

**Friday
21 October 2022**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Friday 21 October 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

The Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House divided: Ayes 0, Noes 34.

Division No. 67]

[9.35 am

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes:
Nigel Huddleston and

Jo Churchill

NOES

Anderson, Lee
Bell, Aaron
Charalambous, Bambos
Chope, Sir Christopher
Coutinho, Claire
Duddridge, Sir James
Duguid, David
Elmore, Chris
Fellows, Marion
Fletcher, Katherine
French, Mr Louie
Glendon, Mary
Greenwood, Lilian
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, Helen
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hunt, Jane

Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Lewis, rh Brandon
Moore, Damien
Morrissey, Joy
Nici, Lia
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Siddiq, Tulip
Smith, Greg
Stevenson, Jane
Stewart, rh Bob
Villiers, rh Theresa

Tellers for the Noes:

Shaun Bailey and
Nickie Aiken

The Deputy Speaker declared that the Question was not decided because fewer than 40 Members had participated in the Division (Standing Order No. 41).

Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy and Family Leave) Bill

Second Reading

9.50 am

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I begin by acknowledging that the House was originally due consider the Bill on Friday 9 September. I was looking over my speech the day before when I learned, with the greatest sadness, that Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II had passed away. I am grateful that we can proceed with Second Reading today.

I welcome the new Minister to his post. I also thank the previous Ministers—the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), who is in her place, and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully)—for their support for the Bill at an early stage. They were both incredibly helpful and supportive and I am grateful to them.

I pay tribute to the officials at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy for their excellent work in supporting the Bill. I also say a big “thank you” to the Clerks of the House, who have done excellent work, as they always do, to ensure that we can proceed with Second Reading today. I put on record my sincere gratitude to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the TUC, the Royal College of Midwives, my union Unison, Maternity Action, Pregnant Then Screwed, The Fawcett Society and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, all of which have offered invaluable support to the process over the last few months.

There is no more important or gratifying experience than raising a family. Children provide hope for the future and bring joy to our lives, although I can say as a parent, as I am sure other hon. Members will, that on occasion that has been tested to the full in my household—but that is teenagers. Despite its importance, however, raising a family has never been more challenging. The scarcity of affordable housing, sky-high childcare costs and now soaring inflation make the decision to start or grow a family simply unaffordable for many. This Bill seeks to alleviate some of that hardship by increasing security in the workplace for pregnant women and new parents by extending redundancy protections. I am proud to be bringing forward the Bill in the House today.

The current safeguards afforded under the Equality Act 2010 and the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999—the MAPLE regulations—are not being applied correctly, and are sometimes not being observed at all. As it stands under the law, a woman on maternity leave is entitled to be offered a suitable alternative vacancy if her role is at risk, but a lack of clarity coupled with poor compliance means that new mums are often first rather than last to be shown the door. The sheer scale of the problem makes the case for reform irrefutable.

Each year, there are somewhere in the region of half a million pregnant women in the workplace. A Human Rights Commission survey, commissioned by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and published in 2016, found that a majority—three in

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four—experience pregnancy and maternity discrimination, while some 54,000 women a year lose their job just for getting pregnant. A few months on from that survey, the Women and Equalities Committee, then chaired by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), advocated for a comprehensive ban on redundancies. In response to her inquiry's report, the Government stated that the situation was “clearly unacceptable”.

Two years on, the Government launched a consultation, and in reply they pledged to extend existing protections to pregnancy and a period of six months following a return to work. The 2019 Queen's Speech was set to deliver these commitments through an employment Bill, but that was not brought forward, and then the pandemic hit. As with everything, covid exposed and amplified every pre-existing inequality and prejudice, and expectant and new parents in the workplace were not an exception.

Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that mothers were more likely than fathers to have lost their job or to have quit during lockdown. The Office for National Statistics reported that parents were twice as likely to have been furloughed compared with workers without children. A TUC survey revealed a significant number of pregnant women and new mums had experienced unfair treatment or discrimination at work—findings backed up by two damning reports published by the Petitions Committee.

Behind those numbers are scores of soon-to-be mums and new parents fighting to keep their jobs, struggling to support a young family and now doing so against the backdrop of a cost of living crisis. This debate is therefore not over the level of injustice—we know what that is—but about how we can correct it.

Let me explain to the House what the Bill will do. Clause 1 provides a new power to enable provision to be made by regulations about protection from redundancy during and after pregnancy. Clause 2 amends existing powers to make regulations to enable protection from redundancy on return to work from maternity, adoption or shared parental leave.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): The hon. Member is making an excellent speech on his excellent Bill. Yes, this is about pregnant women, but it is also about family leave, which is superb news. Could he elaborate a little more on that, please?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for her question. As I said earlier, she was incredibly helpful at the early stages of the Bill, and she is absolutely right to make that point. The benefit of the Bill will be felt across hundreds of thousands of households and families right across the country. Although the focus of my remarks to date has been on the impact it will have on women who are pregnant and new mums, the reality is that the benefits of the Bill extend right across the family unit. We know the official numbers are that 54,000 women lose their jobs every single year just because they are pregnant. As we can all imagine, that has a devastating impact on them, but also of course on the wider family unit. The hon. Member raises a very important question, and I completely agree with what she said.

I know there are some right hon. and hon. Members here today, and certainly a number of people and campaigners watching the debate, who would like—and this policy was previously advocated by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke—an outright ban on redundancies, as we have seen implemented in Germany. Not everybody will necessarily be familiar with the German model, so let me briefly explain it.

There are five pillars of the Maternity Protection Act that underwrite the ban in Germany. First, protection from redundancy begins the moment the employer knows that the employee is pregnant. Secondly, if an employer makes a pregnant worker redundant not knowing they are pregnant but then this information is disclosed, they must be reinstated and the protections apply. Thirdly, the local health authority must review each request from an employer to make a pregnant worker or a new mother redundant. This usually takes about three weeks in practice, and while this review takes place the pregnant woman will remain in employment. Fourthly, an employer cannot dismiss a pregnant worker or a new mother without permission from the health authority. Lastly, protections for mothers on maternity and parental leave extend to four months after it has been taken. That also extends to women who, very sadly, have experienced a miscarriage.

Although it may not be wholly translatable to the British system, there is little doubt over confusion and compliance under those rules. The Government have decided that, for the moment, they do not want to apply similar regulations here.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I want to express enthusiastic support for the Bill. It will plug an important gap in protection. Looking back at the proposals from my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), we want to avoid a situation where, if there was a complete ban on all redundancies under any circumstances, that could mean that employers were having to retain employees when there was no longer work for them to do. The Bill is a reasonable compromise, as it is perhaps more difficult to take forward the previous proposals of my right hon. Friend.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. She makes a helpful contribution. As she and other right hon. and hon. Members will understand, including the right hon. Member for Basingstoke, there are different views about this matter. In the end we have arrived at a reasonable and sensible compromise. The debate on that particular issue will continue, and if the Bill is successful there will be a further opportunity to debate such matters in Committee.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for giving way. I have never heard of the German proposals before, and I really like them. I think they are flipping good, if I can say that, and it makes sense that we go some of the way down that road.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. and gallant Gentleman for his intervention. I had not expected us to get into a debate today about what is going on in Germany, but he raises a valuable point. It is always important to look at how things work in different

countries. The German model has been looked at closely, and a number of campaign organisations are strongly supportive of it. I have had those conversations with Ministers and a range of organisations, and there is merit in the German model, which, for the record, is my preference. I understand, however, the concerns that have been raised, and I think the Bill has currently got to the right place. I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's support today.

We are now six years on from the shocking findings by the Equality and Human Rights Commission about the industrial scale discrimination that expectant and new mums face at work. This is a timely opportunity to make progress. I confess that I was taken aback by the level of discrimination faced by pregnant women in the workplace. Perhaps I had made an assumption that such practices had been consigned to history, but that is not the case, and as I said, 54,000 women are directly affected as a consequence, with the wider impact that will have on their families.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): This is an excellent debate, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the Bill. He suggested that more than 50,000 women in this country lose their jobs as a result of being pregnant, which has a terrific impact on family and social welfare. Are employers also missing a trick? They are losing their most valuable resource—those women—who can provide fantastic work in the workplace.

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member makes an excellent point. He is absolutely right that some employers are missing a trick here. As I said, I did not expect to get into a debate about Germany, but he makes an interesting point. There are so many amazing examples of extraordinary women who can excel at what they do—of course there are—so it seems incredibly strange that employers would want to discriminate against women in such a way.

I am sure the hon. Member will agree that that says something about the nature of our society. All of us recognise the importance of children and families—they are the bedrock and foundation of our society—so it cannot be right that women are treated in such a way and on this scale. That must be consigned to the past. We must move forward, and the Bill provides a really good opportunity to do that. I would be the first to admit that the Bill is not a panacea, but it is a good step in the right direction and I am grateful for the support offered for it.

Having made some remarks about the example that I referenced and the enforcement mechanism used in Germany, I am sure the Minister agrees that there is merit in us continuing to work closely together through the Bill's passage to look at how, on a cross-party basis, we can seek to address some of the current safeguards' shortcomings, namely around the confusion and compliance that I referred to.

On the former, now is the time to end the inconsistency of when and how regulation 10 of the MAPLE regulations is applied. For instance, when a firm is reducing its number of roles, many employers see their obligations to women on maternity leave as a two-stage process, initially by forcing them to compete for their job against colleagues and only then seeking to find them suitable alternative vacancies if they are unsuccessful in retaining

their role. That is deeply unfair. Women on maternity leave are at a massive disadvantage, as they might have been out of the workplace for months—obviously, they have been focused on caring for their newborn child. It is also highly irrational. If a new mum has been selected for redundancy, there is little or no chance of their being offered a suitable alternative vacancy, because they will have been filled. As it stands, many workers do not know their rights under the existing regulations, businesses apply them in different ways, and even case law is conflicting.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I have been reflecting on what the hon. Member has been saying about his very good Bill, which may fill some of the gaps that we have been talking about. I also heard what he said about the evolution of society, and hopefully that—as well as his Bill—will go some way towards helping. My employer before I was elected introduced parental leave allowing both parents to take six months of paid leave. I accept that not every employer can do that, but when we get to the place where, regardless of a person's gender and their parenting role, they are entitled to rights, employers may stop looking at women as the first place to go when making people redundant. It would no longer be an easy choice for them.

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Lady raises a really helpful point, following the one made by the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson). The nature of the Bill, and what we seek to achieve through its passage, speaks to the decency that I think we all want to see in our society. In the Bill, we have something in front of the House that is good for pregnant mums, good for new mums and good for families. It is also good for business, as it is in businesses' own interest to be responsible employers and to make the most of their employees.

I very much hope that the Bill will get support from across the House. I sense that it will, and I am encouraged by that. I have spent a lot of time thinking about what the critique of the Bill would be and whether any right hon. or hon. Members would have issues or problems with it. I have tried as much as I possibly can to get around as many hon. Members as possible and have those conversations, but nobody has been able to say that they think there is anything wrong with the Bill. The only debate is around the extent of its ambition and whether the protections could be greater and longer. That is potentially a point of debate, but I hope that we now have the basis of a Bill that all decent right hon. and hon. Members will be able to support—fingers crossed.

Theresa Villiers: An important potential positive consequence of the hon. Gentleman's Bill and further protection for women in the workplace is helping us to tackle our productivity problem in this country. If we can monopolise the vast resource of women in the workplace, including pregnant women and new mums, it will make us a more competitive nation, help us to plug skills gaps and make us more productive, which ultimately will raise living standards.

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Lady's point is spot on and she has made it very eloquently. I can see there is consensus. She is right that for a very long time we have grappled with the productivity challenge, and we are

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still grappling with it. This is part of how we can seek to address the complicated and difficult productivity challenge that we all know we face as a country. I am grateful to her for that useful intervention.

It would be helpful at this point to inject some real-life experiences into the debate so that the House can better understand what this Bill, if successful, might mean for women in the workplace. I am in receipt of a number of real-life cases of women who have suffered injustice simply because they were pregnant. There are many, and I must say some of them are genuinely shocking.

Emily got in touch with me a few weeks ago. She was made redundant from her job more than halfway through her pregnancy and just days before she would have qualified for statutory maternity pay. She is now attempting to appeal the decision on the grounds of pregnancy discrimination and is feeling targeted not only for being pregnant, but for working part time. Her company told Emily it would be making several people redundant, but instead it laid only her off. It did not follow a fair process and she was not offered any alternative employment. Stories such as Emily's form part of the wider issues surrounding the inconsistent implementation of regulation 10.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I welcome this Bill. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is so important because many women are putting off having babies until later in life? When I had my first child at 35, the average age in the Chelsea and Westminster hospital was 39. That means women are further on in their careers, and a Bill of this type will support women who are further into their careers as well as those who may be at the beginning.

Dan Jarvis: That is an excellent point that has attracted support from right across the Chamber. The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We must make sure that women are making decisions about their professional careers without having to weigh up all sorts of factors of unfairness. There must be a level playing field and we must make sure that women are not disadvantaged in the workplace, so I completely agree with her and very much hope this Bill will go some way to achieving that ambition.

I was referring to Emily, whose story highlights the need for consistency and the devastating consequences of what can happen when regulation 10 is not applied correctly. Confusion should never be an excuse for discrimination in the workplace. I have been working closely with the TUC and Unison on the Bill, along with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, which has been incredibly helpful. It has offered to inform all its 160,000 members of the changes that the Bill will introduce, if it is successful. Will the Minister say how, if the Bill is successful, he plans to communicate the changes to workers and how he will clarify to employers their what their legal obligations will be?

On compliance, some firms simply do not offer an alternative role by falsely claiming that one does not exist. Others engineer situations to force new mums out the door. When a business flouts the rules, the onus is on the woman—who, remember, is on maternity leave—to take the matter to an employment tribunal. That highly

stressful and costly decision must be made within three months. However, the 2016 findings showed that less than 1% of women lodged a complaint with an employment tribunal.

When we look into that worryingly low statistic, it is painfully obvious why the figure is so small. The scale of the challenge that such women face is almost insurmountable. Sarah, for example, was made redundant by e-mail six months into her pregnancy. Not wanting to be saddled with a gruelling legal battle during the final months of her pregnancy, she decided against taking legal action at that point. After her baby was born, she sought legal advice, only to be told that she no longer had a case because she had not raised her unfair dismissal within the three-month window. She told me that she never realised how vulnerable pregnant women are until it happened to her.

There is also Natasha: after telling her employer that she was pregnant during the pandemic, she was made redundant while other members of her team stayed on. Shortly after, Natasha suffered the heartbreak of a miscarriage. She lost her baby and she lost her job. I know that many across the House have experienced the pain and trauma of a miscarriage and know only too well its profound and devastating impact.

Lee Anderson: Those are shocking stories; I cannot believe that is happening in this day and age. Does the hon. Member think that some women are perhaps living in fear when they fall pregnant, and that some ladies' fear of losing their job may lead to them doing the unthinkable, which is to have an abortion?

Dan Jarvis: I think all of us can completely agree that that is not the kind of society in which we want to live. We should value people who do the right thing and step forward to enter the workplace. Collectively, we all have a responsibility to put in place legislation that will provide protections to ensure that people are not treated in that way.

To go back to the hon. Member's previous point, there is a big responsibility on business. In my experience, the overwhelming majority of the business community are sensible, decent employers. They want to do the right thing. As he said, it is in their interest to do the right thing, value their staff and invest in their workforce—not least a cohort of the workforce that, in every respect, are effective and efficient, to go back to the point about productivity. We have an opportunity to take a step forward today. As I said, this is not a panacea. There is a debate about whether we should go further and be more ambitious, but this is a good step in the right direction and I very much hope that we take it.

Bob Stewart: I thank the hon. Gentleman—my friend—for giving way. It seems to me that in the Bill Committee, we could put in a clause that makes it incumbent on employers to give a sheet of paper to women who are packing up their job because they are pregnant stating what their rights are. That might already be in the Bill—I do not know—but it seems to make sense and that would make it clear to women leaving their jobs exactly what their rights are.

Dan Jarvis: That is an excellent suggestion. The right hon. Member mentioned the Bill Committee. If the Bill is successful in its passage today, we will look for Members to sit on the Committee. I have a form here

that I can perhaps give to him—I would be incredibly grateful. He will remember the expression, “Never volunteer for anything,” even better than I do, but in good faith he may have just volunteered to serve on the Bill Committee. Fingers crossed and touch wood, if we get to that point I will be knocking on his door with the form.

I was making the point about employment tribunals and about Natasha. When she finally felt able to take her employer to a tribunal, she was told—*[Interruption.]* That is the office of the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) calling to make sure they have the date of the Bill Committee in his diary—*[Laughter.]* Natasha was told that it was too late and that she should have applied within the three-month window. Extending the time limit to bring forward a claim to six months was supported by every single stakeholder I engaged with. That is an important point.

Nickie Aiken: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point. What has shocked me in the work I have been doing on my own private Member’s Bill on employment rights for those undertaking fertility treatment is that it is not just small and medium businesses that can have questionable policies on pregnant women or women who are trying to get pregnant, but even the larger ones, including some of the biggest businesses in the country and even major banks. I have been appalled by some of the stories that I have heard from women who have had to take their employer to a tribunal. Does he agree that, through his Bill and my Bill—which will come to the Chamber soon—it is important to give women confidence that their job is secure when they are pregnant or trying to get pregnant?

Dan Jarvis: I agree with the hon. Lady’s excellent point, to the extent that I wonder whether she might also be available to sit on the Bill Committee. If we are successful today, I may be knocking on her door. There is an absolute responsibility on business to look at their practices and ensure that they are doing the right thing. My overwhelming experience of the business community is that that is what they want to do, but it is clearly not happening everywhere. For all businesses and companies, particularly the larger ones that she referenced, I hope that their minds will be focused on the issue as part of this process.

Legislation and direction from national Government is an important element, but some of it is cultural. It is about leadership in the business community and senior management looking at their own organisations and satisfying themselves that they are doing the right thing. As parliamentarians, we interact regularly with the business community, and I hope that we will have the conversations with senior business leaders in the weeks and months to come. I hope that those conversations will be well received by business. I am grateful for her intervention and hope to see her in Committee.

I was just making the point about the support that I have encountered for expanding the time limit. It is widely supported by stakeholders and that reform has also been advocated by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the Women and Equalities Committee, the Petitions Committee and the Law Commission. The Government have acknowledged the problem and I have had good conversations about it, but so far they

have not made a commitment. I hope that will be a further point of debate, because advising women to make an out-of-time application will not cut it.

I asked the Ministry of Justice how many exceptions had been granted, and in a written answer it said that it did not have that information—I suspect it is very few. Indeed, I have had anecdotal accounts of law firms refusing to represent women if their claim has not been lodged within the current limit, as judges often do not use their discretion. Improving access to justice is an important part of this issue.

Bad employers must know that there will be consequences to their discriminatory treatment. I would be grateful if the Minister would look at when the Government are planning to implement the Law Commission’s April 2020 recommendations and extend the time limit for all employment tribunal claims to six months.

I said earlier that there is no more important job than raising a family. It seems only fair that no one should be penalised for doing so by losing their job. I also said that three in four pregnant women in the workplace experience pregnancy and maternity discrimination, and that 54,000 women a year lose their job just for getting pregnant. We have had a good debate about this. By any metric, ensuring that women are treated decently and fairly should be a foundation of a civilised society, rather than just an aspiration. If we are serious about tackling discrimination in the workplace, providing parity and equality and ensuring that employers fulfil their obligation, we need laws to support that ambition that are fit for the 21st century and the modern workplace. The Bill will not fix everything, but if it is passed, it will be an important step towards providing working families with more security and dignity in the workplace, which they both need and deserve.

Let me say, once again, how grateful I am to all those who have offered support and to all right hon. and hon. Members present. I very much hope that the Bill will have support from the Government and all parties, and I commend it to the House.

10.26 am

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am surprised to be called so early; it is unusual. I am slightly off piste, to be honest, but willingly so because this issue is so important.

Every single person on this planet is equal, but it is clear, from what we have heard and what we know, that in work women are not as equal as men. That is wrong. A woman who takes time off work because she is having a baby will take a minimum of six, nine or 12 months, perhaps longer. It is incredibly important that she does that—we all know that. Women do a huge duty to society. I do not consider women to be equal to men—please, do not just quote that but listen to the second half—I think that women are at a higher level than men. I know they will cut what I say, but it is absolutely true. Without what they do, we would have no future. We should recognise that, and so should employers.

Lee Anderson: Does my right hon. Friend also agree that men play an important role in the future of mankind?

Bob Stewart: I knew I would get that sort of response from my hon. Friend. He is right that we momentarily play a part. My goodness, am I going to be in real trouble? I hope not, because I am totally on the side of women.

This is a really good Bill, and I would like it to go further. The Government support it, so as a big, loyal follower of the Government, I support it, too. It is right. This is a good Bill because it fundamentally improves protection from redundancy for pregnant women and other people with family reasons for not working. It is simply unfair for women to be sacked or to suffer because they have been away from their job to have a baby. It is just plain wrong.

I love the idea that this Bill extends beyond the period when leave has been taken. I recall that the 2019 Queen's Speech said we would extend protections against maternity discrimination. It has taken three years, but I am sure it will now happen. I have not heard anyone suggest otherwise. The Bill will pass Second Reading and go into Committee. Yes, I will sit on the Committee, but I ask my friend, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), to make sure it is short, because I have little concentration. I call the hon. Gentleman my friend because we were in the military together. We are apparently not allowed to be friends in this place, but we are.

The Bill will apply to everybody on maternity leave, shared parental leave and adoption leave. There is good evidence, as has been explained, that the Bill is absolutely necessary. In 2015, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills found that one in 10 women—10%—had been fired or treated badly in the workplace, resulting in them giving up their job. This is wrong.

Since 2015, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the Women and Equalities Committee and campaign groups such as Pregnant Then Screwed—I was a bit worried when I read that for the first time, and I wondered whether somebody had made a spello, but it is accurate and I now understand what it means—have investigated new mothers facing redundancy. The EHRC found that some 54,000 new mothers may be forced out of their job in Britain each year. That is appalling. It is so wrong. A survey of new mothers by Pregnant Then Screwed—I am worried about saying such words, but that is the name—found that 30% believed they had experienced discrimination from their employer during the pandemic.

Lee Anderson: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Bob Stewart: Of course I give way. I am about to be castigated again.

Lee Anderson: My right hon. Friend is giving a masterful and interesting speech. Does he agree that, although this discrimination is abhorrent, it also happens before pregnancy and, sometimes, during the recruitment process? Employers will look unfavourably on women of a certain age for fear that they may fall pregnant and cost them in the short term. As I said before, that is a very narrow-minded view and these ladies can probably offer more in the workplace than some of us men.

Bob Stewart: I thank my hon. Friend for saying that, and I totally agree. I have already explained that I believe women are at a higher level than men, so they do

everything much better. They can certainly multitask, I gather. I certainly cannot. I am not trying to be too flippant, because this is a serious matter.

I gather recent research has found that 15% of pregnant ladies in ethnic minorities experience even more discrimination, which is utterly wrong. The figure for lesbian and bisexual women is 15% as well. This is fundamentally wrong, and we must correct it: that is what we are here to do. A great many Conservative colleagues are here to support you—I mean the hon. Member for Barnsley Central. I would have been castigated for that, wouldn't I, Mr Deputy Speaker? A few minutes ago you were wearing a dress, Mr Deputy Speaker! *[Laughter.]* Congratulations! This is woke him/her, is it? Oh my goodness, I've really had it now.

Well done the Women and Equalities Committee for further investigation into these findings. A good friend of mine suggested that I might sit on the Committee one day, although I am not sure whether people would want that to happen. In its report, the Committee recommended that enhanced protections should be introduced applying not just throughout pregnancy but, importantly, for six months thereafter.

It is often difficult enough for women to take all their parental responsibilities seriously. Let me clarify that: they do take these matters seriously, but it is difficult for them to achieve everything they want to achieve when they also have to work. Childcare costs are enormous. How many times have all of us sat in our constituency surgeries and heard women say, "I want to go out to work, but all I am doing when I am working is covering my childcare costs"? I am afraid we have a problem with the cost of childcare costs as well, but that, I suspect, is a subject for another debate. It is hardly easy for a woman anyway, looking after children and getting them to school, often as a single parent, and then trying to work as well. Balancing all that is pretty awkward. We in the House therefore have a duty to make it as easy as possible for women to balance their civic duty of bringing children up with working. I do not mean that they have to work, of course.

Let me now turn to the Bill's two clauses. As we heard from the hon. Member for Barnsley Central—my hon. Friend—the first extends the Secretary of State's existing powers so that additional protection can more easily be applied to an individual who has taken pregnancy leave, and the second seeks to improve the protections. Both those clauses make sense. The Bill makes sense. The Bill is why we are here. It is a very important Bill, and we have to get it through. I fully support it.

10.38 am

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here today, and to follow the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart).

Let me start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). As I am sure everyone will agree, private Members' Bills are very much sought after, especially by Opposition Members, who do not have much opportunity to change the law—and I think the reason all of us came into politics was our wish to make a difference. My hon. Friend could have chosen any topic for his private Member's Bill, and I was particularly pleased to note that he had picked this topic, although, cynically, I thought, "Is he

going to benefit from this in some way?" I actually texted him last night to say, "Are you planning to have another child?" He was very quick to reassure me, saying that three was enough. He said that he was planning to get another dog, but, no, he was not planning to have another child, so there is no vested interest. I am very proud that a male Member of Parliament is bringing forward a Bill that will protect so many thousands of women who face maternity discrimination. He has earned the right to wear a T-shirt that says, "This is what a feminist looks like", and I shall be sending him one in the post.

Although I am proud that my hon. Friend has brought this Bill to the House, I also feel a bit disappointed that this important legislation had to come through a private Member's Bill. There have been many missed opportunities. It could have been brought to the House earlier and made into legislation. It could have been included in an employment Bill, which was mentioned in 2019 in the Queen's Speech. Hopefully, this private Member's Bill today will rectify an injustice that has survived for a very long time in our country.

I am passionate about this topic because I witnessed at first hand what maternity discrimination can do to people. After I had my children, I formed a close friendship with eight women locally whose children were around the same age as mine. Out of the eight women, four faced maternity discrimination, which, ultimately, ended up in redundancy when they went back to work. I watched what it did to their lives. The hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) mentioned that this was a family matter—that it was not just about the women. I saw that the effect was not just the financial hit to the family, but the mental health implications for the woman herself, for the husband and for the child. One of the babies started losing weight and not feeding properly because of all the stress that his mother was having to go through trying to deal with lawyers, trying to deal with the courts and trying to deal with, frankly speaking, a horrible employer.

Wendy Chamberlain: The hon. Member is speaking very powerfully. What she says about how this affects the family is so true. Part of that stems from the outdated idea that women are the supplementary breadwinner from a family perspective. I refer back to what the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) said about women being older now before they have their children, which means that they have progressed further in their career. Actually, in many families, the women in the partnership—obviously we have same-sex partnerships as well—are earning the most money, so the financial impact of redundancy discrimination can be even greater for the family.

Tulip Siddiq: The hon. Member is absolutely right. The cost of living in my constituency of Hampstead and Kilburn is extremely high, and those families were very worried about what would impact them financially. Moreover, parents are meant to enjoy the time after they have a baby, but instead, these four women were fighting court cases and going to their employers. What really shocked me, as I was helping them and supporting them through it, was that it felt like the onus was on the women to prove maternity discrimination, whereas the employer did not seem to have much of an obligation to prove genuine redundancy. That worried me. I felt that

there was more and more pressure on new mothers to say, "Actually, this is maternity discrimination. This is what happened when I left, and then when I came back, my job wasn't there. You are not offering me another job." That is why I feel so passionate about this Bill. If it shifts the onus on to employers to prove that they are not indulging in maternity discrimination, that would be a huge win for the country.

I wish to mention briefly the godmother of my children. She had a child and took only four months off—she had shared parental leave because she loved her job so much. Four days after going back to work, she was told that she was fired. Members of this House sit on the board of the organisation in which she worked. I went with the godmother of my child to her hearing. I felt frustrated that I could not stand up for her and prove maternity discrimination, because I did not have the law on my side. I felt like I failed her. The case was swept under the carpet. When I spoke to her later, she told me that when she eventually found a new job, she discovered that she was pregnant with her second child—this goes back to the point made by the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster. She said that her first feeling when she found out was "total panic"—those were the words she used. She thought, "What's going to happen? Am I going to be fired again? Should I tell my employer that I am having another child?" She said that she was so traumatised by what had gone before—dealing with lawyers, having to go back to her employer and fighting with her friends in the workplace—that she would not even take a lunch break in her new job, because she felt like they might discriminate against her when she told them she was pregnant.

Jane Hunt: Does the hon. Member agree that it is so short-sighted of that business to have done that? These women are hard-working, and they will be on maternity leave for a short period in comparison with the rest of their career. That business will lose skills and knowledge because of what happened.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the hon. Member for her point. I do not just say this because she is the godmother to my children, but I have never met someone as hard-working and dedicated to her job as Anne. Her employer fired her mostly because she had taken the time off—they essentially penalised her for having a child—and that is why I am so passionate about the Bill. Penalising women for having children is not what our country should be focused on.

I will not speak for much longer, because I know there is a lot of interest in the Bill, but I want to touch briefly on covid. As my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central said, covid exacerbated every inequality. The TUC brought out a report about what had happened to expectant mothers and pregnant women during the covid pandemic, which found that 25% of new mothers and pregnant women said they had faced some sort of discrimination during covid, whether that was being made redundant, being forced to go on furlough or being told they should take sick leave because they were pregnant. Being pregnant does not mean someone is ill, but these women were being forced to take sick leave.

That report from the TUC is really important, as is all the analysis that has been done by Pregnant Then Screwed, which shows how we as a country have failed

[Tulip Siddiq]

new mothers and pregnant women. By passing this legislation, we are signalling to the employers that we will not put up with this any more and that things have to change. In a situation where there is soaring inflation, childcare costs are rocketing and there is a cost of living crisis, we owe it as a House to new mothers to give them job security.

10.46 am

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the powerful speech by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who gave examples of lived experiences. The experience she highlighted of her children's godmother is horrendous. These experiences are brushed under the carpet, and that is disgraceful. I hope that, through the Bill, we will ensure that that does not happen again, because it cannot. I commend the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for bringing in the Bill. It should not be necessary to do so, but clearly it is. We have to do this, and it is the right thing to do. What has struck me today is the way in which we have come together as a House to support the Bill and its aims.

The background to this area astonishes me, and we have heard about it in contributions from Members across the House. In 2022, it should not be an impediment to someone to want to have a family, so that they cannot at the same time pursue a career—that is crazy. The hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central touched on the report of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and some of the figures in that were horrendous. When scaled up, the figures show that something like 54,000 women could experience discrimination as a result of either being pregnant or having had children. That astounds me.

Jane Hunt: I absolutely agree with what my hon. Friend is saying. We see headlines these days about the lack of labour in the market and needing people to fill jobs, yet 54,000 people are either being made redundant or feeling the need to leave their jobs. That is a disgrace, is it not?

Shaun Bailey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is a disgrace. I think about my own experiences. Before I entered this place, I was a lawyer; that is what I trained to do. I was fortunate to work in some great firms and meet some fantastic, intelligent people. I know that people sometimes typecast lawyers as all sorts and do not trust us, but the people I worked with were fantastic, intelligent, hard-working and inspirational. However, let us look at the figures in the sector, and I am thinking in particular about the gender pay gap and how the issues we are debating contribute to that.

A London School of Economics study found that even though today 62% of new entrants into law firms are women, by the time we get to partner level only 28% of women are partners. That is absolutely crazy, given the proportion of women at entry level. What we are seeing is that women want to go and have a family and a personal life, which we are all entitled to, but they are being impeded. That might not all be down to the discrimination we have been talking about, but what I hope the Bill achieves is a cultural change. That is what

we have to drive forward. It amazes me that we actually have to say this today, but a woman can have a career and a family at the same time, and an employer that enables that to happen.

Thinking of my own office, 80% of my staff are women. I have no problem if they need to take time out because they have to go and look after their family or collect their kids. To me, that is just basic decency as an employer. Surely it is a two-way street as an employer: what we do is get the talent and ability of the people we employ, and in turn we give something back.

Jane Hunt: Does my hon. Friend agree that this Bill is very helpful because it also includes shared parental leave? Those partners, both male and female, who are impacted by shared parental leave will also be able to take advantage of the redundancy scheme.

Shaun Bailey: My hon. Friend articulates it so well. She is absolutely right; shared parental leave is now such a key part of the broader landscape of family and employment rights—I do not want to just say maternity rights. We now know that the idea that mum goes off for a year and looks after the baby while dad works is ridiculous—it is rubbish. Both parents need to be playing an active role. We say that both parents need to be playing an active role in the life of their child, but if we have an employment structure that does not allow us to do that, then it is all good words but absolutely no action. My hon. Friend is right to draw out with her intervention the point about shared parental leave. What I am encouraged by is the recognition that shared parental leave needs to become the norm. From what I have seen at the moment, we are seeing that transition; we are seeing that more organisations are getting that. But there is still more to do.

The other point I will touch on is the societal impact. I talk about this from my personal experience. What we do not want to do is frame this in the context of mum, dad and 2.4 children, because actually families do not operate like that; there are many shades of grey. If someone is a single mother, or a single woman who is pregnant, and runs the risk of redundancy as a result of that, where does that leave them?

Lee Anderson: Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the threat of redundancy, or actual redundancy, for a pregnant woman can have a serious impact on her health and the health of the baby?

Shaun Bailey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and the academic studies have shown that. We have the data showing the mental health impact on women who are having to worry about the risk of redundancy in their job. Of course it is not right—I am framing this in the context of a mother who is giving care to a child—that they should have to worry about their employment and everything that interconnects with that, and at the same time have to raise a child.

I have not had children, but for those who have—I am probably going to get interventions from hon. Friends across the House now—that initial period of time, and I will not say how long it is because I am sure it might vary, is probably one of the most stressful points in a mother's life. They are getting to grips with realising that there is no handbook, and that everything they

were told was going to go this way or that way actually does not—children do not work like that and there is no button to push. They are balancing that—a new person they have brought into the world and have to care for—and at the same time having to worry about how they are going to put food on the table, and go back into a career that they love, are passionate about and have maybe trained for years to do but now are at risk of losing because their organisation has potentially decided, “No, goodbye, see you later.” It seriously blows my mind that we even have to be here having this conversation.

Jane Hunt: Does my hon. Friend agree that the six-month window at the end of this part of the Bill is also very important? I hate to use this phrase, but it is almost an “out of sight, out of mind” situation. When a woman is on maternity leave or a person is on shared parental leave, they are no longer in the workplace. They need that window of opportunity to get back into the workplace and into the swing of things, so they can show their value to the business.

Shaun Bailey: My hon. Friend raises a good point, and I was hoping to touch on the transitional period later. We know how important it is to have the opportunity to transition back into the workplace and get back into the flow of things. Going through a life-changing event such as having a child changes the whole dynamic in someone’s life. I think that window is a really important opportunity for them. I hope I have not misunderstood my hon. Friend, but I agree that having that period of time means the individual is able to contribute in the way they know they can.

It all comes back to realising people’s potential. That is another part of this issue. It is not about saying to someone, “Okay, you’ve had a child; you’re done.” It is not like that at all. I have been very fortunate in the organisations I have worked in, out in what we call the real world—certainly more real at times than this place has been, particularly over the last week. I have seen organisations that get this issue, already have processes in place and are developing a culture that understands that it is not just about, for instance, the amount someone bills every month, but the contribution they make as a person.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) just described, the provision for that period of time is a crucial part of this legislation. We are on Second Reading today, but the Bill represents part of a broader landscape, and what my hon. Friend is saying on its provisions is vital. It comes back to a point that right hon. and hon. Members across the House have raised—including the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central, my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough, and a few hon. Members from a sedentary position—which is that we are currently losing skillsets from the workforce as a result of this issue. How daunting must it be for someone who has taken an extended period of time to go and have a child to come back and worry about not having the protections they should be afforded?

Lee Anderson: My hon. Friend is making some brilliant points. When employers sack pregnant women or women on maternity leave, as well as losing these skilled workers

are they not also losing other women who might want to come into the workplace but have been put off by the treatment of their friends?

Shaun Bailey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Why would someone want to join such an organisation, having seen how it operates and what its practices are? Talented individuals who know they have something to bring to the table, and know their worth, particularly in the climate we are in, are going to vote with their feet, are they not? And they should. They will be empowered to know that they can now go to organisations that will treat them as individuals who deserve respect. These organisations will understand that people are allowed to have a family life and balance. People should be able to have an employer who contributes toward that balance and is part of a partnership with them.

As I understand it, the whole point of the employer-employee relationship is that it is a contract and partnership—an understanding between two people in an organisation. The balance of power has at times gone completely off.

Jane Hunt: My hon. Friend is being generous with his time; I promise that this is my last intervention. Just to balance it out, he is absolutely right in what he just said, but this Bill is absolutely brilliant in bringing up one segment of the business sector. Many businesses already meet these and further requirements, but we need everybody to do the same, because that 54,000 figure should not exist.

Shaun Bailey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. To reiterate her point, I certainly do not want to give the impression that I am typecasting every business in that regard. As I have said, many businesses are getting this right and are going above and beyond—but that should not be above and beyond; it should be the standard.

I return to the idea that not every family is black and white, with 2.4 children and a mum and dad—I apologise to hon. Members for segueing away from that point. I speak as someone who was brought up in a single-parent family with a sole breadwinner who at times was working three jobs in order to put food on the table, and doing a part-time university degree. My mum went back to work six weeks after she had me, because she needed to, and it was similar with my sister. If someone is a sole parent on their own income and is pregnant with another child, or if there has been a family breakdown, the last thing they need is to have that threat of, “If I have a child, or if there’s anything connected to that child, I’m going to lose my job.” It does not bear thinking about—it blows my mind.

The societal impact of what we are talking about goes much further than the scope of the Bill’s provisions, and that is why it is so important. When we pass legislation in this House, particularly legislation such as this, it is not just about the Bill or the laws that we implement; it is about the message we send about society. We have seen that throughout history, particularly with legislation that has passed as a result of private Members’ Bills, such as women’s rights legislation. Lord Steel was a big advocate of women’s rights and the work of those organisations when he was on the Liberal Benches. We are sending a broader message that we need a society that understands that balancing work and family life is key.

Bob Stewart: My hon. Friend may not have had children yet; I have had six. One point that has not been talked about today is that when a woman is pregnant, it is often traumatic and frightening for her. It is often not an easy time. Some people may find it joyous—it is joyous, of course—but it is difficult for some women. If we put that on top of the fact that they might lose their jobs, it is just another pressure. I make that point because it is valid.

Shaun Bailey: I thank my right hon. and gallant Friend for that powerful intervention, to which I cannot add any more. He is right that it can be a traumatic experience. The Bill also seeks to address when someone has a miscarriage or loses a baby, which is a horrific time in the lives of both parents. It is important to consider how we support someone who has gone through that, particularly a woman, who feels that loss acutely and painfully. Unless someone has gone through that experience, I do not think that they can truly understand the pain that is felt as a result.

Again, talking about what this Bill does, its broader messages and what it seeks to achieve in supporting people at the most vulnerable points in their lives is absolutely key. Surely it is incumbent on all of us in this House to support people when they most need it and at the times in their lives when they are most vulnerable, particularly during pregnancy. That is the point in their life when a person is most exposed to both physical and mental challenges, as well as in other ways.

I am conscious that I should conclude my comments, but I really want to say that I am so proud to be able to support this Bill. I really do commend the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central for the work he has done on it. What this Bill seeks to do, as was articulated so brilliantly by my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough, is to set what is currently seen as the exceptional standard as the norm, and that is right because it is what we should be doing.

The Bill will ensure that we do not lose brilliant people from our workforce. We should enable everyone who has the passion and drive and who wants to contribute to do so. We should back up the mantra we have been churning out from this House for decades about how we want to encourage the family base and encourage people to have families. Families are the core of society, and we should follow that up with tangible action. This place is very good at talking, but we need to follow through with tangible legislation. We must have the tangible means by which we can follow up on our good sentiments, and that is one thing this Bill does.

The Bill also ensures that in situations a bit like my mum's and other people's, when single mums are trying to get on with life and secure a life for their kids, whether or not they have been born, they can do so without worrying about how they are going to do it. They, too, can contribute, because this is surely about lifting people up, is it not? If they fear that they are going to lose their job or that they cannot progress up the ladder because they have had a child, that just should not be happening.

Finally, the Bill will ensure that, at what for many is the most exciting time of their lives, but also a time when they are at their most vulnerable and most exposed, people get the support that we should rightly be giving them. I fully endorse the aims of the Bill, and if the

hon. Member for Barnsley Central is looking for someone to serve on his Bill Committee, I would be honoured to do so, because this is absolutely one of the reasons why I came into this place. *[Interruption.]* I can see he is already putting my name down—brilliant—so I expect the email in due course.

I just think back to the reason why I came into the place. I always say, whenever I am asked, that it is for people like my mum. With this Bill today, I think of her and what she went through as a single mum bringing me up and enabling me to get here. I will always owe her for that, because I would not be here had she not made the sacrifices that she had to make to get me—a lad from a council house who was told he probably would not amount to anything—to be a Member of Parliament. If we can ensure we get a few more young people like me from such backgrounds into this place by agreeing to the provisions of this Bill today, as far as I am concerned that is exactly why we are all here.

11.8 am

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): Gosh—follow that! That was extremely moving from my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey). I am grateful to him for his articulation of his experience, which was superb.

I very much thank the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for introducing this important Bill, which will ensure better protections for women and families with new babies. It was a pleasure to work with him, albeit briefly, to help drive this Bill forward in my former role as the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, and I would like to emphasise my continued full support for it.

The hon. Member talked about being proud of this Bill, and I feel sure he is quite right to be so. I certainly feel proud to have been involved. The current Minister has done a huge amount of work to support it, as indeed did the previous Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). He did a great deal of work on this, and also on many other Bills, which I will refer to a bit later. What we are looking at in the Bill is part of a matrix of workers' rights, and it is right, good and proper that we are doing so.

It is shocking that, in 2022, new parents—mothers in particular—are still being forced out of their jobs through either dismissal or compulsory redundancy when others in the workplace do not face that, or are being treated so poorly that they feel they have no choice but to leave. A 2020 survey by Pregnant Then Screwed found that 11.2% of women on maternity leave had been made redundant, or expected to be made redundant, and 60.7% of them believed that their maternity leave was a factor in the decision. A more recent 2021 survey found that 20% of mothers have experienced discrimination from an employer.

I turn to the background to the Bill. Research published in 2016 commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that about one in nine mothers—11%—reported that they were either dismissed, made redundant or treated poorly and therefore had to leave their job. The publication of that research was followed by a Women and Equalities Committee inquiry and report on pregnancy and maternity discrimination

in August 2016. One of its key findings was that mothers returning from maternity leave still faced discrimination. It therefore recommended that the Government should take steps to provide

“additional protection from redundancy for new and expectant mothers”.

It recommended that enhanced protections should apply throughout pregnancy and for six months after a woman's return to work.

The Government published their response to the report in 2017. They acknowledged the scale of pregnancy and maternity discrimination experienced by new and expectant mothers and committed to

“consider further and bring forward proposals to ensure that the protections in place for those who are pregnant or returning from maternity leave are sufficient.”

The Committee said:

“We are persuaded that additional protection from redundancy for new and expectant mothers is required. The Government should implement a system similar to that used in Germany—

that was referred to earlier—

“under which such women can be made redundant only in specified circumstances. This protection should apply throughout pregnancy and maternity leave and for six months afterwards. The Government should implement this change within the next two years.”

In January 2019, the Government published a consultation seeking views on extending current redundancy protections for pregnant women and new parents. It recommended that the Government extend the current redundancy protection afforded to women during maternity leave under the Maternity and Paternity Leave etc. Regulations 1999 to cover a woman's pregnancy and a period of up to six months after returning to work. The consultation also acknowledged that those returning from forms of leave comparable to maternity leave may have been away from work for long periods and therefore might similarly face discrimination or be prone to less favourable treatment.

The Government response, published in July 2019, made two commitments: to extend the redundancy protection period to include pregnancy and six months after a new mother has returned to work; and to provide the same enhanced protections to those returning from adoption leave and, crucially, shared parental leave.

It is unacceptable that anyone should be penalised for deciding to have a family. I welcome the fact that the Government have acknowledged the scale of pregnancy and maternity discrimination experienced by new and expectant mothers. Given the scale of the problem, it is clear that current legislation does not go far enough to protect new parents. We have talked about that in earlier speeches and interventions. The Bill caters for pregnant women working in all types of employment. There are women throughout the whole of the workplace, and all such people will benefit from the Bill.

I am particularly grateful that the Bill covers those on adoption leave and shared parental leave. The Bill dovetails wonderfully with the Neonatal Care (Leave and Pay) Bill introduced in July by the Scottish National party hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), working closely with the Government and BEIS, as well as with the Fertility Treatment (Employment Rights) Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster

(Nickie Aiken), which has yet to have its Second Reading, and the shared parental leave Bill that we have discussed. There is a matrix being formed of support and business guidance to ensure that businesses are helped to do the right thing to support their employees, women and parents. There should be no barrier to any parent having the opportunity to get to know their child and bond with them at the earliest opportunity.

I welcome the fact that in 2019 the Government consulted on the proposals to extend redundancy protections for pregnant women and new parents. The majority of responses showed support for measures to extend the redundancy protection period once a new mother had returned to work, and to extend protections to adoption and shared parental leave. That consultation was undertaken in January 2019 and BEIS reported

“that 6 months would be an adequate period of ‘return to work’ for redundancy protection purposes”,

and

“that protection should be extended to parents who have taken adoption leave and shared parental leave”,

which I think is crucial.

The Government responded to the consultation on 22 July 2019, including a series of commitments to increasing redundancy protections in this area, first to

“ensure the redundancy protection period applies from the point the employee informs the employer that she is pregnant, whether orally or in writing;”

secondly, to

“extend the redundancy protection period for six months once a new mother has returned to work. We expect that this period will start immediately once maternity leave is finished;”

thirdly, to

“extend redundancy protection into a period of return to work for those taking adoption leave following the same approach as the extended protection being provided for those returning from maternity leave—it will be for six months;”,

and fourthly, to

“extend redundancy protection into a period of return to work for those taking shared parental leave, taking account of the following key principles and issues: the key objective of this policy is to help protect pregnant women and new mothers from discrimination; the practical and legal differences between shared parental leave and maternity leave mean that it will require a different approach; the period of extended protection should be proportionate to the amount of leave and the threat of discrimination; a mother should be no worse off if she curtails her maternity leave and then takes a period of Shared Parental Leave; the solution should not create any disincentives to take Shared Parental Leave”.

The Bill before us would enact those crucial changes and clearly has the backing of many. I recognise the cross-party agreement we have seen across the House; in my opinion, we are at our best when we have that. The Bill is a welcome extension of the framework of workers' rights in general and crucially allows family leave to be included in legislation. The German model is a good one, but I believe we must reach a compromise between the needs of businesses and the needs of families and pregnant mothers.

Shaun Bailey: Looking at other models and the broader matrix my hon. Friend talks about, does she also believe that the legislative framework we are trying to bring in needs to be an evolving one? The likelihood is that we will need secondary legislation or even further primary

[Shaun Bailey]

legislation, but as part of that we must ensure that the framework continues to evolve and adapt as the workplace landscape changes.

Jane Hunt: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. This Bill provides a framework that the Secretary of State can adapt to meet future needs for both pregnant women and those on adoption or shared parental leave. It sets up a matrix that can be filled as required.

In conclusion, I welcome this Bill. I truly believe it is something we should do and are able to do. I feel that the Minister will do a wonderful job in bringing this all together and I wholeheartedly thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central for bringing the Bill forward.

11.19 am

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I wholeheartedly welcome this Bill, and I feel privileged to speak in this debate and support the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). I am proud that there are a number of hon. Members on this side of the House who—they may not accept it—are feminists, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). It is important to recognise that this should not be about women's rights; this is about wanting to ensure that our country supports all its employees, male or female. It is sad that in the 21st century we still have to introduce Bills such as this to give women protection in the workplace.

The Bill provides long overdue guarantees to pregnant women that they will not be dismissed during or shortly after pregnancy. It is also important to remember—we have not yet touched on this—that the Bill contains protection for those adopting children. A number of my gay friends have adopted children over recent years, and they will welcome this progressive Bill. This is not just about women, it is also about gay couples who are involved in adoption or a pregnancy, and it is important to highlight that—[*Interruption.*] I thank my right hon. Friend. Perhaps he would like to intervene.

Bob Stewart: I was just pointing out that a lot of my friends, male and female and married, also want to adopt. They have that right too, which is great.

Nickie Aiken: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is about adoption, whether by a gay or heterosexual couple. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central is right to say that women should not have to choose between a career and raising a family, but unfortunately, far too many women are forced to make that choice. In 2016, a survey commissioned by BEIS found that three in four women experienced some form of pregnancy or maternity discrimination. As we have heard, 54,000 pregnant women a year are dismissed from their jobs. That eye-watering statistic should shame this country, and I hope that if passed, the Bill will go towards rectifying that shameful record. It is wholly unacceptable, but nevertheless we see that story across the board.

In my constituency I hear the same stories again and again from women who are trying to balance family planning with their career. As I said in an earlier intervention, I am sponsoring my own private Member's

Bill to secure employment rights for those undertaking fertility treatment. That Bill seeks similar outcomes to those sought by the hon. Member for Barnsley Central. After all, this is 2022 not 1922, and people need to feel comfortable to choose to have a child—or more than one child—whether that child is conceived naturally or through fertility treatment, and no matter where they work and without fear of their career being negatively impacted.

That fear is all too familiar for women across the country. There are women who are trying to make a career, but who are conscious that they have a limited time in which they can have a child. As I said earlier, when I had my first child aged 35, the average age of the woman in the hospital I was in was 39. Women now have careers and want to establish themselves in their 20s and into their 30s, and they then try to have a child.

Shaun Bailey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is also about ensuring empowered women leadership. In a previous life she was the leader of Westminster City Council—if I may say so, probably the best leader we ever had. In this era of political comebacks, who knows? Perhaps another comeback is on the cards. We have to empower women leaders to encourage others. Given her experience as a woman in leadership, how does she feel about women leaders empowering women having children later in their career to find balance?

Nickie Aiken: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I remember being pregnant with my first child, aged 35, holding down a full-time job and attempting to be elected to Westminster City Council. I was elected when seven months pregnant with my second child. Believe me, that was an interesting time. I do not think I would have been able to that without the support of my employer at the time Bradford & Bingley, and my group leader Sir Simon Milton, the late leader of Westminster City Council. I was very well supported but, sadly, not all women are. That is why this legislation is needed.

My hon. Friend is right to highlight that women in leadership roles—and men, but women in particular—must support women in the generations below. We have been fortunate to get to a certain place in our careers, and it is our duty as feminists and human beings to support women—and men—coming through their careers.

Tulip Siddiq: I applaud the hon. Lady for having been a councillor and leader while having children, because if I had had children while I was a councillor, I could not have done it, given the hours we were doing. On the fact that her employers were good at letting her take time off or working around her pregnancy, is the problem not that we rely so much on good will? It should not be based on good will; there needs to be legislative change to achieve equal opportunity for everyone. Does the hon. Lady want to comment on that?

Nickie Aiken: To be perfectly honest, it is really sad that we have to legislate. We have to because we must ensure that women have those rights, but I would prefer it if we did not have to. As part of my private Member's Bill, I am trying to achieve a voluntary workplace pledge to ensure that employers support their employees who are going through fertility treatment. I wish that I did not need to do that, but I have to.

Returning to this brilliant piece of legislation, we have heard some excellent interventions and speeches from colleagues across the House. I am pleased that the Bill provides guarantees to women and their partners—there is an important clause in the Bill about partners during pregnancy. The Bill does not just cut off support at the birth of a child; vitally, women and their partners are supported during maternity leave, shared family leave and adoption leave.

I am a mother of two; my children are much older, in their late teens. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) that we parents never stop being parents; we never stop worrying or trying to do the best we can. I am sure that one day he will have the honour of being a parent. I have gone through pregnancy and the stress of being pregnant. I had a miscarriage before I successfully had my first child and I know the stress of that second pregnancy, worrying whether it will be successful.

As I said, I worked for Bradford & Bingley and was very supported. That was an example of good practice. Before I was on maternity leave with my first child I was a public relations manager; when I came back, they promoted me to head of PR and gave me support. I worked three days a week, but I felt I could not do my job effectively in three days, and the other two days I was trying to balance being a mum of a young baby and work. It was my decision to go to my line manager and say that I wanted to work four days, so that I could do my job properly and be a full-time mum on the other days. It supported me in that, and crucially Bradford & Bingley realised how dedicated I was to my job and, even though I was working four days, it chose to pay me for full-time work. That is an example of an exemplary employer. Sadly, it was a victim of the banking crisis and I lost my job. But that was 15 years ago and an example of how employers can support women through pregnancy, and support mothers—or fathers—of young children.

Shaun Bailey: My hon. Friend is being incredibly generous in giving way, and it is always great to hear about personal experience. She represents the City of London as part of her constituency and we talked earlier in the debate about encouraging the brightest and the best, and those who have the right skillset. Does she agree that the Bill would ensure that the brightest and best—such as my hon. Friend, if I may say so—are able to stay in their roles in our financial centres and contribute to vital parts of our economy?

Nickie Aiken: My hon. Friend makes another good point. The City of London can be a beacon of exemplary employer-employee relations, and I hope and expect that the Bill will ensure that small, medium and large businesses show respect to working women who become pregnant and are raising a family and ensure that they have the support they deserve.

It is important to remember that going back to work after maternity leave can be a daunting step for many women. I was fortunate that I had the support of my employer, but many do not. That is why I welcome the extension of workplace support for women to six months after their maternity leave. A recent study found that it takes an average of six months to adjust back to the workplace fully, for multiple reasons. It may also be that

women are coming back to work after a second or third child, and trying to balance a large family with work can be very difficult.

Going back to work can mean adjusting to new staff members who have been employed while someone has been on maternity leave, and they have to start establishing new working relationships. New practices or policies may have been introduced in the workplace. It is important that someone coming back to work after six, nine, 12 months or even longer is supported in understanding new policies or working with new employees.

Going back to work is difficult: I did it myself a couple of times. Particularly with a first child, it is difficult to understand how to balance parenthood with a job. Most working mums will know that we feel guilty when we are at work and when we are at home. We need to find a balance, and it is crucial to support women at that stage in their lives.

To go back to my point about adoption, if someone has tried to have a child for many years but failed to do so and then chosen to adopt, it is a very difficult time in their life. Having time at home without the threat of being made redundant is crucial, and that also applies to gay couples in the same position.

Too often, companies wishing to cut back will choose a woman who is pregnant or on maternity leave as an easy target, but I think it is agreed across the House that that is categorically wrong. No woman should ever be disadvantaged because she is having a child or has had a child. In 2018, the Government commissioned a report on women and work after childbirth, which found that women and men experienced a large divergence in their careers following the birth of a baby. Fewer than 30% of women are in full-time work or self-employed three years after childbirth, compared to 90% of fathers. That is a clear example of how giving birth can affect a woman's career chances. In the 21st century, it is a shocking statistic. I firmly believe that we must encourage women to feel empowered when they have a child, not anxious, not fearing that their job prospects are now weakened or that they may be at the top of the list to be made redundant.

There is no doubt that employers sometimes handle pregnancy and maternity poorly. I was appalled to read the finding of the Equality and Human Rights Commission that one in five pregnant women experience harassment at work owing to their pregnancy or flexible working requests. The commission also found that more than 50,000 women a year felt forced out of their jobs by poor treatment. We should note that this is also an issue of retention. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) referred to the need to retain women for productivity purposes. That is crucial: we cannot afford, in this country, to lose female talent on account of poor protection. It is also important to note at this time that the birth rate is falling, and we need women to have babies for the sake of our economy—not today, not tomorrow, but in 10, 20, 30 and 40 years' time. The Bill is not just about the immediate; it is about our country's future.

Among women with careers, we have seen the subsequent loss in earning and career progression that is termed the motherhood penalty. What kind of country do we want to be if we put a price on someone's career because of motherhood and call it a penalty? It is not a country that I want to live in, and it is not a country in which I

[Nickie Aiken]

want my daughter—who is now 18—to grow up and start her career. It means that employers are losing female talent at a time when we need to retain talent, both male and female.

Further data reinforces the concern about gender inequality, with an emphasis on the penalty that maternity represents for women's salary and careers. It is crucial that we provide viable solutions to rectify that, and the Bill is certainly one solution. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) mentioned the gender pay gap. The fact is that women can feel, and indeed are, penalised for having children, and it can affect their ongoing ability to increase their pay, move up the career ladder and enjoy the benefits that that brings.

Births are falling in this country. In the last 10 years we have seen a drop in the birth rate in England and Wales of nearly 16%.

Shaun Bailey: My hon. Friend has just mentioned the birth rate and the wider picture. I know that, since her days on the council, she has been passionate about building a strong sense of community in Westminster, but people in this area generally have careers and are not growing families. Many of them cannot have children, given the demographic. That will surely have an impact on communities, and the sense of community, in areas such as my hon. Friend's in Westminster.

Nickie Aiken: My hon. Friend has made another excellent point. This is about ensuring that we encourage families to grow, and encourage women and gay couples either to have children or to adopt them, because it is families who create a community. As my hon. Friend says, in central London having families of all types—whether they are single households, older people or growing families—is crucial to community cohesion. Whether a woman is living in central London, the midlands, the north, Scotland or Wales—whatever part of the country she lives in—she must feel protected in having a child, so I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

The Government have said that family life and the economy will suffer unless workplace practices are brought into the 21st century. We need to take that and staff retention seriously. One of the last things that I did as the leader of Westminster City Council, before I came to this place, was to change our parental leave policy. I introduced a policy whereby there was full pay for 12 months for people who were either on maternity or paternity leave and shared parental leave. That sent the message to staff that they were so important to keeping the council going and that they were part of its success. In the year following that announcement, there was a huge increase in people having children in Westminster City Council, and that is a very good thing.

We simply cannot afford to let women be sidelined or penalised because they are pregnant and want to start a family. I believe that there is no greater or more important job in this world than raising a child, but the economic and emotional burden on parents can be equally as tremendous. We need to support our workforce, our women in the workforce and our families. For those reasons, I wholeheartedly welcome the Bill and commend it to the House.

11.41 am

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow some wonderful speeches, not least the one by my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). I very much support the Bill, which plugs an important gap in our employment protections, and I commend the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for introducing it. I welcome the cross-party support today and it is good to see the Minister in his place, ready to give the Government's support.

The improvements in protection against redundancy for women who are pregnant or returning from maternity leave and people who are returning from shared parental leave or adoption leave are very welcome. We have heard from a number of colleagues about the unfairness that is still being perpetuated in the workplace. The Bill will help to resolve those matters. I believe that employment protection is one of the significant achievements of this Parliament. In this country, we have one of the most comprehensive systems of employment protection in the world. I am proud to have voted for a number of improvements to those protections over the years and I look forward to voting in favour of this one.

Ensuring fairness at work is one of the hallmarks of a modern economy and a civilised society. There is inevitably a power imbalance between employers and employees; there is economic power that rests with the employer. It is right for the legal system and the state to step in to help to rebalance that relationship and ensure that there are decent standards of treatment in the workplace. As many have pointed out, it is important to support young families and ensure that they are not subject to unfair treatment. The Bill provides a sensible compromise. I cannot see that the impact on employers would be excessive or negative. Indeed, as we have heard, ensuring high standards for women in the workplace potentially gives employers much better access to a wider labour pool, because it means that they are more attractive to talented and experienced women recruits, so there are real positives not just for employees, but for employers.

It is important to recall the point that I made in my intervention, which is that, in this country, we have a productivity problem. We have been grappling with that for the past 10 years. Part of the problem is due to people who are economically inactive. The Bill helps to ensure that women have the opportunities in the workplace that they deserve and that they are not forced back into economic inactivity. This is one of a range of measures that could help us to improve our productivity by getting the most from one of our greatest assets—women in the workplace and women in our population.

We can all be proud to be supporting another step in the road towards genuine gender equality. Like workplace fairness, this Parliament can be proud of the achievements of the past 100 years in remedying injustice dealt out to women. There is a debate about exactly when that started, but the Married Women's Property Act 1882 was one of the first landmark decisions, which sought to remove the institutionalised discrimination and unfair treatment which, for millennia, had characterised this country and others around the world. This Parliament can take some credit for many items of legislation over the years, which have, in essence, been dismantling the patriarchal systems that had been in place in previous centuries. The reality though is that there is still more to

do, which is illustrated by the need to introduce a Bill such as this, and by the examples that we have heard today of the adversities that women continue to face.

I was particularly struck by the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster that the career paths of men and women after women become mothers are still so dramatically different. It is very welcome that we have seen the gender pay gap close in many respects, but there are still hurdles that mothers are asked to jump over in relation to their careers that their male competitors simply are not. I am pleased that we are taking a step towards addressing that, but I am sure that these matters will return to Parliament in many different ways over the years to come. This task of securing a truly fair society, where men and women have equal opportunities and are treated equally, continues to adapt as new challenges become apparent.

I close by reflecting on the fact that we are tremendously lucky to live in a country that has respect for the rule of law, that ensures that workers are treated fairly and cannot be summarily dismissed and, in particular, cannot be lightly dismissed in the event of pregnancy, maternity leave, or the return from maternity leave. It is important, on an occasion such as this, to reflect on the fact that, in many parts of the world, women are not so lucky. One of the most notorious examples of this is, of course, Iran, where we see, on a daily basis, women and girls out protesting and demanding fair treatment. They continue to face institutionalised discrimination in terms of their right to travel, their consent to marriage and, in many areas, their right to decide what they wear. I have found those protests inspiring. I hope that they do lead to democratic change in Iran. It is a place that has a shocking human rights record, and both men and women have suffered at the hands of a cruel regime.

This legislation is an illustration of the fact that we in this country take fairness seriously, we in this country believe that people should be treated fairly at work, and we in this country believe that women are entitled to equal treatment and equal opportunities. I commend this Bill to the House.

11.50 am

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): I do not normally come to this place on a Friday, because I normally have better things to do in my constituency, but this Bill is so important that I felt I had to be here today. I just cannot imagine what it is like to be a woman at work who gets the wonderful news that she is pregnant, goes home and tells her partner, "I've got some great news," and they are very happy and tell their family, then the following day she may come home and say, "I've got some bad news: I've lost my job," or, "My firm don't want me any more; I'm being discriminated against." To think that that happens in this day and age is absolutely shocking. I cannot imagine it.

As the law stands, employers cannot make mothers redundant while they are on maternity leave, but under this excellent Bill that protection will be extended through pregnancy and for six months after returning to work. That is brilliant. We do discriminate against women in this country—I know we do—and especially young women and young single parent women. I was a single parent for many years—17 years—with two children,

but I did not come up against the barriers that women do. I know that, because when I went for a job, they never even asked me if I was a single parent; they assumed that I was just a man looking for a job, and I got the job. I know full well that when women go for a job, employers probe and poke their nose into business that, quite frankly, is not theirs. I know that employers look at those women and think, "She's a single parent—she's going to have time off. Her kids have got to go to school. They're going to be ill. She might get pregnant again." Those are the barriers that us men do not normally face.

The contributions today have all been outstanding, as have the interventions. I thank the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for bringing this Bill to the House, because it is so important. He once said:

"No one should be penalised for having a family, but pregnant women and new mums face grotesque levels of discrimination in the workplace."

He is bang on. He went on to say:

"This bill will help tackle the appalling injustices they face. From the extortionate cost of childcare to difficulty in finding flexible hours, balancing family life with a job is already hard enough."

That sums it up for me.

Nickie Aiken: My hon. Friend talked about the fact that men do not face the same questions when being interviewed for jobs. Given the fact that he is saying that and that the Bill is being introduced by a male Member of the House, does he agree that it is so important that men stand side by side with women, to ensure that women have workplace rights?

Lee Anderson: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It is not right; men do not face these questions and this discrimination, and we forget that. It is, unfortunately, still a man's world. I sometimes get slated for saying that, but it is—let us be honest. There are so many barriers for women in the workplace, in life and in general, and this is just another barrier that they have to come up against time and again. It is quite shocking that we are having this conversation in 2022, but we are here having it, and hopefully the Bill will be passed—I am sure it will—and will give the extra protection that women in this country need.

I just hope that there are plenty of women listening to this today who will know that we are on their side and are going to make changes, and can have that confidence. We have talked about women being sacked from the workplace because they are pregnant or may get pregnant, and the skilled workforce that employers lose through that. They are not only losing skilled workers and their potential to go on to be brilliant employees, but saying to the marketplace out there, "We don't want you. You're a woman, and we don't want you working here." How wrong is that, when 50% of the population in this country are women? I think we are getting close to that in this place—we are getting more and more women here—and rightly so. Why should women not work here and why should they not do all the top jobs? It is an absolute disgrace.

The most important job that women do on this earth is to have children. Without them, I would not be here. They have children and they do a fantastic job, but to

[Lee Anderson]

balance that with having a career, running a home, being married or having a partner, or whatever they have to multitask. My right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said he is not very good at multitasking—I can vouch for that because I have been in his office quite a few times this week, and he cannot multitask at all. Women play an incredibly important part in society.

Bob Stewart: I had to intervene on my very good friend, but I must say that I think I am seriously lucky to be a man. Frankly, I do not have to put up with all the rubbish that women sometimes have to go through, so I am very glad, and I think my hon. Friend would probably say the same, would he not?

Lee Anderson: I completely agree with my right hon. and gallant Friend, who makes a really good point.

We know this happens: the majority of single parents in this country are ladies—women—and the hurdles they have to go over on a daily basis just to get by in life are hard enough. As a Government and as a society, we are trying to get more people back into the workplace. We have a skills shortage and there are lots of jobs in the economy—there are over 1 million vacancies, and we need to plug that gap—but what are we doing in such situations? We are putting up obstacles and barriers, as we sometimes do to disabled people, and making it so difficult for them to get back into the workplace.

We are missing a trick, and it is costing the economy. It is also costing employers, because if they are not recruiting or keeping in the workplace a lady who has had children or is on maternity leave, they are missing a trick. They are not upskilling that person, and if they are not retaining that person, they have to go out and recruit somebody else and spend thousands and thousands of pounds getting them up to speed when that asset—that employee—is already there. We need to stop missing that trick, use a little bit more common sense in the workplace, get behind our brilliant women in the UK, because they are brilliant, and give them all the support they need.

Theresa Villiers: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is particularly important to do this at a time when the cost of living is causing so much pressure on family finances? The last thing young families need at this point is for women to be forced out of the workplace because of unfair treatment.

Lee Anderson: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. As I say, we have an abundance of talented women in this country, and many of them are sitting in here today—I had to say that, did I not? We are putting up barriers and obstacles to these women, but they want to go out there, get into the workplace, earn good money, have good careers and contribute to society, and it is only right that we remove all these barriers in the workplace. So I welcome the Bill and wholeheartedly support it. I am going to shut up now because I have said enough, and I know there are one or two more speakers and the Minister wants to have his say about this.

11.58 am

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I never thought I would hear myself say the words, but it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson). It is always good when there is such consensus across the Chamber on Fridays in this place, and I think it is something we could perhaps do with a little more of at other times of the week.

I congratulate the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on his success in the ballot to secure the opportunity to introduce a private Member's Bill. I admit I am jealous, but I really want to commend him for the choice of subject, especially given the fact, as the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) said, that he as a man is introducing this Bill.

I also commend the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), who has been congratulated by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, for all her previous work to bring forward a similar Bill. I mention my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), who raised the matter in a Westminster Hall debate last year, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans), who had hoped to be here today but unfortunately cannot be. I thank him for giving me some good pointers for my speech. I commend the work of Maternity Action, the maternity rights charity, for its work to advance women's rights during pregnancy for many years.

For far too long, women have been discriminated against in many ways—in society generally, in employment particularly and when pregnant specifically. Looking round the Chamber, I can confidently say that I am the oldest woman here. When I was pregnant with my first child in 1974, I was discriminated against in the most horrendous way. I found out that I was pregnant about a month before I was due to start a job in the civil service setting up jobcentres on the east coast of Scotland. The arrangement was that I had to phone and say that I was ready to start, so I had a very pleasant chat with someone—I cannot remember the details; it was a long time ago—and mentioned in the conversation that I was pregnant. They literally said, “Goodbye,” and put the phone down, and I never heard from the civil service again. That was standard operating procedure in those days; the civil service did not do anything wrong that I could chase them up in law for or anything. That was just the end of what might have been a wonderful civil service career.

When I have told that story to younger people, such as my daughters, my daughters-in-law and my students when I taught at West Lothian College, I got the same gasp that I just heard in the Chamber. We have moved on—my daughter and my two wonderful daughters-in-law have never experienced anything like that—but I am acutely aware of the cultural change that is necessary in this area. Although there are some laws that prohibit direct discrimination against women, there needs to be cultural change to bring people on board.

I would like to think that with this private Member's Bill and the Government's support, we are working our way towards eliminating another form of discrimination against women, especially when they are pregnant. They are vulnerable enough. My daughter is pregnant at the moment and I am pleased to say that she is in secure employment and is unlikely to face that kind of pressure.

The Bill is an important step towards achieving that and providing protection for pregnant women against them being treated less favourably than men in similar circumstances—well, there will not be a similar circumstance for men.

At this point, I must say that I agree entirely with the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). In my first public speaking contest—in the days when we talked about sexual equality—I gave a speech saying that I did not want to be equal to men because I thought that women were much better. I have not changed my mind much about that, and it is nice that he has the same view on the matter. It is important to recognise that many hon. Members, some of whom I have mentioned, have supported this work. The cross-party basis on which the Bill is being debated is a wonderful demonstration of how, if we pull together, we can make things better for our constituents and others across the United Kingdom.

In 2015, the Equality and Human Rights Commission published research, some of which we have heard about already today, showing that one in 20 new mothers are made redundant during pregnancy or maternity leave or on their return to work. That shocking statistic reveals a disturbing level of disregard on the part of some employers for the needs of women. The following year, the Taylor review into modern working practices highlighted further research confirming that the majority of employers expressed a wish and willingness to support pregnant women and new mothers, and the report commented favourably on the finding that more than 80% of employers felt it was in their interest to support pregnant women and new mothers.

However, women might be less enamoured of the finding that at least one in 10 employers, and possibly as many as one in five, are not willing to support pregnant women and new mothers. We have heard some terrible examples of that today. The detailed findings show a disturbing level of acceptance among employers and managers that discrimination against women on the basis of their decision to bear children or their caring responsibilities is acceptable.

All the following views were endorsed by at least one third of the employers and managers interviewed. Many of those interviewed claimed to have seen at least one pregnant woman “take advantage” of her pregnancy and regarded pregnancy as putting “an unnecessary cost burden” on the workplace. That is shocking, and it is a cultural attitude that we all must strive to change. Given that those attitudes and views are widely held among employers and managers, is it any wonder that pregnant women and new mothers are so widely discriminated against in the workplace?

Between employers and Governments, effective arrangements must be put in place to support women and their families through the potentially life-changing process of pregnancy and rearing children. However, under current arrangements women have enhanced protection from redundancy only until they return from maternity leave, and the evidence—some of which I have heard here today—is that that protection is not working. It means only that a woman on maternity leave can be made redundant, but must be offered an alternative job above anyone else being made redundant if another job exists, which can prove a very big caveat, and the current law does not stop employers using pregnancy as an excuse for a piece of cost cutting.

That is clearly demonstrated by the case of Jessica—not her real name—whose story was disclosed by the campaign group Pregnant Then Screwed. Jessica had a well-paid job, became pregnant and was made redundant on the day she was due to return from maternity leave. The day before she was due back, which was during lockdown, she received a text telling her not to go in to the office but to be available for a video call with a senior manager. During that call, she was told that she was being made redundant. She had been back at work for all of 30 minutes. She is convinced that the firm simply wanted to cut its staff budget and that, by going on maternity leave, she had unknowingly self-selected for redundancy. What a way to treat a member of staff—and what a welcome into the world for her child, with a family now burdened by unaffordable debt and forced to move out of their home, and a mother whose mental health and career were in tatters.

As an employee of the company, Jessica might have had some chance of arguing her case for discrimination, although the costs and hurdles associated with attempting that would put most people off. On the other hand, Mandy, whose case was highlighted by the Taylor review, had no chance of taking out a legal case, because legal protections in the UK are so heavily and deliberately weighted against workers who are not direct employees. Mandy had worked for a bank on a zero-hours contract for several months. However, when she informed her employer that she was pregnant, her hours were reduced to zero; in effect, she was summarily dismissed with no recourse. Mandy is one of those pregnant women and new mothers who have borne the brunt of the increasing casualisation of the UK workforce. She found out that employment status—whether as a direct employee, self-employed, or through other ways of employing people—is important because that dictates entitlement to key maternity and paternal rights. Those in the growing number of insecure forms of employment can find their rights greatly diminished, reducing or eliminating their entitlements to maternity and parental pay and leave, health and safety protection, time off for antenatal appointments, and rights to return to work.

I know that this is not covered by the Bill, but it must be highlighted. The “Insecure Labour” report produced in 2020 by Maternity Action spells out some of the implications of casualised or insecure work on women workers, pregnant women and new mothers. Heather Wakefield, the chair of Maternity Action said that the report

“paints a shocking picture, which requires swift and radical action by Government, employers and trade unions to halt the damaging impact of casualisation on the working lives and wellbeing of pregnant women and new mothers.”

These cases are not isolated incidents; we have heard plenty about that this year.

I commend the hon. Member for Barnsley Central. I think that the parts of his speech concerning German law were new to most of us, and they were really interesting and useful. I know that this private Member’s Bill does not go into that, but it can be a really good start. It is really important that we can look at improving working rights altogether, especially for women, but for everyone in the UK.

I am not an economist, and I do not really want to be, but it does not make economic sense for businesses to discard women who have huge skills and bring so much

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to the workforce. There is a real economic case for retaining members of staff—it has been proved over and over again—as they can be role models for other young women who want to come in and they can help businesses succeed. They are well worth retaining.

I do not think I need to say this, but, in case of doubt, I fully support the Bill and would be happy to serve on its Committee. As I have said, I applaud the hon. and gallant Member, and I thank everyone who has spoken so well and so passionately in the debate.

12.13 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his place and congratulate my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on bringing this important Bill to the House for debate. I know that he has worked closely with civil servants and previous Ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to produce a workable Bill that can pass through the House.

The Bill before us has cross-party support, as was evident from the contributions. Those of us who have been in this place for any length of time know how difficult it is to get cross-party support—especially on a private Member's Bill—so that is a testament to his hard work. I know that hon. Members across the House will join me in congratulating him on that.

May I also thank the previous Minister, the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), who is in her place, for the fantastic work she has done in this area? I know about that from conversations we have had. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) is not in her place, but I understand that she has done a considerable amount of work in this area too. I think it is important to record that here.

I also want to pay thanks to other hon. Members to their contribution to the debate. Before I do, I have to say that I feel the Conservative Whips today will be very pleased with my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central, as he has nominated a number of Members to take the somewhat burdensome task at Committee stage off their hands. He did it in a masterful way; I was sat admiring and learning how it was done.

I want to genuinely thank hon. Members from across the House. The hon. Member for Loughborough made the point that we are at our best when we come together. It is absolutely right that we come together on matters of huge importance. I thank the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who, in his customary style of combining humour, passion and some very serious points, spoke very well. We will all take away his fine point about women being far superior to men. It is certainly a point I would never disagree with. My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) spoke very passionately and gave real-life examples from her constituency that highlighted the broader impact on families and children.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) gave a very passionate speech. He spoke from personal experience but also made the good point that good employers would actually welcome this legislation for all the right reasons. I have already thanked the hon. Member for Loughborough, but she rightly pointed out

that this legislation extends to shared parental leave and adoption leave, and quite rightly so. The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) cited constituency examples and spoke of her personal experience, and I think everybody would agree about the importance of the cases she referenced.

The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) quite rightly highlighted the benefits to employers as well as employees. She made a valuable point about the increased productivity that this measure will clearly bring. The hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) made a pertinent point, the theme of which ran through all Members' contributions: it is tragic that we are in the year 2022 and having to address this form of discrimination. It is shocking. Tragically, he is right that the discrimination in the workplace starts way before pregnancy. He highlighted many important points.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) cited a harrowing personal experience with the civil service. It was from the past, but she was visibly still quite moved, naturally and understandably. She gave equally moving examples from her constituency.

I am very grateful to all the hon. Members who have spoken today. They all spoke well and highlighted the importance of this Bill, which seeks to extend the protections from redundancy afforded to those taking maternity leave, adoption leave or shared parental leave beyond the date on which their leave ends, and to strengthen the protections afforded in pregnancy. As we have heard, these protections are desperately needed.

Maternity Action, Unison, the TUC and others have found that many employees are still being unfairly dismissed through redundancy. A number of hon. Members rightly cited reports such as the 2015 Equality and Human Rights Commission finding that 54,000 new mothers may be forced out of their job each year by being made compulsorily redundant or being treated so poorly that they have no option but to leave. Rather alarmingly, the Women and Equalities Committee found there is more discrimination and poor treatment of pregnant women and mothers at work than a decade ago, which should shock the House.

If those figures were not alarming enough, the campaign group Pregnant Then Screwed, which has been referenced by a number of Members, found in 2020 that more than one in 10 pregnant women had either been made redundant or expected to be made redundant, with almost two in three believing their pregnancy and motherhood was a factor. The TUC has reported that some women had been forced to take sick leave or unpaid leave because their workplace was no longer safe for them during their pregnancy and because their employer had refused to make the required adjustments.

As everyone who spoke before me said, it is frankly disgraceful that, in 2022, there is still discrimination against new mothers and mothers-to-be in the workplace, and that bad bosses feel they can flout employment law with impunity and without consequence or retribution. It could not be clearer that the existing protections for pregnant women fall far below the standard we should expect in this country.

With more than 15 million women aged 16 and over in employment between April and June 2022, with the female employment rate increasing to 72%—many of whom may choose to take periods of leave to have a

family—and with the right to family life being a key human right, protecting those who choose to start and raise a family from unfair dismissal must be a key priority for this House and this Government. That is why Labour's new deal for working people, published last year, makes a firm commitment to enshrine stronger protections in law to make it unlawful for an employer to dismiss a woman who is pregnant, while also extending statutory maternity and paternity leave.

I am pleased that not only has my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central introduced this Bill but that the Government support his proposal, even if it has tragically taken us more than three years since the consultation to see this legislation. Although the Opposition Front Bench team support this Bill, we have a number of concerns about the shortcomings of Government policy that will weaken the Bill's protections. The Minister will know from the tone of my speech that it is made in good faith. The strength of this debate shows the passion on both sides of the House to make this Bill as strong as possible and to afford as many protections as possible.

I am concerned about the Government's plans to raise awareness among employers of the changes the Bill will make to regulations. Employers of all sizes must be made aware of their existing statutory responsibilities to those who are pregnant and those who are taking maternity, adoption or shared parental leave, even before we get to the strengthened protections that my hon. Friend proposes. As we have heard, many employers are flouting the current protections either deliberately, knowing they can get away with it, or inadvertently because they simply do not know what protections the law affords to pregnant women and those taking parental leave. It is clear that if we are to make progress, in my view, the Minister should have a hands-on approach to regulation and must ensure that employers are made aware. I hope the Minister is able to confirm today the actions that they will be taking to spread awareness among employers of existing and new protections—that point has been made by several Members today.

The issue of upholding and enforcing rights also takes me neatly on to my next point about the current backlog in employment tribunals. As has been pointed out, the Bill today and the regulations set to be made by the Minister will not apply a comprehensive blanket ban on making a pregnant woman or those on parental leave redundant, but only strengthen their chances of making a successful claim of unfair dismissal through the employment tribunal system. As anyone who has tried to hold their employer to account through the employment tribunal system for a breach of employment law will know, the situation is beyond dire. With a backlog of over half a million single and multiple claims, it can be up to two years after a claim is made that someone will have their case heard.

Faced with such a backlog, it is simply no wonder that such a high proportion of people withdraw their claims. If the Minister intends for the protections afforded by the Bill and forthcoming regulations, he must tackle that backlog as a matter of immediate priority.

Those made redundant and unfairly dismissed from their employment while pregnant or on parental leave must also have much greater flexibility in making an employment tribunal claim. That is why the Opposition's new deal for working people proposes extending the time limit on

bringing an employment tribunal claim so that no one is forced into making a hasty claim to a tribunal before allowing ACAS and their trade union to reach a settlement with their employer, so that anyone who has recently had a child does not have to face the additional pressures of making a claim in those hectic first three months when, as everyone will agree, caring for their child comes before their own wellbeing.

As has been pointed out, the Bill does not propose imposing a blanket ban on redundancies during the new extended period that the Minister must define in secondary legislation. That leaves real concerns that it will not go far enough in stopping discrimination against pregnant women in the workplace and those on parental leave, nor sufficiently protect them from redundancy. There are concerns that it will not be clear enough to employers.

As the Minister knows, and as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central, the German model offers a clear and pragmatic standard that the UK can adopt and adjust. My hon. Friend has gone through the German model point for point, so I do not seek to repeat that; it is on the record and Members were here when he made those points. In all sincerity, I would be grateful for a response from the Minister as to why the Government cannot adopt that model, beyond claiming that it would be too difficult to implement.

The qualifying period to obtain the additional protection offered after a period of leave is also a worry. That point, as I understand it, has not been made here today, but I believe it is equally important, as those most in need of protection are those who are forced to tragically curtail their leave before the sixth week because of personal, often financial, circumstance. These individuals should not be excluded from the extended protections being offered because of their circumstances and their need to curtail their leave. I hope the Minister will look again at this issue when regulations bringing it into effect are being drafted.

Finally, I wish to raise my concerns around the legislation itself. Although the Bill is the first step in introducing stronger protections for those on parental leave, the journey culminates in the Secretary of State making regulations that apply and specify the protections, and, as far as I can see, there is nothing compelling him to introduce these regulations by a certain date. Having covered this brief for some time, I am more than a little used to the Government promising action and, tragically, not following through on many important issues. For example, the ethnicity pay gap reporting keeps getting kicked into the long grass, and the legislation that mysteriously enters into the “in due course” world never seems to come back.

Tragically, some private Members' Bills rarely make it on to the statute book because the Government refuse to make time for them in Committee. I therefore hope the Minister will confirm the date for the Bill to pass through its Committee stage. I know that there may be a provisional date, but it would be nice to have that confirmation.

All these concerns could have been addressed if the Government had only introduced and passed an employment Bill, as they said they would almost three years ago. It was first announced in the Queen's Speech in 2019 and then pushed back to a point “in due course”—that seems to be when so many of the plans

[Imran Hussain]

from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will take place—and now seemingly has been scrapped, with no mention of it in the Queen's Speech earlier this year. An employment Bill would have provided a means for the Government to strengthen protections for pregnant women and those on parental leave years ago, as well as so much more.

In closing, I want to be clear that we absolutely support the Bill before us today and applaud the work that has been done by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central. Again, I thank hon. Members from the across the House for the spirit in which this debate has been conducted today and for their powerful contributions. I hope, given the strength of feeling and the sincerity with which we have all spoken today, the Minister will look at making concessions with regards to the points that I have raised, particularly around ensuring that the regulations that are made can be upheld and enforced.

12.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Dean Russell): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). I thank him for his contribution and his questions, which I will do my best to cover. If I do not, hopefully, we can cover them separately as we move forward.

I truly thank the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for bringing this important legislation forward. I thank, too, all of the Members who have spoken on this important matter today, including: the hon. Members for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), my hon. Friends the Members for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) and for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), with his incredibly powerful and moving comments, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), and the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). I will come to some of the key points as I progress with my speech.

I wish to echo the thanks of the hon. Member for Barnsley Central to my predecessors. I often say that anyone who takes on these roles stands on the shoulders of giants. I am very fortunate to be building on the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), whose work has been phenomenal, and my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), with whom I have worked closely and whose work has been even more phenomenal in helping us get to this point today.

My right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet both predicted what I am about to say: I am pleased to confirm that the Government support the Bill. I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Barnsley Central in Committee. We have talked a lot about recruitment; he did an amazing job of recruiting many members to his Committee—hopefully more women than men, although I was not keeping count.

I am pleased to support the Bill from a personal perspective. I am the father to an inspirational daughter; the husband to an incredible and smart wife; the son to a loving and hardworking mother; my sister is a cancer survivor and has dealt with challenges with such kindness and strength; and I am an uncle to beautiful nieces. The Bill is trying to support women and girls for the future to feel true equality in their lives and in the workplace. It certainly signals that to them all.

The Bill is another example of how Parliament works so well together. When we support and challenge each other, we get the best legislation and we show the country that we are all compassionate and believe in getting the legislation right. That often means that things take a bit more time, but the trouble is the very small number of unscrupulous businesses. We heard moving comments from the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) about how when people think they can get away with things, sadly they do, and in some of the worst instances. Most businesses are honourable and do the right thing, but we have to ensure that there are no holes in the legislation, because those who want to get around doing the right thing will always find those holes. It is right that the legislation takes time and it is fabulous that we are discussing it.

I know what a crucial issue pregnancy and maternity discrimination truly is and the pernicious effect that it can have on both the immediate and longer term prospects for women in work. More generally, it puts a drag on equality and productivity. We heard earlier about the challenges not just to the workplace and to the economy but to mental health. The Bill will make a difference not just in the workplace but at home, so that people truly have a work-life balance. That means not having to worry about things that they should not need to worry about.

Nickie Aiken: It is important to provide women who are pregnant or on maternity leave with workplace protections. Do women trying to get pregnant by undergoing fertility treatment deserve the same employment rights as those who get pregnant naturally?

Dean Russell: My hon. Friend has done incredible work on her private Member's Bill. Officials and I are looking at it very closely. I applaud her for her work not just on that but generally. She is a staunch, hardworking Member for her constituents. That is why I am pleased to be here and to have taken on this important portfolio, for as long as it may last—hopefully years rather than days.

Irrespective of who is at the Dispatch Box, the Government are committed to ensuring that the UK is the best place in the world to work and grow a business. We need a strong and flexible labour market that supports participation and economic growth. Let me put on record why the Government support the legislation. When we talk about female economic empowerment, we tend to talk about positive facilitative policies: parental leave and pay, flexible working, women on boards and so on—policies looking to drive positive action to achieve better outcomes.

We are taking huge strides to deliver equal opportunities for women in the UK. They include mandatory pay gap reporting, the largest ever cash increase in the national

living wage in 2022 and passing the landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021. It is pleasing to see that nearly 2 million more women are in work since 2010. The number of women on FTSE 350 company boards is up by over 50% in just five years. The number of women in FTSE 100 company boardroom roles has jumped to 39% from 12.5% 10 years ago. There is a higher percentage of women on FTSE 350 company boards than ever before. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West pointed out however, there are some very negative statistics that we need to address.

Shaun Bailey: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position. When it comes to Ministers who should be in position, he is 1,000% one of them and I am so glad to see him in his place on the Front Bench. He has just pointed out that the statistics in other areas are not great: can he give a commitment that the Government are 100% determined to ensure that we get those stats up? The fact that in the legal profession only 28% of partners are women is not good enough. If 60% of employees are women but only 28% make partner, that is nowhere near enough.

Dean Russell: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments. Equality is not just for the sake of equality: it improves things on every level—the economy, the workplace, the challenge in boardrooms and many other areas. I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend mention that 80% of his office staff are women, because that is a powerful example of how we in this place can lead from the front. We talked earlier about mental health. I have noticed in the past few years how people here have talked much more about mental health, and now it is talked about much more in the workplace and in society. That is a really important example of this House leading. I remember a few years ago in 2015 when I had a small role in helping to support, in a professional capacity, a report by the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament. It looked at how we could encourage more women into the workplace and, in particular, more women into politics. We need to have that at the front of our minds at all times.

On International Women's Day in March this year, we announced a package of initiatives to help to open up more opportunities to women and to boost the post-pandemic recovery, including by promoting transparency and fairness in pay, ending employers asking about salary history, and supporting women who want to return to the science, technology, engineering and maths workforce. We have an extensive suite of parental leave and pay rights. Parents have access to a range of leave and pay entitlements in a child's first year, giving working families more choice and flexibility about who cares for their child and when. Our maternity leave entitlement is also generous. To qualifying employed women we offer 52 weeks of maternity leave, of which 39 are paid, which is three times more than the EU minimum requirement. For self-employed women and those who are not eligible for statutory maternity pay, maternity allowance may be available. Both maternity payments are designed to provide a measure of financial security, to help women to stop working towards the end of their pregnancies and in the months after childbirth in the interests of their own and their babies' health and wellbeing.

As well as the positive steps we can encourage or require employers to take, we need to clamp down on poor and inappropriate practices, such as waiting for a woman to return from maternity leave and for the current protected period to end, and then—terribly—making her redundant. That is just so wrong. We know that one of the key drivers of the gender pay gap is the time that women stay away from work. Ensuring that women are not needlessly forced out of the workplace is therefore an important way to tackle that inequality and maximise the economic contribution that women can make. As the hon. Member for Barnsley Central explained, the incidence of pregnancy and maternity discrimination, and the poor treatment of pregnant women and new mothers, is still far too high. That is unacceptable, and why the Bill is so important.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham—I cannot see him in his place but I am sure he will be listening elsewhere—asked whether the Government will produce guidance on pregnancy and maternity discrimination advisory boards. I will take that back to the Department, but there will be work to ensure that information is communicated far and wide so that both employers and employees are aware of those rights.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central and others mentioned the German model. I am conscious that there is always a question whether we can push further and faster and do more. I definitely take his comments on board, but the Government do not think that it is right to follow the German model; I will happily follow up separately with specific details about why we do not agree with going that far. However, there is merit in how the Bill takes definite strides in that direction.

The personal stories told today have been really powerful. Emily and Natasha have been mentioned; my condolences and thoughts are with them after the challenges that they have faced. I hope that the hon. and gallant Member's work today will ensure that what happened to them is not repeated. The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn spoke about the discrimination during pregnancy that her friends faced, which was a really powerful way of bringing to life why the Bill is so important.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West asked about cultural change. As he alluded to in his intervention just now, this is a societal thing. We can change things through legislation, but it is often much better to ensure that we change things in society. The Bill should be the backstop rather than being front and centre for businesses—they should just do the right thing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough did an excellent job, both as my predecessor and in her comments today. I commend her for ensuring that we have moved in the right direction with the Bill. As the hon. Member for Bradford East said, getting collaboration around the table on amendments—never mind getting a private Member's Bill agreed by the Government—is an immense achievement, and my predecessor has kept the Bill on the table.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster made the point that it is so essential to ensure that women can continue to pursue their career. Nobody should feel that wanting to have a family

[Dean Russell]

should end their career. That should never be the situation in the 21st century, or any century. We need to go full force on this.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet spoke about economic activity. She made the point that this is not just about being nice and doing the right thing; it has a substantial impact on the bottom line and on this country's economy.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield—I should call him my hon. Friend, but I am sure he will be my right hon. Friend at some point; he is always right honourable to me—was so eloquent, as always. He always hits the nail on the head. He made the important point that if we retain women we can also navigate the challenges of skills shortages. That is so important, especially when we consider that there are almost 1 million roles available. Let us make sure that we promote all opportunities to all people.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw spoke so eloquently about the challenges that she faced many decades ago. Hopefully, many of them have since been addressed in legislation, but the Bill will take things even further.

I note the point that the hon. Member for Bradford East raised about tribunal time limits. The Government recognise that there are concerns that in certain circumstances the three-month time limit for bringing Equality Act-based cases to tribunal may not feel long enough. In July 2019 we ran a public consultation on whether the limit should be extended; the positive impact that such a change could have is clear from the responses that we received. The Government response, which was published in July 2021, committed to

“look closely at extending the time limit for bringing Equality Act 2010 based cases to the employment tribunal”.

We continue to consider the evidence for doing so, and we understand the positive impact that it will ultimately have.

In conclusion, these measures will provide invaluable support and protection for parents during what should be an exciting and joyous time—pregnancy and the start of their child's life—as they juggle work and caring responsibilities. The extension of MAPLE to pregnancy in a period of return to work is backed by evidence and analysis. The Government's and the EHRC's research, and the work of the Women and Equalities Committee and others, have established that there is a clear need for further work to help parents at these times. We must take steps to tackle the discrimination and poor treatment that some undoubtedly face.

The Government are pleased to support the Bill. It is wholly in line with our ongoing commitment to support workers and build a high-skilled, high-productivity, high-wage economy. We look forward to continuing to work with the hon. Member for Barnsley Central and, of course, all the new Committee members who are in the Chamber today to support the Bill.

12.50 pm

Dan Jarvis: With the leave of the House, I will briefly respond to what has been an extremely useful and constructive debate, at the end of what, according to any metric, has been quite a long week in this place.

There have been some outstanding contributions from Members today. Everyone who spoke added real value to the debate, and I am incredibly grateful to all of them. I also thank the EHRC, the TUC, the Royal College of Midwives, Unison, the Fawcett Society and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, not just for their invaluable support for the Bill but for the important work that they do. Let me, in particular, thank the Minister, who has been remarkably helpful, as was the previous Minister, as was the shadow Minister, and as have been the officials at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Clerks, and my very small team in Parliament, Richard Mitchell and Alex Foy, for all the hard work that has gone into the Bill.

As I have said, this has been an extremely useful debate. A huge number of important points have been made—too many to mention. I think it has been acknowledged that the Bill is timely. We all know that our constituents are facing a cost of living crisis, so this is the right moment at which to introduce such legislation. We should of course recognise the pain and suffering of those who have had to endure the hardship of unfair dismissal.

There has been general agreement on the fact that raising a family is a difficult, though important, job, but it is made much more difficult when people have to face discrimination in the workplace. I pay tribute to all who have been fighting that discrimination, including the extraordinary women who are fighting for justice in the courts. I also pay tribute to organisations such as Pregnant Then Screwed and Maternity Action for their dedicated work to protect and enhance the rights of pregnant women.

Whatever happens today, it will still be too late for Emily, Natasha and Sarah, but, as the Minister rightly said a moment ago, their contribution to this process has been incredibly valuable. I hope that they, and all the other people who have been affected, will take some comfort from knowing that they have contributed to—hopefully—a change in the law that will help to give more than 50,000 women a year the security of returning to their job after taking maternity leave. I ask the House to support the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Congratulations, Mr Jarvis. It has been a privilege for me to chair this particular debate, which has shown the House working at its very best.

Carer's Leave Bill

Second Reading

12.53 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Let me first echo the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and say that it would be remiss of me not to comment on the fact that the Bill was scheduled to have its Second Reading on 9 September. Very sadly, the death of the late Queen Elizabeth prevented that. I am therefore pleased to have the opportunity to present the Bill today. Again like the hon. Member for Barnsley Central, I want to recognise the work of previous Ministers, in this case the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) and the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), who is in the Chamber, and thank them for their support for the Bill so far. I also thank the civil servants at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who have been a constant thread in the time that has elapsed since I took up this cause.

In many respects, carers are the backbone of our country. We think of caring for our loved ones as often a small and personal thing; we do it behind closed doors. It can be full-time personal care—washing, dressing or feeding; things that we instinctively think of as private—or it can be, for instance, making appointments or taking someone to a hospital appointment. Those are the small things that we do for people we love, or know, without questioning it. Taken together, however, all those individual acts of caring are huge. In 2016 the Office for National Statistics estimated that the gross value of unpaid care in the UK was almost £60 billion, and we know that that figure will only have gone up in the last six years. This country would collapse without its unpaid carers, and their importance must not be underestimated.

The Liberal Democrats have long championed unpaid carers, and never more so than under the leadership of my friend and carer, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey)—I do not mean that he cares for me, but he has spoken in this House and other places about the care he gives to his family. At the height of the pandemic, the Liberal Democrats campaigned to have unpaid carers recognised as a priority group for vaccinations, and we have long been calling for employment rights for carers, including the type of leave that the Bill will introduce. Indeed, all Bills that will hopefully achieve Second Reading today are about improving employment rights for all.

Although I knew that the Bill had the backing of my party, I have been overwhelmed by the amount of cross-party support it has received. I have received support from Members from every party in the House, and I am pleased to see Members here today. Sadly, I know there would have been others, but for the rescheduling of the Bill. Indeed, I was even more ahead than the hon. Member for Barnsley Central, because I managed to secure members of the Committee before I got here. For example, I know that, among others, the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinanage), who co-chairs the all-party parliamentary group on carers, and the hon. Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans), for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), and

for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), wanted to be here today, but they were unable to due to the rescheduling. I have been tapping them for Committee membership as a result.

I have had conversations with the Government, who I hope will support the Bill. It is disappointing that we have not had the opportunity to have an employment Bill, as proposed in the Queen's Speech in 2019. That was long-promised, but sadly never delivered, and although that has given me, and others, the opportunity to bring forward employment legislation, we must ensure that other gaps are filled by the Government.

Members are here today because this is a good Bill, and if the House will bear with me, I will set out in more detail some of what it proposes. It will mean that for the first time ever, all employees from their first day of employment will be entitled to take time off to help manage caring responsibilities. That fills a gap in the current law whereby although employees can take limited time off for emergencies, and parents can take time off to care for their children, there is no provision for the day-to-day planned caring of adults.

The idea of a caring responsibility has been drafted widely to include as much as possible. As I said at the outset, a lot of things count as caring. Caring can include day-to-day physical support, taking someone to appointments or doing the shopping, liaising with medical staff, or sitting with someone as they struggle through a diagnosis. It could be helping elderly parents move into sheltered accommodation, or the time spent arranging for social carers to visit daily. It includes support for someone with a long-term physical or mental illness, and anything to do with old age.

The Bill has also been drafted widely to include as many caring relationships as possible. We would obviously expect it to cover immediate family, but the Bill goes further and includes not only cohabitees, tenants and lodgers, but anyone who reasonably relies on an employee to provide or arrange care. This summer I spoke to one of my constituents in relation to the Bill. In addition to caring for his wife, he does the shopping for an elderly neighbour. That small act of kindness is also caring, and the Bill recognises that.

The leave is flexible and incredibly light touch. It can be taken in half-day chunks, and it works through self-certification. The notice period is expected to be short, at twice the length of time to be taken plus one day. For most people, if they want a half day on Wednesday afternoon that means letting their employer know by Monday lunchtime. As flexible not emergency care, I believe that to be reasonable, and in line with current regulations for annual leave so easy for everybody to understand. Most importantly, employers cannot refuse a request for leave. They can ask for it to be postponed, but only in a manner that is reasonable.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I want to emphasise some of the points that the hon. Lady is making, which illustrate that having that flexibility built in with the notice provisions, and a Bill that affects anyone who is involved in providing care, is crucial. I commend her for her work in bringing forward this Bill.

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution. Yes, we need to be flexible—that is important—because there is such a range of caring. It is also

[Wendy Chamberlain]

important, however, that we align that with other existing legislation, as that will make this easier and less burdensome for employers and employees to understand. I do not want the Bill to become law but then people do not utilise it, because they are not aware of it.

I met the Minister and officials to discuss the Bill and to ensure that it is the best we can get it before becoming law. That means that, in some areas, it does not potentially do everything that I would want it to do, if it were down to just me. For a start, my instincts would be to want the rights to be implemented immediately through primary legislation. That is not possible, which means I am trusting the Government to act in good faith in supporting the Bill, and I expect them to bring in the proposed regulations at the earliest possible opportunity. I will be here to make sure that they do.

The Bill does not go as far as Liberal Democrat policy would go. We would like there to be more time and for that to be paid, but I accept that this is a journey and that this is a vital first step in getting these rights on to the statute book now. There is nothing on the statute book that recognises leave for caring.

It is estimated that 2.3 million carers—that is a conservative estimate—cannot wait for the perfect policy to be put in place. They need these rights as soon as possible. According to the 2011 census, there are at least 3,000 carers in my North East Fife constituency. I spent summer recess meeting many of them. I have been told time and again that, although the Bill will not make their lives easy, because caring is challenging, it will help just a little bit to keep some of the plates spinning.

I learned a lot this summer about the vast variety of caring experiences that people have. Karen cares for her 91-year-old mother. She drives from Cupar in North East Fife to Annan every weekend to be with her mother—I assure the House that that is a long way; hon. Members should look it up on a map following the debate—to make sure that she is stocked up and to deal with any household tasks that need doing. Her mum is fiercely independent and wants to remain in her own home. She makes and manages her appointments and, despite the 125-mile distance between her and her mother, she is a carer and needs her employer's support to make things work.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Is it not true that family members often do what they do out of love and that, in many ways, they find it difficult to come forward and claim the financial support they need for the hours they put in looking after their loved ones?

Wendy Chamberlain: I agree. During my conversations I find that carers are using annual leave and emergency unpaid leave, when they need to, in order to undertake caring responsibilities, and that sadly—as I will mention later—they are forced out of the workplace because they cannot manage to balance their responsibilities.

I also met the Fife carers support group in St Andrews, a group who call themselves, and I hope the House will forgive my language, the CRAP carers—that stands for compassionate, resourceful and patient. One lady was caring for her grown-up son, who is coping with severe mental health challenges, two were caring for terminally ill parents, and parents and partners with dementia

were being cared for. All were doing so with huge amounts of grit and compassion, and indeed humour—as the name they have chosen shows.

I came away from meeting that group feeling not only uplifted by their love for their family members, but angry because a number of them expressed guilt—guilt that so much of their time is spent dealing with the administration of caring, rather than feeling that they can give their loved ones the care that they need. That care admin includes negotiating with their employers.

I will bring to the House's attention the experience of one of my constituents in particular. Amanda works full time as well as providing increasing care to her mum and dad. Her dad has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and her mum, having been forgetful for a few years, is showing clear signs of dementia. Many of us will recognise that path: forgetfulness followed by confusion; denial followed by anger; and frustration as managing day-to-day life slips away. For Amanda, that means setting up appointments and speaking to carers and medical professionals. It means popping in as often as she can to do the shopping, to keep her dad company, to make sure her mum is okay and to be there after nurses leave to manage her mum's confusion and sometimes even distress.

That is all relatively new and, so far, Amanda's employer has been supportive. She has taken some last-minute holidays and she has been able to take the odd day off, but she is worried about what comes next. Her mum is not going to get any better. Will her employer stay supportive? What happens if she gets a new manager? Something that struck me in the earlier debate today is that sometimes it is not just about employers, but about managers and line managers, and ensuring that they have the correct information to take the correct decisions.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that this is just one of many changes that we will need to make as a society to reflect the fact that we are growing older and there are more and more of us who need care on a daily basis, much of which is thankfully provided by those heroes, unpaid carers and carers within families? I hope this is the start of a wider process where we reflect on what we can do to support carers in the incredibly important work they do.

Wendy Chamberlain: Absolutely; we have seen a lot of family legislation come in to support that, but the reality is that many people are not only looking after children and dependants, but looking after older generations as well. That is an increasing challenge for people, for employers and for society at large.

If I could, I would want to make it all better for Amanda, but I cannot. Ageing and illness are a part of life, and we care for family members because we love them and it is what we do. However, I know from research by Carers UK, which has given me and my researchers so much support in bringing this Bill forward, that there is a significant risk that someone like Amanda will burn out and end up cutting back on work or having to leave work altogether. My goal is to help, and with this Bill we can make things a little bit easier, with the guarantee of time off when she needs it—to be there when the nurse comes, to make those appointments and to have the breathing space to manage.

There is of course much more we could do to help unpaid carers, both those in work and those who find it impossible to cope and have given up their jobs to care full time. I met many carers over the summer whom this Bill will not help, because for them it is too late and they have given up on the world of work.

The experiences of those carers and the loved ones they care for are best expressed by my constituent Amy. She has multiple sclerosis and is the chair of the Fife MS Forum, and her husband now cares for her full time. That is not unusual; research by the MS Society found that 34% of carers give up work when caring for someone with MS.

I must tell the House that Amy is a force of nature. In her working life she was a behavioural scientist specifically working with young offenders. So successful was she at engaging those young people that at one point the local police force started to hear positively about a potential new gang called “Amy’s lads”—young people who were rehabilitating their lives and proud to be associated with Amy and the work she did.

However, for Amy and her husband it all boils down now to making sure that carers are valued—and not just through words, which I know we can all be guilty of. I started this speech with the time-honoured cliché that carers are the backbone of our society, but we in this House need to show that we value them through our actions.

First and foremost, that should mean uprating carer’s allowance for those who receive it and reviewing the policy under which carer’s allowance counts as income for other benefits such as universal credit. It should also mean reviewing the amount of work carers can do before they lose their allowance. That is particularly important for young carers, because those young people are caring even before they get into the world of work and will potentially be prevented from ever entering it if we do not help them.

Being a carer is hard work even when we do it for loved ones, but if we really want carers to know they are valued and if we want them to have some dignity, we must ensure that we help them. Amy told me from her experience with the MS Forum that many carers feel they are failures—failures for not being able to balance their home and professional lives, failures for not being the perfect partners, failures for not being able to get everything right. Amy was not the only person who told me that; sisters Alex and Claudia told me the same thing. They need caring for a loved one to be seen as equally valuable to paid employment. I thank the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), who is not here today, for his support to both sisters when they were his constituents. The work of the right hon. Gentleman and his team has been invaluable. I want every carer to know that they are not a failure—far from it—and we need policies to put that into action. I hope that all hon. Members agree.

To turn back to the details of carer’s leave, I will set out how the Bill will work for businesses. I am delighted that this is a policy where doing the right thing for people is also doing the right thing for businesses. Thanks to Carers UK, I have had several opportunities to speak with businesses that already have support policies in place for carers. A carer from one of those companies is in the Gallery. Those businesses include

Centrica, TSB Bank, Nationwide Building Society, the Phoenix Group, CMS, and not forgetting the University of St Andrews, which is the largest employer in my constituency. From those meetings, I happily offer the House three key observations.

First, offering carer’s leave, even paid carer’s leave, makes financial sense for businesses in the long run. Centrica, which has been at the forefront of the move among businesses to be carer-friendly, offers 10 days’ paid leave. With 20,000 employees, it estimates that it is saving £3.1 million a year by avoiding unplanned absences and improving employee retention. It and other businesses also report increased loyalty and higher motivation. People who feel supported in difficult times are simply more likely to put in that extra effort in the good times. That was borne out by what I have heard from carers. They want to keep working and are grateful for the support from their employers that means that they can.

Secondly, I have heard about the importance of formal leave policies that are well communicated and widely used throughout organisations. There are many different businesses and organisations in this country, and within those companies, there are lots of people doing lots of different types of roles. I have heard that, even within organisations that are ahead of the game on such policies, it can be a challenge to get people to make use of the time that they are allowed. That sometimes makes people feel that the policies are not for them, because they work in a frontline or customer-facing role. That is why this law would help employees even in companies that are already on this journey. The Bill will make it a legal right, which will feel very different from just a perk of working for a good employer.

Thirdly, I was struck by the strength of feeling among businesses that there was a role for employers in helping their staff to recognise that they are carers and to feel supported and dignified in accessing the help they need. My husband is in the Gallery and he cares for his mother. He does not think of himself as a carer—many carers do not. Those businesses felt that introducing carer’s leave and other support, and reaching out to build a network, had been a catalyst that had kick-started an open conversation about what being a carer looks like. It helped people to realise the many forms that caring can take and that support is available to them. Again, the Bill plays a part in that by bringing the conversation into the open and into businesses up and down the country.

I also want to highlight the Scottish Government’s carer positive scheme. I am pleased to say that my office has just been accredited as a carer positive organisation. That is a way to identify and share good practice, and to show that an organisation is proud to support carers. If someone is in Scotland, I recommend finding out more about that.

Before I conclude, I will reflect on why this Bill works for the Government. Sitting on the Opposition Benches, I am not usually in the business of helping those on the Government Benches, but I assume that despite a tumultuous week, the Government are still broadly in favour of wanting to get more people, especially the over-50s, back into work—as set out in the growth plan of the former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng). I agree with the Government

[Wendy Chamberlain]

on that, although I oppose any plans that force people into unsuitable work through the threat of sanctions or benefit cuts.

The good news for the Government is that the primary demographic that will benefit from the Bill and will be supported to stay in work is the over-50s, particularly women, who have a 50:50 chance of providing care by the age of 46—I am just about there—and are more likely to work part time as a result. If the Government want people who have a 50% chance of caring to be in employment, having employment rights for carers is a really good first step. As I previously said, this Bill will also help to get young carers into the workplace and support them as they come in.

I appreciate that I have touched on this already, and it is outwith the Minister's portfolio, but it would definitely help if we lifted the number of hours that someone can work before they lose their carer's allowance. At the moment, carers can earn only £132 per week before it is taken away. That is less than 14 hours on the minimum wage. Increasing that to 25 hours, ideally on the slightly higher living wage, would go so far towards helping carers to keep their jobs and support themselves. Put simply, if the Government want people to work, they should let them.

I know that many of my colleagues want to speak in favour of the Bill, for which I am grateful, so I would like to conclude my remarks by returning to Amanda—caring for her parents, now more a parent than a child, trying to hold everything together. We all in this place, through our constituency casework, our family and friends, know someone like Amanda; it may even be us in the future. Our constituents, too, will either be in this situation or know someone who is being stretched in every direction. We are passing this Bill's Second Reading today for them. I commend the Bill to the House.

1.15 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), and I commend her for bringing in this important and timely Bill. She articulated so clearly the reasons why we need the Bill and its rationale, and I will not repeat the points she made because I could not clear that bar, but I want to chime in with support for the aims behind it.

The hon. Lady touched on some of the facts and figures, but we need to remind ourselves that in the first eight months of the pandemic, unpaid carers saved the state £135 billion. The contribution that this group of people have made to our society, particularly during that period but also more broadly, is without question. The truth is that, at some point in our lives, we will all have caring responsibilities of one form or another. This transcends society. It will impact every single person in the Chamber at some point, because we all have family members and people we love and care about, and it hits every single one of our constituents. The Bill is a great leveller for all of us, because we will all have to care for someone at some point, and we should not have to worry about our employment or financial obligations as a result of stepping up and helping the people we care about. I agree with the purpose of the Bill.

On the economics behind this, and particularly job retention, the hon. Lady talked about the £3.1 million a year that companies could save by supporting and retaining people through this legislation. As we touched on in the previous debate, we do not want to lose talented people from our workforce, but we run the risk of doing that if people cannot fulfil their caring responsibilities.

We come at this from different political prisms, as is often the case in the House, but we unite on the basis that this is an important, pragmatic piece of legislation. Those of us on the Government Benches often talk about giving people the opportunity to achieve what they wish to in life. Many of us are here or joined our party on the basis that we would do that. This issue is at the core of our principles as well, because it is about allowing people to achieve their potential, in spite of whatever circumstances may come their way, by giving them this opportunity.

I am proud to support the Bill, and the hon. Member for North East Fife has my support in what she is trying to achieve. If she needs someone to serve on the Bill Committee, she can put my name down; that is not a problem at all, and I expect an email in due course. What we are trying to do here today is absolutely right. Economically, it makes sense; socially, it makes sense; and morally, it makes sense. If we are determined to create a society founded on the basis that people care for one another and that we have strong family units and strong caring units, we have to ensure that there are the conditions in which they can do that. That means we have to legislate to ensure that those rights are protected, through carer's leave and what this Bill tries to achieve.

The hon. Lady highlighted some organisations that are doing great work on this already, but that should not be the exception; it should be the norm. If we have to legislate to do this, we will, because it will ultimately ensure that people can achieve their ambitions and that we can care for people in society; that is what this is about. I can tell the hon. Lady that I absolutely endorse her Bill.

1.19 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on her success in the ballot and bringing forward this really important Bill. I commend her for mentioning Carer Positive, the Scottish Government's scheme of which I have been a member for many years.

I may almost need to declare an interest as I was a carer for my late husband. I know that I was in such a fortunate position in being able to do that without any fear of having to ask for time off. I thank hon. Members across the House who supported me during that difficult time. It was a privilege to help care for him, but it was also much, much easier for me than it would be for any normal member of the public. That is why the Bill is so important.

I acknowledge the work carried out previously by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton). My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans) unfortunately could not be here, but I am glad to hear that he has asked to be a

member of the Bill Committee if everything goes smoothly today. However, I am not just here in his place as the SNP spokesperson on disabilities.

Where people have disabilities, their carers in particular work really hard and are fully deserving of a hand from the Government. So many organisations do good work. In particular, I commend Carers UK. I went to one of its drop-in sessions in this place having intended just to pop in and out, but I stayed for an hour and a half simply hearing about the first-hand experiences of carers, both in and outwith work. The Bill deals with people who are in work so that, by right, they will get leave to do important, necessary things such as shopping and hospital appointments and all the things that the hon. Member for North East Fife mentioned.

It does not reflect well on our society if we expect carers to care all the time and get no help from the state. It is really important that we acknowledge and help them. As people have said, not all heroes wear capes, and that is really true of folk who are working and doing unpaid care. Many people are helped by organisations such as North Lanarkshire Carers Together, which is based in the same office building as me in Motherwell. I am sure that it would highly appreciate the Bill progressing.

Evidence suggests that about 5 million people across the UK are providing unpaid care by looking after an elderly or disabled family member, relative or friend. Nearly half of them are also in work. As was mentioned in the previous debate, we have an ageing population in the UK, so we can expect that the number of carers to rise substantially.

It can be a real struggle to balance work and care. Many carers say that they are tired, stressed and struggling to manage their own physical and mental health. They urgently need more support to ensure that they can remain in work. The successful passage of the Bill would be a major step forward in recognising the enormous contribution that unpaid carers make to the care, health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities across the country.

When we think of carers, we tend to think of people looking after elderly relatives or parents, and sometimes of someone looking after a family member or friend. In reality, the person requiring care could be someone with an almost unimaginable range of circumstances, including adults and children of all ages. It is really important that we provide people with support so that they can do that caring.

It may seem strange to say, but carers leave could also have significant benefits for employers through lower recruitment and retention costs, better staff planning and better engagement. It will help to keep many more skilled people, the majority of them women, in work and contributing to our economy. The hon. Member for North East Fife mentioned the number of people who have to leave employment because they cannot do the necessary juggling.

Carers leave could also improve workforce health and wellbeing outcomes, which is important for everyone. It is still the case that most, but not all, carers are women. If women are in work, they can be role models to other women. These role models disappear if women have to leave work because of caring responsibilities. It is good when the Government and society recognise what people are doing. Although this is a small measure, it is important recognition.

We owe a debt of gratitude to carers who voluntarily do so much to care for others in our society, and we as a Parliament must do what we can to support them. My absent hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, my party and I support this Bill, and we hope that this Government, and future Governments, will continue to recognise the value and contribution of unpaid carers and introduce legislation to ensure at least one week's paid leave—ideally paid by the Government at a set rate in order to compensate employers—with a pledge to move to two weeks, or 10 days, of paid leave, and a longer period of up to six months' unpaid leave.

I hope the Bill will proceed with Government support, and I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife for introducing it.

1.27 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I rise to support the Second Reading of this excellent Bill, and to congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on introducing it. This timely Bill is much needed, and it is warmly welcomed on both sides of the House. I trust it will proceed smoothly through both Houses.

As the hon. Lady said, the world is full of carers who look after people far less fortunate than themselves. We should congratulate them on their work and, as the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) rightly said, we should recognise and support them wherever we can.

We heard in the previous debate about our falling birth rate and ageing population. All of us, at one stage or another, will undoubtedly need some form of care. In some ways, this Bill is an insurance policy. Indeed, the number of carers will undoubtedly increase and, as we all know, the cost of living and inflation mean that the cost of professional care is extremely high. The cost of hospices, paid carers and retirement homes has therefore become an impossible strain on many families, and it increases the need for unpaid care.

I was shocked but, nevertheless, heartened to learn that in Harrow, the borough I have the honour of representing, there are now some 25,000 unpaid home carers—that is equivalent to one in 10 people—whose life is significantly impacted by caring responsibilities. It is also the second highest number of unpaid home carers in the London boroughs. Only 15% of those 25,000 carers receive any financial support or recompense at all, so 85% are left to fend for themselves. They have to juggle a career, their family and other responsibilities.

From hearing other colleagues speak this morning, I think that personal memories are powerful. I remember in my early 20s, when I was still at university, having to remotely care for my parents, who were both suffering with cancer. They eventually died of cancer, my mother at a very young age. It is vital that we recognise the stress placed on carers, their careers and families. Watching people you love die is very hard. You never forget it. It is vital to remember that some carers have to juggle caring responsibilities for other members as well. We must also recognise that dependency on care can be sudden. It can place people in an almost impossible position of how to deal with their circumstances at work. The Bill creates powers for the Secretary of State to enable employees to go on work leave, and quite rightly.

[*Bob Blackman*]

When passed, the Bill will immediately help 2 million people. That has to be good news. That is a high proportion of the population, showing how important the Bill is. The knock-on effect of allowing opportunities for carers to take time off work is that people are more rested and productive when they return to the workplace. It benefits the employer and the employee and helps people maintain a balance.

I welcome the Bill and the emphasis it puts on the hard work that carers provide. It is an important though probably not final step, because we need to support carers. I trust that the Government will not only encourage and give the Bill a clean bill of health, but also keep under review what else must be done to help carers. I offer my support to the hon. Member for North East Fife. I doubt that she will be able to support my private Member's Bill in a few weeks' time, because it applies to England only, but nevertheless, I am happy to extend a hand of friendship to arm her Bill.

1.32 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I would like to thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for introducing and driving through this important Bill. It goes a long way in helping hard-working carers juggle their caring responsibilities with their employment. I will say only a few words, because we may otherwise run out of time, and that would be completely wrong for this Bill.

The approximately 4.2 million people across the UK providing unpaid care, over half of whom do so alongside their jobs, are playing a vital role in supporting some of the most vulnerable people, often at a cost to their own lives. I know from conversations with my constituents of the toll that providing care, often unexpectedly, can take—not just on the mental and physical wellbeing of the carer, but also on their household finances and other responsibilities, including their jobs. I would like to take this opportunity to thank every single person in this country who conducts any form of caring. It is a hidden cost to society. They maintain and look after it, and they do fantastic work. I thank them very much indeed.

Juggling caring responsibilities and work can be particularly challenging and can limit the participation of unpaid carers in the labour market. We know that women, who are often still the primary carers within families, tend to be disproportionately impacted. Carers must receive the right support to help them carry out their caring roles, and I welcome that the Government enshrined improved rights for carers in the Care Act 2014 and have been working hard to implement this ever since.

I was proud to stand on a manifesto that committed to extending the entitlement to leave for unpaid carers to one week, and I was pleased when the Government launched a consultation with their proposals for entitlement to carer's leave. In their response to this consultation, the wide-ranging support for such a policy was highlighted, and it was evident that flexibility is the key to meeting the needs of carers.

The Bill draws on all this work and would ensure that flexibility is built into workplaces, so that from the first day of employment, carers can request leave to provide

or arrange care for a dependant with a long-term care need. That is very important, because it means carers can move from job to job, improving their career, and yet still have help from day one. It is especially important that this additional rise is not dependent on length of service, and that it can be divided up as needed, because we must ensure that legislation accurately reflects the realities of caring, which is often unpredictable in nature. I welcome the Bill's support from key stakeholders, who arguably have the greatest understanding of the needs of carers, including Carers UK. I support and welcome the Bill, and I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife for bringing it forward.

1.35 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Like other speakers, I am delighted to support this Bill and I am very happy to follow on from a great speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt). Introducing a day one right to carer's leave is a really good step forward in the crucial task of making life easier for the millions of unpaid carers who do such dedicated work across our United Kingdom. I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for bringing the Bill forward.

As we have heard today, very often caring responsibilities fall on women—although not exclusively, of course. Like the first Bill we reflected on this morning, this Bill is another way to ensure gender equality and that we are doing all we can to support women to pursue the opportunities and careers that they wish to pursue. We started out this morning reflecting on pregnancy and maternity leave; many women go through that in their 20s, 30s or 40s. We now are going on to the caring responsibilities that many women take on in their 40s, 50s and 60s. We have covered that spectrum today.

As I said in an intervention, I feel that this is just one point on a longer journey. There are many things in this country that we will have to change if we are to adapt to an ageing population that needs more care. Finding different ways to make life easier for those heroes who care for their elderly relatives will be an important task for us as a generation. Like others, I highlight the incredible economic value of the work done by unpaid carers. If that burden fell on the state, it would have a massive impact on the public finances and cost billions of pounds. We all owe carers a massive debt of gratitude. This Bill is just one small step in trying to repay that.

I recognise that many employers would already go well beyond what is in this Bill, and I encourage them to do that. In terms of legislation, I hope in the future we can go further than what is currently in this Bill.

I will close my brief remarks—I do not want to jeopardise this Bill or subsequent ones on the Order Paper—by commending all the carers in my constituency. I have met many of them in the 17 years I have had the privilege to represent Chipping Barnet in this House. They are incredible people who are incredibly dedicated. Sometimes they work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I single them out for their compassion and dedication, as well as the groups that support them, such as Friend in Need in east Barnet and the Barnet carers centre.

We all know that we face difficult decisions on spending and the public finances over the coming weeks and months for many reasons, not least the overhang of

covid and the debts that has left us with. We must always ensure that we do as much as possible to ensure that the social care system is funded, not least because of the crucial importance of respite care in giving all of our wonderful unpaid carers support, respite and the opportunity to live their lives. I look forward to supporting this Bill today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Dean Russell): It is always an honour to speak in these debates, and this one in particular shows the emotion that flows round the House. I really thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for bringing forward this important legislation, and I thank all hon. Members who have spoken on this important issue. I will do my best to cover some of the key points—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I do apologise for interrupting the Minister. It is important to admit a mistake when one has made one. I have omitted to call the Opposition spokesman. I am terribly sorry, but I got the order wrong. I call Imran Hussain.

1.40 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think it is a fair mistake. When one has been sitting here since 9.30 this morning, one blends into the furniture and background. I fully understand.

I, too, thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for bringing forward this very important debate. As I did in the previous debate with my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), I congratulate her on securing support for this Bill from across the House. The speeches we have heard, which I will come on to, are all a tribute to how she has worked across this House to secure support. The point I made earlier was that, in any debate of this nature on a private Member's Bill, securing such support requires a lot of hard work and dedication in working with colleagues and coming to compromises on certain issues. Well done to her and to all the hon. Members who have made excellent contributions during the debate.

The hon. Lady herself spoke very well about the huge benefits this legislation will bring. That point was continued by the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey). He gave a figure, which I was not aware of, of £135 billion as the amount that has been saved by the work—the fantastic work—done by carers. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) again spoke passionately about her personal experiences. She is quite right and I join her when she says that we, as a House and as a country, owe a debt of gratitude to carers for all the work they do. The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) is absolutely right in saying that the number of people who ultimately, with time, will need care will undoubtedly increase. I think that is a common-sense argument, and I agree with him. Both the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) and the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) also set out the huge benefits that the Bill will bring, and I absolutely agree with them.

I am conscious of the time, so I may not speak for as long as I did in the previous debate. I am very conscious of the need for the Bill to progress, but I will make a few points. First, I join all other Members in thanking carers for the fantastic work they do. I think all in the House would agree that there is no doubt that statutory carer's leave is long overdue. While almost 5 million working people care without pay for friends, family and loved ones alongside their work, they have no statutory right to request time off to attend to these important responsibilities when the need arises. Instead, they are forced to take annual leave to care for their family or friends, rather than use it for their own rest and relaxation. Given the increased risk of sickness, exhaustion and burnout that unpaid carers face, they desperately need to take that leave for themselves. If they do not take annual leave, they are forced to rely on the good will of their employers to allow them to take unpaid leave instead. As we have heard with countless examples, that is given on some occasions and, tragically, is not on others. Given the important role that unpaid carers play and the fact that so many of them find themselves in precarious financial positions, especially with the soaring cost of living crisis, this situation is simply unacceptable.

Many Members have set out the huge benefits of having carer's leave in statute. Carers UK has stated that granting unpaid carers the right to take carer's leave would improve the finances of carers who would no longer have to reduce their working hours or give up work altogether. It would also increase productivity for employers by improving retention rates, and increase economic gains for the Treasury—a point made by other hon. Members. It would support women in the workforce who are, tragically, overwhelmingly more likely to be juggling work and unpaid caring responsibilities.

The issue of carer's leave should have been addressed by the Government long ago. We therefore support the Bill, but it is disappointing that we have had to wait for it for so long while the Government have continued to drag their feet to introduce statutory carer's leave. It is especially disappointing given that they promised in their last two manifestos in 2017 and 2019 to introduce statutory carer's leave, creating false hope for unpaid carers up and down the country for the past five years.

While the Government were right to junk many of the proposals of their 2017 manifesto, the promise of introducing statutory carer's leave should not have been one of them. I am sure that the Minister will explain why it has taken so long to get the proposals to the Floor of the House, and why these important measures are being introduced only as a private Member's Bill and not as Government legislation, given their repeated commitments to me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) to introduce an employment Bill. As I said earlier, such a Bill would have allowed the Government to protect unpaid carers and much more.

We of course support the Bill, but it falls short of what unpaid carers really need, which is paid carer's leave. Under the proposals set out in our new deal for working people, the next Labour Government will legislate to introduce just that, to ensure that working people can respond to family emergencies as and when they arise without being left out of pocket.

Unpaid carers are among the many unsung heroes of the health and care sector—a point that ran through all the contributions today. They step in to support their

[Imran Hussain]

friends and family with care so that those people can retain some of their independence and dignity. I hope that the Bill progresses with support from all parties. This important Bill certainly has our support and I hope the Government will join us in supporting it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: And now, Minister Dean Russell.

1.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Dean Russell): I should start by letting anyone watching on Parliament TV know that this is not a glitch—I am genuinely on my feet.

It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for introducing this important legislation. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken on this important issue. We must remember that any one of us, due to circumstances in our lives or those of our loved ones, could be a carer, and perhaps one who needs to work at the same time. The Bill affects everyone across society, but especially those incredible people who care for others. With that in mind, I am pleased to confirm that the Government will support the Bill. I thank my predecessors, my hon. Friends the Members for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) and for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), for their work in this incredibly important area.

Carer's leave will enable unpaid carers who are balancing paid employment with their caring responsibilities to take some time out of work if required, which will provide increased flexibility to support them to stay in work. The Bill has support across the House, which I was pleased to see reflected in our debate.

The speeches of the hon. Member for North East Fife and my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) were incredible, especially the statistics that my hon. Friend cited. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) gave incredibly powerful and moving testimony about her own experience.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) shared his personal experience with his parents; my heart truly went out to him.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) is an incredibly experienced politician and a staunch and hard-working representative for her constituents. She asked whether we should legislate to go further, and she recognised the importance of the Bill and of where we are today. My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough cited powerful statistics in support of the Bill and spoke about her work on the Bill as a Minister.

The Bill will provide invaluable support to unpaid carers, who carry out such an important and often difficult role in looking after their loved ones. It has been wonderful to see support for it across the House and across the political spectrum today. The Government truly look forward, as I do, to continuing to work closely with the hon. Member for North East Fife to support its passage.

1.51 pm

Wendy Chamberlain: With the leave of the House, I will be brief, because I know that time is running short. I thank the hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), who does so much to make Fridays work. Her advice and guidance to me have been invaluable.

My researcher Kathryn Sturgeon has done fantastic work with Carers UK. Carers UK, you are absolute legends in what you do for carers and for unpaid carers—thanks for your support with the Bill. I have worked closely with Fife Carers and with Fife Young Carers; it has been great to speak to so many constituents. I thank all hon. Members for their speeches and interventions: it is important that people out there know how much this House appreciates carers and their work.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) said that not all heroes wear capes. So many carers feel quite the opposite because of the burden that they face in their caring responsibilities. I am delighted to hear that the Government will support my Bill. I hope that we can send a message to carers that we do think of them as heroes, and we do appreciate what they do.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Bill

Second Reading

1.52 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I was very excited to be placed 15th out of 20 in the private Members' Bills ballot earlier this year. My number was 461 because in 2017 I was the 461st woman ever to be elected to Parliament. I owed it to my winning number to introduce a Bill that would improve women's equalities, rights and protections. The Bill will protect not only women but all employees from sexual harassment in the workplace, but the great majority of people affected by the new legislation will be women.

I thank the Fawcett Society and the Government Equalities Office for their tireless work on drafting the Bill and for many prior years of campaigning. My thanks also go to the Women and Equalities Committee, whose inquiry into workplace harassment led to a 2018 report that was influential in driving the proposed changes in the law.

For too long, women and girls have been unsafe in the workplace. An Opinion survey suggests that 20% of the UK population have experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace. That is more than 10 million people—a shocking number. It is therefore right and imperative that the law changes to protect people in work. In these testing times, such legislation is more important than ever.

Harassment is both morally unacceptable and bad for the economy. Evidence suggests that disrespectful and abusive work practices lead to lower performance and productivity and increased staff turnover. Even for those who are not compelled by the moral reasoning behind increased protection from workplace harassment, it is hard to ignore the economic arguments.

The 2018 Presidents Club scandal highlighted the extent to which people are currently unprotected by the law. In that instance, young female hostesses were allegedly sexually harassed by businessmen at a notorious men-only dinner, being instructed to wear “black, sexy shoes” and black underwear. Those women, who faced violations of their dignity, would not have had recourse to the law as it stands. Sexual harassment by third parties is a major problem in the UK. A 2017 survey suggested that 18% of those who had experienced workplace sexual harassment said that the perpetrators were clients or customers. Some 1.5 million people have been harassed by a third party, meaning that clients or customers were allowed to harass 1.5 million workers.

Workplace sexual harassment is widespread and widely under-reported. A TUC survey suggested that 79% of women do not report their experience of sexual harassment, for many reasons including fear of repercussions, lack of awareness regarding their rights and fear of not being taken seriously. Those concerns are heightened for people of colour, people in the LGBT+ community and people with disabilities, who already face greater discrimination in the workplace. It is understandable why people do not come forward. For one, it is not just third parties who harass people, with 20% of surveyed women suggesting that their direct manager or someone

else with direct authority over them was the perpetrator. It therefore goes without saying that any reporting could have direct career implications for those involved.

Whether sexual harassment is by a third party or not, employers have not done enough to prevent and punish it. The Equality and Human Rights Commission found that in nearly half of cases reported, the employer took no action, minimised the incident or placed the responsibility on the employee to avoid the harasser. It seems that the risks of reporting sexual harassment can outweigh the merits. That is disgraceful in modern Britain. The problem is that the current laws on sexual harassment mean that employers often adopt individual responses to institutional problems. That creates space for employers to minimise what is going on and leads to confusion about how to respond appropriately. Statistics show that only 45% of managers felt supported by their organisation when reports were made to them. Ultimately, the current laws leave people who have encountered traumatic experiences unsupported. We can and must do better.

The Government agree that more needs to be done to tackle sexual harassment in the workplace. In their 2021 response to a consultation on workplace sexual harassment, the Government committed to introduce a new preventative duty for employers, to provide more explicit protections from harassment by third parties, and to support the EHRC to develop a new statutory code of practice on workplace harassments. For things to improve, we need a shift in focus from redress to prevention. Currently the question of whether employers have taken adequate steps to prevent sexual harassment arises only as a defence if an incident of sexual harassment has already occurred. That means that employers are not required to take actions that prevent sexual harassment. Indeed, the EHRC found in 2018 that only a minority of employers had effective processes in place to prevent and address sexual harassment.

The Bill would provide the shift in focus that is so desperately needed. Clause 2 would ensure that employers prioritise prevention by imposing a new duty on them to take “all reasonable steps” to prevent their employees from experiencing workplace sexual harassment. That will not require employers to do anything substantially more than what they currently must do to avoid legal liability for acts of harassment carried out by their employees, but it would mean that employers could potentially be further held to account if they have failed to take those actions, first by an uplift in the compensation awarded at an employment tribunal, and secondly through the EHRC's strategic enforcement. That will, I hope, push employers to prioritise prevention of sexual harassment, including through improving workplace practices and culture.

The new duty would operate through dual enforcement. The EHRC may take enforcement action for a breach or suspected breach of the duty under its strategic enforcement policy. This means that women would be able to inform the Equality and Human Rights Commission of any concerns without necessarily having to take forward legal action against their employer. In addition, the employer's duty will be enforceable by the employment tribunal in individual cases. Where the employment tribunal has found in favour of an individual claim of sexual harassment and has ordered compensation to be paid, the tribunal will examine whether and to what extent the duty has been breached.

[Wera Hobhouse]

Where a breach is found, tribunal judges will have the power to order an uplift of up to 25% of the compensation awarded. The Bill will also introduce explicit protections against third-party harassment in the workplace. Clause 1 would make employers liable for the harassment of their staff by third parties, such as customers and clients, where they have failed to take all responsible steps to prevent such harassment from happening. These protections will apply to all acts of third-party harassment in the workplace, including racial as well as sexual harassment.

Once again, there will be a system of dual enforcement. Individuals will be able to bring claims to an employment tribunal in the usual way for work-related cases under the Equality Act 2010. The Equality and Human Rights Commission will have strategic enforcement powers. Compensation will be assessed in the usual way for Equality Act claims, with the same uplift outlined earlier available in cases where a breach of duty has also been established following a successful third-party sexual harassment case.

A claim for third-party harassment could be brought after a single incident of harassment. This replaces the previous “three strikes” formulation, whereby employers needed to know of two previous incidents of third-party harassment before they could be considered liable, but employers will be able to rely on the “all reasonable steps” defence in the usual way. To ensure that employers are as informed as possible about the proposed changes, which will come into force 12 months after Royal Assent, the Government Equalities Office will support the Equality and Human Rights Commission in creating a statutory code of practice on sexual harassment and harassment in the workplace. This will be based on the technical guidance that the Equality and Human Rights Commission published in 2020 and will be introduced as the new legislation comes into force.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission will have a duty to consult on this code of practice in advance. In the meantime, the Government Equalities Office has produced guidance for employers on how to prevent sexual harassment, which I understand it is looking to publish in due course.

Let me finish by turning away from the technical details of the Bill, and return to the wider set of circumstances that makes it important for us to pass this legislation. An unacceptable number of nurses, paramedics, bar staff, people who were key workers during the pandemic and everyone in between are being subject to a form of harassment that causes a variety of harms, including psychological, physical and economic harm. Employers should be required both morally and legally to take all reasonable steps to stop sexual harassment from occurring. The fact that the law of this country does not compel them to do so is a concern.

For too long the onus for challenging sexual harassment has been on individuals. Our current laws mean that employers do not know how to respond to cases appropriately, which leaves people who have encountered traumatic experiences unsupported. Introducing a standalone preventive duty for employers will shift the responsibility from individuals to the institution. It will prevent harassment and protect victims, and it will drive a change in the culture around victim blaming. I

urge that this House supports my Bill, enshrining in law historic measures to protect employees from harassment in the workplace.

I thank everybody across the House who has given support to this Bill and already committed to serving on the Committee that will ensure that the Bill progresses through the House.

2.4 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I rise to support the Bill in the name of the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). The reality is that we as MPs do not work regular hours; we work incredibly long hours, as we all know. Most people are working between 37.5 hours and 40 hours on average a week and it is absolutely right that they should feel safe in the workplace in which they are working. I welcomed the Equality Act 2010 and the employer liability it implemented, but unfortunately cases are still rising and the Act now needs to go further to protect employees. Where employees are given appropriate support when sexual harassment takes place, it is extremely welcome, but that is far too infrequent. We need to encourage it.

I therefore encourage the removal of the three-strike rule. We all make mistakes at times, and owning up and apologising is a very good way of ameliorating those mistakes. When people commit sexual harassment, however, that is not a mistake; that is predatory. We should call it out for what it is and we must not allow it to continue. The fact that at the moment employees may have to suffer three strikes before action is taken is completely unacceptable—a single time is once too many. It shocked me to hear that 79% of women do not report sexual harassment in the workplace because they fear repercussions, losing their job or losing their livelihood. We must make that change, and I welcome the fact that this Bill will enable that to happen.

We should also remember, however, that it is not only women who suffer sexual harassment in the workplace; men also suffer, so we must ensure that those cases are covered. In most cases, men are very embarrassed to report sexual harassment. We have that classic British stiff upper lip, which leads to rising concerns for men’s mental health and the rise in suicides that can follow.

It is important that employers take measures to prevent sexual harassment from taking place, and the clause providing for such measures in the Bill is very welcome. If an employer breaks their duty, they should pay for it, because it is their responsibility to ensure everyone is safe and protected. I trust that once the Bill passes this House and the other place we will see the number of cases falling rapidly, so that everyone can feel safe in the workplace. No one should have to fear having to come to work and suffer harassment. I support the Bill.

2.6 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for bringing this important Bill to the House. She spoke very well to make the case for the great need for a change in the legislation.

I will be brief, because I am keen for this Bill to progress to the next stage. Last year, the Fawcett Society released harrowing research into sexual harassment in the workplace showing that, despite the bravery of the

#MeToo movement in coming forward to challenge abuses of power by employers and others in the workplace, harassment, particularly sexual harassment, remains a deeply concerning problem that should worry us all. Two in five women report that they have faced harassment in the workplace.

What is more, a report from the Government Equalities Office has indicated that 80% of women who have faced harassment in the workplace do not go on to report it. I am sure all of us on both sides of the House are committed to stamping out that abhorrent behaviour and abuse, and the Opposition stand committed to this Bill. After all, by making employers liable for harassment committed by clients and customers, the Bill reintroduces the provisions that the last Labour Government introduced under the Equality Act 2010, but that the Tory-led coalition Government ditched in 2013, claiming that the protections imposed an unnecessary burden on business.

Let me be clear: protecting people from harassment, especially in the workplace, is never a burden; it is a responsibility. Nine years since the protections were first removed, it is welcome that the Government have finally realised the error of their decision. However, we should not have had to wait so long for them to do so, especially given that, like so many of this Government's initiatives, the consultation on strengthening protections against harassment in the workplace was launched back in 2019.

Labour supports the Bill, but I repeat that the Government should never have repealed those important protections for working people. We should be dramatically extending the protection already available, rather than having to reintroduce it.

2.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Katherine Fletcher): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on promoting this important Bill, as well as all those who have spoken in this brief, but I would argue important, debate. The significance of the issues addressed by the Bill cannot be overstated. The 2010 survey from the Government Equalities Office found that nearly three quarters of people had been affected by sexual harassment in their lifetime, while two in five had experienced it within the last 12 months. In the world of work those rates remain unacceptably high, with 29% of people having experienced harassment in some form in the past 12 months. That is nearly one in every three people. It is therefore rather auspicious that this debate has fallen in the week coinciding with the fifth anniversary of the #MeToo movement going viral.

On 15 October 2017, the words #MeToo were shared on Twitter by 12 million people around the world, including me, and the Government believe that is important and have taken significant steps to combat sexual workplace harassment in the past five years. We have had the implementation of the strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, and the UK has ratified two important international treaties—the Istanbul convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, and the International Labour Organisation's violence and harassment convention, which was the first international treaty to recognise everyone's right to a workplace free from violence and harassment. The UK will continue to work to lead the world in that area.

It is important to recognise that, as we have heard, workplace harassment can affect anyone, regardless of industry, profession, age, race, sex, or sexuality. Anyone can be a victim, with men reporting almost similar levels of harassment, as highlighted in the debate. The Government are therefore pleased to share and support the Bill, and while the Equality Act 2010 already contains a robust legal framework against workplace harassment, the measures in the Bill provide an important strengthening of those protections and a renewed focus on prevention, which we hope will lead to a reduction in workplace harassment across the country.

We have listened carefully, and I am extremely keen to see the Bill progress. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) was correct to highlight that it is not just women who are affected, and we need to protect employees from predators. I thank the hon. Member for Bath for promoting this Bill, which is an important step change in the protections available against workplace harassment. As the debate on the future workplace proceeds post pandemic, the Government are committed to ensuring that everyone feels safe and supported to thrive. We strongly support the Bill.

2.12 pm

Wera Hobhouse: I thank everybody for their support for the Bill. As has been said, this issue does not affect only women; it affects anybody who is in work and should be protected from harassment. It should particularly introduce a culture change so that harassment in the workplace is a thing of the past. I thank hon. Members across the House, and look forward to the progress of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

BBC Licence Fee Non-Payment (Decriminalisation for over 75s) Bill

2.13 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am grateful to all colleagues who enabled a little time at the end of today's sitting to discuss what continues to be a topical issue. People will have heard a report today that some 8 million people in our country are struggling with their bills. My view is that one bill that they should not be struggling with is the bill for the TV licence fee, which I would like to be abolished. Before we can get to that stage—the licence fee is guaranteed under the BBC charter until the end of 2027—we can try our best to mitigate its impact. This Bill is part of my ongoing campaign to try to persuade my Government to decriminalise the non-payment of the BBC licence fee. On the basis that it is better to try to deal with such issues in bite-size proportions, I have started with the group of people aged over 75 who always thought that when they reached that esteemed age, they would not have to pay the licence fee.

Because of some double-dealing on the part of the BBC when it was negotiating with the Government, we ended up in a situation where, contrary to people's expectations and, apparently, to the Government's wishes, the BBC insisted on keeping the BBC licence fee for all those aged over 75 who were not in receipt of benefits. We therefore have a situation where that group of people are vulnerable to being prosecuted for TV licence fee non-payment. I will tell hon. Members what is said by some of the experts in this area.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has made clear his salami-slicing tactic and his attack on the BBC, which has been ongoing for some years. Did he notice in the meantime the BBC's massive audiences during the events following the sad demise of Her late Majesty and the funeral? In the UK and around the world, people saw the immense quality of the BBC, which is a great British institution. Is this yet another example of the wrecking ball tactic used by some Conservative Members against the fundamental things that make this country great?

Sir Christopher Chope: No, that is not my motivation at all. The coverage of Her late Majesty's funeral was brilliantly carried out by all the broadcasting media, including the BBC. I have nothing but praise for the way in which the BBC dealt with that.

To take a topical example of why a number of people feel that the BBC is not being true to its charter, today we heard the sad news that the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) has been put in a situation where he has been suspended from the House for many weeks and, I understand, has chosen to resign and cause a by-election. Has that been prominently featured on the BBC news channels? I fear not. That is a topical example of the way in which some people feel that the BBC is rather selective in the way it deals with its news. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), when he was at the Conservative party conference and in the days following, found himself on the receiving end of some public criticism, which

was featured prominently on the BBC airwaves. The contrast between those two cases is an example of people's concerns.

John Spellar: I did notice the rather significant difference that one was a Government Minister and one was a Back Bencher.

Sir Christopher Chope: They were both Members of Parliament. One of them has been suspended from sitting in this House for a recommended 10 weeks, I think, and one of them has not been suspended—there was no charge against my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West at all. In a sense, the right hon. Gentleman makes my point for me.

To return to what TV licensing prosecutions do, Tara Casey of the legal charity APPEAL says:

"TV Licensing prosecutions are the perfect example of the criminalisation of poverty. This has got to be wrong, particularly during a cost-of-living crisis."

How many people are being prosecuted for TV licence fee non-payment? The latest figures that I have are that 49,144 people were prosecuted last year, 92% of whom were convicted. These prosecutions were dealt with in the courts, thereby creating public expense through the court hearings and a great deal of distress for the people—92%—who were convicted.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): At a time when our courts are under increased pressure, a prosecution over a TV licence is surely not a priority. Does it not make a farce of itself?

Sir Christopher Chope: I agree. That is why I hope the Ministry of Justice, which is concerned about delays in the magistrates courts, will be saying, "How ridiculous that our magistrates courts should be taken up with cases of BBC licence fee non-payment."

We talk about bureaucracy and the shortage of people in this country to engage in productive employment. The BBC has said that it wishes to return to the pre-pandemic level of visits to people's homes in relation to the licence fee. In 2020-21, licensing officers from the BBC visited 671,500 homes, and 62,000 residents were found to have been using the BBC not in accordance with the rules. What an enormous volume of activity that involved—activity that I think we should be able to dispense with, and we would be able to dispense with it if we dispensed with the BBC licence fee, but we could take a staging point halfway if we prevented the BBC from being able to prosecute these normally hapless people.

In February 2020, the Government launched a consultation on the issue of decriminalisation. It took about a year for the results to be published. In their response, the Government were pretty damning about the criminalisation of those who do not pay the licence fee. Paragraph 70 of the report from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport states:

"After considering the consultation responses, the government remains concerned that criminal prosecution is, as a matter of principle, an unfair and disproportionate approach to enforcement of TV licence evasion in a modern public service broadcasting system."

So there we have it, Madam Deputy Speaker. Paragraph 76 states:

“Against this background, the government therefore intends to continue assessing these potential impacts of an alternative sanction on licence fee payers. On this basis, while no final decision has been taken at this time, the government will keep the issue of decriminalisation under active consideration as part of the roadmap of reform of the BBC discussed below.”

I am delighted to see the Secretary of State on the Front Bench, but I hope that the Government are indeed “actively” dealing with this issue.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Damian Collins): I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said, but, for the record, I am not the Secretary of State, although I am a Minister in the Department.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am so sorry. In that case, the hon. Gentleman is even more welcome to his position. It is hard to keep up with some of the changes that are taking place on the Front Bench at the moment.

This issue needs to be addressed, and it is good to know that the Government are still considering it, but another year has passed and there is not much indication—not much that I have received, anyway—that the “active consideration” of the issue of decriminalisation is reaching any conclusion. In the meantime, as I have said, people are being prosecuted up and down the country, and people aged over 75 who thought they were going to have a free television licence are particularly vulnerable to such activity.

This is an important issue. Apparently a mid-term review of the BBC charter is taking place this year. We are told that the licence fee will remain at £159 until the beginning of April 2024. That means that if there were to be a general election after that, in 2024, people would be asking, “Why has the BBC licence fee just increased?” I am not sure it is very good timing, but that is the plan. The BBC is expected to receive £3.7 billion in licence fee funding this year. Why are people not more exercised about this? It is a television tax, and it is more than twice the cost of reducing the top rate of tax from 45p in the pound, about which there was a big argument at the Conservative party conference.

Putting it all in context, and as a party in favour of supporting hard-working families, I would have thought we would be taking action to commit ourselves to doing away with the television tax and, in the meantime, doing away with the criminalisation of those who do not pay the television tax.

John Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that, under a Labour Government, the over-75s got their television licence for free? George Osborne took that away, and it is the only reason why the over-75s are having to pay.

Sir Christopher Chope: The right hon. Gentleman and I agree on a lot of things. I am not sure I would put it exactly like that, but the substance of what he says is correct. We used to have free television licences for the over-75s, and then, with a bit of smoke and mirrors, we suddenly found the system no longer applied. It was done under a Conservative Government, and he refers to George Osborne, who I am sure is prepared to take responsibility.

Damian Collins: Just to confirm for the record that it was, of course, the BBC’s decision to end free television licences for the over-75s. It was ultimately the BBC’s decision.

Sir Christopher Chope: So it was the BBC’s fault. My reading of it is that there was an attempt to cast responsibility on to the BBC, but ultimately it was the Government who enabled the BBC to put back in place a television licence fee—

Damian Collins: The BBC agreed to a financial settlement with the previous Government that provided transitional funding, after which the BBC would take on responsibility. That was always the case, and it was the deal the BBC signed up to at the time.

Sir Christopher Chope: Okay, so what happened? Did the BBC go back on the deal? If so, what was the sanction against the BBC? Why are we continuing to indulge the BBC as we are, by enforcing the £3.7 billion television tax paid to the BBC?

We have also given the BBC additional powers to raise the borrowing limits for its commercial activities, which are a great success. The BBC is selling a lot of important stuff overseas. Why do we need to subsidise that with taxpayers’ money? Why do we not let the BBC run its commercial arm with freedom, and without imposing additional costs on the hard-pressed taxpayer?

I have made a short point and, unfortunately, there is not time for the Minister to respond. We will have to continue the Second Reading of this important Bill on another occasion, when I hope the Minister will be able to respond in extenso.

2.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Damian Collins): In the short time I have, I will address the concessionary licence fee for the over-75s and provide the necessary context for a range of relevant issues, including the BBC’s decision to end free TV licences for the over-75s, the Government’s work on decriminalising TV licence fee evasion and our broader road map for BBC reform, including our intention to review the licence fee funding model.

The House will no doubt be aware that, in the 2015 funding settlement, the Government agreed with the BBC that the responsibility for the over-75s concession should transfer to the BBC. The Government and the BBC agreed to make that change. Alongside that, the Government also closed the iPlayer loophole, committed to increase the licence fee in line with inflation and reduced a number of other spending commitments. To help with the financial planning, the Government agreed to provide phased transitional funding over two years to gradually—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order.

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 28 October.

Business without Debate

GREEN BELT (PROTECTION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 28 October.

PUBLIC ADVOCATE (NO. 2) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (15 July), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be resumed on Friday 18 November.

PLASTICS (WET WIPES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 20 January 2023.

BRITISH GOODS (PUBLIC SECTOR PURCHASING DUTY) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

CONSUMER PRICING BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

BROADCASTING (LISTED SPORTING EVENTS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

EMPLOYMENT (APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

PUPPY IMPORT (PROHIBITION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

PUBLIC SECTOR WEBSITE IMPERSONATION BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

HUNTING TROPHIES (IMPORT PROHIBITION) (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is there any way of saying to the public outside, 90% of whom approve of that Bill, that it has been put off and even promised by the Government, but yet again, the Government Whips Office is blocking it? Is there any way of letting them know what is happening?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): No. The right hon. Gentleman asks a reasonable question, but no, there is no such way—except insofar as he has just done so.

ARMENIAN GENOCIDE (RECOGNITION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

HOUSE OF LORDS (HEREDITARY PEERS) (ABOLITION OF BY-ELECTIONS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

Impact of the Gas Explosion in Galpin's Road, Pollards Hill

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Wendy Morton.)

2.34 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Shortly after 7 am on Monday 8 August, a gas explosion caused devastation in my constituency, changing the lives of the residents of Galpin's Road forever. Beautiful four-year-old Sahara tragically lost her life. Her brave mum, Sana, and her grieving family are watching these proceedings online. I say to them: "This debate is in memory of Sahara, and I pledge to stand with your family every step of the way on your fight for justice to come."

Madam Deputy Speaker, as we have just discussed, the Public Gallery is filled with Sahara's neighbours from right along Galpin's Road. They were asked to move out of their homes with no notice, no belongings and no idea of when they would return. Many remain evacuated to this day. Their strength and fortitude have been nothing short of remarkable in the extraordinarily difficult months since. I look up to them in the Gallery and say loud and clear that I have never been more proud to be their MP.

There are constraints to what I can say in the debate. There is a live investigation, and I am sure that everyone in the Chamber and the Gallery recognises just how important it is that I do not say anything that could be a barrier to justice for Sahara. However, I promise all Galpin's Road residents watching that I will raise their concerns and questions to the furthest possible point today without jeopardising the justice that they so desperately want and need.

I will start by explaining to the Minister what happened. On the morning of Monday 8 August, a huge gas explosion shook the heart of Galpin's Road. For over a week, residents including Sahara's family had been reporting the smell of gas on their street. Those same residents need the investigation to confirm that their concerns had been heard, why the problem took so long to fix and whether the reporting mechanism for smelling gas is still fit for purpose. No matter how the investigation determines the tragedy to have happened, we must ensure that it never, ever happens again.

The blast occurred shortly after 7 am, when some residents were getting ready for work. Some were still asleep. All say that it was indescribable. There was the horrifying fear of what was happening, the volume of the noise and the terrifying shaking of their homes. They fled into the street to witness the damage and rubble that the explosion had caused and to hear the streets of Pollards Hill filled with the worrying sound of emergency sirens racing to their road. Four-year-old Sahara died later that day. In the words of her grieving mum:

"Sahara was the most incredible little girl. Our pride and our joy. Our community will always remember her."

The blast also hospitalised two of Sahara's neighbours, causing severe injuries. I know that everyone involved and watching the debate will join me in praying for their

full and speedy recovery. We say to their loved ones watching the debate that we will stand with them through what must be such an unimaginably worrying time.

Over the following 24 hours, hundreds of residents from Galpin's Road were evacuated from their homes. They were given a moment's notice, at best grabbing scattered belongings and, at worst, leaving with just the clothes on their backs. Almost 11 weeks on, many are still unable to return.

An evacuation point was immediately set up at the New Horizon Centre in Pollards Hill thanks to the support of Commonsense Trust, led by Naomi Martin and her team. They have always been the pride of our community, and they were there for Pollards Hill in our community's gravest hour. As residents fled to the evacuation centre, an army of staff from Merton Council were tasked with booking hundreds of hotel rooms across London for an indefinite, unknown period of time. It took a monumental effort, with the council needing to provide immediate accommodation, food, financial support, clothes and supplies to hundreds of residents.

Support should have come from the Government. I wrote to the Secretary of State on Friday 12 August calling for financial assistance; it took seven weeks to receive a reply. This is one of an abundance of questions that I think should be considered at the very highest level. It seems to me that when a tragedy such as this happens, the local council is left on their own. Why is Government support not immediately offered? Who should pick up the support bill? Most importantly, in a disaster such as this, who should be responsible for supporting the grieving family? Given the number of stakeholders, and the volume of important information being shared with them, I believe that there should be a single point of contact to support them. The Government should have a role to play.

Sana has asked me to share the following quote with Members today:

"My four children and I are Victims of the gas explosion that sadly occurred on Galpin's road. I made the phone call to SGN on 30th July 2022, to save every single resident that lives on Galpin's Road. What did I get as a result of this phone call? I tried to help and warn of a possible gas explosion and my own daughter and in turn our family are victims of such an explosion just days later. A dead child. I am the one who lost my beloved daughter. How does that make any sense? I called that number and I've been sentenced to life. What I find absolutely outrageous is that 10 weeks after this horrific tragedy, my children and I are still sleeping on the floor. As if we have not been through enough, we are still homeless. Why have we not been offered housing? Because at this stage I am getting sick and tired of hearing, week after week that the police are doing their job. I need answers, not excuses."

I am encouraging the council to help resolve Sana's case as a matter of urgency.

Meanwhile, who should be responsible for providing the emergency accommodation for owner-occupiers when no one has accepted liability? The reality is that insurers were warning residents that they would be unable to pay out without being able to attend the location to assess the damage. They could not access the road because it was a crime scene. What more evidence could they possibly need when they could see the damage as the top story on the national news? The council stepped in when in many cases it clearly should have been the insurers. There needs to be clarity. I put on record my

[Siobhain McDonagh]

thanks to Chris Rumsey from the Association of British Insurers for taking up so many individual cases. There is clearly a systemic issue that needs fixing so that this does not happen to any other community in their time of crisis.

I turn now to the ongoing gas pipe replacement programme around the country. The pipes under Galpin's road are described as the M25 of gas pipes, running down a densely populated area. How can this possibly be allowed in 2022 when we have known for almost 50 years that pipes such as these represent a risk? Have people's previous tragedies not been enough? Some context here is important. It was a 36-inch cast-iron pipe on Galpin's road. I understand that a tragic gas explosion in Scotland led to a gas mains replacement programme across the UK. I further understand that those works are approximately two thirds of the way through and that the programme continues to upgrade and make safer the gas pipes that are deemed to be of high risk.

There is a "but". Under the coalition Government, the funding for that programme was cut. Many pipes that were originally set for replacement were suddenly to remain operational. While it is vital that the investigation determines whether the size and material of the pipe had any part to play in this tragedy, it must quickly be established whether this pipe was originally designated for replacement before the funding was cut by the Government. Why? Because there are other 36-inch cast-iron pipes around the country that are not set to be replaced. Will the Minister confirm that he will urgently review this matter and the funding of the programme? This should not need to wait until the investigation is complete.

That is not the only question that residents desperately want answered. What ongoing support will be available to them? What ongoing support will be available for Sana and her family? How long will it take for the investigation to be completed? How long is it likely to be before a coroner's inquiry? Why were Southern Gas Networks possibly tasked with removing the gas pipe in Galpin's Road when it is part of the investigation?

I acknowledge that this issue has been under the close watch of the Health and Safety Executive, but I share residents' bewilderment at how evidence in an investigation could possibly be allowed to be removed by an organisation forming part of the investigation. Of course I recognise that the task of removing a gas pipe requires significant expertise, but is it really the case that no other company was able to complete the task? Surely the Minister shares my concern.

At times of desperate sadness we see the most extraordinary generosity. I can think of few more notable examples than in my caring community in the days and weeks following the explosion. When the residents of Galpin's Road gathered at the evacuation centre, many of them had absolutely no belongings other than the clothes on their back. Community groups and local businesses responded to the call for help by delivering food, clothes and supplies within hours.

I am worried that I will miss somebody out, and I sincerely apologise if I do so, but I would like to put on record my gratitude to the following organisations: the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community for bringing food every

lunch and dinner time; the Dons Local Action Group for van loads of supplies; the Loving Hands International nursery school for children's toys and hot meals; the Casuarina Tree restaurant, the Golden Anchor, Aya restaurant, Domino's, Franco Manca, Papa John's, Pizza Hut, McDonald's, Greggs and Krispy Kreme for sending so much hot and cold food; Uber for hundreds of free taxi journeys; the charity Kids Count for offering hundreds of bowling and cinema vouchers; and Morrisons and Sainsbury's for offering food vouchers as residents return home.

I am also grateful to all the selfless local residents and groups who came by with such a remarkable abundance of generosity. The evacuation centre was staffed by dozens of volunteers, including from the Red Cross, who worked around the clock to ensure that the centre was open 24/7 as somewhere safe for residents to go. I know that everyone watching will share my gratitude to each and every one of them.

It is difficult to imagine how upsetting, distressing and challenging the past few months must have been for the residents of Galpin's Road. Behind every door is a real, personal story. There was Mr B, whose son was getting married later in August but was unable to access their wedding outfits and items for their celebrations. Mr and Mrs D could not get passports for their family holiday. Ms C desperately wanted the school uniform for her young son who was about to start secondary school. A resident who is a self-employed taxi driver could not access his car trapped in the investigation cordon, so he could not make a living. A special needs primary school pupil's teacher contacted me, concerned that the child was falling behind on his schoolwork and putting on weight because of the takeaway food he was living on at his temporary accommodation.

There is sadness and difficulty behind every door along the road, and there is no question but that every family has faced the most challenging few months. I do not for a second dismiss how unbelievably difficult this must have been for each and every one of them. Eventually, they will return to Galpin's. Sahara will never come home. Many of the residents believe that the explosion could have happened anywhere on that street. They count themselves lucky to be alive. They want to know how this tragedy happened and whether it could have been prevented. Above all, they stand ready to fight for justice for the beautiful little girl that they lost as their neighbour. Madam Deputy Speaker, I will be standing with them every step of the way.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Lady has spoken very movingly. May I, on behalf of the whole House, express our sincere sympathy to the family, friends and neighbours of little Sahara and to everyone who has suffered in this dreadful way.

2.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): The convention in debates such as this is to start by congratulating an hon. Member on securing the debate, but congratulations absolutely do not feel right at all. I am incredibly sorry—incredibly sorry—that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) has had to bring this debate to the House today and for the awful and tragic events that have happened to her and her community.

I thank everybody present for their time and their willingness to come to this place today. On behalf of the Government, let me say how sorry I am for all of the challenges that the hon. Lady and the community have experienced in recent weeks. It has been extremely difficult to hear about this matter—that is just in the few minutes that the hon. Lady has been highlighting the incident, quite rightly, and standing up for her constituents.

I am grateful to everybody present today and grateful to the hon. Lady for outlining the very tragic events of just a few weeks ago. I am sure that there are people in the Public Gallery who are very personally affected by this; by what happened on the day itself and, as the hon. Lady has outlined, by what has happened subsequently. I hope those issues are resolved as quickly as possible, and I will come to some of them in a moment. The hon. Lady was absolutely right to highlight the challenges, and I will try to address some of those.

I have been a Government Minister for just over a year now, and have stood at this Dispatch Box a number of times. All debates are important, but a debate such as this, which I have the opportunity to respond to today, is one of the more important ones because of the impact, as we have heard, on individuals' lives and on individuals' communities. This is about the families who were affected by the really tragic events of 8 August, and I completely appreciate the challenge that the hon. Lady has outlined.

The hon. Lady has eloquently described the events of the day in question and the circumstances that led to the explosion on Galpin's Road. I wish to put it on record that the whole House, as you have said, Madam Deputy Speaker, sends its condolences to Sana and to the family of Sahara, who tragically lost her life. I understand that it would have been Sahara's fifth birthday just a few weeks ago and she would have been starting school. I am incredibly sorry for what has happened, and I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for passing on so directly the message from Sana. I will absolutely take that away and we will see what the Government can do to assist in the challenges that the hon. Lady has raised on behalf of her constituents and on behalf of Sana's family, and we will come back to her as soon as we are able to do so.

Such an incident impacts not just one family but entire streets and neighbourhoods, as the hon. Lady outlined. Anyone who walked into the centre at the time would have seen the impact that the explosion had on the local community—500 people, 200 evacuated homes. The hon. Lady eloquently outlined the real-life consequences beyond the most tragic ones. Lives were impacted: wedding dresses not accessible, school uniforms not available, people not able to use their taxis to make a living. Whenever we see a tragedy like this, one of the few good things that comes out of it is the community's ability to come together. The hon. Lady eloquently outlined how that happened. I want to put on record my thanks, and the Government's thanks, to everyone who stepped in and helped during these difficult times.

I also thank Merton Council. As a former local councillor elsewhere in London, I know that local authorities are at the absolute forefront in times of difficulty and trouble such as this, as are Members of Parliament. The work of Merton Council should be recognised. Every council has plans to set up emergency rest centres in times of need, but not every council has

to implement them. Councils do not want to do that. I pass on my personal thanks to all those who helped support people at New Horizons Centre in Pollards Hill, whether to provide food, shelter, water, medicines, wash facilities or housing advice. In many ways, that help continues. I pay tribute to the emergency services. Firefighters worked tirelessly to carry out searches, tackle the explosion and make the area safe, and the paramedics and ambulance service personnel were there when people needed them.

The community pulled together in the aftermath of the explosion, but as the hon. Member rightly pointed out, it is time for action. The community wants answers. Why did this happen? Could it have been prevented? How can we stop such a tragedy from happening again? I hope that residents here today or watching online and the hon. Lady accept that there is a limit to what I can say about some of the specifics today, as she acknowledged in her speech. However, I will do my best to try to provide some answers where I am able to in the time left.

The Minister of State at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), met the leader of Merton Council and the council's chief executive on 11 August. The Minister heard at first hand Councillor Garrod's concerns about the adequacy of gas safe inspections before and after the tragedy took place, and the role of Southern Gas Networks in preventing the explosion. Discussions between the council and SGN are ongoing. Residents have, quite rightly and understandably, been anxious about the risk of future gas leaks. I am glad that SGN has arranged further safety checks with an independent gas safe registered company.

The gas companies involved in the transmission and distribution of gas must comply with the Gas Safety (Management) Regulations 1996—GSMR. The regulations are owned and enforced by the Health and Safety Executive. Under those provisions, where an escape is notified, the gas conveyor must attend the scene and prevent the gas escaping as soon as is reasonably practical, if that is judged to be the case. In the event of a fire or explosion, the gas conveyor must investigate the cause and source of the incident, notifying the Health and Safety Executive that such an investigation is underway.

The hon. Lady highlighted the gas replacement programme funding. As she indicated, that is a programme of work to replace the old and deteriorating metal mains and services with plastic pipes. The majority of that is done under the iron mains risk reduction programme, regulated by the Health and Safety Executive, to decommission those iron mains within the gas distribution network. Like all programmes and projects, it takes time, but I had heard the hon. Lady's concerns and the questions that she rightly has about where things are. I will endeavour to speak to my hon. Friend the Minister, and either he or I will come back to her.

Under the Pipelines Safety Regulations 1996, pipeline operators have a duty to

“ensure that a pipeline is maintained...in efficient working order and in good repair.”

We need to understand what happened. I understand that the Metropolitan police continue to work closely with the Health and Safety Executive to work out why

[Lee Rowley]

this tragedy occurred. We are keen to ensure that we understand what they find and what may or may not be needed subsequently.

In the few moments that I have left, let me turn to insurance. When the Minister of State met the leader of Merton Council, they discussed support for the families who had to leave things behind and the situation at the time. I know that the council has been supporting residents to contact insurance companies, but as the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden rightly outlined, some of them have been presented with large fees or are worried about facing large future premiums through no fault of their own. I know that Merton has been in touch with the Association of British Insurers to pass on its concerns; the ABI recognises that this has been a traumatic period for all concerned, with insurers wanting to ensure that claims are progressed, that repairs are carried out and that residents can be supported as much as possible.

For reasons that I hope are understandable, I cannot comment on individual cases, but let me say more broadly that in such challenging times I expect every insurance company to put its customers first. It will be very clear which companies do so and which do not, and we will be watching. I am grateful that the hon. Lady has had the opportunity to put further pressure on the ones that she has discussed today. Based on this debate, we will be speaking further to insurance companies about the matter, and subsequently I will be happy to talk to the hon. Lady.

The Minister of State has discussed with Councillor Garrod whether Merton Council's response to the incident would be eligible under the Bellwin scheme, which leads me to the hon. Lady's challenge about Government support. The Bellwin scheme enables the Government

to consider a claim to help with some of the immediate costs following emergencies. It allows local authorities to receive help with the costs in the immediate phase of an emergency. We have been following the matter up with the council, and officials in the Department recently met a delegation from Merton to discuss a possible application under the scheme. I know that the council has a number of uninsurable costs that it incurred in the immediate response to the incident. I understand that work is under way, that Merton has formally registered its interest, and that officials in the Department stand ready to assist the council with its application.

I have only about a minute left, so I would like to take one final opportunity to pass on my condolences to the family of Sahara, to send my best wishes to Sana and her family through their recovery, to highlight more broadly the challenges that others have faced, and to say thank you again to all the residents today for coming at such a difficult time and after such an unexpected occurrence that will have changed so many people's lives. I hope that the Metropolitan police and the Health and Safety Executive complete their investigation quickly, with clear conclusions that ensure that a tragedy like this can be avoided in the future and that, for those who have been affected, we can resolve the impact as quickly as we can.

Finally, I give my personal thanks and my thanks on behalf of the Government to the hon. Lady for raising the matter today. I am grateful to her for doing so. The Government will try to assist where we can. We hope that we can bring this matter to a conclusion after such tragic events, as soon as we are able to do so.

Question put and agreed to.

3.3 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 21 October 2022

CABINET OFFICE

National Security Vetting Policy

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Chris Philp): I am pleased to announce the introduction of a new level of national security vetting on 31 October 2022.

Level 1B will run alongside, and in due course replace, the existing counter-terrorism check (CTC), and will allow access to sensitive materials, assets and locations, or proximity to public figures assessed to be at particular risk from national security threats, and will provide a strengthened level of assurance against these threats. The launch of level 1B follows the successful launch of the accreditation check (level 1 A) for roles in the aviation industry on 1 January 2022.

An updated statement of the HMG personnel security and national security vetting policy, which details level 1B and updates to the appeal process, will be published within the personnel security controls on gov.uk. I have requested that a copy of the updated personnel security controls be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS339]

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Business Update

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): This statement will be made at a later date.

[HCWS338]

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**not later than
Friday 28 October 2022**

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