% to 3%, could the Minister confirm the Government's intentions, and the assessment made of the effect for banks on competitiveness in financial services?

Andrew Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend, and pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) for all that he did to put the economy in a strong position, and to navigate the very difficult shoals of the unprecedented covid pandemic.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Griffith: I will make a little progress and then give way. As the Chancellor said, at this point all measures remain on the table. My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) will indulge me if I do not announce that policy at the Dispatch Box today. His point is well understood, and others have made it to me, as Financial Secretary.

John Glen: May I simply point out that, if the rate is retained as an 8% surcharge, banks will be paying 33%? When added to the employment costs for national insurance, they may have issues in terms of competitiveness. If that is necessary, could the Minister please make it clear to banks and the markets, so that they can plan for the future?

Andrew Griffith: As I said a moment ago, we have just eight sitting days now until the statement. Part of my role is to stay in very close touch with our highly valued banking community, and to continue to drive the competitiveness of the United Kingdom as a place for the financial services sector to make the prodigious contribution to the economy that Conservative Members particularly value. As the Chancellor said, we will continue to prioritise fiscal stability, and the United Kingdom will always pay its way. We will fund our promises, and we remain committed to fiscal discipline. That means that we will do whatever is necessary to ensure that debt as a share of the economy comes down in the medium term.

Rushanara Ali: I know that the Minister is relatively new to the job; I hope that he lasts longer than some of his predecessors. The Bank of England has made it clear that the mini-Budget has caused a material risk to the UK's financial stability. As has been said, our constituents' mortgages have gone up, and will be going up by £500, and by up to £900 in London and the south-east. Will he tell us what his Government will do to bring down those mortgages rates, many of which will be a direct consequence of the mini-Budget's failures and fiasco?

Andrew Griffith: I was in the process of telling the hon. Lady exactly what the Government will do. No one should trivialise the impact of rising global interest rates on mortgages. The last time mortgages were at this level was under her Government, and not after the backdrop of a global pandemic and a war on European soil.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Griffith: No, I think I have been relatively generous in taking interventions from the Opposition. I will make some progress, because I am sure that many people would like to speak. As the House knows, we will publish the medium-term fiscal plan, which will be fully reported on by the OBR and will set out our approach to fiscal responsibility: the variable that we can control in Government to help to reduce rates of interest going forward. We remain committed to pursuing growth as the driver of prosperity for all.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's policy of creating investment zones will boost business and create jobs—for hard-working people in Southend West, I hope, and across the country? It is the essence of financial responsibility, and will put us on the path to long-term growth and long-term financial health.

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend the new Member for Southend West makes a very important point. We are absolutely committed to investment zones. I wish her success in her campaign to attract one to Southend-on-Sea. As the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has noted, this will be a transformational programme for the whole United Kingdom, and I hope that many Opposition Members get behind it and seek to attract such zones to their own constituencies.

We are continuing to deliver support for families by cutting national insurance, and we will save an average of £330 for 28 million hard-working people. We will deliver reforms to boost housing supply and accelerate infrastructure projects across the country, enabling growth where it is needed the most.

James Cartlidge: Last week, we considered the Health and Social Care Levy (Repeal) Bill. I spoke in the debate, and said that I hoped that the repeal would not lead to the cap on social care being watered down. As I understand it, the cap may now be delayed or even not come into force at all. We should all be very concerned about that. One of the greatest achievements of the previous Prime Minister was finally introducing a tangible policy on social care. Does the Minister accept that when we repealed the levy it would have been better had we known then that it would have a material impact on social care policy?

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend makes his point typically strongly. He, like me, will look forward to hearing the medium-term fiscal strategy shortly. The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) asked what we will do to protect households with their interest rates and mortgages.

Barbara Keeley: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Griffith: I will not give way at the moment. The difficult decisions that were taken by the Chancellor earlier this week will ensure that we continue to grow the economy. Those decisions will raise around £32 billion every year. Perhaps the Opposition will use the opportunity of the debate to enlighten the House, but to date they have said very little about how they would find the money to do that.

Geraint Davies: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Griffith: Not at the moment.

That brings me to our energy price guarantee, which is a landmark policy that will help millions of people to get through this most difficult winter. Independent and external forecasts expect it to reduce inflation by around five percentage points. It is one of the most generous schemes in the world, and was the biggest single expense in the growth plan, with an estimated cost of around £60 billion between now and the end of March.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): I think the whole House and many of our constituents can support the energy price guarantee and support scheme, but in constituencies such as mine many households are off-grid. Although there is a separate scheme, there is an issue of dual use on a single site. To ensure that there is parity and equity in rolling through that scheme, will the Minister undertake to ensure that there is an ongoing review, to ensure that none of my constituents misses out on the forthcoming generous support from the Government?

Andrew Griffith: Just like the constituents of Arundel and South Downs, I do not want the constituents of Eddisbury to face any prejudice. My hon. Friend makes his point well, and I am sure that the Energy Minister will be listening.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): If the so-called energy price guarantee will reduce inflation by 4% or 5%, what will inflation go to in April 2023 when the Government remove it?

Andrew Griffith: I have learned not to make forecasts in life.

Alan Brown: You just did.

Andrew Griffith: I was citing external forecasts, rather than making forecasts of where energy prices in an unprecedented moment of global volatility will be six months hence. Maybe the hon. Member has a greater insight into that.

Alan Brown: I feel I have.

Andrew Griffith: No. Treasury officials will lead a review regarding the appropriate measures to support households and businesses with their energy needs beyond April, but without the taxpayer picking up an inappropriate share of the burden.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): The energy plan means that the most vulnerable get up to £1,200 in support. When it comes to the review in April, will the Minister ensure that the most vulnerable people are again at the forefront of getting that support?

Andrew Griffith: Yes.

Barbara Keeley: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Griffith: No, I am going to make some progress.

I have talked about the measures that we are taking to support growth, and about the tough decisions that the Chancellor spoke about in the House on Monday. I reiterate that, as we must not sugar coat it. In common with every other major economy, we face economic challenges at this time for three reasons.

First, there is the cost of covid. Through the first two years of the pandemic, the Government borrowed more than £300 billion more than had been forecast in March 2020—about £260 billion more in 2020-21 and £70 billion more in 2021-22—to fund emergency covid support, which had support on both sides of the House.

Secondly, interest rates are rising around the world on the back of increased costs and Putin's war in Ukraine.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): We recently heard that inflation in this country has risen to 10.1%, but is the Minister aware that the European Union reported its inflation figures this morning, and inflation in the eurozone has risen to 10.9%?

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was aware of that, and inflation is 11% in Germany and 17% in the Netherlands. I hope that the hon. Member for Leeds West is listening, because we are seeing this phenomenon in all major developed economies. She has a background in economics, and I hope she can devote some of her energy to sharing her wisdom and insight with colleagues.

When it comes to interest rates, the Federal Reserve has implemented three consecutive increases of three quarters of a basis point, and the European Central Bank has increased rates at its last two meetings, including its largest ever single rate hike in September. As we hear contributions from Opposition Members, I hope that we will hear a little more about the broader context and a little less about attributing the situation to this Government.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank the Minister for being generous with his time. If it is all the fault of the global economy, why was the 38-day Chancellor sacked?

Andrew Griffith: The hon. Gentleman is generous with his comments. In fairness, it is not the Government's position that it is all the fault of the global economy, which is why the Prime Minister apologised and changed her Chancellor, and why different, difficult decisions have been made. In the spirit of having a proper debate on these matters, I hope the hon. Gentleman will accept that I was not saying what he suggests. I was introducing, and will continue to introduce, the very important broader context of these economic issues.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Griffith: I am going to finish as quickly as I can.

I have already said that difficult decisions will have to be made. Those decisions will never be made at the expense of the most vulnerable, and I welcome the fact

[Andrew Griffith]

that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister today reconfirmed at the Dispatch Box our commitment to protecting the triple lock, which was noticeably not forthcoming from the Opposition Front Bench.

The fact is that since the 2008 financial crisis we have all been held back by weak economic growth. For 14 years, people's living standards—especially the living standards of the most vulnerable, whom the Opposition claim to talk about—have not been rising as quickly as they should have been. The bottom line is that by accepting the status quo, without taking any action at all, we would condemn ourselves and future generations in Britain to decline.

We face challenges, but we should address them from a place of optimism. I remind Members that the fundamentals of the UK economy remain resilient, with unemployment at its lowest level in nearly 50 years and with the UK forecast to have the fastest growth in the G7 in 2022. We have incredible strengths.

I met investors this morning, and they talked about the capital they want to put to work in the United Kingdom, in science, research and technology. We have some of the world's best universities, and those who would underestimate and talk down our prospects should not forget that we have one wonderful thing: the British people. With credibility and conviction, we are going to deliver the roads, railways and broadband we need. We will recruit the best doctors, empower the best teachers and back the bravest soldiers. And when conditions allow, when it is consistent with sound public finances, we will continue to cut taxes to further unleash economic growth.

A few weeks ago, the Government took a bold approach to resetting our ambition for the growth rate of the economy, protecting our public services and delivering sustainably low taxes. That remains the most important challenge of our time. The question earlier this week was whether we would take action to protect the economy or whether we would not. Our response should leave nobody in any doubt that we are a Government who choose action in the national interest.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Colleagues will be aware that there is a great deal of interest in this debate, so I warn the next speakers that, after the SNP spokesperson, I will introduce a six-minute time limit. I call the SNP spokesperson, Drew Hendry.

1.35 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): A report out today shows that 60% of people across the nations of the UK are worried about their household financial prospects. The same report shows that nine in 10 people have delayed putting on the heating due to concern about the cost.

Members across the House will have received emails and calls from people who have never before been moved to contact their MP and who are now feeling those concerns for themselves. When those who have felt relatively comfortable start feeling the pinch, imagine what it means for those on the rungs of the ladder below. Then imagine what it means for those who were

not getting by at all, who were already suffering from poverty and who had £20 a week cut from their universal credit. It is crushing them. It is destroying families. It is clearing out food banks. It is moving third-sector and support service staff to tears with the feeling of futility. And it is destroying the health of children.

The actions of this Westminster Government have left vulnerable households abandoned, betrayed and cast aside. This Government laid bare their ideology during the chaotic period of the so-called mini-Budget. Make no mistake, while they were doing that damage, they simply pulled back the curtain on their core ideology. Their error was being so obvious, so blunt, that political spin could not cover it. Their focus has always been on making the rich richer. When their key policies result in poverty but mean £40,000 extra each year for those earning £1 million a year it is a bit of a giveaway, is it not? Only those earning more than £155,000 a year were net beneficiaries of the mini-Budget.

Of course, this month's Chancellor has had to scrap this unfunded giveaway to the most well-off, not through genuine contrition but because he was forced to do so. Limp and clearly insincere apologies do not fool anyone. The parachute Chancellor has dropped in to try to close the curtain and return to the drip, drip of chronic austerity that is the usual *modus operandi*. People now see through it.

With inflation above 10%, the poor are facing the hardest choices. Food inflation is higher than 10%, which means they have really tough choices. The Chancellor has taken away the two-year energy price cap. Although the cap is welcome, it still means a doubling of prices from last year. Ominously, there will be a review in six months. There is no certainty for increasingly desperate people, while rich bankers will still see their wages rocket, as the cap on their bonuses has been removed.

James Cartlidge: On the subject of banking, can the hon. Gentleman confirm that current SNP policy is that Scotland, were it to become independent, would have a currency with no lender of last resort?

Drew Hendry: Let me deal with two issues. First, no amount of deflection by Conservative Members will take away from the fact that they are punishing the poor and they have trashed the economy in recent weeks. Secondly, on the prospectus for independence, people in Scotland should have a choice: to have those questions put before them and to vote on them. It is the hon. Gentleman's Government who are denying democracy in that case.

James Cartlidge: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No, I am going to make some progress.

The Chancellor has ominously set that cap up for a review in six months, providing no certainty for increasingly desperate people, while rich bankers will still be able to see their wages rocket, as I said, with the cap on their bonuses removed. The energy crisis is even more galling for my constituents, and many more across Scotland, as they see their energy being produced from their backyards, yet folk in the colder climate of the highlands pay more per unit for electricity than people anywhere else in the UK—renewable energy suppliers are charged more to connect to the grid than those anywhere else in the UK, and the picture is particularly bleak for those who are off the gas grid.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): My hon. Friend will be aware that even on the Government's own estimates heating oil has gone up by 147% since January, and in constituencies such as ours it is costing more than £1,200 to fill a tank, and sometimes this is with a minimum delivery of 500 litres. Does he share my concern that in these colder, rural and more economically fragile areas of the UK not everyone has £500 to replenish their oil tank? This will not be a choice of turning their heating on or not; they simply will not have the choice, because they will not have the oil or the means to replenish the tank when they need it. This is a crisis.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend is completely right and he represents a constituency with many off gas grid constituents, as I do. He makes a telling point about the cost of that. What support are the UK Government giving to these people who face twice the bills that other people will? They are giving a measly £100.

Imran Hussain: Even today, the Minister refuses to give us figures on the expected windfall revenue. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the simple fact remains that this Government always side with the energy giants as opposed to ordinary British people?

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. As I said in my opening remarks, the Government's ideology is that the rich will get richer while the poor will suffer. That has been underlined over the past few weeks like at no other time in this place. The scales have fallen away—

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I tried to intervene on the Minister on this broad point. Both he and his friends refer continually to growth, but I do not think I have heard any indication from him this afternoon, or elsewhere, as to how that growth will be spread beyond London and the south-east. Is that not a gaping gap in the Government's policy? It will certainly affect the constituents of the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), as it will my constituents and those in Wales, the north of England and Scotland.

Drew Hendry: Again, the hon. Gentleman makes a fantastic point. The growth we are seeing from this Government is the growth in poverty and in inequality. That continues to rise and the Government are very good at driving it forward.

As I was saying, those off gas grid consumers are being given £100. Scotland is energy rich and a net exporter of energy. Renewable energy is six to nine times cheaper than the gas-fired power our prices are linked to. In Scotland we have the energy, but until we have the power our people will continue to be ignored over their basic needs and their potential.

After the Chancellor's statement, the Scottish National party, through my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), tried to introduce some certainty for households terrified by the rising energy prices by tabling an amendment to the Energy Prices Bill that would have required Ministers to outline within 28 days how support after April would be provided to households. Labour failed to support that amendment. The Chancellor says that more difficult decisions will have to be made, which means cutting the funding for

things that ordinary families and the most vulnerable rely on. We should note that the threat for those struggling by, many of them working people relying on universal credit, has not been lifted; there may be further reductions, on top of the fact that inflation has been three times higher than their last increase. Common decency demands that benefits must be fully uprated. Are the Government capable of that?

We should also remember that this Government still have not reversed the pernicious £20 a week cut to UC, yet the Chancellor had the cheek to say—this has been repeated today—that the Government's priority will always be the most vulnerable. Does that include pensioners? This week, he was briefing journalists, including Robert Peston, who said this today, that the Government were abandoning the triple lock. With inflation rampant—today's figure is 10.1%—this means further hardship for Scotland's older people. Yet today, the Prime Minister says no. Is this another U-turn? Or is it like when she says that the energy cap will mean no family would pay more than £2,500 per year? Is it just—let me find some parliamentary language—questionable?

If the Government really mean that they care, they would reinstate the £20 a week to UC, scrap the bedroom tax, get rid of the odious rape clause and uprate benefits in line with inflation. They could choose to follow the progressive lead of the Scottish Government, who have brought in, among a wide package—*[Interruption.]* The Minister is laughing. The Scottish Government have brought in the Scottish child payment, which has risen now to £25 a week. That is helping to mitigate the callous cut made by his Government. They could choose to follow that progressive lead and to follow what the Scottish Government have done in doubling the December bridging payment from £130 to £260, at a time when families will need it most, in the depth of winter and at Christmas. The Government could pay for much of this by taxing the excess profits of companies that are clearly making them.

Alan Brown: My hon. Friend was talking about the Tories not keeping their pledge to protect the most vulnerable, and he has highlighted some awful policies that are making people more vulnerable. In addition, under this Government fuel poverty has increased by more than 50% and now affects 6.7 million households. So to say that the Government are protecting the vulnerable is, unfortunately, a sick joke.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend has said it all there—it is clear. To hear laughter this afternoon from Government Front Benchers about measures to mitigate poverty is shameful.

The Government could have taxed some of the excess profits, and companies are daring them to do so. Sometimes, as with the boss of Shell, they are asking the Government to do this. The Government could do this but they will not, because protecting the vulnerable is not what Tories do. It gets worse, because now the Bank of England will react with further interest rate rises, pushing mortgages to unaffordable heights for some homeowners and prospective buyers. As we have heard again today, the Government want to lay all the blame on the illegal war in Ukraine and on global conditions, but everybody knows that much of this is Tory-inflicted. A big part of that is Brexit. It has hamstrung businesses by starving them of vital staff; it has pushed inflation higher through

[Drew Hendry]

import prices; the UK's shocking balance of trade has been exposed; and it has ushered in a raft of new tax costs for businesses across the nations of the UK. As the former Bank of England Governor Mark Carney pointed out:

"In 2016 the British economy was 90% the size of Germany's. Now it is...70%."

That was before the clusterbùrach of the mini-Budget. Labour, with all the backbone of a squid, joined at the tentacles with this Tory ideology, is trying to pretend that somehow it will make Brexit work. Most Labour Members do not believe that, and it flies in the face of all the logic and informed opinion.

All this chaos is a timely reminder for the people of Scotland about why they should choose a different path. I say to people back home: look at what the Government are doing to you, to your communities, to your businesses, to your families and to your children's futures. Let us make comparisons with the UK. Other countries similar to Scotland are wealthier and more equal, and have higher productivity, lower poverty, lower child poverty and lower pensioner poverty. Democracy can and will triumph. Scotland has the right to choose a very different path from this one, to build a better future as an independent nation and as an equal partner in the European Union—one that seeks to lift people up, not keep them down, and to live by the values of a welcoming, diverse and compassionate nation.

1.49 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Thank you very much for calling me so early in the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. If I may strike a conciliatory tone at the outset of my remarks, I thank everybody in this House who sent me remarkable support in the course of the summer recess. There is nothing unique about my having had issues with my mental health, but what is perhaps more unique than most in the country is that I have the platform and opportunity to highlight that and to speak empathetically, and I am very grateful indeed. In making this speech, there are a number of things in my life that I am struggling with at the moment, but, bizarrely, it seems that making a speech in the House of Commons is not one of them. I am not entirely sure whether that is attuned to my state of mind, and no doubt my hon. Friends on the Front Bench will tell me afterwards.

I want to speak on this important matter because I have not said a word to my constituents about the events of the last month or so. I watched on from home when the Chancellor gave his so-called mini-Budget, which should have been delivered as a full Budget, with the proper procedures of the House duly followed. As the time passed, I grew increasingly concerned by its nature. I am quite an old-fashioned person and, in respect of this House, I like to look at the wording of the motion. I also believe in speaking one's mind, and I can only say that today is the exact centenary of a meeting in 1922, during which Conservative Back Benchers met to decide that they would stand on their own ticket in the 1922 general election, thereby depriving David Lloyd George of the opportunity to continue as Prime Minister. As vice-chair of the 1922 Committee—the foundation of which followed the events of that afternoon

and evening—I think it is quite important to speak my mind. I realise there are some in my party who lament that state of affairs, but I hope they will indulge me, as I have indulged them over time.

Many things that have been said by those on the Front Bench are very true. There is an international situation, an illegal invasion of Ukraine and a spike in the international cost of energy. The Government have many things to be proud of—not least the employment record—but there is no escaping the fact that the measures contained within the financial statement directly caused the situation to be made worse. I am quite sure that was not intentional, but I cannot easily forgive the lack of foresight by senior members of the Government. My forgiveness is not what that the Government should seek at all; it should be that of our constituents, who are in a difficult enough situation as it is. To see this as a question of international turbulence inexplicably increasing the mortgage rates and inexplicably necessitating further cuts to public expenditure—I cannot easily forgive that.

In the course of the summer, I found the trashing of the reputations of independent organisations in this country, such as the Bank of England and the Office for Budget Responsibility, to be near to malice in its nature. Treasury orthodoxy came under attack. I am a Conservative, and I suppose that orthodoxy goes hand in hand with that. That is Conservative orthodoxy. Conservative orthodoxy is sound financial management and a balanced budget—not sticking pamphlets into a test tube, shaking it up and seeing what happens. That is not the way the Conservative party should ever govern.

Apparently I can be a little difficult to handle, and my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) must have wondered what he had done in a previous life to find me in his flock as my Whip. I always commiserate with my Whip when they are appointed; indeed, I have been round the block with a number of them, and I end up getting round to them all over again. But there is a serious point to all this: I am personally ashamed of what occurred with the financial statement, because I cannot go and face my constituents, look them in the eye and say that they should support our great party. The polls would seem to bear that out.

The next debate is apparently a confidence issue. Well, I am not going to fall into that trap. I oppose fracking and thought that we had come to a considered position on it, but there we go. I will vote with the Government Whip.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman be lending the Prime Minister his confidence vote in the next debate?

Mr Wragg: The hon. Lady is very charitable in giving me a further minute for my peroration, although it seems a shame to extend it too long. The fracking debate that follows has been made a confidence vote. If I voted as I would wish, I would lose the Whip. I would no longer be a vice-chair of the 1922 Committee. I would no longer maintain my position as a Chair of one of the Select Committees of the House. Indeed, because of that, my letter lodged with my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) would fall, and I wish to maintain that letter with him.

Geraint Davies: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Member to say that he is against fracking but will vote in the opposite direction?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): That is not a point of order. Each Member is accountable for their own decisions on voting, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman would not want me to interfere with that.

1.57 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), and I pay tribute to him for the frankness of the personal remarks with which he opened his speech. I must say that the whole speech contained a great deal of good sense, which I hope his hon. Friends on his Front Bench will have heard and paid attention to.

Christians on the Left organises a church service each year on the Sunday morning when the Labour party conference begins, and the preacher this year was the Archbishop of York. In the very fine address that he gave on that occasion, he said:

“Increasingly, the safety net in our nation is a foodbank, where more and more people have to go to get what our economy itself fails to provide.”

He is absolutely right: something fundamental has gone wrong in our economy. For many people, including those in employment, the economy does not work. More and more are turning to food banks to survive. Some 61,000 food parcels were distributed by the Trussell Trust’s food banks in 2010-11, whereas the number was 2.5 million in 2020-21—a fortyfold increase in a decade.

In the leadership election campaign in the summer, the Prime Minister acknowledged her party’s failure on economic growth, and she was absolutely right to do so. The new Chancellor told us on Monday that the record on growth had been very good. That is one of many things that he and the Prime Minister seem to disagree about, but on this one, I am definitely with the Prime Minister. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) often points out, we are a high-tax economy because we have been a low-growth economy.

Last April social security benefits were raised by 3.1%, even though inflation was nearly 10%. That was justified on the basis that the regular formula for uprating benefits uses the figure for inflation from the previous September. That formula has, on several occasions, been disappplied since 2010, but never in the interests of the poorest families in the country—only ever to their disadvantage. This year, the formula was applied, piling on yet another real-terms cut in benefits, reducing them to the lowest real-terms level for more than 30 years. The then Chancellor and the then Prime Minister implicitly recognised that unfairness and promised to use the same formula next April, delivering, we have learned today, a 10.1% rise.

The current Chancellor must now decide whether to keep that promise to the poorest families in the country during a cost of living crisis. The Minister, in his opening remarks, referred to protecting the vulnerable. I really hope that he meant that, because those families have so often had a kicking from this Government over the past 12 years. If that happens again, dependence on food banks will get yet another large boost as thousands more people have to turn to them to survive—on top of

the 700,000 households who did so in 2019-20. The food banks themselves are struggling now because donors cannot afford to give as much. Mass food bank dependence is a potent symptom of the economic failure of the past 12 years.

Yesterday, representatives from Muscular Dystrophy UK came to Parliament to spell out the hardship from rising prices facing the people they support, because, for example, those people depend on machinery—ventilators—that have to be permanently switched on and powered. On Monday, the Chancellor spoke of compassionate conservatism. If that is not just a vacuous slogan, those people’s needs must be recognised in the benefit uprating decision that could be announced on Monday week.

The benefit cap was introduced 10 years ago and was supposed to reflect median earnings. It was changed once in 2016, when it was cut, and it has never been increased. This time, surely, it must be. If it is not, at a time when inflation is over 10%, thousands more people will crash into the cap next April and be forced to depend on food banks, heaping yet another economic failure on the catastrophic blunders, as the hon. Member for Hazel Grove rightly pointed out, of the past few weeks.

2.2 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I think we all knew that whoever was Prime Minister or Chancellor and in government at this particular time were going to face some really tough decisions. The fall-out from the pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine and a number of other domestic and global factors were going to mean that some really difficult decisions would have to be made around our economy and our fiscal policy. None the less, the one thing that we should all be able to depend on is that, no matter how difficult times are, the Government will not make those decisions even harder. Sadly, that is what has happened as a result of the rushed mini-Budget. The fall-out has been a loss of confidence—a loss of confidence in the markets and, talking to many local businesses in my constituency in the two weeks immediately after the mini-Budget, a great loss of confidence in the business community.

Growth is a hard-won thing. We do not achieve growth simply by saying as loudly and passionately as possible that we are going to get growth. Growth needs to be nurtured with the right policies that instil confidence in the business community. It is therefore incredibly welcome, and I am incredibly thankful, that the new Chancellor has stepped up and taken a grip on the situation. I am also delighted to see my very good friend in the position of Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Between the two of them, I have great confidence that they will bring the grip and the leadership to the Treasury that is necessary to create the stability we now need to address this difficult situation. As a result, many elements of the original mini-Budget have now been dropped, and we await further details in the near future of exactly how the Government will now balance the books and lay out their policy going forward.

However, we really need to know what the Prime Minister’s policies are. She made a number of very bold statements in her leadership campaign to become Prime Minister, most of which have now been dropped. It is very important that we have confidence that No.10 and

[Steve Double]

No.11 are in lockstep at this challenging time and that they have the same policies, so we need the Prime Minister to confirm exactly what her policies are.

We are aware that some very difficult decisions lie ahead but, in making those decisions, it is vital that we protect the most vulnerable in our society from the damage that has been caused. Those who are least able to shoulder the burden should not be required to pay the price for it. Therefore, it was incredibly welcome that the Prime Minister gave a clear statement at the Dispatch Box that the triple lock will remain in place for pensions. Pensioners in my constituency and across the country will welcome the reassurance that that triple lock will be in place and that they will get a rise in their pension in line with prices.

It is vital to do a similar thing with benefits. The Government have done a lot of work over many years in reforming benefits. Universal credit pays people to be in work, and I have heard at first hand how popular it is, but it is right that those benefits keep pace with the increase in prices and that those on benefits are not the ones who pay the price of balancing the books.

One measure that has survived the cull from the mini-Budget is the cut in stamp duty. Naturally, I am someone who welcomes a cut in stamp duty. However, Cornwall is currently in the middle of a major housing crisis. Experience from the previous cut in stamp duty during the pandemic showed that it fuelled demand for second homes and investment properties. That inflated house prices in Cornwall way higher than the national increase, meaning that even more local people are unable to afford to buy a house. If the Government are to press ahead with the stamp duty cut, will they ensure that it applies only to primary residences and that those who seek to buy second homes and investment properties for holiday lets are not able to attract the proposed cut? If the cut goes ahead, all we will do is fuel second home and investment property purchases in tourist areas such as Cornwall, making our housing crisis even worse. We need the Government to help us address that so that local people can get the housing they need. I ask the Ministers on the Front Bench to take that particular point away and look at it. Yes, a stamp duty cut is welcome to help people buying a home, particularly their first home, but it should not go to those who are buying second and subsequent homes.

All in all, after a very difficult time, I am in a much better place and am confident that the new team in the Treasury has a grip on the situation and will provide the stability and leadership that we need. I look forward to hearing more details in due course of exactly what policies will be put in place.

2.8 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): Government Members should not think for one second that the Opposition will relent from holding them to account for this dog's dinner, which is entirely of their own making. Like a broken record, the lame duck Prime Minister cites global economic headwinds, refusing to take any responsibility for the decisions that brought the British economy to the edge of disaster.

We have a Prime Minister in office but not in power, humiliated and bereft of ideas. Her manifesto drawn up by the libertarian right and the Institute of Economic

Affairs has been cut to ribbons. The dogma espoused in "Britannia Unchained" must never again be allowed to reign supreme in Whitehall. In fact, the ideas must be consigned to the dustbin of history.

Now the Prime Minister has brought back an old foe, who underfunded our NHS for years, to implement austerity 2.0, and once again it will be communities like mine in Liverpool, Wavertree who suffer. This is a Tory crisis, and the damage has been done: an estimated 14,344 people in Liverpool will be paying higher mortgage bills next year as a result of this Government's irresponsible actions. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor now admit that the mini-Budget caused mortgage rates to go up and borrowing costs to surge—a Tory cost we will be living with for years.

Working people have gone through enough. Now they are told that, to re-establish market stability, the responsibility is being shifted from the Government on to households, communities and working people. It all feels very 2011. Some are even saying that a previous Chancellor, the former Member for Tatton, is pulling the strings. The new Chancellor embodies a very different type of dogma from the Prime Minister's, but it is dogma nevertheless—a school of economics that saw us enter the coronavirus pandemic with public services under-resourced and under-prepared.

Feryal Clark: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just public services, but local councils such as mine in Enfield, which faces a £100 million budget gap due to spiralling inflation, that are paying the price for this Government's mismanagement of the economy?

Paula Barker: My hon. Friend makes a pivotal point. Local authorities have been cut to the bone. They provide valuable resources and frontline services out in our communities, but they are being decimated yet again by this Government. Our public sector workforce is demoralised after a decade of pay restraint and cuts to frontline services.

If this Government think for one moment that our people will now put up with more of the same while bankers' bonuses remain uncapped and millionaire bosses continue to rake in profits and dividends, they are sadly mistaken. The British people have woken up to the con. No longer does the promise ring true that each succeeding generation will have it better than the last. That promise, forged in the fire of the post-war consensus, is now in ruins after decades of short-termism and the dominance of capital over labour. We are not all in this together. Not once since 2010 have we all been in this together. Despite the empty rhetoric of a strong economy and levelling up, the Conservative party has always sought to look after its own class interests at the expense of the rest of us.

Young people in my Liverpool, Wavertree constituency now face their lives being put on hold because of this Government's incompetence. They have done the right thing: they have gone out, worked hard and saved, only to be cheated and denied the opportunity of home ownership. Working people are up against real-terms cuts to their pay and our elderly are anxious about heating their homes in the run-up to winter. There is even more uncertainty for small businesses and charities, such as the amazing Love Wavertree in my constituency, which does incredible work. It announced today that

the increase in its energy bills means it must consider whether it can continue to run its community shop, a lifeline for many people in my constituency.

History will not be kind to this Government, nor to anyone who has participated over the past 12 years. The Conservative party is lost. Thankfully, change is coming. As the Leader of the Opposition said so eloquently at Prime Minister's questions today, we are the Government in waiting; the Conservative party are the Opposition in waiting. Frankly, that cannot come quickly enough.

2.14 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): If we have learned one thing from the experience of the past few weeks, it is that there really is no magic money tree, and the Government really do have to pay their way. Some of us, including myself, had started to doubt that essential economic truth because of the Government's heroic response to the covid crisis.

I had intended to say that we had supported the families and businesses of this country to the tune of £400 billion. However, I listened to the Minister at the Dispatch Box, and when we add up all the unplanned borrowing very substantially as a result of covid, the total is actually £630 billion. It is because of that enormous intervention to support families and businesses by this Government that we did not have thousands of bankruptcies and millions of people cast out of work, as was the expectation. Right hon. and hon. Members will recall a forecast that we would have 12% unemployment, but because of the economic management by this Government the impact was cushioned and the economy protected from that enormous external shock.

The Government were quite right to do that, but why were they able to? It was because of the decade of prudent economic management that repaired the enormous economic damage left by Labour in 2010—prudent decisions that Labour fought against tooth and nail. The Labour motion before us calls for a plan to make the economy work for working people, but Labour does not stand up for working people. Every Labour Government in history, without exception, have left office with more people out of work than before. Their policies, again and again, are not the policies for working people, but the policies of unemployment.

Compare that record with that of this Government. Despite suffering the biggest economic shock to the world economy in a century or perhaps longer, unemployment has not gone up, as it always does under Labour. It has gone down, most recently to 3.5%, the lowest level since I was a tiny boy in 1974. In my Broadland constituency, the rate is even lower. That economic management is forcing employers to offer higher wages for staff—exactly the kind of economic conditions that help workers, particularly the lowest paid. It also serves to increase productivity, as local employers invest to limit the number of staff needed to produce. That is what will pay for the wage increases of the future, not Labour meddling.

I recognise, as does the Prime Minister, that the mini Budget went too fast and too far, and she has rightly apologised for it, but this Government have the right economic policies for growth. As one of the few entrepreneurs in this place, having helped to create hundreds of worthwhile, well-rewarded jobs and careers, I know the truth of the business saying that time kills

deals. Speeding up the ability of businesses to get projects up and running will have a huge impact on the future growth and prosperity of this country.

The Government are right to launch investment zones. These zones do not just corral investment into a particular area; by speeding up the process of business, they will also grow the size of the pie. I hope that the results will be so striking that over time they will become a beacon for wider economic policy, showing the way for the rest of the economy.

The Government are also right to accelerate productivity-enhancing infrastructure projects across Britain to help with levelling up, including the building of the western link road in my constituency, which will shorten ambulance times by 20 minutes, open up a swathe of Norfolk businesses to improved market access and relieve the residents of Weston Longville and others from terrible rat-running—all opposed by Labour, I might add. As for the local Lib Dems, literally half of them have said they want it and the other half have said they do not. That says it all about the approach of the Liberal Democrats: to say whatever they think will sound good to local constituents, with no consistency at all.

Finally, the Government are right to speed up the review of EU-inspired regulations to make them bespoke for the United Kingdom economy. That will help British businesses and British workers. This Government have an economic record to be proud of, and I would back them to the hilt over Labour any day.

2.19 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): This economic crisis has been manufactured in Downing Street and, as we approach Hallowe'en, the little shop of horrors on the Government Benches adds 10.1% inflation. That horrendous inflation figure brings more anxiety to my constituents in Weaver Vale and across Britain, as Members across the Chamber have documented today. This nightmare made in Downing Street is being experienced every day by ordinary people who are just trying to make ends meet during this economic crisis.

Mortgages are up, energy bills are up, the weekly shop bill is up and rents are up, while wages, benefits and pensions are down. My God—the Bank of England had to intervene with £65 billion to save our pension funds. People on the Government Benches should be ashamed of themselves for supporting this, voting for it and inflicting on us the horror show that we saw in the summer. This has all been driven by Captain Chaos herself, the Prime Minister unchained as a free marketeer ultra.

Who knew that unsuccessful trickle-down economics, unfunded tax cuts for the wealthiest and borrowing on the never, never would fail? The shadow Chancellor knew, the Bank of England knew, the Institute for Fiscal Studies knew, the Office for Budget Responsibility knew, the *Financial Times* knew and the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) knew, as he has eloquently set out in the Chamber today. In fact, a huge coalition of the economically sensible forewarned that the free marketeer ultras would ultimately fail and crash the economy off a cliff.

The lady who is for U-turning by the hour is now trying to deflect the blame for the chaos to the former 38-day Chancellor, while appointing the former architect—let us not forget this—of NHS austerity mark one. She

[Mike Amesbury]

is a Tory Prime Minister in name only, chained to the passenger seat while Chancellor Hunt tries to swerve away from another cliff of chaos, but the damage is done. Who knows how much longer this Prime Minister in title only will have to attempt to deal with this utter mess of her own making? Almost certainly not as long as our constituents, who will be paying for years to come for this economic chaos. We will ensure that that is not forgotten.

Some 4,800 households in Halton and 13,900 in Cheshire West and Chester will now be paying higher mortgage rates, thanks to the experimental mini-Budget that the Prime Minister and former Chancellor now admit caused interest rates to increase—a Budget that the Cabinet signed up to, although they are now in denial about that. That extra £500 a month on average will inevitably mean that homes are repossessed. The situation will be turbocharged by the new Chancellor of doom who has just decided to gift households with energy bills of up to £5,000 next April—complete and utter madness—while the oil and gas companies rake in £170 billion of excess profits. The answer is staring people in the face. It is those companies we need to tackle, and in fact the likes of Shell are expecting it and have built it into their business plans. It is crazy.

On the long road to recovery that we face, a Conservative Government cannot remain in the driving seat, even if the Prime Minister is not at the wheel. We now have the fourth Chancellor in four months, and that is not going to provide confidence and stability. In fact, we have had 12 years of this Government and 12 years of austerity. The new Chancellor of doom has no strategy for growth, and he is set to outline austerity mark two in the Hallowe'en Budget. It is time to wake up from this nightmare. Step aside, and let us have a Labour Government.

2.24 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and his little shop of horrors, and it is a pleasure to be called to speak on this Labour motion. There is one thing missing from it, because the Labour party normally wants an impact assessment. One thing I have concluded about politics is that we always miss out one impact assessment: the impact of our measures on those who have least of all. When I say least of all, I mean those who have literally nothing—no money, no assets and above all no voice—because they have not been born yet. I am talking about the impact of the decisions we take in government today on those who are to come. In other words, I am talking about the national debt. For me, as a Conservative, it goes to the core of everything I believe in that, as with the environment, we should leave the public finances in a better condition for our grandchildren.

It is fair to say that I warned in the summer that the unfunded measures that were proposed constituted a high-risk strategy. I was dismayed when they were announced and not surprised at their impact. I was, however, delighted by the new appointment to the Treasury of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt)—I had the privilege of being his Parliamentary

Private Secretary when he was Health Secretary and Foreign Secretary—and of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), who is an excellent appointment.

I want to reflect on the wider idea of unfunded tax cuts or spending. There are those in the Opposition who have called it libertarianism. It is certainly not conservatism, in my view. Neither is it libertarianism, because the unfunded measures were not matched by spending reductions—in other words, a smaller state—but the money was simply to be borrowed. There is an argument for saying that it is socialism, and it is certainly what we would have expected from the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). But really, when people promise stuff without saying how they would pay for it or making any difficult decisions, it is populism. This is not new. Where we are with the economy has implications for all of us, from all parts of the House. Whatever steps we now take and whatever measures we announce, we will have to say how they will be paid for. We will have to level with the British people.

I had the great privilege of being PPS to the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) when he was Chancellor. Throughout the pandemic, I never got a single email from a single colleague, no matter how left-wing or right-wing they were, calling for less support. There were only calls for more spending, more tax cuts, more generous support, more debt.

Many, including some Conservative Members, argue that we can borrow because it creates growth. The beauty of that position is that they do not have to say who loses out. That is the hard thing in politics, and we now have to face up to the reality of our position. It will have massive implications for parties on both sides of the House. Even the SNP, in relation to the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, announced a policy to be paid for from the surplus in the national insurance fund, which, though an accounting reality, does not exist as surplus money in the Government accounts that can be committed for years to come. We have all heard such commitments.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is talking about accounting and balancing the books. Perhaps he and his colleagues would like to come up to Scotland and take lessons from our Government, who are having to fill the black holes that his Government have created, because we actually have to balance the books in Scotland. Forget trickle-down economics; it is trickle-down tragedy that I am seeing in my constituents in Livingston being pushed under by the absolute chaos at the heart of this Tory Government.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Lady was not here when I intervened on the SNP Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). I asked if it was true that were Scotland to be independent, its policy would be to have a currency with no lender of last resort, and he did not deny it. It is the most extraordinary proposition, exceeded in its stupidity only by the old idea of a no-fly zone over Ukraine, to be enforced at the same time as unilateral nuclear disarmament—in other words, making nuclear conflict more likely while denuding ourselves of the ability to deter it.

I turn to social care, which I care about passionately. The social care workforce do one of the toughest jobs in the country, and I never take them for granted. They care for the most vulnerable, particularly those with dementia. We all know that they are facing a difficult period, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer certainly knows that.

Last week, I was one of only two speakers on the Conservative Benches who spoke in the debate on the Bill to repeal the health and social care levy. I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) that his predecessor as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, our right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), said several times that, despite the repeal, there would be not a penny less for health and social care. We now know that the social care cap may be delayed, or may even not happen—I sincerely hope that that is not the case. Had I known that last week, would I have changed the way I would have voted had a Division been called? My right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood has been a Health Minister and knows the importance of social care. He needs to reflect on the commitment given last week. I can tell him right now that I would have been sorely tempted to vote against the Bill had I known then what I know now.

The whole point of the levy was to deliver a solution to social care and to help to fund the NHS through these difficult times. It was one of the great achievements of the previous Prime Minister that, after all these years of social care Green Papers and White Papers, not taking decisions, and yes, commitments to spend with no explanation of where the money will come from—perhaps a wealth tax, although that would not get the revenue—we got a policy, and one that was credibly funded. The method of funding it was arguably not perfect, but it would have delivered a cap for those who otherwise face no limit on the costs they can incur if, for example, a loved one in their senior years has dementia. I think that our policy priority must be ensuring the dignity of our most senior citizens at the toughest time of their and their dependants' lives.

It gives me no satisfaction to make these points about the importance of sound fiscal policy, balancing the books and having regard to future generations. That has been the core of every Conservative Government I have served in, and I know it is back at the core with our new Chancellor, who I am sure will deliver market confidence. But we all need to understand that the era of making unfunded pledges is over. That will have implications for all parties, as we will all face greater accountability, but for my grandchildren—if I ever get them—it is a good thing.

2.31 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of the motion. I am glad to hear that it seems to be enjoying a lot of support, and I hope to see the Office for Budget Responsibility's forecast published immediately after the motion is carried.

I have always opposed Tory Governments. I have long been of the view that a bad Labour Government is better than a good Tory one. I know what the Tories are about and I never expected them to do anything other than make life more difficult for the most vulnerable. In fact, if that were not the way the Tory party operated, we would never have needed to invent the Labour party

in the first place. But having opposed many Conservative Governments, never before have I seen one so inept, yet so arrogant as the current Government; so damaging, yet so casual about their impact on people's lives.

When the revisionism comes, as it undoubtedly will in the weeks and months to come, we must remember that this situation did not fall out of a clear blue sky. There was a clear mandate, because during that leadership contest the Prime Minister was clear about what she intended to do. It was Tory MPs who put her into the final two. Now we hear them say, "We must never again let the members choose the leader", but they chose to put the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) in the final two knowing full well what policies she would support. Huge revisionism is going on so that the next generation of Tory MPs will be able to say, "Oh, that was just a rogue Chancellor and a long-ago deposed Prime Minister. Forget about them—we changed after that," but the right hon. Lady won a mandate from her party to pursue those policies.

At the time of the mini-Budget statement, some voices were expressing disquiet, but I recall the support we heard from many Tory Members. It was when I heard how happy the mini-Budget had made the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) that I knew how bad it would be for the British people. I remember the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), who was in his place a few minutes ago, claiming that the whole of Doncaster would support the mini-Budget. I have not heard him say that today. As the hawks of the right-wing press circle over the Prime Minister, let us not forget that they were the loudest cheerleaders for this mini-Budget. The day after the statement, the *Daily Mail* proclaimed, "At last! A true Tory Budget". The *Express* was equally triumphant—"Big tax cuts to herald new era".

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the then Chancellor was carrying out what the Prime Minister had said she would do? She made sure that he lost his job, but she should be the one taking responsibility and, indeed, resigning.

Mr Perkins: I could not agree more. The right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) is the first politician in history to have had to resign for doing what he said he was going to do, which was precisely what the Prime Minister said she was going to do. The mini-Budget was born of the recklessness of the previous Prime Minister having pursued so much, so confidently, with so little evidence.

Make no mistake: I will spend every day between now and a general election making sure that the people of Chesterfield know that the higher interest rates, the tax rises, the cuts to our threadbare services and even, shamefully, the prospect of disabled people on benefits and impoverished pensioners suffering further cuts to their real-terms income, are all the result of this arrogant recklessness. This did not need to happen. Yes, there are global issues, but the central banks in America and Germany did not have to bail out the pension funds. Of course we welcome the fact that the Government have undone some of the measures, although it was bizarre to hear the Chancellor say on Monday how pleased he was that Labour were supporting his plans. They were our plans a few weeks ago! Now, the Tory Government

[Mr Perkins]

see it as a success that they are trying to put out the fire that they lit in the first place, but the damage has already been done.

The logical call for a windfall tax made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) continues to be rejected. What objection do the Government have to asking the energy generators to contribute some of their vast excess profits to help to fund the cost of ensuring that people can stay warm this winter and enabling businesses to keep their doors open?

Paula Barker: Does my hon. Friend agree that when even the CEO of Shell is advocating a windfall tax—we truly have gone through the looking glass—it is time the Tories did the right thing?

Mr Perkins: It absolutely is. I suspect that, ultimately, they will. I am a great student of history and I can remember all the way back to January this year, when the Labour party called for a windfall tax. I remember the then Prime Minister standing at the Dispatch Box mocking us and saying that Labour always wants to raise taxes, and the then Chancellor saying the same thing. A few months later, reluctantly they had to announce precisely that. The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) used to stand at the Dispatch Box criticising the policy—our policy—that he later adopted. That is how bizarre this Government's behaviour has been. Now we have to go through the same damaging charade again. It is clear that ultimately the Government will adopt Labour's policy of a windfall tax, but in the meantime their resistance will cost our country and our people dear.

Just a week ago, the Prime Minister was boasting that she was guaranteeing people's energy bills for the next two years, so why were Labour only going to guarantee them for six months? Then on Monday the Chancellor comes here and says, "All right—six months." That is how this Government are running our economy. You would not run a wheel stall like that.

Government policies change at a bewildering rate, but they do not seem to understand that it is not just that the policies are wrong; it is the clear demonstration that they do not have a clue what they are doing that is unsettling the markets. In Chesterfield, 3,352 households face a hike in their mortgage payments next year. It is quite unforgivable. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) said that this is 2011 all over again, but that is not so. In 2011 we were coming off the back of 13 years of Labour investment in our public services, so there was a chance that our health services, our schools and our Sure Starts could withstand the cuts. Not now. Our public services cannot tolerate the sort of cuts that the Chancellor has warned might be coming our way.

The idea that this Government can restore confidence in our nation's finances by having two more years to demonstrate the ineptitude that in the past 12 years has brought us to our present state would be laughable if it were not so serious. There is no mandate for the approach that they are now pursuing. If the Tories think that they can quietly euthanise the career of the latest Prime Minister and have another go, they are further removed from reality than even I believe they are.

We need a Government who are truly committed to growth, to a green recovery and to rebuilding our public services. We need a Government whose policies last beyond the ink drying on the growth document they have just printed. We need a Government whose plans are robust and whose leader is strong. We need a Government who are willing to lead in the national interest, and not just in the narrow interest of their party. That means we need a Labour Government led by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). We need that general election now.

2.40 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Today's inflation figures underline, once again, the very real pressures that my constituents and people across the country are facing with higher bills and the cost of living, so I welcome the action that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has taken to change major elements of the growth plan and to settle the markets. It is only with economic stability and fiscal responsibility that we can create a platform for growth and help to protect our constituents from higher inflation and higher interest rates. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor have been candid in accepting the mistakes that were made and they have rightly apologised for them. Now we need to focus on setting out a plan that sees debt falling over the medium term while delivering growth and higher living standards.

Listening to the debate, I did not recognise much of the criticism of the previous Government's record on growth, investment or jobs. Of course, as we have said, we want the trend growth rate to be higher, but we have also had the third highest growth rate of the G7 since 2010 and the UK continues to attract high levels of foreign direct investment, as it has throughout that period.

The Opposition's motion makes no mention of the Government's record on jobs—I wonder why. Perhaps it is because the latest figures show that unemployment is at its lowest level for nearly 50 years. In my North West Norfolk constituency, more than 500 people have moved from unemployment benefits into work in the past year. When I talk to employers in my constituency, I hear that the biggest challenge that they are facing is a labour shortage. Given the high number of vacancies, and the people looking for work, I endorse the great work of my local Jobcentre Plus team, who help to match people with those jobs so that they can move into the security of having a job and their own wage. Another reason that the Opposition did not refer to jobs may be that no Labour Government have left office with unemployment lower than when they came into power—my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) mentioned that, but it bears repeating as often as possible.

The motion does refer to the profits of energy companies. Due to Putin's illegal war, companies have been making exceptional profits and it is right that they should help to fund the energy price guarantee for my constituents and businesses, and other support for people, given the real cost of living pressures. Contrary to many of the contributions, however, including from the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), they are doing so: over the next four years, the energy profits levy is expected to generate £26 billion of revenue—£26 billion in a windfall

tax. I welcome the comments from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor earlier this week that nothing is off the table with regard to further potential steps on those excess profits, while being mindful of the need to continue to encourage investment in clean and other technologies.

As the Chancellor prepares his medium-term fiscal plan, I return to the issue that I have raised most frequently in this House since I was elected, which is familiar to my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury—the need for investment in a new Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn. It is the most propped-up hospital in the country, with 2,500 timber and steel supports holding up the concrete cancer roof.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I, along with other hon. Friends, including my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland, have campaigned for that capital investment. Indeed, I raised it when I met the Prime Minister yesterday morning and I have pressed the case with the new Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who understands the real safety issues involved. I look forward to the new Health and Social Care Secretary visiting soon to talk to patients and staff about the impact that is having on care. Given the pressing need and the value for money of the case, I urge the Government to confirm that QEH will be one of the new hospital schemes and part of the planned capital investment programme for the new hospital programme.

Over the past decade, Conservative Governments have demonstrated their commitment to delivering economic stability, growing our economy, boosting employment and attracting investment. As we move forward, we must maintain that focus to drive growth while protecting the most vulnerable in our society.

2.44 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is less than a month since the former Chancellor delivered his “Let’s call it a fiscal event” Budget. The so-called mini-Budget turned out to be a full-on, unmitigated, colossal disaster. To say that that horror show of incompetence spooked investors in the financial markets would be an understatement.

The Government’s unexpected and impulsive tax cut for the richest, withheld from even senior Ministers, plus promises of more reductions to come, were breathtaking in their unfairness and recklessness. Most importantly, none of those crazy plans was costed by the Office for Budget Responsibility, which was also kept in the dark, along with most of us. The Government left a huge un-costed hole in the nation’s finances—no wonder they tipped the City into total panic.

It beggars belief that the Government did not stop to consider for just one minute the consequences of their actions on the global markets and beyond. Despite the Prime Minister’s hero worship of Margaret Thatcher, she clearly paid no heed to her aphorism, “You can’t buck the markets.” It has added insult to injury that the Prime Minister and her Government have repeatedly tried to insist that the chaos they caused has been due to global factors.

In fact, clear data provided by the Bank of England’s Deputy Governor, Sir Jon Cunliffe, shows the direct relationship between the crisis and the then Chancellor’s Commons statement on 23 September. The data shows

that the cost of Government borrowing spiked in the immediate aftermath of the mini-Budget and started to come down again only after the Bank made £65 billion available to bail out the UK pensions industry. By contrast, the cost of Government borrowing in America and the EU markets remained relatively flat while Britain’s financial markets went into meltdown.

Let us be completely clear: this is a Tory crisis made in Downing Street. They created it. They own it. But it will be paid for by working people, paying higher mortgages and borrowing costs for years to come. That is the worst aspect of this mess—the very real harm it will do to real people and real lives. People’s life choices have been shredded in the blink of an eye by a kami-Kwasi Budget. An ideological fixation with failed trickle-down economics has caused the Prime Minister to wreck people’s hopes and aspirations. I have heard from young couples who are no longer able to buy their first homes, pensioners who are worried about putting the heating on, and parents who are panicking about how to make ends meet. Rents are soaring and landlords are hastily selling, which creates an even greater shortage of rented accommodation.

In my constituency of Enfield, Southgate, pollsters Survation found that in the aftermath of the mini-Budget, 60% of people are cutting back on their essential groceries and 57% are worried about not being able to pay energy bills. Approximately 11,000 people will also seek to refinance their mortgages in Enfield in 2023. They will face hundreds of pounds in increased costs thanks to the irresponsible ideology of the Prime Minister and her Government. Even now, with the new Chancellor, we are still flying blind with no OBR forecasts and being left in the dark about much of what the latest Chancellor is proposing and its impact.

Exactly a week ago at Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister said that there would be “absolutely” no public spending reductions. Yet that seems to be another broken promise, with signs that every single public service is again at risk. Public services and local government are already on their knees. My constituents frequently tell me how they cannot get GP appointments for less than four weeks away and how their hospital appointments are regularly cancelled.

Not only have the ex-Chancellor and the Prime Minister trashed the economy, but they have managed to trash the UK’s international reputation. With no less than the President of the United States, Joe Biden, declaring that the mini-Budget was a “mistake” and its implosion was “predictable”, we know the damage has been done. The Government’s economic credibility has been ruined and lasting damage has been done to the economy and to our international reputation. The same set of people simply U-turning will not fix it.

The Prime Minister made much of the anti-growth coalition in her speech to her chaotic party conference. If the Government want to understand who the anti-growth coalition truly are, they need only look in the mirror. The effects of the rashness and cult-like following of failed economic dogma over the last seven weeks will be felt for many years to come by ordinary people across the country. Opposition Members will make sure that the public do not forget who caused this chaos and that the blame is placed squarely on the Prime Minister and the Government.

2.49 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I want to bring us back to the macro side of what we are talking about here—the big picture—because I think very few hon. Members would disagree that economic growth in itself is a good thing. Economic growth is what any Government should be looking to pursue. Economic growth creates jobs, increases livelihoods and makes us a wealthier country, so having a growth plan is in itself a good thing. However, I want to highlight three challenges that I think we will face in future.

The first challenge is low pay. This country unfortunately has too many low-productive, low-paid, low-skilled jobs and too few highly skilled, highly productive, highly paid jobs. Peterborough is really symbolic of that, and I think the Government have been trying very much to address that with the levelling-up agenda, which was the focus of the previous Prime Minister. For places such as Peterborough, levelling up will involve significant investment in R&D and in retraining. That is what this Government were trying to do that.

In Peterborough we have just built ourselves a brand-new university, and it is not just any old university; it focuses on manufacturing and engineering, really creating the environment for all those highly paid jobs of the future. Thanks to the £25 million that Peterborough has received from the levelling-up fund, we are going to build ourselves a living lab next to that university, to act as a magnet for future investment and future companies, leading to those highly paid jobs of the future. It is decisions like that that will increase the health, wealth and happiness of my city.

The second challenge we face, both as a country and as an economy, is tax. Quite frankly, I do not think tax is going to come down. Hopefully, bringing tax down is an ambition, and I confidently predict that we will be able to do so in the medium term. However, we will continue to have big spending commitments in future. We have an ageing population, and they are going to rely more on public services. I think we will also find ourselves exposed to challenges such as the cost of fuel. It is absolutely right that this Government have invested, have brought out the package and are going to reduce significantly the fuel bills that my constituents face. Fuel bills that could have been £6,500, for a typical household, will now be only £2,500. That was absolutely the right thing to do.

Paula Barker: Does the hon. Member agree with me that the £2,500 that his constituents will now be paying is not a cap? That is a sort of misnomer.

Paul Bristow: What I agree with is the fact that, were it not for this Government's intervention, we would have seen prices of up to £6,000 for a typical household. Surely the hon. Lady welcomes the fact that in her constituency, as in mine, because of the actions of this Government, families will save themselves a great deal of money.

This Government have a strong track record on taking people out of tax. Remember that the personal allowance was of such a level in 2010, and it is now over £12,000. That is hundreds of thousands of people taken out of tax altogether, and millions of families supported. That is a good thing. The universal credit taper, reduced from

63% to 55%, has been a lifeline for constituents and families in my constituency. It makes work pay, which should be the focus when it comes to jobs and work. We want to reward those who take on extra hours, work hard and put in the effort.

The solution to tax that is higher than we would like is economic growth, because we can only make those spending commitments in the long term if we grow the economy. It is absolutely right that we have a growth strategy and that we follow it in the way that we are.

The third challenge is about positivity. Sometimes, especially when we are away from this place or when we are in our offices, we get this temptation to glance at our phones or at Twitter, and it is all doom and gloom. There is a real worry that sometimes people can scare themselves into economic difficulties. I think we need to be more positive as a country, and more positive about the long-term prospects for the UK economy.

Only last week I took the Peterborough heroes—I call them my heroes—to a reception I organised in Westminster. Many of those who came were charity workers, or people who have worked for particular businesses, charities or causes for a number of years. However, I very deliberately did not take only those people who had volunteered for their communities, as welcome and heroic as their efforts are. I also took entrepreneurs, because entrepreneurs create jobs, pay people and grow our economy, and I think it is just as worth while saying thank you and well done to them as it is to anybody else.

As has been repeated by Opposition Members, business is not the enemy. In fact, entrepreneurs and businesses are our friends in creating economic growth. I meet so many people in Peterborough, by virtue of being its Member of Parliament, who are truly heroic for taking a risk, truly heroic for having an idea, and truly heroic for employing people and doing the right thing. They are my heroes just as much as any charity worker in my constituency.

Those are the three challenges that I put to Ministers. First, we need to solve the problem of having a low-skill, low-paid economy and turn that into a high-skill, high-paid economy. Secondly, on tax, I do not think public spending is going to decrease in the near future, and we have a challenge there, but the Government have a strong track record. Thirdly, we need to be more positive and to recognise the efforts made by businessmen and women—by entrepreneurs. The foundations of the British economy are strong and we have hard-working, talented people in this country. That should all feature in a growth plan, and that is why I support this Government.

2.56 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Less than four weeks ago, we were sitting here listening to the Conservatives proudly announcing their plan for growth, which amounted to nothing more than a package of unfunded tax cuts for the wealthy. We have since witnessed the pound crash to a record low against the dollar, a run on pension funds and a crisis in the mortgage market. Now we are back here, but this time we are significantly poorer and with no plan for growth. The only growth that millions of struggling families and pensioners will experience as a result of the mini-Budget is in the increased price they will pay at the checkouts and in their monthly mortgage bills.

Now, the Conservatives are proposing cuts that will break our public services and deliver further pain to millions of people across the country. It was good to hear the Prime Minister commit to increasing pensions in line with inflation at Prime Minister's questions earlier today, but I note that this does contradict what the other Prime Minister—the Chancellor of the Exchequer—said on Monday. I note that the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), who is sadly no longer in this place, said how outrageous it is that a few Liberal Democrats in Norfolk cannot decide on a road, but I think that is pretty ironic under the circumstances.

What we need to hear now is that benefits are going to be increased in line with inflation. The news that these could also be undercut is the latest Conservative betrayal of the most vulnerable in society. These cuts were not inevitable, as the Chancellor may like us to believe; they are the result of choices made by this Conservative Government—choices that have trashed the UK's financial credibility and added billions to the cost of Government borrowing. Meanwhile, the Government refuse to tax the eye-watering excess profits of oil and gas companies, which could bring in up to £60 billion more to the public finances.

It is not just households and international markets that have lost faith in the Conservative Government; business confidence across the UK is also falling at an alarming rate after already tough market conditions were made worse by the botched mini-Budget. Small businesses are the engine of our economy, and business owners need a Government they can trust to deliver for them and support their recovery from the pandemic. But now businesses are facing higher borrowing and refinancing costs due to market volatility, at a time when SME debt has reached a staggering £204 billion. This leaves thousands of businesses at risk of going bust.

A real plan for growth is needed to secure future prosperity. The IMF recently downgraded the UK's growth forecast for 2023 to 0.3%, and the outlook from the OECD is even bleaker, predicting complete stagnation. A Liberal Democrat plan would focus on tackling chronic labour and skills shortages, by investing in our young people and delivering higher wages. We would also drive green investment and focus on rebuilding trade after Brexit, which is a major barrier to economic growth. According to the OBR, the UK has become a less trade-intensive economy, and trade as a share of our GDP has fallen by around 12% since 2019, which is two and a half times more than any other country in the G7.

Global economic conditions are tough, but domestic conditions have been exacerbated by Conservative chaos. This economic crisis is a self-inflicted national humiliation that has put markets in the driving seat of UK fiscal policy. The UK is the only country in the G7 that has had to reverse policy that was enacted just three and a half weeks ago, and the only country where the central bank has had to step in to stabilise the economy and secure people's pensions.

After weeks of denial, the Prime Minister has finally accepted responsibility for the economic pain of the mini-Budget, but after years of Conservative chaos, culminating in four different Chancellors in the past four months, the Conservatives have lost all financial credibility and their time is up. The new Chancellor may like us to believe that he can wipe the slate clean by

tearing up the plans of his colleagues, but the damage has already been done by the Conservatives, and millions of families and pensioners will suffer from the increased cost of living and reduced public services as a result.

Nobody has voted for this new economic strategy, and this Government no longer have the legitimacy or mandate to push it through. The public must be given the opportunity to decide what they are willing to accept. It is time for people to have their say in a general election.

3.1 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Let me go back 12 years, to the start of 12 consecutive years of reckless Tory Government. Twelve years—consider that. It is an incredible, or rather a depressing, amount of time. What have they done with their time in charge? They have cut our public services, slashed our essential infrastructure and decimated our communities. They originally asked us to do that in the name of austerity, and said that we must all tighten our belts and pinch our pennies so that their rich mates could be bailed out. We paid for the mistakes of their friends in the financial sector at great cost, and now we see it all happening again. The Government's economic plan has backfired on us all, sending the economy into freefall, and once again, they are asking people to pick up the tab.

Inflation is sky high at 10.1%, and set to rise. Energy prices are through the roof. Rents are rising across the country, and property prices are unsustainable. Wages have been kept low, and benefits have been cut. People are struggling, and they are scared. Are they right to be worried? I am worried too. There is simply no way that people can thrive in these circumstances. In my constituency of Birmingham, Hall Green, we see the worst of Tory failures. Child poverty is at a staggering high of 52.9%, and for every 100,000 children in Birmingham, 4,500 require assistance from food banks to ensure that they are fed. Almost 10% of families in Birmingham, Hall Green receive support from universal credit, while Birmingham suffers from an unemployment rate of 11.4%. Average annual take-home salaries sit at just under £21,000. Those figures fall far short of national averages, and it is clear that enough is enough.

The cause of these problems is clear: the cost of living is too high. This is a Tory-made crisis, made in Downing Street, but paid for by ordinary working people. Wages are low, and too much of our meagre pay cheques goes to pay the dividends and bonuses of big energy barons and the exorbitant rents of private landlords. Too much of our national infrastructure, such as the post and rail services, has been put into the hands of careless private owners who under-invest and push wages down—I know that all too well as a proud member of the Communication Workers Union who once worked for Royal Mail. Meanwhile, Royal Mail Group's profits have risen to £758 million. Do they take us for fools? Do they think we will not notice that blatant rip-off of hard-working people? How is that just, how is it fair? Yet that is what workers face across the country. It is clear that this is not just an economic crisis; this is a moral crisis and a crisis of greed. The resources that we built together—the homes, the infrastructure, the profits—are being sold off for the benefit of the rich. The fruits of our collective labour are going to the select few, which the Tories are only too happy to accommodate.

[Tahir Ali]

Dear, oh dear—where have we heard that before? Not so long ago it was mentioned when the Prime Minister went to see His Majesty the King. The economic mismanagement that we have seen play out in front of our eyes over the past few weeks has been nothing short of astounding. The disastrous mini-Budget pushed by the Prime Minister brought the country to the brink of collapse and left her leadership in tatters. Even with the U-turns, we are left with a Government who are clueless, out of touch, and intent on running our country into the ground. However, with all the U-turns and cock-ups there is a risk that we lose sight of the fundamental problems facing millions of people across the country—problems for which this Government still have no solutions.

The new Chancellor may have bought back an ounce of credibility for this failing Government, but he does so at the expense of working people across the country. His agenda is clear: bankers get to keep their huge bonuses, while the support for people facing unprecedented energy bills is to be scaled back. No tax cuts, but the promise of yet another round of austerity that will hit the poorest the hardest. No announcement on whether universal credit will rise in line with inflation; no solution to low growth and low wages. The mini-Budget may have gone, but we are all left with the same old Tories and the dismal future they offer.

3.7 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): We have had more than 12 years of a failing Conservative Government, and I will outline some of those failures. There has been a drastic rise in food bank dependency, and the Government appear to think that is acceptable and should continue to exist in our society. I say no, that should not happen, and I know Labour Members agree with that. Child poverty is very prevalent. Children in my constituency are going hungry, some both in the mornings and at lunchtime because their parents do not have enough money to feed them breakfast and give them lunch. Universal credit does not go far enough, and the very least the Government could do is ensure that it increases in line with inflation. The Government have carried out cut after cut to our public services. Those cuts affect the quality of people's lives every day, because services are no longer in existence, and charities do not have the support they need to carry out those vital services.

While the roll-out of the vaccine is to be commended—let me say again how great the NHS was in rolling out that vaccine, as it continues to do, and acknowledge our key workers—even under the previous Prime Minister the economy was mismanaged. Many self-employed people were left to fend for themselves during the pandemic, and millions, even billions of pounds were written off by the Government. The UK has recovered more slowly than any other G7 country.

For the recent Prime Minister and her Government it is even harder to know where to begin. In light of what is happening globally, the mini-Budget was supposed to help, but instead it was an act of economic self-sabotage. How on earth did the Prime Minister and her then Chancellor fail to see that large unfunded tax cuts would not work? What we saw was high inflation, the devaluing of the pound, pension funds plummeting and mortgage rates being hiked.

The consequences of the crisis were made entirely in Downing Street. In years to come, the cost will be paid by millions of working people. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor have now admitted that the mini Budget caused mortgage rates to go up and borrowing costs to surge. Nearly 10,000 households in the borough of Lewisham will face higher mortgage rates in 2023, and the situation for renters is no better.

Earlier this week, I raised the case of my constituent who was forced to leave an abusive marriage. She works and has children, and she could barely afford her private rent. She was already on universal credit. To make matters worse, her rent recently increased by £300. She simply cannot afford that. Other constituents are experiencing similar things. One shares a house and has since seen their rent rise by £600. They, too, cannot afford that. Are the Government saying that it is okay for people to fall into debt and that the everyday person has to accept the situation? It is not right.

Many parents across the country are struggling to feed their children. In fact, 26% of households with children have experienced food insecurity in the past month. Instead of the Government focusing their efforts on helping struggling families, they have lifted the cap on bankers' bonuses. How can the Conservatives say that theirs is a party of fiscal responsibility when they hold the management of the economy in scant regard?

The Government have seen four Chancellors in the last 107 days. They need to stand aside. Labour will restore financial responsibility for the country with a serious plan for growth that puts people first. The next Labour Government will establish a great British energy company, because we are committed to lowering bills, protecting the environment and creating jobs. Labour will also introduce a new deal to boost job security, promote fairer pay and tackle the gender and ethnic minority pay gaps. The price of the Tory Government is already far too high to pay.

The Prime Minister says that she is a democrat. If she is, it is vital that we have a general election now.

3.12 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The mini Budget has obviously been a complete disaster and catastrophe, and that is what the motion is about. There was the unfunded tax cuts for the rich—whether the 45p rate, bankers' bonuses or corporation tax—and letting the fossil fuel companies with their excess profits off the hook. It was unfair and unforecasted, and it led to sterling going down, mortgages going up and debt costs going up—a complete disaster. When the Chancellor stands at the Dispatch Box and says, "Okay, it was all a mistake. We will reverse it. Don't worry, we'll grow the economy," that is completely ludicrous.

It is possible to grow the economy. Labour grew the economy by 40% in the 10 years to 2008 and used that to double investment in the health service and education and to lift a million children out of poverty and a million pensioners out of poverty. What have we seen in the last 12 years, since 2010? To start with, we had George Osborne's austerity, where he said that he would sack half a million public servants. The response of the market was that consumer demand went down. We have also not seen any growth or any increases in pay, so the country and the economy had no resilience for the pandemic, wars or outside shocks.

The truth is, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies said, had the trend rate of growth under Labour continued up to the pandemic, average wages in Britain would have been £10,000 higher, so people would have been stronger to take on the shocks that we have all suffered. That is because of the Tories. It was not all right before the mini Budget—it was already a disaster—and now this is a complete crisis caused by the Tories.

Under Labour, in 2010, 26,000 people were using food banks. By 2021, the figure was 2.6 million—100 times the level—and now it is far worse. One in four children, and one in five households, are now in food poverty. What are the Government doing about it? Very little.

In Wales, where there is a Labour Government, we have free breakfasts in schools and free lunches for which anyone can sign up, because we recognise, as Winston Churchill did, that the health of the nation is its most important asset and keeping people fed is critical. On Monday, the *Financial Times* said that for every £1 invested in the NHS, we get £4 back in growth. When I put that to the Chancellor, he completely misunderstood the point and started talking about tech businesses or something. This is about having a healthy nation that can work and proper jobs in the NHS.

In 2014, in a massive study of many countries, the OECD found a direct relationship between inequality and growth: namely, where there is less inequality, there is higher growth. So if the country wants higher growth, why did we have a mini-Budget that was all about giving the super-rich more money and clobbering the poor? Why index benefits to wages instead of prices, which are rocketing? It is completely inept, completely unfair and completely immoral, and it is going on and on.

The Government talk about productivity. We know from the Office for National Statistics that we would increase productivity if we had more people working online—in particular, older people with caring responsibilities who want a more flexible work-life balance—but we have a Secretary of State at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy who, as I understand it, does not even have a computer and pooh-poohs the idea. He thinks, “You can’t be working if you’re at home.” It is completely inept.

We should have equal wi-fi offered to everyone by providing wi-fi clouds in towns and on all our trains. When I commute back to Swansea, we are just wasting hours because there is no proper wi-fi. That is because it is not a public service and the private provider cannot be bothered to put it in. It is completely ridiculous.

We know that austerity, which it has been promised that we will go back to, produced 300,000 excess deaths. We know that trade is down, largely because of a cocked-up Brexit. We know that Conservative MPs voted for the current Prime Minister, who endorsed the mini-Budget that has created an even worse catastrophe. We know that Tory MPs did not support the Chancellor, who is now getting us back to square one. The only reason why we have a certain stability in market confidence is because of knowledge from the polls that there is some prospect of a Labour Government in two years who will put us back on track. What we should do morally, economically and politically is give the people a choice—give them a general election now—so that we can sort out the economy and give power to a party that

can and has delivered growth and which will deliver a better, stronger, fairer, greener Britain, and kick this lot out.

3.17 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies). I speak in support of the points made by the shadow Chancellor and a number of hon. Members from across the House. I will cover three brief points in the time available: reflect on the seriousness of the crisis of the past few weeks, which is unprecedented; consider the serious effects on families and pensioners across the country; and consider the pressing and serious problems facing businesses, whether large or small.

To put the last few weeks into some sort of context, this truly is a crisis made in Downing Street and one that is absolutely dreadful for the country on so many levels. I am utterly staggered that a Prime Minister and Chancellor could have taken those steps, and I cannot understand why they made such serious mistakes.

The unfunded, reckless tax cuts, leading to significant increases in mortgage costs and other business costs, are absolutely dreadful for the whole country. My feelings after these weeks, and at certain points during the journey that we have been on—the zig-zag of U-turns and mismanagement—is one of disbelief. I am sick and tired of waking up to the “Today” programme telling me of some dramatic change in Government policy leading to awful effects on the country. I am also fed up with the evening news reporting on the latest rumours and difficulties facing the Government. I would like to see a period of stability, as I think we all would. Certainly, our businesses would, and families and pensioners would.

Moreover, this deeply saddens me, because the Government’s inept mismanagement has deeply damaged the country’s long-held reputation. It is dreadful that the then Chancellor was at the IMF in Washington at the very time when senior figures in the organisation were criticising British policy. We had the completely unprecedented experience of the US President commenting on UK economic policy and mismanagement by the Government, and the former Governor of the Bank of England criticising Government policy.

I wish to move on from all that but, in the time I have, I will draw Members’ attention to the very real effects on working people who will now be paying the cost of this very serious crisis for months and years to come. I want to explain some of the work I have been doing in my constituency, which covers Reading and Woodley, and the visits I have made to local centres to see the effects for myself and to see quite how awful it has been.

I am lucky to represent a relatively prosperous area in south-east England, but we have serious poverty which is being made dramatically worse. We have a large number of families and pensioners who are struggling and who are very concerned about mortgage and rental costs. I visited the Weller Centre in the last few days, which is a wonderful community centre in Caversham in my constituency. Amazing work is being done there to support people on so many different levels by a charity. It was worrying to see how many people are now having to rely on food banks. That has been a constant for some time, but it is getting much, much worse. In addition, to make things worse still, fewer supplies are now being donated because of the pressures

[Matt Rodda]

on the retailers and households who have generously donated. As a result, the community fridge at the centre is not as full as it was. The boxes of fruit, vegetables, other produce and dry goods are not as full as they were and there are real impacts on people in desperate need. The centre is trying to provide cheap, hot food to pensioners—often things like baked potatoes and basic food—to help them to make ends meet. It also offers a warm bank.

All that is to be commended, but that scale of support would not be needed were it not for the Government's mismanagement. In Reading and Woodley town centres, and in other local centres across the constituency, we can see very clearly the effects of the Government's mismanagement. Other colleagues have mentioned them, too. There are empty shops and business units because of the effects of that mismanagement. My area is a regional hub for business and shopping in the central belt of southern England, so it is disturbing to see that level of empty property.

I strongly suspect that many small businesses—I have had businesses contact me—are having real worries about their energy bills. They are also concerned about the rising price of borrowing and other business costs. They are putting off vital investment and other vital decisions because of the Government's mismanagement, and that has a real effect on employment and business growth across the country. It shows the scale of the Government's mistakes.

I found some solace—it is a salutary warning to Ministers—in the fact that business leaders are increasingly looking to the Labour party for leadership and to what I hope will be an incoming Labour Government in the not-too-distant future. I thought it particularly interesting that the CEO of Tesco praised Labour's economic plan. In fact, I think he said that only Labour had an economic plan to take us out of current difficulties.

To conclude, we have seen today that the Government have made serious mistakes that working people will be paying for, for months and years to come. There needs to be a completely new approach. We need, ultimately, a new Government to take things forward for this country.

3.23 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda).

Last month, the Government engaged in one of the worst acts of economic self-destruction in living memory. Overnight they plunged the pound to historic lows, mortgage interest rates skyrocketed out of control and six major pension funds faced total collapse. In just five weeks, they have imploded the economy, destroyed our global reputation further and thrown countless more families into debt and destitution. One former US Treasury Secretary even described it as one of the worst macroeconomic decisions ever taken, suggesting that

“The U.K. is behaving a bit like an emerging market turning itself into a submerging market.”

Research by the New Economics Foundation found that the trickle-down Budget pushed the income of the poorest 10% a further £900 under the cost of basic living supplies, while boosting the incomes of the richest by £5,000 above cost; a move totally divorced from

reality. Now, with the damage already done, they have announced an embarrassing set of U-turns. They are already signalling a return to the savage and failed policies of austerity, which will decimate our infrastructure and public services, and make working people poorer the length and breadth of Britain.

Despite all that, the Prime Minister and the former Chancellor were right about one thing: the economic policies of the past decade have utterly failed to address the biggest challenges faced in our society. Indeed, successive Tory Governments have overseen the worst growth in GDP per head since records began. According to figures by the ONS, the UK is the only G7 economy yet to recover to above its pre-pandemic levels. That is 12 years of stagnant wages that have resulted in what the TUC referred to as the worst pay crisis “since Napoleonic times,” with real incomes still well below 2010 levels at the time of the outgoing Labour Government.

UK inflation is on course to rise to its highest peak in half a century and 45 million people are about to be plunged into full poverty. Many will struggle to put food on the table and keep the lights on this winter. Low-income households will see the gap between income and the cost of living increase by 40% next April, with three in four households unable to cover rising costs. People in Ilford have borne the brunt of this economic crisis. My inbox this week was full of desperate cries for help from constituents who have no idea how they are going to make it through another grim winter, with so many forced into debt and further below the poverty line.

The Chancellor's attempt to mend the damage done by his predecessor is nothing more than a return to the age of austerity that damaged our economy so deeply, instead of the strategic long-term investment that is so badly needed in the UK. Yet again, a Tory Chancellor has warned that “more difficult decisions” are yet to come to cope with the economic crisis that his own party has inflicted on the country. His new advisory panel is entirely made up of members of the financial sector, including former Chancellor George Osborne's chief of staff, now a member of Blackrock, the designers of the LDI—liability driven investment—schemes that very nearly imploded the economy two weeks ago, as well as a representative from J.P. Morgan. That is hardly reflective of the needs and wants of the wider public. Where are the representatives of the rest of the economy, the TUC or the low-paid workers set to be hit the hardest?

The Chancellor has unsurprisingly already told us that cuts to vital services are seemingly inevitable. Again, it looks like working people up and down the country are going to be asked to tighten their belts even further. Why do these “tough decisions” always seem to fall on working class people, when so many at the top have never had things so good? Indeed, energy giants are set to make up to £170 billion in excess profits during this crisis, while ordinary households struggle to pay the bills, and we may well be heading towards rolling blackouts. CEOs are now collecting an average of 109 times the pay of ordinary workers, with chief execs of the UK's 100 biggest companies seeing their pay increase by a staggering 39%, well above pre-pandemic levels. Isn't it about time that the very richest and their oligarch allies, who got us in this mess in the first place, shoulder some of the burden?

Getting more cash in the hands of everyday people would lead to exactly the kind of high growth that the Government claim to want, with far better health and education outcomes as a result. Wages must rise, at the very least, in line with inflation across the board, and those bearing the brunt of the cost of living crisis need a pandemic-style bail-out for their energy bills. The IMF has suggested that it would cost about £30 billion to compensate the poorest 40% of households for price rises this year—still a fraction of furlough costs and £10 billion less than Shell and BP made in profit last year alone.

The energy giants will continue to raise their mark-ups as long as they are allowed to do so, and they cannot be trusted to keep bills at affordable levels. It is high time that they are replaced by a single publicly owned energy company, run by workers and held to account by consumers. We need a genuinely transformative green new deal, working hand in hand with a coherent, progressive industrial strategy to rebalance the economy away from the City of London and create millions of high-skilled, well-paid, unionised jobs—forging a greener, more just society and putting Britain at the heart of the fight internationally against climate change.

3.29 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I rise to speak in favour of the motion tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). As others have outlined, interest rates are rising while inflation is now in excess of 10%. Mortgages and rents are increasing as real incomes fall. Twelve years of austerity and the cost of living crisis are making life a misery for people in my communities.

On top of that, the mini-Budget of the Chancellor's predecessor has created long-term damage to the economy. Despite substantial U-turns in policy, energy producers and other monopolies continue to make huge windfall profits. There remains economic chaos, which the Government are struggling to control, but that chaos is because the Conservatives defend their and their allies' incomes and their class interests. The mini-Budget that caused such chaos was a huge ideological experiment in tax handouts to the wealthy. That is why I support the motion and, in particular, believe that the economy must work for every single person in every part of the United Kingdom.

The people of my Cynon Valley constituency and the people in Wales are going through a cost of living emergency. When I surveyed people in Cynon Valley, I found that nearly 90% of them felt worse off than they did 12 months previously; more than two thirds said that they will significantly cut down on heating; almost half said that they would not put the heating on at all; and the vast majority said that the situation was having a detrimental impact on their mental health.

Behind those statistics are real people. Let me quote a couple of my constituents. One said:

"Life genuinely doesn't feel worth living any more. I feel guilty for bringing my children into this awful mess of a world."

Another, a disabled person, said:

"I have no idea what I'm going to do—this—

winter, something has to give."

Those are harrowing comments by constituents. That is the real-life impact of the cost of living emergency.

The Chancellor is not interested in working on behalf of my constituents and 99% of the people living in this country. He has been clear that he is going to pursue yet another ideological austerity agenda. Cutting public spending is an attack on the living standards of working-class people.

The people of Wales deserve better. We deserve fair funding and a needs-based funding formula. I commend the First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, who yesterday passionately and rightly condemned Conservative cuts to the NHS in Wales. He has also made clear his backing and support for an inflation-proofed pay rise for public sector workers. Westminster—the Treasury—needs to ensure fair funding for Wales and not force my constituents further into poverty.

The cost of living crisis is undoubtedly a political choice made by successive Conservative Governments here in Westminster. It is clear that the public cannot afford for this Conservative Government to remain in office, and as others said, we are ready for an election at any time. Right now, however, we also need urgent action to better distribute the enormous wealth in this country; we are the fifth richest nation in the world. To do that, we must also change the balance of power from the few to the many. We need to see an inflation-proofed rise in income. I still think that the Tory party's position on pensions is at best unclear or confusing. Social security is now under threat from the Chancellor, who has refused to back a rise at today's inflation rate, and we need to see inflation-proofed increases in pay. We also need to see a shift in the burden of taxation to those who can afford it: the wealthy, the banks, the monopolies making millions and billions in profit.

The TUC congress is meeting this week. Yesterday, it agreed that it must

"organise coordinated action over pay and terms and conditions...with all TUC unions".

I support that resolution, and yesterday I tabled an early-day motion about it.

The people in Cynon Valley, in Wales and throughout the United Kingdom cannot and will not tolerate a further period of austerity based on unacceptable economic theories. We are mobilising to defeat the Tory agenda. Trade unions, local authorities, communities and constituents up and down the country are coming together in unity to campaign and care for one another. There is a better way. In this economic chaos, the Conservatives will continue to defend their own incomes and interests. Now we will defend ours. *Diolch yn fawr.*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): *Diolch yn fawr.*

3.35 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I am pleased to conclude the debate on behalf of the Opposition. I welcome the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury to his position. His colleague the Exchequer Secretary is an old-timer: she has been in post for six weeks. No doubt she is sitting at the Treasury talking about the old times back in September.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. We have heard many powerful speeches about the impact of inflation and rising energy costs, the pressures on business, the UK's international reputation and the impact of rising mortgage rates. If you will forgive me, however, Mr Deputy Speaker, I

[Mr Pat McFadden]

want to single out the speech of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), who not only spoke about his own health issues, but added his voice to those of Conservative Members calling for the Prime Minister to go.

This country has been through very significant economic damage in recent weeks: a run on the pound, a spike in gilt yields that has increased the cost of Government borrowing, emergency interventions from the Bank of England to prop up the country's pension system, and a spike in mortgage rates that will add to the household costs of millions of people to years to come. All of it has been self-inflicted—not an act of God, not the result of global conditions, but the result of using the country for an ideological experiment. To deal with the argument that the Financial Secretary made at the beginning of the debate—essentially, that this is all global—I will quote from a letter from the Bank of England to the Treasury Committee. If any Conservative Member wants to intervene to say that any of it is wrong, they can be my guest.

Immediately after the mini-Budget, there were two days with the biggest daily rises in gilt yields in 20 years. Over four days, the rise was twice as large as the biggest rise since 2000. The Bank of England says that

“the scale and speed of repricing...far exceeded historical moves”.

Following the mini-Budget, gilts moved more in one day than in 23 of the past 27 years. No such moves happened in gilts in dollars, euros or other major currencies. There were global factors before the mini-Budget, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) said, the global context was a reason not to act in such a rash manner, not a reason to behave with all the restraint of a couple of trigger-happy pyromaniacs.

This crisis was not born of global conditions, but made in Downing Street. It has destroyed the Conservative party's claims to be the party of economic competence and of sound money. The real-life impact of what the Government have done has been to place a Tory risk premium on the country's borrowing costs and a Tory premium on people's mortgage rates.

James Cartledge: I asked the shadow Chancellor earlier whether it was correct that Labour's intervention in energy support would be almost primarily funded by borrowing despite its pledges on the windfall tax. Is that correct?

Mr McFadden: We have never argued that there was no need for borrowing. The point we made was that much more of this could be funded by a windfall tax. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that that is some sort of revelation, I can only ask him where he has been living for the last few months.

The Prime Minister and the Chancellor of September behaved like student pamphleteers. When the Prime Minister stood up at her conference and attacked

“vested interests dressed up as think tanks”,

it was an announcement worthy of the gold medal for lack of self-awareness, for never has there been a Government more symbolic of the failure of think-tanks on influential thinking than the one that she leads.

The Prime Minister and her ideological soulmate got the keys to the Treasury Ferrari, took it for a joyride and then crashed it into a ditch. Now, belatedly, by commissioning the OBR report and singing the praises of an independent Bank of England after spending all the summer undermining it, they have signed themselves up for the speed awareness course; but it is too late, because people will continue to pay the price of what they have done.

We have now had two fiscal events with no report from the OBR. This was not just about what was done, but about how it was done. The whole country is paying a price for the Conservative party's contempt for the institutions that safeguard our economic credibility. And where does it all leave the Prime Minister? The mini-Budget was not a surprise to her; it was not imposed on her; she was 100% its co-author. It embodied her beliefs, her world view, the central core of the campaign on which she fought and won the leadership contest. Now everything she believes in has had to be burned in front of her to try to keep this zombie Government carrying on. This is not a case of “too far, too fast”, as she has claimed, or of a minor policy U-turn. It is a repudiation of everything that she stands for. It is a total and utter reversal.

The one surviving policy that the Prime Minister keeps praying in aid, the energy price guarantee, is the one policy that she campaigned against throughout her leadership campaign, saying that she was opposed to handouts. The question now is, what is her premiership for? Is it for the policies that she really believes in—those in the mini-Budget, now rejected and lying in ashes—or is it for the revenge of the orthodoxy that she so disdains? Each dose of the medicine she takes entails embracing that which she has so publicly rejected. Her argument, in effect, is “Please keep me here so that I can be what I am not.”

Mr Perkins: Is not the truth that what the Prime Minister's leadership is for is for the moment? She is here for a very short period, until the Tories can find an excuse to get rid of her.

Mr McFadden: My hon. Friend is right. In fact, the only discussion on the Conservative Benches is about how to do precisely that.

We cannot believe anything the Prime Minister says. Only seven days ago, she stood at that Dispatch Box and promised there would be “absolutely” no spending cuts.

Five days later, the new Chancellor—October's Chancellor—told us that the cuts had to be eye-watering. Conservative Members know that this is an impossible basis for leadership, and that it leaves the Prime Minister in an untenable position. They are remembering the words of the song that was played at their party conference as she came on to the stage:

“You've done me wrong, your time is up...there's no way back...you're movin' on out”.

Three cheers for M People: not just a great band, but one with the political foresight of Nostradamus.

Now the new Chancellor has been sent down from the mountain, come among us, as he says, to restore confidence and stability—but who destroyed confidence in the UK? Who created the instability? Who fashioned

the Tory risk premium? I am too polite to call it what they are calling it in the City, which is “the moron premium”. It was the new Chancellor’s own Government.

Let us be clear: no one was talking about spending cuts before the mini-Budget of 23 September, so the cuts are a result of what the Government have done. There has been no emergency central bank intervention to rescue pensions in the United States, Germany or France. The global circumstances that the Government refer to were the reason not to take such reckless risks with the public finances.

I have noticed one thing about the new Chancellor, though: he is not pretending that it is year zero. He is owning the record—all 12 years of it—and he now wants to implement a version of what was done after 2010. We have gone from an economic policy of having to borrow from communities such as mine in Wolverhampton South East to fund a tax cut for people earning over £150,000 to a policy of those communities having to pay for the chaos caused by the first policy.

We can see what the plan is. Having crashed the economy and brought a new dimension of pity, bemusement and risk to the term “global Britain”, the Government now want the acid test to be support for their public expenditure cuts. They have already made people pay once for their mismanagement through higher mortgage rates. Now they want to make people pay twice through cuts to public services. It is the ultimate in governmental arrogance. They get to mess up the country through a giant ideological experiment and then ask everyone else to pay the price. That is not a political virility test; it is a candid admission of failure.

The roots of that failure lie not just in one or two policy errors but in something deeper. They lie in the triumph of ideology over evidence. They lie in the view that all that is needed is blind faith—the test that someone is a true believer—and the view that anyone who questions or points out inconvenient truths is a doom-monger, part of the blob, and not a proper patriot. That destructive ideology has done great harm to our politics. It has reduced the Conservative party to its current abject state, and has served as the rationale for attacking one institution after another.

Politics begins with wanting to change the world, but what have this Conservative Government been reduced to? Attacking tofu. What other forms of food will now be lined up in the culture war that is all that is left for them? The disaster of the past few months should result not just in a few policy U-turns, but in turning away from the politics that drove those decisions and has done such harm to the country. This country has great strengths: world-leading services, great high-value manufacturing, creative industries with global reach, some of the best universities in the world, and a fantastic workforce. It deserves much better than this Conservative Government.

3.47 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Edward Argar): I think I last stood at this Dispatch Box about three months ago, so it is a privilege to close this debate on behalf of the Government. I welcome the kind words from the shadow Chief Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden). I suspect, knowing him as I do, that he will be tough in his challenges, with, as we have seen, a suitably dry delivery and sense of humour, but I have huge respect for him,

as he knows. I have yet to be treated to his singing voice—sadly, we were not just then—but on a future occasion he might be tempted.

I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions. The debate has understandably invited the expression of strong views on the part of all Members who have spoken. That is because economic stability is not just about abstract numbers and graphs. As the shadow Chief Secretary knows, I am nothing if not a pragmatist. This is about our constituents, our families, our friends and our neighbours, and it matters. As the Chancellor set out to the House on Monday:

“Behind the decisions we take and the issues on which we vote are jobs that families depend on, mortgages that have to be paid, savings for pensioners, and businesses investing for the future.”—*[Official Report, 17 October 2022; Vol. 720, c. 395.]*

Sometimes those decisions are difficult or, indeed, very difficult, as the Chancellor acknowledged. We know we need to do more to give certainty to the markets about our fiscal plans, and we have. I am clear, as is my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and, indeed, the Prime Minister, that we need to prioritise the needs of the most vulnerable, and we will.

We also know that the long-term economic wellbeing of this country relies on our achieving sustainable growth. In the coming weeks and months, responsibly and sustainably, we will continue that urgent mission. Indeed, the reason the United Kingdom has always succeeded is that, at big and difficult moments, we have taken tough decisions in the long-term interest of the country. When conditions allow, when it is consistent with sound public finances, we will seek to cut taxes to support further economic growth.

I remind the House that, since 2010, the United Kingdom has seen the third highest real GDP growth rate in the G7, increasing by more than Germany, France, Japan and Italy. The UK is forecast to be the fastest growing economy in the G7 in 2022. We have a strong labour market with the lowest unemployment rate in almost 50 years, which gives genuine grounds for optimism about our long-term prospects for growth.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to his place. He has used the word “pragmatism.” The shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury was on the money with regard to the folly of applying ideology when the circumstances do not allow it. Will my right hon. Friend, from the Dispatch Box, give both the country and the House confidence that good, old-fashioned Tory pragmatism and common sense—people can call it Treasury orthodoxy if they wish—are back at the helm?

Edward Argar: I have just set out where we are and what the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have said about the approach we are adopting. It is my firm belief, and the Chancellor’s firm belief, that we wish to be a tax-cutting Government, but that must be done from a basis of sustainability. When taxes are cut sustainably, we see behaviours change that help to generate investment and growth, which is what the Prime Minister and the Chancellor seek.

Sir Stephen Timms: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I will make some progress on the contributions made by hon. and right hon. Members. I will address the right hon. Gentleman’s contribution, and he may then want to come back to me.

[Edward Argar]

The concerns expressed by the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), about economic turmoil are a little rich, given that his party seeks to impose the chaos, turmoil and economic cost of another referendum on Scotland, being unable to accept the democratic decision of the Scottish people in the last referendum.

On the most vulnerable, I highlight to the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, other hon. and right hon. Members the £37 billion of support that has been made available across the United Kingdom to support people with the cost of living. The SNP's prospectus, set out a few days ago, on what independence would mean is a recipe for chaos and turmoil for the people of Scotland.

I am extremely pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) in his place. I pay tribute to his courage in speaking out so openly about his own challenges and, in so doing, doing a huge service to many people up and down this country. He is a man of great integrity and great courage, and I pay tribute to him. Although I do not always agree with him, this Chamber is always wise to listen to him. He represents his constituents passionately and well in this place. He touched on a number of things, but he specifically mentioned institutions—as did the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury—including the Bank of England and the OBR. My hon. Friend knows me well and he knows that I have huge respect for both those bodies. Before I knew I would be occupying this place and that the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East would be my shadow, he and I were on television and I paid tribute to him for his role in a previous Labour Government for setting up the independence of the Bank of England, which I believe is important and needs to be respected.

The right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) is a distinguished former Chief Secretary to the Treasury and he highlighted a number of things, particularly the benefits question and the uprating of benefits, as did the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). They will know that there is an annual process by which that is done. That process requires the statistics that were made available for the first time today—the September statistics. It is extremely important that that process is followed and I do not intend from the Dispatch Box to pre-empt a process that should be followed properly.

I listened carefully, as I always do, to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). He raised a particular point about stamp duty land tax thresholds and second homes. The increase in the SDLT threshold implemented on 23 September will remain, supporting first-time buyers and making home ownership more accessible. No one purchasing a second home or buy-to-let property will be taken out of paying SDLT entirely following the Government's changes. The higher rate for additional dwellings introduced by the Government in April 2016 will continue to apply at 3% above the standard rate. I know that the Chancellor will have listened carefully to the points my hon. Friend made.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) raised a number of points, including one about the NHS and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's role in it. This Government have invested record amounts in

our NHS; I was the Minister who took through, in early 2020, the legislation that increased by £33.9 billion the funding for the NHS. My party has a strong track record of funding our NHS.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) was right to highlight, as others have, the broader context in the global economy with which we are faced: the legacy of covid; and the challenges in Ukraine. During covid we did the right thing, supported by those on both sides of this House, to protect lives and livelihoods, but we should not pretend that that did not come at a significant cost.

Sir Stephen Timms *rose—*

Edward Argar: I am very conscious that I have only about two minutes left and I would like to address the points made by a few other colleagues, including some on the right hon. Gentleman's side of the House.

The hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) knows that I am fond of him—I do not know whether that will harm my career or his—but I just highlight to him the challenges that have driven the headline inflation rates we are seeing, which are higher in the eurozone than here at the moment. These are not Government-driven; they are energy costs and supply-chain challenges. If he looks at the analysis by the Office for National Statistics of the figures, he will see that those rates are particularly driven by food costs and food supply chains. We also have to look more broadly at the geopolitical context.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) genuinely understands business and knows what it takes, and he highlighted the need to support the most vulnerable. That is something that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has made clear will be at the forefront of his announcements. My hon. Friend also touched on the social care levy and the social care cap, and I know that he has views on it. I know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will have heard that, but I am afraid that my hon. Friend will have to wait until 31 October for announcements from the Chancellor, which I will not pre-empt.

Significant contributions have been made by Members from both sides of this House. These are challenging times and the Government will take the difficult decisions necessary to ensure there is trust in our national finances. We will also remain completely committed to our mission to go for growth rooted in economic stability and confidence, but let us not forget that our economic foundations remain strong.

We are a Government with a record of action: we acted to support families and businesses on energy costs, we have acted to bring stability, and we will act to grow the economy. As the Chancellor said to the House on Monday, despite all the adversity and challenges we face, there is enormous potential in this country. Our job, now and always, is to fulfil that potential.

Question put.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I understand there has been a problem with the card readers in the Aye Lobby. They should be working now.

The House having divided: Ayes 223, Noes 0.

Division No. 65]**[4 pm****AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Bardell, Hannah
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet
 Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flynn, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Kate
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian

Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorris, Anna
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh
 Liz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh
 Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twigg, Derek
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Navendu Mishra and
Gerald Jones

NOES**Tellers for the Noes:**

Mark Tami and
Lilian Greenwood

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House regrets the long-term damage to the economy as a direct result of the mini budget, where mortgage rates for households have risen and the stability of pension funds has come under threat; notes that despite substantial U-turns in policy since the mini budget, the Government's funding position has deteriorated, the cost of borrowing is expected to be higher for many years and the UK's fiscal credibility has been undermined, all while many energy producers continue to make record windfall profits; therefore calls on the Government to take all necessary steps to stabilise the economy and make it work for ordinary working people and business through a plan for growth that puts them at its heart; and further calls on the Government to publish the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts immediately alongside Government estimates of windfall profits for the next two years from energy producers in the UK.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, the motion that the House has just passed, with no opposition from the Government,

“calls on the Government to publish the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts immediately alongside Government estimates of windfall profits for the next two years from energy producers in the UK.”

Both those pieces of information are very important. The House has just called on the Government to publish them immediately. I seek your help in making sure that that happens.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the right hon. Member for his point of order. Those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what he has to say. He is absolutely right that the Government must respond within a certain period of time to say how they will act now that that motion has been passed.

Ban on Fracking for Shale Gas Bill

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.14 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to introduce a ban on hydraulic fracking for shale gas; and makes provision as set out in this Order:

(1) On Tuesday 29 November 2022:

- (a) Standing Order No. 14(1) (which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that Order) shall not apply;
- (b) any proceedings governed by this Order may be proceeded with until any hour, though opposed, and shall not be interrupted;
- (c) the Speaker may not propose the question on the previous question, and may not put any question under Standing Order No. 36 (Closure of debate) or Standing Order No. 163 (Motion to sit in private);
- (d) at 3.00 pm, the Speaker shall interrupt any business prior to the business governed by this Order and call the Leader of the Opposition or another Member on his behalf to present a Bill concerning a ban on hydraulic fracking for shale gas of which notice of presentation has been given and immediately thereafter (notwithstanding the practice of the House) call a Member to move the motion that the Ban on Fracking for Shale Gas Bill be now read a second time as if it were an order of the House;
- (e) in respect of that Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.
- (f) any proceedings interrupted or superseded by this Order may be resumed or (as the case may be) entered upon and proceeded with after the moment of interruption.

(2) The provisions of paragraphs (3) to (18) of this Order shall apply to and in connection with the proceedings on the Ban on Fracking for Shale Gas Bill in the present Session of Parliament.

Timetable for the Bill on Tuesday 29 November 2022

(3)(a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at the sitting on Tuesday 29 November 2022 in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 5.00 pm.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 7.00 pm. Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put on Tuesday 29 November 2022

(4) When the Bill has been read a second time: (a) it shall, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme Order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put; (b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(5)(a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (3), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply—

- (a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;
- (b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;
- (c) the Question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by The Chairman or Speaker for separate decision;
- (d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a designated Member;
- (e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other Questions, other than the Question on any motion described in paragraph (15) of this Order.

(7) On a Motion made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and Messages on a subsequent day

(8) If on any future sitting day any message on the Bill (other than a message that the House of Lords agrees with the Bill without amendment or agrees with any message from this House) is expected from the House of Lords, this House shall not adjourn until that message has been received and any proceedings under paragraph (9) have been concluded.

(9) On any day on which such a message is received, if a designated Member indicates to the Speaker an intention to proceed to consider that message—

- (a) notwithstanding Standing Order No. 14(1) any Lords Amendments to the Bill or any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly;
- (b) proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under subparagraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed;
- (c) the Speaker may not propose the question on the previous question, and may not put any question under Standing Order No. 36 (Closure of debate) or Standing Order No. 163 (Motion to sit in private) in the course of those proceedings.

(10) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme Orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to a conclusion as if:

- (a) any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member;
- (b) after paragraph (4)(a) there is inserted—
“(aa) the question on any amendment or motion selected by the Speaker for separate decision;”.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme Orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings on consideration of a Lords Message to a conclusion as if any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member.

Reasons Committee

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme Orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order as if any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member.

Miscellaneous

(13) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings on the Bill to which this Order applies.

(14)(a) No Motion shall be made, except by a designated Member, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(15)(a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings on the Bill to which this Order applies except by a designated Member.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(16) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(17) No private business may be considered at any sitting to which the provisions of this Order apply.

(18)(a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which proceedings to which this Order applies are to take place shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings to which this Order applies. (b) Standing Order 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply in respect of any such debate.

(19) In this Order, “a designated Member” means—

- (a) the Leader of the Opposition; and
- (b) any other Member acting on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition.

(20) This Order shall be a Standing Order of the House.

We have called this debate to provide the House with the right, which it should have, to make the decision on whether fracking should be allowed to restart across our country. The Business Secretary made it clear last week that he will not give the House a binding vote on the principle of the fracking ban, despite the Conservatives overturning their manifesto promise to keep the ban in place, despite the concern in all parts of this House and despite the concerns of the public.

If our motion is passed, it will mean that on 29 November, in six weeks' time, the House will debate a fracking Bill. We have done this because we know what would have happened if we had had a simple Opposition Day motion on fracking. The Government would simply have abstained and ignored the vote, as they have done in votes on the windfall tax, fire and rehire, and the cut to universal credit, and as they will no doubt try to do with the motion that has just been passed. This is about faith in politics. The Government are seeking to break their manifesto promise without even getting the consent of this House. Today, we give all Members a chance to make this crucial decision on fracking.

Now let me go through the substantive arguments against fracking. There are four key questions for the House and the country. Will fracking make a difference to the price of energy? The answer is no. Is there categorical evidence that it is safe? The answer is no. Is

[*Edward Miliband*]

it consistent with any remotely serious response to the climate crisis? The answer is no. Crucially, do people want it? The answer is no.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that there is another vital question to be asked? Since we will require gas until at least 2050—£1 trillion-worth of gas is to be imported—where are we going to get that gas from?

Edward Miliband: We can have a debate about North sea oil and gas, but fracking is a wholly different category. It is dangerous, it is expensive and it is not supported by the public.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman knows that I, like many of my colleagues, am not in favour of fracking and would like us to maintain our manifesto commitment. But he also knows that because he is playing party political games this afternoon, there is no way that we could vote for his motion. Is he more interested in genuinely opposing fracking or in playing party political games and trying to score points on this issue of great importance to our constituents?

Edward Miliband: I am glad we have a Conservative Member who wants to uphold their manifesto commitments. It is a refreshing change, I have to say. But here's the thing: he should be directing his point to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State was explicitly asked on the radio last week whether he would give the House a binding vote on this issue—I think the case for that is massively strengthened by the fact that the Conservative party is breaking its manifesto promise—and he said no. We are forcing this debate because it is the only way we can give the House a binding vote on this issue.

I want to talk about price. I know he is not exactly flavour of the month, but the recently departed Chancellor of the Exchequer said in February that

“even if we lifted the fracking moratorium tomorrow...no amount of shale gas from hundreds of wells dotted across rural England would be enough to lower the European price...private companies are not going to sell the shale gas they produce to UK consumers below the market price. They are not charities, after all.”

The Climate Change Committee says the same. Even the founder of Cuadrilla, Chris Cornelius, says:

“Even if the UK were to generate significant gas, we are not likely to see lower gas prices—any more than living next to a farm would mean paying less for milk.”

The reason is that prices are set in the European market, and the best evidence from the British geological survey is that fracking can meet less than 1% of European gas demand, and even that in a number of years' time. Hence it will make no difference to price, and no amount of hand waving from the Secretary of State will change that fact.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Is it not true that the right hon. Gentleman said at the Labour party conference on 24 September 2013:

“Of course, there could be a role”

for fracking

“if it can meet safety concerns”?

Edward Miliband: I am very glad the hon. Lady has done her research about what I said on 24 September 2013, because so have I. [*Interruption.*] I think she should listen. This is what I said:

“I believe when George Osborne says fracking is a panacea he is totally misguided”,

and that the “notion” it could “solve Britain's energy problems” was “just nonsense.”

I went to say that it needed to

“meet safety concerns and the needs of local residents”.

Since then—

Maria Caulfield: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Edward Miliband: No. Since then, it has been shown that fracking cannot meet safety concerns or the needs of local residents.

The second question I want to explore is whether fracking is safe, which has long been the subject of debate—a debate we led in 2013. The Conservative manifesto said:

“We will not support fracking unless the science shows categorically that it can be done safely.”

It is important to go back to what happened in 2019 and the reasons why the Government introduced the moratorium. The then Business Secretary, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom)—hardly a tofu-eating, woke lefty—said that “it is clear that we cannot rule out future unacceptable impacts on the local community.”

It is not surprising that the right hon. Lady concluded that. Has the current Business Secretary read the official report from the time? I have, because I am a nerd. It said it could not rule out an event of 4.5 on the Richter scale, having already seen a 2.9 Richter scale event at Preston New Road. Let me tell the House what the impact of such an event would be by reading from the report. It would

“be widely felt...there could be widespread building damage in the study area, with cracked plasterwork affecting approximately 10 percent of buildings, more serious structural damage (of varying degrees) affecting 5.4 percent of buildings”—

including chimney failure. It continued:

“Some damage would be caused to buildings outside of the study area.”

That is why the Government banned fracking and said that they would not restart it unless the British Geological Survey said it was safe.

In the words of the then Business Secretary in April this year:

“Unless the latest scientific evidence demonstrates that shale gas extraction is safe, sustainable and of minimal disturbance to those living and working nearby, the pause in England will remain in place.”

No ifs, no buts. In its report published last month, the British Geological Survey said that it could not provide that assurance. Instead, it said that hydraulic fracturing “can trigger earthquakes large enough to cause structural damage. These events were not predicted in advance of operations.”

Here is the key point for the whole House: there certainly is not the compelling evidence about safety that the Government promised would be the basis of any lifting of the ban. This is as clear an example of a broken manifesto promise as we are ever likely to see.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a compelling case against fracking with which I fully agree. Does he agree with me that, for all the potential downsides he has referenced, there is absolutely no guarantee that any shale gas extracted would be sold in the national domestic market? It would go to the highest bidder. There could be real downsides for our communities with no obvious uplift in supply.

Edward Miliband: The hon. Gentleman puts it incredibly well. That is why what the Government are coming up with is such a nonsense idea.

The Government are breaking not just a manifesto promise—no doubt they will say that the manifesto was drawn up before the Russian invasion of Ukraine—but a promise made by Ministers in April this year. The Business Secretary's response is not to abide by the promise but to try to shift the goalposts. In his immortal words, which I hope MPs will take back to their constituents, "tolerating a higher degree of risk and disturbance appears to us to be in the national interest"—[*Official Report*, 22 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 40WS.]

I think that could be a description of the Government. This is a matter of trust. How can communities across this country trust a Government who say one thing categorically in their manifesto, repeat it in April, and then go back on their word with no mandate from the British people?

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend talked about the Government imposing the ban because of the risk of disturbance to local communities. There was a proposal to frack in Marsh Lane, which happens to be in a neighbouring constituency—that of the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who I think has responsibility for planning and will perhaps deal with fracking. There would be dozens, if not hundreds of lorry movements a day down rural lanes—that is what "disturbance" means—and lots of wells drilled that would despoil the local environment. That is the reality of fracking, which every Conservative Member should think about if they are prepared to accept fracking in their local areas.

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend puts it incredibly well and I agree.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. In terms of trust, he will know that the Government have set up a new consultation to determine what public consent is. Does he agree that it is a monstrous waste of time and money to try to determine something that does not exist? There is no local consent for this; plenty of Government Members do not actually want it. If the Government really want to know what consent is, why do they not have a general election?

Edward Miliband: The hon. Lady makes her point well and anticipates the issues that I will come on to. Fracking will not make a difference to bills, we cannot be assured of its safety, and it is a disastrous response to the climate crisis.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Edward Miliband: No, I will not give way for the moment.

The decision on fracking is potentially environmentally damaging, with emissions from fracking up to 50% higher than those from conventional gas. If every country follows the lead that the Business Secretary suggests by extracting every last drop of their fossil fuel reserves, global temperatures will rise by more than 3° C, which will spell catastrophe for our children and grandchildren. That should be patently obvious to anyone, not least the person in charge of fighting the climate crisis.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Edward Miliband: No, I will not. I want to make some progress, because many hon. Members want to speak.

On the crucial issue of what the public think, I suggest that the Business Secretary looks at the surveys conducted by his own Department. Some 78% of the public support onshore wind, 83% support tidal and offshore wind, and 87% support solar, but just 17% support fracking. Suddenly, in a sign of desperation about how grossly unpopular and unwanted the policy is, the Government say that they want to design a system of local consent.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Edward Miliband: I will not give way for the moment.

I do not know why the Business Secretary wants further evidence about what communities think. We already have the answer from the public: fracking is deeply unpopular and communities do not want it. Indeed, Fylde Council, which is controlled by his party and at the centre of the main UK experiment in fracking, just passed a unanimous motion saying that the ban should remain and that he should honour the manifesto commitment.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My right hon. Friend knows how the planning system works as well as I do. Councils can refuse planning permission and support their local communities, but fracking companies have the ability to appeal that decision to the Planning Inspectorate, for which, as he knows, public opinion is not a material planning consideration. Is this not just smoke and mirrors to get these unpopular proposals past those on the Tory Benches, when everybody knows that public opinion counts for nothing?

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and there are more weasel words in relation to local consent. I give way to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), who has been desperate to get in.

Mark Fletcher: I find myself in strange agreement with many of the arguments being made from the Opposition Dispatch Box, but will the right hon. Gentleman be clear that the vote that we are having tonight is on not banning fracking, but a procedural matter for the House of Commons? Will he be truthful to the public about what we are voting on tonight?

Edward Miliband: We are voting on our proposal to bring in a Bill to ban fracking. I say to the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have a large amount of respect, that we are not going to get a vote on the principle of fracking, because the Business Secretary has said that. I know that the hon. Gentleman is against fracking, so this is his chance to stand up for his constituents and say no to fracking.

I will say more about the issue of consent and the Government's amendment, and I will say something to the House as a whole and to Conservative Back Benchers, which goes to the hon. Gentleman's point. They should not fall for the Government's weasel words in this debate. The way to stop fracking is to vote for our motion. If they do not, their constituents will know that they had the chance to stop fracking and refused to do so.

We now discover, however, that that is not all they will be voting for tonight, because the genius minds of the Government Whips Office are now seeking to turn a vote on this important issue into a vote of confidence in the current Prime Minister. Let us picture the scene: the Government Whips are confronted with a vote on fracking, one of the least popular causes in the country, with the Government falling apart around them. They could decide to retreat, but that would be yet another U-turn. They could concede a vote of this House on the fracking ban, but they would lose and fracking would be dead.

Then, at the 11th hour, one galaxy brain says that the way to force the vote through is to make it a vote on not just one of the most unpopular causes in the country—fracking—but the most unpopular cause in the country: the current Prime Minister. We might call it the “frack me or sack me” strategy.

In normal times, such an idiotic idea would have been dismissed out of hand, but these are not normal times. The Government see this as their leaky life raft, but I say to the House and to Conservative Members that they all know the Prime Minister will be gone in a matter of weeks, if not days, if not hours, and they know fracking will go with her, so why defend the indefensible? Why not be on the right side of history and their constituents?

Just like this Government, fracking is a dangerous, extreme idea that the British people do not support, and I appeal to all Members of the House, particularly Conservative Members, to have the courage of their convictions. Today is a day when they can put their constituents before their party and vote to give this House the decision on a fracking ban. It is time to consign fracking to the dustbin of history.

4.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “Government” to end and insert

“to consult to ensure there is a robust system of local consent, and clear advice on seismic limits and safety, before any hydraulic fracturing for shale gas may take place; and believes that such consultation must consider how the views of regional mayors, local authorities and parishes should be reflected as well as the immediate concerns of those most directly affected.”

I thank the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) for raising this important topic. I recognise that many Members and their constituents

have concerns about shale gas, and that is why we will consult on the system of local consent and provide clear advice on seismicity and safety before any hydraulic fracturing for shale gas takes place.

Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): I am sorry to intervene so soon on my right hon. Friend's speech, and I am grateful to him for giving way. He will be aware of deep concerns in Sussex about fracking, and they are concerns that I share, not least because our 2019 manifesto said:

“We will not support fracking unless the science shows categorically that it”

is safe, which I do not think it does. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that, in the Government's consultation paper he has just referred to on local consent, they will include an option for local referenda arranged by local authorities and overseen by the Electoral Commission?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend has pre-empted a couple of paragraphs of my speech, because I was going to say that the consultation should consider the use of local referendums. I think that is one of the ways in which local consent could be indicated.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Not at the moment.

We want to ensure that the consultation considers the views of regional Mayors and local authorities, as well as the immediate concerns of those most directly affected. I also want it to consider the views of MPs, as well as the use of local referendums, as I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb). We will consult on the mechanism, but I can assure the House that any process of evidencing local support must be independent rather than directly by the companies themselves, and if evidence of appropriate local support for any development is insufficient, that development should not proceed. Local communities will have a veto, so I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) that if the people in his constituency do not want fracking, they will not have it.

Simon Hoare: Could my right hon. Friend confirm, for clarity's sake, that the moratorium will remain in place while the process of consultation is agreed and that it will remain in place until it is approved by a positive vote in this place following a debate on the Floor of the House? Can he also confirm that the Government will indeed press their amendment today to a Division, if time allows and such circumstances are created?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I would like to make it absolutely clear that we need local consent before anything happens.

Christian Wakeford: Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Mr Rees-Mogg: No.

Let me be clear to my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) that once the consultation on the mechanism for ascertaining a community's view

has been completed, the results will be brought to the House for approval, which I think he was also asking. If the House does not approve, fracking could not go ahead. Even if the House were to approve a mechanism, local communities would still have to consent in accordance with the mechanism. I reiterate: local communities will have a veto.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I want to take the Secretary of State back to the word “unless” in our manifesto, where we said that we would not support fracking

“unless the science shows categorically that it can be done safely.”

Will he confirm that the sense of that word is that we would need, at very least, a new rapid evidence review about safety? Will he commit to that and to the manifesto on which he and I were elected?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I think his suggestion to have a rapid review of the evidence is eminently sensible.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con) *rose—*

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Rees-Mogg: How can I not give way to my neighbour from Somerset?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. Friend for graciously giving way. He might want to clarify that this debate is a bit of a game, and is not exactly about fracking. If we are talking about fracking, scientific evidence and data is so critical—it is everything we base our policies on. Does he agree that the data should not just be about seismic activity, and that the effect on water will be critical? I do not just mean water that is put down the drilling space; I mean the effect on hydrology in future years. It is critical that the Government are seen to be serious about the scientific evidence on this.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend on both counts. She is right to say that trying to take control of the Order Paper is parliamentary interweaving rather than the substance of the debate. To take control of the Order Paper, people need to have won a majority in the election. That is how our system works. The experience that we had in 2017 to 2019 proved how bad it is for Parliament when the Order Paper is messed around with, so I think that part of it is bad.

On the point regarding water, my hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. That is one of the keys to how things could be done safely, and we must be certain that the water used on site, and water that may be near sites, is safe.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) wanted to intervene, and I will happily give way to him.

Steve Brine: That is very kind of the Secretary of State. I am not concerned about the threat that local consent will go the wrong way in my constituency, because I do not believe for a minute that my constituents would give consent to fracking in our area. The shadow Secretary of State took an intervention about the Planning Inspectorate, and the Secretary of State said that local

people will have a veto over that issue. Will he be clear that the Planning Inspectorate will not have a veto over local people?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Let me be absolutely clear: local communities will have a veto. If fracking does not get local consent—what form that local consent must take will be consulted on, and it could be, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton asked, by local referendum. That is what the consultation will be about. If local consent is withheld, that is a veto and it will not be overruled by national Government.

Simon Hoare: In fairness, the Secretary of State is trying to address the serious concern that he knows exists on these Benches, and many of us are grateful to him for that. I think he said this in response to my earlier intervention, but I would like him to clarify this point. When he brings back the local consent process, the tick-box programme, if the House votes against it, the moratorium on fracking by its very definition will remain in place. Will he confirm that point for absolute clarity, and say that today is not the end of the matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right to say that today is not the end of the matter. If the House were not to accept the local consent mechanism, there would be no ability for local communities to give consent, and that would mean a veto were in place.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Is the neatest way of assessing local consent to take away the right of appeal to a planning inspector in these matters, so that the decision of the local planning authority is deemed the expression of local consent and is the final decision?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. That is absolutely the purpose of the consultation—to see what form local consent ought to take

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is absolutely true that the motion tabled by the Opposition does not reflect what was in our manifesto. It calls on the Government to introduce a ban on hydraulic fracking—followed by the three and a half pages of procedural stuff, which is what the motion is really about—whereas our manifesto said that we would introduce “a moratorium”.

In the Secretary of State’s letter to us, he says:

“With time, we will gain more understanding of how we can best develop this potentially very substantial UK asset.”

May I put it to him that, with time, we will gain more understanding of whether we should develop this potential asset? Would he accept that?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We are not pre-empting local consent in the letter that I sent out, so he is right.

I think that the time has come for me to return to my text—at least, for a moment or two. I do understand, as we have discussed, the concerns that people have about the safety of hydraulic fracturing. The excellent report by the Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

from 2012 suggests that shale gas extraction can be managed safely and effectively in the United Kingdom owing to our high regulatory standards and many decades' experience of extracting oil and gas both on and offshore. I return to the quotation from the right hon. Member for Doncaster North. As was reported in Wales Online on 25 September 2013, he said:

"Of course, there could be a role for it if it can meet safety concerns and the needs of local residents".

So he should vote against his own motion, because he accepted that there should be a role for it.

The Government are absolutely determined to build our energy security. At a time when energy costs are a worry for many, I can say that we are starting from a tolerably good place. The United Kingdom is blessed with a healthy mix of different sources of energy, including a strong wind resource, one of the few significant oil and gas reserves in Europe, several gas import terminals and a well-managed electricity network. We have also made strong progress in building new renewable electricity generation such as offshore wind and plan to accelerate that further while also developing new nuclear capacity.

However, we cannot escape the fact that we are a nation with a structural reliance on gas. Even though we will be reducing our reliance on gas on the way to net zero—indeed, we may be using just a quarter of the gas that we use now by 2050—gas will remain the essential transition fuel.

Gas may have been out of sight and out of mind for some years. Perhaps we were not sufficiently prepared. However, we must not take our local gas supplies for granted. This year, the energy world changed. Putin's war against Ukraine and the weaponising of gas supply to Europe has cut off a major source of supply to the European markets that we are connected to and ignited a global rush for gas resources. So while there is no immediate threat to UK supply, we cannot let our domestic production fade away and end up ever-more reliant on imports. No responsible Government would gamble with the gas supply. That is why, in the near term, our priority is keeping our domestic production online. The North Sea Transition Authority has launched the 33rd oil and gas licensing round, which is expected to deliver more than 100 new licences and put more UK gas on the grid. That is why we are discussing making the most of our shale gas resources.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I always try to be helpful. The way out of the dilemma, if you like, is green hydrogen. I repeat what I said some days ago in this place: there are advanced plans in my constituency and the north of Scotland to generate 50 MW of energy, and that will shortly go up to 300 MW. Again, I invite His Majesty's Government to come and see our plans. It would be helpful to all concerned.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman's intervention is indeed helpful. Green hydrogen is one of the most exciting technologies, and I am very enthusiastic about the opportunities there.

Sammy Wilson: Does the Secretary of State share my bemusement at some of the arguments? We know that we will need gas and that we will spend billions of pounds

importing it from regimes that we cannot depend upon, and we know that we have gas in the north of England that could generate thousands of jobs and give us the security of our own supply. What is not to like about that?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who puts his thoughts with classic cogency.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Not at the moment.

The Government remain committed to net zero by 2050. It is how we reach that without putting our energy security at risk.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman always wants to intervene on every point. He always says, "On this point" so it is hard to believe it really is on this point.

It makes no sense to become more reliant on shale gas produced overseas. Indeed, the Committee on Climate Change's analysis notes that while current evidence on the emissions footprint of UK shale gas and liquefied gas imports is not yet definitive, available estimates indicate that emissions from those imports could be higher than those that would arise from commercial UK shale gas production by between 2 and 63 grams of carbon dioxide per kWh of gas consumed. Using our own resources is therefore more environmentally friendly and will help us to get to net zero.

Sir Robert Goodwill: My right hon. Friend is making some very valid points. It is about not just domestic gas supplies and electricity production, but the chemical industry, and most importantly, the fertiliser industry. One of our plants has already shut down and the others are switching from natural gas from UK sources to ammonia from the United States, whose cheap shale gas enables that industry to keep going. If we cannot produce our own fertiliser, food production in this country is under great threat.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who puts it very clearly. Using our own resources is environmentally friendly, but we have to make sure there is popular consent for it. I feel that the British public would not welcome the disruption and shortages that would be caused by Labour's policy of taking gas out of the network by 2030.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. He is being so generous in giving way to people, particularly those on his own side. In my constituency, and in the constituencies of Ellesmere Port and Neston, and Chester, we had a public inquiry only recently, costing hundreds of thousands of pounds, and our communities rejected shale extraction. That is local consent. Why do we again have to jump through hoops and go through the same process?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman should be supporting what I am saying. He shows the value of local consent. The reality is that it will not always be given, and I am very well aware of that.

Let me move on to seismic limits. We have been clear that any future exploration or development of shale gas will need to meet rigorous safety and environmental

standards. Drawing on lessons from around the world, we will make sure hydraulic fracturing for shale gas is done safely. Last month, the British Geological Survey published its report. This is a really important way of looking at what the seismic experience has been and comparing it with other forms of production, both of energy and other forms of manufacturing industry. The report makes it clear that forecasting the occurrence of felt seismic events remains a scientific challenge for the geoscience community. However, it also makes clear that to improve our understanding, we need more exploratory sites to gather the necessary data. We think this is a sensible thing to look at and that it would be unwise not to look at it, but it must have community support.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am almost coming to an end and lots of people want to speak. I have taken a vast number of interventions, including three from the Opposition, but I will give way to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi).

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Will he seriously consider two aspects of fracking? First, it is unsafe in a country like the United Kingdom, which has a very small landmass and a large population. It might be safe somewhere with thousands and thousands of miles of barren land, but not in a country like ours. Secondly, does he really want to see applications for disgusting hydraulic fracturing across our beautiful country?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who is always a great contributor to this House. She is right to raise the issue of safety, which will be fundamental to any proposal for the extraction of shale gas.

The world has changed and our energy policy needs to recognise this. This Government will make the difficult but necessary decisions to secure the nation's energy supply. Exploring our potentially substantial shale gas reserves is potentially an important part of that. But this must not be looked at in isolation, which is why we are exploring all avenues available to us, including solar, wind and nuclear, but we cannot ignore the importance of local gas production. However, let me reiterate the commitment—I reiterate this particularly to my hon. and right hon. Friends—that there is an absolute local consent lock. Any process to determine local consent must be run independently, and this House will vote on any scheme that we bring forward.

4.49 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As the licensing of fracking and the planning process are devolved, I was not initially planning to participate in the debate, but given that the Government have effectively made it a motion of confidence in them, it is only right that we do so and outline the thoughts of the Scottish National party. No matter what the official Government line is, the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), made it clear that the Tory Government are making this a vote of confidence in them. I oppose fracking, and the SNP Government have ruled out fracking in Scotland, producing an effective ban on it, so I agree fully with the motion in that

respect. It is not for us to impose our views on what happens in England, but we will vote for the motion to show that we have no confidence in this utter, utter shambles of a Tory Government.

We have heard interventions on the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), from Tory MPs who say that they are opposed to fracking and want to represent the views of their constituents who oppose fracking, but that they will vote for the Government amendment and against the motion. That makes no sense. If they have any backbone, I urge them to vote for a ban on fracking.

Richard Graham: SNP Members are huge champions of local democracy, so does the hon. Member accept that if a local council were to support the idea of fracking, that does represent local consent? Does he agree that the support of the local council should be the crucial issue involved?

Alan Brown: That brings me to the point that I was going to make. If this is all about local democracy and democracy itself, why are the hon. Member's Government making his MPs vote in a way that they say they do not want to vote? How can we trust them to implement some form of local democracy when MPs are getting forced to vote for the Government amendment against their will?

Sammy Wilson: At least the hon. Member is being honest in his speech. He has made it clear that the only reason why he is intervening on what he believes is an English issue is that this is a vote of no confidence in the Government. Surely he understands, therefore, why this ceases to be a debate about local democracy and where we get our gas from. This is all a bit of political playing by the Opposition.

Alan Brown: The political playing is by the Government, who have made the motion a vote of confidence in themselves, and are making their MPs vote in a way they do not want to. It is not the Opposition playing games—it is that lot over there.

Christian Wakeford: I was at Lancashire County Council when this issue first came to it seven years ago. It was rejected then and overruled by the planning inspector. Since then, we have seen that the public do not want it, councils do not want it, the Secretary of State's Back Benchers do not want it, the leader of the Secretary of State's council, I believe, does not want it, and Ministers do not want it—at least not in their own backyard. Who actually wants fracking? I cannot think of anybody.

Alan Brown: That is a good question, but it is more one for the Secretary of State. It is clear that he is in favour of it and is imposing his will on the rest of his party.

Maria Caulfield: I gently say to Opposition Members that many of us—as we have heard from a number of colleagues in the Chamber—do not support fracking, and if the Opposition want to win hearts and minds, the way to do it is not through political games and stunts such as this, which would introduce a Bill. There is no way that we can support the Opposition taking control of the Order Paper. If they want to be serious about fracking, let us have a serious debate on fracking. When

[*Maria Caulfield*]

the Government bring forward the motion, we will be able to vote, whether we support fracking or not. The way to do this is not to hijack the Order Paper and play political games with legislation.

Alan Brown: I have news for the hon. Member: if she votes for the amendment, she will be voting for the principle of fracking, no matter how she dresses it up.

Richard Graham: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman says that anyone who votes for the Government amendment is voting for fracking. That is not correct. As he knows and you know, a vote for the Government amendment is a vote for the Secretary of State to bring back a definition of local consent for this House to vote on before any fracking can conceivably move forward. Can you, from the Chair, advise the hon. Gentleman of the truth of the matter?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Let us hope that there are no more devices like that. That is clearly not a point of order for the Chair, but the hon. Gentleman has made his view known and it is on the record.

Alan Brown: It is great to hear Tory Back Benchers tying themselves in knots to argue about why they are voting for the principle of fracking.

Let me get back to local consent. The Government amendment refers to consulting

“regional mayors, local authorities and parishes”.

That is quite a vague concept and could open things up to cronyism and political machinations. However, I welcome the sentiment of the Secretary of State, who is now talking about local referendums. It is good to know that the Tory Government now believe in the principle of referendums for people to exercise their democratic right; I look forward to Scotland being able to implement that next year. I welcome that damascene conversion.

The Tory Government’s new-found enthusiasm for shale gas is not based on credible evidence. They have put forward arguments that it will increase energy security, that it is required because of the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine and that we need to move away from our reliance on Russian oil and gas imports, but really they have arrived at a solution to a problem that does not exist. It is quite clear that the UK had minimal reliance on Russian imports and has already managed to eliminate the small percentage of oil and gas imports from Russia.

If the argument is that shale gas will reduce prices, that is quite clearly not true either. The right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng)—the then BEIS Secretary, now the former Chancellor—admitted that any shale gas would be an internationally traded commodity on the international market and that traders would determine prices. The only way that that will not happen is if there is another damascene conversion and if the Government are planning some sort of nationalised energy company that will frack the shale gas, control it and put it on the domestic market at low prices. Otherwise, it will be all about the international market.

The harsh truth is that there is not even enough firm evidence of the reserves available in the basins that can be used for extraction. Without that knowledge, any talk of increasing energy security and reducing imports

is pure fantasy at this stage. Any talk of jobs or of boosting local economies also remains completely speculative—there is no evidence for it.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Our country is fortunate enough to have massive potential for the development and harnessing of renewable energy. Does the hon. Member agree that in resorting to fracking, the Government are essentially admitting that they have no interest in developing the skills, infrastructure, jobs or industries necessary for a green industrial revolution in this country?

Alan Brown: I agree. We have only to look at the renewable energy revolution that has happened in Scotland. Of course, for Scotland to fully embrace that potential, we clearly need the powers that come with independence and we need to get away from the decision makers on the Conservative Benches.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): At a time like this, I am thankful for devolution, because my Northern Ireland Assembly colleagues were able temporarily to prevent fracking in Northern Ireland by banning permitted development rights. Does the hon. Member share my concern that the Prime Minister is taking advantage of the cost of living crisis? Coupled with the removal of retained EU law, this policy risks environmental degradation across these islands and does nothing to sustainably manage the climate crisis or the energy crisis.

Alan Brown: I agree wholeheartedly. As I have said, the Government are trying to present a solution to a problem that does not exist, but which they are using to further their argument.

Geraint Davies: The hon. Gentleman is kind to give way; others would not. He may know that satellite data on fugitive emissions of methane in the United States shows that 5% of methane from fracking has leaked. As methane is 80% worse for global warming than carbon dioxide, that makes fracking worse than coal. How can anybody who is serious about net zero support fracking?

Alan Brown: The hon. Gentleman has made the point very well, and it is one of which we need to take cognisance. We have to doubt the Government when they say they are committed to net zero by 2030. We have to wonder how serious they are about that. They know that 2030 is a while away—it is future Governments away—so they can do what they want now, and pretend they are still in favour of abiding by that net zero commitment.

Even if we accept some of the Government’s arguments, the exploration and appraisal phases of a fracking site last for, roughly, between two and five years, so it is not possible that fracking can produce any sort of quick-fix solution to the problems that they think they are trying to solve.

If this Tory Government are so worried about people’s energy bills, they must ask themselves why they did a screaming U-turn on the so-called energy price guarantee this week. The Prime Minister had told us previously that she would prevent household energy bills from rising to an astonishing £6,000 a year, but presumably the UK Government now believe that—unfortunately

for the majority of households in the UK—bills might rise to that level at some point after April 2023, when they are scrapping the guarantee. They may not think the bills will become that high, but the energy prices paper produced by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy contains an estimate of £4,400, and other papers produced this week speculate that average bills could easily hit £5,000.

Even if the Government introduce measures which they say will protect the most vulnerable, bills as high as that—allied with record inflation—will still cause misery to millions of people. These are, of course, households that have already seen mortgage rates and costs increase as a direct consequence of the Prime Minister's ideological mini-Budget. Bad decisions made by the Government are already affecting household expenditure, and such measures are obviously not the solution. National Energy Action estimates that even under the current support scheme, with average household bills of £2,500, 6.7 million households will be in fuel poverty, and it is clear that if bills became much higher than that, millions more would be in that position. A year and a half ago, when the price cap set bills at an average of £1,100, constituents of mine were already struggling, and some were in fuel poverty. If the bills go up by much more, there will be misery for many. Fracking does nothing to help them in the here and now, and I urge the Government to start thinking about the support that they will have to provide to bring household energy bills down for people.

Other measures that should be taken include energy efficiency installation. The Government need to increase, massively, their commitment to upgrading homes to the target of EPC band C. Energy efficiency installation clearly reduces energy demand. It reduces reliance on gas, at least for energy generation, it brings down household bills, and it creates jobs.

As for energy security, it is not so long ago that the UK Government blocked the six years of onshore wind development. Given that onshore wind is the cheapest form of energy generation, they have arguably added costs to consumers' bills. That form of electricity generation could have reduced reliance on gas, and on imports, in the UK, so why was onshore wind development banned? It is because some loud Tory Back Benchers were against wind turbines, and the Government used that—and some voices in the community—to argue that local consent for the turbines was not there. That was using a few people to destroy local democracy. In fact, it was local democracy in reverse: overturning offshore wind development across the UK was imposing the view of a few people in the shires, and elsewhere in the UK, and making energy more expensive for the rest of us.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the main reason people are opposed to onshore wind is that it is extremely land-intensive? Compared with the area that 10 fracking pads would take up, 725 times more land would be required for windmills, which are of course a blot on the landscape.

Alan Brown: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and for proving where he is on the whole climate change denial aspect. Studies and surveys show time and again that people are in favour of onshore wind, and we know that people are against fracking, so his argument is completely at odds with what the public think, and probably what his own constituents think.

On energy security and further reducing reliance on gas, the Government need to introduce a pricing mechanism for pumped storage hydro. Dispatchable energy is one way to hit peak demand. SSE already has all the permissions in place. The funding is there to build the Coire Glas scheme in the highlands. All that is needed is a funding mechanism. The predecessor of the Secretary of State said at an evidence session of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee that the Government had not agreed a pricing mechanism and were not doing anything on it because it was a predominantly Scottish technology. I urge the new Secretary of State to get over that mindset, and to realise that pumped storage hydro is for the good of the grid and the good of the UK as a whole.

Jamie Stone: The bit of the jigsaw that would be helpful to both the Scottish and UK Governments is floating offshore wind production. We have the skills in Scotland for all parts of fabrication, and we have some of the mightiest oil platforms ever built. Surely that is the way forward. Finally, to repeat my point, electricity generated out at sea could be taken in and lead to the generation of green hydrogen.

Alan Brown: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman, and I recommend that he reads the report by Landfall Strategy Group, which illustrates that Scotland could have 385,000 jobs created in the future by developing a green hydrogen strategy. That would certainly benefit his constituency. I have been up to the port in Eigg, and it is fantastic to see what its plans are for the future.

There is so much more that the Government can do. Fracking is not required, and it is not the answer to reducing people's energy bills. It certainly will not do anything to help the transition to net zero. It is opposed by the majority of the public. Seemingly just a few people in the Government are trying to force their will on the rest of Parliament, and possibly these communities.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): The Secretary of State has brought a proposal to the House. There is clearly disagreement across the House on the issue, but at least he is opening up an honest debate on a very important matter.

The hon. Gentleman has made a number of criticisms of the Government's general energy policy. I would like to know how the SNP will balance out energy security, given that it opposes nuclear, and oil and gas exploration.

Alan Brown: Scotland is already a net exporter of oil and gas, and the equivalent of our domestic electricity consumption is already generated with effectively 100% renewable energy. We export electricity, so it is clear that in terms of energy Scotland can stand on its own two feet. It is time that we are able to realise the benefits of being such an energy-rich country, because right now it seems to me that the broad shoulders of the UK are preventing us from realising the benefits that we should have.

The SNP has introduced a ban on fracking. We will not issue any fracking licences in Scotland. I would like to think that the UK Government will respect that aspect of the devolution settlement and not try to overturn what we are doing in Scotland. If they do so, it will add a further few percentage points to those who believe that independence is the future for Scotland.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have already indicated that there is a six-minute limit, but because of the pressure on time, and because I want to be fair to everybody, the limit will be six minutes for Mr Menzies and Barbara Keeley, and then drop immediately to four minutes so that we can get as many people in as possible. I call Mark Menzies.

5.9 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): As always, it is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). Anyone listening to us can tell that we clearly come from the same part of the world.

The matter before us today is of great importance to my Fylde constituency. I begin by saying to those on the Treasury Bench that my vote today is very much conditional on what the Secretary of State has already said and on what the Prime Minister said to me at Prime Minister's questions. The moratorium was a manifesto commitment that each and every Conservative Member stood on, campaigned on and was elected on, and it is no secret that I would much rather the moratorium remained in place.

The manifesto commitment said:

"We will not support fracking unless the science shows categorically that it can be done safely."

We in Fylde will not forget that fracking in our communities has twice led to national moratoriums. For people in Fylde, this is not a debate of what might happen; it is about not repeating events that have happened. Those events impacted on our countryside, our people, our homes and our communities.

I continue, as I always have, to take an evidence-based approach, but the geology has not changed; neither has the science. The industry has had more than a decade to show that fracking can be carried out safely in Fylde. Every time it has tried, the same thing has happened. We cannot keep doing the same thing, hoping for a different outcome. The 2019 seismic event proves that. The only conclusion I can reach from the evidence is that Fylde and its geology remain wholly unsuitable for fracking.

If this motion remains unamended, I simply cannot support it today. As someone with genuine concerns, I thank the Labour party for giving the House the opportunity to debate this critical issue, but I am afraid that the motion goes too far. Simply taking control of the Order Paper is not something I can support. Just as I opposed it during the Brexit votes, I am unwilling to reopen that Pandora's box. Once we do that, where on earth does it end?

My only objective is to get the right outcome for the people of Fylde. I gently remind the Labour party that it was the last Labour Government who issued the fracking licences in Fylde. They issued those licences without the gold standard of regulation for which I fought for many years and secured. That includes the traffic light system and the seismic limit of 0.5, and the fracking industry signed up to both.

The 2.9 event in Preston New Road in August 2019 was 251 times more powerful than the industry's own safety limit. In reply to me this afternoon, the Prime

Minister mentioned that she will look at the regulations. Well, I urge her and the Government to ensure that any look at regulations has, at its heart, the desire to maintain a safe approach to seismic limits.

If the industry were to have its way and the limit were raised to 3.5—bearing in mind that Preston New Road was 2.9—the limit would be 1,000 times more powerful than the previous limit of 0.5 and four times more powerful than the August 2019 event that led to the second national moratorium.

My vote is based on the good faith that the Prime Minister has shown me and my constituents over recent weeks, and the promises that she made earlier in this House. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is very excited by the prospect of local compensation and incentives to local communities, but he should not confuse that with the thought that communities can be bought. The people of Fylde are not for sale and their principles are not up for auction. They will look at this on the facts and the safety merits first and foremost.

Yasmin Qureshi: The hon. Gentleman may not be aware but, when fracking was happening in Fylde, I went out there to protest against it. He talks about carrying the people, but Bolton South East and the whole north-west have been against fracking. The Secretary of State is listening, and I tell him that we in the north-west do not want fracking.

Mark Menzies: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and the point she makes is a powerful one that stands on its own.

In his letter, the Secretary of State has confirmed that the Government will launch a consultation next month to assess how local consent is to be gauged and has committed to put this vote to the House—I welcome that. I also welcome the fact that he has agreed today to ensure that there is, in effect, a local veto—or whatever words people wish to use for it—and that the voices of the people in Fylde will be listened to in a fair, transparent and independent way. I thank him for listening to them. It is not up to the fracking companies to determine whether local consent exists; an independent, transparent alternative to that must be found, and I thank those on the Treasury Bench for agreeing to it. May I also make it clear that it is important that the local planning process must remain in place and that we rule out any nationally significant infrastructure projects referral? If we are committed to localism, I can think of no more important issue than the one before the House today.

Ultimately, I am able to vote for the amendment because I believe that the people of Fylde share my conviction that the answer from our communities is no to fracking, and when they say no to fracking, I expect the Government to deliver and to hear that no does mean no.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is about not only seismic activity and local consent, but climate change, and that the Government should listen to the Climate Change Committee and produce a report about the climate impact of fracking?

Mark Menzies: The hon. Lady makes an important point.

On energy security, let me say that there is nobody more committed to it than myself; we manufacture all the nuclear fuel for the UK in my constituency, at Westinghouse. But in order to make up the shortfall of the amount of gas we import, we will be looking at drilling somewhere in the region of 6,000 to 10,000 wells. The quantities we are talking about are astronomical and the timescales involved mean we are not going to get gas into the network any time in the next two years. There is no infrastructure to get the gas from these wells into the grid. The alternative is building gas-fired power stations to turn this into electricity and feed it in through wires, but again the timescales involved simply do not exist. So the energy security argument, important though it is, does not even stack up in the timescales the Government are talking about.

In conclusion, I welcome the fair, transparent and meaningful consultation that both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have committed to today. That gives the people of Fylde the opportunity to reject fracking and, more importantly, to have their voice heard.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Home Secretary has been sacked or has resigned this afternoon—this is utter chaos. The Prime Minister appears to have appointed and sacked both a Chancellor and a Home Secretary, two of the great offices of state, in the space of six weeks. This is no way to run a Government. Have you had any indication from the Prime Minister that she will come to this House to answer questions arising from this?

The former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), says in her resignation letter that she sent

“an official document...a draft Written Ministerial Statement about migration, due for publication”

from her personal email, and that this was against the rules. This raises huge questions about why a Home Secretary who was responsible for security was breaching basic rules. There are also rumours that in fact this statement on migration had not been agreed across the Government, there were major disagreements and that it had been blocked by the Chancellor. She also says in her letter that she has

“concerns about the direction of this government”

and the breaking of “key pledges”. She says very pointedly that they have made mistakes and that

“hoping things will magically come right is not serious politics.”

There is clearly huge chaos at the heart of the Government. Home affairs is far too important for this kind of chaos. This is about security, public safety and the issues covered by the great offices of state. Given that the Government seem to be imploding, we clearly need not simply a change of Home Secretary, but a change of Government. Can we get a new statement to this House?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order and for advance notice of it. I was made aware of the departure of the Home Secretary in the usual way, but the right hon. Lady is asking whether I have been notified in the usual way as to whether there will be a statement. I have not been notified as such, but should the situation change,

Members will be notified via the annunciators and other means. As it stands at this moment, there are no statements to be made today.

We are still on the six-minute limit, and then we will drop to four minutes. I call Barbara Keeley.

5.21 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Fracking is an outdated, dangerous and expensive way to produce energy. It causes disruption and distress to local communities and, crucially, it will not provide the clean, secure energy that our country needs, as laid out very effectively by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) when he opened the debate.

I have a former exploratory site for fracking at Barton Moss in my constituency. The energy company IGas drilled the site to a depth of about 10,000 feet in an exploratory exercise over the course of six months between 2013 and 2014. During that time, there was much local opposition and a fierce protest, which resulted in months of demonstrations. Some 150 police officers were involved in policing the protest every day, and a total of 120 people were detained. Greater Manchester police had to pay £1.7 million for the cost of policing the protest, which came out of our local policing budget. At the time, the *Manchester Evening News* ran a survey of 2,500 local residents, which showed that over three quarters of local people were opposed to fracking.

I want to explain why I have always opposed fracking and why the reasons for my constituents' opposition are so justified. Some of the issues are local to Barton Moss. The exploratory fracking site is close to an area of raised peat bog, which is a rare and precious resource where it has not been ruined by over-extraction. There are real concerns among my constituents about dewatering the precious mosslands and the harmful effects of pumping water into underground rock to force out the shale gas in this mosslands area. People are also very concerned about air pollution, which is particularly worrying at Barton Moss because the site is next to the M62 motorway—itself a cause of high levels of pollution. Other environmental risks are not specific to Barton Moss, but they have an extensive evidence base.

I want to quote from a report by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, which was produced by local academics at the University of Manchester. It says:

“The depth of shale gas extraction gives rise to major challenges in identifying categorically pathways of contamination of groundwater by chemicals used...in the extraction process.”

An analysis of those substances suggests that many have

“toxic, carcinogenic...or other hazardous properties. There is considerable anecdotal evidence from the US that contamination of both groundwater and surface water has occurred in a number of cases.”

Perhaps the Government should listen to their own experts. A few weeks ago, the British Geological Survey published a report on fracking, which was commissioned by the Government. It said:

“Hydraulic fracturing can trigger earthquakes large enough to cause structural damage. These events were not predicted in advance of operations.”

[Barbara Keeley]

Clearly, the science does not show categorically that fracking can be done safely. For the Government to allow fracking now therefore breaks another election promise.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Lady was speaking earlier about the protests in her constituency. I am perhaps the only hon. Member of this House to have been arrested, tried and acquitted for protesting about fracking. Does she share my concerns about the Public Order Bill, which was passed yesterday? Peaceful protest, which is entirely legitimate, against things like fracking might well be closed down by that draconian piece of legislation.

Barbara Keeley: Absolutely, yes, and we voted against that yesterday.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case on behalf of her constituents, but does she share my puzzlement about this? The Government have made a screeching U-turn today and finally committed to a local veto. Every Member who has spoken representing areas where there has been fracking or there might be fracking has made it quite clear that there is no prospect of getting local consent; there will be a veto everywhere. Why are we going through this whole process when every one of us knows what the outcome will be?

Barbara Keeley: It is as much of a puzzle to me as it is to my right hon. Friend.

Going back to the report of the British Geological Survey, on the same day on which it was published, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy announced his intention to revisit the safety limits on fracking. He said that

“tolerating a higher degree of risk and disturbance appears to us to be in the national interest”.

I do not know whether that answers my right hon. Friend’s question, but it is weird. Now the Secretary of State’s amendment to the motion indicates that he will seek

“clear advice on seismic limits and safety”.

Which is it—tolerating earthquakes and dangerous tremors, or listening to the evidence commissioned by his own Department?

Fears about pollution, contaminated water supply and seismic events are by no means far-fetched. An earthquake caused by fracking near Blackpool measured 2.9 on the Richter scale. It led to the works being stopped immediately and the company responsible apologising.

Other concerns about drilling for shale gas extend beyond the environmental. In 2014, a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs report forecast that house prices were likely to fall by up to 7% within a mile of fracking wells, and that the price of house insurance would also rise within five miles of fracking wells. It is right that we end our reliance on Russian oil and gas, but fracking is neither the solution nor part of the solution. The Government should instead be focusing on boosting the UK’s use of renewable and nuclear energy.

Fracking is an issue of great importance to my constituents and a vote on it should not be used as a confidence vote by this failing Conservative Government

trying to bully their Members into line. There is an alternative. Labour’s plan for energy would quadruple offshore wind and double onshore wind capacity. Instead of blocking new solar projects, as the Prime Minister is planning to do, Labour would triple solar power, which is up to nine times cheaper than gas. It is irresponsible to revisit the question of fracking when we know that it will have profound environmental impacts and make life very difficult for those people living near a fracking site. It is ignoring what happened in the past. It is ignoring scientific and expert opinion. It is reckless and it is dangerous.

The flimsy measures in the Government’s amendment to today’s motion are another case of their moving the goalposts to achieve their own ends. Before it was about safety, but the report that they commissioned is not to their liking. Now it is about consent, but the Secretary of State should know that we already have

“a robust system of local consent”.

It is called listening. I know that my constituents do not want fracking, because they have made it very clear indeed. When will the Government respect the evidence, respect the experts and respect the public, and finally put the threat of this awful process of fracking to rest?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The time limit is now four minutes.

5.28 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): We often wonder why we in this House are not taken very seriously. I will tell Members why. We are in the depths of an energy crisis. We have shown ourselves—Europe as a whole—to be too reliant on a dictator who has been conducting an illegal war, and the problems have come home to roost. Here we are speaking about trying to ban a source of domestic energy while we are short of it, and we wonder why people out there think that we are stark staring mad.

Of course, today’s debate is not about fracking—it is not about fracking at all—but about taking control of the Order Paper. We have seen that before during the height of the Brexit wars. My dear friend the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) was part of that. I am really sorry that the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) is not in his place. I did try to intervene on him, but he did not show me the courtesy of taking my intervention. If he had been in his place, I would have shown him that courtesy now.

There are a couple of things that need to be said. It has been said here that fracking will make no difference to the price of gas. I do not know about anybody else in this House, but when I did O-level economics, the first week—no, probably the first lesson—taught me that if we put more supply of something into a system, the price tends to come down. Further than that, even if Labour’s economics are true and the price will not change, would one rather spend tens of billions of pounds per year on foreign imported liquefied natural gas, even at a high price, or spend that money at home? That is a very clear decision.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Craig Mackinlay: No, I will not give way; I do not have time today, and others have not done it for me—*[Interruption.]* Oh—yes, if the hon. Lady will please intervene, it gives me another minute.

Wera Hobhouse: Has the hon. Gentleman not listened to his own colleague, the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies), saying that it would take at least two years to get any fracking going, or to his other colleague, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), who said just a few weeks ago when he was still Business Secretary that no amount of fracked fuel in this country would make a difference to the global gas market, because the quantities are too small?

Craig Mackinlay: I thank the hon. Lady from the Liberal Democrats for that point. I remember a former leader of the Liberal Democrats saying, about 12 years ago, “What is the point in nuclear?” because it would take 11 or 12 years to get it on stream. I think that 10, 11 or 12 years on from 2010 would be about now, and that would have been quite useful. Of course, it will take time to get fracked gas out of the ground. The best time to have done it was a few years ago; the second-best time to think about it is now.

I refer hon. Members to a House of Commons Library report dated 14 January this year, called “The energy price crunch”. As ever, House of Commons Library reports are excellent, and this one was very clear. Table 4.2 shows a very easy chart, which I will describe to hon. Members. It shows the output of UK-produced gas from the North sea, which peaked around 2004, when we were net exporters of gas. Since that time, we have been using only about 75% of that peak usage, and that may be for many reasons. We may have better-insulated houses, and that is to the good. I feel pretty sure that one of the main reasons is that any energy-intensive business has simply offshored somewhere else, but let us put that aside.

What has happened, very distinctly, is that we are now only producing one third of what we did at peak. We are using 25% less, but we are producing only one third of what we once did. Where do people think that gap is being filled from? That gap is being filled from international resources. There are three countries alone, forgetting Norway: £64 billion we have spent over the past 10 years on importing LNG from Russia, Qatar and the United States.

Surely it must be better to have those tens of thousands of jobs at home, as well as the many billions in investment and the profits and tax revenues—remember those? They are pretty helpful; they pay for things such as the NHS, or perhaps the insulation that we would all very much support. What would also be quite useful is balance of payments, because we have always run a pretty bad show on that. But if CO₂ is your thing—it is certainly my thing—why are we importing LNG and emitting 5 million tonnes of extra CO₂ just in the process of importing it, rather than doing it domestically?

This debate is a valid one—it is happening for other reasons, which we are all very aware of, as shown by Labour—but I support fracking. Let us give it a go. There is no Government money involved; it is all private.

5.33 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Lancashire County Council’s ecology adviser described Aurora’s assessment of earthquake risk at the Altcar Moss fracking site as “superficial, outdated and not justified”.

My constituents in nearby Formby agree with the ecology adviser. Their houses shook when tests were carried out. My constituents have been saying for years that the Conservative plan is a charter for earthquakes, because that has been their experience, as it has been elsewhere nearby in Lancashire. Conservative MPs stood on a manifesto that said:

“We will not support fracking unless the science shows categorically”

that it is safe. Changing the safety threshold does not change the level of risk, and changing the safety threshold when the science has not changed will not convince my constituents or people across the country.

I can tell the Government that people in Sefton and in west Lancashire will not support fracking, and if the Government think they can manipulate fake consent, people simply will not be fooled. As for the environmental impact, the Environment Agency says that contamination of groundwater has not been addressed by fracking companies. Natural England says that fracking applicants have not produced evidence that their plans would have no significant effect on wildlife.

I turn to the Government’s claims. First, on the gas price, fracking will not help because the price is set on the European market. Secondly, on the immediate challenge of supply, fracking will take time to produce gas even if the Government choose to ignore local people. It will not deliver in the short term. Thirdly, on the climate, producing more fossil fuels will just make the climate crisis worse. Have we not seen enough evidence of the acceleration of the climate crisis, with storms, floods and extreme heat in this country, let alone around the world? We need to do everything we can to end our reliance on greenhouse gas-producing fuel. Introducing fracking will add carbon emissions to our atmosphere. Fracking is climate action delay, and to delay is to deny the reality that we face a climate disaster and all its consequences unless we act with all speed.

The only sensible way forward is to invest in wind and solar to deliver renewable electricity self-sufficiency, as the Opposition would do by 2030; to invest in insulating 19 million homes; to invest in new nuclear, in tidal, in hydrogen and in carbon capture and storage; and to create a publicly owned Great British energy company that we can be proud of and that will deliver in the national interest. Labour’s energy plan would lead to a million jobs, lower bills and energy security. Labour’s long-term plan will create a world-leading renewable energy industry that enables us to export our technology around the world.

Our plan is the right way to address the energy challenge. Fracking, whether in Formby or anywhere else in Britain, is completely the wrong way. My constituents are right to oppose fracking. Labour in government will make that investment in renewable energy and ban fracking for good.

5.37 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I do not support ending the moratorium on fracking, because I do not believe that new scientific evidence has yet emerged to

[Mr Robin Walker]

justify doing so. It has been welcome to hear the Prime Minister and the Chancellor talking in recent days about the importance of our 2019 manifesto, and I agree both with the triple lock on pensions and the moratorium on fracking. I support the UK maximising the domestic supply of gas, as the Secretary of State has said, to support the transition to net zero. I support the production of new technologies for heating, including hydrogen, and I agree on the importance of our supplies for energy security, but we should do those things in ways that are proven to be safe.

I will not vote for the Opposition motion, and I urge all Conservative colleagues not to do so. It is a blatant attempt to seize control of the Order Paper, as the Opposition tried to do so many times in their efforts to thwart Brexit. I welcome the assurances of my the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) that there will be consultation with parishes, councils and other local bodies to ensure that there is a tough requirement for local consent, but there cannot really be such a thing unless local planning committees can simply say no. If they do, I cannot see how fracking is ever likely to impact on energy prices, certainly not in time to have an impact on heating costs this year or the next.

I therefore want to put on record my concerns and those of thousands of my constituents. Let us take action to help people with the cost of living, protect our environment and deliver on our 2019 manifesto.

5.39 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Frankly, it is becoming difficult to adequately express my horror at the state of this Government. Every single decision seems calculated to destroy—to destroy our economy, our public services, our international reputation and our environment. This utter nonsense about fracking is another example.

Truth is, there is very little prospect of fracking in West Ham, and I do not think our communities will be affected by consequent earthquakes or polluted water supplies, but in recent weeks I have had loads of emails from constituents extremely concerned about the direction the Government are taking. They are worried about the communities that could be affected, because they know how local consent can be and is manipulated to suit the agendas of the powerful. My constituents point to the constant Tory failure to prevent vile sewage pollution and ask why anybody would trust the Government when they say that fracking wells will not destroy local water supplies. The Tories have proved time and again that they are simply not willing or able to stop greedy companies, whether privatised water utilities or frackers, from destroying our environment in the pursuit of profit.

The issue of fracking is about the safety of our world and the future of our children, so of course the people of West Ham want to have their say. They do not want us to respond to the cost of living crisis simply by increasing our dependence on the exact same technologies that caused it. They do not want to pretend that fracking can make a difference to energy costs without blighting our lives, because it will not. My constituents want us to

get to work on speeding up the green transition they have been promised. They point out, quite rightly, that wind and solar power are enormously cheaper than gas, and that these technologies are getting more and more efficient with every passing year.

In this place, we need a focus from the Government to plan, to invest and to lead partnerships with green business. We know that if we do that, there will be huge economic benefits in terms of lower energy bills and jobs in all our communities, and we can slash our dependence on fossil fuels from Russia and other anti-democratic bullying states. We cannot move away from that dependence by extracting fossil fuels at home; there are not enough of them, and the costs—social, economic and environmental—are too high.

In addition, we are rapidly approaching COP27. Effectively, we are asking and expecting poor African states such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo to do the right thing and develop their economies with the minimum amount of dirty energy. We are talking about countries that have much larger fossil fuel reserves than we do, enormously lower emissions than we do, and much higher vulnerability to climate heating than we do, and we are asking them to choose a greener path to development when Ministers here shamefully talk about extracting “every last drop.” It is madness as an energy strategy. It will be devastating for local communities, who transparently do not want it, and it drives a wrecking ball through the patient climate diplomacy that this world desperately needs.

5.43 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): There is of course one great example of fracking in West Ham—fracking good football, which many of us watched at Upton Park and now at the new stadium.

Today's is an interesting debate. Unfortunately for all the eloquence of the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who made in many ways a very good speech about some of the hazards of fracking, it has been spoiled by the three and a half pages of the Order Paper that are all about a procedural takeover of this Chamber, which straightaway rules out voting for the Labour motion.

In an interesting contribution, the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), focused on the fact that in his view there is no support for fracking anywhere in the country. That view has been echoed by several Opposition speakers. Now, I do not support fracking. I do not think it should happen and I do not think it will happen, but this is a democracy, and it is perfectly possible that there are parts of the country—it might be South Thanet or Ashfield, although not the centre of the City of Gloucester—where people might support it. That is where the question that the right hon. Gentleman himself raised in 2013, and which the leader of the Liberal Democrats has previously said is vital, must be addressed: the question of local consent. I think that the Secretary of State is on a journey on this. He started, frankly, by assuming that local consent could be a consultation done by the fracking company with a few houses around where a fracking site might be. That was clearly not sustainable—it is not genuine consultation and does not take into account enough views.

My view, for what it is worth, is that there are two crucial elements of local consent, which I hope the Secretary of State will bring back to the House after his consultation. First, planning should be controlled locally and not by the inspectorate nationally. Secondly, local councils should be recognised as the expression of local democracy. That is absolutely at the core of compassionate Conservative values and is a view shared by many hon. Members on both sides of the House. A vote by a full council is the most important part. Along with those two considerations—I hope that the Whips are listening; they are talking among themselves—it is crucial that we have a free vote, on the Floor of the House, on the local consent definition, to give all hon. Members confidence that there will be no fracking in any constituency unless there is absolute local support.

Jamie Stone: I am sorry that there are no Scottish National party Members present, because it may interest the House that, when councils in Scotland make a planning decision—for instance, to refuse a wind farm application—it is quite frequently overturned by the Scottish Government. The rhetoric about local power can be hollow.

Richard Graham: The hon. Member makes a good point and it is disappointing, in a way, that SNP Members are not present to hear that, because they are huge supporters, in theory, of renewable energy.

A great deal that the Secretary of State has said and written about renewable energy, not least a very good article in *The Guardian* a week ago, is excellent and is something that we would all get behind, as would, I suspect, all Opposition Members. I would love him to do more to support tidal lagoons, which could have been done by now in Swansea; it seemed expensive at the time, but it is good value now. There is more that can be done on marine energy, which contributes to baseload. There are lots of other things, such as rules about onshore and floating offshore wind, about which he is absolutely on the right track and so are the Government. Hon. Members and the wider public should recognise that the Government are doing a huge amount on renewables, but the question of local consent on fracking is crucial.

Sir Greg Knight: On the question put to my hon. Friend by the Liberal Democrats, is the answer not my suggestion that, in fracking applications, we remove the right to appeal to an inspector and allow the local planning authority to be their final determinant?

Richard Graham: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right—Yorkshiremen so often are, as the Minister knows. Local planning approval should absolutely be at the heart of the definition of local consent.

Simon Hoare: The Secretary of State used the word “veto”, not objection, so there is no business of appeals or anything else. If the local community vetoes it, it is dead—strangled, kaput.

Richard Graham: I think we are all broadly in agreement on that; I hope that the Minister is in listening mode.

The perfect solution would have been to get back to the 2019 manifesto, as the Prime Minister has urged us to do in many instances. That would have taken us back

to the moratorium, which was a settled position that the whole country accepted. None the less, I recognise that some hon. Members think there may be virtue in fracking. As the Secretary of State likes to say—his nine-word mantra—everything has changed because of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. That is true, and there may be worse to come—who knows what nuclear weapons might be deployed and what impact that might have on energy and all the rest of it.

We should accept, as should the Labour party, that there may be a role for shale gas should the scientific evidence support it and should local consent indicate that communities support it. It is fair enough for the Secretary of State to say that we should look at it, but I urge him to have a free vote on the definition when it comes back to the House.

5.49 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Fracking—again! To be honest, since the moment I was elected to this House I have spoken in probably every single debate on this subject, because for my constituents in Lancashire this is something that really matters. It has a tangible effect on their lives with the fracking application on Preston New Road, and with Roseacre in the constituency of my friend the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies). This matters because of the climate emergency, which we risk losing sight of if we keep focusing purely on tackling the energy crisis and the cost of living crisis. Important as they are, we cannot forget that the planet is burning. Therefore, in all the conversations we have about energy, we must bear in mind that there is a climate emergency that needs to be addressed.

For a bit of background, after I was elected in 2015, Lancashire County Council passed its first motion opposing fracking, which was followed three months later by Lancaster City Council passing a motion against fracking. Then Cuadrilla got permission and started fracking at Preston New Road, and at that point there were subsequent motions objecting to fracking in councils across the county, including Lancaster City Council’s second motion. It was clear that there was cross-party consensus and huge public dismay about fracking, which is why, when during the general election of 2019 the Conservative party changed its policy and stood on a manifesto pledging to ban fracking, there was a sense of widespread relief in our red rose county.

There was cross-party consensus, and the people of Lancashire thought that the issue had been put to bed—they thought they could be safe knowing that there would not be earthquakes and there would not be fracking wells littering the Fylde coast—but, no, fracking is back, and we still do not want it. Local councillors of all political colours are backing motions at councils right across the county. Those include, this week alone, one at Fylde and one at Lancashire County Council, with both those Tory-run councils voting unanimously to pass anti-fracking motions. Councillors are telling me that they do not understand what this local consent looks like, so I suppose my question to the Minister is: what on earth does he mean by local consent? Many people have been very concerned by the Business Secretary’s comments at the Conservative party conference, when he talked about fracking companies going door to door to canvas support for fracking. I do hope that that will

[Cat Smith]

not be included in the consultation, and I would like the Minister for Climate to rule that out in his closing remarks in this debate.

The people of Lancashire do not want to have fracking forced upon them. Yes, we live in tough times and, yes, energy bills are going up, but fracking will not solve the energy security or price issues the UK currently faces. We need the Government to put far more energy into looking at energy demand reduction, such as home insulation. Frankly, the only viable long-term route to lower bills and energy security is to get off fossil fuels. Fortunately for the Minister, the answer is staring us clear in the face, because forms of clean energy such as solar, wind, tidal, hydrogen and nuclear are all options that this Government should be throwing their full weight behind.

That is why the last Labour leadership at Lancaster City Council led the way in installing solar panels on public buildings, such as our Salt Ayre sports centre. It is why the big employers in my constituency, such as Lancaster University, are seeking permission for more wind turbines. It is why local businesses such as NanoSUN in Lancaster, are looking to harness hydrogen, and it is why the nuclear power stations at Heysham 1 and 2 provide my constituents with thousands of jobs. Lancashire will play its part with enthusiasm in a green energy revolution. We know it makes sense when solar and wind power, for example, are nine times cheaper than gas, but fracking? No, thanks. Fracking is expensive and unsafe, and we know that communities in Lancashire do not support it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. As the House can see, a great many people wish to speak and we have very little time left, so after the next contribution I will have to reduce the time limit to three minutes.

5.53 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I rise to reaffirm my opposition to fracking in Rother Valley. I believe I am the only colleague in the House who not only has two potential fracking sites in my constituency—Harthill and Woodsetts—but actually lives in one of the villages threatened, Harthill. My position since being elected has been consistent: I oppose fracking in our area. Indeed, it was the very first thing I spoke about in the House of Commons Chamber after being elected, and I rebelled against the Government on the issue in May 2021, being the only Conservative to vote to ban all fracking, including exploration.

I was therefore looking forward to reconfirming this in the House today, but the motion before us is not about fracking; it is about confidence in this Government. It is about who runs the country—the elected party, the Conservatives, or Labour, which lost the general election. This, unfortunately, is a cynical attempt by Labour to play party political games. This is not a game. These are people's lives. These are people's communities. This is a dastardly, cynical move to create division, and to weaponise the issue rather than working together on a cross-party basis to put in a ban on fracking. That is what is wrong

with the state of our politics. All that matters is cheap points—[*Laughter.*] Labour Members are laughing at people in Harthill; they are laughing at people in Woodsetts. This is cheap point scoring, ultimately chasing misleading headlines rather than working with us on this side of the House to make better policy for our communities.

Fracking is unnecessary, harmful to the environment, and it will have no impact on international gas prices. It is yesterday's technology, not an answer to today's problems. I have had several meetings with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on this matter, and we heard him today in the Chamber. He has made it crystal clear that there must be a majority of local independent community support for fracking to proceed—he used the word “veto”. Let us be honest: in some parts of the country there may indeed be that support. I am the elected Member of Parliament for Rother Valley. I am not the Member for the Rhondda—I represent Harthill, not Hartlepool, and Woodsetts, not Woking. Who am I to dictate to the rest of the UK what other communities want? That is undemocratic.

In my local villages there is no community support for fracking, and today we have been given a cast-iron guarantee that these changes will at last put communities, even down to parish level, at the heart of any future decision—no more worries about the changing nature of Government, and those directly affected by this issue will ultimately have the final say. That is correct. Harthill and Woodsetts are riddled with old mine workings, and the fault lines are already severely weakened by coal extraction, right beneath where companies wish to crack. My constituents do not wish to live next to an industrial site. The traffic movement associated with fracking presents a huge risk to pedestrian safety, and could destroy local flora and fauna and ruin the unspoilt countryside. The proposed site in Woodsetts is only yards away from residential homes of the elderly and vulnerable, which is deeply depressing.

Let me again be clear: I am against fracking in Rother Valley, but I am also against this disgraceful attempt by Labour to overturn the Government. The policy the Government have announced today gives more power to local residents to reject fracking—I want them to reject fracking. I reassure the House that when there is the local community vote, and the vote that actually matters to communities—and as a resident of Harthill I will get a vote—I will not only vote against fracking in Rother Valley, but I will be leading the charge against it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We are now on a time limit of three minutes.

5.57 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. Why on earth would the Government seek to perform another manifesto U-turn and support fracking—their amendment effectively lifts the moratorium on fracking? Two reasons are stated. One is an attempt to drive down energy prices, and the other is to tackle security of supply. Those are two massive issues. There is enormous energy poverty in my constituency in Cumbria, and everybody is rightly worried about the lack of energy security, particularly

given the evil actions of President Putin. But if those were the real reasons, one would not pick fracking, and I am astounded and bemused as to why the Government have done so.

The right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), former Chancellor of the Exchequer, stated that fracking would not materially affect the market price of gas. That is obvious, so that is pricing out the window. The fracking industry lobby group stated that shale gas would contribute less than 1% of Britain's gas needs, and the British Geological Survey stated that shale gas under the United Kingdom is 15 times less in volume than originally thought. Fracking will have no impact on price, and it will do nothing meaningful when it comes to volume.

What fracking will do is add another fossil fuel into the mix at a time when we should be keeping all fossil fuels in the ground. Of all the threats that we face as a country and a community, climate change is undoubtedly the greatest, and fossil fuels should be kept in the ground. Fracking will also create massive seismic risk. The north-west of England, Cumbria and Lancashire, are two of the most geologically active places in the country. Fracking is madness. Opting for fracking is divisive and expensive, whereas renewables are popular and cheap.

Jamie Stone: I have gone on again and again about green energy and hydrogen creation. Hydrogen is green and clean, and we must get serious about this. Does my hon. Friend agree it is vital that all Governments in the United Kingdom work together fast, and now?

Tim Farron: Green hydrogen is an essential part of the mix, and I agree with my hon. Friend. If the Government were trying to change policy quickly to do something that would make a radical difference quickly, they would be opting for renewables. After Canada, the United Kingdom has the greatest tidal range on planet Earth, and yet we are tapping almost none of it. Why are we not investing in wind and solar and allowing farmers to diversify?

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): The hon. Member is generous with his time. I wonder if he can recall when his leader said:

"I love shale gas—it is much cleaner than coal and we need more gas. I hope we get loads of it".

Tim Farron: When my leader, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, he was responsible for the United Kingdom increasing renewables by 20% every year, and that dropped by 3% when he left office. The hon. Member is concerned about leaders changing their mind, yet the Conservative party is led by someone with more flip-flops than Benidorm, so we will not take any lessons from the Conservative side of the House. Renewables are the answer. They are quick and they are popular.

The Minister for Climate (Graham Stuart) rose—

Tim Farron: Other people need to get in. The Minister needs to be patient and wait his turn.

My concern is: what does this decision say about the Government? It is not rational to choose shale gas and fracking when it is obvious that it will not have an impact on reducing prices or improving energy security. Instead, the Government could be moving towards tidal, marine, hydro, wind and solar. It is not rational.

It is also not rational that, earlier, the Treasurer of His Majesty's Household, the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), the Government's deputy Chief Whip, wrote to every Conservative MP saying that the motion is not about fracking and is a matter of confidence. That causes a great problem for Government Members, who must vote either to end the moratorium on fracking—only 19% of the British people support fracking, and the overwhelming majority, including those in my constituency, are opposed to it, so that would be enormously unpopular—or to bring down the Government. That is an irrational thing for the Government to seek to put before the House.

We are beginning to see a pattern of irrational behaviour at the centre of our Government. If we care about our energy supplies, the cost of energy, the enormously painful cost of living—a threat to every single family in the country—and our economy, we cannot have those people in high office and leading the Government party consistently acting illogically and irrationally. The Government's proposal is irrational. That is why they should give way. We should oppose fracking. I will vote to oppose fracking today, and I challenge Government Members to ignore their Whips and to vote to end fracking.

6.2 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Let me be clear for my constituents: I do not support fracking and will not vote for it in the future. My constituents' concerns are clear. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) was right that the Secretary of State gave a commitment that local residents would have a veto over any plans for fracking. I am encouraged by that. The moratorium will therefore stay in Sussex, because I am pretty confident that my residents would not support fracking.

I echo the concerns raised on planning. We see on a daily basis refusals for planning being overturned by the planning inspector. I want reassurance from the Minister that that will not happen in cases involving fracking. This may be an opportunity to look at the role of the planning inspector overall as well as how we can respect wishes locally on fracking.

Let us also be clear that the motion is to agree on the date when there will be a vote on a Bill to ban fracking. The vote today is not on banning fracking. I am amazed at the sheer brass neck of the Opposition, who often criticise the Government for rushing through legislation by having all stages on one day, and yet that is exactly what they propose. They often say, "These issues are too important," "Too many colleagues want to speak," and, "There is not enough time to debate amendments," and yet their motion is for all stages of a Bill in one day. Is that an indication of the Government-in-waiting who they claim to be?

I pointed out to the shadow Secretary of State his hypocrisy: when he was Labour leader, he said to the Labour party conference that there was a role for fracking.

[*Maria Caulfield*]

However, that bears no resemblance to the brass neck of the Liberal Democrats, who as usual said one thing when they were in government and, now that they are in opposition, say another.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Member give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will not; there is not enough time. When the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), was Energy Secretary, not only did he lift restrictions on fracking, but he voted against a ban on fracking in 2015. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) said, he was quoted in 2013 as saying:

“There is an awful lot of nonsense talked about fracking. I love shale gas—it is much cleaner than coal and we need more gas. I hope we get loads of it”.

I will say the same thing to my constituents today and tomorrow: I will not support fracking, whether I am a Government Minister or a Back Bencher. I hope that when the matter does come to the Floor of the House, and I will not support fracking when it does, my constituents will see that I stand by every word I say.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Stephanie Peacock.

6.5 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

“We will not support fracking unless the science shows categorically that it can be done safely.”

That was the 2019 Conservative manifesto. We will only allow fracking where there is local consent. That was the Prime Minister in her leadership bid this summer. There is no new science and there is no local consent. Indeed, in July this year, the Government commissioned a report from the British Geological Survey, which has already been quoted today, to investigate the impact of fracking. The report showed no new science, but concluded that forecasting earthquakes as a result of fracking “remains a challenge”.

Extracting shale gas through fracking in the hope of offsetting the energy crisis will not work. Implementing the process is expensive and returns simply not enough to make a significant difference to our energy sector. It was the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) who stated that fracking “won’t materially affect the wholesale market price”.

It would do nothing to cut bills, costing far more than renewables, and it is unsafe. Even the founder of the fracking company Cuadrilla has stated that fracking is neither safe nor viable in the UK. It is clear that nobody in the UK other than the Government want this plan to go ahead.

Given that 50% of the last round of fracking licences were in Yorkshire, people in Barnsley are concerned about the Government’s disastrous plans to reintroduce fracking. Only 17% of the public support the practice. The Business Secretary claims he would be happy to allow fracking in his back garden, but he does not speak for the rest of the country and he certainly does not speak for the people of Barnsley.

6.6 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): First of all, may I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, a long-standing friend, for how he has approached today’s debate? The assurances he has given to the House should be taken seriously and with the sincerity with which he made them. They have been enormously helpful.

My opposition to fracking is well known. I would say to anybody who is uncertain about the merits of new exploration and exploitation of fossil fuels that they should watch—on playback if they did not see it on Sunday—the concluding episode of “Frozen Planet II”. Only an idiot would think that our planet could sustain new forms and new exploitations of fossil fuels into our environment. I am not entirely sure why this has been made a matter of confidence, and I am still less certain why His Majesty’s Government have decided to resurrect an issue that I thought had been interred, quite properly, some little while ago. However, I am absolutely convinced that fracking is not going to happen. These are bald men fighting over a comb. It is not going to occur. No local community is going to grant consent. I would love to vote against fracking tonight, but like my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) I want to keep my voice and my vote to help shape the future of the party I have been a member of since 1985, and I am not prepared to throw that away on something which, as I say, is not going to happen.

I agree with those who have called for a free vote. There should be a free vote once my right hon. Friend has undertaken the consultation and the matrix of that consultation has been sorted out. It is not, however, an esoteric point to say, as a point of principle, that His Majesty’s Opposition should take control of the Order Paper. We have, dare I say it, quite enough chaos at the moment without adding to it. It is a strange day when the Labour party is trying hold us to a manifesto commitment I was proud to stand on in 2019 to maintain a moratorium. The key thing is that the moratorium remains in place unless or until a new regulatory system is introduced. From listening to the debate today and having been privy to conversations with many colleagues on the Conservative Benches over the past few days, it is my very firm belief that that day will never dawn.

6.9 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I remind Members why we are here today: the site on Preston New Road rocked houses, damaged communities and terrified residents not just on one occasion, but on two or three. Quite rightly, the Conservative Government put a ban on fracking until they could be convinced that it could be safely drilled out and would cause little disruption to communities.

When the Prime Minister was on Radio Lancashire, host Graham Liver—we have a very good host, and I congratulate him on his wedding—cornered the Prime Minister in the first 30 seconds of speaking to her when he said, “What has changed?” She did not have an answer. He asked three or four times but she still could not answer. She just kept saying that she was very clear that people would be consulted. He asked her what that consultation would look like. She did not know.

Government Members accusing Opposition Members of taking over the Order Paper is an absolute joke. Your Government put in the ban. Your Government said that the ban would not be lifted—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It is not “your” Government; it is “their” Government.

Kate Hollern: Their Government put in the ban. Their Government said that they would lift the ban when safety had been assured, but that has not happened. So they can play politics and find an excuse to vote against their conscience, but they cannot blame Opposition Members. I do not support fracking, Lancashire does not support fracking, and the Government have failed to deliver any assurance that it is safe.

6.11 pm

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): I love shale gas and I hope we get loads of it—we have certainly had loads of it today from Opposition Members—but it is not up to me, and it should not be up to people in this place to decide whether they want fracking to go ahead in the country. The Prime Minister has been consistent in saying that local people will have the final say on whether fracking goes ahead. We learned today that local people will also get a veto. That is right.

I keep coming to this place just to remind myself, most of the time, how out of touch a lot of MPs are. How many people in this place actually worry, in bed at night, about paying their gas bill or their electricity bill? Nobody in this place worries about how to pay the next bill that drops through the door. They would sooner side with the people we have seen out on Downing Street today gluing themselves to the pavement again than think about the hard-working taxpayer in places like Ashfield. Not once today has any Opposition Member mentioned fuel poverty. All they have banged on about is fracking in order to possibly save their own skin at a general election.

Let us be clear: nobody would support fracking in their area if it was dangerous and did not provide a cheaper supply of gas or give incentives to local communities. We all know that—we are not daft. The GMB union, which, I believe, is the Labour party's biggest funder, supports the idea of fracking. It said:

“If it can be shown to be safe for workers and communities, fracking offers part of the solution to the energy crisis.”

Now then—if the Labour party disagrees so much with the GMB on that very important issue, maybe it should stop accepting donations, but, of course, it will not do that.

Let us be honest: most people do not think twice about where the energy comes from when they switch the kettle on in the morning. They expect electricity and gas to come to their house and they expect to be able to afford it, but my constituents are fed up with having to face increased energy bills, especially after seeing successive Governments give up on our domestic supply of fuel over the years. We now import about 40% of our gas, which means money going into foreign Treasuries and going to foreign workers when it could be here.

If local communities in Ashfield do not want fracking, I will support them. If there is a community in Ashfield who do support it, I will support them. I cannot understand why we are even here to debate this, other than because of the mischief of the Labour party.

Edward Miliband indicated dissent.

Lee Anderson: The shadow Secretary of State can very well shake his head. What I say to him is, please come to a place like Ashfield. I know you don't visit your own constituency very often, but come to a place like Ashfield and talk to some real people.

That's me done, Madam Deputy Speaker.

6.14 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): Until recently, the debate on climate change was about the science and about whether global heating is caused by humans. It is important to say, however, that although the climate deniers argued about science and hockey stick graphs, that was not what gave their arguments momentum.

Let us be clear. There has long been overwhelming evidence that human CO₂ emissions are causing global heating. The motor of climate denial was never a rational, scientific debate; it was about defending the financial interests of the fossil fuel lobby. Pseudoscientific arguments were the only form that that defence took. Now, after decades of campaigning, protesting and lobbying, the monumental efforts of climate campaigners have meant that it is politically very difficult to deny the reality of the climate emergency. The overwhelming scientific evidence has been joined by the international grassroots political movement calling for climate justice.

We are now seeing a different strategy for protecting oil and gas profits. We are being asked to choose between tackling the cost of living crisis and tackling the climate emergency, between energy security and meeting our Paris obligations. The decision to reverse fracking is part of that new and very cynical strategy. It is an argument that says that black is white, up is down and pulling more fossil fuels out of the ground is somehow a form of environmentalism. We should completely reject that argument, because it is nonsense.

The twin ecological and climate emergencies are two of the greatest existential threats that we face. They demand that we restore our natural environment, keep fossil fuels in the ground and make a transition to clean, renewable energy. Fracking takes us in exactly the opposite direction. The Climate Change Committee has warned that the moratorium should not be lifted without an independent review of the evidence on the climate impact. Has that review been done? No, of course not.

The process of fracking produces methane, which contributes to rising global temperatures. Research by NASA has shown that leaky gas production is one of the main drivers of methane emissions on the planet. In fact, during a single week of 2019, in a site in Lancashire, 4.2 tonnes of methane—equivalent to 142 flights—were released. Extracting shale gas is also environmentally damaging because the geography of the UK means that it is more likely to cause earthquakes and chemical flowback, with waters at significant risk of contamination and further significant ecological damage.

None of this will lower our energy bills or increase our energy security. Gas prices are set not by domestic supply, but by the international fossil fuel markets. Even if domestic production significantly affected international prices, the wells here would not make a difference to those prices. That is a falsehood.

6.17 pm

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): Today's debate is less about fracking and more about the Labour party's next social media campaign. If the Opposition had wanted to show the true strength of the House's opinion on fracking, they could have tabled a normal motion today, calling for the moratorium to be reintroduced at a later stage, or they could have amended a parliamentary Bill. With either of those routes, they would have had a reasonable chance of carrying many Conservative colleagues with them, but instead they have chosen the one route that they know no Government Member could possibly support: a confidence vote. I do not support fracking, but I am even less keen on the idea of letting the Labour party play at being in government for the day. I remember what happened last time.

My views on most things, and certainly on fracking, are no secret. I do not buy the argument that it is less environmentally friendly; gas is gas, whether it is drilled here or overseas, and the carbon footprint of gas produced in the UK is smaller than that of liquefied natural gas shipped from overseas. Nor am I convinced by the argument that it is unsafe, but I do think that it is unsuitable in a country like the UK with a high population density, especially as even relatively small tremors can be felt by the local community. As the British Geological Survey, which has its headquarters in Rushcliffe, says, our ability to predict such tremors has not improved since the moratorium was put in place.

My main objection to fracking, however, is that, after all the division and local anguish it has been causing, even the industry itself estimates that it will produce very little gas. We would be better off focusing on increasing output from our North sea industry, renewables and nuclear. I am relieved that we will have a binding vote on the process for gaining local consent, because that is vital: communities must know that they have a legally enforceable route to either accepting or rejecting fracking under their homes.

My final observation tonight is for our own Front Benchers, for they have enabled the Opposition to force colleagues to choose between voting against our manifesto and voting to lose the Whip. They should take a look at the faces of colleagues behind them—colleagues who have fracking sites in their constituencies—and they should hang their heads in shame. A Conservative Government will always have my confidence, but their leadership today has severely tested my trust and the trust of many colleagues, and I would advise them not to do so again.

6.20 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): The fight against climate change is one that everyone but this Government seems to be deeply worried about. In Wales, we are proud that our Labour Government remain steadfast on the fracking ban which has been in place for seven years and will continue.

It is even more disturbing that this Prime Minister, in the absence of a public mandate, has decided to tear up her own party's 2019 election manifesto, and any hopes of a stable future, by bringing back fracking; but is that any surprise when this Government are imploding? Will the Secretary of State even be here tomorrow? It is heartening, though, to see Conservative Members publicly declare their support for us and against the Government's

option on Twitter, coming out one at a time—particularly the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), who is also chair of the Government's net zero review panel: I think that that is quite telling.

The energy crisis is costing lives, and action absolutely needs to be taken to curb the suffering, but fracking is not the answer. Indeed, it makes the position worse. This crisis has been created by an over-reliance on oil and gas. We cannot increase that, but the Government refuse to understand that it is not possible to tackle one crisis without tackling the other. Instead, they have chosen to ignore the warnings, the science and the pleas, making this a deliberate attack on not only the environment but public health.

In England alone a third of drinking water is supplied by groundwater, and the British Geological Survey has said that groundwater can be contaminated by fracking. One concerning risk is from flowback water coming from the fracking process itself. Water that flows back contains a high concentration of salinity. This is known to cause hypertension that can lead to pregnant women developing pre-eclampsia, exposing the them to potential stroke risks and organ failure, with some babies being stillborn. Medical experts have written to *The BMJ* stating those arguments. In complete contrast, the Government's own Minister for Climate, the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), has claimed that fracking is "good for the environment"—although that same Minister publicly published his support for the fracking ban in March this year.

Fracking will not solve any of our energy problems, and it will not provide the essential support that the country needs right now. Drilling is irrelevant to the energy crisis, let alone being a complete abdication of duty to the environment, local communities and the climate. This latest move drives a coach and horses through any chance of credibility for global leadership on climate issues. The Government must keep that ban now.

6.23 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Let me start by praising my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards), who spoke so eloquently. I endorse every word that she said about the way in which the Government have handled this matter, and I share her sense of despair, frustration and fury. Although at present I frequently find myself saying, "We are where we are, and we have to get on with it", I would much prefer the manifesto commitment to a moratorium on whose implementation I stood for election to endure. However, I have to welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to hold a substantive vote on the process by which consent will be determined, and I echo the view expressed by others that it should be a free vote.

This is a polarising issue in my constituency. Opinion locally has always been broadly opposed to fracking, which I have always respected and taken note of, but there has also always been a vocal supportive minority, whose voices have become louder as higher energy costs have begun to be felt, even if fracking is not a solution to the problem of higher energy prices. Everyone in my constituency deserves to have their say, so my aim over recent weeks has been to ensure that the Government's commitment to local consent was a meaningful one, and not one placed in the hands of companies such as Cuadrilla Resources.

Any process should be independent—indeed, a local referendum would be my preference—because all areas of the Fylde coast should be able to participate in the discussions, as they will feel the consequences. Blackpool, as a unitary authority, has no involvement in Lancashire’s planning decisions, but it will bear the seismological consequences just as much as the parish of Roseacre. I am particularly annoyed by suggestions of financial inducements that will be proffered by the shale gas companies trying to influence the decision making. They must not form part of the decision over consent.

Getting the consent system right, which means that it needs to be in a broad area, not a narrow parish within 15 metres of some pad, will allow all my constituents, either in favour or against, to feel that their voice was listened to. Perhaps fundamentally, carried out under my principles any rejection of fracking locally would be a permanent people’s “no”, on the record—not some temporary politicians’ “maybe” that could be reversed by yet another U-turn or new Government, which is what Labour’s ban, I am afraid, offers us. Let the people of this country put on the record their views about fracking in their local area. Then we as politicians should pay attention to that and act accordingly.

6.26 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): We are here because the previous Chancellor lifted the moratorium on fracking, and his previous boss, Crispin Odey of the hedge fund Odey Asset Management, has put millions of pounds of investment into fracking. He is the same one who made hundreds of millions of pounds when the pound went down following Brexit, having supported leave. He is the same one who made a lot of money out of sterling going down after the mini-Budget. Strange, isn’t it?

The Government have lifted the moratorium and said, “You can go ahead with fracking, so long as you have safety and local consent.” That may be bribed—we do not know what will happen there—but I do not think that it is sufficient, because we need to think about the environment. I was rapporteur on fracking for the Council of Europe. We found from satellite data that 5% of the methane being pulled out was leaked through fugitive emissions, which means that fracking is worse than coal for global warming, because methane is 80 times worse than carbon dioxide. We recommended—46 countries—that no one went ahead with fracking. As a result, when Macron was first elected and did not have many policies, he took that policy off the table and banned fracking, as we have in Wales.

Fracking consists of sending millions of tonnes and cubic metres of chemically impregnated water—often hundreds of chemicals, which are carcinogenic—into the ground. Half of them come back. Half of them stay underneath so that they can contaminate the water table; the rest have to be processed. In the United States, they are dumped in Arizona. Well, we are not the United States and we do not have the space.

We have lorries running around the countryside, smashing up our environment. We have mini-earthquakes causing disturbances. We have air quality data from the United States showing that local people have runny eyes and all sorts of problems. That is why we have banned it in Wales. We are focusing on tidal lagoons, wind farms,

solar energy and spatial planning. There is a way forward for a sustainable green energy future. The answer is not fracking; it is environmentally unsound. We should dismiss it even if there was consent and the safety concerns were alleviated, which they will not be. This is absolutely appalling. It is Tory fracking, and people should vote Labour because of this appalling decision to lift the moratorium.

6.29 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Fracking is an issue that ignites very strong feelings among my constituents. Since the Government announced a change in direction on this issue, I have been very much looking forward to a genuinely free and fair debate in this place, where I could go on the record and outline my concerns, and those of thousands of my constituents, about fracking returning to the Fylde coast.

However, this is most certainly not the free and fair debate I have been hoping for. This Opposition day debate is a very different beast. The motion is not about fracking at all; it is an attempt by the Labour party to take over the functions of Government. It would overturn the Standing Orders and procedures of this House that say only the elected Government of the day get to decide parliamentary business. It would allow Labour to legislate against the wishes of my constituents, who elected a Conservative Government at the last general election. We will not and cannot allow the Labour party to seize control of the Order Paper. If they want to do so, they should do something they have not done in 17 long years and win a general election. The Opposition know full well that Conservative Members who share their legitimate concerns about fracking cannot vote for their motion today. Instead of engineering a constructive and fair debate, Labour has contrived to weaponise this issue. Truly shameful behaviour.

While I have the opportunity, I state once again that the vast majority of my constituents do not support the return of fracking to the Fylde coast. The environmental and safety thresholds and protections were breached when fracking previously took place at the Preston New Road site, only a few miles outside my constituency. As a result, fracking stopped in 2019.

The war in Ukraine has woken up the west and demonstrated that we cannot rely on authoritarian foreign regimes for our energy supplies. As such, I support the Government in striving to maximise more of our domestic energy reserves, particularly North sea oil and gas, and nuclear power. Although I can see why the Government have put fracking back on the table, it should only take place where it is safe and where it is supported by local communities, as the Government have reiterated time and again, and as the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has made clear once again today. I wholeheartedly support that position.

I welcome the steps the Government are taking to determine how local consent can be established, and I look forward—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I call Rebecca Long Bailey.

6.32 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Fracking will not solve the energy crisis. Indeed, the shale gas extracted by fracking would make no difference to gas prices and is a more expensive alternative to renewables. Further, fracking would demonstrably increase the risk of local earth tremors, as recently confirmed by the British Geological Survey.

On the wider environmental impact, Greenpeace says:

“Not only is fracking bad for our climate, it risks causing air, water and noise pollution. It uses toxic chemicals that may not be regulated well enough. An accident could mean that these chemicals leak into water supplies or cause pollution above ground. In fact, this has happened many times in the US.”

With all this in mind, why on earth would the Government pursue a strategy that poses such risks and flies in the face of efforts to tackle climate change? Well, the author and climate commentator Naomi Klein calls it

“the Shock Doctrine: the exploitation of wrenching crises to smuggle through policies that devour the public sphere and further enrich a small elite.”

This bandit capitalism extends beyond just fracking into the way the Government approach our whole energy system. The pursuit of markets at all costs, with little state intervention, keeps leading to the same problems: complex, poorly designed mechanisms, open to gaming and profiteering, that deliver poor value for money and poor environmental outcomes, if they deliver at all. When that system fails, as it is failing now, well, it is everybody else's problem.

A new generation is now calling for change, a green new deal and a green jobs revolution that distributes costs and rewards progressively, deepens economic democracy and kick-starts an industrial strategy to rebuild and light up Britain. We get it on this side of the House, but I am worried that we will miss this chance. Worse, I am frightened that, although numerous Conservative Members may speak out against fracking, the fact remains that they are still in a Government led by an environmental and economic vandal.

The clock may well be ticking on the Prime Minister's days in office but, as Naomi Klein sadly states,

“When powerful ideologies are challenged by hard evidence from the real world, they rarely die off completely...A few true believers always remain to tell one another that the problem wasn't with the ideology; it was the weakness of leaders who did not apply the rules with sufficient rigor.”

That is why today is so important. That is why across this House we have a moral duty to vote in favour of this motion, to introduce a Bill to ban hydraulic fracking for shale gas once and for all.

6.35 pm

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): I was very grateful that the Secretary of State today gave confirmation at the Dispatch Box about a local veto. As other colleagues have said, that local veto on fracking must be paramount. There can be no local authority overturning what has been decided by local people in a referendum or other similar independent method of decision making. Although some colleagues have spoken about local authorities being bastions of listening, that is not always the case. Unfortunately, some would be cynical enough to pass fracking applications in just a couple of opposition-held wards and then claim that the planning committee was the democratic representative. We would then find that

those wards, which were never going to vote for the administration, would be unable to hold the council to account. It is important that local authorities are not able to hornswoggle smaller communities within the local authority in that way and that, by the mechanism that the Secretary of State has rightly set out—I look forward to further detail on it—we enable local residents to prevent local authorities from trampling local rights.

I am incredibly pleased that that has been confirmed, because I fear that Wigan Council, which is in a huge dispute with local residents and is fighting tooth and nail over a number of incredibly unpopular planning applications in just a handful of areas in my constituency despite thousands of objections, is fundamentally unwilling to listen to objectors. I am delighted that that would not be the case with fracking and that the veto would remain at the community level. With that, I shall sit down. I have made my point very clearly that the local voice must be paramount, and if people do not want fracking, they should not have it.

6.37 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Government must ban fracking once and for all. It is an outdated, dangerous and expensive way to produce energy. It will not provide the clean, secure energy that our country needs, nor will it help us to meet our legally binding commitment to net zero. As Friends of the Earth has pointed out, fracking risks contaminating water, it poses risks to public health and the environment and it is unlikely to reduce energy bills. The Government's written statement of November 2019 said that the moratorium on fracking would

“be maintained until compelling new evidence is provided which addresses the concerns around the prediction and management of induced seismicity.”—[*Official Report*, 4 November 2019; Vol. 667, c. 56WS.]

Likewise, the Conservative party manifesto of 2019, on which Members opposite stood and were elected, said:

“We will not support fracking unless the science shows categorically that it can be done safely.”

Nothing has changed, and I ask the Minister to explain what he thinks has.

The recent report by the British Geological Survey found:

“Forecasting the occurrence of large earthquakes and their expected magnitude remains a significant challenge for the geoscience community.”

Recently, the Secretary of State has said that

“tolerating a higher degree of risk and disturbance appears to us to be in the national interest”.—[*Official Report*, 22 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 40WS.]

So it appears that as well as being reckless with the economy, the Government are being reckless with the environment and the health and safety of communities. The Climate Change Committee has made it clear that moving away from fossil fuel consumption will both benefit households, as it will reduce exposure to volatile fossil fuel prices, and reduce emissions.

The Government speak of consent, but reports that households could be handed £1,000 to consent to fracking in their area are of real concern. Greenpeace has rightly labelled that as a cynical ploy and said that the Government must be hoping they

“can buy off people's concerns while they are struggling with the cost of living crisis.”

There currently exists a petroleum exploration and development licence, PEDL 184, covering an area of north-west England that includes my constituency. The licence allows a company to pursue a range of oil and gas exploration activities, subject to the necessary drilling and development consents and planning permission.

No wonder my constituents are worried. They have made it abundantly clear that they do not want to see fracking. We on these Benches will stand up for our constituents today and oppose fracking. The Members opposite should stand by their manifesto commitment and do the same.

6.39 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I will start with words from page 55 of the Conservative party manifesto, because it is very clear and it is there in black and white. It says:

“We placed a moratorium on fracking in England with immediate effect. Having listened to local communities, we have ruled out changes to the planning system. We will not support fracking unless the science shows categorically that it can be done safely.”

I read out those words because they should mean something. They should mean something to everyone on the Government Benches, who were elected on those words. If they do not mean anything to Conservative Members, I am sure they will mean something to the people who voted them in and who will be watching very closely how the vote today, because the science has not categorically shown that it can be done safely.

I thank the Tory Whips for making this a confidence vote in the Prime Minister, because after the week that she has had, I think that is more likely to lead to Back Benchers voting with us than against us. But if they are not persuaded by that, I hope they do not fall for the spin that we have heard about our needing fracking to deal with the rising cost of energy, because it was not so long ago that the now former Chancellor said that

“those calling for the return of fracking misunderstand the situation.”

He also said:

“Even if we lifted the fracking moratorium tomorrow, it would take up to a decade to extract sufficient volumes—and it would come at a high cost for communities and our precious countryside. Second, no amount of shale gas from hundreds of wells dotted across rural England would be enough to lower the European price any time soon. And with the best will in the world, private companies are not going to sell the gas they produce to UK consumers below the market price. They are not charities, after all.”

Well, even a stopped clock is right twice a day, just as a discredited former Chancellor can be right about something. He was certainly right about that.

I will say a few words about consent. The dictionary definition of consent is

“permission for something to happen or agreement to do something.”

Let us be clear that that is not the same as getting a payment in lieu of consent, and it does not mean having a refined planning process to create the illusion of consent. I am afraid the Government amendment does not take us to a place where I am convinced that we will have genuine consent, and whatever is said from the Dispatch Box does not really mean anything when Cabinet Ministers are falling on a daily basis. Let us be clear that consent is not the same as consultation, and the amendment talks too much about consultation rather than consent. Consultation is not as robust and definitive, and it is certainly not what people would expect.

The Business Secretary said last month:

“Compensation and consent become two sides of the same coin.”—[*Official Report*, 22 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 796.]

I would say that they cannot possibly be two sides of the same coin. Compensation is payment in recognition of a loss, which does not in any way mean that people have agreed to suffer that loss. If the Government really do want to get consent for fracking the countryside, they should put it in their manifesto and call a general election. We will see whether they get that consent.

6.42 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): I am pleased to be called to speak in today's debate, which I believe the Government Whips have called a confidence motion in the Prime Minister. I do not know who is more excited for her to receive her P45—is it our side or theirs?

The Prime Minister promised that

“fracking will take place only in areas with a clear public consensus behind it”,

but the Business Secretary ruled out local referendums and suggested that fracking companies themselves could “go around door-to-door...and ask people if they will consent.”

Aside from being a truly ridiculous idea, appointing fracking operators as the arbiters of local consent would create an obvious conflict of interest and would undermine the authority of democratically elected councils. If the Business Secretary is so keen to start digging up people's areas and causing earthquakes, I look forward to the Government's newest site opening in North East Somerset in the coming weeks.

It might surprise some people, but I agree with many Government Members. The hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) spoke passionately last week and again today about his constituents, who were labelled Luddites by the Business Secretary. Given that I was a county councillor in Lancashire when fracking was debated some years ago, and that I am now the Member of Parliament for Bury South, I know the people of Radcliffe, Whitefield and Prestwich are certainly not Luddites, and neither are the people of Lancashire.

I am against fracking. It is unpopular, it industrialises the countryside, it contributes to climate breakdown and, importantly, it fails to address the energy crisis.

But it is not just me who thinks that; it is the public. One person said,

“it would take up to a decade”,

to extract what we need by fracking and that it was pointless—that was the Chancellor of last week. It will create,

“enormous disruption...for little economic gain”;

said the Chancellor of this week, four months ago.

The Defence Secretary opposed proposals for a fracking site in his constituency. The Tory party chairman, the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Sir Jake Berry), signed the Defence Secretary's letter opposing fracking. The Levelling Up Secretary said, “There isn't strong support” for fracking, and I agree. The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport did not want it in her backyard, and I do not blame her. Now we know that the Prime Minister's Cabinet do not have faith in fracking, or in her, I look forward to many Conservative Members joining me in the Lobby today.

6.45 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Today we have heard from colleagues across the House making clear their opposition to fracking. It was particularly powerful to hear from MPs from the Lancashire area, already affected by the seismic shocks of previous drilling, whose constituents live in fear of that happening again.

Fracking is dangerous and polluting, it will not provide energy security for this country and it is deeply unpopular. The Government finally seemed to get that in 2019 with their manifesto commitment to a fracking ban; as has been said, everyone on the Conservative side of the House stood on that manifesto and made that promise to their constituents. Yet it has taken only a matter of days for this new Administration to bring fracking back, not through a vote, a consultation or a debate in this House, but through a decision taken by the Secretary of State alone, who has not even turned up to hear the winding-up speeches, with no scrutiny and no accountability—[*Interruption.*] Oh, sorry; I did not see him there.

The Tories' manifesto promised that the ban on fracking would remain in place unless evidence proved categorically that it was safe. However, the recent report from the British Geological Survey commissioned by the Government has offered no new evidence whatsoever to suggest the situation has changed. As the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) said, the geology has not changed—how could it?—and the science has not changed either. So what did the Secretary of State do when he could not find the evidence he wanted? He decided to change the rules on how big an earthquake can be and still be considered safe. I would laugh, but there is nothing funny about this.

Labour has been absolutely clear that we will always oppose fracking, whether in Opposition or in Government. I am proud that the Labour Government in Wales are keeping the ban.

Let us not forget that this reckless decision comes in the middle of a climate emergency. At COP26 this Government made a commitment on the world stage to prioritise the clean energy transition and end public support for the fossil fuel sector by the end of 2022. How is that going? One year on, they are not only bringing back fracking for gas, but issuing hundreds of new licences for fossil fuel extraction. No wonder the Prime Minister is trying to wriggle out of attending COP in Egypt next month.

Let us call this what it is—it is climate vandalism. The decisions of this Government are undermining our climate targets and trashing our reputation on the global stage. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) said, it is taking a wrecking ball to years of patient climate diplomacy. I am sure the COP26 President would have something to say about that.

The Minister for Climate, who is replying to this debate, may be willing to swallow his pride and claim that fracking is green in exchange for a seat down the far end of the Cabinet table, but on the Opposition side of the House we will be honest about fossil fuels. They are expensive, they are polluting our air and they are destroying our planet. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) made clear earlier, the only solution to the energy crisis is a green one.

Removing the ban on fracking shows that we cannot trust a Tory promise even if it was embedded in their manifesto, so how can we trust what is being said today about ensuring local consent? Let us be clear: the amendment does not say there will be a veto or explain how consent would be obtained. It is very weak on the detail and it does not promise a binding vote by this House on what that consent would look like.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, why do we even need to do this? We know that the Government's own polling shows that only 17% of people support fracking, although I would imagine that a large proportion of those who would say, "Not in my backyard," were quite happy for fracking to happen in—as I think a Lords Minister once called it—the "desolate" north.

I am sure the Government's committing to a ban on fracking today, and committing to bringing forward their own Bill if they do not want Labour to seize control of the Order Paper, would come as a great relief to many of the Government's own MPs.

Our message to colleagues on the opposite Benches is this. Fracking is not necessary, it is not wanted and it is not inevitable. I say to each of you on the Opposition Benches—on the opposite Benches, I should say—[*Laughter.*] That was forward thinking on my part. I say to you that you have a chance today to ensure the voices of your constituents are heard, and that our planet is protected. If you support our motion today, we will secure a binding vote on 29 November on a Bill to ban fracking, in the absence of any willingness from the Government to bring such a Bill forward. You will all have the opportunity to ban fracking before a single drill starts up in your constituencies. You know that that is what your constituents want you to do, and that there is no excuse for not doing it. Do the right thing, and support the Labour motion today.

6.50 pm

The Minister for Climate (Graham Stuart): It is a great pleasure to wind up this debate, to which there have been so many excellent contributions from across the House. Perhaps not for the first time, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband)—he is an extremely clever man, for whom I have a great deal of respect—has been a little bit too clever by half. Perhaps if more drafting had gone into this, instead of seizing the Order Paper we could have had a different style—[*Interruption.*] It was an attempt to seize the Order Paper. Quite clearly, this is not a confidence vote—[*Interruption.*] Obviously, this is not a confidence vote; it is an attempt—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Come on, let us listen to the Minister. That means be quiet up there on the Back Benches as well.

Graham Stuart: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Edward Miliband: Will the Minister give way?

Graham Stuart: I will not give way. [*Interruption.*] The right hon. Gentleman is getting over-excited. He has described himself as a nerd—accurately, of course. Perhaps he should have spent more time looking at parliamentary procedure.

I am proud to say that this Government have led the way in reducing emissions and moving towards net zero. When the right hon. Gentleman left power in 2010, not only was there that note that said there was no money left, but less than 7% of our electricity—around 6.8%—came from renewables. It is the Conservative party that has delivered the green revolution and will continue to do so. That means that more than 40%—[*Interruption.*] Madam Deputy Speaker, are they allowed to maintain this ridiculous stunt? It is bad enough—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Davies, we are having a debate. If everybody shouts at one another, we cannot have a debate.

Graham Stuart: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It has brought calm to the Opposition to point out that only 7% of electricity came from renewables when they left power, but the figure is more than 40% today. If we look at energy efficiency and people who are struggling to heat their homes today, what percentage of houses had an energy performance certificate rating of C and above when Labour left power? [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) wants to tell me from a sedentary position, but I will tell him that it was 14%. What is it today? It is 46%. The Conservative party is moving this country towards net zero, and not only are we doing that at home but we are leading internationally as well.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The Minister is absolutely right about the green revolution, in which our region in the Humber is playing such a big part. I ask him to reflect on the speeches that have been made today. If this was a clear vote on whether or not we should have fracking, I would be in the Lobby with the Opposition. On any binding vote, I will stick to my manifesto and election commitment to oppose fracking absolutely. Will he reflect on that? He was talking about how much we should be investing in green energy, and I urge him to continue in that vein.

Graham Stuart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and we are investing. Near both our constituencies, we have seen the transformation—

Edward Miliband: Will the Minister give way?

Graham Stuart: May I at least answer this without being permanently harassed by the right hon. Gentleman, who should learn to sit? My hon. Friend has seen the transformation of the whole economics of offshore wind. He has seen this Government put in place the contracts for difference, which are being copied all around the world.

Edward Miliband: Will the Minister give way?

Graham Stuart: I feel as though if I do not give way to the right hon. Gentleman, he may suffer some serious medical emergency.

Edward Miliband: For the guidance of the House, the Minister said something very important from the Dispatch Box: he said that this is not a confidence motion. I think Conservative Members want to know, because if he confirms that statement, they can vote for our motion in the safe knowledge that they can be confident in the current Prime Minister. Will he confirm that?

Graham Stuart: The right hon. Gentleman was so excited to repeat something I had already said multiple times. Colleagues on this side of the House are perfectly clear. They are not going to surrender or allow the Labour party to become the Government for a day by seizing control of the Order Paper.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It had better be a point of order.

Justin Madders: I think it is, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is really important that Members know what they are voting on—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Members know what they are voting on.

Graham Stuart: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We will continue to lead the world and drive forward offshore and onshore wind and solar energy, we will have SMRs and gigawatt-level nuclear, as well as support for AMRs, and we will come forward with proposals to support hydrogen and CCUS. We are looking all across the piece to drive the green revolution, but as part of that work we need to secure the gas and oil we rely on at the moment as we manage and drive down our usage on the path to net zero.

Ruth Edwards: I really need to press the Minister on this question of a confidence vote. Many of us have been told today by our Whips that if we vote for, or abstain from voting against, this motion, we will lose the Whip. Will he please confirm whether that is the case?

Hon. Members: Oh!

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We have to hear the answer.

Graham Stuart: That is a matter for party managers, and I am not a party manager.

Community support is so important. That is why, as we heard the Secretary of State say today, we have pledged that there will be the community veto we have heard so much about from colleagues including my hon. Friends the Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), for Winchester (Steve Brine), for Gloucester (Richard Graham), for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), for Worcester (Mr Walker), for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards), for Blackpool South (Scott Benton), for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), and for Leigh (James Grundy), as well as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), my right hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill), up the coast from me.

Tim Farron *rose*—

Graham Stuart: It is interesting to see on his feet the Liberal Democrat Member who in his speech suggested that not a drop more gas or oil should come out of the ground, forgetting that 75% of our energy needs today are met by fossil fuels. It is this Government who are leading the green transformation to take us away from fossil fuels. It is this Government who are driving forward net zero, not only here but, equally important, all around the world. It is my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) who, as President of COP26, has moved the world from having just 30% of global GDP covered by net zero pledges in 2019 to more than 90% today. It is that transformation of the global position on the pathway to net zero that has been critical, as well as the development of net zero at home.

That is why we will continue to make sure that we develop. It is why we are issuing licences and blocks in the North sea, so that we can produce domestic oil and gas as we manage that pathway down. We will—

Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 230, Noes 326.

Division No. 66]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Chapman, Douglas
Ali, Rushanara	Charalambous, Bambos
Ali, Tahir	Cherry, Joanna
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Clark, Feryal
Amesbury, Mike	Cooper, Daisy
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Cooper, rh Yvette
Bardell, Hannah	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Barker, Paula	Cowan, Ronnie
Beckett, rh Margaret	Coyle, Neil
Benn, rh Hilary	Crawley, Angela
Betts, Mr Clive	Creasy, Stella
Blackford, rh Ian	Cruddas, Jon
Blake, Olivia	Cryer, John
Blomfield, Paul	Cummins, Judith
Bonnar, Steven	Cunningham, Alex
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Daby, Janet
Brock, Deidre	Davey, rh Ed
Brown, Alan	David, Wayne
Brown, Ms Lyn	Davies, Geraint
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Davies-Jones, Alex
Bryant, Chris	Day, Martyn
Buck, Ms Karen	De Cordova, Marsha
Burton, Richard	Debbonaire, Thangam
Butler, Dawn	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Byrne, rh Liam	Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Cadbury, Ruth	Dodds, Anneliese
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Doogan, Dave
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Doughty, Stephen
Carden, Dan	Dowd, Peter
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Duffield, Rosie
Chamberlain, Wendy	Eagle, Maria
Champion, Sarah	Eastwood, Colum

Edwards, Jonathan	Madders, Justin
Efford, Clive	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Elliott, Julie	Mahmood, Shabana
Elmore, Chris	Malhotra, Seema
Eshalomi, Florence	Maskell, Rachael
Esterson, Bill	Matheson, Christian
Evans, Chris	Mc Nally, John
Farron, Tim	McCabe, Steve
Farry, Stephen	McCarthy, Kerry
Fellows, Marion	McDonagh, Siobhain
Ferrier, Margaret	McDonald, Stuart C.
Fletcher, Colleen	McDonnell, rh John
Flynn, Stephen	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Foord, Richard	McGovern, Alison
Fovargue, Yvonne	McKinnell, Catherine
Foxcroft, Vicky	McLaughlin, Anne
Furniss, Gill	McMorrin, Anna
Gardiner, Barry	Miliband, rh Edward
Gibson, Patricia	Mishra, Navendu
Gill, Preet Kaur	Monaghan, Carol
Glindon, Mary	Moran, Layla
Grady, Patrick	Morgan, Helen
Grant, Peter	Morgan, Stephen
Green, Kate	Morris, Grahame
Green, Sarah	Murray, Ian
Greenwood, Margaret	Murray, James
Griffith, Dame Nia	Nandy, Lisa
Gwynne, Andrew	Nichols, Charlotte
Haigh, Louise	Nicolson, John
Hamilton, Fabian	Norris, Alex
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette	O'Hara, Brendan
Hanna, Claire	Olney, Sarah
Hardy, Emma	Onwurah, Chi
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Osamor, Kate
Harris, Carolyn	Osborne, Kate
Hayes, Helen	Oswald, Kirsten
Healey, rh John	Owatemi, Taiwo
Hendrick, Sir Mark	Owen, Sarah
Hillier, Dame Meg	Peacock, Stephanie
Hobhouse, Wera	Pennycook, Matthew
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	Perkins, Mr Toby
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Phillips, Jess
Hollern, Kate	Phillipson, Bridget
Hopkins, Rachel	Pollard, Luke
Hosie, rh Stewart	Powell, Lucy
Howarth, rh Sir George	Qaisar, Ms Anum
Huq, Dr Rupa	Qureshi, Yasmin
Hussain, Imran	Reed, Steve
Jardine, Christine	Reeves, Ellie
Jarvis, Dan	Reynolds, Jonathan
Johnson, Kim	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Jones, Gerald	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Jones, rh Mr Kevan	Rodda, Matt
Jones, Ruth	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Jones, Sarah	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Kane, Mike	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Keeley, Barbara	Sheerman, Mr Barry
Khan, Afzal	Siddiq, Tulip
Kinnock, Stephen	Slaughter, Andy
Kyle, Peter	Smith, Alyn
Lake, Ben	Smith, Cat
Lammy, rh Mr David	Smith, Jeff
Lavery, Ian	Smith, Nick
Leadbeater, Kim	Spellar, rh John
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Starmer, rh Keir
Lightwood, Simon	Stephens, Chris
Linden, David	Stevens, Jo
Long Bailey, Rebecca	Stone, Jamie
Lucas, Caroline	Streeting, Wes
Lynch, Holly	Sultana, Zarah
MacAskill, Kenny	Tami, rh Mark
MacNeil, Angus Brendan	Tarry, Sam

Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twigg, Derek
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt

Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Lilian Greenwood and
Jessica Morden

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon

Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus

Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward

Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola

Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek

Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wood, Mike
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Amanda Solloway and
Mark Jenkinson

Question accordingly negated.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. There are very strong rumours that the Government Chief Whip has apparently resigned. I wonder if it is possible to get some clarity—*[Interruption.]* More than rumours—*[Interruption.]* Well, if Government Front Benchers want to say no. I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on whether or not that can be confirmed, given that this is a matter of parliamentary discipline?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Lady raises a point as to whether a member of the Government has resigned. I have not been given any such information. I know no more than that and it is not a point of order for the Chair.

Tim Farron: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you could clarify that the Minister closing the debate we have just had from the Dispatch Box informed his colleagues that it was not a vote of confidence, when we saw earlier, in writing from the Government Deputy Chief Whip, that it was. Could it be possible that Government Members voted in the Division just now without any clarity on what it was actually they were voting for?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point, which of course is not a point of order for the Chair. My concern is that what is said on the Order Paper is correct and accurate, and it is. I thank the hon.

Gentleman for the point he raises, but it is not one on which I can judge. Ministers are responsible for their own words.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I urge you to launch an investigation into the scenes outside the entrance to the No Lobby earlier. As you know, Members are expected to be able to vote without fear or favour and the behaviour code, which is agreed by the whole House, says that there shall never be bullying or harassment of Members. I saw Members being physically manhandled into another Lobby and being bullied. If we want to stand up against bullying in this House of our staff, we have to stop bullying in this Chamber as well, don't we?
[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We are talking about behaviour. We will have a little bit of good behaviour for a moment on both sides of the House.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important matter about behaviour. He knows better than anyone else that we have an extremely good system for investigating allegations of bullying, intimidation or bad behaviour. If the hon. Gentleman cares to bring evidence and facts to me, I will make sure that the matter is properly investigated. Of course, we must have decorous behaviour at all times, so we will now proceed quietly and politely.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)).
 That the proposed words be there added.

Question agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to consult to ensure there is a robust system of local consent, and clear advice on seismic limits and safety, before any hydraulic fracturing for shale gas may take place; and believes that such consultation must consider how the views of regional mayors, local authorities and parishes should be reflected as well as the immediate concerns of those most directly affected.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES AND SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ADJUSTMENTS) BILL)

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Monday 24 October—

(1) notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 55 (Questions on voting of estimates, etc), the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on any Motion in the name of Andrew Griffith relating to Out-of-Turn Supplementary Estimates not later than two hours after their commencement;

(2) if a Bill founded upon a Resolution agreed under paragraph (1) is then brought in, a Motion may be made without notice by a Minister of the Crown, That the Bill be now read a second time; and

(3) proceedings under this Order may continue though opposed after the moment of interruption and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—*(Darren Henry.)*

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

SANCTIONS

That the draft Sanctions (Damages Cap) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 20 July, be approved.—*(Darren Henry.)*

Question agreed to.

Air Quality in Towcester

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Darren Henry.)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Dame Andrea Leadsom—[*Interruption.*] Order. Surely hon. Members will show some dignity and respect for the right hon. Lady, who is about to begin the Adjournment debate. Leave quietly and quickly. [*Interruption.*] That means all of you.

7.25 pm

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I am grateful to you for granting this important debate.

Picture the scene: a beautiful, historic town whose origins date back to the Roman days; small businesses lining both sides of the street; and traditional architecture providing a link to the area's local history. [*Interruption.*] That is Towcester, at the heart of my South Northamptonshire constituency. It is an idyllic scene until the traffic starts—[*Interruption.*]

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sitting not 6 feet from my right hon. Friend and I am unable to hear what she is saying.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. I have asked Members to behave in a decent and respectful way. I think it is a bit more quiet now.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I was describing Towcester, a beautiful town in the heart of my South Northamptonshire constituency. It is an idyllic scene until the traffic starts. Most days, and sometimes all day, cars queue down the A5 Watling Street, which is the high street through Towcester. Buses cannot pass the cars parked either side, and worst of all, whenever the M1 or the M40 are up the creek, which can happen at any point during the day or night, we have heavy goods vehicles squeezing their way through the narrow gap between parked cars. They often have to drive on to the pavement with air brakes wheezing, tooting their horns to each other to signify, "You first.", "No, you first." I will never forget the day, when my son was 12, that we were walking past the town hall where the pavement narrows to only two feet wide. He dropped a ball into the road and leant out to catch it just as an HGV came past. I grabbed him, but if I had not, that would have been the end of him.

HGV drivers have little concern for busy families with pushchairs or elderly residents crossing the street with walking sticks. The only crossroads in the town is at the historic Saracens Head pub, mentioned in Charles Dickens's, "The Pickwick Papers". Back in the day, as a coaching inn, it would have been a beautiful stop-off point for travellers, but now, having a pint in its pub garden is akin to having a beer alongside several gallons of diesel fumes. This road is unbelievably unsuitable for the size and volume of traffic that is using it, and

quite apart from the obvious dangers for cyclists and pedestrians, the traffic is having an appalling impact on Towcester's air quality, noise levels and quality of life for residents.

Towcester has been in need of a ring road for probably 50 years, and since becoming MP for South Northamptonshire in 2010, resolving that issue has been one of my main local priorities. The beauty of the town drew the eye of Persimmon Homes, which agreed to build a relief road for the town, among other things, in return for planning permission for more than 2,000 new homes on the edge of Towcester. I am no nimby and neither are my constituents. The new housing has been welcomed, and new residents are enjoying the lovely independent retail offer of Towcester, as well as the stunning walks through parkland that used to belong to the Easton Neston estate. As always seems to happen in these situations, the houses are being built at breakneck speed, but after 12 years of my beating down the door of National Highways, the local council, the Department for Transport and Persimmon, we have somehow only managed to achieve a road to nowhere. I have a meeting with them all together once a month; everyone is keen to get the job finished, but as hon. Members can imagine, the sparks occasionally fly.

The relief road will ultimately join the A5 with the A43 as a bypass to the town centre. After years of negotiation, the DfT has agreed that signage will push traffic out of the town and on to the relief road. A new consultation is also under way to improve the look and feel of Towcester town centre and put traffic calming measures in place. The future for Towcester is promising, but that happy vision is probably the best part of two years away or more.

The centre of Towcester was declared an air quality management area as long ago as September 2005. Since then, pollution levels have steadily got far worse; they are currently well above the target level set by the Government. West Northamptonshire Council wrote to all residents of Watling Street and the surrounding areas in March 2021 about air quality, reminding them that their properties fall within an air quality management area and that they might wish to reduce the amount of air pollution to which they are exposed. I am absolutely certain that they all agree.

One of the specific measures that the council proposed was to keep windows adjacent to the road closed during peak traffic periods and to ventilate homes as much as possible through windows that face away from the primary traffic route. You can imagine how residents felt about that advice, Madam Deputy Speaker. Quite rightly, many constituents have contacted me to ask why help in the form of the relief road is not being expedited. They also want to know what we can do in the meantime to protect local people from the damage that is being done to their lungs.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Average levels of asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease are higher in my part of Devon than across the rest of England. Congestion in Cullompton would be eased by a relief road and by the reinstatement of a railway station. Does the right hon. Member agree that railway stations and relief roads can improve air quality?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I entirely agree; I wish the hon. Gentleman success with his campaign for a relief road. However, my purpose this evening is to talk about Towcester, the Roman town of Lactodorum. It is a beautiful place, but it could be so much more beautiful if we get the relief road issue sorted and—most importantly—if the Department deals as far as is possible with relief in the meantime.

I ask my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister the following questions. First, what further action can National Highways take to stop heavy goods vehicles using the A5 at Watling Street until the relief road, which could still be up to two years away, is built? Secondly, can she confirm that National Highways intends to introduce a 7.5-tonne weight restriction in the town centre once the relief road is open? Thirdly, what other measures does she propose to improve air and noise quality in Towcester before the relief road opens? Fourthly, can the programme of signage and traffic calming on which National Highways is consulting as part of the improvements to Towcester town centre be expedited to tackle the problems as soon as the relief road is open, rather than waiting until 2025?

Fifthly, the proposed new developments, particularly logistics centres and warehousing, threatened in a large number of new planning applications in South Northamptonshire will massively exacerbate existing traffic congestion problems. What further action can be taken to stop overdevelopment and ensure that planners take into account the full aggregate impact on traffic of the various individual development projects proposed?

My final question is this. What consideration has been given to the cumulative impact of many significant infrastructure projects, such as the Towcester relief road itself, combined with HS2 and the desire for road closures and traffic movements, as well as the strategic rail freight interchange at Northampton Gateway? What consideration has been given to the aggregate impact of those projects on traffic and air quality in the local area, and what action can be taken to reduce that impact?

Knowing how diligent the Minister is and knowing of her commitment to improving local infrastructure, I look forward to her response and to hearing some reassurance that I can convey to my constituents.

7.35 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Lucy Frazer): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) for providing us with such a vivid picture of the idyllic town of Towcester, while also raising the important issue of congestion and air quality that affects the residents of her town. I know that she has been a staunch campaigner on this subject for a number of years, supporting her local community. Like her, the Government take air quality and its effects extremely seriously; although we have achieved significant reductions in air pollution, it remains the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK.

We are taking a range of actions to drive down air pollution across all sectors, including emissions from transport, domestic burning, industry and agriculture. In these difficult times, we are working responsibly as a

Government to balance those actions with other key priorities such as achieving net zero and managing economic burdens on businesses and individuals.

I hope my right hon. Friend will not mind if I begin by specifying some of the measures that we are taking nationally. Last November we passed the Environment Act 2021, under which we have consulted on two stretching new targets for concentrations of fine particulate matter, the pollutant most damaging to human health. We know that in many cases it is bespoke local intervention that is needed to tackle local air quality issues, which is why the Government have worked to help and empower local authorities to take action. This includes allocating £883 million under our NO₂ programme to help local authorities to develop and implement measures to tackle nitrogen dioxide exceedances, in the shortest possible time. It also includes the money paid to local authorities through our air quality grant scheme, which helps English councils to develop and implement measures to benefit schools, businesses and communities and reduce the impact of polluted air on people's health. Since 2010 we have awarded more than £42 million across almost 500 projects, and this year we more than doubled the funding paid to local authorities through the scheme, to £11.6 million.

National Highways and local authorities already work together to improve local air quality, but in order to formalise that collaboration the Government are designating National Highways a "relevant public authority" through the Environment Act. As a relevant public authority, it will be required to collaborate with local authorities to tackle areas with poor air quality, identified alongside the motorways and trunk roads within each local authority, to help ensure that local air quality objectives are met and subsequently maintained. That will give greater clarity and cohesion to their partnership with local authorities in responding to air quality issues. The statutory instrument designating National Highways a relevant public authority will be laid this autumn.

Let me now turn to the specific local issues raised by my right hon. Friend. The air quality action plan for the Watling Street Towcester air quality management area, updated recently in 2021, sets out the measures that the council plans to take to improve air quality. As my right hon. Friend said, the most significant measure to sustain air quality improvements will be the proposed A5/A43 new road, which will provide an alternative to the route through the centre of Towcester for some traffic. The new road is largely developer funded, but National Highways has made available a contribution of £3.8 million to enable an earlier start to the construction. Like my right hon. Friend, I am very keen to see the road completed as soon as possible, to deliver the important benefits that she outlined.

I know that National Highways has been working closely with West Northamptonshire Council to support a solution that will help to alleviate the traffic and air quality problems in Towcester. As my right hon. Friend discussed with the previous Roads Minister, that will involve installations of signs to direct traffic via the new road, as well as a complementary programme of traffic calming measures, which she talked about. As she mentioned, those actions have already been subject to a public consultation, which closed on 11 September this year. I know that National Highways is in the process of analysing the feedback from the consultation to further inform design development.

I know that my right hon. Friend has vigorously lobbied on behalf of her constituents to introduce a weight restriction and speed reduction through Towcester's high street. She asked me a particular question about that, and I can confirm that a 7.5-tonne limit was included within the options in the recent public consultation. Introducing a weight limit, however, would be dependent on the provision of the new road as a more suitable road for HGVs, and exceptions will need to be in place to enable businesses along the high street to receive deliveries.

My right hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the range of measures being proposed by National Highways, working alongside West Northamptonshire Council, will bring many benefits. The main objectives for the scheme include reducing the impact of air and noise pollution on the surrounding environment, making Towcester's high street an attractive place to visit, improving accessibility to Towcester town, and above all preserving Towcester's rich history and identity. She mentioned that the new road is being constructed by Persimmon Homes, which has assured National Highways that the road will be completed in the summer of 2024.

I reassure my right hon. Friend that National Highways has agreed to deliver both the signage and traffic calming measures on Towcester's high street as soon as the new road is completed. In response to her questions on what further action can be taken by National Highways to stop HGVs using the A5 street, I understand the current frustration for her constituents when the A5 is used as a diversion route following accidents on the nearby M1, as well as during the ongoing works to the motorway. I assure her that the M1 improvement works, which are due to be completed early next year, will not only add extra capacity on the M1 but substantially reduce the frequency of the A5 route being used as a diversion for the M1.

My right hon. Friend raised the issue of new developments in South Northamptonshire, which will deliver immediate impacts of protecting and creating jobs, improving livelihoods and supporting the long-term transformation of the local economy. I acknowledge her views on how those developments exacerbate the existing traffic problems, and reassure her that National Highways is a consultee for any planning applications that may impact the strategic road network. For any applications that impact that network, developers are required to undertake a series of cumulative assessments of traffic levels based on the requirements set out by the Department. Once assessed, impacts of individual schemes may require mitigation measures to be put in place, which would form part of any recommendation for approval. However, as she will know, any decision on whether to grant development consent would be a matter for the local planning authority.

I appreciate the robust campaign led by the council, and the efforts of my right hon. Friend, to protect local residents from poor air quality, and I am pleased that the latest air quality annual status report, conducted by South Northamptonshire Council in 2021, confirmed a continuous downward trend of nitrogen dioxide levels, and all monitored sites in Towcester achieved legal compliance with NO₂ levels in 2019.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her perseverance in improving the lives of the residents of Towcester, and for providing us with an opportunity to outline the steps we are taking to improve both the traffic situation and air quality in and around Towcester. Improving air quality across the nation is a key priority for this Government, and I am committed to addressing it while supporting the economic growth that we so desperately need.

Question put and agreed to.

7.45 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 October 2022

[MRS SHERYLL MURRAY *in the Chair*]

Scottish Devolution Settlement: Retained EU Law

9.30 am

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): I wish to make a short statement about the sub judice resolution. The question whether provisions in the draft Independence Referendum Bill relate to reserved matters under the Scotland Act 1998 has been referred to the Supreme Court and a judgment is anticipated in the coming months. I am exercising the discretion given to the Chair to allow reference to the issues concerned, given their national importance.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of retained EU law on the Scottish devolution settlement.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair for this morning's debate, Mrs Murray, and I welcome the Minister to his new post.

Should this shambles of a Government manage to stumble on past the weekend, we are being told that their Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill will come before the House on 25 October. The Brexit freedoms Bill, as the Government like to call it, will give UK Ministers unprecedented powers to rewrite and replace almost 2,500 pieces of domestic law covering matters such as environment and nature, consumer protection, workers' rights, product safety and agriculture, and that will be done with the bare minimum of parliamentary scrutiny. It is, in short, an ideologically driven deregulatory race to the bottom that will do enormous damage to our society and our economy.

The Bill, taken in conjunction with the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, will fundamentally undermine and alter the devolution settlement by giving primacy to UK law in areas that are wholly devolved, such as environmental health, food standards and animal welfare. Today, I thought it would be useful to consider the Bill to examine what it could mean for Scotland and for the devolution settlement. I believe that any objective analysis would see not only that it puts at risk many of the high standards and protections that the people of Scotland have enjoyed and come to expect from more than four decades of EU membership, but that it is part of the Government's long-term plan to undermine the devolution settlement and weaken our Scottish Parliament.

Under the Bill, and with the 2020 Act already in place, any legislation passed by the Scottish Parliament could be undermined by a Government here in Westminster whom we did not elect, even in matters that are wholly devolved. I will give a few examples. In the area of food standards, if the Scottish Parliament decided that we would remain aligned with the European Union and would ban the sale of chlorinated chicken, but this place decided that cheap, imported, chlorine-washed chicken was acceptable, there would be almost nothing

the Scottish Parliament could do to stop lorryloads of chlorine-washed poultry crossing the border, with that chicken then appearing on our supermarket shelves.

Similarly, if the UK agreed a trade deal that saw the UK flooded with cheap, factory-farmed, hormone-injected meat, but the Scottish Parliament decided to protect Scottish consumers and Scottish farmers by adhering to the standards and protections that we have up to now enjoyed, under the terms of the Bill—again, backed by the 2020 Act—Westminster could override that and Scotland's supermarkets could be inundated with inferior-quality cheap cuts of meat that under existing EU law would get nowhere near our supermarket shelves.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Is it not the case that this is not just about standards? On farming and farmers, we have only to look at the trade deal signed by the UK with Australia and New Zealand, which allows them a higher quota for importing lambs to the UK than is allowed for the entire EU. The EU is protecting our farmers whereas the UK Government are throwing them to the wind.

Brendan O'Hara: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is correct, and I will expand on his point in a moment.

This Government and the Bill are an existential threat to Scottish agriculture. Scotland could decide to stick to long-established best practice in the welfare and treatment of animals, and retain the stringent checks on animals entering the food chain. However, if this place decides to deregulate, animals whose provenance is unknown, and whose welfare history is unaccounted for, can and almost certainly will enter the food chain. Most worryingly, if the Government decide to change food labelling standards, Scottish consumers not only could be subjected to chlorine-washed chicken, hormone-injected beef, genetically modified crops and animals of questionable provenance, but will probably not be able to tell what they are eating. The labelling regulations could be so diminished that the protections consumers now enjoy could be completely removed.

On Friday, I met with the Argyll and Bute regional board of the National Farmers Union Scotland. Its message was stark: farmers feel forgotten and undervalued. They have been battered by Brexit. They are barely surviving the energy crisis. At a time of falling incomes, they are at a loss as to how they will cope with the skyrocketing costs of feed and fertiliser.

Farmers know, too, that the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill is a potential death sentence for an agricultural sector that requires a hefty subsidy. It needs that subsidy because it manages the land, keeps the lights on in our hills and glens, provides employment in rural communities, and helps stem the tide of rural depopulation while producing high-quality, high-value beef, lamb and dairy products. They know—we all know—that the lowering of food standards, the relaxation of rules on labelling and animal welfare, and the mass importation of inferior products will be an unmitigated disaster for Scottish agriculture. They are also painfully aware, as we are, that there is precious little that their democratically elected Scottish Parliament can do about it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Member will know that his opinion and mine greatly differ on this precious Union. I understand that, but it does not

[Jim Shannon]

make us friends any the less; we are dear friends, and work on many things together. One of the reasons for that difference of opinion is seeing the impact that being slightly removed has had on constituents, which he has referred to. Undoubtedly there are some businesses that will thrive in dealing with the EU, but for the vast majority, basics are more expensive to come by. It is simply wrong to have no representative to speak on our behalf on EU legislation. We are painfully aware of that in Northern Ireland. It goes against everything we in a democracy hold so dearly and believe. Does he agree that no nation can knowingly subject itself to law with no voice?

Brendan O'Hara: I thank my dear hon. Friend, and reciprocate the feelings that he has expressed. Every community needs a voice, and his community and farmers need a voice. His farmers need protection. I would caution that his farmers will look at the situation and also be extremely worried that, if the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill and the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 are spread across into Northern Ireland, as they may well be, they will face the same threats as Scottish farmers.

Angus Robertson MSP, Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, has already raised the Scottish Government's serious concerns with the Secretary of State. The Minister will be aware that if the UK Government act in wholly devolved policy areas, they will do so without the consent of Scottish Ministers or the Scottish Parliament, and that will significantly undermine the devolution settlement.

As I said earlier, we will be in a deregulatory race to the bottom, a race in which individual citizens will surely lose out to the spivs and the speculators—and no doubt to the politically connected, who will be fast-tracked into making a quick buck at citizens' expense. The Government say that the Bill will give the UK the opportunity to be bolder and go further than the EU in securing consumer rights and environmental protections, but there are clauses in the Bill that actively prevent Ministers from imposing any new regulatory burden, including any "administrative inconvenience", on anyone.

Those clauses suggest very strongly that this is headed in one direction only, towards deregulation, and that that deregulation will make it easier to circumvent our legal obligations on food labelling for allergens, or not to pay holiday pay, or to roll back on the safe limits on working hours, or to change hard-won rights to parental leave. The Government will be aware of the fury that will follow should they move to weaken existing controls on polluting substances, or attempt to lower existing water or air quality standards, or dare to dilute the essential protections that defend our natural habitat and our wildlife.

Let me stress again: this is not a road that Scotland has chosen to go down. Rather, it is a road that Scotland is being dragged down. Our nation rejected this Tory Brexit fantasy, but our democratic wishes have been ignored at every turn. This is not of Scotland's doing, but because of the constitutional straitjacket we find ourselves in, we are having this done to us by a Government that we did not elect.

The Minister cannot dismiss this as SNP scaremongering, because organisations as diverse as the Scottish Trades Union Congress, Food Standards Scotland and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds have all warned about the adverse impact that the Bill will have. Frances O'Grady, Trades Union Congress general secretary, has described the Bill as "reckless" and said that "vital protections could disappear overnight".

The RSPB has warned that if the Government push ahead, they will be undermining the long-established and vital laws that are in place to protect nature. Food Standards Scotland said that the Bill poses

"a significant risk to Scotland's ability to uphold high safety and food standards."

Yet it seems that, in their desperate, deluded pursuit of the mirage of a Brexit Shangri-La, this Government are prepared to put at risk our natural environment, our food and animal welfare standards, consumer protections and workers' rights. That is why the SNP will oppose the Bill every step of the way.

Not only are this Government coming for those rights and protections that we have enjoyed for decades, they are also coming for our Parliament. I repeat the call from the Scottish Government for the UK Government, even at this late stage, to perform one of their trademark—almost legendary—U-turns, and abandon this disastrous Bill. The Bill not only undermines the devolution settlement, it also diminishes the role of MPs here, with the plan to deal with everything via secondary legislation, conveniently avoiding the intense parliamentary scrutiny that the measures require. The Secretary of State claimed in his letter that this was about "taking back control", but I have to ask: who is taking back control? It is not this Parliament.

As the Government have already gleefully announced to the press, the amount of parliamentary time required has been dramatically reduced. It seems that, for this Government, taking back control means putting a group of hand-picked party loyalists on to a delegated legislation Committee—a Committee with a built-in Government majority, which will be able to bulldoze through change after change after change, as instructed by the Government. The history of delegated legislation Committees is not particularly encouraging. In the past 65 years, only 17 statutory instruments have been voted down in DL committees. The last time that happened was in 1979. While there is certainly a role for DL Committees, I do not believe it extends to making wholesale and fundamental changes to vast swathes of the law on everything from environment and nature to consumer protection, workers' rights, product safety and agriculture, just to help this Government avoid proper parliamentary scrutiny.

Of course, the reason the Government are avoiding scrutiny is because, in their fervour to rid themselves of any lingering European influence, the zealots at the heart of this collapsing Government have arbitrarily put a sunset clause of 31 December 2023 in the Bill. Unless 2,500 pieces of legislation are removed and replaced—unless the Government give themselves an extension, of course—they will simply disappear off the statute book, leaving huge holes in UK law. It is a tactic fraught with danger as it once again introduces another totally unnecessary Brexit cliff edge that will be welcomed by nobody outside the inner sanctum of the European Research Group—sorry, I mean the Cabinet. It is further evidence of the panic at the heart of the Brexit project.

They know the wheels have come off and that the Government are disintegrating before their eyes. Thankfully, Scotland has a way out and we will, as soon as possible, rejoin the European Union as an independent nation. I sincerely hope that the rest of the United Kingdom will find its way back to the European Union as well.

I will conclude with a number of questions for the Minister. Will he confirm that, should the Scottish Government decide to preserve all retained EU law, that would be respected and upheld by the Government here in Westminster? Does he accept that, as it is currently written, the Bill threatens sweeping controls here in Westminster over areas that are wholly devolved? Can he explain why, despite issues raised over the summer by the Scottish Government, the Bill was published with powers to undermine devolution? What impact assessment has been carried out on how the Bill will affect the sectors of the economy that will be most affected by it, particularly farmers in remote, rural, economically fragile areas? Will the Government accept and honour the legislative consent motion from the Scottish Parliament? If they do not, why will they not?

Finally, does the Minister agree that by allowing the UK Government to act in policy areas that are wholly devolved, and to do so without the consent of Scottish Ministers or the Scottish Parliament, that is in direct contradiction to the 1998 devolution settlement and particularly the Sewel convention, which was given a statutory footing in 2016?

9.47 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray, and to welcome the Minister to his post. He will be missed from the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art, which he has chaired so ably for the past few months or more. It is a pity he is not enjoying the solidarity of his colleagues from the Scottish Conservatives, who might have wanted to show an interest in this issue, stand up to defend the Government and extol the virtues of Brexit, which so few people in Scotland supported—but, apparently, there is no sign of them.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) on securing the debate. It is particularly important, given the chaos engulfing the Conservative Government and Westminster more generally right now, that we take this opportunity to shine a spotlight on an issue that might risk going under the radar. Perhaps that is what the Government—and particularly the Secretary of State—are hoping for: to dress it up as a relatively technocratic, legalistic reform of the statute book and hope that nobody pays too much attention.

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute has said, many stakeholders—not just those who might be dismissed as part of the anti-growth coalition, which now appears to include the President of the United States and the Chancellor—and a whole range of financial services are particularly concerned about the impact of so much regulation simply dropping off the statute book without any clear mechanism for its being replaced. As we have heard, it is not a technocratic, legalistic reform of the statute book. The Government's proposals to reform retained EU law represent an Executive power grab on a colossal scale: a power grab from

Parliament, from the devolved legislatures—particularly Scotland—and a complete mockery of the claims that Brexit was ever about the House of Commons taking back control of anything.

The concept of EU retained law was created by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Members might recall that the vast majority of MPs from Scotland took quite a bit of exception to that Bill when it was progressing through the House. I looked back at *Hansard* and, although the Minister will not remember because he was not here at the time, the House was detained on multiple points of order on 12 June 2018, when the Government railroaded through amendments to the Bill that undermined the powers of the Scottish Parliament. The next day, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) led the majority of Scotland's MPs out of the Chamber during Prime Minister's Questions in protest at the power grab that had been enacted.

The precariousness of the Government's position during the 2017-19 Parliament meant that they were forced to make certain concessions in passing the Act, including the establishment of the European Statutory Instruments Committee, which made a nod in the direction of enhanced parliamentary scrutiny. In reality, the EUWA itself represented a significant power grab, with the UK Government taking on powers over legislation that would otherwise have been subject to scrutiny across the EU institutions by our representatives in the European Parliament, and by this Parliament and the devolved legislatures. That is why the Act also enacted a significant undermining of the devolution settlement by reserving powers for Westminster that should otherwise have been devolved to Scotland and the other devolved institutions as the UK left the European Union.

Of course, as my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute said, Scotland never voted to leave the European Union in the first place. The blatant disregard shown by the UK Government of the differential in results across these islands, their unwillingness to compromise on issues such as membership of the single market, instead rushing headlong into the hardest of Brexits that nobody could have had evidence to vote for and did not represent what had been proposed by several of the Leave campaigns; all of that demonstrated a contempt for devolution and any notion of a respect agenda.

Now, having invented the concept of retained EU law, the UK Government want to abolish it. They want to introduce a concept of assimilated law, which to the “Star Trek” fans among us will probably have a particularly sinister overtone—the legislative distinctiveness will be added to our own, as the Borg queen may or may not say. They think that by introducing this concept they can erase the legacy of the UK's time in the EU. Of course, it is not by some strange doublethink that they want to erase the legacy of EU membership: they literally want to sunset every provision accumulated over the past 50 years if it is not reviewed or retained by the end of next year. Never mind that we do not know who the Prime Minister will be at the end of next week, or that the House has sat for little more than four weeks since July; the Government seem to expect us to believe that they can effectively and efficiently revise and update this entire corpus of law in less than 12 months.

They do not pretend that there will be much of a role for this House. As my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute said, they want to create massive

[Patrick Grady]

powers to railroad through statutory instruments and other secondary legislation, or let retained EU regulations drop off of the statute book completely. Never mind if they provide fundamental protection for workers' rights, food standards or the natural environment across all of these islands; the arbitrary deadline from the Secretary of State cannot be met, so off they will go, without any consideration of the consequences for businesses or organisations that are trying to operate or trade in a legislative vacuum. The Secretary of State was previously the Minister for Government efficiency, but this is not efficiency: this is ideology.

That brings us to the specific impact on Scotland and the other devolved administrations. The Northern Ireland Assembly is barely functioning, so it has practically no path of resistance or opposition to this. Sensible voices are already calling for the expansion of the capacity and powers of Senedd Cymru, but the Tories seem determined to stand in the way. That leaves Scotland; because Scotland already has the greatest degree of devolution on these islands, it faces the biggest power grab of all from the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute said, the UK Government asserted primacy over a whole suite of policy areas that were previously understood to be devolved. All of the concerns about the capacity and time available for scrutiny in this place apply equally to Scotland's Parliament. The Scottish Government already have their work cut out trying to mitigate the most devastating impacts of Tory economic and social policies in Scotland, and now they need to find time and space to deal with everything coming down or coming up the road in this Bill.

The Scottish Government have committed to remaining aligned with European Union regulation wherever possible. Alignment makes trade in goods and services easier and more beneficial for all. It will also make the process of Scotland rejoining the European Union as an independent country much more straightforward. Perhaps it is not surprising that the UK Government want to ensure that as much of the UK as possible diverges as much as possible from the EU *acquis* as quickly as possible.

Surely the whole point of Brexit freedom, if that is what the Government think this is, should be to identify naturally and organically where reform of retained law was needed, through the usual processes of engagement with our constituents, consultation with stakeholders and the small matter of political debate and deliberation in Parliament. Instead, what we see exposed is the ideological determination of this Government to erase the UK's membership of the EU from history, irrespective of the outcomes.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute that the Second Reading of the Bill might take place as early as next week. Will the Minister tell us whether it is the Government's intention to commit that Bill to a Public Bill Committee for scrutiny, or whether, like the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, it will be committed to the whole House for scrutiny? That Act received eight days of scrutiny in a Committee of the whole House and two days on Report, because the Government recognised its constitutional significance.

If this Bill is as significant as the Government try to claim, it should be subject to the scrutiny of the whole House through all its stages. In reality, I do not think

that is what the Government are interested in. The explanatory notes are always a riveting read, and I pay tribute to the civil servants who pull them together for the benefit of those of us trying to get our head round the legislation. The explanatory notes say it all. Paragraph 28 says:

"There is no definitive list of general principles recognised in the Court of Justice of the European Union case law, but examples include the protection of fundamental rights, and the equality principle."

Paragraph 30 says:

"This Bill abolishes these general principles in UK law by the end of 2023, so that they no longer influence the interpretation of legislation on the UK statute book."

That is the abolition of fundamental rights and the abolition of the equality principle. Brexit really does mean Brexit after all.

Among the Westminster chaos, the people of Scotland can see what is happening and want no part of it. Their chance for a different kind of repeal Bill—repeal of the Act of Union 1707—is coming very soon indeed.

9.57 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) on introducing the debate. It is incredible, in an hour-and-a-half debate on such an important subject, that I am standing to sum up less than half an hour after it began. That shows a lack of care from many Conservatives, particularly the Scottish Tories.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said, where are the Scottish Tories? They continually challenge the SNP when we talk about power grabs by the Westminster Government. They always ask us to name one power that has been taken away from the Scottish Parliament. As we have heard, this abolition of EU retained law is not a single power grab, it is a *carte blanche* undoing of devolution. It allows the UK Government to force standards in Scotland. When trade deals are signed and Westminster wants to diverge from the EU, the Internal Market Bill, for example, can be used to railroad and force those standards on Scotland. It is disgraceful that the Scottish Tories are not here to make a case for the Government and why they want to do this.

It could be argued that Scotland did not technically have full powers in all these remits because it was EU law, but the point of EU law in regulations is that it was agreed by member states. Scotland will no longer have the facility to keep EU retained law and that alignment, if the Westminster Government have their say. We have to remember that the EU single market is the biggest single market in the world. Why do the UK Government want to diverge from standards that allow access to the biggest market in the world? It makes no sense, but again it is a throwback to the British empire and bringing back British sovereignty. It is a falsehood—a fallacy.

We previously heard from Brexiteers that the good thing about being able to diverge from the EU is that we can improve environmental standards. I spoke last week in a debate about sewage discharges into watercourses and on beaches. Before coming to this place, I was a sewerage civil engineer, and I saw at first hand how the

Tory Government back then resisted EU legislation to clean up beaches. The UK was known as the dirty man of Europe, and it is no surprise that, now that we have left the EU, the rest of the UK is having a problem with sewage discharges. It cannot be a coincidence. Given that you represent a coastal community, Mrs Murray, you must have concerns about water quality and the sewage discharges that this Government seem to be allowing.

Another Brexit falsehood is the so-called sea of opportunity. Fishing communities were told that they were going to benefit from Brexit, but unfortunately they were sold a pup, to mix my metaphors. That again is proof that whatever the Brexiteers promise never comes to fruition—they are just false promises.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute pointed out, it is ridiculous that we are looking at overturning almost 2,500 pieces of legislation by some false 2023 deadline when we do not even have a functioning Government. That process is retained under the control of the Secretary of State. Previously, he was all about parliamentary sovereignty and scrutiny, but that seems to have gone out the window now that he is a member of the Cabinet. We only have to look at the Henry VIII powers inserted into the Energy Prices Bill on Monday to see that the Government are taking back control on one level—they are taking back control from MPs in the House of Commons. I have grave concerns about that.

As my hon. Friend said, this is about food standards and animal welfare. It is about maintaining standards and having checks in place. Another Brexit dividend is that we do not have enough vets because we have ended freedom of movement—it is ridiculous, and it just shows Brexiteers' blinkeredness. As my hon. Friend said, this is an existential threat to Scottish agriculture. It is actually an existential threat to the devolution settlement.

On deregulation, I mentioned workers' rights, and Frances O'Grady of the TUC has highlighted concerns about that. In his speech on the ten-minute rule Bill yesterday, the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) attacked workers' rights and said that the EU working time directive has allowed idleness. That is the attitude. I am sure you have read "Britannia Unchained", Mrs Murray, which was co-authored by the Prime Minister, who attacked British workers for being lazy, idle and unproductive. That is the attitude at the top of the Government, so what hope do we have when EU retained law is completely abolished?

That brings me to the official Opposition. Of course, Labour has promised to make Brexit work. It is also in favour of a hard Brexit. It does not want freedom of movement or to be in the single market, so what does it stand for when it comes to EU retained law? What is Labour's vision for the future? It seems to me that it mirrors the Tory vision.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North rightly pointed out that the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 was forced on Scotland, but at the time we were reassured that the idea of retained EU law was somehow going to give us some continuity. It was going to give us protections, and it was shown that we were not going to diverge from the EU. Now the Government's motives are absolutely clear: that was just another Brexit falsehood, and it is all about divergence and free market

opportunities. Who cares about standards as long as it is a free market and prices come down? That is all they care about, not protecting workers' rights, agriculture and food standards and hygiene.

Another silly example of this Government's obsession with divergence from the EU is the weights and measures consultation. Why would we want to go back to imperial weights and measures? Scotland exports more manufactured goods to the rest of the world than to England, and weights and measures are important in that. Alignment with metric measurements is the way we do things. Why would we want to change? Last week, an article in *New Civil Engineer* magazine noted that using thumb measurements or inches might have been fine for a 16th-century carpenter, but today we have alignment with the biggest single market. Even the United States, despite being one of the few countries that still uses imperial measurements, aligns measurements for its exported goods with the metric system. Why would we want to go back on that? How much money would it cost to rip up what we do now? Again, it just shows the Brexit fantasy and falsehoods.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for raising this, because it is a fallacy that people would want to go back to those kinds of measurements. What the Business Secretary is trying to claim about going back to those measurements is just farcical. Could we perhaps talk about this matter in the bar tonight over 568 ml of beer?

Alan Brown: The hon. Gentleman is being slightly flippant, but he makes a good point. That is the thing: the EU did not force the UK to go metric. It was done willingly. The EU allowed pints and other things to be retained as measurements because it was not about the EU imposing its will, but about a sensible way forward over alignment. Of course, it is a rare thing for me to enjoy a 568 ml drink—or a pint—but I might come back and do that at some point.

I look forward to the hon. Gentleman, who is the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, telling us about Labour's vision for making Brexit work, and why it will not align with the EU, why it does not want to rejoin the single market and why it does not want freedom of movement. I shall conclude there, because I really do want to hear from him and from the new Minister, whom I welcome to his place. Who knows how long he will be in his post, given the current chaos? I hope he will address these serious points and explain this Government's rationale.

10.7 am

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve with you in the Chair for the first time, Mrs Murray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) on bringing this debate. We never know during these debates which Minister will actually turn up, because we are never quite sure who the Minister is. We are always online trying to search the departmental webpages, if they are ever updated properly, to find out who the Ministers are. I welcome the Minister present to his place.

It is very strange that no Scottish Conservative MPs are here to take part in this important debate, but maybe this is a vision of the future after the next general

[*Ian Murray*]

election, where there will be no Scottish Conservative MPs available to be here. I am very disappointed that it was not put on record earlier that the entire contribution of the Scottish Labour party is here participating in this debate, unlike the SNP—only a small fraction of that entire party is present. I think Labour wins that particular battle.

I want to say a few words about this particular debate, which is similar to a debate we had in this Chamber a few weeks ago on the devolution to Scotland of employment law. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute can correct me if I am wrong, but I think that this matter boils down to two things: one is an ideological attack on the rights and protections we have all enjoyed, whether in or out of the EU; the other is the Conservative Government who are putting these changes through. My contention in the previous debate was that this matter is not about two Parliaments up against each other, but about a UK Conservative Government making decisions that we find to be deplorable and not in line with what we would like to see. Perhaps a change of Government would make these things an awful lot easier to achieve.

Brendan O'Hara: Does the hon. Member agree with my substantive point that this is actually a power grab from this place against the Scottish Parliament? It is a power grab that gives primacy in law to what happens in Westminster, as opposed to areas that have hitherto been wholly devolved.

Ian Murray: The powers argument is a consequence of what the UK Government are trying to do. They want to get rid of all this EU law and this is the way they want to do it, so it is an ideologically driven piece of legislation and policy. The consequences of that are all the consequences he laid out in his speech.

There is one thing I want to say about power grabs. We have an argument—whether it be in the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which is now on the statute book, or in this debate—where the Minister stands up and says, “This is a powers bonanza” and the SNP says, “It is a power grab”. It is probably neither, and it will depend on the decisions made by both Governments about what will happen, which is driven by the desire of the Scottish people. In the past few polls, nearly 70% of Scottish people want both Governments to work together. It surprises me that when the Scottish Government were talking about a power grab in the Internal Market Act, they were hiring all these new civil servants to deal with the new powers that were about to arrive. Of the 157 powers that have been repatriated from the European Union, 130 or 135 of them currently sit with the Scottish Government. These bland statements about power grabs and power bonanzas are rather unfortunate and are probably not of any use to the debate.

I agree with the hon. Member about the consequences that could happen if decisions in Westminster are made in line with how we think they will be made. We only have to look at our inboxes over the past few weeks to see the emails from all the nature organisations, such as the RSPB, as the hon. Member mentioned, Greenpeace and others, which were apoplectic at the possible consequences for protections from this attack on nature

across the whole of the UK. The Minister has to tell us the driving force behind this. I think the Minister or the Secretary of State said that the reason for this piece of legislation is that if it was not in place removing or amended outdated EU laws could take several years. I ask the Minister to give us an example—if we did not have this Bill—of a piece of EU law that would take several years to repeal. I bet he cannot give us one because it is just another line from the Secretary of State's speech that makes no reference to the reality of the situation.

The key point is that we were all told at the Brexit referendum that EU law would be repatriated to the EU, but it would be the minimum standard and it would be built on. We seem to have a bonfire of regulation and a clumsy drive from this Govt and the previous two Conservative Governments since the EU referendum to rip up regulations and turn the UK into the Singapore of Europe. Rather than working in the national interest, it is always about what is in the party's interests.

Hon. Members have asked some questions. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) rightly talked about the impact on devolution. All these things have an impact on devolution. Asymmetric devolution across the United Kingdom gives us these kinds of issues, and it is driven by a Government that wishes to create them. We have a situation where the UK Government and the Scottish Government want to rip up the devolution settlement. That is just a fact. Whether the Government realise it, every time they bring a piece of retained EU legislation to this House, they just give succour to the nationalists who wish to rip up the devolution settlement to deliver independence.

While we have just had a huge discussion about this Conservative Government wrenching the UK out of the European Union with a hard Brexit, we have the hard Scexiters here, who want to do exactly the same. [*Interruption.*] They like that, don't they? They are hard Scexiters who wish to do exactly the same, and it is not my words: it is the words of the economic paper that the First Minister launched on Monday. There would be a hard border between Scotland and England for goods, services and probably people. They want to seamlessly rejoin the EU with a 12% deficit, using someone else's currency with no central bank as a lender of last resort with no money. The paper itself has been trashed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. It was trashed by Robert McAlpine, who is a massive supporter of independence, who asks, “How do we get out of this crazy mess?” While we have a discussion about hard Brexiteers, we have three hard Scexiters here—I will give way to one of them.

Alan Brown: I am trying not to bite here, but I will go back to the question I posed. The hon. Member mentioned a hard Brexit and said it is what the Tories are doing. Is it not the case that Labour favours a hard Brexit? The hon. Member has not mentioned why Labour is against re-joining the single market, nor defended why Labour is against freedom of movement. Does the hon. Member agree with the shadow Chancellor who thinks that the UK needs to process and deport people back to their countries more quickly? That seems to be the Labour view, and it is no different from the Government.

Ian Murray: That is more fantasy from the SNP. I find it strange that, when we have a Government on their knees bringing forward a piece of legislation that

ultimately could undermine devolution, the main part of the hon. Member's speech was an attack on the Labour party. That maybe tells us that our ascendancy in Scotland is worrying the SNP.

Let me say what would have happened. The hon. Member calls the Labour party hard Brexiteers; had the SNP not abstained on the amendment for the customs union it would have passed in Parliament—a matter of public record. The SNP spent less on the EU referendum than it did on the Shetland Scottish parliamentary byelection—to win 3,400 votes. The SNP asks about where we are as a country at the moment. It is perfectly practical for the Labour party, who wish to be the next Government, to try and make Brexit work. The first day that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) walks into No. 10 as the Prime Minister, he is going to face the circumstances of the day, not those that we may wish to find. The first task will be to make what we have got work, the second task will be to build and deepen that relationship with Europe, and the third task, which overarches all of that, is to do what is in the national interest. That is clear.

That shadow Chancellor was actually saying that part of the problem we have in this country with the immigration system is the Home Office not processing applications for asylum quickly enough, which leaves the massive backlog of tens of thousands that we have at the moment. If hon. Members had listened to what she actually said, that is what she was referring to—which I think is SNP policy? If the Home Office was processing applications in a timely manner, and in a humane way, we could get through applications much quicker, lessening those issues.

Where was I with the hard Scexiteers? I think we had gone through that. I will get on to some of the issues raised about what the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill will do. I hope the Minister will tell us what the Government's plans are, because this is essentially a theoretical Bill about trashing, amending, or otherwise, EU retained law in this country. The Government always have those grand phrases, but they do not tell us what they are going to do. Can the Minister answer my first question: what would take several years if it was not in the Bill? Will the Minister give us an example about what he wishes to do with some of those regulations? I would be happy to listen to that.

The Labour party wants to use that platform to put in a new deal for working people. That is a prime policy example. That would give people workers' rights from day one and it would build on EU regulations that we have already had. Incidentally, the UK has always gold-plated EU regulations. In fact, Conservative Governments have always gold-plated EU regulations. The Labour party would end fire and rehire and zero-hour contracts—is that part of the Government's strategy? We would make work more family friendly and flexible. We would strengthen trade union rights, which would raise pay and conditions. We would roll out fair pay agreements, and we would use Government procurement to ensure that we could lift standards, pay, conditions and skills right across the country.

Our new deal for working people is a practical example of what we would do with regulations, rather than a Bill that says we will rip up every piece of EU regulation without saying what we would do instead, while, at the same time, undermining devolution.

I will ask one final, two-part question to the Minister. What discussions is he having with the devolved Administrations about the Bill, and about trying to achieve a consensus so that legislative consent motions can be passed? The Sewel convention—which was right—was put on a statutory footing under the Scotland Act 2016 by an amendment brought forward by the Labour party. We cannot just disregard that; the Sewel convention is clear that the UK Government will not legislate in devolved areas where they do not need to. If they do, a legislative consent motion must be positively passed by the Scottish Parliament—not the Scottish Government. What discussions is he having to make sure those legislative consent motions can come forward?

I am grateful that the debate has been brought forward, and that we have had the hard Scexiteers and hard Brexiteers arguing over the EU. However, yet again we have had a combined 37 minutes from three SNP Members, and they have not told us one iota about how they can get back into the European Union with the huge deficits they have, no currency, no central bank, no lender of last resort and no immigration policy—[*Interruption.*] Now they are claiming that I am slagging them off, but they spent a lot of their speeches slagging off the Labour party. I look forward to the Minister answering some questions, and maybe at some point in the future we will get some answers from the SNP as well.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): I welcome the Minister to his place.

10.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Dean Russell): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I have to say, I have quite enjoyed this debate. I will respond to as many of the questions as possible. Given the fact that the Leader of the Opposition is likely to push to form a coalition with the SNP, I do not quite know how the divide that has been so clearly created today will be filled.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) on securing this important debate. I am grateful to him for the opportunity to debate this very important topic ahead of the Second Reading of the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. I look forward to continuing discourse with him, his SNP colleagues and others during the passage of the Bill. I intend to cover as many of the points raised by the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) as possible.

I will start with a clear message: the Government are absolutely committed to the devolution settlements and to safeguarding the Union. It is our mission to deliver economic prosperity for every citizen in every part of the UK. As my colleagues are undoubtedly aware, the Government are committed to devolution and to working collaboratively and constructively with the devolved Governments. That is the way to deliver better outcomes for citizens across the UK. The people of Scotland rightly expect both the UK and Scottish Governments to work together and focus on the issues that really matter to them.

[*Dean Russell*]

We have the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and global economic slowdown, which has created incredible challenges for the UK—for Scottish, English, Welsh and Northern Irish citizens. The Government are committed to working towards economic and legislative solutions that work for the whole of the UK. Accordingly, the Government remain fully committed to the Sewel convention and the associated practices for seeking consent for the devolved legislatures.

Retained EU law, the subject of today's debate, was brought on to the statute book as a bridging measure to ensure continuity as we left the European Union. It was never intended to sit on the statute book indefinitely. Its existence has created legislative anomalies that we must now address. On 31 January, the Government announced plans to bring forward the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. It is a culmination of the Government's journey to untangle ourselves from nearly 50 years of EU membership, and it will provide the tools for the Government to fully realise the benefits of Brexit. We realise that those benefits for citizens are paramount, especially for businesses across all four great nations of the UK.

Alan Brown: Can the Minister actually explain the brilliant benefits of untangling the UK from EU legislation? What are those benefits?

Dean Russell: I thank the hon. Member for asking that very clear question. There are many benefits. In fact, on the EU dashboard there are over 2,500 pieces of legislation that we can start to look at. The key point of this Bill is to create a framework to enable us to look forward at how we can get the best out of Brexit. It will affect every citizen across the UK, and the Bill will make sure that we are covering that. I will come to points raised earlier, if I may.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for giving way again; I appreciate it. Please will he name one EU law that will be abolished that will benefit the lives of my constituents in Kilmarnock and Loudoun?

Dean Russell: I thank the hon. Member for that question. The key point about the Bill today is to talk about the framework, and what we are trying to ensure is that as the framework goes through, we will then be able to look at the individual pieces of regulation and legislation—all of those pieces that will then be looked at.

There are many, many, many, but I will not be drawn on the specifics today, because it is, of course, important that the conversation happens for the UK Government, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Government, to make sure that we are getting the right output from this, and it would be wrong of me to pre-empt that. However, I am sure that within the coming weeks and months we will have lots of conversations, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will himself be listening to many of them in the coming years.

Alan Brown: I will be listening.

Dean Russell: Thank you.

The Bill will abolish the constitutional and outdated special status that retained EU law currently has on our statute book by 31 December 2023. It will empower the UK and devolved Governments to amend, repeal and replace their retained EU law more quickly. It will also include a sunset date by which all remaining retained EU law will either be repealed or, if a decision is made to keep it, stripped of interpretive provisions associated with retained EU law, and assimilated. I noted the comment of the hon. Member for Glasgow North, being a fellow “Star Trek” fan; although I disagree with his analogy, I understood the concept of the Borg, which probably has not been mentioned in Parliament very often. The key point is that any retained EU law that we keep will be assimilated into domestic law.

The Bill will enable the Government and, where appropriate, the devolved Governments to take back control of the UK statute book. The powers in the Bill will enable swift reform of the laws—more than 2,500 in total—derived from the UK's membership of the EU. Many of those laws are outdated; some are even inoperable or not fit for the UK's economic circumstances. That is why reform is needed.

Without the Bill, there is a risk that retained EU law becomes an immutable category of law on the statute book. The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 preserved EU laws as if they had effect in domestic law immediately before the end of the transition period following the UK's withdrawal from the EU. It is manifestly sensible that we all have the power to repeal or reform those laws and that we do so without delay.

Patrick Grady: Surely the point is that if this Parliament has regained sovereignty, in the way that the Brexiters claimed it has, it has that power and can do it on a case-by-case, piece-by-piece basis, as people come forward with allegedly sensible improvements to the retained EU law. Having the end of next year as a sunset clause is just completely arbitrary; it is not necessary. The whole point of the Brexit case, as I understood it, was that this Parliament could take its time and assert its sovereignty, and change these hangover regulations as and when it saw fit, and not with an arbitrary sunset clause.

Dean Russell: I thank the hon. Member for his comments, but no—we need to make sure that there is certainty on this issue. Having that date is absolutely essential to make sure that we are working towards it and ensuring that there is commonality in the way we work across these regulations and laws. Ultimately, however, this is what the British people—people across the United Kingdom—voted for. I appreciate that saying that may open up a whole load of new interventions, so I will hesitate to go down that rabbit hole.

This Bill will provide both the UK Government and the devolved Governments with the powers to amend, repeal and replace these laws more quickly and more easily than before. It will enable the devolved Governments to establish a more nimble, innovative and UK-specific regulatory approach, in order to go further and faster to seize the opportunities of Brexit.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute mentioned devolved Governments quite a few times and I understand the reasons for that. I just want to make it absolutely clear, and I will reiterate this because it is so important, that the decisions for those in devolved Governments to

make—the choice to preserve, amend or repeal retained EU law in their areas—are theirs to make. I will come on to this again a bit later in my comments.

The measures in the Bill are UK-wide. This will ensure that citizens and businesses across all four nations of the UK are able to realise the benefits of Brexit. Nothing in our proposed legislation affects the devolution settlements. The proposed legislation will not restrict the competence of either the devolved legislatures or the devolved Governments. In fact, the powers in the Bill will give the devolved Governments greater flexibility to decide how they should regulate those areas that are currently governed by retained EU law in the future.

Ian Murray *rose—*

Brendan O'Hara *rose—*

Dean Russell: I give way to the hon. Member for Edinburgh South.

Ian Murray: Perhaps the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) wants to make the same point. The Minister is refusing to give us examples, so let us give him an example and he can tell us whether it would be allowable. Say food regulations were reduced and chlorinated chicken in this country was allowed. What would stop a Scottish supermarket selling chlorinated chicken even if the Scottish Government, under those rules, would not allow that to happen in terms of their food safety responsibilities under devolution?

Dean Russell: I shall assume that the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute wanted to make the same point. To be absolutely clear, the premise of the Bill is to enable the conversations to happen among the UK Government and the devolved Governments and to enable us to look at the best way to ensure that we have very high standards in our approach around a whole load of areas. It is not about trying to reduce the quality of food or any of those things. The UK has always had very high standards. I will come to that later in my speech.

Brendan O'Hara *rose—*

Dean Russell: I want to make progress if I may, because I will come to those points—

Brendan O'Hara: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Dean Russell: Okay, I will take an intervention, but I am going to come to those points later.

Brendan O'Hara: The Minister has failed to answer the question, which is very specific. He talks about conversations being had, but this is not about conversations. It is about where decision making and power lie. If the Scottish Parliament decided that chlorinated chicken was banned, but the UK Parliament decided that chlorinated chicken was okay, what would stop chlorinated chicken appearing on supermarket shelves in Scotland? That is a very specific question.

Dean Russell: I take the intervention. The key point here is that this is about the Bill, and the conversations between the UK Government, through devolution, with the Scottish Government and others are yet to be had. We have to have those conversations, and the Bill will

enable them to be had and to look at how we put those regulations in place. The idea that the UK is somehow going to start to reduce quality with respect to food or any other area is a rehash of old, proven-to-be-untrue Brexit arguments, and it is not the case here. I am going to make progress and I will come to some of those points later.

The majority of the powers in the Bill will be conferred on the devolved Governments. Conferring those powers will provide the devolved Governments with the tools to reform retained EU law in areas of devolved competence. That will enable the Scottish Government to make active decisions about the retained EU law that is within their devolved competence, for the benefit of citizens and businesses throughout Scotland. When using the powers of the Bill, the Government will use the appropriate mechanisms, such as the common frameworks, to engage with the devolved Governments. That will enable us to take account of wider context and allow for joined-up decision making across the UK.

The Government believe that a sunset provision is the quickest and most effective way to remove or amend all retained EU law on the UK statute book. That will incentivise genuine reform of retained EU law. The reform is needed, and it will help to drive economic growth. It will also enable us to capitalise on the rich vein of opportunity afforded to us via Brexit.

The sunset provision will of course not include Acts of Parliament, or indeed Acts of the devolved legislatures. It is right that an Act that has received proper parliamentary scrutiny should be the highest law of the land. Most retained EU law, however, sits on our statute book as a constitutional anomaly—somewhere between primary legislation and secondary, neither here nor there. It never received proper parliamentary scrutiny, and unless we actively want it, it ought to be removed.

The power to preserve specified pieces of retained EU law will also be conferred on the devolved Governments. That will enable the Scottish Government to decide which retained EU law they wish to preserve and assimilate, and which they wish to allow to sunset within their devolved competence.

Brendan O'Hara: Will the Minister give way?

Dean Russell: I will take one more intervention.

Brendan O'Hara: Time is pressing, so I appreciate the Minister giving way. Given what he has just said, will he confirm now that should the Scottish Government decide to preserve all retained EU law, that would be respected and upheld by the Government here at Westminster?

Dean Russell: I will come to that later, so the hon. Gentleman will get his answer. Ultimately, we are saying that where there is devolved competence and where there is engagement on that, absolutely we will work together on it.

I want to assure the House that the Government are committed to ensuring that the Bill works for all parts of the UK. We have carefully considered how it will impact each of the four nations, in close discussion with the devolved Governments, and it is of paramount importance that our legislatures function in a way that makes certain that we can continue to work together as one.

[Dean Russell]

The Government recognise the importance of ensuring that the Bill is consistent with the devolved arrangements, and we remain committed to respecting the devolution settlements and the Sewel convention. Indeed, the Business Secretary has made that commitment clear in his engagement with Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Angus Robertson. The Government have sought legislative consent from the devolved legislatures for the provisions in the Bill that engage the legislative consent motion process. Both I and the Business Secretary look forward to engaging with the devolved Governments on the process of seeking legislative consent as the Bill progresses through Parliament. Alongside that, the Business Secretary and I remain committed to engaging with our devolved counterparts as the Bill moves through. We will work together to address any concerns and ensure that the Bill works for all parts of the UK.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute asked about devolved settlements. We are not changing the constitutional settlement. The Scottish Government will still have control of areas within devolved competence, including food standards. On workers' rights, the UK has one of the best records on workers' rights—those high standards were never dependent on the EU—and we intend to continue them. Environmental protections will not be weakened. We want to ensure that environmental law is fit for purpose and able to drive improved environmental outcomes.

Ian Murray: The Minister has been hugely generous in taking interventions—he is a friendly Minister—but he is not quite answering the questions. He is pretending to answer the questions, but is not quite doing so. Let me give him a practical example. Before 31 December 2023, the EU law on food standards is revoked. The UK Government decide that chlorinated chicken is allowed into our food system in this country—currently, under EU retained law, it is not—and the Scottish Government, under their food standards devolved powers, decide that they will not allow that to happen. What happens? Do we end up with chlorinated chicken in Scotland? Or, with the Scottish Parliament having made that decision, will there be no chlorinated chicken on the shelves of Scottish supermarkets?

Dean Russell: To be clear, as I understand it, the preservation will be respected. If the Scottish Government want to preserve legislation within their competency, the UK will respect it. I think there is clarity on that. I am happy to write to hon. Members to confirm in more detail, but that is my understanding of the Bill. The premise at the moment is that we have to make sure that we get the Bill through to enable those activities to happen—to enable the work between the Governments and to deliver on those benefits for our citizens and businesses.

On food standards, the Government made a clear manifesto commitment that, in all trade negotiations, we will not compromise on our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards. In any case, that is always going to be a high bar that we will deliver on.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute asked about impact assessments. There will be an impact assessment of the measures in the Bill during the passage of the

Bill. The Bill is an enabling Bill. Further work will be done by Departments, while reviewing specific rules. That is why I am not getting drawn into specifics, because this is the framework for those conversations to be had and those conversations will then have impact assessments aligned to them.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun made some comments about sewage. I want to be clear: we will not weaken protections. The UK is a world leader in environmental protections and we are committed to delivering our legally binding targets to halt nature's decline by 2030. The Government have a clear environmental and climate goals set out in the 25-year environment plan and the net zero strategy. Any changes to environmental regulation will need to support the goals. This whole nonsense is repeatedly put out—that somehow we have voted as a Government to put more sewage in waterways. We have put more protections in place to stop it happening and we are the first Government to do that in decades. We have to be really clear in the accuracy of the language we use in Parliament. We have not voted to do that; we have actually improved measures around the environment.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North—I consider him a friend and would address him as my honourable friend—asked about the Public Bill Committee. I cannot say at the moment whether there will be a PBC or not. I am sure that will be decided in a matter of weeks.

For me, this is about ensuring that we help growth and that businesses can focus on doing business and not filling out forms. Ultimately, we need to ensure that individuals across the country know where they stand and that when they vote for their parliamentarian—their MP—they know that they have the right to change the rules and the law and do not have to wait for unelected bureaucrats elsewhere to do so.

The Bill is an essential piece of legislation. It will enable all four nations of the UK to capitalise on the regulatory autonomy offered by our departure from the EU and fully realise the opportunities of Brexit. I hope that I have been able to demonstrate in this debate that the Government are committed to devolution and working collaboratively and constructively with the devolved Governments. We need to make sure we are moving on and that the UK has the ability to make the laws that we were elected to do. We have an opportunity collectively to seize the opportunities of Brexit and cement ourselves as a leader in the global world.

10.41 am

Brendan O'Hara: I thank everyone who has taken part this morning. What we lacked in numbers we certainly made up for in quality. I thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), and even the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), who, despite his best efforts to go on a fishing expedition very early on this Tuesday morning, will have noticed that I and my colleagues are far too long in the tooth to bite, particularly this early in the morning.

I thank the Minister for what he said. I am delighted that he confirmed that, should the Scottish Government decide to preserve all retained EU law, that would be

respected and upheld by the Government here in Westminster. But nothing that he has said has altered the fact that on the rights and protections—

Dean Russell: I just want to be clear on the wording that the hon. Member used. I said that if the Scottish Government want to preserve all areas within their competency, the UK Government will respect that. I want to be clear that that is what was being repeated back.

Brendan O'Hara: Okay—as we dance on the head of a pin this early in the morning. What it does not change is the fact that our rights and protections that we have enjoyed for 40-odd years in the areas of food standards, animal welfare and environmental protections are under threat. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun says, why would the Government legislate to ensure that we cannot get access to the biggest market in the world sitting on our doorstep? Nothing the Minister has said changes my position that they are coming for our Parliament. The sooner we are out of this Union and rejoin the European Union, the better.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of retained EU law on the Scottish devolution settlement.

10.43 am

Sitting suspended.

Off-grid Homes: Energy Support

11 am

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): I will call Fay Jones 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 the debate, as is the convention in 30-minute debates. I can see that a lot of Members want to make interventions, but I ask them to keep them snappy to be fair to the Member leading the debate.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered energy support for off-grid homes.

It is lovely to see you in the Chair, Mrs Murray. I am delighted to see the Minister here; I welcome him to his place. He and I have a history of working together; the last time we did a double act was in moving the Loyal Address back in May. There are many Members present, and I intend to be as generous as possible in taking interventions, as I want the Minister to be fully aware of the strength of feeling on this issue. It is evident that this subject has cross-party support.

As a country, we have faced a multitude of challenges over the past few years. Although we often faced bleak forecasts, the Government have done well to steer us through the obstacles, and the global energy crisis is no different a challenge. Russia's aggressive and brutal invasion of Ukraine shocks us with its barbarity, and it has had very real impacts on our energy markets. As we and others adjust and rightly manoeuvre away from dependence on Russian energy, we must overcome the logistical challenges in our way.

We are fortunate in this country that our dependence on Russian gas was minimal. However, global supply disruptions, high energy prices, geopolitical turmoil and an as yet unrealised transition away from carbon-intensive energy sources are causing real concerns for my constituents and many others across the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The fact that so many Members are here is an indication of how important the issue is. The hon. Lady asked me before whether this issue will affect Northern Ireland—of course it will. Some 68% of people in Northern Ireland are oil-dependent. I live in a rural constituency, and on its outskirts, “off grid” refers to those who depend on coal. I appreciate that the Government have taken massive steps to help, but does the hon. Lady think that they need to monitor the situation over the next few months to ensure that the people who need help most get it?

Fay Jones: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I am pleased to see two Members from Northern Ireland here. I sit on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, and we discussed this issue with the Northern Ireland Secretary yesterday.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this important issue to the House. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, two thirds of Northern Irish homes are on oil, and

[*Claire Hanna*]

half of the remaining third use keypad meters. My Assembly colleagues have brought forward a proposal to issue a voucher, consistent with the support we are giving to gas customers and based on the Northern Ireland high street voucher scheme, which we used last year. Is the hon. Lady aware of any modelling being done to allow the Government to issue support directly to households that they can use with oil suppliers in their area?

Fay Jones: As I say, we discussed this in great depth on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, and I hope we continue to do so. I am not aware of any modelling, but I am keen for the Government to explore all options to see how this can be rectified. All hon. Members are keen to ensure parity.

There is a feeling of unfairness among the many rural households across the country that we collectively represent.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is vital that those who live off grid, of whom there are 12,000 in my part of the west country, get additional support to reflect their increased vulnerability to price rises. That includes those who use heating oil, those who live in park homes and those who use solid fuels. The £100 offered by the Government simply does not come close to the scale of price increases we have seen, but I am concerned about the speed—

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman should be making a short intervention, not a speech.

Richard Foord: Any additional support should reach households quickly. Does the hon. Lady agree?

Fay Jones: I think the Government have done extremely well—the issue of park homes has been rectified, and I firmly commend them for that—but I want to see further support for off-gas-grid homes.

The Government mobilised a rapid response to the energy crisis earlier this autumn and are supporting all households through a variety of means. This is the right thing to do and I commend the Government for their approach. However, I am concerned that not enough is being done to support rural households.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Fay Jones: I will make a touch more progress, and then I promise I will bring my hon. Friend in.

The cost of heating oil has skyrocketed this year. Consumers are experiencing a 21% increase from two months ago, and a nearly 60% increase compared with prices before the war in Ukraine. That is unsustainable for many households. People in rural areas are, on average, five years older than the national average in urban areas. They are often vulnerable and especially susceptible to changes in energy prices.

Dr Hudson: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate about a very important issue for all our areas. In her part of the world, and in rural Cumbria,

off-grid households and businesses rely on heating oil, liquefied petroleum gas, biomass, wood and so on. We welcome that the Government have recognised that, but does she agree that the £100 support must be looked at? People often have to make minimum orders of 500 litres. We urge the Government to do more to address the issue.

Fay Jones: My hon. Friend's constituency is much like mine, with often challenging topography and older housing stock that leaks energy. He and I share the same concern, and I want the Government to look at the amount of support offered to rural areas.

The Government have so far introduced a series of short-term measures designed to assist the lowest-income households through extraordinary times. It is an ambitious and comprehensive package of support, necessitated by the severity of the situation, and it rightly supports the most vulnerable in the short term; however, for rural homes, it is lacking. Only £100 has been announced so far. I am confident that the Government can go further.

On Monday, the Chancellor announced a review of the energy price guarantee, so that it will apply not for two years but for six months; in April, we will look to introduce a targeted system of support. My concern is that, if we do not do more now, we will increase the number of people who are considered more vulnerable later this year.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Fay Jones: I give way to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone).

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Member is making an excellent speech. It would be very well received in my vast and very remote constituency if a Government Minister agreed to come north and meet with citizens advice organisations. That would mean a huge amount to people. I am willing to offer bed and breakfast—and maybe a dram—to any visiting Minister.

Fay Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention; I am sure that the Minister will cover it in his speech. I will talk about some of the groups that can input into this debate once I have taken the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately).

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for securing the debate. Many of my constituents, particularly those who use heating oil and those who live in park homes, are extremely worried about how they will cope with costs. I am grateful to the Government for the support that has been announced, but it is not enough. We need more clarity and further certainty about the protections that will be available for these residents.

Fay Jones: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. The Government have taken some extraordinary, comprehensive steps, but there are some gaps, which she is right to highlight.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, in the past few days I have met Liquid Gas UK and National Energy Action. It is apparent that the Government's short-term approach is

universally welcomed, but there is more to do. NEA was quick to outline that my constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire has one of the highest levels of off-gas-grid properties in the UK: up to two thirds of my constituents are dependent on heating oil to heat their homes.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. A lot of Members are talking about very rural constituencies. Mine, which lies on the edge of York, is not amazingly rural, but we still have a lot of off-grid communities that are reliant on off-grid energy support. Does that add weight to her argument? We are not talking just about remote rural communities; the issue affects vast areas of the country.

Fay Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am glad that he made that very important point. My constituency is heavily rural, but people need only live half a mile or a mile outside one of its larger towns to be off the gas grid. This is not a remote rural problem; it affects a huge amount of the population. I would be remiss not to say, Mrs Murray, that it probably affects a large number of your constituents too, which gives us even more reason to be delighted to see you in the Chair.

The Country Land and Business Association reports that 70% of rural housing across the United Kingdom is off the gas grid and has to use alternative heating methods, such as oil. We must not forget those heating their homes using LPG or wood pellets. They are currently not receiving equity of support with more urban households or those on the gas grid.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): Like many others here, I am delighted that my hon. Friend has secured the debate. My constituency of Eddisbury is like hers, with a high proportion of people off the grid. There is a particular issue with how dual-purpose properties, where a farmhouse might provide accommodation or there is accommodation above a pub, could be supported by the Government's welcome scheme. It would be helpful if the Minister addressed that point.

Fay Jones: I have never had such a workout in Westminster Hall! I thank my hon. and learned Friend for his intervention; the Minister will have heard his point. It is also important to consider the commercial aspect of this issue, because a lot of businesses heat premises via heating oil, LPG or pellets. We forget the rural economy at our peril.

I want to mention the case of a constituent who contacted me about the cost and availability of heating oil. She lives high up in the Black Mountains, where the weather is colder and more severe. Her home is in a beautiful place, but it is in an austere position, without a connection to mains gas. She told me earlier this month that she had bought 500 litres of oil, costing £500. That will barely last her through the winter. She is deeply concerned about how she will afford to heat her home this winter and the remainder of the year.

Between May 2020 and May 2022, the average price of heating oil in the UK increased almost 250%. Some communities are reporting increases in LPG costs of around 200%. The price of logs has more than doubled for many. It is therefore vital that off-grid homes in rural areas do not lose out on this support.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for leading this debate. I have had many constituents on Ynys Môn write to me, as 60% of them rely on off-grid energy for heating. The average cost of filling an oil tank has almost doubled this year. Although they are grateful for the £100 heating oil payment, that is simply not enough. On behalf of my constituents and those of other rural constituencies across the UK, I ask whether the Minister agrees that a price cap should be applied to off-grid heating oil and LPG, mirroring that applied to gas and electricity.

Fay Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I, too, hope that the Minister addresses that point. It is important to remember that those living off the gas grid are not subject to the protection of the energy price cap. I hope the Minister acknowledges that point.

I want to allow some time for the Minister to respond, but a point I would like to press this morning is that rural areas are not wealthy. It is misleading to think that, because we live in beautiful homes, we do not suffer some of the social pressures that the rest of the country does. Rural poverty is often masked by the relative affluence of rural areas, and by a culture of self-reliance in rural communities, but self-reliance cannot be how my constituents stay warm this winter. Rural homes are often older, damper, draughtier and more poorly insulated than those in urban areas. In the long term, it is right that those issues are addressed, to improve overall energy efficiency, decarbonise our homes and save money for our constituents. However, the short-term needs of people who live in rural areas need to be addressed now.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for giving way just before she reaches her conclusion. Her constituency, albeit in Wales, will be similar to mine in Angus, where the 3,500 houses that rely on oil are in the more remote places, further up the glen where the weather is much colder. It is a double whammy for people. Does she agree that, when the Government review the situation, they should accept that £100 does not cut it and that we need a far more significant intervention in the oil market?

Fay Jones: I do. We have heard a chorus of unanimity this morning, and I hope that the Minister has heard that message. The hon. Gentleman underlines my great concern that if we do not do more now, we will create a bigger cost for the Treasury later in the year, when the Chancellor moves to a targeted package of support for the most vulnerable. We will increase the number of those people if we do not do more now. I am very concerned, and I look to the Government to take more urgent action.

It is clear from the debate that there is unanimity right across the House. It is imperative that we speak for rural communities and ensure that we deliver equity between those who live in rural homes and those who live in urban homes. I urge the Government to reconsider whether more could be done to support rural households. Perhaps the Minister will also outline how the £100 payment will be delivered. We do not yet have that detail from the Department, and I would like to see that uncertainty ended.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I am so grateful to my hon. Friend, who is doing a wonderful job of representing the interests of millions of rural and urban residents around the country who are not on the grid. Last Friday, I held a winter support summit in my constituency, where I brought together all the organisations that can help people, from charities and businesses to schools and councils. To help the Minister, there are some schemes that large energy companies are running to help the most vulnerable. I encourage hon. Members to look into that, because there is some help that can support the work that I am sure the Minister will tell us about.

Fay Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, which gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to all those supporting vulnerable individuals through this winter, whether in rural or urban areas. We could not get by without the support of many of the charities and social organisations that are supporting those who deal with fuel poverty issues.

I will sit down shortly—I hope that I have allowed all Members to speak—but I hope that the Minister is clear about the strength of feeling on this issue. It is imperative that the Government come forward with a package of measures that matches their ambitious and comprehensive support for those who live on the gas grid; I would like to see that replicated for my constituents who live off the grid.

11.17 am

The Minister for Climate (Graham Stuart): It is a great pleasure and privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray—for the first time, I think. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones) on securing the debate. We can see how motivated rural colleagues are across the House; we have the Liberal Democrats here, we have Plaid Cymru, the SNP, the SDLP and of course a large mass of Conservative Members. It is pretty shocking, given the importance and topicality of the issue, that His Majesty's Opposition did not even bother to turn up. I thank everyone else for doing so, and for taking this issue seriously.

Colleagues will know that I have long been involved in this issue. My constituency has a lot of people who are off grid; I have spent a lot of time fighting the inequities of Government systems of support, which too often are shaped around urban needs and ignore or try to fit the rural into some urban pattern. That does not work, and too often the system, under successive Governments, has failed properly to recognise the needs of rural areas that, because of their natural grittiness, put up with it more than they should.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his position, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones) on a brilliant debate. The Minister talked about the equity between off grid and those who have access to the grid. For people in South Suffolk on heating oil who have contacted me, one of the key issues is that it is not regulated; there is no cap and so on. Is it not the case that in practice that may be difficult because of the size of the producers, and therefore the issue is competition? Can he assure us that he keeps the competitiveness of

the market under review? The worry I have is that as it gets tougher, we get more agglomeration, and that is how we get higher prices in the long run.

Graham Stuart: As ever, my hon. Friend is absolutely right, and has gone to the heart of the issue. The Government recognise and understand the pressures that people are facing with the cost of living. This is a deeply worrying time for many of our constituents, and we will continue to listen to their concerns, which have been well expressed by many colleagues today.

Wholesale energy prices have been rising due to global pressures, and the UK is hardly alone in feeling the pinch. It is important to recognise how significantly this Government have stepped in. Back in May, £37 billion of support was announced, which altogether means that the most vulnerable households are receiving £1,200 a year—£100 a month—before we get to the energy price guarantee and the alternative fuel payments. It is important to put that on the record. There is a lot of support for all of our more vulnerable and rural constituents. The hare that is running—and this has been repeated by my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire today—is that it is inequitable. On the face of it, that £100 intuitively does not feel right. However, I will take colleagues through the numbers and explain why there is equity, while also recognising the issue of monitoring. That is important, and the Government are going to monitor the situation going forward.

Heating oil prices have risen more than prices for other alternative fuels such as coal, biomass and others. The Government have picked a point in time; we looked at what the situation was going into winter last year and compared it with this year—then we have sought to provide protection. We have looked at the numbers for September last year to September this year. LPG, coal and biomass have risen less than heating oil. The average price of heating oil in September 2021 was 40.6p per litre in Great Britain. A year later, that average price is 100.3p. For those colleagues who have talked about a 60% rise, it actually comes to a 147% rise. The average use of heating oil over a year is 1,514 litres; that used to cost £615, but has gone up to £1,415. That has a serious impact on those with the least. I have already talked through the £37 billion package. The difference in the current bill is around £100—that has been the rise.

The cost of heating for the average on-grid home would have increased by approximately 220% in that same year to October. The energy price guarantee lowers that increase, through unparalleled Government intervention to support people, which I think we can be proud of and should do a better job of trumpeting. Over the same period the price of heating oil rose by 150%. It has been dampened by the EPG for on-grid homes to 130%. Probably due to market competition and lack of Government intervention—I am not saying that that is the only explanation—heating oil rose by 150%. That is where the £100 comes in. I beg colleagues on all side of the House to stop the hare running; there is comparable support. I can say that as someone with many oil-heated and LPG homes in my constituency; it is comparable.

The question is about going forward—what if prices spike? That is why, quite rightly, colleagues have pressed me and the Government to monitor the situation and to be prepared to intervene if necessary. I cannot pledge

precisely that that intervention would happen, but we are going to monitor the situation with a view to being able to intervene if necessary and maintain the equity that I assure colleagues is in place.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for putting that explanation on the record. The £100 figure has been totemic. As that is a very technical response, it would be ideal if he were able—with his copious free time—to provide us with a “Dear colleague” letter that we could all share with our constituents. I also acknowledge the enormous help that the Government have provided to people on the grid. The energy price guarantee and the vulnerable household payments that the Minister set out are incredibly helpful. The next question I am bound to ask—I sense some parliamentary questions—

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Order. Short inventions.

Victoria Atkins: I apologise, Mrs Murray. When will the payment be made?

Graham Stuart: Let me return to my scripted speech, which I seem to have entirely ignored so far, and hope to get to that answer. The energy bill support scheme—there are so many; I struggle with the acronyms myself, and I am responsible for them—provides £400 per household to assist with the cost of rising energy prices and in most cases is being delivered automatically through domestic energy suppliers.

There is a small proportion of households, including off-grid homes, that will experience increased energy costs but do not have those domestic energy supply contracts. I assure hon. Members that the Government are committed to ensuring that they receive support for energy costs. We are working rapidly to ensure that off-grid households will be able to apply for the scheme. We do not have a centrally controlled society. We do not have a database of everybody—they are not forced to register—so we are finding practical ways and looking to find designated parties to help to administer the scheme, and to do so in real time, this winter; having a perfect system next winter is of no help to people who need help now.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC) *rose—*

Dave Doogan *rose—*

Graham Stuart: I am going to press on as I have so little time left. The alternative fuel payment is an additional one-off payment of £100, which is provided equally. Both schemes will be delivered across the UK and we have been working with devolved Administrations to understand how best to deliver it. It is important that all households receive support from the Government this winter, including harder-to-reach households that are not benefiting from the energy price guarantee or automatic energy bill support.

There were questions earlier about park homes and farmers. Our aim would be a system that ensures that each household receives the support. We are looking to find the right counterparties in Northern Ireland and GB to make sure that that is in place. Some forms of delivery will be more burdensome administratively than others, but for the most part, where we are able to do things automatically, consumers have to do nothing.

Dave Doogan: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Gentleman bear with me? I have so little time left and I would like to get these points on the record.

The Government are seeking to ensure that nobody is inadvertently excluded from the generous package of support that is being provided. As the Chancellor emphasised in his statement on Wednesday, the Government’s priority will always be to support the most vulnerable. That is why we are ensuring that individuals not covered by other schemes will be able to apply for the £400 of energy bill support and, if relevant, the additional £100 alternative fuel payment.

Helen Whately: I looked at these schemes as Exchequer Secretary in the Treasury, and my right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the complexity of helping people who are off grid, as well as about the competition in the heating oil market. It is very helpful that he has set out the figures and the rationale for that help. Can I push him to address the need for reassurance on what happens if prices go up further, and on the need for clarity, for people in park homes for instance?

Graham Stuart: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. As well as getting the policy right, a lot of government is about communication and I hope there will be a “Dear colleague” letter, working with colleagues, to get those messages out. I am sure no one would want to say that maintaining something was not fair, when it in fact was—we have to get the information out there and it is our responsibility to do that.

Ben Lake: In addition to off-grid homes, can the Minister ensure there is further consideration of support for off-grid businesses?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and there are two parts to our interventions, one for business and one for homes. If the homes scheme is complex, the business one is even more so. There is a vast variety of contracts. Coming into this Department from elsewhere in Government, I have been amazed at the quality of work done by officials. They have been working nights and weekends, day after day. I am just on the receiving end of the submissions and feel a bit knocked down; they are producing the schemes succinctly, and dealing with very complex issues and delicate balancing acts, to make sure that we balance timely intervention against perfection. Perfection is not possible. What we can do and what we will work on, with the help of colleagues, is to be transparent.

Dave Doogan: Is the fact that oil customers pay for their oil up front factored into the support?

Graham Stuart: We are trying to get payment to those who have bought ahead. In terms of timing, we cannot time payment exactly with when they are purchasing. What we can seek to do is to make sure that they are getting comparable levels of support and that we are monitoring the situation going forward.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Transport in Nottinghamshire

[SIR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Transport in Nottinghamshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I congratulate the Minister on her inaugural Westminster Hall debate. I thank colleagues from across our great county for attending this debate, and I look forward to hearing their contributions. I know that there are other county colleagues who would be here had their ministerial obligations allowed them.

If I may, Sir George, I want to take you on a journey to the heart of England, to a place where the English civil war began and ended. It gave the world Boots the chemist, D. H. Lawrence, Alan Sillitoe, Nicholas Hawksmoor, Sir Paul Smith, Torvill and Dean, Ken Clarke and Ed Balls. The strapline of Nottingham City Council used to be “Our style is legendary”. I submit that, across the arts and sciences, from medicine to sport, from politics to business and literature, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire compete on not only a national but an international stage.

In a global world, connectivity is key. It is therefore appropriate to talk about transport in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. I will talk about recent successes and what more we need to do. Our great county is not one of forests and bows and arrows; its legendary style is taking us into the future. Nottinghamshire is to host the world’s first fusion energy power plant at a site near Retford, bringing billions of pounds and thousands of jobs to the region. The East Midlands freeport, including the Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station site in Rushcliffe, is the UK’s only inland freeport and promises to position the region as a green tech trailblazer, driving significant new job growth in the region as well as local and international trade.

But we need the funding to match those ambitions. The East Midlands Chamber and east midlands councils analysed the Treasury’s latest public expenditure statistical analysis for 2021. They found that there was a particular deficit in transport infrastructure spending, at just 64.7% of the UK average for 2020-21—the joint lowest of any UK region or nation. If the east midlands were funded at a level equivalent to the national average, it would have an extra £1.26 billion a year to spend on transport.

Over the past 10 years, there has been a growing gap in transport spend between the east midlands and the west midlands, where spend has been rising. In 2016-17, the £217 per head spent on transport in the east midlands was two thirds of the £322 received by the west midlands, and by 2019-20 that proportion had declined to 61%.

Before speaking about how we might remedy that, I want to praise the good news. I welcomed the publication of the integrated rail plan in 2021, which offered a £96 billion package. *The Sun* newspaper described the east midlands as the big winners of the plan, and I am particularly keen to see High Speed 2 come to Nottinghamshire to reduce not only travel times to London but the journey time from Nottingham to Birmingham from 74 minutes to 26 minutes. John Lewis might have closed its store in central Birmingham, but residents of Edgbaston and Selly Oak will have no trouble coming to Nottingham to shop.

I also welcome the integrated rail plan’s inclusion of the full electrification of the midland main line. It has been a long time coming. I remember as an 18-year-old attending my first Conservative parliamentary selection meeting for the 2001 general election and hearing the campaign hopefuls talking about it then. We seem finally to be making progress on that. I ask the Minister to confirm that the Government remain committed to delivering the integrated rail plan in full, including the plans for the east midlands generally and Nottinghamshire in particular, and that recent announcements about Northern Powerhouse Rail will not affect the county.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate on such an important topic. Does he share my concern that we have been promised investment in east midlands transport many times, only to be disappointed? Schemes such as the electrification of the midland main line have been promised and then withdrawn. Does he share my concern that we are having to wait longer and longer for the improved transport services that our region needs? Does he share my hope that the Minister will commit to some timescales for the completion of the electrification and the HS2 link to the east midlands?

Tom Randall: The hon. Lady comes to this debate with more experience than me of being a Nottinghamshire MP, having been in this House for some time. Also, as a former Chair of the Transport Committee, she speaks with some experience of this issue in particular. However, I come here optimistic and hopeful that we will see the progress that has perhaps eluded us for too long.

Our railways are not just about inter-city travel; getting into and out of cities from suburbs, towns and villages is equally important. The integrated rail plan offered, business case permitting, investment in the Robin Hood and Maid Marian lines. Can the Minister say whether these schemes are included in the Department’s acceleration unit’s portfolio of projects?

In my constituency of Gedling, we have three railway stations—Burton Joyce, Carlton and Netherfield—that are not being used to their full potential. They are pleasant stations, but local residents complain that if they have a train to take them to work in the morning, they will not necessarily have one to take them home. Too many trains pass through Gedling stations without stopping and rail services do not run late enough for the train to be an option for those travelling to the city of Nottingham for leisure.

This can and must be remedied. Improvements on the lines between Nottingham, Lincoln and Grantham can help to make rail journeys competitive with car journeys. I know that the Minister will receive a business case from Midlands Connect in the new year on how to make improvements on this line. Can she make a quick determination on that proposal? If she would like to visit any of those stations to help her to understand the problem, she is more than welcome to visit.

Netherfield station stands on the Grantham line, which runs south from Nottingham, which brings me to another serious topic: crossing the river. In “Henry IV, Part One”, Hotspur speaks of “the smug and silver Trent”.

I would not describe the Trent as “silver” these days, but perhaps the river had reason to fill “smug” in February 2020, when it succeeded in bringing gridlock to Nottingham. There are three bridges across the River Trent in Greater Nottingham. The latest was opened to traffic in the early 1980s, having originally been built as a railway bridge in the 1870s. Over time, the growing city has had to rely on these existing connections, which lie in the centre of the western city.

In February 2020, it was discovered that water damage had corroded steelwork under the Clifton bridge, which is the only dual carriageway crossing in Greater Nottingham. That caused the temporary closure of the east bridge, which carries all eastbound traffic and one lane of westbound traffic, while the bridge was repaired. The closure of the Clifton bridge brought large parts of the city to a standstill at rush hour, including traffic on the A612 in Gedling, which is on the other side of Greater Nottingham. Natalie Fahy, editor of *The Nottingham Post*, wrote at the time:

“The closure of Clifton Bridge means traffic has been chaotic, with journeys of just a few miles taking people hours to complete. The QMC has been hard to reach, being stuck right at the epicentre of the crisis. Throw into the mix a high-stakes Forest game at home and you’ve got a big Nottingham problem.”

She concluded:

“The problem we’ve got is that there is no slack in our traffic system. We are incredibly vulnerable.”

Ms Fahy’s analysis is, I submit, entirely right. One remedy would be to construct a fourth crossing for road traffic across the River Trent in Greater Nottingham. A fourth Trent crossing to the east of the city would relieve the pressure on the existing system. If it was constructed in, for example, Colwick, that would complement the recently built Gedling access road, while also providing better services and better access to the A46 for residents in the eastern side of Nottingham.

Midlands Connect has described the A46, which runs from Somerset to Lincolnshire, as one of the country’s most important trade routes, performing an important local, regional and national function. The Government have previously signalled their commitment to the importance of the A46 in Nottinghamshire by widening the single carriageway section between Newark and Widmerpool, and there are plans for an A46 Newark bypass. A fourth Trent crossing would connect Gedling to the A46 corridor. I spoke earlier about the East Midlands freeport and the thousands of green jobs that it is destined to create. I want my constituents to be able to access those jobs, which a fourth Trent crossing would help them to do.

A full bridge would be costly, and I appreciate that infrastructure projects take time and need to progress step by step. However, I would be grateful if the Minister signalled her support for a strategic outline business case for such a project, which even in these financially straitened times would come in at a much more manageable £150,000.

I must resist the temptation to be too Gedling-focused in any debate about Nottinghamshire. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) cannot contribute to today’s debate, let me also mention Nottinghamshire County Council’s £40 million levelling-up bid to finance the planned Toton link road. The new link road would consist of a one-mile, single carriageway track between the A52 east of Bardills island and

Stapleford lane, taking the form of a high-quality, landscaped boulevard with significant tree planting and walking and cycling routes. I know from the recently opened Gedling access road, which cost a similar amount, how transformative such a scheme can be. The Minister will be instinctively coy about commenting on levelling-up funding, but I gently ask whether the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is aware of the merits of these proposals.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe would have also mentioned bus services and the vital lifeline they provide for elderly and vulnerable constituents, citing particular concern about the withdrawal of the L10 and L11 services in Bramcote, and now the withdrawal of the number 21. Other Members will likely also mention bus services, but locally in Gedling, I welcome the Government’s support for the bus service improvement plan, which will support a number of routes, including the 39, 53 and Lime Line services from Arnold to the city of Nottingham.

So far, I have focused on the south of the county. As someone who was born in Nottingham and lives in Arnold, I hope that is forgivable—I have tried to speak about what I know. I have also covered projects that might be considered high level. However, in any discussion about transport in Nottinghamshire, I ought to mention the concern of the average road user: potholes. It is no secret that Nottinghamshire’s roads need a bit of tender loving care, and the issue has been the subject of numerous local newspaper reports.

I will highlight two recent developments. The county council decided to replace—where possible—the much-hated, temporary “tarmac out of a bag” pothole repairs, which seemed to disintegrate as soon as workmen had tended to them, with a new patch repair way of cutting and filling, which works much better, lasts longer and is much neater. I also applaud the Conservative-run Nottinghamshire County Council’s decision to spend an extra £15 million on road repairs. Residents in and around Westdale lane in Carlton, to give one example of many, will much appreciate that forthcoming transformative investment.

We will hear shortly from the leader of Nottinghamshire County Council, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), and others who will speak knowledgeably about the entire county, particularly the north. In general, I am positive about the future possibilities for transport in Nottinghamshire, and the forthcoming Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire devolution deal, which will see transport decisions made more locally. Nottingham and Nottinghamshire’s leaders have worked in partnership with the Government to deliver a series of announcements for our region. I look forward to hearing colleagues’ contributions on how we can make sure that not only our style, but our transport, is made legendary.

2.42 pm

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) on securing this timely debate and welcome my hon. Friend the Minister. I feel sure that our transport woes are about to be magicked into thin air as she takes hold of her brief. I thank her for being here today.

The 20th century will be remembered for many things: the telephone, the television, the internet, two world wars, one World cup, Beatlemania, Winston Churchill,

[Ruth Edwards]

Margaret Thatcher and the second Elizabethan age. But it will also be remembered as the century where our public transport policy—pardon the pun—lost its way. Convinced as we were that the car was king, public transport infrastructure was neglected or destroyed. From Beeching to Blair, railways bore the brunt. Buses were brushed aside, and cycling and walking were relegated to the second division of transport choices.

It is only since the Conservative Government came into office in 2010 that this 20th-century, feet-of-clay thinking has been replaced with 21st-century, forward-looking optimism. That optimism reimagines our transport system around car-free journeys and reinvests in our public transport system. It is behind the Government's drive to make record investment in transport to and from Nottinghamshire.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling mentioned, last autumn the integrated rail plan confirmed the delivery of HS2 right into the heart of Rushcliffe, to East Midlands Parkway station. That is also the heart of the new East Midlands freeport. We will get up and down our country faster. Train times from Nottingham to London will be cut by two thirds. We will get across our country faster. Train times from Nottingham to Birmingham will also be slashed by two thirds. It is a package worth more than £10 billion for the east midlands.

The arrival of HS2 will help to level up a region that has historically suffered from one of the lowest transport spending rates per head anywhere in country, and that is not all. We are also powering ahead with the electrification of the midland main line. As a result of that investment, travel to and from Nottinghamshire will be much faster than before. The Government's vision for building big infrastructure is impressive, but smaller and—crucially, in the current climate—much cheaper investment is also needed to improve people's daily journeys.

Lilian Greenwood: I am quite surprised to hear the hon. Member talking as if there were no investment in transport in Nottinghamshire under the last Labour Government, because of course Nottingham City Council was able to create its tram lines in that period, which have obviously been expanded in recent years. Does she share my concern, however, that I will have retired, and perhaps she will have too, before future improvements such as the electrification of the midland main line and HS2 actually appear in our constituencies?

Ruth Edwards: Not at all. I looked up the last Labour Government's delivery of miles of track, and it was something absolutely pathetic—something like 63 miles—so I have every faith that the delivery of the midland main line electrification and HS2 will come a lot faster than they would if Labour were in charge.

For my constituents, getting around Rushcliffe and into Nottingham, Loughborough and Melton is also key, and there are two issues I want to touch on in this debate. One is the train service from Radcliffe-on-Trent to Nottingham; the second is the issue of rural buses, which my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling highlighted.

In Radcliffe-on-Trent, we need a more reliable, frequent train service on the Poacher line, with trains every hour between 6.30 am and 10 pm, and every half an hour at peak times. Constituents have told me that the early

finish to train services and the long gaps between trains mean they are not a realistic option for commuting, or for going into Nottingham in the evenings. There is also only step-free access on one side of the station for customers going into Nottingham. How those who cannot use steps are supposed to cross the railway tracks once they get back to Radcliffe is not entirely clear. We applied to the restoring your railway fund, but were refused on the grounds that our railway was already up and running. That is fair, but it seems a shame not to invest what must be a fraction of the cost of restoring a derelict track in order to enable more people to use an existing one.

I have been working with the Department for Transport and with East Midlands Railway, and we have made some good progress. Earlier morning services have been introduced, as has an additional peak service and evening service, and we have more services on Saturday and Sunday. However, we are still short of the regular service we need. DFT is working on a business case to extend the service, and East Midlands Railway has told us how popular the new services have been. I have been fortunate to have great support from previous rail Ministers, especially my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris). I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that the new ministerial team at the Department will continue to support the project to get more trains running to and from Nottingham and Radcliffe-on-Trent, serving this fast-growing community in my constituency.

Many of my constituents also rely on rural bus services to go to work, doctors' appointments and the shops, and to visit friends and family. Last month, out of the blue, Trentbarton announced that it would be cutting the Skylink bus service between Nottingham and Loughborough. That service links many of my constituents in villages such as Sutton Bonington and Normanton-on-Soar to vital services in those centres. I would like to share with Members a couple of stories from constituents who rely on that service. Carol Payne says:

"I live on my own in a housing association property in the village and don't drive. I also have a son with SEN who has recently started uni at Brackenhurst NTU, we chose this so that if he needed support we could meet in Nottingham. This is now not the case as the weekend service is cancelled and there is the worry the service could be cancelled altogether...I myself work in Loughborough",

at the college,

"and rely on the bus to get to work and back. Without this service I cannot work which ultimately means I could lose my job and possibly my home if I can't pay my bills. I cannot afford to move to Loughborough, as I would need to rent privately...I travel on this service twice a day...people use this particular service for work but it is also used by several young people who are using it to access Loughborough college and some schools."

Jodie Warrington writes:

"I for one, and I know many other residents, use the bus to get to QMC for hospital appointments on a regular basis. I also use the bus to get into Loughborough to do the shopping. With two villages only having one corner shop and two very small community shops, how are we meant to shop cheaply with the cost of living? As far as residents are aware, no consultation has been sent regarding losing this bus service. I can't afford taxis everywhere. How do we get to doctor's appointments, hospital appointments, food shopping, top up gas and electric? I can't walk the mile there and back to Pasture Lane stores in Sutton Bonington from Normanton with my disabilities. I have no family that I can really rely on."

I am extremely grateful to Nottinghamshire County Council and the leader of said council, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), who is sitting next to me, for stepping in to provide the funding for this service until April, while a review of bus services across the county is undertaken. I know that work patterns have changed for many people since the pandemic. Many routes that used to be commercially viable and could cross-subsidise those that were not, no longer make enough money.

We need to look at new ways to provide these services, such as the on-demand bus model being trialled in Nottinghamshire. We also need to address the issue of shortage of labour, because Trentbarton is struggling to get enough drivers to maintain its timetable. Buses have become irregular to the point where the timetable is part fact and part fiction. It is making daily tasks and journeys very difficult for my constituents. Just this morning, constituents from Cotgrave told me that last night lots of people were unable to get home as all the buses were suddenly cancelled, due to a lack of drivers.

Trentbarton is not the only bus company facing this problem. Having spoken to them, I understand that the main issues in recruiting drivers are people no longer wanting to work unsociable hours after the break over the pandemic, and the higher wages being offered to HGV drivers. Businesses up and down Rushcliffe in all sorts of sectors—transport, farming, hospitality and social care—all tell me of their difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff.

The tight labour market is one of the biggest supply-side issues facing businesses and inhibiting growth at the moment. I urge the Minister to take that feedback to colleagues, and also ensure that we have strong plans to encourage more people into careers across our transport sector. I also hope the Minister will be able to commit to a meeting with Nottinghamshire colleagues and Nottinghamshire County Council to discuss how we can continue to fund and deliver a strong rural bus network, right across the county.

We are getting funding but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield will set out in more detail in his speech, it comes with caveats, such as that the funding must be spent on bus lanes. On many of Rushcliffe's rural roads there is no space for bus lanes—we would rather have the buses in the first place, please. Reliable buses and regular trains, accessible stations and timetables that mean that people who took the train to work can also get home: I accept those are not the sexy announcements that make the front page, but they are the vital bread-and-butter services that enable our constituents to use public transport to get to work, to take their family on an outing, to do their weekly shop, or to visit their doctor, dentist, hairdresser or dog groomer. Get the picture: it is important.

If we want to promote the use of public transport, it needs to be regular, reliable and convenient. Otherwise, why would people use it? The Government are trying to encourage more car-free journeys, so it is vital that investment is made in the local transport that people use every day, if we want to encourage people to use that instead of the car. I met a gentleman at a parish meeting in Keyworth last week, who told me that he used to get the bus to work in Nottingham. The bus had become so irregular and unreliable that it was taking him longer than it took his partner to drive from Keyworth to Coventry. He no longer takes the bus.

Strong public transport networks become even more vital when we consider the record number of new homes being built. In Rushcliffe we have seen far more new homes and developments than the national constituency average. They have been built without the infrastructure to match. Reform of the planning system is an issue for another debate; I can hear the Minister breathing a huge sigh of relief at that. The wider issue that is relevant today is that resilient public transport networks and infrastructure are even more vital in areas with significant numbers of new houses being built—areas such as Rushcliffe.

That brings me to my fourth point, which is, happily, about the fourth bridge—the one over the Trent, that is, as showcased earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling. My hon. Friend described the chaos that rained down on Nottinghamshire the weekend when Clifton bridge was shut for emergency repairs. I think I remember reading at the time that, on that weekend, Nottingham was the most congested city in not only the UK and Europe, but the world.

In conclusion, at the moment our infrastructure for crossing the Trent is stretched to capacity. I really hope that the Minister will commit to delivering the initial assessment of proposals so that we can consider our options, including costs and timescales. We have made fantastic leaps forward with big infrastructure investments, but we now need to focus on the issues that affect people getting around our constituencies every single day. Buses and trains need to be reliable and frequent; if they are, I am sure people will use them more and more.

2.56 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) on securing this important debate. I echo his words about the fourth Trent crossing; he is a keen campaigner on this issue and has been lobbying hard for several years to bring forward an idea that he has discussed with me in my role as leader of the council. The project is well beyond our local budget, but I would welcome the opportunity to work with the Government and bring forward a business case in the way my hon. Friend has described. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Minister, who, even during our short seconds of conversation before this debate, has already made me decide that she is a breath of fresh air. I hope that will continue.

As colleagues have mentioned, I am the leader of the local transport authority, so I am pleased to have the opportunity to bang on at length about these issues—I think I have about an hour left to go through them all. I want to start with the very local and raise a couple of Mansfield-specific issues with the Minister. The first is the Robin Hood line. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) and I have been banging on about this now, in our various capacities, for about 12 years. We have made a lot of progress: the project has inched forward significantly, but it has only inched. We have had a commitment for a long time, but progress is slow. It was finally announced in the integrated rail plan, most recently, as part of the connections around Nottinghamshire in Toton, which are hugely important.

There is now further potential to link the existing Robin Hood line—it is still in place; it just needs upgrading—to projects such as STEP Fusion in the

[Ben Bradley]

north of the locality. There is the opportunity to bring in billions in investment, jobs and growth and link all that together. We can improve on the issue and take local control over through our devolution deal, but should take any opportunity to accelerate the process or bring forward what is a smaller and perhaps less widely strategically vital project for the locality and the region, but hugely important to local communities, who just want to access work and leisure opportunities that they cannot at the minute without a car. Many cannot afford a car in those areas. The issue is hugely important to us and I welcome any opportunity to accelerate the project.

The second issue is the Sainsbury's junction, as it is known locally, on the A60 in Mansfield. Frustratingly, at one point I had actually secured the funding the fix it. We worked hard prior to the pandemic to come up with a workable plan that we thought would improve the situation resulting from the district council's helpful decision to put about 20 different businesses, including two supermarkets, into a retail site with one entrance and exit on to a busy trunk road. People can queue for up to an hour at Christmas to get out of it.

We came up with a plan and submitted it to the Government's pinch point fund and were promptly told that we would get the money. That was the day before the pandemic hit, and the money was promptly—and quite understandably—reprioritised to other things. But the plan is there and the money was there. If we could get the money, we would crack on and do it. The issue is hugely important to my constituents. Does the Minister know whether such pinch point-type funding opportunities are likely to be revisited?

My final point, a positive one, is about the significant upgrades to the A614—the spine road up through the north of Nottinghamshire that allows many of my constituents to get to work—that are starting this year. We are keen to deliver those and accelerate the outcomes and the growth they will unlock around those communities. People will not be surprised to hear that inflationary pressures will have an impact. Are the Government minded to give support to deal with inflationary pressures around such projects? The good news is that work will commence later this year.

My colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards) and for Gedling, have touched on the issues I want to raise, beyond Mansfield and into the county. The first is highways maintenance. A good quality highway network is absolutely key for residents in Nottinghamshire. It is always the number one thing that comes up in county council elections and in surveys; I imagine it will be the number one issue that people raise in our budget survey later this year. Although our care services are vital, they touch only a very small proportion of our residents, whereas everybody uses the roads.

We undertook a massive review about 12 months ago. It has now finished and has resulted in 50 different actions that we will take forward, including a longer-term programme of works and improving the way we repair local roads, including residential roads, with a move to a “right first time” approach where we make the more expensive, long-term repair that delivers the quality residents expect, instead of temporary repairs, wherever we can. We are also working hard to communicate

better with residents to make sure they understand what is happening on their street and why and how long it will take, in advance of it happening, which has perhaps been lacking up to now. I am pleased we have been able to do that.

We have invested an additional £12 million over the next four years, on top of the £18.5 million annual DFT funding, to start to tackle the historic backlog of repairs. In truth, there is some £150 million-worth of repairs. If the Minister can find that down the back of the sofa, I can get it all sorted. It is a challenge. Dare I say that this is what happens when 32 years out of the last 40 have been Labour-led in the county? I knew Opposition Members would enjoy that remark.

The changes we have introduced are starting to make a real difference to residents on the ground. We have reduced the number of temporary repairs, which everybody hates to see, by nearly 60%, while doubling the number of square metres of high-quality repairs that we have been able to do over the past 12 months. Those outcomes are great, but we have thousands of miles of road to cover, so that is a really long-term project. We are making good progress. I welcome the announcement that the pothole element of the DFT funds will continue into next year. I hope we will get a good share to be able to tackle the backlog and continue to deliver this work.

On wider transport, and particularly buses, it is often forgotten how important they are—not just the local economy in terms of jobs, industry and the supply chain, but for connecting people to health and leisure opportunities and as support for my constituents in tackling health inequalities and having better lifestyles. That is hugely important to all of us.

We had a relatively good bus network around the county pre-covid, with high levels of satisfaction. The county council was consistently rated in the top three upper-tier authorities in the country. We annually invest more than £4 million into bus service provision, supporting 80 services that, pre-covid, carried nearly 2 million people. The commercial sector would not provide those services and we have worked really hard to sustain them and to provide lots of new infrastructure.

This year, we have provided further temporary support to another 20 services to help bus recovery. That is the thin line that prevents those services from being withdrawn, because they are not commercially viable. As with many parts of the country, there are increasing challenges for bus companies and the provision of services, including inflationary costs, driver shortages and passenger confidence, which has taken a massive hit, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe described. It is increasingly difficult for bus companies to show up on time, or even at all, and deliver a service. We get a daily constituency report of all the different bus routes that have been cancelled that day, with less than a day's notice. That makes it incredibly difficult for people to be able to get around and get to work.

Local bus companies have undertaken big recruitment campaigns and lots of new drivers are being trained, and hopefully we will get there in time, but the viability of the routes is a huge concern. I welcome the Government's support for the sector. We have been able to prop up some of those services because of that support. We are also trialling on-demand responsive transport, which has to be part of the future of the networks to make

them sustainable, so that we are not running empty buses around fixed routes all the time. We have been able to pilot that as a result of the national bus strategy rural mobility fund. That seems to be going really well, to the point that the residents who sit just outside the pilot areas are asking when they will get access to these new services, which is really good news.

We have been indicatively allocated £30 million under the bus service improvement plan, for which I am grateful. The truth is that many fixed-route services are not likely to be viable in the future if trends continue. There are really challenging times ahead for bus services. The current combined funding will not support them all from April next year. I have asked the Government to look at greater flexibility in BSIP funding to tackle services being withdrawn in rural areas and market towns. It is really difficult to justify investing in bus lanes and other infrastructure when at the same time services are being withdrawn.

I have recently written to the Secretary of State for Transport to ask for the flexibility to spend that money on a viable bus service, rather than on bus lanes for buses that I have not got. That would be really helpful, and I hope it would be common sense. I have written a very long letter to the Secretary of State for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, laying out a number of ways we could use local money that already exists more flexibly, rather than having to splash the cash on lots of things. We could certainly make it simpler for ourselves.

The final thing I will touch on is the macro bit—the regional bit—which is where the good stuff is happening. It speaks to what the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said earlier on about the commitment to get these things done, and that is the devolution deal we secured this summer. It is massively meaningful, because it gives us local control over delivery of lots of these projects. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling touched on earlier, the figures around investment in the region make for stark reading, both in terms of transport and wider public spending and private sector spending. Even for the year 2020-2021, if we were to have the average level of national funding that would be an additional £1 billion into our region to support those services, so it is really meaningful.

That is why I am so pleased that we have been able to secure the largest gainshare investment fund in any devolution deal anywhere in the country ever, which is brilliant. It is worth just over £1.1 billion to our area, with a further transport pot yet to be determined. In the west midlands they recently got another £1 billion on top of that to invest in their local transport, which would be absolutely fantastic. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) for signing off and making that commitment to Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and the east midlands when he was Secretary of State.

It gives us the opportunity to do all sorts of really good things, such as joined-up ticketing across the network on all types of service. Someone should be able to get from Arnold or West Bridgford to the Peak District on one ticket, across bus, train and tram with one day rate in a really simple and joined-up way in the future, and that will be hugely meaningful and impactful to local residents. It also gives us the opportunity to lay out those key routes around employment in particular,

to fill the gaps on that key route network and to link up our transport systems to the sites of future jobs and investments—I mentioned STEP fusion earlier on.

We have a £20 billion investment; we can not only build the skills pipelines and support that industry, but connect people into work from the surrounding villages and towns and ensure everybody has access to those opportunities. We can also accelerate long-awaited projects such as the Robin Hood line and the Maid Marian line.

Take the Toton site, for example, which I know the Minister knows well. It is the site of significant jobs and investment in coming years. It has been in the integrated rail plan, and there is new station investment and all sorts of commercial and housing investment going on there. We need a link road, which we put in a levelling-up fund bid for and which I hope the Government will look favourably on, but we then have the ability to install that road network and public transport network to deliver projects, such as the Maid Marian line, that connect surrounding towns and villages into Toton. We will have that in our local control for the first time; that is hugely important and meaningful, and tackles some of the concerns that the hon. Member for Nottingham South laid out earlier.

We will have responsibility for the wider area transport plan by March 2024. Being able to build a joined-up strategy across the whole area is really important, because it means that residents living in Broxtowe, Mansfield or Ashfield—who may just as well travel into Derbyshire as into Nottinghamshire for work and leisure—can have a joined-up system that actually works and connects them to the places they get to, and not be constrained by boundaries.

Lilian Greenwood: I agree with many of the points that the hon. Member has made, but if the region is to be successful in planning for the future and developing the transport network that we need in Nottinghamshire—and, indeed, those links across to Derbyshire and other parts of the east midlands—do we not need certainty from the Government about investment in the future? As he will know, we spent a great deal of time planning around an HS2 station at Toton, only for it to move to East Midlands Parkway. Would certainty about both timescales and locations not enable us to do a better job in the region?

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling said, she knows the area incredibly well and knows the transport issues incredibly well from her own experience. She is right, of course, that certainty would be hugely helpful; she pointed to the midland main line, where we perhaps have not had that in the past. I was really pleased to see that as one of the accelerated projects in the recent Budget announcement, which I am really grateful for.

What this devolution deal gives us is certainty; we know we will have that funding over the next 30 years, and we know it will be within our local control to deliver some of these projects. We have been given overall control over the integrated rail plan, which means that those HS2 stations, what we build around them and the transport connectivity to join it all together is, for the first time, within our local gift, instead of relying on Government to do that. That is a good thing because it means we can focus on our local priorities.

[Ben Bradley]

I totally get what the hon. Member for Nottingham South is saying, but there are some answers in this devolution settlement that can help us achieve our priorities. As I say, we will have that integrated rail plan and the HS2 element, so there is a huge growth potential. If we can get that right, that would be meaningful for investment, jobs and opportunities in our area, so I am excited about that.

I would welcome a conversation with the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), about the options and that certainty around HS2. So far, we have gotten to Parkway, Nottingham and Derby, and then Sheffield to Leeds, but there are still some options on the table for the bit in the middle. I have a view as to what those options should be, as I know many colleagues, Midlands Connect and others will have, but the timescales to make that decision are uncertain, so I would welcome the chance to have that conversation.

To summarise, there are significant challenges on a local level where we need support to maintain networks—not least bus networks, in the short term—to improve highways and to help our communities, but I welcome the long-term opportunities that come from that devolution settlement to deliver more investment and growth, to improve our transport links and to have more local say over how it all works.

I hope the Minister will take away the requirement to ensure those two things are joined up. That would enable us to sustain and protect local services while we put together those plans and strategies over the next 18 months before our devolution deal comes into force, and ensure that those things are not lost and we do not end up with a big gap in the middle. If the Department for Transport and wider Government can help us to overcome those challenges, the future for investment and transport links in our area is bright.

3.11 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) for securing this important debate, and to all those hon. Members who have contributed. I also thank those who have listened intently; I allude to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) and the new shadow transport Minister, my good Friend the Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood), who have a passion for the region and wider transport systems in our country. I welcome the Minister to her place; this is the first time we have met in a Westminster Hall debate since her appointment. I have been in my role for almost three years, and I seem to welcome a new opposite number most years, but I shall not take it personally.

It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate on transport in Nottinghamshire, and it seems appropriate, given the economic situation. Perhaps if the Government had adopted the economic principles of Robin Hood instead of doing the exact opposite, they might not be in this economic crisis. Although the area is nearly 150 miles from my Slough constituency and a few hours from it by train, I know that constituents in the region have suffered badly from the same mismanagement of our national transport system that my constituents have, as have countless communities across our country.

When it comes to transport, overpromising and underdelivering more than epitomise this Government's policy direction. Trying to follow the commitments, U-turns and cancellations is enough to make anyone dizzy. Northern Powerhouse Rail was launched, and then scrapped. Then the Prime Minister promised that it would be built in full, but that is being put into question by her new Chancellor. High Speed 2 was promised in full and then scaled back, and the Toton rail hub was removed. The east midlands is chronically underfunded and receives the lowest amount of public funding in the whole of England, and there is a lack of certainty for transport industries, which are eager to deliver on key transformative projects for the people of Nottinghamshire. It is an utter shambles.

Like the hon. Member for Gedling, I will try to decipher the ambiguities of the Government's policies and to figure out exactly what their plan is for long-neglected midlands communities. As he rightly said, funding needs to match the ambitions of the people in the region, especially with regard to HS2. It is clear that for decades Nottinghamshire has been sidelined when it comes to funding viable transport solutions for residents. In spite of the excellent work of local leaders, organisations and local enterprise partnerships, the east midlands has consistently received the lowest public spending allocation in England, according to the Government's own figures. The region ranks bottom or near the bottom for spending per head of population almost across the board.

The East Midlands Chamber and East Midlands Councils have produced a statistical analysis that shows that transport infrastructure spending in the region was just 64.7% of the UK average for 2020-21—the joint lowest of any UK region or nation. If the region had been funded properly and fairly, it would have had an extra £1.26 billion to spend on transport alone.

Sadly, that neglect is also reflected in national policy announcements. On rail, opportunities have been missed or delayed. HS2 commitments for the midlands have been vague or missed. Can the Minister provide clarity today? What are her Government's proposals for HS2 in the midlands under the new leadership? How will she ensure that they are delivered on time, within budget and with minimal disruption to local residents? Is there an update on the proposed railway station at Toton?

I am becoming increasingly concerned that the draconian cuts that the Chancellor has confirmed will take place may include cuts to HS2 spending. Rowing back further on half-baked plans will not benefit Nottinghamshire, or any other region of our country. When the integrated rail plan was first published, Transport for the East Midlands noted:

“full delivery of the Eastern Leg of HS2 as originally proposed is the best way to connect the towns and cities of the Midlands and the North, address transport poverty and ‘level up’ the eastern side of Britain”.

HS2, including the eastern leg to Leeds, should be built in full. Fulfilment of that project would also open a door to improved rail services elsewhere, releasing much-needed capacity. When HS2 is running, it may be possible to double the number of services between Nottingham and Lincoln to two per hour. As the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards) noted, the region needs more train services. She also spoke about the criticality of bus services for rural areas, and gave some

excellent examples from constituents. Under this Government, there have recently been 19,000 cuts to rail services and 5,000 cuts to bus services.

On Northern Powerhouse Rail, it seems that the Government do not know whether they are coming or going. Will the Minister confirm that a link to the midlands will be included in the Northern Powerhouse Rail proposals when the project is looked at again? We need reassurances that promises will be kept. The Prime Minister committed to the project in full; when will we have confirmation of that? When will the Minister be able to comment on the business case submitted in May 2021 for a line between Nottingham, Leicester and Coventry? That project is supported by 87% of local people, and has an initial delivery time of just four years. It would cut journey times and reinstate a direct rail link, so I hope that her Department looks at that proposal favourably.

The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) spoke about various local projects, including the Sainsbury's junction, funding for local transport projects, the A64 and potholes, which are a perennial problem across our country. As the leader of Nottinghamshire County Council, he is looking to build on the good work of previous councils. Hopefully, there will be clarity from the Minister on those projects.

There has, however, been some progress. I am pleased that there has been progress on the electrification of the midlands main line. That must form part of a rolling annual programme of electrification that brings down costs, ensures a sustainable supply chain and helps us to tackle the climate crisis. What are the timescales for electrification? That question was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), the former Chair of the Transport Select Committee, no less? She has vast experience. Many constituents in Nottinghamshire and beyond need certainty about the programme of electrification. Will the Minister elaborate and give us that certainty?

Transport can be transformative to people's livelihoods and wellbeing, and can increase the opportunities available to them, particularly during a cost of living crisis. That is particularly true of bus services. In Nottingham, key services have been preserved, due to the hard-working, Labour-run local authority managing to secure much-needed funding. That is in the face of 5,000 services being lost nationally. Nationwide, almost 60% of areas missed out on funding altogether, which will do long-term damage to bus networks. Great Britain is the only country in the developed world where private bus operators set routes and fares with no say from the public.

The Labour party would put the public back in control of the public transport that they heavily depend on; they would have the power to set bus fares and routes, which is as it should be. Local communities and leaders know best when it comes to the transport services that they use every day, so I hope the Minister has heard what hon. Members have said today about the local council's bid for the Toton link road. It would bring benefits to the tune of 400 jobs and 2,700 new homes, and has a potential completion date of 2026. Will the Minister look at the application very carefully and consider the significant benefits that it could bring?

We face impending cuts, and the Government have form on slashing transport commitments, but I remind Ministers that our commitments to net zero, a thriving economy and a levelled-up north and midlands cannot

be achieved without transport investment. It is always the communities outside our capital hubs that get left behind, so I hope the Minister has positive news for the future of transport in Nottinghamshire.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Minister, welcome to your new position.

3.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Katherine Fletcher): It is a pleasure to serve for the first time under your chairmanship, Sir George. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) for securing this debate. He has demonstrated his passion for what has been his home county—man and boy? I see him nodding. It has been a thoughtful and interesting debate, and I thank everyone who has contributed.

I thank the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for his warm comments welcoming me. In many respects, his remarks have epitomised the debate. He highlighted the investment in London and the south-east in previous years. Perhaps, offline, he will let me know what the people of Slough and London would not have wanted to happen that would have allowed for investment in Nottingham. However, I want to stay positive.

Colleagues might not be aware, but Nottingham is close to my heart. It is where I went to university, and every Saturday I played amateur sport all over the county. As I listened to the contributions, I remembered the practicalities of trying to get from point A to point B in the county. I recognise many of the points that hon. Members have raised on behalf of their communities.

As a civil engineer's daughter and a northern MP, I appreciate in both a practical and intellectual capacity what a positive impact good transport links have, and the need for certainty and investment to make them happen. The Department is committed to using transport to drive economic growth across the country. We are also determined to play our part in making transport greener—for example, through the electrification of rail lines. I am proud that this Government are investing in transport for people, including those in Nottinghamshire and the broader east midlands. Today's debate highlights how crucial the interconnections are between transport modes. Responsibility for much transport connectivity in the area rests with Nottinghamshire County Council, working closely with the bus partnerships. There is a significant role for national operators such as Network Rail and National Highways, as well as regional transport. I was delighted to hear the emphasis that my hon. Friend and leader of Nottingham City Council, the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), placed on the devolution deal.

Ben Bradley: I just want to clarify that I am leader of Nottinghamshire County Council. I would not want to be associated with some of the challenging issues in the city.

Katherine Fletcher: I apologise profusely to the leader of Nottinghamshire County Council—of course, Robin Hood Energy is not something that he would have put in place. Perhaps some of that funding might helpfully have been used to improve transport, but that is a conversation for another day.

[Katherine Fletcher]

There is lots to be positive about in Nottinghamshire. The devolution deal that has been agreed with some of the authorities in the east midlands is great; the commitment of local leaders, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield, in agreeing that deal and working together to deliver it is really important. There is an exciting public consultation this year, in advance of formal proposals to Government. When implemented, that deal will see a new combined authority formed, with an elected Mayor and significantly greater transport freedoms, as has been highlighted. For example, the Mayor will have the power to decide whether to introduce bus franchising, or integrated ticketing across public transport areas to join up the multiple local authorities in the region. As a northern MP, joining up the dots in regional transport is, and will continue to be, a passion of mine.

We will also provide funding to the combined authority, so that it can create a new local transport plan that integrates transport in Nottinghamshire with transport in the surrounding authorities, and can target transport funding at the areas that need it most. Once the Mayor and the combined authority are in place, the deal will include a Government fund of £38 million a year over 30 years to be invested by the combined authority, so that it can drive growth and deliver its priorities. That will provide the region with the certainty regarding investment and the power that many Members have mentioned. That east midlands investment fund will be monitored to make sure it is driving economic growth and levelling up, but given the energy and ideas that have already been displayed in the Chamber, I am confident that it will do that.

I turn to issues raised in the debate, starting with the roads projects, as I am the roads Minister. Improving road connectivity, enhancing safety and reducing congestion are important priorities, which is why we are already investing in the roads around Nottinghamshire. We are boosting economic growth; we want to reduce delays and incidents by improving the A46 Newark bypass. National Highways will soon launch a public consultation on its latest plans, and I would be grateful for the input of anybody watching this debate and of Members present.

Another example of progress being made is the A614/A6097 corridor scheme—try saying that after a couple of beers—on the major road network. It was identified in the Chancellor's recent economic growth plan as a scheme that the Government want to accelerate as fast as possible, because we recognise its importance. Those improvements are designed to deal with increasing traffic volumes, to relieve congestion, and to improve safety for all road users. That work will bring about important employment and, potentially, housing opportunities. Department for Transport officials will discuss with Nottinghamshire County Council how progress with the scheme's business case might benefit from acceleration, potentially through planning reform, regulator reform and other improvements. I look forward to engaging with my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield on that issue. The Government are investing over £24 million in that scheme, with approximately £4 million more coming from the county council and private developers. It is a real example of quick delivery; we need to get on with it.

A number of Members also mentioned the fourth Trent crossing—as someone who has got stuck in Nottingham when traffic grinds to a halt, I recognise the points they made. My hon. Friends the Members for Gedling, for Mansfield and for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards) all highlighted that issue and mentioned wanting to pull a business case together in order to go ahead with the investment and ease congestion. I am happy to take that away. The proposal is in its embryonic days, but perhaps I can write to Members with the routes and the opportunities there are to build an investment case locally and get that on to the DfT's slate. I will follow that up with official help.

The Government recognise how important the issue of potholes is, not least for cyclists pursuing active travel. I am a cyclist myself, and when you go over a pothole, it can be painful—never mind the economic and practical damage that potholes do to cars. We have been investing £950 million per year, which has been committed for three years. Crucially, that is outside London and the mayoral combined authorities. The Department is committed to allocating this funding to local highways authorities so that they can spend it most effectively on maintaining and improving their respective networks, based on local knowledge and circumstances. Since 2015, the Government have allocated over about £110 million to Nottinghamshire County Council for local road maintenance. To answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling directly, Nottinghamshire County Council will in the future receive over £18.6 million from a new fund to enable it to consider work on bridges, cycleways and lighting columns, as well as fixing potholes.

The Department has long advocated that highways authorities should go risk-based on their asset management plans and is committed to helping to support the production of those where possible for highways assets, including road resurfacing, because well-maintained roads are important for the safety and security of all road users. I recognise that Nottinghamshire County Council has worked hard in recent months and years to develop and deliver its highways improvement plan, and I hope it will reap significant benefits.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield mentioned a number of specific schemes, not least the junction with access into the retail park. He will forgive me if I do not use my debut to riff on Government policy on specific schemes. I am happy to write to him with a little more detail.

Buses are a huge passion of mine. They are often the easiest and quickest piece of public transport to put in place. As set out in the national bus strategy, we are determined that everyone everywhere should, in time, have access to a great bus service. That is why £3 billion has already been committed in this Parliament to drive improvements, which is the largest investment in buses in a generation, highlighting their importance. More than £1 billion of that fund is going directly to local transport authorities such as Nottinghamshire County Council to support the delivery of their bus service improvement plans.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield highlighted the substantial funding that the BSIPs across both Nottinghamshire County Council and Nottingham City Council received—a combined £30 million. I note his request for flexibility in the BSIP

funding and, rather than answering from the Dispatch Box here, I will pass that on to Baroness Vere, who is the Minister responsible. I would comment that these were high-quality bus service improvement bids and that the £18.7 million and the £11.4 million allocated are a recognition of the quality of the work that has gone into them. The initial funding will support bus priority measures on key routes, such as the A60 in Mansfield and the route between West Bridgford and the city. That is important and will provide for better connections and integration, as well as bus stops—we should not forget the humble bus stop. It is all important.

The Government also recognise that the bus sector continues to face significant challenges. The pandemic had a massive effect on bus patronage across the country, and although it is now stabilising and steadily increasing, it still remains below pre-covid levels. The Government have therefore provided £2 billion of funding to bus operators and local transport authorities to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and to continue supporting services. My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield highlighted the idea of a gap, and we are committing significant funding to prevent one.

This funding was due to end in October but, because of the challenges facing the sector and because many households are struggling with the rising cost of living, the Government have announced a further £130 million, six-month extension to the bus recovery grant to continue to support services until March 2023. That will help millions of people who rely on bus services, as highlighted so articulately by my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe. Nottinghamshire County Council is allocating around £690,000 of that support between April 2022 and December 2022 alone, with further funding until March 2023 to be confirmed in due course.

We are also very aware that the needs of passengers in urban and rural areas differ, as highlighted by colleagues, and that traditional local bus routes may not be financially sustainable in rural settings. That was put beautifully during the debate: are fixed, empty buses beneficial for everybody?

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield referenced the rural mobility fund, worth £20 million, which we created to trial more demand-responsive services and allow people to have a different way of accessing the public transport they need. Nottinghamshire County Council was awarded nearly £1.5 million from the fund to launch its Nottsbus On Demand service, which started operating in August in the villages around Retford, Ollerton and Newark. It also provides an evening service to Mansfield and is due to be extended to the rural areas west of Rushcliffe in the coming months.

I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe invited me to a meeting. I am extremely happy to pass that on to Baroness Vere, as the Bus Minister, but I am happy to meet my hon. Friend in a private capacity to buy her a coffee for being nice to me at the start of the debate.

Ben Bradley: Would the Minister also pass on our thanks? I was talking to my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) about Gedling buses, and the funding that has been provided by the Government for the next six months through to April has genuinely saved routes in all our constituencies that would otherwise

have been unviable. Various services, including Stagecoach and Trentbarton, announced the closure of many services prior to that funding, as they were unable to support them. As much as there is uncertainty into the future, that intervention has saved those routes in many of our communities.

Katherine Fletcher: I would be very happy to pass that on.

I will turn now to rail, which was the subject of much of the debate and which is another important component of the public transport system. My Department has been working on some exciting projects in Nottinghamshire. East Midlands Railway will be introducing the new bi-mode trains to the midland main line by late 2024, so passengers can expect a smoother, quieter and more reliable journey than those on diesel trains. The further electrification of that route, which was raised by a number of Members, is also under development. As announced in the recent integrated rail plan, it is planned to be completed by around 2030. That will directly address the points raised by the hon. Members for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and for Slough.

The hon. Member for Slough raised the HS2 proposals and commitments. The integrated rail plan is what is going to get delivered—that is the plan moving forward, and I think it is the appropriate one. With regard to East Midlands Railway, my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe raised the importance of the Poacher line, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling mentioned the current service on East Midlands Railway. I am happy to reassure Members that East Midlands Railway services are being kept under review. The Department and EMR have the opportunity to improve the frequency of services, should the evidence base be there, and that is being kept under review. We want to have enough clean, reliable and punctual trains running where they are needed most. The integrated rail plan is a step towards making sure that that practical, on-the-ground delivery is there, and masthead projects.

I would also point out that work has begun on developing a new high-speed rail line to the east midlands. Unlike previous plans, this will enable HS2 trains to serve both East Midlands Parkway and the city centre of Nottingham directly, which is an improvement on the original proposals. It will also cut journey times and provide more seats for passengers.

During my time in Nottingham, I worked in Toton and cycled to and from the city centre, so I recognise the need for improved connections and the opportunity for regeneration and investment in the area, and I have had a close look at the map of the plans. I recognise that local leaders had plans for economic development around the previously proposed station at Toton, and that has been improved on in the integrated rail plan. The Government are committed to accelerating the transport improvements in Toton.

As for the request from my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield for a meeting with the Rail Minister, I am happy to pass that on. Rail is not in my portfolio, but I will make sure my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) is aware of the request.

Ben Bradley: I want to take the opportunity to thank the Government, because they have been really helpful. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling said, we are probably one of the places in the country that is happiest

[Ben Bradley]

with the integrated rail plan, which delivers the connectivity that he talked about and includes an ongoing commitment to Toton. Our development corporation has since been given a huge amount of capacity funding to redo its plan on the basis of the integrated rail plan, and that work is progressing at pace. I want to put on the record my thanks for that investment, because the Government really are backing Nottinghamshire and the region with those long-term plans.

Katherine Fletcher: My hon. Friend is approximately five lines ahead of me in my remarks. I thank him for his contribution.

The mixture of options for local and regional rail services and the scope for capacity on high-speed services will attract significant private sector investment. With 50:50 match funding with the taxpayer, what my hon. Friend highlights sounds extremely exciting.

In addition to considering station options, we have committed resources to the study, as my hon. Friend highlights, to exploit the linkages with any other investment in Nottinghamshire, including proposals for reopening the Maid Marian line. We are continuing to develop the study and scope, and we are working closely with local railway stations. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling kindly invited me to visit Nottingham railway stations, but in all honesty I should probably pass that invitation on to the Rail Minister, although I may be there shortly, in which case I will have a quick look myself.

My hon. Friend mentioned the levelling-up fund bids and tempts me to talk about an ongoing departmental process. I recognise his passion and commitment, but the bids are currently under evaluation and I cannot comment on them. I can assure him that Ministers' evaluation of the shortlist stage is criteria-based and absolutely bias-blind. His passion is clear to see, and I am happy to pass on that enthusiasm, but I am not able to comment.

The East Midlands freeport is the most exciting project when talking about economic growth and thinking about regions holistically. When it is completed, it will be a national hub for global trade and investment and will promote regeneration and job creation. It is uniquely placed to capitalise and innovate on the region's commercial and industrial strengths. Once operational, those three sites may be the best-connected freeport in the UK. It is exciting to see this all starting to come together in a regional debate.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to debate the successes and aspirations of the transport sector in Nottinghamshire, of which there are clearly many. I hope I have answered hon. Members' questions, but given that this is my first time out, if there are any that I have missed or further points that I have not fully addressed, I will be happy to review the debate and write to hon. Members afterwards.

It is clear that Nottinghamshire is a place with many excellent champions, including Ministers who could not attend the debate and the Members who have come and contributed so well, and organisations doing dedicated work, such as Nottinghamshire County Council, Transport

for the East Midlands and East Midlands Connect. I leave this debate optimistic about the future of transport in the county, and I look forward to working with hon. Members further to improve connectivity for local people.

3.43 pm

Tom Randall: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. There was a bit of political back and forth with the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), but despite a degree of political bickering, we all spoke passionately and with one voice to get the best for our city and county.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards) illustrated with vivid examples from her constituents some of the key transport issues affecting Rushcliffe. We are very much on the same page when it comes to improving train services and getting better stopping services. The examples she gave clearly set out the extent to which so many rely on the bus services, which can play a vital role in everyday life.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) for his contribution. With his wide-ranging and roving brief across multiple portfolios, he not only gave us a bird's eye view of the east midlands, but went right down to the level of Sainsbury's junction to talk about the issues there. I thank him for the progress report on highways maintenance, which has been a common thread and key issue in the debate.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for being a candid and critical friend in many respects and for the points the Opposition raised. I tried not to mention Robin Hood as an historical figure, because there is more to Nottinghamshire than Robin Hood. I regard him as fighting a corrupt regime to restore the status quo while Richard was fighting in the crusades, but I am not sure he was the socialist visionary that the Labour party would like him to be.

I again welcome the Minister to her place, and I welcome her commitment to join up the dots in transport, as she put it. I welcome the further discussion about road schemes, of which many have been mentioned during the debate. I particularly welcome her comments about exploring opportunities to build further crossings over the River Trent. I look forward to receiving further correspondence from her Department on that matter.

The comments the Minister made about potholes and bus stops vividly illustrate the point that we can talk about grand projects, but the issues that are important to a lot of people are the state of their own streets. We have to cover both of those. The Minister said that the Government are committed to using transport to drive economic growth, which we can all get on board with. The debate has been an opportunity to celebrate what we have achieved but also to start a conversation about further things that need to be done. I look forward to continuing that conversation in other forums.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Transport in Nottinghamshire.

3.46 pm

Sitting suspended.

Vehicle Taxation Reform

[Relevant document: Fourth Report of the Transport Committee of Session 2021-22, Road pricing, HC 789.]

4 pm

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): I will shortly call Wera Hobhouse to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind hon. Members that there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

4.1 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.15 pm

On resuming—

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered reform of the vehicle taxation system.

I am delighted to bring this matter to Westminster Hall for debate. There is an urgent need for reform of our vehicle taxation system, for both fiscal and environmental reasons. The public understand that change must come; they look to the Government for clarity on the path to be followed. I hope that the Minister will be able to aid that process today. She will recognise that the future of travel is changing every year; Britain's transport networks and habits are moving into the net zero era.

Electric vehicle ownership is rising, as people try to help the planet and their wallets. Battery electric vehicles, or EVs, made up 14% of the new cars sold so far this year, and more electric vehicles were sold last year than in the previous five years combined. 2030, the year in which polluting vehicles will no longer be produced or sold, is fast approaching. The Government must act to reform road tax if they are to avoid yet another huge black hole opening up in their finances.

No form of change will be easy, but the sooner change is made the easier it will be. The main form of vehicle tax in the UK is fuel duty, which is nearly 53% added to every litre of fuel paid for at the petrol pump. Fuel duty raises approximately £28 billion a year for the Treasury. That is alongside the 28% VAT that is paid on fuel sales.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. The issue of how we tax road usage is very important, but I am deeply concerned about what is happening right now. In rural areas such as mine, where cars are essential to get around, we see people being hammered at the fuel pump. In part, that is due to limited competition and because there are fewer forecourts. Does she agree that we need to expand fuel duty relief for rural communities, so that it brings down prices immediately and eases the cost of living in the short term?

Wera Hobhouse: Absolutely. We see that people are facing great problems in rural communities and it is important to make short-term interventions to help them. However, I am really talking today about what vehicle taxation will look like in the long term, once we transition to net zero. Nevertheless, I fully take the point made by my hon. Friend.

On the other hand, drivers of electric vehicles pay no fuel duty. The Government need to continue incentivising the use of electric vehicles for environmental reasons. However, there are many ways in which that can be done without subsidising fuel duty. One option is to increase the number of public electric vehicle charging points. So far, the UK has only 31 electric vehicle charging points and only six rapid charging points per 100,000 people. If the Government are serious about encouraging the uptake of electric vehicles, they must ensure that the infrastructure is there. That would be of great benefit to my constituents in Bath and to the wider south-west, as our region is the second largest in the country for electric vehicle uptake.

Other incentives could include providing grants for electric car conversion. The conversion of old cars has significant benefits. For example, the carbon footprint of producing a new car is far higher than that created by continuing to use an old car. Currently, buying a new electric car is not an easy option for many people who do not have off-road parking or their own charging facilities. The conversion of older cars would help lower-income families who are struggling with the cost of living crisis, while also being part of the movement to less carbon-intensive transport options.

If we are to transition to net zero sustainably, the Government must find a way to fill the taxation income gap caused by declining fuel duty. The Government's own net zero strategy from 2021 states that the taxation of motoring must keep pace with electric vehicles. I understand that the Treasury has said in the past that the level of income from motorists should stay about the same in future, but how can that be achieved?

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this excellent debate. The Select Committee on Transport, which I chair, has put a series of recommendations to the Treasury, and we work closely with it. In advocating a form of road pricing, she rightly says that there will be a fiscal black hole. Some 4% of the entire tax take comes from motoring taxes. The evidence we received from the Treasury was that that figure would plummet to zero by 2040, so that means a loss of investment not just for roads, which account for just 20% of that total tax figure, but for schools and hospitals. Does she agree that the reason why we need road pricing is not just to fill the hole, but because devolved Mayors, in using their powers, are creating a patchwork of road-pricing schemes, and it will be difficult for the Government to get into that space with that patchwork already in place?

Wera Hobhouse: I totally agree. We need some clarity and something that motorists across the country can see as a coherent strategy, rather than the patchwork that the hon. Gentleman spoke about. One approach would be a scheme based on mileage. Other factors, such as emission levels or road type, could be added into the mix. Road pricing, as it is often referred to, is not a new idea. The Liberal Democrats proposed a version of it in our 2010 manifesto. It has been explored in depth many times. So far, no noticeable progress has been made towards its adoption and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to act and find ways forward quickly.

Nearly 20 years ago, the then Transport Secretary said that road pricing was 10 years away, but we do not have another 10 years to waste. The motivation then

[Wera Hobhouse]

was to cut pollution and reduce congestion, particularly in larger cities. Our most urgent need now is getting to net zero and, while doing that, looking at the immediate financial implications that I have mentioned.

I want to draw the Minister's attention to an excellent report released just a few days ago by the Campaign for Better Transport. The report tested options for a national road pricing system with a large cross-section of the public. The good news is that the public appear to be open to the idea of road pricing, otherwise known as pay-as-you-drive. In the survey, nearly 50% of respondents felt that fuel duties were unfair. That is unsurprising. Low-income households are more likely to have older, more polluting and less fuel-efficient cars and to pay more fuel duty per mile travelled. That is in contrast to wealthier households with newer, more fuel-efficient vehicles. According to Policy Exchange research, someone with a new car could pay half the amount of fuel duty compared with the owner of an older car. Other findings from the report show that 65% of those surveyed believe that electric vehicle owners need to pay tax to use the road system. Drivers felt that people with electric vehicles are effectively driving tax free, while those who are unable to switch—largely for financial reasons—must pay.

We must encourage the take-up of electric vehicles to reach net zero. However, the public are acutely aware that Britain's finances are under pressure after the recent economic shocks. Money must be found somewhere. There is evidence that the current vehicle taxation system is not fit for purpose, and the public agree. In the Campaign for Better Transport report, 60% of respondents agreed that there was a need to reform the vehicle taxation system. What options are available to Government and are these options fair in the eyes of constituents? Pay-as-you-go, or pay-as-you-drive, is worthy of consideration. It is widely regarded by experts as a progressive step forward. A pay-as-you-drive system could charge drivers directly per mile driven with a set distance charge. Another alternative could be smart road pricing, whereby the charge per mile varies depending on different factors. The Treasury would have the option of applying this equally to all vehicles. Alternatively, it could create a series of levels based on emitting status and/or the location where the person is driving.

The Climate Change Committee report to Parliament this year noted that road pricing “will be necessary” in the longer term. It recommended that the Government implement it “later this decade”. The Select Committee on Transport has recommended smart pricing, as has the Policy Exchange, the AA, and the Social Market Foundation.

For the first time in a long time, consensus is beginning to emerge. When pay-as-you-drive was initially pitched in the Campaign for Better Transport survey, 42% of respondents supported the idea, with 21% saying “No”. After the concept had been explained and questions answered, the percentage in favour rose to 49%, with opposition dropping to just 18%.

Pay-as-you-drive can come in many forms, but there are three options worth considering. One is a flat per-mile charge for electric vehicles. That would keep fuel duties as they are for existing petrol and diesel vehicles, and those duties would wither away as those cars disappear

from our roads. Another option is replacing fuel duty and vehicle excise duty, with a set per-mile charge based on the emissions level of the vehicle. That could be estimated at the annual MOT mileage check. Lastly, we could replace fuel and excise duty with a smart per-mile charge that varies with vehicle type, emissions, location and time of day.

The main argument in favour of pay-as-you-drive comes from the need to reduce the number of people driving to lower congestion and reduce air pollution and carbon emissions. The transport sector is now the biggest source of domestic greenhouse gas emissions and accounts for 28% of all emissions. Cars make up 55% of that figure, while lorries and vans make up 32%. Buses, coaches, and rail collectively account for just less than 5%, according to Government figures.

A system based on rewarding those who drive less, rather than a flat rate, could lead many members of the public to use their cars less and use public transport more. The idea that drivers who drive more should pay more in tax, and that those who drive less should pay less, was popular in the survey and it is clearly the right direction to take.

There is no doubt that ensuring investment in public transport, including reforms to the integration of bus and rail ticketing systems, is critical to a functioning pay-as-you-drive system. Those reforms cannot exist in a vacuum and must be part of a wider conversation on how we move people away from private cars and on to environmentally friendly public transport.

In the Campaign for Better Transport survey, 69% of respondents stated that a key element of making the entire system fairer for drivers was to make public transport cheaper. The Liberal Democrats would seek to give new powers to local authorities and communities to improve transport in their areas. That would include the ability to introduce network-wide ticketing, like that in London, and greater powers to franchise bus services and simplify the franchise application system. We would also reverse the ban on local authorities setting up their own bus companies, which should give councils the tools to make transport accessible for everyone.

Reforming the system towards pay-as-you-go would also bring transparency to vehicle taxation. Many drivers are unaware of the level of fuel duty that exists within the price that they pay for fuel. It is important that we bring clarity and openness to the vehicle taxation system when we reform it.

We must do everything possible to reach our net zero targets. However, that transition needs to be sustainable and accessible. Pay-as-you-drive is a progressive way of solving the problem of declining fuel duty revenue. In particular, it would encourage much more sustainable transport habits. Clearly, pay-as-you-drive schemes must be combined with more investment in public transport and environmentally friendly infrastructure. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.28 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Felicity Buchan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George, on my first outing as a Treasury Minister in Westminster Hall. I will begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and thanking

her for securing this important debate on vehicle taxation. As today's discussion has demonstrated, it is a highly topical issue.

These taxes bring in some £35.5 billion to the Exchequer every year—money that is essential to fund high quality public services. That sum is worth about 4.3% of our total tax take, so it is critical. As the hon. Member for Bath said, the taxes have a crucial role to play in our transition to net zero, to which this Government are absolutely committed. Vehicle taxation and its future are a matter of great public interest. Road vehicles in Great Britain covered almost 300 billion miles in 2021, underscoring our need to maintain high-quality infrastructure while minimising emissions. As we transition to net zero, it is vital that we also consider how we continue to pay for our roads, as well as our schools, hospitals and armed forces.

Let me begin to outline the background by exploring the present system of vehicle taxation. We have two main vehicle taxes in this country: fuel duty and vehicle excise duty. Fuel duty is currently the largest yielding excise regime, raising £26 billion in 2021-22. Vehicle excise duty, or road tax as it is sometimes known, is worth a further £7 billion a year. Altogether, those revenues equate to just under 40% of the total education budget for this entire financial year, as we have an Education Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), present in the Chamber.

We also have other smaller taxes, most notably company car tax, which raises some £2.5 billion a year. That tax applies when a car is made available to an employee for private purposes, since that represents a taxable non-cash benefit. The funds raised from all those taxes contribute to both road maintenance and the resourcing of other vital public services. The Government have refined those taxes both to help families and businesses navigate cost of living pressures and to support our net zero ambitions.

At spring statement 2022, the Government announced a temporary 12-month cut of 5p to fuel duty on petrol and diesel, worth £2.4 billion. That is the largest ever cash-terms cut to fuel duty. Perhaps I can use this opportunity to address a few points made by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord). First, we asked the Competitions and Markets Authority to undertake an urgent review of the market for road fuel. Its findings suggest that the fuel duty cut was largely passed through, but Government have asked it to do a fuller market study on the supply of road fuel, and Government will react to those conclusions.

I draw the hon. Member's attention to the rural fuel duty relief scheme, which gives support to motorists by compensating fuel retailers in some select rural areas that meet certain criteria. If they qualify, there is a 5p per litre reduction for the retailers. We have also adapted those taxes to incentivise take-up of electric vehicles. Road transport accounts for a massive 24% of UK carbon emissions, so reducing those emissions is essential to the UK's transition to net zero.

Industry statistics suggest that more than 1 million battery and plug-in hybrid electric vehicles are now registered in the UK, which is a huge success, but we need to go further and faster. To support that, we will introduce a ZEV mandate in 2024, and end the sale of petrol and diesel-powered vehicles by 2030 and of hybrid vehicles by 2035. At that point, all vehicles sold will be zero emission. In all, the Government have committed

£2.5 billion since 2020 to support the transition to electric vehicles, with targeted funding to offset the higher up-front costs and to accelerate the roll-out of charge point infrastructure. That includes £500 million to support local charge point provision, £950 million to support rapid charging on motorways and major A roads, and funding for charge points in homes and businesses.

In addition to those measures, the Government also use the vehicle tax system to incentivise the take-up of vehicles with lower carbon emissions. In 2017, the Government introduced a reformed vehicle excise duty system for new cars. Under that system, zero emission models pay nothing on first registration, while the most polluting pay more than £2,000. In subsequent years most cars move to a standard rate, currently set at £165 per year; meanwhile, zero emission vehicles pay nothing, either on first registration or subsequently. Company car tax, too, is adapted to the pursuit of net zero, and it has been effective in incentivising the uptake of electric vehicles and ultra-low emission vehicles. Company cars comprise a significant proportion of electric vehicles and ultra-low emission vehicles on the road today. Those cars will filter through to the second-hand market, increasing the supply of used electric vehicles and making the transition more affordable for consumers.

I will move on to the future of motoring taxes. I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) who, as Chair of the Transport Committee, has done a lot of work on that topic. As more road users switch to electric vehicles, tax receipts from fuel duty and vehicle excise duty will decrease if the present system remains unchanged. The net zero review indicates that tax receipts from fossil fuel-related activity will eventually trend towards zero. Revenue from fuel duty is projected to decline from 1.2% of GDP in the middle of the decade to 0.2% by the 2040s, and revenues from vehicle excise duty will also fall. The Government are committed to ensuring that revenue from vehicle taxes keeps pace with that change, with taxation simultaneously remaining affordable for consumers. That will ensure that we can continue to fund the public services and infrastructure that people and families across the UK expect. In considering how to replace those lost tax revenues, the Government will also consider the secondary impacts of existing vehicle taxes, not least in reducing road congestion.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the Minister agree that the principle of all new taxation has to be that we disincentivise people from using their cars and incentivise more use of public transport? Ultimately, that is the most sustainable way to go forward.

Felicity Buchan: I am sure the hon. Lady will recognise that we have a medium-term fiscal plan coming up in about 10 days, and at this stage we will not commit to anything ahead of that plan.

I conclude by thanking the hon. Member for Bath for the opportunity to have a fruitful discussion about vehicle taxation. We are all aware of how important the issue is, given the fact that motoring taxes account for 4.3% of total tax take and £35 billion—a significant sum. We are also all aware that our constituents have a strong interest in any changes to vehicle taxation. I welcome the widespread support that hon. Members have expressed

[Felicity Buchan]

for using vehicle taxation to facilitate our transition to net zero, and I am grateful that so many hon. Members appreciate the need to reform vehicle taxation to maintain tax receipts while achieving net zero. We will listen to our constituents and to hon. Members as we continue to refine vehicle taxation and adapt it to the Britain of net zero, economic growth and fiscal responsibility.

Question put and agreed to.

4.41 pm

Sitting suspended.

Apprenticeships and Teacher Training

4.44 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered apprenticeships and teacher training.

I am looking forward to this very important debate about apprenticeships, specifically the role that I hope apprenticeships will play in our education sector in future. Expanding apprenticeships in a way that delivers for all our communities is going to be really important.

Apprenticeships are a vital but criminally underutilised part of our education mix. They drive productivity and growth in our economy, as well as allowing young people to earn while they learn. They have the ability to attract the widest cross-section of society, and they benefit disadvantaged young people more than any other group, making them a fundamental building block of levelling up and social mobility.

Today, I will talk about why apprenticeships are so important and how an increase in their number would benefit those outside London the most. Most critically, I will talk about why creating an undergraduate apprenticeship route into teaching is so important not only to the sector but to the enthusiastic young people it would attract and the wider economy.

Apprenticeships are a great part of individual development and are a unique route to gaining valuable skills. They cultivate knowledge, develop skills, allow young people to use their initiative to manage projects and develop good communicators who can make strong decisions and become role models to others. Importantly, apprentices can earn while they learn without acquiring university debt or a graduate tax, and they still get a degree qualification at the end of it. That means that apprenticeships can attract the widest possible pool of talent.

Better still, apprenticeships are great for employers. Hiring an apprentice is a productive and effective way to grow talent and develop a motivated, skilled and qualified workforce that can be moulded to an employer's bespoke needs from day one. Furthermore, studies show that apprentices are far more loyal than university graduates. Perhaps our Prime Minister would welcome a few more coming through that route on to the Back Benches of the Conservative party.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech that I wholeheartedly agree with. It is deeply disappointing not to see a single Member of the Labour party, other than the shadow Minister, or of the Lib Dems in the Chamber. My hon. Friend is talking about the aspirational element of what apprenticeships can offer. Does he agree that it is essential that we ensure that local places of education are linked up with local businesses so that we can offer, present and platform those opportunities?

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Studies show that more than half of young people looking to apply for higher education are interested in apprenticeships but they often find it difficult to access the relevant information. Some colleges and sixth forms are not interested in helping people pursue that option, and I will come to that later.

Apprenticeships are an effective means of achieving long-term growth and improved productivity—two of the core elements of what the Government are driving for. If we are truly to upskill our workforce while levelling up by turbocharging productivity and growth across the country, apprenticeships are absolutely key, especially in the education sector.

My successful apprenticeships fair with Derwentside College last year was attended by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart)—the predecessor of the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis). Prior to that, he attended Parkside Academy in my constituency to talk to the young people there about apprenticeships as an alternative route to academic sixth form.

I recently held another apprenticeships and jobs fair at Crook in North West Durham to help forge connections between young constituents looking at post-school options and local employers. Derwentside College in my constituency is one of the best examples, and I urge the Minister to come and visit. It does excellent sector-based work academies and apprenticeships that are tied into local firms, like those that my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) was talking about.

After seeing that at first hand, it is clear to me that having local apprenticeships working with local businesses is critical to boosting local economic activity. I am running a “How to run an apprenticeships fair” event for staffers in Parliament on 7 December, so if anyone wants to send their staff along, please do so. In constituencies across the country, we do not want to see young people constantly having to migrate in order to find work.

Anthony Mangnall: I apologise for having two bites of the cherry, but just two weeks ago I held my own careers fair at a local further education college—South Devon College—in my constituency of Totnes and south Devon. It was a fantastic example of how to join up local apprenticeships and local businesses and explore the opportunities in the area. Will my hon. Friend come down and see what we are doing in the south-west—a sometimes overlooked area—so that, across the whole country, we might join up this idea of linking up apprenticeships, colleges and businesses?

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Obviously, the decision whether or not to take interventions is for the hon. Member who is moving the motion. I would point out, however, that there are five people hoping to speak, and each intervention means that the time limit may be reduced for those people.

Mr Holden: Thank you for your guidance, Sir George. I will just say that, when I was in the Department for Education, I visited South Devon College with the then Education Secretary’s special adviser, and I can definitely recommend that my hon. Friend the Minister does so too.

Far too often we hear stories of young people leaving our communities, particularly in constituencies such as North West Durham, to go away to university. They are out of the jobs market for three years and sometimes end up right back where they started, having accumulated student loans in the process. A three-year residential course is not the right route for everyone—actually, it probably

is not the right route for the majority of people—but at the moment, in too many cases, it is the only option for those who want to be seen to get ahead. That is specifically the case for the teaching profession, where there is not currently an undergraduate apprenticeship, although there is a postgraduate one. I want to see young people become apprentices so they can earn a degree and valuable skills while earning a stable income right away, rather than continuing on the traditional university route first.

Despite the multifaceted benefits that apprenticeships can clearly provide, we could do more to encourage apprenticeships, particularly in constituencies such as mine, which have seen apprenticeship starts fall in recent years. That really concerns me. I want to see as many people as possible in North West Durham, and across the country, in apprenticeships. The fall in apprenticeship starts also demonstrates that the north has the most to gain by increasing apprenticeships, particularly in areas such as teaching, especially if people can do them through local universities and schools so they do not have to move away. If we want to look at different ways to deliver on levelling up, then increasing apprenticeships is critical.

Clearly, an undergraduate apprenticeship route into teaching is a no-brainer. Currently, someone who wants to be a teacher must have a degree and either do a postgraduate apprenticeship or a postgraduate certificate in education. That may make sense for a group of people for whom a few drinks is the right option for their first year at university and who then finally settle down to study, but many of my constituents need to be earning from day one. For so many young people who go into certain FE courses—particularly young women in my constituency—it feels as if their choices are limited from that point, especially if they are interested in education, as they cannot take the final steps into the full teaching profession.

As I have said, the traditional route is not the right one to ensure that as many people as possible can access the profession. That means we are missing out on huge talent in vast swathes of the population, some of whom might be some of the best teachers from the earliest stage of their career. We need to unleash the potential in this broader base of the population. That will also help the sector with vacancies, particularly in certain subjects, possibly including some technical subjects. I do not see any reason why we could not have some of the important academic subject bases as part of that mix; it is about design.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman raises an innovative idea. Will he expand on it a little? Previously, when we were looking at maths teachers, people who had a maths degree would be seen as suitable to do the maths part but would have to go away to do a PGCE in order to learn the teaching part. How does he foresee that we would ensure that people who had not done a degree were capable of providing that technical knowledge?

Mr Holden: The hon. Gentleman rightly picks up an important point about subject specialism, which I will come to a little later. We want to ensure that the teaching profession is delivering the full knowledge all the way down. I do not think that is necessary in exactly the same way for pre-school or, perhaps, primary school teachers;

[Mr Holden]

while they have to have subject knowledge, it does not have to be to the depth of degree level. I think that knowledge could be gained, perhaps, as part of a four-year teaching apprenticeship. In a couple of years' time, doctors will be able to do degree-level apprenticeships—that provision has already been made—so I do not see why we could not have the same provision for teachers, particularly those teaching early years and in primary schools.

I have visited so many schools in my constituency since I was elected—about half my primary schools and all my secondary schools—and I have noticed that a lot of them have an early years setting alongside them. I make the point to the Minister that an early years teaching apprenticeship could be a first look at this, perhaps as a pilot scheme. So many people go in, perhaps with a level 2 or level 3 qualification, but that is where their opportunity ends. It is a particular issue when someone with qualified teacher status can look after 13 four-year-olds, whereas someone without qualified teacher status can only look after eight. Some of those ratios are really difficult; they restrict the ability to pay more, when childcare costs are already so high, but they also put extra costs on families. Providing an early years apprenticeship route could be part of the answer to the issues around childcare, which everyone knows is a major issue in the country at the moment, particularly with respect to cost.

The broader point is that having a degree apprenticeship would bring teaching into line with other professions. With accountancy, someone can get an Association of Accounting Technicians qualification and then go on to the full accountancy course. It is the same with architecture and engineering. Someone can go into the legal profession right at the bottom end and work their way through to becoming a fully qualified solicitor. No one is suggesting that those other sectors have a prestige issue. People can do apprenticeships all the way through those professions, but they cannot do one in teaching. That is a particular issue.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I can provide an example from personal experience in respect of the solicitor apprenticeship route. In my previous business, I recruited a young lady at the age of 18 who did not want to go to university. I am delighted to report that she is about to qualify as a solicitor, having gone through all the necessary steps.

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend provides a superb example of exactly what I am talking about. In the teaching profession and the education sector there are already a lot of people who have done level 3 qualifications, or even level 4 or 5 qualifications, in all sorts of teaching assistant and some advanced teaching assistant roles. That is a natural progression. It can be done in nursing as well, with healthcare assistants moving through into nursing. There are so many ways that this is done in other professions. We are almost holding teaching back from so many people with many different talents who just did not want to choose a particular route at age 18; we are stopping them being able to progress their careers.

For so many young people, an apprenticeship is a particularly good option if they need to earn while they learn. So many people in our communities, in constituencies

such as mine, do not have the option of going away. Even if they would get all the support of student loans and grants, they want to be earning from day one. They may have commitments to their family that they want to maintain. The apprenticeship model might mean that they do not have to remove themselves from the job market in later life to go and do training or professional qualifications, because they can earn and learn on the job.

Having spoken to so many people across the sector about my plan, I have heard some reservations. The first is that apprenticeships would somehow dilute the teaching profession. The issue of prestige perniciously permeates apprenticeships across the board, but with companies such as Goldman Sachs now taking on apprentices and people able to do an apprenticeship to become a doctor, that is being eroded. That reservation is particularly frustrating because it is demonstrably untrue.

While a three-year residential degree and one year of training provide an in-depth understanding of academic study, surely four years of working in a teaching apprenticeship in a school environment, while doing those academic studies on the side, would help teachers get a greater understanding of teaching. That is particularly true for early years and primary, which I have already touched on.

What is more, the apprenticeship model already exists in the public sector. In 2017, undergraduate degree apprenticeships became the main route into nursing and, as I have said, the Department of Health and Social Care has approved an apprenticeship, to be rolled out next year, as a route to becoming a doctor. That addresses the grievances of those concerned about the lack of prestige or academic credentials. I understand those concerns. We want to ensure that people with really good subject knowledge are going into our professions. I just think that we can do that with a proper, well-thought-through degree apprenticeship route too.

While it is difficult to object to the idea of apprenticeships in principle, some have expressed concern about funding. However, this is where I am probably most optimistic about the viability of my proposal. Since 2017, the Treasury has allocated an annual apprenticeship budget to the Department for Education, which is used to fund apprenticeships at small employers and incentive payments, among other things. If it is not used by the end of the financial year, it is returned to the Treasury. I have spoken to Ministers and officials in the Department, and it is estimated that around £200 million in unused levy funds has been returned, although a specific freedom of information request recently suggested that the figure could be as high as £2 billion over a five-year period. There are hundreds of millions of pounds, at least, in the Department for Education's budget to do this. Without having even to look far, we have a silver bullet to fund an undergraduate teaching apprenticeship pathway and unleash the potential of enthusiastic apprentices who could shape the future of the children of today and tomorrow.

One big issue with apprenticeships in general—I think this is one of the most important points—is that they are often not considered a prestigious option post-school. Schools often strongly encourage students to go down a traditional three-year residential university route, even though it might not be the best fit for them. That is natural—that is where all the teachers came from. Einstein's

definition of madness is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting a different result. This is groundhog day in our education system. We put people who have degrees into schools and then, naturally, teachers say that is the route into teaching that people should go down. We need to stop doing this; it is a disservice to the people we are trying to represent and to apprenticeships more broadly.

If our children's role models were themselves living examples of successful apprentices, that could surely change how apprenticeships are perceived, particularly in the education sector. Therefore, teaching apprenticeships could unlock a new generation of apprentices, not only in the teaching profession but more broadly in all sectors of society. That would address the broader issue with apprenticeships that results in them being seriously under-utilised and thus create far-reaching benefits beyond the teaching profession itself.

I believe that creating an undergraduate teaching apprenticeship degree route would have extensive and multifaceted benefits. It is an astonishingly simple solution to many issues in the sector, from getting people into apprenticeships who should be in them to helping out in the early years and with the financial pressures on families and, obviously, on the Government. It would boost productivity, it would provide a pathway into a well-paying job with a good pension for so many young people who have not historically gone down the teaching route, and it would really help to address some of the vacancies in our already overstretched teaching sector. Furthermore, it would create a route into teaching for enthusiastic young people who currently have no path to progression. Primarily, a teaching apprenticeship would benefit the most disadvantaged, who feel that they cannot afford to take a degree or that, for varying reasons in their lives, teaching has not been an option for them. Most importantly, there is already a considerable tranche of funding available to make this happen.

Finally, as I have already said, having apprentices as ambassadors in schools would provide a huge boost to the entire sector, reaching well beyond the profession itself. I want to see apprenticeship starts increase wherever possible. I know the uniquely valuable role that teachers play in children's lives—both my parents were teachers—and I see this route into teaching as essential to helping us address some of the gaps that we see in our country at the moment.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): In order to try to get in everyone who has indicated that they want to speak in the debate, I will impose a time limit of five minutes on speeches. I will call the first of the two Front Benches at 5.27 pm.

5.3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Sir George, for calling me to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) on setting the scene.

May I say what a pleasure it is to see the Minister in his place? We have become great friends over the last few years. I know he is a good man who will do a good job. If he were not a Minister, he would be on the Back

Benches supporting us in this debate. He is very much poacher turned gamekeeper, so we are pleased to see him in his place and we look forward to his contribution.

There are certain professions that are not jobs but callings or vocations, and teaching is one of them. Although I adore my grandchildren and enjoy giving talks to classes interested in politics, I can think of nothing more challenging than teaching nine classes of 30 different children five times a week. To progress those children, to understand how best they learn, to be able to teach the brightest while bringing along those who struggle—it is all beyond me. I really applaud the teachers who are involved in that—well done.

In these debates, I always try to give a Northern Ireland perspective. I do it to add to the debate, ever mindful that the Minister does not have any responsibility for education in Northern Ireland, because education is a devolved matter. It is getting much harder to be a teacher in Northern Ireland, as the needs of our children have changed. Statistics released by the Northern Ireland Education Authority in January outline those changes, with a 26.4% increase in the number of pupils accessing a placement in a special school since 2015-16, and a 24.1% rise in the number accessing a placement in special provision in mainstream schools. Other statistics show that 20,505 pupils have a statement of need where there were once only 16,500, an increase of 23.7%.

That is not the subject of the debate, of course, but I say those things to give a perspective on how education has changed since I was young. Any teacher training now does so in the knowledge that they will have to teach the subject they choose to pupils with a range of skill levels and learning processes in one classroom. An essential component of making that work are the classroom assistants who aid those children who need to learn differently. There is a lot of pressure on the teacher to know how best to utilise that help in the classroom. The classes are large and the teaching aids and funding are low. Schools are feeling the pinch. It is quite a grim picture. I have served on the board of governors of Glashury College for nearly 36 years, and in that time I have seen how the needs and demands of the pupils, parents and teachers have changed.

In England, the pupil to teacher ratio has increased from 17.6 in November 2010 to 18.5 in 2021, and the teacher vacancy rate has risen over that period. I believe those things are linked, with greater pressure on time spent outside the classroom for teachers and, increasingly, for classroom assistants. That must change through increased funding, which would reduce class numbers and increase classroom assistants' hours in class and time for preparation. I know the Minister is keen to do that, and I believe he will. Every penny spent on education is a penny invested in our children and, subsequently, in ourselves and the future of this great nation.

It is time that we again focused on the outcomes for us all, which would be better if a teacher were not singlehandedly trying to teach 30 children with three different teaching needs and a number with behavioural needs. A rising tide lifts all ships. Minister, we must ensure that we can entice people who love education and children into teaching, by showing the support and help that will be granted to them, not simply in private schools, if they can get a job there, but in every mainstream school in this nation. The job is clear; the question is whether the Government will put their shoulder to the

[*Jim Shannon*]

plough and deliver. Knowing the Minister as I do, as a friend—I welcome him and wish him well in his new role—I believe that he will be the first to do just that.

5.8 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the second time today, Sir George. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) for bringing forward this important debate. I will focus today on education, but I also totally agree with what he said about the apprenticeship levy and the opportunity, by making that more flexible, to open up a range of employment and training opportunities that do not currently exist. We should definitely have done that a long time ago, to be honest.

There are two things I wanted to raise today. The first is helping people to access teaching as a career, regardless of background. Insistence on degree qualifications makes for a less diverse workforce, although not less diverse in terms of physical characteristics—which the Minister knows I have all sorts of issues with, which I will come to in a minute—but less diverse in terms of background, views and experience.

Other areas of education, such as independent schools and colleges, are free to bring in a broader range of teachers and lecturers with different backgrounds. We regularly see colleges bringing in people from industry, for example, into teaching settings. That is sometimes to support more vocational or technical qualifications, or to support and advise on business or getting into private sector roles or entrepreneurship. I often hear businesses say that schools struggle to teach effectively about being in business, about entrepreneurship, and about being work ready and the expectations of private sector employment. In reality, that is less about qualifications and more about engagement, character and extracurricular interests.

Many groups and charities are working to get more business experience into schools, which is good. Even better, we could get that experience into teaching. To have a wider variety of routes and ways to get into teaching, without having to take years out to take a degree, would be incredibly beneficial. Giving schools more flexibility to employ a wider range of people would also be beneficial. It would help us to give our young people a wider range of options, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham said, and a wider and better range of careers advice.

Often, the most effective role models for young people are those from their community. A young person who grew up on an estate who has done well, and who is capable and engaging and understands the local context and issues, is perhaps better placed than a graduate from another, very different area to mentor young people—to be a role model. Often, people get to grips with learning and qualifications later in life, having struggled at school. That is particularly true in very disadvantaged communities, where levels of post-16 qualifications can be very low. People being able to access teaching through apprenticeships and shorter courses, to transition from other sectors such as business, to work as a teaching assistant while they learn and qualify on the job, and opportunities such as those would help those people to get on, to give

back to their community and to teach where they grew up, instead of going to do something else elsewhere. I extend that to other professions, as well—the police, for example. I would make the same case in that sector, but I do not have time to go into that today.

In other areas of education, having new ways into teaching could be hugely beneficial and create new opportunities. Just last week, I visited Crocodile Rock Day Care, an early years setting in Mansfield, where we spoke about a variety of things, including the challenge of recruiting and retaining staff. We spoke about the challenge of offering appropriate training and development with very tight budgets, and how many staff in the sector end up moving into retail or going to work at Amazon because it is better money. If those young people entering early years education could progress into primary teaching, for example, by learning on the job—by transferring their training and qualifications in early years to schools through apprenticeship-type options—we could open up a whole world of new opportunities, and also improve recruitment and retention in the sector.

If people could progress from an entry-level role in early years education to become more experienced and qualified, work in a nursery or reception setting at a school, gain experience with older children, learn as a teaching assistant and become a newly qualified teacher, and do all of that on the job, it would mean people would not have to take career breaks to requalify. It would also remove financial barriers and enable people to progress in settings within their own community—the community that they most care about—and then perhaps teach in their own area, not leave and go somewhere else. That is a real challenge for schools, particularly those in disadvantaged communities, so I hope the Minister will take those points away. I fully support what my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham has said.

In the short time I have left, the second thing I want to raise with the Minister is the importance of male role models in teaching, which relates to this teacher training issue. I do not need to go into my issues with the Equality Act 2010 and the perverse outcomes it has led to: there are countless examples of trying to support women into university or into science, technology, engineering and mathematics, for example, but next to no examples of trying to support young men into teaching, even though the profession is 75% female, and even more so in primary education.

In the east midlands, 30% of schools do not have a single male teacher. That is really upsetting when we consider that in some of the most disadvantaged communities, that male teacher might be the only decent role model that a young man has. It is difficult and confusing to learn how to be a man in modern society when there is no male role model, or when the male role model at home is involved in domestic violence, for example, or unhealthy relationships. Where do young men learn those things from? I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to also take that point away, and look at how we might encourage more male role models for the children in those disadvantaged communities who most need them. Most importantly, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham has said, we need to open up access to teaching to a much broader range of people, to make that easier for all our communities.

5.13 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) on securing the debate.

We all know good and bad teachers: they shape our lives, and therefore can be considered the most important influence after parents and carers. Our economy depends on skills and apprenticeships, and I welcome ways into career paths that open them to people from a range of backgrounds. However, I have huge concerns about the number of ways of getting into teaching, and whether they all guarantee the preparedness of teachers. Depending on what equivalence we attach to similarly operating pathways, there are around 10 ways of getting qualified teacher status. It is now proposed to introduce a level 5 associate teacher apprenticeship aimed at teaching assistants, both as a route into teaching and a continuing professional development activity. We should remember that most TA roles are based on a level 3 qualification, or level 4 in some cases.

If, as I have said, teaching is the most important influence, we should be making sure that teachers are well trained and motivated. Teaching is a vocation, but that does not mean that everyone is good at it. There needs to be rigorous training over years to enable good teaching, which includes child pedagogy. It requires a mixture of sciences, such as child development, as well as subject teaching. Finland, which comes top of most education surveys, has primary school teacher training for four years and secondary school teaching programmes for five years. Candidates then have to do a year of pedagogical training; alongside that, they do a research thesis on a topic of their choice and spend a full year teaching in a university-affiliated school before graduation.

This gives status to teachers, and confidence that teachers are well prepared. Compare that with the lack of that foundation in some routes in England, which particularly concerns me, because we cannot rely on stretched schools and their teachers to provide additional support to newly qualified teachers who are expected to learn from others on the job. Additionally, we cannot put children and young people in a position where they may have an unqualified or struggling teacher for a whole year. The new apprenticeships specification builds in so much overlap with the qualified teacher status that it is inevitable that the distinction will be lost or overlooked.

We lose far too many of these valuable recruits early in their careers because they feel unprepared in the classroom. The average rate for teachers leaving the profession is around 10% per year. However, among early career teachers the rates are a lot worse; some 12.5% have already left within a year of qualifying. Some 17%—

Ben Bradley: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Drummond: I will not, because we do not get extra time.

Ben Bradley: We get a minute back at the end.

Mrs Drummond: No, we do not get a minute back in here, I am afraid.

Some 17% will have left within two years. After five years a third have left, and 40% of teachers who qualified 10 years ago have left teaching. Besides being a failure of current policy, this also undermines our ability to develop a cadre of experienced teachers who can help the next generation.

I am a huge fan of apprenticeships, vocational education and learning while working, but the stakes are so high in education that we must be cautious. Classroom-based professional development can help qualified teachers learn themselves and stay in teaching, but it is not a substitute for giving teachers a solid foundation at the start. We certainly should not be circumventing routes to it, which I am concerned the kinds of apprenticeships now being proposed will do.

5.16 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I begin by congratulating my County Durham colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), on securing today's important debate.

Over 30,000 individuals enter initial teacher training in England each year through several routes. However, it is regrettable that in general, over the past decade or so, the overall number of qualified teachers in state-funded schools has not kept pace with increasing pupil numbers, with recruitment and retention of teachers still being a significant issue. This is of particular concern in the north east, where we have seen the sharpest reduction in the number of teacher training places in the country, with nearly a third of our places at risk. With 92% of teachers in the north-east coming from the north-east, we know that this will result in reduced teacher supply, and significantly impact the ability of schools in the north-east to continue to improve and develop. Given that we know schools in disadvantaged areas have the greatest problems in recruiting staff, the impact on disadvantaged children will be even more significant than on the system as a whole, compounding the problem.

With this in mind, I have been made aware of a number of concerns about the recent re-accreditation process for providers of initial teacher training. I will take this opportunity to highlight the issues Carmel College in Darlington is currently experiencing. Carmel College's teacher training programme has been running for 20 years, delivering over 100 new teachers each year. I am deeply concerned that this outstanding school in my constituency now faces the removal of its teacher training accreditation from 2024. It is essential that outstanding schools such as Carmel College are able to continue their teacher training programmes, so that we can ensure that children in the north-east are not let down because of a lack of teachers to fill vacancies. I greatly appreciate the engagement that I have already had on this issue from the Minister for School Standards, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), and I wish Carmel College good luck in its appeal.

More generally, I am committed to helping the people of Darlington to secure employment and training opportunities. Further to this aim, and like my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham, who led the debate, I recently hosted my second apprenticeship and training fair at Darlington College. I was delighted

[*Peter Gibson*]

to have almost 50 organisations represented, which were collectively recruiting for well over 700 opportunities in and around Darlington, alongside helpful tips and advice for job seekers. Such events are hugely important for ensuring that our constituents are fully aware of the job opportunities and training available to them to enable them to reach their full potential. The apprenticeship levy allowance has been a great tool for encouraging employers to commit to apprenticeships, allowing them to fund apprenticeship training or else lose the funds.

While apprenticeships are a great way for schools to improve the skills of their non-teaching employees, the funds are not currently available for schools to fund teacher training costs, which seems a missed opportunity. I encourage the Minister to look at the feasibility of that measure. We must ensure that we can tackle shortages in teachers if we are to enable children up and down the country to fulfil their potential.

I want to see us encouraging more businesses to establish apprenticeships and opening up more opportunities for people seeking employment and training. I know that the Minister and this Conservative Government share those views, and I know the Minister will have listened closely to all the contributions today. I look forward to hearing his response to this excellent and timely debate.

5.20 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) on securing a debate on this important matter. Apprenticeships are dear to many of our hearts. The pressure on teacher numbers is also an issue we are all very conscious of. I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman was able to secure this debate. It is a shame that the “back frack or sack” debate in the Chamber has overwhelmed many of us. As a result, there were rather more Labour Members there, and maybe some Conservative Members were hiding away in here. I cannot imagine that there is anyone here who does not want to let everyone know what they think about fracking, but we never know—it is possible.

The hon. Member for North West Durham raised some important points. I want to dwell on the importance of apprenticeships for learners from deprived communities. He is absolutely right that level 2 and 3 apprenticeships are incredibly important. There are real issues in the expansion of level 6 and 7 apprenticeships; there has been a huge middle-class grab of those. I welcome degree apprenticeships, but we need to be careful that we do not end up with a twin-tier system where level 2 apprenticeships are for working-class kids and level 6 and 7 apprenticeships are what someone does if their parents are ambitious. None the less, his central point about the value of apprenticeships is an important one.

The hon. Gentleman touched on the fact that apprenticeship numbers are falling. At our recent conference, the Labour party outlined new proposals on flexibility around apprenticeships. The apprenticeship levy is not working in its current format, and we want to see apprenticeship numbers driven up. He was right to say that.

I take this opportunity to welcome to his post the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis). I hope that he lasts rather longer than the Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), appears to have. I know he has great passion in this area, and we look forward to hearing his thoughts going forward.

The hon. Members for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke of their commitment to apprenticeships. I know that commitment is found across the House.

The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) is a great example of someone who covets another job when in one; throughout the years I have known him, he seems to have been almost constantly campaigning for the next job. I know he would like to be my Mayor in Nottinghamshire in the future, and will no doubt have been hugely excited about Labour’s announcement of devolution of skills funding to Mayors at our recent conference. Whether he gets that opportunity, time will tell, but I know he has a genuine commitment to this area of policy, and it was good to hear his contribution.

The hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) made a point about the retention of teachers, mentioning that the sharpest reduction in teacher training is in the north-east, and that there are often particular pressures on teacher recruitment in town communities and areas that are further away from universities. That is an issue of real importance. The hon. Member for North West Durham talked about the value of apprenticeships; I completely agree with what he said. Apprenticeships are a hugely important opportunity for people to work while they learn. Ensuring that both employers and learners get access to those opportunities will be a key priority for the Labour Government. A lot more can be done to ensure that all students coming out of school are aware of apprenticeship opportunities, which is a real passion of mine.

There is a particular missed opportunity for public sector apprenticeships. I asked a number of parliamentary questions to the Minister’s predecessor, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), about the amount of levy left unspent in the public sector. I was shocked to discover that the Government did not have those figures to hand. I had to try to establish them on an organisation-by-organisation basis. It should be a matter of strategic interest to the Government.

Our health sector trusts, which pay huge amounts of levy, also have a huge staffing crisis. How much do they have unspent every year in their apprenticeship levy pot? In that context, the hon. Member for North West Durham made an important and innovative suggestion for teacher training. We need to think a huge amount more about how to do it, but he has raised a topic of real importance. It is vital that we attract more people into the teaching profession, and such innovative solutions are definitely to be explored.

Over the past decade, the number of qualified teachers in state schools has fallen behind increasing pupil numbers. At one time, it was guaranteed that there would be no more than 30 pupils in a class, but that is now commonplace in schools that I visit. The rising teacher vacancy rate over that period has seen more and more schools struggling to recruit. I have met schools in my constituency that have advertised vacancies two or three times and not

had a single application. We need to stop for a moment and consider why that is. Is it the workload, the burnout that teachers experience, the highly pressurised environment, or the extent to which schools have become extensions of social work services? Rising poverty means that schools are expected to feed as well as educate our children, which is a massive social problem. It no doubt has huge consequences for teacher retention.

We have a great generation of teachers, but never have the Government expected so much while offering so little. Many teachers in my constituency, knowing about this debate, wanted me to express the sense that they are drowning in work and facing unimaginable pressures, due to the crisis in children's mental health, the cost of living issues, and the number of families struggling to feed themselves and afford the basics. Our teachers are very much on the frontline of that economic crisis. It is crucial that we recognise the vital role that teachers play in our communities and do more to address the poverty behind many of those issues. We need to recognise the shortage of teachers that we have.

The last large-scale survey of teachers, administered by the OECD in 2018, found that full-time secondary teachers in England reported working on average almost 50 hours a week. Full-time primary teachers reported working 52 hours a week—more than any other participating country except Japan. In our country, the amount of time that pupils spend in school is less than it is for many of our competitors, but the amount of time our teachers spend working is more. That is simply a recipe for failure.

Recent recruitment campaigns to the teaching profession have tended to target those already in work, but many of the desired recruits, as the hon. Member for North West Durham said, will already have family commitments and all the other expenditure that makes it difficult to get away from the world of work to pursue full-time education. I absolutely agree with the principle that non-possession of a degree should be a barrier only where there is a specific reason why a degree is needed. I am someone who never went to university, and yet, despite having been a senior manager in business, I know from subsequently attempting to get into the public sector that there were a number of jobs there that I did not even have a chance to apply for, regardless of my abilities, because I do not have a degree.

The Labour party views apprenticeships as the gold standard, so we want to see further investigation of these important ideas, but there is a number of considerations that will need to be made to make the idea work. In conclusion, we are broadly supportive of the suggestion of apprenticeships for teacher training and we look forward to exploring these ideas in future.

5.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Jonathan Gullis): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George, and to make my first appearance as the Minister for School Standards. It could not have been sweeter that it was my next-door neighbour in the parliamentary offices, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), who managed to get me at the Dispatch Box in Westminster Hall for the first time. I thank him and I thank his parents, who are obviously excellent teachers, for producing such a wonderful son. Most importantly, I thank all the

teachers, teaching assistants and support staff who time and again go above and beyond in their incredible dedication to those amazing young people, who will be the future of our country and drive that economic growth that we are so keen to see.

This important debate has been secured by my hon. Friend, who is not just a great champion of his local schools, having visited 22 out of 40 in his constituency to date, but the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships. I was a member of that group for a period of time before starting in this role. I want to put on the record the fact that I am lucky, as the representative of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, to have my own apprentice in my parliamentary office. Jessica is on the verge of completing her qualification, and I felt that I could not preach about apprenticeships if I was not going to support one myself.

The debate is an important one, and my hon. Friend will know that there have been over 13,000 apprenticeship starts in his constituency since the beginning of 2010. They have provided fantastic opportunities for his constituents to enhance their careers and, as he says, earn while they learn. The Government are committed to providing world-class education and training for everyone, whatever their age or stage of life. Since 2015, we have transformed apprenticeships into a prestigious, sought-after option designed to meet the needs of employers and learners across the country, and we have seen over 2,600 starts on the level 6 teacher apprenticeship since its inception in 2017.

Thanks to our transformational reforms, millions of people in a wide range of sectors have benefited from these industry-led routes to earn and learn. In the last academic year, there were 37,000 new trainee teachers—10% more than the last pre-pandemic cycle in 2019-20. To support this, we recently announced a new package of financial incentives worth over £180 million for the 2023-24 academic year. That support for teacher training will include bursaries worth up to £27,000 and scholarships worth up to £29,000, and these incentives will encourage talented applicants to teach key subjects, such as chemistry, physics and mathematics. We are also offering a £25,000 bursary for geography and languages, a £20,000 bursary for biology and design technology, and a £15,000 bursary for English, all of which will be tax free.

I should declare an interest, having been a teacher myself and having got my postgraduate certificate in education at the Institute of Education only in 2011. Never in my wildest dreams—or theirs, probably—would I have thought that I would be standing here as the Minister for School Standards, and I am absolutely honoured to be guiding that next generation of young teachers on their journey, because they are so important.

I am very grateful for the time that my hon. Friend spent at the Department, meeting me and officials on 22 September. I heard and learned more about his idea and what could be done. I will set out the work that the Department has undertaken to date to consider that option. Between 2018 and 2020, a sector-led trailblazer group considered the viability of an apprenticeship with a pre-degree entry point leading to qualified teacher status. In 2020, after detailed consideration and wider stakeholder engagement with initial teacher training providers and schools, including a survey among headteachers, the group rejected the creation of an undergraduate teacher

[Jonathan Gullis]

apprenticeship. That was due to its prohibitive costs, the duration required and insufficient demand from the sector.

The Department is always willing to listen to the sector, and as the Minister for School Standards I am absolutely putting teaching degree apprenticeships on the table. However, I need to ensure that there are benefits and take account of the wider views of schools, pupils and prospective teachers.

Mr Perkins: When the Minister says there was insufficient demand in the sector, does he mean there was insufficient demand from people wanting to study and pursue that route, or was there insufficient demand from schools to take on apprentices?

Jonathan Gullis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to clarify. From my understanding, it was headteachers who reported that there was not a massive desire—and nor did they believe that there would be—within the sector. The cost was definitely the main problem. A regular apprentice gets 20% of time off to undertake further learning, but that figure is 40% when applied to the school year, because there are 13 weeks when teachers are not physically in the classroom with their pupils. The cost to a school was felt to be too great to have someone off timetable for 40% of the time. However, allowing a teaching assistant to take a teaching qualification through a level 5 apprenticeship, which we are exploring, could be a way to deliver teachers through an apprenticeship scheme. We would be using people who are already in the school system—those 200,000-plus teaching assistants who do a fantastic job up and down our country.

Where there is employer demand for new apprenticeships in education, including a route to teaching for those without a degree, we will work with employers and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to consider how those proposals could be delivered. We are currently engaging in detailed work with a new trailblazer group to explore the viability of the new apprenticeship standard at level 5. That apprenticeship would enhance training opportunities for existing teaching assistants. It would also offer a route for high-potential individuals without an undergraduate degree, providing them with a career pathway to gain a qualification to train to teach.

I look forward to continuing discussions with school leaders, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham on how best to support talented non-graduates to gain the necessary qualifications to train to teach.

I want to ensure that I address the points raised by hon. Members, because that is important. I thank my good friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for his kind words and his continued passion for state education, a sector that I am proud to have worked in for eight and a half years. To declare an interest, my partner is a member of that sector as well. It is a fantastic career. I hope that anyone watching today who is not yet a teacher will be able to understand what a great profession it is. Not only is the new starting salary for this academic year over £28,000, but I have supported

the pledge in the 2019 Conservative manifesto to ensure that a £30,000 a year starting salary is enacted for the next academic year.

On top of that, there are bursaries. The levelling-up premium is available in education investment areas. That can give someone up to £3,000 tax free, on top of their salary, depending on the subject they teach. We should really promote that. I believe that take-up is really good so far, but we are checking those numbers. I want every Member in those education investment areas to drive those reforms by getting people to sign up as quickly as they can.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) is a fine champion for his local area, and I am glad to have been able to spend time with him to learn about the work he has been doing for education. We have no plans in place yet to look at what we are doing specifically for men. However, my team in the Department are looking at diversity, which is not just about ethnicity; it is about gender as well. It is about men getting into the profession, particularly in primary schools, as well as women getting into leadership roles in the sector. It is also about socioeconomic backgrounds and those white, working class, disadvantaged boys who we want to see representing the profession in schools, as well as people from other ethnic minority groups who, tragically, are falling out of the profession at a quicker rate than their white counterparts. We are going to do a big piece of work in that area. I look forward to visiting Lambeth Academy tomorrow to meet Leon, one of those inspirational headteachers, and understand what he has done throughout his career journey.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) was a teacher—

Mrs Drummond: Ofsted inspector.

Jonathan Gullis: They were the ones I dreaded when I was in the classroom. It is absolutely brilliant that she has that insight into the profession. I understand the importance of maintaining that high-quality education and ensuring that that the skill and knowledge base is there, particularly with the important reforms that we have made to GCSEs and A-levels. That is why I am certainly intrigued to explore further what my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham said about primary education as potentially a pilot route.

Ben Bradley: I thank the Minister for giving up a few seconds. On the primary environment—the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) touched on this earlier—the challenges in disadvantaged communities mean that teachers are often seen as social workers, and some of the issues that come through the door are more akin to those experienced in an early years setting than in what we would traditionally associated with a teaching setting. Does the Minister agree that the opportunity to drag people from those care and early years settings and place them in those primary environments might be of huge benefit? That is slightly separate to the discussion about academic excellence and brilliance at post-16, which has been mentioned.

Jonathan Gullis: My hon. Friend makes fantastic points. I visited a school in Wolverhampton recently to hear how the multi-academy trust had hired its own

social worker to work among its schools. I found that very inspiring. Absolutely, looking at how we can build that relationship between the early years sector and the primary school sector—that knowledge base, that understanding and that familiarity with the local people—is so important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) is a doughty champion. He has been lobbying and banging the door over Carmel College and its fantastic CEO, Mike Shorten. We know that an appeal is coming, so my hon. Friend will appreciate, as I have said before, that I cannot make any comment, but his and Mike's comments have been heard and will be taken into consideration when the appeal is made.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), who also represents Staveley, for his kind words. I am sad that my natural counterpart, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), is not here. I assume that he is still in detention with the Commissioner for Standards, having been a bit of a naughty boy recently when he sent a letter about me to *The Guardian* before she had made a comment. However, I really do appreciate the opportunity to hear the fine words of the hon. Member for Chesterfield and about his passion for level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships, which are absolutely important and should not in any way be seen as unimportant by this Department. Yes, we have put a lot of work into the degree level, but we want those take-ups at level 2 and level 3, and we are very pleased that that is continuing.

Finally, on teacher numbers, we have 466,000 full-time teachers on the books. That is a record number and 24,000 more than in 2010. While there are, of course, rising teacher vacancy rates, it is important to understand the context. The situation across all sectors is challenging, but I will ensure that we challenge that head-on with recruitment and retention strategies.

5.42 pm

Mr Holden: I welcome the Minister's pledge to continue to engage. I thank all hon. Members who took part today. Some important matters were raised.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised teacher workload. In an intervention, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) raised the importance of getting employers working with colleges and dealing with apprenticeships. My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) mentioned recruitment issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) spoke about how we have to ensure that standards are maintained at all costs, to ensure that children get the education they need. My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) spoke of being a champion of real diversity in the teaching profession and in communities.

It was also good to hear from the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) that the Labour party is open to this, too, and want to look forwards. I share some of his concerns, in particular about things such as executive MBAs and cash from the apprenticeship levy being used for them by some very high-end companies, instead of driving skills for the people who really need them. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), who I think is in his first gig as a Parliamentary Private Secretary, sitting behind the Minister.

In conclusion, I say to the Minister that there have been studies on this matter. I ask him to reach out to the vice-chancellor of the University of Gloucestershire. It was doing work with multi-academy trusts in this space, and I think there is a lot more that can be done. I do not expect the Minister to rush into anything, but I think that this is a real opportunity for the entire sector to turbocharge apprenticeships and open up the profession to so many more people who would be great teachers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Apprenticeships and teacher training.

5.44 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 19 October 2022

TREASURY

Contingencies Fund Advance: Asset Purchase Facility

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): The Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee implements its quantitative easing (QE) programme through a subsidiary entity known as the Asset Purchase Facility (APF). HM Treasury agreed to indemnify the APF against losses when it was set up in 2009¹.

To date, the APF has transferred circa £120 billion of excess cash to HMT from interest payments on purchased gilts. As QE is unwound and gilts are sold back into the market, this cash flow is expected to reverse. Further information can be found in HMT's annual reports and accounts.

No provision for payments to the APF was made in HMT's main estimate. However, MPC decisions since this time have meant the reversal of cash flows, not previously expected to impact this financial year, will begin in October 2022, when HMT will need to make a payment to the APF.

Parliamentary approval for additional capital of £828,267,000 for this new expenditure will be sought in a future supply estimate for HM Treasury. Pending that approval, immediate expenditure estimated at £828,267,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

¹ https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/+/http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/ck_letter_boe290109.pdf

[HCWS330]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

East Kent Maternity Services: Independent Investigation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Caroline Johnson): I wish to inform the House that the independent review into maternity

and neonatal services at East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust has today published its report, which can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/maternity-and-neonatal-services-in-east-kent-reading-the-signals-report>

NHS England commissioned Dr Bill Kirkup CBE to undertake an independent review into maternity and neonatal services at East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust in February 2020, following concerns about the quality and outcomes of care. On behalf of the Government, I would like to thank Dr Kirkup, the families, and all those who contributed to the report.

The report details the poor maternity care that over 200 families received at East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust between 2009 and 2020. The trust failed to provide safe care and treatment which resulted in avoidable harm for mothers and babies, causing tragedy and distress that no family should have to experience. I am profoundly sorry to all the families that have suffered and continue to suffer from these tragedies. I also wish to pay tribute to the families who have come forward to assist the review.

In line with the review team's families first approach, I am pleased to hear that the families were able to see an advance copy of the report this morning ahead of the publication.

I, and the Government, take the findings and the recommendations from the report extremely seriously and I am committed to preventing families from experiencing the same pain in the future.

My Department along with NHS England has already established the independent working group, chaired by the Royal College of Midwives and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. The independent working group will help guide the implementation and next steps of the immediate and essential actions from the Ockenden report and the recommendations from the East Kent report. The group has met twice to date, and the next meeting will focus on reviewing the recommendations for the East Kent report.

In March 2022, NHS England also announced a £127 million funding boost for maternity services across England that will help ensure safer and more personalised care for women and their babies.

I will be reviewing and considering all the recommendations from the report, and I will issue a full response once I have had time to consider the recommendations.

[HCWS329]

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 19 October 2022

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Home Ownership: Government Support

The following is an extract from Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions on 17 October 2022.

Hilary Benn: As well as having to cope with the cost of remortgaging, thousands of people who thought they had bought a safe and secure home are still living with unsafe cladding and other fire-safety defects. What is the Secretary of State's current assessment of the total number of properties in England that have yet to be made safe?

Mr Clarke: My commitment to making sure that we follow through on the issue of remediating unsafe buildings is total. There are 24 buildings over 18 metres that have yet to be remediated in the way that the right hon. Gentleman sets out.

[Official Report, 17 October 2022, Vol. 720, c. 369.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke):

An error has been identified in my answer to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

The correct response should have been:

Mr Clarke: My commitment to making sure that we follow through on the issue of remediating unsafe buildings is total. **There are 24 buildings with unsafe ACM cladding over 18 metres that have yet to begin remediation in the way that the right hon. Gentleman sets out.**

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 19 October 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	679	WALES—continued	
Engagements	679	Floating Offshore Wind Locations in Celtic Sea	677
WALES	669	Freeports	669
Cost of Living Crisis: Devolved Budget,		Investment Zones: Impact on Welsh Economy	678
Households and Businesses	672	Mortgage Interest Rate Rises	675
Cost of Living Rise	676	North Wales Growth Deal	678
Domestic Energy Costs: Differential Between		Police Funding	677
Wales and Rest of UK	676	Rail Infrastructure Funding	674

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 19 October 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	27WS	TREASURY	27WS
East Kent Maternity Services:		Contingencies Fund Advance: Asset Purchase	
Independent Investigation	27WS	Facility	27WS

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Wednesday 19 October 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>
LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND	
COMMUNITIES	3MC
Home Ownership: Government Support	3MC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Wednesday 26 October 2022**

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 19 October 2022

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 669] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Wales
Prime Minister

Energy Costs (Pre-payment Meters and Social Tariffs) [Col. 692]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Kenny MacAskill)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Opposition Day [5th allotted day]

Economic Responsibility and a Plan for Growth [Col. 695]

Motion—(Rachel Reeves)—on a Division, agreed to

Ban on Fracking for Shale Gas Bill [Col. 748]

Motion—(Edward Miliband)—on a Division, negatived

Amendment—(Mr Rees-Mogg)—agreed to

Motion, as amended, agreed to

Air Quality in Towcester [Col. 805]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Scottish Devolution Settlement: Retained EU Law [Col. 289WH]

Off-grid Homes: Energy Support [Col. 310WH]

Transport in Nottinghamshire [Col. 319WH]

Vehicle Taxation Reform [Col. 341WH]

Apprenticeships and Teacher Training [Col. 348WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 27WS]

Ministerial Correction [Col. 3MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
