

**Wednesday  
2 November 2022**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 2 November 2022**

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# House of Commons

*Wednesday 2 November 2022*

*The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

**Mr Speaker:** Before we come to COP26 questions, it might be helpful if I point out that, following ministerial changes made since Members tabled their questions, answers will now be led by the Climate Minister, rather than the right hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma).

## Oral Answers to Questions

### COP26

*The Minister for Climate was asked—*

#### Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use

1. **Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD): What steps he is taking to help ensure that international partners deliver on the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use commitments. [902028]

14. **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): With reference to the Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use, what recent steps he has taken with international partners to conserve forests. [902042]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** Through the Glasgow leaders' declaration, 145 countries, representing 90% of the world's forests, committed to ending and reversing deforestation this decade, and we secured \$20 billion of public and philanthropic finance to help them. We also secured a commitment from the world's biggest traders to stop buying commodities grown on illegally deforested land. At COP27, the world leaders who made that pledge are gathering again to report back on progress and agree next steps.

**Daisy Cooper:** The Environment Act 2021 was passed nearly a year ago, but we still do not have the necessary strong secondary legislation to regulate the use of forest-risk commodities in the UK. Ministers are yet to decide which commodities should be regulated, and under every one of their own scenarios the Government will not even manage to halve the UK's deforestation footprint between now and 2030. With COP27 starting in just a few days, will the Government commit today to bring in regulations within a year that apply across all items that pose a risk to forests?

**Dr Coffey:** The hon. Lady raises an interesting point. I am new in post as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but I spent three years there working on such projects. I assure her that the protection of sustainable forests is key to this Government, which is why we continue to ensure that the £1.5 billion specifically earmarked for forests across the current international climate finance period will be honoured.

**Richard Graham:** A lot of good work was done at COP26 by the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) and others to preserve the world's forests. The decisions by south-east Asian nations to participate in the declaration were not easy, because livelihoods and the environment are closely allied issues in those countries. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State confirm that our Government remain committed to working with the countries of south-east Asia both to deliver on the declarations and to help them with tricky issues, such as palm oil and the sustainability of timber?

**Dr Coffey:** My hon. Friend is right to praise my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) for what he and, indeed, the UK Government as a whole did last year, but I also thank my hon. Friend for his steadfast efforts at rallying partners across south-east Asia behind global forest commitments in his capacity as trade envoy. He is right that south-east Asia is critical to this, recognising that it is home to some of the most vibrant forest landscapes on earth, and we will continue to work with partners in the area to protect the critical ecosystems while supporting local livelihoods.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): It is disappointing that the COP President has not been allowed to answer questions today. I hope that Lula's election victory in Brazil at the weekend heralds a new era in protecting the Amazon from deforestation. Globally, however, it seems that little progress has been made on the ground since the COP26 promises last year. We have also just heard that the UK has failed to pay out more than \$300 million promised at COP to the green climate fund and the adaptation fund. Was the Prime Minister trying to avoid going to Sharm el-Sheikh because he is embarrassed that the UK has not delivered on all its promises?

**Dr Coffey:** I think the hon. Lady is being ungenerous. All our pledges are still in place, and she will recognise this Government's work to bring partners together. We established the Forest & Climate Leaders' Partnership to gather high-ambition partners together to accelerate efforts to reach our 2030 target to halt and reverse deforestation.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The COP President worked hard in his role and achieved some worthwhile results at Glasgow's COP26 on commitments such as the declaration on forest and land use, and I commend him for that. I certainly do not think he deserved to be demoted from Cabinet, along with the Climate Minister, just weeks before his handover and at a time when sensible voices on the climate crisis are needed around the Cabinet table more than ever. Does the Secretary of State agree that the PM's decision sets a poor example to other countries, let alone to us in the UK? Can she tell us who will be driving forward these important international commitments in the future?

**Dr Coffey:** Indeed, the Prime Minister will be taking the lead on this agenda. That is recognised because, as was announced earlier today, he is attending COP. The hon. Lady should be aware that this is about an

implementation process. At the same time, I remind her that Government representatives are already attending COP and the Montreal protocol partnership. This leadership on forests and land use is an important recognition of how nature-based solutions are critical to achieving that, which is why many people from Government are making sure that we achieve net zero and are supporting global efforts.

### International Energy Self-sufficiency

**2. Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential contribution of international energy self-sufficiency to meeting climate targets. [902029]

**The Minister for Climate (Graham Stuart):** Home-grown renewable and low-carbon energy are fundamental to meeting climate targets for every country and are key components of energy security and independence, as outlined by the International Energy Agency. The alignment of economic, climate and security priorities has already started a movement towards a better outcome for people and the planet.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** If my right hon. Friend supports self-sufficiency, why is the United Kingdom still importing such vast quantities of liquefied natural gas from the United States, especially when two thirds of all that gas is produced by fracking?

**Graham Stuart:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course, it makes sense to ensure that we maximise the albeit declining production from the North sea to this country. To those who suggest—including, it must be said, the separatist Scottish National party—paying billions of pounds to foreign countries to supply gas that we have to have, rather than producing it in Scotland with Scottish jobs, I say that is frankly absurd, as he will recognise.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): In the context of the climate crisis, self-sufficiency cannot simply mean yet more new extraction and burning of fossil fuels. According to the UN, Governments still plan to produce more than double the amount of fossil fuels in 2030 than would be consistent with limiting global heating to 1.5°. To help us to assess production against climate targets, will the Minister urge all countries at COP27 to join Germany, France and Tuvalu in giving diplomatic support to the new global registry of fossil fuels that is designed to help us to do precisely that?

**Graham Stuart:** I thank the hon. Lady for what she said. Of course, it is important in this country to recognise that, given the Climate Change Act 2008, the fact that production here is from a declining basin, and that our production is expected to fall faster than is required for oil and gas around the world, producing that at home, with lower emissions for our gas than for liquefied natural gas, is a sensible way to go.

**Sir Oliver Heald** (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I thank the Climate Minister for agreeing to speak at the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly on Monday. Does he agree that there is scope for far more co-operation

between European nations to ensure energy security and, in the short term, to meet the challenge of Russia's war of aggression?

**Graham Stuart:** My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right, and we are seeing increasing co-operation. This summer, we saw electricity exports from the UK while the French nuclear fleet was down. We saw gas exports from the UK helping to fill storage there. We are also looking to renew our co-operation in the North sea co-operation apparatus and a memorandum of understanding on that is expected to be signed soon.

**Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): We are often told by the Government that they follow the science. How safe is fracking? Would the Minister want it happening in or near his constituency?

**Graham Stuart:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. As the Prime Minister made clear, the moratorium on fracking has been reinstalled, so that is an effective stop on fracking.

### Net Zero Strategy and Carbon Budgets

**3. Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet members on the Net Zero Strategy and carbon budgets. [902030]

**6. Mr Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet members on the steps they are taking to meet the commitment to reduce economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions by at least 68 per cent by 2030. [902033]

**9. Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet members on the Net Zero Strategy and carbon budgets. [902036]

**The Minister for Climate (Graham Stuart):** Delivering net zero is essential to tackling the global challenges facing countries around the world, including the impact of climate change, threats to energy security, the decline of nature and slowing economic growth. Ministers from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and from across Government Departments, such as those represented on the Front Bench, including the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, are committed to that agenda.

**Chris Stephens:** I thank the Minister for his answer. A couple of weeks ago, the former BEIS Secretary, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), dropped plans to appeal against a High Court ruling that found the UK Government's net zero strategy was unlawful after a trio of non-governmental organisations challenged the Department's strategy on the basis that it failed to show how its policies would cut emissions enough to meet legally binding targets next decade. What recent discussions has the Minister had with Cabinet members to ensure that legally required information on how carbon budgets will be met is available to Parliament and to the public?

**Graham Stuart:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and his close interest in these issues. The net zero strategy is Government policy and it has certainly not been quashed. The judge in fact made no criticism about the substance of our plans, which are well on

track, but he is right that it was about the information provided, and we will respond in due course. In fact, it is notable that the claimants themselves described our net zero plans as “laudable” during the proceedings.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Khalid Mahmood—not here.

**Angela Crawley:** The Treasury has warned of a £50 billion financial black hole. This has been caused by crisis after crisis—the war in Ukraine, inflation, Brexit and the cost of living crisis—yet oil giants are still making record profits. BP intends to pay around £700 million in windfall taxes on its North sea operations, but more than three times that in the share buyback programme, which puts surplus cash into the hands of their shareholders, rather than renewable investment. Does the Minister think this is ethical, and does he agree that the UK Government should expand the windfall tax for fossil fuel extraction?

**Graham Stuart:** Of course, taxation is a matter for His Majesty’s Treasury. The point I would make to the hon. Lady is that a system that encourages those companies to reinvest in the North sea, and produce gas with much lower emissions attached than the liquid natural gas that we import from abroad, is good for Scottish jobs, is good for our energy security and, because of those lower emissions, is good for the environment.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

**Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con):** As the Prime Minister will no longer be chairing the Climate Action Strategy Committee, what structures working across Government Departments does the Minister expect the Prime Minister to use to drive delivery of the nationally determined contributions to the COP programme and net zero Britain?

**Graham Stuart:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his excellent question. As he will doubtless be aware, we are working across Government—as represented here today; people can see just how cross-Government our efforts are. The Climate Action Implementation Committee, which met only a couple of weeks ago and on which I and multiple Ministers sit, is very much driving forward reviewing our carbon budgets and ensuring that we have the policies to stay on track.

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** In his discussions with other Cabinet members, did my right hon. Friend reflect on the contribution new nuclear projects, such as Hinkley Point C, can make to the delivery of the net zero strategy and how the objections of some to those types of projects mean we simply end up emitting more carbon?

**Graham Stuart:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is bizarre that those who claim to be green oppose the green baseload that is provided from nuclear. Of course, if we take the separatist party over there, with an aspiration of 100% renewables, that is reliant upon the baseload nuclear provides from England. It is not green to oppose nuclear. That is why we have set a 24 GW target and that is why we are committed to it, and the jobs and the technology that are associated with it.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab):** I pay tribute to the work of the COP26 President, and I am sorry he has been removed from the Government. Let me take this first opportunity at the Dispatch Box to congratulate the Minister on bringing down the last Government in the vote on fracking.

Before it fell, that Government pledged to end the onshore wind ban in England, changing the planning rules to bring consent for onshore wind “in line with other infrastructure.”

But the new Prime Minister spent the summer campaigning for an onshore wind ban because of the “distress and disruption” he says it causes. So can the Minister tell us: is the Government’s policy to change the planning rules as promised by the last Government, or to keep the ban on onshore wind as promised by the new Prime Minister?

**Graham Stuart:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I am delighted that, as has been announced today, the Prime Minister is going to be leading our delegation to the COP. We are working to ensure the speedy take-up of a whole range of technologies across the piece to ensure that we can deliver the net zero targets and stay on track.

**Edward Miliband:** It is a mad world when the new Government make the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) look like an eco-warrior, and he was in favour of lifting the ban. This is just one example of their failure. We are way off track from meeting our climate targets, the net zero strategy was ruled unlawful, the PM sacks the COP President and all this when the UN is telling us we are heading for 2.8 °C of global warming. Is not the truth that this year began with a Prime Minister who made grand promises that have not been fulfilled, and it ends with one who has to be dragged kicking and screaming even to turn up?

**Graham Stuart:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Government of which he was part had to be dragged kicking and screaming by the Conservative party to pass the Climate Change Act 2008 in the first place. Since he left office, this country has moved from renewables accounting for less than 7% of electricity to more than 40%, and seen the transformation of the energy efficiency of our housing stock. This Prime Minister will not only lead us at COP, but take us forward. We are on track to meet our net zero targets, and we will meet our carbon budgets. The Conservative party, and this Government, have a track record of action rather than rhetoric—although I have to admit the right hon. Gentleman is increasingly good at that.

### Global Temperature Rises

4. **Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of progress towards limiting global temperature rises to (a) well below two degrees and (b) 1.5 degrees. [902031]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** Every major report published this year shows progress on bringing down warming projections compared with last year, but we



are still far from the 1.5°C pathway. That is why we need more countries, especially the major emitters, to implement their Glasgow commitments. I welcome the fact that 26 countries have new or strengthened nationally determined contributions as part of their response to the Glasgow climate pact.

**Matthew Pennycook:** The global methane pledge that emerged from COP26 committed its signatories, including the UK, to collectively reduce methane emissions by at least 30% below 2020 levels by the end of this decade. By how much have the Government reduced UK methane emissions in the year since the COP26 summit, and when will they outline a strategy to meet their 2030 commitment in full?

**Dr Coffey:** I will have to write to the hon. Gentleman with a detailed response, but I hope he will welcome the progress being made. For example, we have people at the Montreal protocol agreement right now. We also welcome the US Government ratifying the Kigali amendment. Other measures, including on gases, will help us to achieve, hopefully, that 1.5°C.

**James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend concerned that in the Arctic countries the temperature is rising something like four times faster than in the rest of the world, and in some places six times faster? What more can we do to assist the Arctic countries to resist the worst effects of the rise of the oceans and the rise in temperature?

**Dr Coffey:** I know my hon. Friend has long been concerned about this and he is right to be so. That is why we will continue to work with high-level ambition partners, and work towards our 30 by 30 ambitions around the world, which will also preserve the Arctic and Antarctic.

### Loss and Damage Settlement at COP27

5. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): What discussions he has had with his Egyptian counterpart on achieving a loss and damage settlement at COP27. [902032]

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan):** Throughout the UK's presidency, my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) has engaged with all parties, including co-operating closely with the upcoming Egyptian presidency on the issue of loss and damage. Addressing loss and damage will continue to be a priority for the UK presidency in the run-up to, and at, COP27.

**Owen Thompson:** The Egyptian presidency of COP27 has hailed Scotland as leading the world in taking steps in the right direction regarding loss and damage. Scotland's First Minister has called it a moral responsibility finally to acknowledge the damage done by developed nations through emissions, and to contribute towards loss and damage funding. What more can this Government do to follow the lead of the Scottish Government in tackling that important issue?

**Anne-Marie Trevelyan:** Loss and damage has been, and continues to be, a priority for the UK COP26 presidency. The Glasgow climate pact dealt explicitly with that issue, recognising the urgency of the challenge, and the Santiago Network will enable technical support for countries to understand climate impact, and to plan and carry out actions on account of that.

### Topical Questions

T1. [901995] **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan):** Let me take this opportunity to put on record my thanks, and I know that of the whole House, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) for his absolute and unwavering commitment as COP26 President on behalf of the United Kingdom. His team, led by Peter Hill, have worked tirelessly alongside him and deserve great praise. My right hon. Friend has brought the world together, not only raising ambition across the board for net zero strategies, nation by nation, but building trust and confidence that that can be achieved by driving the global change in the private sector's view of money. In turning investment green, he has been able to drive the commitments of Governments and business to make decisions with net zero at their heart. If Paris set the mitigation goal, Glasgow—under his leadership—turned that into real commitments. He has now challenged the world to put adaptation for resilience at the heart of all we do, and the Egyptians will continue that work.

**Dan Carden:** I welcome the Minister to her new role. As we all know, Shell is making windfall profits—more than double those last year. Despite that, it is not paying a penny of the UK's windfall tax, because of a get-out clause that obscenely incentivises new oil and gas extraction in the UK. Given that we know that drilling for more fossil fuels is incompatible with the target of 1.5°C to avert climate catastrophe, will the Government now remove that loophole?

**Anne-Marie Trevelyan:** All matters of tax are for His Majesty's Treasury, but it is clear that all our formerly fossil fuel companies are indeed energy companies, and they are investing incredibly heavily across the piece in renewables as well. We will continue to work with them to ensure that they invest their profits wisely.

T4. [901998] **Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): When Ministers go to the COP27 conference, will they give the cold shoulder to Germany to show our country's disapproval and disgust at it continuing a massive expansion in its use of lignite, which is the dirtiest way of generating electricity?

**Anne-Marie Trevelyan:** After the COP presidency is handed over to Egypt, we will ensure that we continue to work with all our international partners to find solutions that move to renewables and clean energy.

T2. [901996] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State update us on what steps are being taken to reduce methane gas emissions by 2030, in accordance with the global methane pledge set at COP26?

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** As I just said to the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), I will have to get the detail and write to him. I will share the same letter.

T5. [901999] **Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): This year, I have met pupils at Sayes Court and Manorcroft primary schools who wrote to me about the environment. Does my right hon. Friend agree that alongside the big—the Glasgow pact—the small such as local environmental activism is critical to protecting our environment and join me in being proud of the pupils we have in Runnymede and Weybridge?

**Dr Coffey:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to commend the children at Sayes Court and Manorcroft schools. It is the children who are genuinely the future, and leading by example in what they do is an element in reducing waste. Nature-based solutions are fundamental to tackling climate change and, as we embrace them through programmes such as Eco-Schools, they must be the way forward for his schoolchildren and indeed our country.

T3. [901997] **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent discussions has the Minister had with the incoming Administration in Brazil in seeking to tackle deforestation and the clearing of the Amazon rainforest, the lungs of the planet? What consideration has she given to an international preservation alliance where richer countries pay for carbon credits to keep rainforests alive?

**Anne-Marie Trevelyan:** If I may, I will write to the hon. Lady with more detailed information, but the work that Lord Goldsmith in the other place has been doing as part of the COP26 team over the last two years, as was set out, has driven work on deforestation and commodities. We continue to do that. I will ensure that she gets a fuller answer.

T6. [902000] **Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): While it is admirable to assist other countries in meeting their net zero goals, closer to home, the planning laws mean that polluting companies gain planning permission to build waste transfer plants such as the one in Cwmfelinfach in my constituency. Will the Government reform the planning laws to be mindful of net zero as well as granting permission against the wishes of the community?

**Dr Coffey:** I think that planning is devolved to the Welsh Administration, so the hon. Member may wish take that up with the Welsh Government directly. Of course, we will always ensure that our obligations on improving the environment are honoured as we take forward any potential reforms to planning.

T7. [902001] **Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): Coventry is leading the way in the manufacture of electric cars. Despite that, our Conservative Government continue to flip-flop both on attending the COP27 climate summit and on investing in green technologies. When will the Government step up and sign off the gigafactory for Coventry?

**The Minister for Climate (Graham Stuart):** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We are absolutely committed to having zero-emission vehicles and I am pleased to say that we have led on that, with our 2030 and 2035 targets now, I notice, being copied by our European neighbours. We remain committed under the Prime Minister to continuing our leadership. We have reduced our emissions by more than any other major economy and we will continue to do so.

T8. [902002] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Shell and BP have announced bumper profits while they have also benefited from a loophole put in place by the now Prime Minister which means they secure taxpayer support for drilling oil in our North sea. Does the Minister think that that is a good decision or a bad decision ahead of the COP27 summit?

**Graham Stuart:** I have said repeatedly that it is absurd to suggest that bringing in gas from abroad, for instance, with higher emissions attached to that and paying billions of pounds for it, is sensible when we can produce it at home. That is why we incentivise investment in the North sea. It is declining, it is a managed decline, and it is compatible with net zero. It is about time that the hon. Lady backed the British economy and British jobs, and did not play politics with this issue.

**Mr Speaker:** Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to point out that the British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on [parliamentlive.tv](https://www.parliamentlive.tv).

## PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

### Engagements

Q1. [901980] **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 2 November.

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

**Dame Meg Hillier:** The Prime Minister promised integrity, professionalism and accountability in Government. His Home Secretary has leaked information, is overseeing chaos in the Home Office and has broken the law. What will she actually have to do to get the sack?

**The Prime Minister:** The Home Secretary made an error of judgment, but she recognised her mistake and took accountability for her actions. She has now set out, transparently and in detail, a full sequence of events in a letter to the Labour Chair of the Home Affairs Committee and offered to share relevant documents with the Chair. She is now getting on with the job: cracking down on crime and defending our borders, something that the Labour party has no interest in supporting.

**Q4.** [901984] **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): My 19-year-old constituent Marie, who has been in care for much of her life, has worked long and hard, by childminding and in other ways, to save £3,600 to help support herself at university. Marie now faces her university studies with no savings and no means of recovering them, because they were all stolen in a few seconds by a heartless scammer pretending to be her bank. What assurance can the Prime Minister give that the Government are working hard to help prevent this all too common type of despicable crime and bring the perpetrators to book?

**The Prime Minister:** I am very sorry to hear about Marie's case. I know how convincing scammers can be, and the upset and hurt they cause. I am pleased to reassure my hon. Friend that the Government will shortly publish our fraud strategy, which will establish a more unified and co-ordinated response from Government, law enforcement and the private sector, to block more scams and better protect the public.

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

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): The Prime Minister's Home Secretary says the asylum system is broken. Who broke it?

**The Prime Minister:** We can look at the record on migration policy. Let us look at it. What did we on the Conservative side of the House do? We gave the British people a referendum on Brexit. We delivered Brexit. We ended the free movement of people. That is our record on migration policy. It is not something the right hon. and learned Gentleman supported. He opposed it at every turn and that is not what the British people want.

**Keir Starmer:** No one on the Labour side of the House wants open borders. It is the Government who have lost control of our borders. Four Prime Ministers in five years and it is the same old, same old. The Prime Minister stands there and tries to pass the blame. If the asylum system is broken and his lot have been in power for 12 years, how can it be anyone's fault but theirs?

**The Prime Minister:** People rightly want to see us getting a grip of migration and our borders, but let us look at the record. The right hon. and learned Gentleman voted against the Nationality and Borders Bill. He said he would scrap the Rwanda partnership. He opposed the ending of the free movement of people. Border control is a serious, complex issue, but not only does the Labour party not have a plan; it has opposed every single measure that we have taken to solve the problem. You cannot attack a plan if you do not have a plan.

**Keir Starmer:** We voted against it because we said it would not work, and it has not worked. The Prime Minister says that he is getting a grip and he has a plan, so let us have a look at that plan: the Rwanda deal was launched in April; it has cost the taxpayer £140 million and rising; the number of people deported to Rwanda is zero. Since then, 30,000 people have crossed the channel in small boats. It is not working, is it? He has not got a grip.

**The Prime Minister:** We on the Government side of the House are clear that we want to defend our borders. When the shadow Home Secretary was asked this weekend, she could not answer a simple question about whether the Labour party was in favour of higher or lower migration. It is that simple. The Home Secretary and I, when it comes to tackling and reducing migration, are on the same page. The Labour party's policy is a blank page.

**Keir Starmer:** Blame others, deflect, attack on something else—so much for the new age of accountability. Of all the people who arrived in small boats last year, how many asylum claims have been processed?

**The Prime Minister:** We do need—[*Interruption.*] Not enough is the answer, very straightforwardly, and that is what we are going to fix.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman raises the question of what we are doing. We have increased the number of processing officials by 80%, and we are putting in an extra 500 by next March. If he really was serious about fixing this problem, he would acknowledge that we need to tackle the issue of people putting in spurious claims—spurious, repeated, last-minute claims—to frustrate the process. That is how we will tackle the system, so why, then, did he vote against the Nationality and Borders Act, which deals with it?

**Keir Starmer:** The Prime Minister says, "Not enough". He can say that again. It is 4%—4% of people arriving in small boats last year had their asylum claim processed. According to the bookies, the Home Secretary has a better chance of becoming the next Tory leader than she has of processing an asylum claim in a year. The Prime Minister talks about numbers. They are taking only half the number of asylum decisions that they used to. That is why the system is broken. There are 4,000 people at the Manston air force base, which is massively overcrowded and all sorts of diseases are breaking out, so did the Home Secretary receive legal advice that she should move people out—yes or no?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman is very fond of reminding us that he used to be the Director of Public Prosecutions, so he knows the Government's policy on commenting on legal advice. But what I can say is the significant action that the Home Secretary has taken to fix the issue, providing, since September, 30 more hotels with 4,500 new beds, appointing a senior general to control the situation at Manston and, indeed, increasing the number of staff there by almost a half. These are significant steps to demonstrate that we are getting a grip of this system. This is a serious and escalating problem. We will make sure that we control our borders and we will always do it fairly and compassionately, because that is the right thing.

**Keir Starmer:** The Prime Minister talks about my time as Director of Public Prosecutions. I prosecuted people smugglers; he cannot even get an asylum claim processed. I think the answer to the question of whether the Home Secretary received legal advice to move people out of Manston is yes. He just has not got the guts to say it—weak. He did a grubby deal with her, putting her in charge of Britain's security just so that he could



dodge an election. She has broken the ministerial code, lost control of a refugee centre and put our security at risk.

The Home Secretary did get one thing right: she finally admitted that the Tories have broken the asylum system, with criminal gangs running amok, thousands crossing the channel in small boats every week and hardly any claims processed. So why does he not get a proper Home Secretary, scrap the Rwanda gimmick, crack down on smuggling gangs, end the small boat crossings, speed up asylum claims and agree an international deal on refugees? Start governing for once and get a grip.

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Can we just calm it down a little? I want to hear the replies. [*Interruption.*] Covering your mouth is not helpful to me or you.

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman rightly raises the topic of national security, because it is important, but this is the person who, in 2019, told the BBC—and I quote—“I do think Jeremy Corbyn would make a great Prime Minister.” Let us remember that national security agenda: abolishing our armed forces, scrapping the nuclear deterrent, withdrawing from NATO, voting against every single anti-terror law we tried, and befriending Hamas and Hezbollah. He may want to forget about it, but we will remind him of it every week, because it is the Conservative Government who will keep this country safe.

Q6. [901986] **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Right now we are suffering the worst outbreak of avian flu ever recorded. Hundreds of thousands of birds are being destroyed to stem the spread of this terrible disease. The Government have acted quickly to bring forward compensation for live birds culled to 48 hours after confirmation of disease, but even that short delay is causing significant losses to farmers in Broadland as the disease wreaks havoc on flocks. Dead birds are not compensated. Today is Back British Farming Day. Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to back British farmers and agree compensation for all affected birds from the date when disease is confirmed?

**The Prime Minister:** As someone who represents a very rural farming community, it is a great pleasure to support Back British Farming Day and to join colleagues on both sides of the House in doing so. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the fact that outbreaks of avian flu this year are on track to be some of the worst on record. That is why we have toughened up biosecurity measures on poultry farms. I can tell him that we have confirmed that we will now pay compensation from the outset of planned culling, rather than at the end—something that I know he and the farming sector will warmly welcome.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the leader of the SNP.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): In May, the Prime Minister told this Chamber:

“I can reassure the House that next year...benefits will be uprated by this September's consumer prices index...the triple lock will apply to the state pension.”—[*Official Report*, 26 May 2022; Vol. 715, c. 452.]

But last week he repeatedly refused to say whether he would keep to a promise that he made only five months ago. People do not need to hear any more spin about compassionate conservatism; they just need a straight answer to a simple question—will he keep his promise and lift benefits and pensions in line with inflation?

**The Prime Minister:** We now have an excellent new Chancellor, and I am looking forward to his autumn statement in a couple of weeks. It would not be right to comment on individual policy measures before then, but I think everyone knows that we face a challenging economic outlook and difficult decisions will need to be made. What I would say is that we will always—as my track record as Chancellor demonstrates—have fairness and compassion at the heart of everything we do.

**Ian Blackford:** It was a very simple question. I asked the Prime Minister to reiterate what he promised just five months ago. For the second week running, he still will not give a straight answer to the most vulnerable who require support.

The Prime Minister keeps telling us that difficult decisions need to be made, but austerity 2.0 is not a difficult decision; it is what it has always been—a Tory political choice to hit the poorest hardest. In the week that BP saw quarterly profits of £7.1 billion, why not take the easy decision to bring in a proper windfall tax? Why not take the easy decision to reinstate the cap on bankers' bonuses? Why not take the easy decision to scrap non-dom tax avoidance? And with all that new revenue, why not stand up today and take the easiest decision of all: to protect those most in need and increase benefits and pensions in line with inflation?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman has raised the issue of the North sea. This is a point of significant difference between his party and ours. As Chancellor, I introduced a new levy on oil and gas companies because I believed that that was the right thing to do, but this is the point on which the right hon. Gentleman's party and ours will always differ: we believe that our North sea producers do have an important role to play in our transition to net zero and are an important source of transition fuels, and we will ensure that we support them to enable them to invest in and exploit those resources for the British people.

Q8. [901988] **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Let me first welcome the Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation from Madagascar, whose members are in the Public Gallery.

More locally, I am delighted that next year Openreach will roll out ultrafast broadband in Wigginton, in my constituency. However, other rural areas of south-west Hertfordshire, such as Dudswell, are still in dire need of better connectivity. Can the Prime Minister update the House on the progress of the £5 billion Project Gigabit?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is right to recognise the role of broadband in providing levelling-up opportunities across our economy. We invested £5 billion in Project Gigabit and 71% of UK premises now have

access to it, up from just 5% when we came into office. I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that we will be launching a procurement process to provide gigabit coverage for his area in the coming weeks.

**Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): The Prime Minister will know that it is Scotland's energy resources that feed corporate profits and keep His Majesty's Treasury pumped full of cash, to the tune of £8 billion in the last nine months alone. In return, candidates in the summer Tory leadership contest tried to outdo each other in their contempt and hostility towards Scotland's democracy. Without falling back on the "you've had your vote" trope, can the Prime Minister tell me this: is Scotland in a voluntary and respectful union of equals, as was claimed in 2014, or are we hostages in a territorial British colony?

**The Prime Minister:** What people across Scotland rightly want to see is both their Governments working constructively together to improve their lives, and that is what we will do on this side of the House. Part of that is actually supporting Scottish energy producers, and the hon. Gentleman is right: they have a vital role to play in enabling our transition to net zero and improving our energy security, and those Scottish companies will have our full support.

Q12. [901994] **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): Nearly 40,000 illegal immigrants have crossed the channel so far this year, landing taxpayers with a hotel bill of £5.6 million per day to accommodate them. Is it any wonder that millions of people in this country are furious about the situation? During the summer, the Prime Minister set out a comprehensive 10-point plan to tackle the issue, and everyone on this side of the Chamber wants him to succeed in that aim. When can we expect the firm action that the British people are demanding?

**The Prime Minister:** I know that this issue is, rightly, a priority for my hon. Friend and a priority for his constituents, and I can reassure them that it is also a priority for me and for this Government. Whether through the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 or through the further measures that we are planning to take, we will defend our borders, stop the illegal crossings, and ensure that there is fairness and compassion in our system. That is the way to restore trust, and that is what my hon. Friend's constituents and the British people deserve.

Q2. [901981] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): A constituent of mine is a supermarket worker who is paid four-weekly. Because she receives one double salary payment, there is one month of the year in which she receives no universal credit. Normally that is not an issue, but because universal credit is linked to the cost of living payment, my constituent no longer qualifies for the £320 that could see her through the very worst of a cold, hard winter. What can the Prime Minister do to mend this gap in cost of living support?

**The Prime Minister:** What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that we also provided discretionary funding, which was supplied to the Scottish Government through the

Barnett formula, especially to deal with cases like the one that he has raised. If he writes to us with the constituent's details, we will be happy to look into it, but, as I have said, discretionary funding was made available especially for such cases.

**Darren Henry** (Broxtowe) (Con): I was visited at one of my surgeries by my constituent, Aaron Horsey. In his arms was his three-week-old newborn baby, Tim. Aaron's wife Bernadette tragically passed away while giving birth to Tim. Aaron came to see me regarding the disparity that exists over shared parental leave. The current eligibility requirements differ between those for a surviving birthing partner and those for a surviving non-birthing partner. This meant that, in his case, he was not entitled to leave to raise his son. Will the Prime Minister ensure that my constituent and I can meet the relevant Minister to make sure that we move towards a future where parents are not in this position?

**The Prime Minister:** I know that the whole House will join me in extending our condolences to Aaron following the tragic loss of his wife, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Employed parents can benefit from statutory support depending on personal circumstances, and I am concerned to hear that that is not happening in this case. I will of course ensure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister as soon as possible to resolve this issue.

Q3. [901982] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister join me in condemning the opaquely funded so-called think-tanks that exert so much influence on gullible politicians that their policies were able to almost crash the UK economy just weeks ago? Open Democracy reports that a former member of the Charity Commission board has called for the Institute of Economic Affairs to be stripped of its charitable status, saying that

"the very purpose of the IEA—shrinking the state—is political".

Is it right that this body receives charitable tax status? Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss the influence that bodies such as the IEA exert over politicians, including what influence they still have over him?

**The Prime Minister:** Obviously, charitable status is a matter for the Charity Commission, but more generally, we believe in free speech and the vibrant debate of ideas. That is a good thing and we should do absolutely nothing to stamp it out even when we disagree with it.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): In the run-up to the autumn statement, will my right hon. Friend do everything he can to persuade the Chancellor to assist those people who took out mortgages in good faith and are now at risk of losing their homes through unaffordable increases?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise mortgage payments. This is why it is absolutely crucial that we put our public finances on a sustainable footing to limit the increase in interest rates, because ultimately that is what puts pressure on people's mortgage payments, and that is what this Government are determined to do. In the short term, I hope he can direct his constituents to the support available through the welfare system for those with mortgage payments.

**Q5. [901985] Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Given the continued Russian invasion and the now illegal annexation of parts of Ukraine, will the Prime Minister recommit his Government to pursuing the full and proper accountability, including through the International Criminal Court, of those who violate international law in territories that they occupy? In particular, will he pursue the rigorous application of the fourth Geneva convention on the treatment of civilian populations in militarily occupied areas?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, which is absolutely right. I can confirm that we will continue with the policy that the previous Government put in place, and we can be proud that we provided, I think, the earliest technical support to gather evidence for future prosecutions at the ICC. We will continue to gather evidence and provide support to the Ukrainians, because the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that what we are hearing is abhorrent and wrong, and those who are conducting these things must be held to account.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend and I both represent rural constituencies and he will know the difficulty in securing both NHS dentistry and GPs in rural areas. We on this side of the House know that the financial decisions that he and the Chancellor will be taking are going to be tough, but notwithstanding that, may I urge him to ensure that as many initiatives as possible are supported to make GPs and dentists aware that rural areas are attractive places to work and to encourage recruitment and retention?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of healthcare provision in rural areas, which our constituents feel acutely because of the distances they have to travel. He has my assurance that we will continue to prioritise both dentistry and GP recruitment to make sure that everyone in this country has access to the primary healthcare they need and deserve.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Chris Bryant. [*Interruption.*]

**Q7. [901987] Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I will not be bullied into silence by anybody in this House.

With the highest peacetime tax rates, food inflation running at 11.6%, mortgage rates rising dramatically and a £50 billion hole in the public finances, the Prime Minister knows that Britain is broke. What is it about 12 years of Tory rule and his five years as a Minister that has made such a mess of Britain?

**The Prime Minister:** When it comes to the economy, the hon. Gentleman failed to mention the single biggest causes of the challenges we now face: the aftermath of a global pandemic that has affected supply chains across the world and an illegal war conducted by Putin that is leading to high energy prices. These are the root causes of the challenges we face, which are global in nature. It is wrong to say they are particular to this country, and we will of course do what we always do on this side of the House: deliver a strong economy for the British people.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): People across Essex witnessed terrible fires in last summer's heatwave, and in Ethiopia last month I witnessed the horrific climate change-driven drought that is forcing millions of people across the horn of Africa to the brink of famine. I have discussed climate change with my right hon. Friend, and I know he cares. It is great that he is going to Sharm el-Sheikh. The UK brought the world to Glasgow for COP26, so it is vital that we remain a world leader on climate change. Will he please confirm that this Government will fulfil the promises that the UK made in Glasgow?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for her work and the role she has played in championing our fight against climate change. I agree with her that there is no long-term prosperity without action on climate change and no energy security without investment in renewables. That is why I will attend COP27 next week to deliver on Glasgow's legacy of building a secure, clean and sustainable future.

**Q9. [901989] Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): The Prime Minister was secretly recorded boasting to friends that he had helped to divert money away from deprived areas such as Coventry towards wealthy areas, but staff at Coventry's hospital are still paying £600 a year to park at work. When will he stop hammering working people in my community?

**The Prime Minister:** We introduced temporary free car parking during the pandemic, which was the right thing to do, and all NHS trusts that charge for parking have now implemented our free parking manifesto commitment for those in the greatest need, including hard-working NHS staff who work overnight.

**Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): On Back British Farming Day, will the Prime Minister join all Members in recognising the important role of farmers, and in recognising that public money for public good means producing food in this country? Will he also recognise the value of our trade deals in allowing us to export our high-quality produce around the world, particularly to Australia, where my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) will be able to enjoy a certain delicate cut in his bushtucker trials?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree with my hon. Friend that British farmers are, indeed, the lifeblood of our nation. I join him in celebrating their contribution, and I agree that we need to prioritise food security. He is right to champion free trade deals, which open up new markets and new opportunities for great British produce. We will continue to open up more markets for our farmers everywhere.

**Q10. [901990] Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome our first Prime Minister from Yorkshire in a very long time—I am trying to be kind to him. Since he resigned as Chancellor of the Exchequer on 5 July, we have had the most turbulent economic and political disaster in our country that any of us can remember. When he reflects on that, will he think about why, when he was Chancellor, he did not help ordinary working people as well as he could? Will he take the opportunity to tax the 70,000 non-doms who are getting away with avoiding tax? And will he bring in a tax on the windfall profits of the gas and oil industries?



**The Prime Minister:** I am very proud of my record as Chancellor in this country. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could talk to the 10 million people who had their jobs saved through furlough. Perhaps he could talk to the millions of those on the lowest incomes who benefited from the changes we made to universal credit. This will always be a fair and compassionate Government who have the most vulnerable at our hearts.

**Sir Robert Buckland** (South Swindon) (Con): With only two out of 10 autistic adults currently in employment, it is clear that much more needs to be done to realise their potential. Will my right hon. Friend work with me to make sure that business and industry help to close that alarming employment gap?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. and learned Friend rightly champions this area and knows an enormous amount about it. I look forward to working with him closely to get his recommendations on how we and industry can improve the lives of those who need our help.

Q11. [901992] **Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): The Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister who broke the asylum system—he dodged the question. The truth is that the backlog is now so great, the decision making so collapsed and the returns so low, at a 10th of what they used to be, that the criminal gangs have a business model to die for. Whose fault is that?

**The Prime Minister:** The reason we are in this situation is the unprecedented number of people arriving here illegally, often from safe third countries. If the Labour party was really serious about this, it would realise that we have to stop illegal migration and stop the exploitation of vulnerable people abroad. But Labour Members have opposed every single measure we have taken. They are not serious about this problem, because they do not think it matters.

**Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): Both myself and many of my constituents remember fondly the Prime Minister's visit to Ipswich when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. We spoke about levelling up and he made it clear to me that levelling up is not just about one part of the country; it is a national mission. Therefore, does he agree that a great way to show that to the people of Ipswich would be by supporting our levelling-up fund bid to get Ipswich active? We are talking about £18 million—£15 million for Gainsborough sports centre, and £3 million for the outdoor lido in Broomhill.

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is right: levelling up is about spreading opportunity in every part of our United Kingdom, ensuring that people have pride in the place they call home. I look forward to seeing his levelling-up fund bid. I know it will be being considered over the course of this year and I wish him every success.



## Points of Order

12.33 pm

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. November marks the beginning of Islamophobia Awareness Month, which is a call to tackle this insidious hatred. This time last year, to mark the month, I made a similar point of order, highlighting the then Prime Minister's failure to respond to my letter urging him to better safeguard British Muslim communities. A year on, we have had another two Prime Ministers, and each has failed to respond to my letters on Islamophobia. That is wholly unacceptable and it is an insult to British Muslims. Is it in order for consecutive Prime Ministers to ignore Members' correspondence? If not, what action can I now take? Perhaps the Prime Minister could come to this Chamber to make a statement on Islamophobia Awareness Month.

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. I can confirm that I have not had a statement from the Government on this matter, although Ministers on the Treasury Bench will have heard his points. I am not responsible for ministerial correspondence, but the right hon. Members he mentioned were written to in a ministerial capacity and I would have expected replies to have been provided. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will continue to pursue the issue that he has raised. If he does not, he should please let me know. If he would like to drop me a line to tell me which Ministers have failed to reply, I will take that up in private.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance. ITV has made a drama series about the heinous plan to murder the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), whose permission I have to make this point of order. What advice can you give Members in such a situation, to ensure that the facts are fairly presented, that threats on the lives of our colleagues are not treated as entertainment through the use of the public interest defence, and that such series do not risk re-victimising those of us still living under a significant threat to life?

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. As the House will know, the safety of Members, our families and our staff, and of this House, is one of my highest priorities. Like all hon. Members, I would hope that any depiction of threats made against parliamentarians is undertaken responsibly, based on the facts and mindful of the impact on those subject to such threats.

I am also very concerned that a friend of mine was subject to those threats. We all stand in awe of the bravery that she has shown and her courage in ensuring that she is still a Member of Parliament, even if she might be going to new pastures.

**Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am appalled at ITV's recent treatment of the threats to MPs. I have been used as a marketing tool by both Hope not Hate and ITV.

What excuse is there for a press release that says, "Who is Rosie Cooper and who wanted to murder her?" There is no defence to that.

Let us test the public interest defence to this despicable behaviour. I call on Hope not Hate and ITV to donate all moneys and profits generated from this TV series, both here and abroad—every single penny should go to the Jo Cox Foundation. We should not tolerate this kind of behaviour.

May I crave the indulgence of the House, Mr Speaker? Obviously, I have not had an opportunity to speak to people about this. If I may, I want to quickly thank some people. I will not spare your blushes, Mr Speaker, in saying that I would not be here today without your support and unfailing kindness. I have had to call on you and your advice many, many times as a result of death threats, all piggy-backing on the original threat; in fact, one case is with the Director of Public Prosecutions right now. How many more will come from this stupid, stupid, stupid series?

I thank you primarily, Mr Speaker, but I also thank Jeremy Corbyn and Karie Murphy, who allowed me the use of a Government car to get me into the Old Bailey during the second trial for the sentencing, simply because ITV's despicable cameraman chased me up and down the road at the end of the first trial. I thank the then Prime Minister Theresa May for the really kind handwritten letter she sent me; I would have hoped to have said that while she was here, but I have not been able to tell people as I did not know I was going to do this. I thank the Minister Ben Wallace, action man—he was absolutely brilliant—and the former Home Secretary Priti Patel, who was unstinting in her support. Finally, I thank all my colleagues, right across this House from every party, who have been absolutely kind and supported me throughout.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) *rose—*

**Mr Speaker:** We have another point order. I call Dame Diana Johnson.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The current situation at Manston asylum processing centre in Kent came to light as a result of the Home Affairs Committee's oral evidence session with Home Office officials last Wednesday, which is part of the essential work of scrutiny that we undertake. Immediately after that session, we asked the Home Office to facilitate a visit by the Committee to Manston so that we might scrutinise what had happened there since we last visited in June, when the site was fully and properly operating. The Chairs of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Women and Equalities Committee, and the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and a member of the Justice Committee have all asked to join our visit. As of now, nearly one week later, the Home Office has agreed in principle to our visiting, but has, in spite of repeated requests for a visit this Thursday, refused to agree any date or to enable our visit this week to see what is happening on the ground.

Visits by Ministers and others are being enabled. A visit by the Committee, which this House has charged with scrutinising the Home Office, is not. What action will this House be able to take to remind the Home

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

Secretary and the Home Office that parliamentary oversight of their actions is essential and should be facilitated with all due speed?

**Mr Speaker:** First, I thank the right hon. Lady for giving me notice of her intention to make a point of order. I agree with her about the importance of Government Departments being open to parliamentary scrutiny. That is the role of Select Committees. I hope that people are listening and that they recognise that need, because scrutiny is so important. It is also important to recognise that it involves Back Benchers from all parts of the House. This is not about Members from one political persuasion. Why Ministers or anybody would want to block the role of Members, I do not understand.

As I have said, I agree about the importance of this, but scrutiny and enabling it to happen at an appropriate speed is essential. This is a matter for the Home Office rather than the Chair. However, those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what the right hon. Lady has said, and I am sure that she will continue to pursue this cause with vigour. Please keep me informed; I will be having a meeting later with certain Government officials and I will personally raise the issue.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, the energy bill's support scheme payments are landing in accounts across the UK, yet doubt abounds in Northern Ireland. There was an agreement with the Government to advance lump sum payments to Northern Ireland in November, but the utility regulator said yesterday that that may no longer be the case. Have the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland and for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy advised you, Mr Speaker, of an intention to make a statement on this issue? Could you advise me on the avenues I can pursue to get the answers that my hard-pressed constituents so desperately need?

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving me notice of her point of order. I can confirm that I have not had any notice of a statement on this matter. However, Ministers will have heard her views on the matter and I know that she will certainly pursue it.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for not giving you notice of my point of order. I had hoped to raise this yesterday in Health and Social Care questions. Thousands of children worldwide are dying of measles. The measles, mumps and rubella vaccine is critical for

children's health in this country. May we have an inquiry into what exactly happened in a recent debate in Westminster Hall, which was, it seems, taken over by anti-vax people? There was much shouting, screaming and carrying on. May we have an investigation into what happened when Westminster Hall was taken over by anti-vaxxers who made a spectacle of this House?

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** It might be easier if I could try to answer the first point of order. Let me just say that I was not aware of that. If the hon. Member was there, and I am not convinced that he was because that is not the report that I received about the incident—

**Mr Sheerman:** It was in all the papers.

**Mr Speaker:** Ah, we do not respond to papers. Come on, Sir Christopher Chope.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** Mr Speaker, I am glad that I was present in the Chamber when the hon. Gentleman made that ridiculous allegation. He was not present in Westminster Hall for that debate. I was present and there were many people in the Public Gallery, one or two of whom may have been, as he put it, anti-vaxxers, but most of the people present in the Public Gallery were those who were vaccine injured—people who had suffered as a result of having covid-19 vaccines and who are seeking compensation.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I do not think we will carry on the debate. You have certainly got your point across and corrected the position of what happened on the day, so I am not going to continue with it.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, you will be aware that Royal Mail workers had intended to undertake strike action. I have the largest delivery office in Scotland in my constituency. That action was postponed, but new dates have been rolled out. Have you been given advance notice of a Government statement from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about the plans for Royal Mail to sack 10,000 staff and the upcoming industrial action?

**Mr Speaker:** I have not had notice of a statement on the dispute with Royal Mail. As the Government are a shareholder within the organisation, at some point no doubt they will wish to make a statement to the House as a matter of urgency.

## Microplastic Filters (Washing Machines)

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

12.45 pm

**Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require manufacturers to fit microplastic-catching filters to new domestic and commercial washing machines; to make provision about the promotion of the use of microplastic-catching filters in washing machines and raising awareness about the consequences of microplastics from washing machines for pollution in rivers and seas; and for connected purposes.

First, I would like to thank colleagues across the House who have sponsored my Bill and all colleagues for their support on this important way of tackling pollution. We do not often think about plastic pollution when we wash our clothes, but all our clothes and garments, including yours, Mr Speaker, shed what are known as microfibre plastics. I am introducing this Bill to encourage the Government to work with washing machine manufacturers to set standards to ensure that all new domestic and commercial washing machines are fitted with a microfibre plastic-catching filter.

Microfibre plastic pollution is one of the most pervasive and preventable forms of microplastic pollution; 35% of all microplastics released into the environment are shed from clothing. Microfibre plastics are tiny fibres that can be shed from our clothes during the wash cycle. Due to their small size, they are not trapped by existing washing machine filters and can end up in the waste water system, where they may be caught, remain in sewage sludge that is then spread on to our growing crops, or be released from the waste water into rivers and, worse still, the marine environment. Research by the University of Plymouth has found that one wash cycle can release more than 700,000 microfibre into our sewerage system. That means that across the UK, 10 trillion microfibre are released every week. That is a gargantuan amount of plastic pollution.

It is not enough to rely on our waste water treatment centres to filter microplastics from our water; the microplastics are so small that sewage works cannot capture all of them. The result is millions of microplastics being released from the waste water into our rivers and seas, damaging our environment. The microplastics contain chemicals that are then ingested by fish and other small aquatic creatures. Much of the plastic pollution then travels up the food chain so that we humans ingest it through consumption of fish.

Microplastic fibres from clothing are contaminating otherwise pristine natural environments, including in the snow close to the peak of Mount Everest, and have even been found in the depths of the Mariana Trench in the western Pacific ocean. They are found in many urban and semi-urban river beds in the UK, in our constituencies. I urge colleagues to think about their own constituency rivers, which are probably contaminated with microplastics.

Recent research has also shown that microplastics are also in the lungs and blood of some human beings. That means that some of us here today already have microfibre plastics in our bodies, possibly even you, Mr Speaker—

**Mr Speaker:** I hope not!

**Alberto Costa:** I hope not too. It is suspected that they may have an effect on human health. We are still at the embryonic level in terms of research into this matter, but it cannot be good to have microplastic fibres in our lungs and in other parts of our body. More research is clearly needed to determine the health impact.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on microplastics, I have been working with the National Federation of Women's Institutes, which has long campaigned on microfibre plastics that come from laundry through its End Plastic Soup campaign. Many colleagues will remember that it brought that campaign to Parliament a few years ago, which is where I first learned about it. The APPG has also worked with a range of stakeholders, including academics, global washing machine manufacturers and environmental groups.

I would like to emphasise the importance of also tackling this issue at source. We must encourage textile and clothing manufacturers to make garments using sustainable thread with a reduced shedding rate, so that garments do not shed microfibre in the first place. However, adding filters to washing machines is completely achievable in the short to medium term and can be enacted quickly. Numerous studies, including by the University of Plymouth, demonstrate that the use of microplastic fibre filters can dramatically reduce the release of microplastic fibres into the environment—by as much as 78%.

Through my work on the APPG, I am aware of several British companies that make microfibre-catching filters for washing machines. The technology is already available and is fast developing. By taking advantage of that UK innovation, we would be leading the way in preventing microplastic pollution. I propose that the Government work with washing machine manufacturers and British companies that are already designing and making filters, to ensure that all new domestic and commercial washing machines are fitted with filters to capture a high rate of these offending microfibre. This is a low-cost solution to our plastic pollution problem, and I am not proposing something that would be a first. Other countries, such as France and Australia, have already pledged to look at this issue and are working with manufacturers to install industry-leading microfibre-catching filters.

It is incumbent on us all to ensure that the environment is left in a better condition than when we found it. Like many Members, I was inspired by Sir David Attenborough in the BBC's "Blue Planet II" documentary, which was released in 2017. It opened our eyes to the damage that we are all doing to the marine life and marine environment of our wonderful planet. Microfibre plastic pollution is an enormous problem, and the Government should explore all avenues to tackle the different types of pervasive plastic.

I thank all those who have been involved with the APPG for the excellent work they continue to do to encourage stakeholders such as the Government to take this matter seriously and to enact the necessary legislation. Washing machine manufacturers themselves want that; they want a level playing field, so that they can produce these filters, sell them to consumers and allow consumers to enjoy their existing quality of life—cleaning clothes



[Alberto Costa]

is an important aspect of maintaining a good quality of life—but in a way that maintains, rather than damages, our natural environment.

I urge my colleagues in the Government to consider my Bill and to work with washing machine manufacturers, who want to achieve a solution that ensures that microfibre plastics do not become an even bigger problem. With such legislation, the United Kingdom, working with allies such as France and Australia, could become a global leader in tackling this microplastic pollution.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Alberto Costa, Caroline Lucas, Tim Loughton, Mr Jonathan Lord, Andrew Selous, Mrs Pauline Latham, Philip Dunne, Stuart C. McDonald, Selaine Saxby, Mr Alistair Carmichael and Mrs Flick Drummond present the Bill.

Alberto Costa accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 February 2023, and to be printed (Bill 180).*

## Opposition Day

[6TH ALLOTTED DAY]

### Scottish Independence and the Scottish Economy

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the Member to move the motion, given the subject of this afternoon's debate I wish to make a short statement about the sub judice resolution and the Supreme Court's consideration of whether provisions in the draft Scottish Independence Referendum Bill relate to reserved matters under the Scotland Act 1998. As a judgment is anticipated in the coming months, I have exercised discretion to allow reference to the issues concerned in that case, given their national importance, but Members are encouraged not to discuss the detail of the legal proceedings.

12.57 pm

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House regrets the economic damage the Government has caused since the mini-budget on 23 September 2022, with the pound hitting a record low against the dollar, mortgage rates at their highest level since the financial crash and inflation at a forty-year high; calls on the Government immediately to reinstate the bankers' bonus cap, increase benefits in line with inflation and protect the pensions triple lock; considers that Scotland cannot afford to be part of the failing state of the UK and must be independent for economic stability; and welcomes the publication of the Scottish Government's independence papers series, Building a New Scotland and The Economic Opportunity for Scotland from Renewable and Green Technology by David Skilling.

Mr Speaker—

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Too long!

**Ian Blackford:** From a sedentary position, the hon. Gentleman says, "Too long," and of course he is right—Scotland has been stuck in this Union for too long. I look forward to the opportunity for my colleagues to leave this House for the last time when Scotland becomes an independent country—it has indeed been too long.

It is fair to say that Westminster has been no stranger to chaos and crisis over the last number of years, but even with that in mind, it has still been hard to take in fully the mayhem and madness in this place in the last few weeks. Another Tory Prime Minister gone. Another Tory Prime Minister imposed in Scotland. The only thing that stays the same is the constant crisis in this place. Even the kangaroo genitalia-eating junket to Australia of the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) passes for a normal affair around here these days.

The core of today's motion is designed to demonstrate that the permanent political pantomime that Westminster has become is not somehow victimless or benign; it comes with a massive, massive cost. Each and every one of these Westminster crises comes with a consequence, and it is always those who can least afford it who end up paying the price of the failure of Westminster control.

Let us take the example of the last few months. The UK Government have been so consumed by their own political crisis that they have ignored the economic crisis they caused with their mini-Budget on 23 September. Indeed, they are not just ignoring it; they are completely



blind to the mess they have made. In the last 10 days, it has been hard not to notice that Tory Members are in a state of excited relief at the fact that they have got rid of a Prime Minister who managed to crash the UK economy in the space of 44 days. In their great relief, they seem to have magically forgotten that they were the ones who put her in place. They were the ones who were cheering on her libertarian joyride—until the very moment that she crashed the economy. They may have gotten rid of the Prime Minister they put in place, but for ordinary people the damage is already done.

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): I get extremely anxious about my homeland splitting from my now home country, particularly as Scotland has no credible fiscal plan. As I see child poverty increase, the once leading education system trashed and the NHS left to deteriorate, I wonder who is at fault. Does the right hon. Member accept that while the Tory Government have let Scotland down—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. This is meant to be an intervention, not a speech about all your issues. I am more than happy to put you on the speaking list.

**Ian Blackford:** Mr Speaker, if anybody is letting themselves down, it is the hon. Gentleman, because the Scottish Parliament has done its best to mitigate the effects of Tory austerity, thank goodness. We can applaud what the Scottish Government have done with child payments—introduced at £10, increased to £20 and now up at £25—but we cannot stop the damaging effect of austerity on our country, because the bulk of economic power lies in Westminster. The hon. Gentleman and his Labour colleagues may indeed support the Scottish Parliament—our Parliament—which does its best to protect the people from what happens in this place in Westminster and, of course, from the damaging effects of Brexit that mean our businesses cannot fulfil their potential. The hon. Gentleman ought to look in the mirror.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The reality is that the split in terms of values is between the red Tories and the blue Tories here. The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) should be aware that in Ireland, which became independent, the poorest 5% are 63% richer than the poorest 5% in the UK. If ever there was a lesson about being independent, that is it.

**Ian Blackford:** My hon. Friend is quite correct. When we look around the world, we see small countries thriving. Small countries tend to do better than larger ones. There are no economies of scale for large countries, and it is Westminster, the UK, that is holding Scotland back.

Let me return to the economic situation we face today: the pound is still down against the dollar and euro, mortgage rates are at their highest since the financial crash, and inflation is still at a 40-year high. History shows that those in the Tory party always act fast to rid themselves of their own political problems, but they always fail to take responsibility for the crises they create. They are failing to take responsibility for the cost of living crisis they created and the failing UK state they have presided over for the past 12 years.

It would be wrong to believe that the events causing deep damage over the last few weeks are somewhat isolated incidents. It does not take a genius to know that the timeline for every bit of turmoil in this place over the last few years stems from one place and one place only: the utter disaster of Brexit. Six years on, it has been a disaster by every significant measure. Brexit broke Britain.

Only yesterday, Scotland's *The Herald* newspaper revealed that the value of Scottish exports has dropped by more than 13% in two years, costing £2.2 billion, with Brexit entirely to blame. That is what Brexit has done to the Scottish economy and Scottish trade. That has been the impact of what the Tories have brought to us. However, faced with these Brexit facts, it is a disgrace that Westminster's only response is to say one of two things: "Suck it up," or, "Shut up." I assure the Brexit fanatics that we intend to do neither.

The reality of Brexit is biting everywhere. Last week I visited the Nevis Bakery in my constituency. The owner, Archie Paterson, explained to me that they currently employ 30 people, and that they could easily double that tomorrow, expanding their production line, expanding their premises and growing the local economy. But just one thing is stopping them, and it is Brexit. Brexit means they have no access to labour. The balance of workers used to be 80% EU skilled bakers, and that has declined to only 20%. They cannot get the staff, so they cannot expand. It is the same story for businesses across the highlands and right across Scotland: denied economic opportunity; denied the opportunity to grow our economy; denied the opportunity to prosper and deliver the taxation receipts. All that has been delivered by the Brexit Scotland never voted for.

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): I agree with much of what the right hon. Gentleman is saying about the incompetence of the Conservative Government. On Brexit, however, an important fact is being missed. During the referendum, when many of us fought very hard to make sure the UK stayed within the EU, the Scottish National party spent just £91,000 on its campaign—13% of what it could have spent. It spent less on that campaign than on a Shetland by-election. It spent less than 7% of what it spent on trying to take Scotland out of the UK. Will he take this opportunity to apologise to everyone who voted remain for the fact that the SNP went missing from the pitch during that campaign?

**Ian Blackford:** My goodness, Mr Speaker, I hate to point out to the hon. Gentleman that 62% of those who voted in Scotland voted to stay in the European Union. I am proud to say that my right hon. and hon. Friends and I were up and down Scotland during the Brexit campaign, leading the people of Scotland and making the case for Scotland to stay in Europe.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): On that point, will the leader of the SNP please explain to us why his party spent less on the EU referendum than on a Scottish parliamentary by-election on Shetland?

**Ian Blackford:** This would be funny if it was not so tragic. It used to be the case—[*Interruption.*] We have many hours of debate, and if Labour and Liberal

[*Ian Blackford*]

Democrat Members calm down, I am sure that they will get the opportunity to speak. Maybe I should point out to the hon. Lady that the Liberal Democrats used to proclaim staying in Europe—

**Christine Jardine:** And still do.

**Ian Blackford:** No, you don't. If the Liberal Democrats wanted to stay in Europe, as the hon. Lady suggests, they would have that in their manifesto. The Labour party and the Liberal Democrats have run away from Europe, just as they have run away from their responsibilities to the people of Scotland.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Is it not the case—just to educate the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins)—that not only did we carry the argument in Scotland, winning 62% of the vote for remain, but we carried that argument successfully in all 32 council areas in Scotland?

**Ian Blackford:** My hon. Friend is quite correct that every local authority area in Scotland voted to remain. Not only did people across Scotland vote to remain, but that demand to stay in Europe has increased over the past few years. In fact, recent polling shows as many as 72% of Scots wish to remain in Europe. I say to those watching in our own country that there is a clear way to achieve this. If Scotland has its right to determine its own future, and if our Parliament, which has an independence majority, can enact the referendum that our people voted for, then Scotland's journey to independence and back into the European union will be complete.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way—[*Interruption.*]

**Ian Blackford:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have just been called a liar.

**Mr Speaker:** I did not hear what was said—

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Ask him!

**Mr Speaker:** Do you want to go out early for a cup of tea? Because you are on my speaking list. Let me deal with it. Mr Bonnar, I need no help, thank you. If somebody said that, I expect them to withdraw it, because we do not use that term in this Chamber.

**Mr Perkins:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I certainly withdraw any implication that the right hon. Gentleman is a liar. I did not say he was a liar, but I did say that what he said was untrue. I withdraw that out of respect to you, Mr Speaker.

**Kirsten Oswald** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** I call Ian Blackford. We are moving on. We have dealt with it.

**Ian Blackford:** I give way to my hon. Friend.

**Kirsten Oswald:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Does he not think that people at home will be looking askance at Labour Members? First, they were apologists for the chaos that the Conservatives have inflicted on Scotland's economy. Now, they are some kind of supporters of Brexit, which has caused so much harm to Scotland. It is inexplicable how any Opposition Member could take such a position, as we all heard them do.

**Ian Blackford:** My hon. Friend is correct. It is 1.10 pm; we have until 7 o'clock to debate the issue. To hon. Members in other parties on both sides of the House, I promise that we will respect the importance of the subject, because this is about Scotland's future. To friends and colleagues—Conservative, Labour and Lib Dem Members—I say, let us have that debate about Scotland's future and let us respectfully disagree on what we see the future as. We will put the case for Scotland to be an independent country; they should come and engage with us, and put the case for Scotland to stay in the Union. I have to say that when we have these debates, I do not hear that case for Scotland to stay in the Union.

The evidence of the damage done by Brexit is mounting by the day. From those who forced it on Scotland, however, not one word of contrition or apology has ever been offered for that massive act of economic self-harm. I am tempted to say that when it comes to Brexit and Westminster, there are really none so blind as those who will not see—my goodness, that has been shown today. In many respects, however, the truth is even worse.

**Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman saying that he wants a serious debate about the status of Scotland in the Union and the benefits of Scotland being in it. In his arguments so far, however, he has blamed everything from rising energy costs to global supply chain challenges on Brexit. Does he not recognise that we have been facing a tumultuous global situation? If he acknowledged that, we could at least start to have a sensible debate.

**Ian Blackford:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman. I think he is genuinely trying to be helpful, so I will respond in kind. We are suffering from an enormous increase in energy costs. I applaud the fact that we have the energy cap, but let us remember the harsh reality that for people up and down these islands, energy costs have doubled in the last year. People will face genuine hardship. [*Interruption.*] I can see him shaking his head, but the harsh reality is that our energy market is determined by the wholesale gas price. For those of us in Scotland, 14% of our electricity consumption comes from gas and we actually produce six times as much gas as we consume. We are being affected largely by the failures of UK energy policy and, yes, by global issues as well, but the fact that energy costs are so high in energy rich Scotland is an absolute disgrace.

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): On the intervention of the right hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns), of course the last few years have shown how unpredictable the world can be and how many unexpected challenges we can face, but does that not just hammer home how important it is for

Scotland in particular to get the Governments it votes for? Given that Scotland has not voted for a Conservative Government since 1955, does my right hon. Friend not agree that by far and away the best way to protect ourselves against the unpredictable is to be independent and in control of our resources?

**Ian Blackford:** My hon. Friend is correct. Not since 1955 has Scotland voted for a Conservative Government, yet we face Conservative Government after Conservative Government. The difference between me and the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) on the Labour Front Bench is that I would rather have an independent Labour Government in Scotland than a Tory Government in London who demonstrate their contempt for the people of Scotland through their policies. That is the reality. Unfortunately, he would rather have a Tory Government in London than an independent Scottish Government over whom he may have influence.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Again on the intervention of the right hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns), is it not the case that, although there are high global oil and gas prices, Norway has a sovereign wealth fund of \$1 trillion—the biggest in the world—that can be used to support its citizens, whereas Westminster has squandered our oil and gas revenues all these years? Even then, the McCrone report from the '70s, which was buried for 30 years, showed the wealth that would have accumulated to Scotland had it been independent. Both Labour and the Conservatives held that information from the Scottish population.

**Ian Blackford:** My hon. Friend is correct. I think the taxation receipts for North sea oil over the period that he is talking about have been north of £350 billion. What a missed opportunity to ensure that we could invest for future generations, eradicate the poverty that has been talked about and deliver hope for future generations. I will come on to the opportunities from green energy. My message to him and other hon. Members on both sides of the House is that a green industrial revolution could come to Scotland, so we need to create the jobs that will drive up productivity and investment and give people hope—but we are not going to do that while we are part of Westminster.

There are plenty of intelligent people in this place—I am especially looking at Labour Members—and we can see the damage that Brexit has done. They see it, but they will not say it. The reason they will not say it is that they are frightened that they will lose votes in the north of England, and to hell with the consequences in Scotland and everywhere else. I am sorry to say that that is one of the most shameful examples of politics replacing principles that this place has ever witnessed—that is really saying something in Westminster.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): One of the reasons that the UK voted for Brexit was that the EU stands for ever-closer union, which means joining the euro. The right hon. Gentleman has talked about independence, so will he be joining the euro? Will he not then accede some of the control over the fiscal situation that he wants to deal with?

**Ian Blackford:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but let me return to 2014. At the time of the Scottish referendum, we were told that, if we stayed in the United Kingdom, two things would happen: first, we would stay in Europe and secondly, we would lead the UK in a voluntary Union of equals. None of that has happened, however, because of his example of being taken out of the European Union against our will. The key difference is that Europe is a partnership of equals.

Since the hon. Gentleman asked about currency, I will answer head on. When Scotland becomes independent, as it will, we will retain the pound. *[Laughter.]* It is funny, is it? We are talking about people's futures and we are trying to deal with a serious matter. We will keep the pound until such time that a number of economic tests are met that will allow us to have a Scottish pound. That is what will happen.

**Dr Luke Evans:** I am grateful that the right hon. Gentleman has been clear and direct in saying that Scotland will have the pound. If he joins the EU, however, is the plan not to join the euro? He will have to concede, therefore, that Scotland will have to do that. By what mechanism would he therefore keep the pound, or the Scottish pound, or refute having the euro?

**Ian Blackford:** I respectfully say to the hon. Gentleman that he should go away and read the treaties, because they are very clear; we are all aware of what is contained in them. Crucially, to join the euro, countries have to join the exchange rate mechanism for two years, which is voluntary. Countries cannot be forced into the euro. Our position is clear: we will deliver a fiscal programme that will deliver jobs for Scotland, create the circumstances for investment and drive up living standards—that is what we want with independence. We will make sure that we have the answer to the currency situation that delivers for our people.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Perhaps the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) is misled by headlines in *The Times* newspaper and should apprise himself better of what is actually happening in Europe. On 1 July 2013, Croatia joined the European Union and Croatia is not in the euro. There are about six or seven other countries in the European Union that are not in the euro. A country can join the euro if it wants over its own timescale—it can be hundreds of years if it wants—but it does what it wants and what it thinks is sensible for itself, and that is why it has independence.

**Ian Blackford:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for revealing—

**Ian Murray:** No, he's wrong.

**Ian Blackford:** My hon. Friend is not wrong, if the hon. Member reads the treaties. I have pointed out that joining the ERM is a step that has to be taken before anyone is able to join.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Ian Blackford:** I am going to make some progress, and I will allow interventions later.

**Ian Murray** *rose*—



**Ian Blackford:** I give way.

**Ian Murray:** I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene because this is a crucial point that people need to understand. The current position of the Scottish National party is to stick with the pound for an undefined period, then to set up her own currency. As Nicola Sturgeon said herself when she launched the economic paper, she will not commit to joining the euro. That does one of two things: it either denies EU membership, or it means an independent Scotland would have a separate currency from both the EU and its bigger trading partner, the rest of the UK. Is that not correct?

**Ian Blackford:** The hon. Gentleman is wrong. I have pointed out that in order to join the euro—[*Interruption.*] I have already laid out that we will retain the pound sterling immediately on attaining independence, and when the time is right and a number of economic tests are met, we will have the Scottish pound. There are six tests, and I will be—

**Dr Luke Evans:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Blackford:** I am now going to make some progress.

**Dr Evans:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Blackford:** I have already given way twice to the hon. Member, and I think I have been very gracious with my time.

As I said at the start, all the Westminster-imposed chaos comes with real consequences because the cost of the last six weeks, and the consequences of the last six years of constant crisis mean that the Tories are right back where they originally started—implementing austerity. This week, we have been deliberately bombarded by Treasury briefing about the “difficult decisions” that need to be made in order to fill the economic hole that the Tories dug themselves, but the return of austerity, if it ever truly went away, is not a so-called difficult decision. It is instead what it has always been—a Tory political choice to hit the poorest hardest.

No one should be fooled into thinking that there are not other choices. In the week that BP announced a quarterly profit of £7.1 billion, why not take the easy decision to bring in a proper windfall tax on excess profits? Why not take the easy decision to end non-dom tax avoidance? Why not take the easy decision to reinstate the cap on bankers’ bonuses? With all that new revenue, why not take the easiest decision of all, and protect those most at risk by uprating benefits and pensions in line with inflation? That, after all, was the promise the Prime Minister made when he was Chancellor back in May.

Until each and every one of those easy and essential decisions are taken, the Tories should not dare talk about the difficult decisions they are having to take. I fear, though, that the Tories and their new Prime Minister have already made their choice: they are gearing up to take a wrecking ball to public services and double down on austerity. That is exactly why we are now at such a critical juncture. It is clearer by the day that austerity 2.0 is the future awaiting the Scottish people unless we escape Westminster control for good. That is why independence is not just desirable; it is essential.

There is no better example of that necessity than the energy issue. The motion refers to the detailed and evidenced-based report by David Skilling, who has laid out the facts on the sheer scale of the energy opportunity awaiting an independent Scotland. I encourage hon. Members across the House to read that report. We have the potential to generate around 10% of Europe’s wave power and possess 25% of the potential European offshore wind and tidal resource. Let us not forget that it is Westminster that is holding back our tidal potential with its refusal to fund it to the rate that will be necessary to generate up to 11.5 GW of tidal energy by 2050.

**David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con):** I am not sure if I picked the right hon. Gentleman up right, but is he accusing the UK Government of not funding tidal energy, when in fact £20 million of contracts for difference were committed, as ringfenced, specifically for tidal stream energy?

**Ian Blackford:** I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman raises that because it takes us back to the discussions we had last year. The Royal Society report published just before COP26—a peer-reviewed report—indicated the potential to get to 11.5 GW of electricity from tidal. Incidentally, that would be 15% of the UK’s electricity production, which is the amount that nuclear contributes today, and by 2030 tidal would be cheaper than nuclear. We do not need nuclear to provide our baseload electricity because tidal does it. The fact remains that that £20 million, welcome as it is, does not go far enough for that industry to develop its potential. When we look at the programmes that are already live around these shores, about 70% of the value added from tidal comes from Scotland and about 80% comes from the UK. It is a domestically grown industry.

We heard earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) about the contrast with the oil industry in Norway, but one of the key lessons from that is to make sure not just that we have the energy production, but that we control the supply chain. This is exactly an industry where we do control the supply chain. I say to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) that he should join me in pressing the Treasury to make sure we get the £50 million-a-year ringfenced pot—that is what would allow us to fulfil our potential—and at the same time to make sure that we get carbon capture and storage for Peterhead. Those two clear examples are direct demonstrations of how Scotland has been held back—held back on its ability to deliver green energy and on its desire to get to net zero in 2045. That is the cost of Westminster control for Scotland.

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** I may be corrected, but I fancy I am the only person in this place who has worked in an oil fabrication yard; it was at Nigg. When I worked there, 5,000 people were employed—vital jobs in the highlands. We have the skills still, but they are ageing skills and the skills are going. If we miss the opportunity to build offshore floating wind structures in Scotland, we will be failing the Scottish people. What is the difference between us and Norway? Norway does build; we do not, and we should do something about it.



**Ian Blackford:** I thank the hon. Member for that remark. He is right to talk about what happened in Nigg back in the day. But it was not just in Nigg, as he will recall; it also happened in the west of the highlands—in Kishorn in my own constituency and Ardersier. If you would allow, Mr Deputy Speaker, we could sing the song of the Kishorn Commandos, but maybe we will save that for another day.

**Jamie Stone:** I was a Kishorn Commando.

**Ian Blackford:** And there is many a tale to be told about what happened in Kishorn back in the day, but this is a serious point about the opportunity to industrialise the highlands and the opportunity to create jobs for generations, create wealth and create prosperity. I congratulate the hon. Member because we have worked together on making sure that we are pushing for the opportunities in Cromarty, but these are decisions that we should be taking in Scotland to make sure that we deliver on that promise.

We cannot mention often enough the potential we have in green energy. Scotland is energy rich, and we simply should not be facing an energy emergency. We should not have cold homes and soaring bills. Even before this crisis—as the hon. Member would acknowledge, we already had the situation before this crisis—40% of pensioners in the highlands lived in fuel poverty. What a disgrace that we allow that happen.

**Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP):** My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree with me, and do his constituents share my concerns, that people look out at these wind installations—such as Seagreen off the Angus coast, two revolutions of which can power a home for an entire year—yet at the same time they cannot pay their electricity bill, thanks to the UK's energy market? Is that not in itself a reason to decouple ourselves from this broken Union?

**Ian Blackford:** Indeed, because I think it fair to say that we are being ripped off. We are being ripped off by transmission charges. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn, because he took me to see an offshore wind farm in Kincardine a few weeks ago—what a demonstration of the opportunity we have from the North sea. The fundamental point is that we should not have cold homes and soaring bills. We produce six times more gas than we consume, and nearly 100% of the equivalent of our electricity consumption already comes from renewables—[*Interruption.*] I have said equivalent on many occasions.

**Ian Murray:** We'll check *Hansard*.

**Ian Blackford:** I did ask for respect and honesty in this debate, and I think that if the hon. Gentleman checks *Hansard*, he will find that I have said that on a number of occasions.

This is Scotland's energy and it should serve Scotland's people. The Skilling report shows that Scotland has the potential to boost our output by more than five times, increasing from 12 GW of installed renewable capacity to over 80 GW by 2050. Just think about that—80 GW of electricity by 2050. That is as much as four times the energy Scotland needs. It will provide the cheap, green energy that will allow us to have a new industrial revolution, and to see jobs come to the eastern highlands,

the western highlands, the lowlands and the south of Scotland as a consequence of the economic opportunity that will be created. By expanding Scotland's renewable capacity and becoming a green hydrogen exporter, we have the chance to pump as much as £34 billion into Scotland's economy every year—an investment that would sustain up to 385,000 jobs, dwarfing the jobs that we have in oil in gas today. That is a real energy transition.

This is a plan for growth—green, sustainable growth for the long term, not the fantasy growth that we had from the Truss Government and the absence of any plan from the existing Government. Driving better productivity, driving an industrial green society, and driving our economy into the future—that is the plan on which an independent Scotland can and will be built. Apparently, the only UK Government response to that energy plan is the bizarre argument that we should ignore the vast renewable energy potential and instead turn to nuclear. Well, let us be very clear: we do not need nuclear in Scotland, we do not want nuclear power, and we will not be having nuclear power. We want the powers of independence so that Scotland's energy can finally serve the needs of the Scottish people.

In the latest Scottish Government paper on independence, our First Minister set out all the economic opportunities that independence will unleash. Instead of Westminster anti-trade union laws, we could ensure fairer work with European-style labour market policies. Instead of an economic race to the bottom, we could build an economy based on human wellbeing, lifting people up so that they can contribute fully, not waiting for wealth to trickle down while the inequality gap grows. Instead of Brexit, we would be an EU member state in our own right and we would, for the first time, be in a position not just to benefit from EU trade deals, but to help shape them. Instead of a hostile environment and the disgrace of a Home Secretary who talks about “invasions”, we would have a humane immigration policy tailored to our needs.

**David Duguid** *rose—*

**Ian Blackford:** I will happily give way to the hon. Gentleman if he will join me and ask the Home Secretary to apologise for the outrageous language that she used in this Chamber on Monday.

**David Duguid:** I genuinely thank the right hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene on the point he was making about an independent Scotland being in the EU—a point he made previously. Does he agree with his leader in Holyrood, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, when she admitted that there could be hard borders and passport controls between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom?

**Ian Blackford:** Here we go: “Project Fear” all over again. Let me give the hon. Gentleman and the House the example of Ireland. Way back in the 1940s, close to 90% of Ireland's exports were to the rest of the United Kingdom. Today that figure is less than 10%, but the value of Irish exports to the UK actually increased every single year, irrespective of the economic cycle. An independent Ireland was able to pursue policies that delivered growth and resulted in investment and trade opportunities. That is the opportunity for an independent Scotland.

**Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): I would not want us to move too far beyond the point about humane treatment. Is it the case that Ukrainian refugees in Scotland currently have to be housed in temporary accommodation on ships, in which the space they must occupy is less than is legally required for prisoners in Scottish prisons?

**Ian Blackford**: I should not be surprised by some of the things we get from the Tories in this House, but has the hon. Gentleman any sense of listening to what has been happening this week in Kent, when he comes and accuses the Scottish Government regarding those seeking refuge on our soil? We can be proud of what the Scottish Government have delivered, led by our former colleague Neil Gray. Around 20% of Ukrainian migrants who have come are in Scotland living in our country. We have opened our doors and welcomed them, and by goodness that is something we should be proud of.

*Several hon. Members rose—*

**Ian Blackford**: I will make some progress as I am conscious of the time.

Instead of Westminster control, we would always have the stability of knowing that the Governments who shape our economy have been elected by us—a simple democratic principle.

The great American writer Maya Angelou once said:

“When people show you who they are, believe them the first time.”

Well, people in Scotland have had more than enough of Westminster control. We know who the Tories are, we know what this place is, and we know the deep damage it has done. We believed them the first time. That is why Scotland has not voted for the Tories since 1955. Westminster has made its choice and chosen its future. It is a present and a future of constant crisis—a Brexit-backing, failing UK state. It is time that Scotland left those choices and that future behind us for good. We do not have to believe in Westminster control anymore; we have only to believe in ourselves. It is now time for Scotland to build its own future—an independent future in Europe.

1.37 pm

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack)**: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I would, by convention, congratulate the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on securing the debate, but forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, if I break with custom on this occasion, for the simple reason that a debate on Scotland leaving the United Kingdom is not a priority for the Scottish people, it is not a priority for Scotland, and it should not be a priority for this House. It is no surprise to me—but it is a great pity none the less—that the SNP has retreated into the only issue it ever cares about. It is a great pity because I and Conservative Members would warmly welcome a serious debate about the Scottish economy.

I believe that this House should be discussing ways to improve Scotland's economic growth, because our economic growth has lagged behind that of the United Kingdom during the time the SNP has been in power at Holyrood. Why is that, I wonder? How much better might things

have been if the SNP had respected the democratic result of the 2014 referendum, and ceased its constant, unwanted demands to re-run that referendum?

*Several hon. Members rose—*

**Mr Jack**: I fear that the SNP's constant campaign—its neverendum campaign to leave the United Kingdom—acts like a millstone around the neck of the Scottish economy.

**Steven Bonnar**: I appreciate the Secretary of State giving way. We often hear that we do not respect the result of the referendum. I joined the SNP one week after the referendum. I was sent here to protect Scotland from Brexit and to fight for Scottish independence. Is that not taking part in the democracy of our country? I was not a member of the SNP then; I joined one week after the referendum, and I was elected to this place to help deliver Scotland's path to independence. That is democracy.

**Mr Jack**: That simply is not democracy, because the hon. Member is not respecting the result of the referendum in 2014. As we heard from the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, there was confusion and, in that referendum, the Scottish National party was proposing that Scotland leave the EU. We have just heard a whole speech on how desperate the SNP is to get back into the EU, yet in 2014 the proposal made was that Scotland would leave—

**Angus Brendan MacNeil**: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order to suspend proceedings so that the Secretary of State can have a tutorial on how elections and ballot boxes work and how an x is put on a piece of paper?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)**: I am sure that the hon. Member's leader would not be delighted if I were to suspend proceedings for any reason whatsoever.

**Mr Jack**: I say to the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil): take the splinter out of your own eye. I am explaining how ballot boxes work. There was a very good, legal referendum in 2014, and it was won by those who wanted to remain in the United Kingdom. It is as simple as that.

I return to the point about the neverendum campaign being a millstone around the neck of the Scottish economy. The last thing that people need is greater uncertainty. The last thing that Scotland needs is the SNP's continual push for a divisive referendum on leaving the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom Government are working tirelessly to strengthen the Scottish economy.

During the covid pandemic, it was the UK Government who had the ability to support our economy through furlough and business grants, keeping businesses in business and protecting people's livelihoods. We are now supporting households and businesses facing increased energy costs. The UK Government are also providing the Scottish Government with a record block grant settlement of £41 billion a year over the next three years. In real terms, that is the highest settlement since 1998.

**Alex Cunningham**: Seeing as I live in England, I may well have scuppered any chances I had of getting my Scottish passport, but the leader of the SNP did not mention education in his speech. Does the Secretary of State believe that may be because we have seen Scotland

tumble down the PISA rankings for maths and science as the SNP has neglected the education of the future population of our home country?

**Mr Jack:** The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. It is not just education standards that are falling—there are many problems throughout public services in Scotland, and drug deaths are three times higher than in the rest of the United Kingdom. It is clear that those failings in public services in Scotland happen because the Scottish Government get up every day and go to work with the one objective of breaking up the United Kingdom, not realising that they are a devolved Administration who should be focusing on health, education and crime, doing the proper day job that people voted for them to do. I absolutely agree with him.

**Jamie Stone:** It is a well-known fact that the Scottish National party loves me to bits. However, I received my second covid vaccination from a British soldier in Raigmore Hospital, where the British Army stepped in during the pandemic. The independence argument falls apart when it comes to the defence of the United Kingdom, because there is nothing that Vladimir Putin would like to see more than Scotland breaking away and our defences split in two.

**Mr Jack:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. During the pandemic, in my role as Secretary of State for Scotland I signed many MACA—military aid to civil authorities—requests for Scotland, and our armed services stepped up and did an incredible job of helping us through the process.

In addition to the UK Government support that I mentioned, we are directly investing £2 billion that will be delivered through the city region and growth deals programme, the levelling-up fund and the United Kingdom shared prosperity fund. Those projects are starting to transform communities and create tens of thousands of high-quality new jobs.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The Secretary of State goes on about levelling up and how grateful we in Scotland should be for money that is disbursed from the UK centre at Westminster. Does he actually believe that? Does he not understand that people in Scotland pay taxes here as well as in Scotland and that we are entitled to a share of all those funds?

**Mr Jack:** All the SNP councils in Scotland are applying for these funds, and they have been welcomed. I remember the leader of Glasgow City Council—an SNP council—saying how pleased she was that the UK Government were delivering those funds directly to local authorities in Scotland. And—guess what?—they are taking that money in its full amount and delivering it to local projects. That is exactly how it should be.

**Marion Fellows:** I have signed applications for levelling-up funds because my community is as entitled to them as communities in the rest of the UK. We pay our taxes as well, and we do not need to be lectured about taking hand-outs, which is what the Secretary of State is implying.

**Mr Jack:** That could not be further from the truth. I am not implying that for a minute. It absolutely is fair shares for everyone; we have never disputed that. All I

am explaining is that the method of delivery is through local authorities to get project funds directly to local communities.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Jack:** I am going to make some progress—*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Mr MacNeil, you could start an argument in a room on your own. The Secretary of State is not giving way. Please pipe down.

**Mr Jack:** We are close to announcing two new UK freeports in Scotland, backed by £52 million of investment from the United Kingdom Government. That is a great example of how much more we can achieve when Scotland's two Governments work together. We know that we can achieve much more by working together. So I repeat my offer to the Scottish Government to come and work with us on transport by improving cross-border links such as the A75 and on agriculture by giving farmers the gene editing technology that they desperately want. Gene editing will make crops more disease and drought-resistant and thereby drive down food prices. They should also work with us on energy, bringing small modular nuclear reactors—yes, you heard it here—to back up our tremendous renewable energy.

**Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Mr Jack:** Yes, I give way to my former colleague.

**Iain Stewart:** In talking about the city region and growth deals, the freeports and all the other shared investments, is not the key point that that is real devolution and not central Government—whether here or in Edinburgh—dictating to local areas what they want? It is them deciding their priorities and working with both Governments to deliver on them.

**Mr Jack:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I thank him for all the work that he did on the subject while he was a Minister in the Scotland Office. He was an absolute powerhouse in working with local authorities and working through all the different deals available. I appreciate everything that he did.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Jack:** If I can continue, the North sea transition deal is another thing that shows the UK Government working together with the offshore oil and gas industry to achieve a managed energy transition that leaves no one behind. The deal has the potential to support up to 40,000 jobs and generate up to £16 billion of investment by 2030. We are also supporting 1,700 Scottish jobs through the £3.7 billion Ministry of Defence shipbuilding programme on the Clyde. Those are just a few examples.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State explain how he is working with the Scottish Government to tackle child poverty? The Scottish Government have the Scottish child payment of £25 a week. What more can he do to support children who are living in poverty just now because of the UK Government's policies?



**Mr Jack:** Apart from the record settlement of £41 billion over three years, there is additional money—the £37 billion—from the support schemes the Chancellor introduced. That has Barnett money, which goes to the Scottish Government. The wonderful thing about devolution is that the Scottish Government can then decide how they spend that money.

**Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): Is the Minister able to tell us what percentage of the £8 billion of oil and gas revenue that has gone to the Treasury in the last nine months is being directed to the Scottish Government to prioritise for their own spending? What percentage of that revenue goes to Scotland? The answer is none, isn't it?

**Mr Jack:** The answer is that Scotland gets her share of Government spending. Everything goes into one big pot, but we know that spending in Scotland is 26% higher per head than it is per head in England. That is the Union dividend, which I will come on to, of £2,000 per man, woman and child. We have one Treasury and one pot, and Scotland takes a very fair share out of that.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Jack:** I am going to make some progress.

I have given some examples of how the UK Government are investing in Scotland. As I said earlier, I would welcome a proper debate about the Scottish economy any day, but this is not a serious debate. It is, I am afraid, just another opportunity, as we have heard from SNP Members, to dust off some of their tired old grievances.

Let me turn to the premise of the motion and let us all consider reality. As the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber will be well aware, the pound has recovered. The Bank of England interventions have been effective and our energy interventions will help to bring down inflation.

**Ian Blackford:** Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Mr Jack:** I did not intervene on the right hon. Gentleman and I do not expect him to intervene on me. He spoke for a very long time.

This is a challenging economic period internationally and we should not pretend that the UK—

**Ian Blackford:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On the day of the referendum, the pound-dollar rate was 1.64. The Government have crashed the pound over the course of the last few years. That is the harsh reality and the Secretary of State might actually recognise that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call the Secretary of State.

**Mr Jack:** To clarify the record, I was referring to the recent turmoil in the market. *[Interruption.]* Let me proceed.

This is a challenging economic period internationally and we should not pretend that the UK is the only nation which faces difficult times. The overall economic stability that the UK offers is the best long-term guarantee we have, so the right hon. Member is simply wrong in the motion about the state of the UK economy. He

compounds his mistake, because his motion speaks of a land that exists only in his overactive and deeply aggrieved imagination: the so-called failing state of the UK. That will be the United Kingdom which has the sixth-biggest economy in the world, the UK which is a leading partner in NATO, the UK which is at the heart of the G7, and the UK with a permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations. *[Interruption.]* They do not like hearing it.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. Please resume your seats. Come on. Stop it, please. Stop it. We did not have that noise when the leader of the SNP was speaking, so in deference, and in good behaviour, please stop the shouting.

**Mr Jack:** SNP Members do not like hearing it. Instead of insulting Scots' intelligence, the SNP might explain what it is doing with Holyrood's extensive powers in economic development, education and skills, planning and transport to grow the Scottish economy.

I hope that as the debate progresses we will hear something constructive from SNP Members, but I fear ferries will float before we do. Rather than deal with what actually matters to the vast majority of Scots—growing the economy and creating jobs—SNP Members want to talk about the Scottish Government's "independence papers".

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Jack:** I will make some progress.

Those papers have provoked scorn from respected economic experts, and even from high-profile independence campaigners. One prominent nationalist—Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise in advance for the unparliamentary language—referred to the recent economy paper as "utter pish". The kindest thing I could do is move on without further mention of those publications, so I will.

I am very clear that we will tackle the challenges we face more effectively as one United Kingdom. Much to the frustration of the SNP, the Scottish Government's own Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland figures demonstrate the benefit to people in Scotland of being part of the United Kingdom. As I mentioned earlier, people in Scotland benefit from a Union dividend worth more than £2,000 a year for each man, woman and child.

**Mr Perkins:** I agree with the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) that in 2014 the pound was at 1.64 against the dollar and that now, because of this Government, it has crashed. However, what does it say to the Secretary of State that even with that, the Scottish independence campaign seeks to reassure the markets by saying it will not go for the Scottish pound, but stick with this crashing economy? What does that say about its confidence in the Scottish pound?

**Mr Jack:** I would add to the hon. Gentleman's remarks by saying that as a country shadowing the pound it will not be the lender of last resort—it will have no lender of last resort. It is utterly irresponsible.

As one United Kingdom, we are able to draw on our great shared institutions such as the NHS. We are better able to respond to the nationwide challenges on the cost



of living, just as we did in overcoming the pandemic when we offered the covid vaccine to everyone in the UK. The energy price guarantee will save a typical household in Great Britain around £700 this winter. I believe that our collective strength as a family of nations means we are much better able to tackle the big problems.

**Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State give way? [*Interruption.*]

**Mr Jack:** For ingenuity, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will give way.

**Stephen Flynn:** I thank the Secretary for State for giving way. In the aftermath of his former Prime Minister's and former Chancellor's budget, he called on the Scottish Government to implement those tax cuts. Beyond that, the following day he said that he was going to "hold firm" on those tax cuts. Does he regret those comments, and indeed the damage that his Government caused to households in Scotland?

**Mr Jack:** I make no apology for the fact that I have always been pro low taxes. That remains my position today.

For all that the motion for today's debate purports to focus on the economy, we should be clear that it is, in reality, about allowing the SNP to talk about the one issue that matters to it: separation and seeking to break up the UK. This is simply not the time to be talking about another independence referendum. We share these islands, and we share a rich, shared history.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Mr Jack:** It is like musical chairs, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** If the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) carries on moving across the Labour Benches, he will find the door is there. [*Laughter.*]

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order to put on a Liverpool accent so that the Secretary of State will maybe give way to a Scottish MP?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** It is up to whoever is on their feet who they allow in. For whatever reason, you are not the flavour of the month, Mr MacNeil, and I have to say you are rapidly going down my list as to when you will actually come in.

**Mr Jack:** Mr Deputy Speaker, I admire the tenacity of the hon. Gentleman. He is obviously very good at playing musical chairs, but I am going to finish.

We share these islands. We share a rich history. Together, we have been able to develop the great institutions we are so proud of, such as the NHS and our armed forces. People in Scotland want their two Governments to be focused on the issues that matter to them: growing our economy, ensuring our energy security, tackling the cost of living and supporting our friends in Ukraine against Russian aggression. Those are the issues that matter to the people of Scotland, not the motion before us today.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.59 pm

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and the SNP on bringing this debate to the Chamber. I also pass on my thoughts and best wishes to the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), who signed the motion. He is not with us today because he has lost his father, so our best wishes go to him. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

When I learned of and read the motion, I got quite excited, because I thought that I might finally agree with one of my SNP colleagues' motions. It starts off, rightly, by highlighting the disastrous impacts of this Tory-created economic crisis, but I am sorry to say that it ends in a rather familiar way, with their one-size-fits-all and only answer to any question: independence. I will come to that later, but let me go through the first part of the motion.

To start with the Secretary of State's contribution, I did not hear an apology for what the Government have just done to the UK economy. The Conservatives once claimed to be the party of economic competence, but they have now created absolute chaos. Let there be no doubt that the Conservatives have crashed the British economy. Their now junked mini-Budget—well, partially junked, because they have kept the scrapping of bankers' bonuses—which was mini only in its connection with reality, has exacerbated an already burgeoning crisis. That crisis was born from catastrophic decisions made over the past 12 years, including when the current PM was Chancellor.

As the motion outlines, the pound is at a record low, mortgage rates are through the roof and inflation continues to spiral out of control. I know that for many on the Conservative Benches, those are just indicators—numbers on a screen—but they show an economy tanking as a result of their incompetence. This is not just about numbers; it is about the quality of life of millions of people up and down the country. It is about the unimaginable stress caused to families, who were already stumped by how they would make ends meet. They find their mortgage rates shooting up and energy prices rocketing, and they are staring at their supermarket receipts, wondering at how few items they got for such a high cost.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** The hon. Member makes some great points about the catastrophe we are involved in due to being in the UK. On that basis, would he prefer an independent Scotland with a Labour or an SNP Government, or a Scotland inside the UK with a Tory Government? Which is it?

**Ian Murray:** I prefer Scotland in the UK with a Labour Government. What an absolutely ridiculous and pointless intervention from a ridiculous and pointless Member of Parliament. [*Interruption.*] Is that unparliamentary, Mr Deputy Speaker? Okay, I apologise. [*Interruption.*] I just said I apologise.

A family came to my surgery last week to say that their fixed-rate mortgage of 1.79% was expiring. Given the increases in interest rates, they were expecting to pay and had budgeted for 3.5%, but they were quoted more than 6.5% and they simply cannot afford it. What was it

[Ian Murray]

all for? To give unfunded tax cuts to the richest. Make no mistake: the Tories crashed the economy from Downing Street and it will be paid for by ordinary people, either through their pay packets or through austerity.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. When we ask a question of a colleague in Parliament who finds it difficult to understand, is it in order that he responds with insults?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** The hon. Member did apologise immediately, Mr MacNeil. I think you should accept that with good grace.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** I did not hear it. Thank you.

**Ian Murray:** I did apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I do so again.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Accepted.

**Ian Murray:** I am glad that the hon. Member has accepted it, from whichever seat he is now sitting in.

As I was saying, what has happened will be paid for by ordinary people either through their pay packets or through austerity, because the Government U-turns and change of Prime Minister cannot undo what has been done to Britain's reputation. Our institutions have been undermined, our standing on the world stage has been diminished, and our credibility as a place to invest has been damaged. The devastation will last for years, maybe decades. As the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber said in his opening speech—I will quote him as accurately as I can—that comes with “massive, massive costs”. But one of the other massive costs would be the break-up of the United Kingdom, because there is no doubt that this Conservative Government are as big a threat to the Union as any nationalist sitting by my side here.

Who have the Conservative party turned to to put out the fire? The arsonist himself. Let us not forget that even before this abject disaster, the now Prime Minister, as Chancellor, delivered the highest tax burden on working people in 70 years, the highest inflation in 40 years and the highest of any G7 country, the largest fall in living standards since records began in the 1970s, continued low growth and stagnant wages.

We have a Prime Minister who increased the tax for everyone else while he did not think his family should pay it; a Prime Minister who, while every single person in this country suffered under lockdown, was fined for partying in Downing Street; a Prime Minister who left a loophole in the windfall tax so that billions of pounds that could have been put into public services to help people with their energy bills were left on the table; a Prime Minister who lost tens of billions of pounds to covid fraud and shrugged his shoulders; a Prime Minister who was so weak in dealing with the cost of living crisis that he thought that the best and only response was to increase everyone's national insurance; a Prime Minister who was, as a Member of Parliament, more of a US resident than a UK citizen; a Prime Minister who always puts his party first and the country second; and a Prime Minister without a mandate to govern. As the Leader of the Opposition so aptly put it, in the only

competitive election in which the Prime Minister has stood, he was trounced by someone who was in turn beaten by a lettuce.

**Alan Brown:** The hon. Member is making our case for us, given the shambles of a Government that he is talking about. Does that mean that he will go back on his vow to do better together again and that Labour will not stand shoulder to shoulder with the Tories? Will he also call out Labour councils for working in coalition with the Tories, including in Edinburgh?

**Ian Murray:** Let me put it firmly on the record that there is not a coalition in Scotland between Labour and the Conservatives. In the Edinburgh example that the hon. Member talks about, which I know very well because it is my city, the Conservatives are an official opposition party. What SNP Members do not like is that they could not get their leader in as leader of the council.

Let me say to the hon. Member and to SNP voters that the best way to resolve the crisis at the UK level and to stop Scotland being ripped out of the United Kingdom against the will of the Scottish people is to vote Labour in Scottish constituencies at the next general election and have us replace the Government, rather than just shouting at them from the Opposition Benches.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP):** Will the hon. Member give way?

**Ian Murray:** I will make some progress because I am attacking the Conservative party and I think the hon. Member might like that.

If the Government had any shred of decency left, they would call this ridiculous circus to an end and give the British people a choice at a general election. The choice is between the people who caused it in the first place, and a credible Labour party, led by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), ready to give this country a fresh start. The reason that SNP Members do not want a UK Labour Government is that they know it shoots their independence goose. The UK Government's reticence to offer such a choice at a general election shows what they think the outcome would be. They are an out-of-touch Government with no plan, no mandate and absolutely no idea of what misery they have inflicted on working people in Scotland and all over the UK.

**Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** The hon. Member made an interesting point about the SNP not wanting a Labour Government. I joined the SNP a week after the referendum. One reason that tipped me over was that I remember, back in 2014, Labour joining hand in hand with the Tories to vote for air strikes while SNP MPs voted against them. I urge caution, because the fact is that the Labour party does not stand up for the people of Scotland.

**Ian Murray:** My recollection may be incorrect, but I am not sure we did in that instance.

This entire motion is predicated on the fact that we have a rotten, out-of-touch Conservative Government—and we do—and my contention is that the best way to resolve that is for Scottish voters to deliver Scottish

Labour MPs so that we can become the UK Government in place of the Conservatives. The alternative is Members sitting on these Opposition Benches moaning about the situation rather than trying to change it.

**Dave Doogan:** I thank the shadow Secretary of State for giving way; he is very kind. He has given an excellent list of reasons why Scotland should not endure a UK Administration, but let me try to get him to focus on a particular point. We have heard a lot from the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) in this debate. The shadow Secretary of State's bairns in Edinburgh South are much better looked after by an SNP Scottish Government in Scotland than the bairns of the hon. Member for Chesterfield are looked after here. What does the shadow Secretary of State think about that? What does the Union mean to bairns in poverty in Chesterfield compared with those in Edinburgh South?

**Ian Murray:** The hon. Gentleman gets the phrasing of his question wrong. He says that we do not want to endure a UK Administration in Scotland. No: we do not want to endure a Tory UK Administration in Scotland. Perhaps SNP Members do, because it suits their cause.

The hon. Gentleman talks about child poverty. When Labour was in power from 1997 to 2010, we lifted millions of children out of poverty. All of that has been reversed in the past 12 or 13 years because of decisions made by the UK Government and the Scottish Government. And do not dare talk about children in my constituency when educational standards are going down the pan, nobody can get a GP appointment and inequalities are rising. Rising inequalities are the responsibility of both Governments in Scotland: the Scottish Government and the UK Government.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): SNP Members talk about children in poverty. Of course nobody wants to see children in poverty, so does the shadow Secretary of State agree that it is utterly shameful that one in four children under the SNP's control are now growing up in poverty, and the numbers are increasing?

**Ian Murray:** I agree. I will be happy to correct the record if I am wrong, but I think the highest poverty rates among children in Scotland are in the First Minister's constituency, Glasgow Southside. If its rate is not the highest, it is certainly very close to the top.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the shadow Secretary of State give way?

**Ian Murray:** I am happy to give way. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will tell us about the poverty rates in Glasgow.

**David Linden:** The poverty rates in Glasgow are far too high, but that is because of the Tory Government who are controlling the economy: 85% of welfare spending is controlled by this place.

The shadow Secretary of State talks about the turgid record of the Conservative party. As we approach a general election, people will want to see the big difference that Scottish Labour MPs would make. What would be the biggest difference in immigration policy and Brexit policy, for example?

**Ian Murray:** The big difference will be having a stable economy. The big difference will be growth. The big difference will be a laser-like focus on child poverty. The big difference will be trade. The big difference will be making this country work. The big difference will be repairing our relationship internationally, including with our EU partners. Those are the big differences. We will have a constitutional settlement fit for the 2020s, instead of ripping Scotland out of the United Kingdom with all the problems that that may cause.

If my attack on the Conservative party has upset SNP Members, wait until they hear the next few pages of my speech. While I am speaking of having no plan, let me turn to the second part of the SNP's motion, which I certainly disagree with: the prospectus for independence. The much-anticipated paper appeared a few Mondays ago, after years or even decades of no credible economic answers from the yes movement. Unfortunately, even with all these papers, the wait continues.

Let me turn to a few of the big themes. They may seem a little like *déjà vu* in this House, but we still have no answers. The first, and probably the most obvious and important, is currency. SNP Members have had more views on the currency of an independent Scotland than I have had fish suppers—and I can tell you I have had a few, Mr Deputy Speaker. Their latest wheeze was revealed last week. Immediately after having voted to leave the United Kingdom—in their hypothetical scenario—an independent Scotland would take back control with a radically different economic approach and keep the pound. So the Bank of England and the UK Treasury would still set the fiscal rules; all that would change is that we would have no say whatever over them.

The economic levers that SNP Members continually bleat about would be left in Westminster. Would that just be temporary, though? They say yes, because they would introduce a separate Scottish currency, the Scottish pound. We might ask how long that would take, but they do not tell us. At first, people would pay their mortgage in the same currency in which they borrowed it, but at some point during the lifetime of their mortgage, the currency would probably switch to one that does not currently exist. One thing I know from discussions with my own mortgage provider is that if people borrow in pounds, they will pay back in pounds, regardless of the value of any new currency.

The SNP chair of the Sustainable Growth Commission—a commission that has now been junked and barely mentioned—has said:

“The risk would be that the currency would come into being and then quickly devalue... That would have an effect on people's income”.

Just listen to that sentence. After the mini-Budget, we know all too well what happens when a currency devalues so quickly. According to the eminent economist Professor MacDonald of Glasgow University, that devaluation could be as much as 30% on day one. That is a 30% reduction in income overnight, but everyone's borrowing would stay in pounds.

If SNP Members will not listen to economists or experts, perhaps they will listen to someone they know better: the First Minister herself, who said that using the pound is in the long-term interests of Scotland. She said that for years. It has now been junked.



[*Ian Murray*]

A new country and a new currency would also mean a central bank, but not one like any other central bank that exists in the economies of the world. At first, for an indeterminate period, it would be a central bank operating with another country's currency. The First Minister claimed at the launch and the press conference that the central bank would be a lender of last resort and would stand by things like the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, which guarantees up to £85,000 in someone's bank account if a bank goes into liquidation or disappears. So we would have a central bank as a lender of last resort, standing by things like the Financial Services Compensation Scheme in someone else's currency, but with absolutely no control over monetary policy.

The Scottish Government paper says that a greater emphasis would be placed on fiscal policy to ensure the strength of the economy. Surely that is shorthand for greater austerity. I will come back to that issue later.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Murray:** Let me just finish this point, because it is really important and perhaps the hon. Gentleman will be able to answer it. According to the paper, when the new currency is established after an indeterminate period, the planned reserves will total just \$14 billion—a fraction of what similar small nations require. In the Scottish Government's first paper, they drew comparisons with lots of other small European countries, so let us compare some currency reserves. Denmark's currency reserve is equivalent to \$82 billion, Norway's to \$84 billion and Sweden's to \$62 billion, and those are all established currencies with a track record and a borrowing record. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can tell us how that makes the case for borrowing to create massive reserves.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** The hon. Gentleman has just pointed out the reserves of independent countries, so he can obviously tell us the reserves of Scotland, if it is doing so well in the Union. If Scotland becomes independent, will Labour Members come forward with policies, or will they pretend they are like the Tories and refuse to play? Will he try to get into the House of Lords, or will he want to be a politician in Scotland after independence? What is his position? Under devolution, five parties come forward and present their views to the public. I imagine that that will be the same after independence—or are Labour and the Tories saying, “We're taking our ball home—we can't play any more”?

**Ian Murray:** Mr Deputy Speaker, honestly! We want a sensible debate, but according to the hon. Gentleman I am taking my ball home and going to the House of Lords. I suspect that the reason he is so animated is that his seat might become a Labour seat at the next general election. Let me tell him my prospectus for Scotland: my prospectus is that Scotland stays in the United Kingdom with a UK Labour Government. That is my policy. He seems to forget that this is his motion, not mine: I am replying to an SNP Opposition day debate on a motion tabled by SNP Members in their own terms.

I was talking about the reserves of other countries. The SNP's approach to creating Scotland's reserves, which would be a fraction of those of other countries, is to borrow. The SNP's proposition for independence is to continue to use the pound while setting up its own central bank, being a Scottish lender of last resort and borrowing tens of billions of pounds to create reserves for a new currency. The very foundation of the new state would be built on unfunded, unforecasted borrowing. It is like someone trying to build up their savings by using a credit card. We know it is bonkers, because the UK Government have just demonstrated how bonkers it is, and SNP Members know it.

**Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP):** I congratulate the shadow Secretary of State on demolishing the case for independence. Mind you, a feather could probably knock that case over; it does not need a wrecking ball.

The shadow Secretary of State is talking about the economic disaster that would come after independence. Does he accept that as part of the United Kingdom, even with the largesse that comes from Westminster, the Scottish Government have still failed to raise education standards, to have effective policing or to deal with the drugs crisis in Scotland? Indeed, they already have the lowest rate of economic growth.

**Ian Murray:** I agree with the right hon. Gentleman up to a point, but I wish he would not refer to the UK Government's largesse or Westminster's largesse. It is this Conservative Government's largesse, and if we want to turn the UK around and keep the UK together, we have to replace this rotten lot with a UK Labour Government.

The right hon. Gentleman is right, however: the list of failures of Scottish Government policy is the length of your arm, and I would be here until 7 o'clock this evening if I went through them all. That includes the failures in my own constituency, where it is impossible to get a GP appointment. The Health Secretary tells me there is no problem, although NHS Lothian has said that health services and GP services in my constituency are failing—and I quote that directly from one of its reports.

Let me now turn to the subject of the European Union, because we have heard a lot about that. I remind the House—including my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield, who made some great points about the EU—that when the Division bell rang on our efforts to find a way through a deal with the European Union, we would have won on the customs union had the SNP not abstained. And let us not forget that when the Division bell rang on 12 December, after the general election, when the offer on the trade and co-operation agreement was “take it or leave it”, SNP Members voted for no deal. That is their record here: they talk a good game, but they do not deliver when they should be delivering.

Much like the experience of some Conservative Members in recent years, the response from Brussels has not fitted the preconceived fantasy. At the aforementioned press conference, the First Minister rejected the idea that Scotland would join the euro, saying it was

“not the right option for Scotland”.

Nonetheless, she added, Scotland would have no problem with joining the European Union. That is awkward, is it not, because the EU does not seem to agree. The law

does not seem to agree. Officials have insisted, and the treaties state, that any country wishing to join the EU would legally have to commit to the euro. I wonder whether any SNP Members can shed any light on the Scottish Government's position—but let me answer my own question, because I am more likely to get the answer than I would be if the SNP answered it.

The paper says that an independent Scotland would use the pound for an undetermined period, then borrow tens of billions—which may be an inadequate amount—to support a new currency, only to have to legally commit to joining the euro at some point in the future. The SNP has more currency positions in this paper than we have had Prime Ministers since the summer. If the mini-Budget has demonstrated anything, it is that the markets take a dim view of fantasy economics. What an economic catastrophe for Scottish people's mortgages, borrowing, pensions and wages!

Before SNP Members start jumping up and down, as they have already, saying that some EU countries do not use the euro, let me repeat that every new member of the European Union must legally commit to joining the euro. That is written in an international treaty, which is international law. But here comes the conundrum for the SNP. The paper that has been presented by the First Minister does several things; are she and the SNP saying (a) that they are not willing to abide by the EU rules on the euro? They have already said that they would not join the exchange rate mechanism. They would play their games: they would say they would do it, and would not. Is that the policy, or is it (b)? If it is not joining the euro, they are essentially saying that a separate Scotland would sit outside the rest of the UK and the EU with a different currency.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Got it in one.

**Ian Murray:** That position is surely not in the best interests of Scotland—but I hear someone shout, from a sedentary position, “Got it in one.” So SNP Members want to create a border with our biggest trading partner, and to create a currency border with what they say will become their biggest trading partner, and Scotland will be sitting with a separate currency, a different currency, outwith both. What they are doing—and this is key to the whole argument—is cherry-picking EU rules, which sounds more like Farage “cakeism” than a credible proposition for any country. They want to take all the good things but none of the bad, and they have no way of squaring that circle.

**Mr Perkins:** My hon. Friend is making a magnificent case. *[Laughter.]* SNP Members may well laugh. They appear to be so much more in touch with the view of the Scottish people, or so they tell us. Perhaps they can explain why only one of the last 19 opinion polls on Scottish independence showed the people of Scotland to be in favour of independence. The points that my hon. Friend is making demonstrate the reason: the inoperable difficulties of Scottish independence. That is why the people of Scotland not only voted against independence in 2014, but continue, in response to opinion polls, to say that they want to remain a part of the UK.

**Ian Murray:** My hon. Friend is right. SNP Members always cite opinion polls when they are in their favour, but they never cite them when they are not in their favour.

What I would say, in all sincerity, to those who support independence in Scotland is “Look at the proposition that is in front of you.” The best way to resolve this is not to take Scotland out of the UK and do Brexit on stilts—Scexit, if you like—but to vote Labour, deliver a UK Labour Government, and allow us to prove that Britain is a place that Scotland would want to be a part of.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his speech. May I introduce a constitutional element? The hon. Gentleman's own party, when in government, fully supported the constitutional position of the people of Northern Ireland on whether to remain in the Union—as I know some of our friends and colleagues here wish to do—or to become once again a part of the Irish Republic. They believe that that position should be allowed if a unification referendum happens every seven years, I think; Members will need to correct me if I am wrong. The hon. Gentleman's party therefore believes in the inalienable right of the people of Northern Ireland to determine their own governance and destiny. Does he believe that Scotland has the same right?

**Ian Murray:** I have a lot of respect for the hon. Gentleman—I genuinely have, and I say that with all sincerity—but I believe that comparisons between Scotland and Northern Ireland are not only unhelpful but, to some, offensive. The purpose of the Good Friday agreement is to create peace on the island of Ireland, and I think that trying to superimpose the Good Friday agreement on the issue of Scottish independence will be seen as it should be seen, as unhelpful and historically inaccurate. *[Interruption.]* All the SNP Members are shouting, but one of the Labour party's proudest achievements in office was peace in Northern Ireland. If they think that the Labour party's position is inconsistent with a position of wanting to keep the UK together, they are simply incorrect. We on the Labour Benches will do nothing—absolutely nothing—to undermine the Good Friday agreement.

As an adjunct and a footnote to that, what SNP Members are proposing in their proposition for an independent Scotland will create the same problems at the border at Berwick as we have in Northern Ireland with the Northern Ireland protocol, and they know that to be the case.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) *rose—*

**Neale Hanvey** *rose—*

**Ian Murray:** Let me make some progress. The time that I am taking is making you agitated, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Murray:** I would prefer the hon. Lady to tell us about the SNP's proposals rather than talking about the Labour party, but I am happy to give way if the SNP wants to continue this nonsense and charade.

**Kirsty Blackman:** The shadow Secretary of State is making the case, as a Labour politician would, for why Labour should be in charge. For two thirds of my

[Kirsty Blackman]

lifetime we have had a Conservative Government for which Scotland has not voted. How does the hon. Gentleman expect the next 36 years to be any different from the past 36?

**Ian Murray:** As for the other third of the hon. Lady's life, the UK Labour Government transformed it. That is why we want to create a UK Labour Government who can do things for the whole United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Ian Murray:** I will come back to hon. Members—I promise I will come back—but let me just make some progress.

All this brings us to deficit and debt, which is the great elephant in the room when it comes to independence. Let us talk about what independence would cost, and the scale of public service cuts that would be required. Very helpfully, These Islands—an organisation that believes that Scotland should stay in the UK—made the following comment, which I thought was quite interesting:

“We are waiting with trepidation about how the Chancellor will fill a £50 billion black hole”,

which, it said, equates to about 2% of UK GDP. An independent Scotland would have to fill a hole equivalent to more than 10% of Scottish GDP, so there would be five times the problem that has been created by the Tories at Westminster. As the First Minister acknowledged, the Scottish economy would be cut off from its biggest trading partner by a hard border. But before we even take account of the devastating impact of this, we just have to look at the Scottish Government's own accounts.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Murray:** Let me just finish this point. I promise that I will give way in a moment.

We are not helped by the Scottish Government's paper itself, which simply chooses to ignore the figures from Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland and pretend that they do not exist. The paper says:

“No estimate of the fiscal starting point for an independent Scotland's finances is included in this document.”

That is rather surprising, because the SNP has—along with Labour and other Opposition parties—rightly been demanding that the UK Government produce the figures from the Office for Budget Responsibility on the forecast for the UK economy on the basis of their botched mini-Budget. The SNP does not even mention its much-lauded growth commission, which it has now junked. That does not seem very reassuring.

**Pete Wishart:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Murray:** Let me just finish this point. I will come back to the hon. Gentleman.

The starting point was always the Scottish Government's own accounts—the GERS figures that the First Minister used to use as the starting point and bible have now been disowned. Every previous key document on their

independence case had referenced those figures, and I have them here. Their independence referendum White Paper states:

“GERS is the authoritative publication on Scotland's public finances.”

“Scotland's Future: What independence means for you” cites its source as Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland—that is, GERS. “The Economic Case for Independence” states:

“This report uses data published in the annual Government Expenditure and Revenue for Scotland (GERS) report.”

“Pensions in an Independent Scotland” also states:

“This report uses data published in the annual Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland (GERS) report.”

“Your Scotland, Your Voice” states:

“The most recent GERS demonstrates that Scottish public finances ran current budget surpluses in each of the three years”.

**Pete Wishart:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Murray:** I will give way to the hon. Gentleman before his knees give out.

**Pete Wishart:** I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but he need not worry about my knees. He is coming very close to saying that somehow the Scottish people, with all our resources and our history of invention and creativity, are unique in the world in that we would not be able to make a success of independence. What does he think is so lacking in the Scottish people that we, among all the peoples of the world, would not be able to make a success of being an independent nation?

**Ian Murray:** By the hon. Gentleman's proposition, I could go into Barclays bank on Monday morning when my mortgage is due and say, “I'm not going to pay it” while waving the saltire. I wonder if the bank manager would accept that as payment.

This debate is not about the Scottish people; it is about the bust proposition that is being put to the Scottish people on independence. There is no doubt that the Scottish Government are now GERS deniers. These are their own figures; this is the crux of the issue. The Scottish Government's own accounts show a deficit in Scotland of £23.7 billion, which is equivalent to 12% of Scottish GDP or 1.5 times the entire budget of the Scottish NHS. How do they plan to resolve that deficit? Where will the spending cuts land? If they are going to borrow tens of billions to support a new currency, what happens to the day-to-day spending deficit? Do they borrow that as well? At what cost, and in what currency? I am afraid that this paper makes the Conservatives' mini-Budget look like an economic masterstroke.

Let me finish by talking about borders. For the first time, the Scottish Government and the nationalists have admitted that there would be a hard border between Scotland and England. Families and businesses who for three centuries have bonded and traded freely would be split up by a hard border, a different currency and a different country—[*Interruption.*] Members keep braying from a sedentary position, but they have no answers to these questions. In fact, the answers they are giving us make their position worse, not better. Let us be clear: Scotland trades more with the rest of the United Kingdom than it does with the rest of the world combined. The



SNP's response to the Conservatives' damaging Brexit is to commit an act of economic folly that would be several orders of magnitude worse.

The SNP has no credible answers on pensions either. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber claimed that the UK Government would continue to pay Scottish pensions after independence, having seemingly not read his party's own policy from 2014. So who will pay? Will somebody clarify whose position on pensions is right? Is it the right hon. Gentleman, the First Minister or the papers that they have put into the public domain?

Let me finish with words from themselves—

**Neale Hanvey:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Murray:** I said I would give way to my neighbouring colleague, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), but she is no longer here—

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** She's given up on you.

**Ian Murray:** She has given up; she has no answers to these questions either.

It is little wonder that the Institute for Fiscal Studies—much quoted by the First Minister in the last few weeks, and rightly, because of the mess this Government have made of the UK economy—has also slammed the SNP's position. The IFS said:

"It is highly likely an independent Scotland would need to make bigger cuts to public spending or bigger increases to tax in the first decade following independence".

The IFS was right about the mini-Budget—indeed, everyone quotes it, including the First Minister—and it is right about this proposition as well. If SNP Members will not listen to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, why will they not listen to their own people on their own side? Robin McAlpine of the Common Weal foundation has been quoted already today, and he is somebody the SNP used to quote vociferously in here. He campaigned for independence alongside the First Minister—and alongside many Members who are now sitting here—in 2014.

**Neale Hanvey:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Ian Murray:** I will happily give way if the hon. Gentleman wants to talk about Robin McAlpine.

**Neale Hanvey:** I think it is important to point out to the shadow Minister that there is no single blueprint or proposal for Scotland. Those are decisions that the people of Scotland will take after independence, and there are other propositions on the table. That is what a democracy is. I want to pick him up on one point from some time ago, when he made the suggestion that democracy is allowed to prevail in Ireland and he supports it because it keeps the peace. Is he therefore suggesting—I hope he is not—that there needs to be violence—*[Interruption.]* No, this is important. I fled Northern Ireland when I was a seven-year-old boy because of sectarianism. Is that really the point that he is making about how democracy will prevail?

**Ian Murray:** I am going to treat that intervention with the contempt it deserves and utterly ignore it, if that is the kind of argument we are getting from the Alba party. The hon. Gentleman was elected as an SNP

Member of Parliament, and the people of his constituency of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath should reflect seriously on what they do at the next general election.

**Neale Hanvey:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I just want to give the shadow Minister the opportunity to correct the record. I was not elected as an SNP MP. I was elected as an independent MP.

**Ian Murray:** Ah, yes, the hon. Gentleman did correct the record. I forgot that he was suspended for antisemitism. I am surprised he wants to put on the public record why he was thrown out of the Scottish National party, but I think that his second contribution probably sums up my disdain and the reason why I would not accept his first one about violence in Northern Ireland.

But I was talking about Robin McAlpine, who said of the economic position for independence that we have to get off the "mad bus" of the First Minister's independence prospectus. He said:

"It could be because you think the government should have a lender of last resort. It could be because you realise they have no economic plan for Scotland. It could be because they failed to come up with answers on trade or borders. It could be because the whole thing is utter pish. Pick your reason, but for God's sake get off this mad, mad bus".

The Tories have lost all economic credibility by crashing the UK economy, and on the same day that they reversed their catastrophic mini-Budget, the SNP produced a paper that should have been entitled "Hold my beer". It is a mad, mad bus indeed, and ordinary working people across the country will pay the price. It is time for a UK Labour Government.

**Neale Hanvey:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I know it may feel politically expedient for the shadow Minister to slur me in the way that he did, but he should be aware that I was reinstated into the SNP because the accusations of antisemitism did not stand. I have worked tirelessly with Danny Stone from the Antisemitism Policy Trust and other Members in this House to ensure that that scourge is not furthered. I am not an antisemite.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** That is now on the record. I think we should move on. As "Erskine May" states, there should be good behaviour, but to be honest I am not seeing a lot of it in this debate. Let us try and change the tone.

**Ian Murray:** Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I accept the timeline, but I was accurate to say that the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) was thrown out as the SNP candidate following accusations of antisemitism.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** We are now moving on. Everybody has got their point on the record.

2.39 pm

**David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con):** I rise reluctantly to speak in this debate because, as will come as little surprise to Members of this House and to people watching, I do not believe Scotland should be separated from the rest of the United Kingdom, nor do I think there should be a referendum on the matter. I do not even believe we should be having this debate today.

[David Duguid]

Of course there are those who disagree with my position, not least SNP Members and the party they represent, and I respect their right to hold that view. However, I do not believe their view is shared by anywhere near a majority of people in Scotland, particularly in these challenging times. And they are challenging times, as we have heard today.

I do not deny that many of our constituents in Scotland and across the rest of the United Kingdom are facing real pressures. Contrary to the implication of the SNP's motion, these pressures are not only faced in the United Kingdom. The whole world faced inflationary pressures as a result of the covid-19 pandemic and the strain on global supply chains as lockdowns were lifted at different rates in different places, and then there was the impact of Vladimir Putin's aggression and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, which has had an impact on energy prices.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman says our views are not felt or shared by the majority of people in Scotland. Will he therefore explain why the same people elected SNP Members to come to this Chamber and did not elect Scottish Conservatives?

**David Duguid:** I have previously debated this issue with SNP Members. Every Member is elected to this House by a plurality of their constituents, but the majority of voters across the whole of Scotland did not vote for the SNP. [Interruption.] SNP Members are indignant in their incredulity. They may have more Members in this House, but that is not how referendums work. The referendum they dearly want would be based on a majority of voters across the whole of Scotland. I will not debate that point, as it is not the subject of this debate.

In response to the challenges faced by the whole country, this UK Government have taken action to support domestic and business customers, particularly the most vulnerable and the hardest hit. The energy price guarantee is expected to save a typical household in Great Britain at least £700 a year. The energy bill relief scheme will protect businesses and other non-domestic energy users, including charities and public sector organisations, by providing a discount on wholesale gas and electricity prices of roughly a third of what they would have paid without the intervention. That is on top of the energy bill support scheme announced earlier this year, which provides at least £400 to every household with a domestic electricity supply. There is also a further £9 billion of targeted support to the most vulnerable households, including pensioners.

There is a £650 cost of living payment to every household on means-tested benefits, paid out to more than 8 million households in two instalments—one in July and one in the autumn—which works out at roughly a third of all households in Great Britain. There is a £300 cost of living payment to the approximately 8 million pensioner households in receipt of the winter fuel payment, and a £150 cost of living payment to the nearly 6 million people in receipt of disability payments.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** *rose*—

**David Duguid:** Before I give way, I remind the hon. Gentleman that these measures were taken by the UK Government.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** The hon. Gentleman talks of the pressures and challenges. He will be aware that mortgages are, on average, two percentage points cheaper in Ireland, that Irish pensions are higher and that the poorest 5% of people in Ireland are 63% better off than the poorest 5% in the UK. Does he think Ireland would want to rejoin the UK, or does he think Ireland is happy with its independence?

**David Duguid:** I am not here to speak on behalf of the people of the Republic of Ireland or, indeed, the people of Scotland, unlike the hon. Gentleman. I am here to speak on behalf of my constituents in Banff and Buchan, who I continue to argue have benefited greatly from being part of the United Kingdom.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**David Duguid:** If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will continue listing the many benefits of being in this United Kingdom for the people of Scotland and everyone else.

The household support fund, which was launched at the 2021 autumn Budget, provided £500 million from October 2021 to March 2022. It was extended by the 2022 spring statement for the period from April to October this year, and the latest extension will cover the period from October 2022 to March 2023, bringing the total amount provided to £1.5 billion since October 2021. This is a devolved area of policy, but it has generated Barnett consequential for the Scottish Government of £41 million in the last financial year and a further £82 million in the current financial year. As hon. Members have described, it is for the Scottish Government to decide how to fund mechanisms in Scotland as they see fit.

That £1.5 billion package is in addition to the more than £22 billion of UK Government support announced previously, including the £9.1 billion energy support package announced in February 2022, which had £296 million in Barnett consequential for the Scottish Government as a result of the council tax rebate payment and the discretionary funding for local authorities in England.

The reduction in the universal credit taper rate and the increase in the work allowance announced in the 2021 autumn Budget meant an extra £1,000 to those on the lowest incomes. An increase in the national insurance primary threshold to £12,570, making it the same as the threshold for income tax from July 2022, and a lowering of the earnings limit were also announced in the 2022 spring statement. A fuel duty freeze was announced in the 2021 autumn Budget, and a 5p cut to fuel duty was announced at this year's spring statement.

**Alan Brown:** Do the national insurance changes not show how the Westminster Government make decisions for Scotland without consulting Scotland? After it was announced, we argued that a rise in national insurance was a regressive measure, and then the Westminster Government decided that they would reverse the rise. Scotland had no say on that. All the other measures

that the hon. Gentleman mentions are not free money coming from Westminster. We pay our share in taxes, and we are paying billions in additional oil and gas revenues. Borrowing funds most UK Government spending, and Scotland is allocated a share of that debt, so it is not free money or a dividend. His lot decide what we get, and then they say, “By the way, here is what you are going to have to pay for it.”

**David Duguid:** I was going to talk about the reversal of the health and social care levy, which will save 2.3 million people in Scotland an average of £285 in 2023-24. I will return to the question of tax coming in, payments going out and the terms of the Union dividend.

I will continue with the list, which is not exhaustive. I am listing just some of the highlights of what this UK Government have provided to everyone in this United Kingdom. The national living wage has been increased by the largest-ever cash amount, meaning that 2 million full-time workers will be £1,000 a year better off. Another benefit of Scotland being in the UK is that the rest of the UK accounts for £52 billion-worth of Scotland's exports, which is three times larger than the amount going to the EU. Half a million Scottish jobs are supported by trade with the rest of the UK.

The Union dividend, for those who are not aware, is the combined value of higher public spending and lower tax revenues in Scotland. In 2021-22, the Union dividend reached a record high of £12 billion, which works out, as the Secretary of State said, at £2,184 per person, up from £1,925 per person the previous year. This includes Scotland's geographical share of North sea revenues, and it is comprised of £1,963 of higher expenditure per person plus £221 in lower revenues generated per person in Scotland.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** The hon. Gentleman is talking about identifiable spending, which is a bit like the two of us going for a pizza, throwing away a third of it and then saying, “You got slightly more of the two thirds.” There is loads of non-identifiable spending in London—there is Crossrail, there are MPs' expenses here in the evening, and whatever else—and we are not seeing Barnett consequential for that. When we talk about this expenditure, he is telling only part of the story, and it is a misleading part of the story. If he wants to tell the real story, he must talk about the whole lot, and those figures are hidden.

**David Duguid:** I think I heard an invitation to join the hon. Gentleman for a pizza one night.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** You did.

**David Duguid:** I would be happy to take the hon. Gentleman up on that, where we can discuss this further. [HON. MEMBERS: “You'll be left with the bill!”] Quite possibly. I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that it is a complex issue but, as has been highlighted by the shadow Secretary of State, the Scottish Government's own figures point out the Union dividend. They recently published a paper on the economy for an independent Scotland. I am not going to get into the detail but, as has been mentioned, it contains vague claims about how a new Scottish pound would be created, despite the central bank being in a different country. More recently, we have had confirmation from the EU that not only

would rejoining the EU not be as straightforward as the SNP would have us believe, but it certainly would not be able to rejoin without committing to join the euro.

Finally, on the subject of that paper, let me read out the following quote from the Institute for Fiscal Studies: “it skirts around what achieving sustainability would likely require in the first decade of an independent Scotland: bigger tax rises or spending cuts than the UK government will have to pursue... Scotland's public finances are therefore expected to weaken relative to the rest of the UK... Experience from recent weeks suggests the markets may not look favourably on fiscal plans built on the uncertain hope of a substantial future boost to growth.”

These are challenging times, but the breaking up of our 300-year-old Union of nations is not the answer to those challenges. The Scottish people want both of their Governments—both of our Governments—to work together on delivering economic stability and quality public services, rather than pursuing a cynical, divisive second independence referendum. But rather than working collaboratively with the UK Government, the SNP continues to waste taxpayers' money—the £250 million on ferries is just one well-known issue, and I could go on, but I am not going to take up any more of Members' time—undermining the quality of vital public services and holding Scotland back, while constantly using the calls for an independence referendum as a distraction.

I know that happened during my time as a Minister, and I am sure that the new Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who will be responding to the debate, will continue, along with the Secretary of State, to seek to work productively and collaboratively with the Scottish Government as we work to deliver economic stability and improve vital public services for the Scottish people. That collaboration in the national interest is what the people of Scotland desperately want, not a damaging, divisive and distracting independence referendum.

2.52 pm

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am delighted to be called so early, Mr Deputy Speaker; I was not expecting it. I want to see whether we can do something different in this debate. These debates are always characterised by real polarisation, with people who are passionately Unionist on one side and wanting to put that case, and with us on the SNP Benches wanting to put the case for an independent Scotland. I am going to see whether there is any place where we can get agreement, perhaps even on a set of principles on which we can engage, based on something approaching a consensus around the language. I might not be successful, but I will give this my best shot and see how far we get.

I am going to propose a few assertions, just to see whether the House will agree to them. The first is that Scotland would be a successful independent country. Surely all of us could agree on that. I am not sure about those on the Labour Front Bench, because I put that to the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and he was not so sure. But even the most rabid, passionate Tory Unionists surely would not try to assert that the Scottish people, with all their history of invention, creativity, innovation and imagination, would somehow uniquely fail, among all the peoples in the world who have secured independence, in making a success of our independence. So can we call agree that Scotland would be a successful independent country?



**Ian Murray:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I am delighted that he has given way so early. This debate is not about that; it is about the broken proposition that he is putting as a prospectus for that independent Scotland. That is what we have demonstrated has holes in it. It is up to him to make that proposition, not us.

**Pete Wishart:** I will respond to that challenge and I thank the hon. Gentleman, because I think I heard him say that Scotland would be a successful independent country. I think that is what he was saying.

**David Duguid** *rose*—

**Pete Wishart:** I want to hear the hon. Gentleman say that too.

**David Duguid:** If the hon. Gentleman is looking just for that quote, to edit it for the purposes of having a video clip, I am happy to oblige. But just as an independent or separate Scotland could possibly succeed, would he also argue that an independent England, an independent Wales or an independent Northern Ireland would succeed as well, but not nearly as much as a United Kingdom?

**Pete Wishart:** This is progress. I feel that I am on the right track with this, because what we are getting across the House is agreement to the assertion that Scotland would be a successful independent country. I have no doubts whatsoever that England, without Scotland's contribution through its resources, would be equally successful as an independent nation; I believe that somehow it would just about muddle through without our support—

**Jamie Stone:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Pete Wishart:** I hope I am going to get a clean sweep here and get the Liberals to agree to this. I am counting on the hon. Gentleman to do that.

**Jamie Stone:** I hate to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, but if he took a straw poll of the pregnant mothers in Caithness who now have to travel more than 100 miles to give birth in Inverness—this has happened on the SNP's watch—he would get a pretty dusty answer.

**Pete Wishart:** It was going so well. I had the Conservatives agree to this and I think I had the Labour party agree to it, but the Liberals just could not bring themselves to agree with the proposition that an independent Scotland would be a successful, independent nation.

**Christine Jardine:** *rose*—

**Pete Wishart:** I think we have heard from the Liberals. I will come back to the hon. Lady, because I have other assertions to make. I think we have now all agreed, other than the Liberal Democrats, to that one, so let us try another.

I am going to speak about all our resources. Let us include a good proportion of nearly all of Europe's oil and gas reserves; the greatest potential for renewable energy that exists in Europe; vast fisheries; and a water supply that is the envy of the world. With all of that, Scotland has what it takes to be an independent country. Can we all agree to that?

**Christine Jardine** *rose*—

**Pete Wishart:** Let us see whether the hon. Lady will agree that Scotland has what it takes to be an independent country.

**Christine Jardine:** May I point out that the hon. Gentleman misinterprets what all of us think? None of us has ever said that Scotland could not be independent, but the people of Scotland, when given the choice, voted no, because they feel that their future is better within the United Kingdom.

**Pete Wishart:** That is a little more encouraging, because I think we are moving towards the assertion that Scotland would be a successful country and it has more than what it takes to be one. Throwing this theme a wee bit further on, we could even suggest that Scotland is perhaps the best resourced country that has ever considered becoming independent. I think that is pretty incontrovertible. No country is better endowed to be an independent nation. When we look around Scotland, whether at our oil and gas reserves, our fisheries or our potential renewable energy, we see that no country is better prepared for this than Scotland. Can we agree to that?

**David Duguid** *rose*—

**Pete Wishart:** Are we good for the hon. Gentleman to agree on that?

**David Duguid:** I could not agree more with the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), who said that nobody would disagree with the hon. Gentleman's assertion other than for the fact that the people of Scotland have repeatedly—or have when it counted—voted to stay in our United Kingdom. Being in the UK is better. *[Interruption.]* Let us all agree that Scotland is great. Scotland is fantastic. Scotland within the United Kingdom is even better. But will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the SNP's proposals for an independent Scotland would mean rejoining the EU and therefore rejoining the common fisheries policy?

**Pete Wishart:** I am so grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the EU because of what I am going to say now. I suspect I will not get the same range of agreement around the House with this particular assertion: the only way for Scotland to be a member of the European Union is for it to become an independent nation. Do we all agree with that? *[Interruption.]* I am hearing a couple of noes, mainly again from the Liberal Democrats; I have to say that I am very disappointed with them. I thought I would have had a more encouraging response from them.

**Mr Perkins:** I do not know whether at some point the hon. Gentleman is going to touch on the motion that we are actually debating. His theories about interesting questions, which I would be happy to discuss with him in the Strangers bar, are not relevant to the debate we are having.

In the motion, his party describes Britain as a “failing state”. Without defining “failing” or “successful”, he now asks us all to say whether an independent Scotland would be successful. If Britain is failing and Scotland is going to be successful, why is it his proposition that Scotland should keep the pound, given that he claims it is failing?

**Pete Wishart:** I will say a couple of things gently to the hon. Gentleman, who, for all his noise and bluster in the Chamber, I actually respect. Look—this debate is about Scottish independence; I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman missed that.

**Mr Perkins** *rose*—

**Pete Wishart:** I will come to the hon. Gentleman's other points, which are important, but I am keen to say this: I wanted to find agreement across the House. I thought I was making a bit of progress, but it is disappearing a little. I will try once again, to see whether I can do it.

All I want is for everybody to agree that the only way for Scotland to be a member of the European Union is by becoming independent. We know that because all the other parties are parties of Brexit now—they all want to make Brexit work. I do not know how they will do that. I do not even know whether it is possible to make Brexit work; it is almost designed not to work. It is not any sort of economic strategy but an ideological mission. But they want to make it work, so we are left in a situation where the only way—I do not see how this can be uncontroversial—to make Scotland a member of the European Union is for it to be an independent nation. We know that the Scottish people want that because that is what they voted for. We are talking about democracy: the overwhelming majority of Scottish people voted to remain in the European Union, and every single poll since then has shown that they want to rejoin the European Union.

**Christine Jardine:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Pete Wishart:** No; I have given way to the hon. Lady before.

Let us all agree that the only way for Scotland to rejoin the EU is by becoming independent. I will try another one; this one is probably not going to get there, but let us see. The only way for Scotland to get the Governments that it always votes for is as an independent nation.

**David Duguid:** That doesn't make sense.

**Pete Wishart:** The hon. Gentleman says that that does not make sense, but when I was elected in 2001 Scotland voted for Labour; it got the Government that it wanted. But since 2010, Scotland has never had the Government it voted for. What I am saying is uncontroversial: the only way for Scotland always to get the Government it votes for is as an independent nation. I thought we might have a little difficulty with that one, but the reaction does not seem too bad. I am a bit more encouraged, so I will see how much further I can get.

My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) always refers to Ireland, and he is right to; it is a great example. If we look at other European nations such as Ireland, Iceland, Finland, Norway or Denmark—they are all roughly the same size as Scotland, at 5 million to 8 million people—we see that they are all much more successful than Scotland. They are all powering ahead, with economic growth and GDP figures that we could envy. Can we all agree that there is something about the constitutional arrangements of Scotland that does not let us prosper as our neighbours do?

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** My hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. He just listed nations in the top 10 of the UN human development index. Here we are as Scots MPs in the UK, and the UK is at No. 18—and we are told that we are a poor part of that No. 18. Those who have left, such as Ireland, are 10 places higher. Of the countries he has mentioned, Iceland and Norway are at Nos. 2 and 3. He makes the case brilliantly.

**Pete Wishart:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who takes these issues seriously.

I have been a bit encouraged. Here is one that I am pretty certain Members from other parties will definitely agree to. I think we have to be honest about certain things and acknowledge that there will also, obviously, be difficulties. However, I think independence will be positive for Scotland; like our near-neighbours, we could be an incredible nation if we were in charge of our own affairs.

Let us see whether other Members agree—I am almost certain they will—that there would be issues at the starting point of Scottish independence because of the deficit we have as part of the United Kingdom. We can all agree with that: no objection from the Conservative Benches to that. Can we also agree that the way to resolve the deficit, as has been demonstrated by colleagues, is to remove the conditions that create it? Can we agree to that?

What we want is to have the full range of economic powers that will allow us to properly address the issue and to remove ourselves from the very institutions that give us the deficit as a result of being part of the United Kingdom. Can we agree to that? Other hon. Members are silent; I do not think they are agreeing—they are just humouring me now.

**David Duguid:** I seek clarification about what the hon. Gentleman is actually asking. Is he saying that by removing Scotland from the United Kingdom, Scotland's deficit will no longer exist?

**Pete Wishart:** I will put it the other way round; it might be easier for the hon. Gentleman to comprehend. We have this notional deficit as part of the United Kingdom. We all agree that these other nations are powering ahead of us. According to the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), we have a deficit that apparently means that we cannot be independent, but we have the deficit because we are part of the United Kingdom. What strikes me as the logical course of action is to extricate ourselves from the conditions that have given us the deficit. That means leaving the United Kingdom and ensuring that we get the full suite of economic powers to deal with the situation.

I think we all agreed that we as a people are resourceful enough to make a success of our independence and that, with its abundant natural resources, Scotland has what it takes to be an independent country. What is happening to make us have this deficit, according to the hon. Members for Edinburgh South and for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid)? We have the skills, the history of inventions, the creativity, the universities in the top 100, the oil and gas, the fisheries and the best potential for renewables in Europe. Why do we have a deficit? Maybe I am just not getting it, but I sense that it is to do with the constitutional arrangements that we find ourselves in.

[Pete Wishart]

I do not think I did too badly with all that; we got rough agreement on a lot. Let us park all this. Please—I never want to hear anybody suggest ever again that our nation, the people of Scotland, are somehow too wee, poor and stupid to make a success of independence. Never again! [Interruption.] I am hearing the hon. Member for Edinburgh South clearly. What I say to him is that I will make sure that no one in the Scottish National party utters that. Can he do the same in his party and can the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan do it in his? Let us never hear that suggestion again.

That was a useful kickaround. We have agreed all these things. What do we do now? How do we have the debate about going forward? We have to have the debate. People have knocked about opinion poll figures, but we are at 50-50 in the polls and the issue has to be resolved. It is intolerable that it should not be—we cannot continue into the future like this. Everybody says that we had a referendum in 2014, and yes we did, but Scotland in 2022 is almost entirely different from how it was in 2014. The United Kingdom today is unrecognisable from how it was in 2014. We have consistently and continually elected Governments with a commitment to holding a referendum and moving towards independence. SNP Members are here as representatives of that very mission. We have to resolve this.

My last plea is this: let us all demonstrate to the Scottish people that we are not some sort of hostage within the United Kingdom; that we are the equal partner that everybody talks about and that was described so eloquently during the last independence referendum—during our campaign to lead Scotland. Let us test this. Let us have the debate. Let us take all the pillars of the Better Together campaign—the things that sustained this tent that accommodated both Labour and the Tories, which was so catastrophic for the Labour party. The hon. Member for Edinburgh South is one of only a few Labour Members in his place. It was a terrible experience for Labour. All those central pillars are now gone. The case for staying in the Union has gone, particularly given the crisis and the chaos of the past few weeks. Scotland cannot put up with this anymore—we cannot be governed by incompetents who drove us to the very abyss of a pension crisis. We cannot go on like this. The last thing on which we can all agree is that we must have a referendum to settle this.

3.10 pm

**Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to rise to speak in this debate. I have listened with interest over the past couple of hours and welcomed the tone and the plea of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for a serious debate. However, I share the Secretary of State's sentiments that there is no desire for a referendum. There is no desire from these Conservative Benches to see Scotland break away from the United Kingdom.

**Ian Blackford** *rose*—

**Kirsten Oswald** *rose*—

**Robin Millar:** Please, let me make a little progress. It is important to enter into that serious debate.

I find myself standing here asking myself questions about identity when the matter of independence is raised. Identity is a complicated business. As a proud Welshman and supporter of this Union, I find myself at the heart of a web of family, communal, economic and national bonds and histories. These bonds link me to those across these islands whose past and whose future are interwoven with my own. I cannot hold it against SNP Members that they find themselves pulled in a different direction. Our disagreements on identity are those perhaps of the heart, not just of the head.

The foundation of the state is a serious matter, deserving serious scrutiny and question. Millions of people across these isles, and, indeed, the world, would find their lives dramatically shaken by the break-up of the United Kingdom. Those who seek to found their arguments on promises of prosperity have also the utmost responsibility to set out plans that are honest, transparent and detailed.

**Ian Blackford:** Let me commend the hon. Gentleman for the way that he is going about this. May I say to him respectfully that this is not to do with identity. There is the phrase, “It is not a question of where you are from, it is where you are going.” It is about that shared identity that we have for the country. On the question of the demand for independence, will he not acknowledge that there is an independence majority in the Scottish Parliament, and the SNP won that election to the Scottish Parliament last year on a manifesto commitment to delivering that referendum to the people of Scotland?

**Robin Millar:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. They are good questions and I shall try to do them justice in my answer. First, on the matter of identity, I have a sense of where I am going, but I also have an acute sense of who I am, and pity the person who does not.

On whether there is a democratic mandate for independence within the Scottish Parliament, I do not see that there is. That body does not have the power in law to call a referendum, so I could, with confidence, look at the SNP manifesto and say, “Do you know what? I love what it is planning to do with services and with help for the homeless, the poor and refugees, but I do not care for independence. However, I can give the SNP my vote because the Scottish Parliament would not have the power to call a referendum.” I do not see a democratic argument for independence in a majority in Holyrood.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I think the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar)—Aberconwy is a beautiful part of Cymru—said on the Floor of the House of Commons that the Scottish Parliament does not have the ability to call a referendum under its set-up. Perhaps that is why the Scottish Government are going to the Supreme Court. I take it that his premise is that the only place that has the sovereign capability either to grant a referendum or to recognise the result of a general election is the House of Commons. If so, it is up to his party to recognise that all the pro-independence MPs on these Benches represent the majority of Scottish constituencies, in the UK's constitutional situation, and to accept that result.

**Robin Millar:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, but he plays with the difference between a referendum and electoral representation in a House



that runs a first-past-the-post scheme. I am happy for those arguments to be played out in a place where greater minds than mine can exercise themselves on that.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** *rose*—

**Robin Millar:** I wish to make a little progress.

Having said that serious plans deserve serious question and scrutiny, I was disappointed to discover that the SNP Administration's recent economic plan for separation fell short of what I would consider serious consideration. The paper contains no modelling, no projections and no hard analysis of the implications of independence—criticisms that were laid by many against this Government in recent weeks.

Two key arguments in that document for separation put forward by the SNP are a reversal of so-called austerity and EU membership. I will consider both points briefly. On austerity and state spending, an independent Scotland would have, as we have heard, a high public sector deficit. In fact, it would be among the highest in Europe, with state spending exceeding tax receipts by 12%, and yet the SNP contends that spending is not high enough. Indeed, the Scottish Government announced real-term cuts of 8% to local government, the police, prisons, universities and rural affairs after the Institute of Fiscal Studies warned that they faced a £3.5 billion overspend. That is crucial in understanding what the implications would be for an independent Scotland.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** The hon. Gentleman seems to say that if a country, a state or a Union has a 12% deficit, it cannot be independent—that should be news to the UK. I have a couple of questions for him. Does he accept that this is a political Union, and is there a democratic way out? When we left the trading bloc of the European Union, we had a right to choose. Surely that right exists in relation to this Union, too.

The hon. Gentleman says that Westminster can block a referendum, but if the Scottish Parliament were to hold an election—he mentioned elections earlier—on the sole question of independence, would he, as a democrat, recognise that, or would he seek to find a way to worm his way out of the straightforward recognition of the will of the Scottish people?

**Robin Millar:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. I missed his earlier invitation for pizza. I would gladly discuss those points over a pizza, but I will not get drawn into that tangle now—it is an important tangle and these are important questions. However, I offer this observation. For me, this is not a transactional, contractual relationship between two parties. The relationship that the United Kingdom had with the EU was of that sort. The relationship that we enjoy as part of this Union is a covenant, an intertwining of a relationship over centuries. It goes beyond a simple piece of paper. In fact, one of the great deceits of the past couple of decades has been the mistranslation of, and confusion over, Union and devolution. A deep and complex relationship has been misinterpreted as a contractual relationship, which is the basis of devolution.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** *rose*—

**Robin Millar:** I will not take an intervention on pizza, thank you.

How is such spending to be managed? Where is the central bank to buy Government bonds? Where is the support of the UK taxpayer? How is Scotland to simultaneously build up the estimated £64 billion in reserves that it would need to join the EU? The welfare of millions rests on the answers to such questions, but the document is silent.

Moving on to the EU, the document notes that the single market accounts for a minority of Scottish exports, or about 18%, compared with the 60%—fully three times as much—exported to the rest of the UK. How then can trade with the EU compensate for cutting off Scotland's biggest trading partner?

What would be the effect of customs checks on the border? How would those who travel across the border daily to buy groceries interact with stringent EU agrifood checks? How would farmers whose land is split by the border contend with the EU's sanitary and phytosanitary checks—the same checks that have stopped tractors because of mud on their tyres and that have refused permission for loads to be taken to Ireland because blue ink has been used instead of black ink on the forms?

**David Duguid:** My hon. Friend gives a good example of why we need to stay together as a Union. On this Back British Farming Day, does NFU Cymru agree with the National Farmers Union of Scotland that keeping the integrity of the internal market of the United Kingdom is far more important than any other external market?

**Robin Millar:** Indeed it does. The internal market we enjoy by virtue of being a United Kingdom is of huge importance to every farmer in every part of this United Kingdom. There is more I could say on that, but I will keep to the thrust of this debate.

I must agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray): there is no plan. The SNP's plan is no plan at all. It falls short on how key public services will continue to be funded and to operate. Further, it does not address the two biggest shocks to our economy in the past two years—a covid pandemic and a war in eastern Europe. The UK Government have responded to both by virtue of the strength of the United Kingdom economy, for the benefit of all parts of the United Kingdom. There is no provision, however, in the plans of the SNP and the Scottish Government for a response to such emergencies and no demonstration of the resilience necessary to cope with the global storms we must weather.

The plan fails to give those whose livelihoods depend on the UK an idea of how they would be able to provide for their families. It fails to offer anything to communities that would be split by a new border. In short, more than matters of the heart or even of the head, and more than the hard-nosed transactions of an economy, the plan fails in its moral duty to the people of Scotland.

That moral duty is real. The fate of Ukrainian refugees is a concern to us all, and we know that the people of Scotland and the Scottish Parliament extended a warm welcome to many of them. However, that warm welcome has been poorly served. We know that those people are being housed in temporary accommodation on ships,

[Robin Millar]

and that the space they are allocated on them is less than the amount a prisoner in a Scottish prison can expect by law to enjoy.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** *rose—*

**Kirsten Oswald** *rose—*

**Robin Millar:** I will take an intervention from the hon. Lady.

**Kirsten Oswald:** May I gently ask the hon. Gentleman to reflect on the treatment that his Government are meting out to those who are fleeing to the United Kingdom, in contrast with the welcome and the open door that the Scottish Government have given to Ukrainian refugees? Will he reflect very carefully on the set lines that he is talking about, which do not reflect the reality on the ground?

**Robin Millar:** I take the hon. Lady's point in the spirit in which it was intended, but perhaps she or another Member could answer whether it is true that Ukrainian refugees have had to be housed on ships in Scotland because there has not been the accommodation they were promised. They have received a warm welcome across the UK—I have no doubt that, or about the ambition behind it—but my point is the reality of public services in meeting that ambition. That is the thrust of this debate. It is a debate about independence and the economy, and about how we meet the reality of providing for those on who depend on us.

I will make one more point on the question of moral duty. Ireland has been mentioned a number of times as an example. Ireland secured its independence in 1922, but as one of his first actions the Irish Minister for Finance, Ernest Blythe, cut the pay of civil servants and reduced Government spending from £42 million in 1923 to £28 million by 1926. That is a one-third cut in Government spending in the years immediately following independence. These are real questions about the consequences of a transition to an independent nation but, again, on these practical points of a plan for independence, the document presented is silent.

I will finish on this point—

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Robin Millar:** No, I have taken several interventions. The planning of a new country is a serious undertaking, but we have yet to see a serious plan.

3.25 pm

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I think it is clear to us all that this Government have made life harder for everyone—well, maybe not bankers, but everyone else. Many face real hardship and the all-too-real choice between heating and eating, and many, for the very first time, face having to go to food banks to feed their families.

That is the Brexit dividend unleashed on our country. It was a Brexit we did not vote for in a referendum invented by a Prime Minister we did not vote for, leading a party that last won an election in Scotland back when we used pounds, shilling and pence and had

one TV channel to watch, in black and white. That is the kind of democracy we are used to in Scotland—the kind of democracy that sees the votes of Scotland shoved in the Brexit bin while Government after Government are elected on a minority of votes in a single part of these islands.

That is democracy Union-style: a democracy where the electoral system dates from the 14th century, the political parties from the 17th and the constitution from whenever it needs to be changed to suit the current incumbents and keep the nats at bay. Whatever positives the Union once held for Scotland—and there were always negatives, too—have been jettisoned and are just folk memories now. The UK is a failing state, with the passage of time marked by the realisation here and abroad that the gilt and glitter favoured by the British establishment masks the state's sinking further into a morass of its own making.

We have had to sit back and witness the explosive financialisation of the economy at the expense of productive industry and commerce, leading to real economic output that lags behind virtually every other European country, and then the desperate attempts by the governing class to blame that on Johnny Foreigner and his sleekit ways. The reality is that the Union has delivered flatlining wages for the last decade and a half, with households facing rapidly rising prices and housing costs while incomes stay stagnant.

We have an entire country afraid to turn the heating on because they do not know whether they can afford the bills; whole communities left to stew in long-term poverty and deprivation; and people forced into the gig economy with no protections or employment rights, forced to pay the costs of their boss's delivery van out of their own pockets because we have had decades of workers' rights being systematically stripped at the altar of economic extremism. As we speak, we await the date for the Second Reading of yet another Tory Bill stripping back workers' already meagre rights.

The reality is that the Union has delivered a social security system that Kafka would have torn up at first draft, where the terminally ill are told they are not sick enough for benefit and then sanctioned when they die, and people living with debilitating diseases that can only get worse are told they will be fit for work. It is a system where women are forced to prove to the Government that they were a victim of rape before their children receive benefits.

The reality is that the Union has seen insularism turned into a badge of honour rather than something to escape from. Both main UK parties have embraced Brexit regardless of the utterly catastrophic damage it has wreaked on our economy and society.

The leader of the UK Labour party proclaims:

“We do not want to go back in. We want to make Brexit work.”

That goes against every shred of evidence showing what an unmitigated disaster Brexit has been. Scotland voted for no part in this carnage. We are—to the tune of 72% in the latest opinion poll—proudly European and supporters of EU membership. Despite the best efforts of the Labour and Tory parties to keep us out of the EU, that democratic mandate will be respected when we regain our independence.

No one on the SNP Benches pretends that independence is a magic panacea for the immense challenges facing our country. We will not look out of the window on the

morning of our independence and see rainbows shining on the sunlit uplands, with the problems of our generation magicked away. However, independence will give us the power and resources to begin the change to a better society—a society that looks to allies and neighbours across the Irish and North seas for the kind of attitude to its citizens that should be the norm here but that has been denied by the UK.

An independent Scotland should choose to have a more sustainable and more humane social security system. An independent Scotland should choose to invest in sustainable connectivity within itself and to link itself directly with the rest of the world. An independent Scotland should choose a future that does not rely on weapons of mass destruction parked in the Clyde and instead invest in its people.

It is only independence that gives Scotland the opportunity to unleash our full potential in the world and to harness that potential for the betterment of all who make our country home. It is only independence that gives our country the chance to end once and for all the despicable attitudes displayed by the Home Secretary on Monday. Our country is not being invaded. Migrants are not prisoners to be released. For thousands of years, our country has been home to an extraordinary diversity of humans—from Celts and Picts to Indians and Poles. That history is embedded in our present, and independence will allow us to continue that history into the future—rather than the repugnant Alf Garnett garbage that passes for UK immigration policy.

I encourage Members from the north of England to start thinking and preparing now for how they might change their part of the continuing Union after Scottish independence. It is shameful that the cradle of the industrial revolution has been left to beg for scraps from the table. One major infrastructure project after another has been shelved or mothballed, while a single station on a single railway under London is allowed to go £500 million over budget. That is not the cost of the station—it is £500 million over budget. The line itself has seen an extra £5 billion thrown at it. An independent Scotland will want to work with all parts of these islands constructively to support all our citizens. It is in our interests to see a strong economy along our border—not somewhere that is an afterthought for Whitehall.

The Union has failed those areas too, but it is Scotland that is taking the opportunity to make the change and undo decades, if not centuries, of stupor, neglect and misgovernment. Whatever discussions happen in the meeting rooms of the Supreme Court, democracy will inevitably have its way. Scotland has voted for the democratic right to choose its own future—that is incontestable. Those in this place who seek to stand in the way of that right are doing their cause no favour whatever. They should have the confidence and the courage to make the case for the Union they say they support. We on the SNP Benches are taking our case to the people, and I am confident that Scotland's people will support that case and drive our country forward to normality and independence.

3.32 pm

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I was actually glad to hear the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) speak up on behalf of the Union. We might not agree, but at least a

Conservative and Unionist party Back Bencher from Scotland is here to do the job they are paid to do by their constituents. I know that the Secretary of State was here earlier and that the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), is here now, but it is commendable to see the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan here doing his job. That is what we are all here for: to speak up on behalf of our constituents. I just thought it was important to say that.

On the constitutional debate that we are having—there is an element relating to the constitutional position—the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) talked about a covenant. The treaty of Union is not a covenant; it is a piece of international law, into which two independent—

**Robin Millar** indicated dissent.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Well, the hon. Gentleman can shake his head, but he perhaps needs to read up on English, Welsh and, separately, Scottish history and about the pre-treaty parliamentary positions.

Let us go back to the debate at hand. In 2017, in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, the now Prime Minister was clear—

**Robin Millar** rose—

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** No, I have just started, so I hope the hon. Gentleman will let me go on for a wee bit.

In 2017, the Prime Minister said that

“it seems hard to block”

a second independence referendum for Scotland. Let me also repeat the words of another Tory Prime Minister, whom I repeat time and time again for the historical record. The former right hon. Member for Finchley said that if the Tory party

“sometimes seems English to some Scots that is because the Union is inevitably dominated by England by reason of its greater population.”

Now, that is just a simple fact, and the former right hon. Member for Finchley was correct.

They then went on to say:

“The Scots, being a historic nation”—

I am sure that you and I agree at least on that, Madam Deputy Speaker, although I will not ask your opinion from the Chair—

“with a proud past, will inevitably resent some expressions of this fact from time to time. As a nation, they have an undoubted right to national self-determination.”

We are a nation. We are not a region. We are not some subsection of some great state in the Soviet Union. We are a nation of historic lineage going back into time immemorial that people all over the world call home. They continued by saying that

“thus far, they have exercised that right by joining and remaining in the Union.”

They go on to say, and this is worth repeating time and again:

“Should they determine on independence, no English party or politician would stand in their way, however much we might regret their departure.”

That, I think, is a clear constitutional position.



[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

Members will be relieved that I do not intend to go over many of the excellent points already made by my colleagues—[*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is welcome to interject at some point if he wishes. Let us go to the economic case for independence, because that is the crux of the matter. This may go back to some of the questions raised by Government Members, because I cannot help but feel that things are often framed very much in the wrong way. If things were perfect for the Scottish economy, or for the UK economy—I mean the United Kingdom of Great Britain and also Northern Ireland, which does not get much mention from some on the Government Benches—there would not be so many SNP MPs here making the case for independence today. Our aim is not to tweak the economy here or there or hope for some marginal improvements for Scotland; Scottish independence is a political project—a political choice for the people of Scotland, should they make it—that seeks to change the underlying economic conditions in order to improve the lives of everyone not only in my constituency but across the length and breadth of Scotland.

While at one time that idea may have seemed utopian, the events of the last few weeks and months—actually, the last few years—have turned the chronic problems of the UK economy into an acute polycrisis of stagnant wages and productivity and plummeting competitiveness precipitated by the disastrous consequences of a Brexit that Scotland did not vote for.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** My hon. Friend is right: this is not about utopia; it is based in reality, because we have an example in front of us. One hundred years ago, the poorest part of the United Kingdom was Ireland. It became independent and shed the six counties that had the majority of the industry. One hundred years later, Ireland's GDP per capita is well ahead of the UK's. Such a thing can happen only when a country can make its own political choices, rather than them being abdicated to people for whom that country does not vote and who do not care about that country.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I totally agree with my hon. Friend. That is the premise for independence. An independent country would seek trade deals and agreements with those countries with which it seeks to boost trade. It would seek to boost productivity, improve competitiveness, and get rid of the idea of stagnant wages, because that is the basis of the UK economy.

Turning again to Brexit, in the past year alone—not since 2016, but in the past year—my constituents in West Dunbartonshire, which is one local authority area, have lost £32.5 million in exports because of Brexit. On top of the cost of living crisis, that comes to £869.97 per household. In my part of the world, that is a lot of money when people are trying to pay their electricity or gas bill, even though Scotland produces more gas than we need. It is an absolutely failed economic model.

Our current economic model is quite simple: we get a fiscal transfer every year from the Treasury, and in exchange we accept—and have accepted—that macro-economic policy will continue to be made with London and the south-east of England in mind. My constituents

receive—this may go back to some of the questions from Government Members—slightly higher per capita public spending in return for what is essentially a guarantee that their wages and the Scottish economy will grow at a slower rate than they do here in London and the south-east of England.

In the past, that felt like a fair exchange. We were told that the engine of the UK economy would power up more quickly after recessions and recover more quickly from blows than the peripheral areas. That meant that the fiscal transfer could continue. No one seemed to notice the divergence over time, which led to the situation that was memorably compared by the economist Duncan Weldon: the UK economy basically consisted of the Republic of Singapore surrounded by a series of Portugals—no disrespect; I love Portugal—with a high-wage, high-productivity engine that could support the sluggish economies of its hinterland.

That divergence has led to the incredible reality of northern English regions and constituencies now being poorer than the former communist parts of east Germany, with other states that did not have an open economy until 30 years ago, such as Poland, Slovenia and Estonia, not far behind. The change of the economic crisis from chronic to acute can be put down to Brexit and 12 years of Tory misrule, but I have to say to my friends on the Labour Benches that the seeds for two decades of stagnant productivity and wage growth were sown during their period in office with their total inability to challenge the UK's macroeconomic orthodoxy.

I am mindful of the comments of my former colleague, Andrew Wilson, who was a Member of the Scottish Parliament and has written a lot on these issues. He calls the UK an “aeroplane with one engine”. In good times, we are unlikely to notice any turbulence, but that cannot be guaranteed forever. When the engine begins to run more slowly than its competitors, as we are seeing now, there is a knock-on effect for everyone, including those in Scotland.

Simply, people across these islands are getting poorer, while those across the Sheuch in Ireland are getting wealthier all the time, as my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar said. Let us not forget that Ireland, as an independent sovereign state, used the pound from 1922 to 1928 and was then pegged to the pound for 50 years. People should not just say that the fiscal position cannot happen; we need to be conscious about history and the reality on the ground. The people of Scotland recognise that.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** My hon. Friend raises an interesting and important point. Ireland was pegged to the pound for all those years, which probably held it back and was a mistake. It was unpegged when the UK went cap in hand to the International Monetary Fund for a bailout in the 1970s, and Ireland then—combined with joining the European Union, incidentally on the same day that Scotland joined—took off.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Indeed. The underlying economic case for this Union, the British Union—not the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—that we get slightly higher public spending in exchange for worse wages and growth begins to fall apart when average incomes in the UK decline relative to those of its neighbours.

As it is appropriate to ask Scottish National party Members to lay out the economic case for independence, it is also appropriate to ask questions of the Conservative Government and of the Labour Opposition, who seem unwilling to diverge from the Government on matters of macroeconomics. I would love to hear from the Front-Bench teams what they would say to people from West Dunbartonshire when they ask what the cost is to them over a working life of having lower wages than their peers in similar parts of northern Europe. Similarly, they ask about the economic value attributed to combining those lower wages with fewer years of healthy working life lived.

**Ian Blackford:** I commend my hon. Friend on his excellent speech. In essence, there are three components of growth: population, productivity and participation. One thing that has been ascribed to the Union since 1850 is the relative decline of the Scottish population, because there has been a lack of economic opportunity to drive up wages and productivity. We are being held back by the migration policies of this Government, which are, sadly, supported by the Labour party. That is why we need independence, because we will need migration to drive up the opportunities in Scotland and to deliver economic growth.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I am grateful for that intervention from my right hon. Friend, and I fundamentally agree. As the grandchild of migrants, I hope they brought something at least to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as I hope many future migrants will bring to an independent Scotland.

Ultimately—and, again, I come back to the Government—we can put a price on the fact that people in Clydebank, Dumbarton and the Vale of Leven die younger than comparable cohorts in Denmark, Ireland and even the south-east of England. In 2014, my constituents were among the four council areas in Scotland that voted to change the dismal economic calculus of Britain, because it never has worked for them and it never will work for them. I cannot help but feel that unless both the main Unionist parties in this Parliament—the Conservative party and the Labour party—find answers to these simple questions, there are going to be a lot more of my constituents voting for independence next time.

3.45 pm

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): When I joined the SNP more than 20 years ago, I did so because I wanted Scotland to become an independent country. I believe that the people of Scotland should be able to make the important decisions on the issues that matter to us. It was not all that long after the reopening of the Scottish Parliament, and devolution was still finding its feet. It was also not that long after we had managed to extricate ourselves from 18 years of Tory rule—18 years of Tory Governments, who Scotland had not voted for since 1955.

In the time since I joined the party, we have had another 12 years of Conservative government Scotland has not voted for. I honestly thought that it could not get more damaging, and that we could not have a more damaging Government and a more damaging Prime Minister, than what we experienced during the Margaret

Thatcher era. Then David Cameron said “Hold my beer”, and had the Brexit referendum. Then the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said “Hold my beer”, demonised immigrants and put in motion the hardest possible Brexit. Then the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) said “Hold my beer”, and destroyed what little faith the public had left in politicians being honest. Then the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) said “Hold my beer”, and crashed the economy. If the current Prime Minister asks someone to hold his drink, I recommend running a mile. Scotland has not voted for any of this chaos. We did not vote for a Brexit referendum, we did not vote for Brexit, we welcome immigrants—and we do not vote Tory.

Our Scottish Government are consistently having to mitigate Tory-inflicted hardships in order to offer some measure of protection for our constituents, and I will make no apology for making the wellbeing of the people of Scotland my ideological mission. Because of the decisions of the UK Government we did not vote for, four out of 10 on those on universal credit skipped meals this summer. Mortgage rates have soared £6,700 a year on average. Since last year, energy costs have gone up £1,200, while pasta costs 60% more and bread costs 40% more. The UK Government have capped benefits and reneged on the pensions triple lock—and we did not vote for this. The people of Scotland and the country of Scotland cannot afford to be part of this Union.

**Mhairi Black:** As my hon. Friend will be aware, during the last referendum campaign we were continually told that we were in a Union of equal partnership. As she has touched on, even if every single seat in Scotland—all 59 seats—was SNP, the city of London, for instance, has 73 MPs. Is that not ridiculous, and how can this ever be a Union of equals if the second largest nation of that Union can be outvoted by one city?

**Kirsty Blackman:** My hon. Friend is absolutely correct, and she lays out very clearly the democratic deficit facing Scotland.

We cannot afford to continue having our resources squandered by Westminster. We cannot afford to go without energy market reform. We cannot afford trickle-down economics. We cannot afford the UK’s xenophobic immigration policy. We cannot afford to keep people having no recourse to public funds, which is making some of the poorest people in the UK even poorer still. We cannot afford a UK Government who refuse to increase the minimum wage. We cannot afford to keep having our workers’ rights stripped. We cannot afford locally—the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who has just stepped out, mentioned this—to have a UK Government who refuse to match Scotland’s funding for our £500 million just transition fund.

This UK Government are failing to tackle the issues that are facing our constituents. It is a joke that they keep mentioning the £37 billion support package. It is a joke that they keep mentioning people being £1,000 better off. For some unknown reason, the UK Government have included a freeze on alcohol duty in their £37 billion calculation. On what planet does that help people to pay their fuel bills or feed their children? People are not £1,000 better off as a result of the energy support

[Kirsty Blackman]

provided. The average household is still paying double what it was paying last year. Where does the Prime Minister expect people to find the extra money?

A quarter of people across these islands have got no savings. With borrowing costs rocketing, people are spiralling quickly into unmanageable levels of debt, and that is only set to get worse as the cold weather kicks in. We have consistently voted against that, yet the larger size of England means that we are consistently burdened with Westminster Governments who do not care. Owen Jones published a video that he made during the Tory party conference. He pointed out that mortgage rates are going to go up as a result of the mini-Budget. The Tory party member he was interviewing replied, "I don't have a mortgage." That is the attitude we are faced with in the Conservative party. Many Tory party members and donors are doing all right, Jack, so why bother taking action? Our constituents are scared, and the UK Government are refusing to provide adequate help or certainty. The Prime Minister will not even commit to the triple lock or to uprating benefits in line with inflation.

My colleagues have spoken about Scotland's potential. We have so many resources. We can lead the world in the deployment of renewables, and we can reach our economic potential. We have the best educated population in Europe. We have the talent and the potential, and we are not, as my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) said earlier, singularly unable to flourish as an independent country. An independent Scotland would use its potential to ensure minimum living standards. How is it that in 2022 we are having to say that? Why are we being approached by constituents who have nothing, and who are experiencing poverty that has not happened in this widespread way during my lifetime? Before this cost of living crisis, some people were living below the destitution line, despite being in receipt of social security. Other European countries have stepped up and provided far higher levels of support to ensure that people can live through this crisis.

What are the people of Scotland doing about this? We are consistently exercising the democratic rights that we have to vote for the SNP. We have a majority of independence-supporting MSPs in the Scottish Parliament, and we had our best ever council elections this year. We have been the third largest party in Westminster for seven years, despite standing in less than one tenth of the seats. Yet the Westminster Government suggest that we have no mandate. I will say who has no mandate—the Tories. They have no mandate to inflict Tory economic policies on our population. They have no mandate for xenophobic immigration policies, and no mandate for cutting social security. If this is a voluntary Union of nations, why are the UK Government not respecting the mandate given by the people of Scotland to the Scottish Parliament to hold a referendum? Why have we had to go to the Supreme Court to assert our right to hold the referendum, and how can the UK Government justify arguing against that? This is not about identity; this is about democracy. Scotland has voted for the right to choose our own future, and we will do everything possible to ensure that happens.

3.53 pm

**Amy Callaghan** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): While we hold this debate, a cost of living crisis continues to hit people the length and breadth of these four nations. Scotland has a chance to shelter our people from facing the brunt of Tory mismanagement of fiscal responsibility, and from the Tories' disregard for people. I say that with confidence, because Scotland does not and will not vote Tory.

I need not lay bare the many merits of independence for our nation in this speech. Successive Governments in this place have been covering that for us more than adequately, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) covered a number of those merits in his usual fashion—at great length. I will, however, outline a vision—my vision for an independent Scotland. I see our role in this as being to win over the hearts and minds of those who are still undecided, but that happens on doorsteps and in our communities, not through a speech from these Benches.

Like, I am sure, many of my colleagues, I am often asked why an independent Scotland will be better, fairer, and why it will make us happier. A straightforward answer is: we will get what we vote for—so, not the Tories. We have not chosen market upheaval; to close our borders; to ask women whether they have been raped before they can access welfare; to cut energy support; to crash the pound with unexpected borrowing; or to ship people—our people—off to Rwanda without considering the ramifications. It was mere days ago that the Home Secretary referred to groups of refugees who have come to our coast in search of a better life as an "invasion".

**Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I do not whether my hon. Friend, like me, has been contacted by many constituents about that. If she has, she will know that it is not just us, and that the people of Scotland are utterly horrified and ashamed about words such as "invasion" and "scourge" being used to describe vulnerable human beings who are fleeing conflict in other parts of the world. Does she agree that independence would give us a massive benefit as we would no longer have to be even partly responsible for shameful policies that treat human beings like they were worse than the dirt on the bottom of our shoe and that, once we are free of the UK, we can treat them like the human beings that they are?

**Amy Callaghan:** I welcome that intervention and agree that the language used by the Home Secretary is shameful. I think that my constituents agree as well.

Every single one of those wounds has been inflicted on us by Tory leadership—leadership that the people of Scotland did not choose. We have a chance to be a much bigger player on the world stage. We have a chance yet again to stand shoulder to shoulder with a multitude of our closest allies at a time when the world has rarely seemed so unstable. But as usual, it is ordinary people who pay the price for decisions made by a Tory Government we did not vote for.

The cost of living crisis continues to spiral out of control. The Trussell Trust handed out 2.1 million food parcels across the UK in 2021-22, yet the SNP must continue to call on the UK Government to develop



comprehensive child poverty targets. The Government would clearly rather spend their efforts on protecting bankers' bonuses than on investing in people.

We can think about austerity no longer being imposed, poverty being no longer a political choice forced on our communities and Scotland having a Government—its only Government—elected by its people, for its people. Every child in an independent Scotland should go to school with food in their tummy because their family could afford that from a true living wage, not at the expense of their parent or guardian not eating—and definitely not from accessing a food bank. There should be no need for food banks in an independent Scotland. We are endlessly grateful for the service that they provide in our communities, but they are a by-product of the first round of austerity, not a long-term, sustainable solution to ending poverty. I dread to think what is coming with the Prime Minister's and Chancellor's austerity 2.0. That is why our vision for a better, different Scotland is so crucial at this time.

We need only take one look at the legislation coming out of this place—the single market Bill, the Public Order Bill and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022—to see why people across the political spectrum are talking about another independence referendum. The majority of Scotland's MPs are outvoted at every turn while the Government make up legislation as casually as if it were a shopping list. With an independent Scotland, we will get the Governments that we vote for and we will be rid of the economically irresponsible Tories for good. We have a bright future. We have the opportunity to gain powers that will allow us to rescue many Scottish children from a life of poverty. Very soon, I know that Scotland will grasp that opportunity.

3.58 pm

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am pleased that the Scottish National party has decided to bring this debate to the Chamber. It is important that the case for an independent Scotland is re-examined. The points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) will have been heard loudly both in Scotland and across the United Kingdom.

This is a matter of great interest to my constituents in Chesterfield. It is a fact that people across England feel very passionately and strongly that the United Kingdom is better together, and that the success of Scotland and the success of England is assured by our being together in the United Kingdom. We gratefully remember the many contributions made by Scots to the United Kingdom in a whole variety of different ways. The successful Union we have had over hundreds of years has led to Britain being the successful country that it is.

It was precisely because it matters to me and my constituents that, during 2014, I went up to Scotland and spent a considerable amount of time campaigning in the independence referendum, speaking to people in an array of constituencies.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** I hear the hon. Gentleman's confession that he went up to Scotland for the 2014 referendum. Did he, on any doorsteps in Scotland, say to the people that voting to stay in the UK would guarantee their place in the European Union, or was he a Brexiteer by that point?

**Mr Perkins:** Clearly, I went up there to make the case for Scotland to remain in the United Kingdom. I absolutely recognised that that was a choice for the people of Scotland, but it was a choice that was going to affect England. The fact that we were to have a referendum on our relationship with the EU was already known in 2014, because the Conservative party had already committed to that and the people of Scotland voted to remain on that basis. Clearly, I was hopeful that the people of Britain would vote to stay in the European Union. In fact, I only wish that the hon. Gentleman's party had put the same effort into that referendum as the Labour party. If it had, we might have seen a different outcome.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Perkins:** A number of people want to intervene. I will accept interventions, but I will not accept one from the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), because she misrepresented me previously. She said that I had said that I had apologised for the Government's record. I have not; I have done the opposite. *[Interruption.]* I will check the record very carefully. She misrepresented me and if she wants to correct the record I will let her, but if she does not want to correct the record I will hear from the right hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie).

**Stewart Hosie** (Dundee East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is perfectly entitled to make the case he is making, but given that in Scotland we voted to stay in the European Union and given that in his constituency 34,000 voted to leave and only 22,900 voted to remain, would it not have been better, instead of wasting his time in Scotland, if he had done his job in Chesterfield, instead of having that act of economic self-harm that is Brexit?

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Perkins:** May I respond to the point that has just been made? I worked very hard during the Brexit referendum to make a case, but I accept that people across the coalfield voted in a different way. I return to the statistic that I put to the right hon. Gentleman's leader, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). The Scottish National party spent a paltry £91,000 on the EU referendum. During the Scottish independence referendum, it spent £1,344,000. The truth is that the people committed to Scottish independence believed that the outcome they got was exactly the one they wanted. They wanted the rest of the UK to vote out while Scotland voted to stay in and that is why they did not lift a finger to get a result. Because of the limp effort it put in, the turnout in the Brexit referendum was lower in Scotland than in any other region or nation of the United Kingdom. That is the reality. The Scottish National party made it very clear to its voters that it was happy with that outcome. It knew there was a likelihood that that outcome would strengthen its case for Scottish independence.

**Kirsten Oswald rose—**

**Mr Perkins:** If the hon. Lady is willing to withdraw the comment she made, I will give way to her.

**Kirsten Oswald:** I am grateful to the hon. Member. I am somewhat perplexed. I pointed out that his colleagues had made comments that clearly apologised for the UK

[Kirsten Oswald]

Government's economic mismanagement. I do not know why the UK Labour party would support that, but that is its problem, not mine. I absolutely stand by my concerns about the Labour party's position on Brexit. It is unclear to me why Labour Members are so supportive of Brexit, considering the damage that it has done to Scotland, or why the hon. Gentleman continues to suggest that people such as me, with a 73% remain vote in my constituency, somehow were not marching the streets, as all my colleagues were. Scotland did not want to leave the EU and we want to be back in it. The hon. Gentleman might not like that, but he does not get to misrepresent it.

**Mr Perkins:** I hear what the hon. Lady says, and I repeat what I said: if the SNP was desperate to stay in the European Union, it had a funny way of showing it. Why is it—[*Interruption.*] I will respond to the points that have been made. Why is it—let SNP Members answer this—that the SNP spent just 7% of the amount of money on the Brexit referendum that it spent on the Scottish independence referendum? The only conclusion that I can come to is that the SNP did not care nearly as much about that.

I accept that the people of Scotland—the majority of people who voted in that referendum—voted to remain in the EU. However, the turnout in Scotland was also very low and I believe that the SNP's lack of effort was a major factor.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Mr Perkins:** I will return to the subject—[*Interruption.*]

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. I have to protect the hon. Gentleman. He has as much of a right to speak as anyone else. Let us give him a chance.

**Mr Perkins:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. During that Scottish referendum, I was in Edinburgh, Cumbernauld, West Dunbartonshire, Airdrie and Falkirk, and I spoke to people about the issues and about how much I hoped that they would choose to stay in the United Kingdom. The people I spoke to on the doorsteps were pleased to debate the subject. Lots of them voted to stay in the UK and lots voted otherwise. Virtually all those constituencies ended up voting overall to stay in the UK, but they recognised that not only was this a matter on which the people of Scotland would decide, but that the matter was of interest to people across the United Kingdom.

The basic assertion that the Scottish National party made—that an independent Scotland would be part of the EU but that it would take the pound and, at some point in future, have a Scottish pound—has been absolutely blown to pieces by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South. That was clear for everyone to see, and the momentary quiet that descended among those on the SNP Benches when he was making his case spoke volumes.

We have heard from SNP Members—

**Kirsty Blackman:** Will the hon. Member give way?

**Mr Perkins:** I will, because I was about to refer to the hon. Lady's speech, so that is perfect timing.

**Kirsty Blackman:** I am very pleased that the hon. Member has given way. Is he aware that if all the 1 million people in Scotland who voted to leave the EU had voted to remain in the EU—if we had had a remain vote of 100%—we would still have lost the referendum?

**Mr Perkins:** That is an important point. I could make the same point about the response in Chesterfield. Of course, this was a vote for the entire United Kingdom. However, I want to respond to something else that the hon. Lady said; although I disagree with her conclusions, I thought that she made an excellent speech. On her point about the independence referendum, when I was up in Scotland for that, it was said very clearly by Alex Salmond, and it was very clearly understood by the people of Scotland, that that was a once-in-a-generation referendum. That was said strongly.

The hon. Lady has spoken powerfully about the mandate that the SNP has won by getting Members of Parliament elected to this place. Is she making the case that we should have had another referendum after the 2015 election, another after the 2017 election and yet another after the 2019 election? Every time the SNP has a majority of MPs in Scotland, should we have another referendum? If not, how often should we have these referendums?

We all know that if the 2014 referendum had had a different result and people had voted for independence, there would have been no second referendum. There might have been a 0.1% majority, but it would not have mattered: that would have been enough to say, "We have heard the voice of the people." But the referendum was lost by more than 10%, and there was an immediate demand for a second one. How often do we have to have these referendums? If the independence campaign wins the next one, does the hon. Lady want the best of three?

**Kirsty Blackman:** I was talking about the different ways in which Scotland has given us a mandate for an independence referendum. When SNP candidates stood for the Scottish Parliament in 2021, the SNP committed explicitly in our manifesto to a referendum on independence. The Scottish people have chosen to have that referendum by voting for independence-supporting parties. If that is not the route for the Scottish people to have an independence referendum, what does the hon. Gentleman think their route to choosing a referendum should be?

**Mr Perkins:** I notice that the hon. Lady has answered my question with a question. My question was a very specific one: how often will we have this referendum? It is not for me to set the terms of a referendum, but I do think that things would be very different if opinion polls showed that the view of the Scottish people had massively changed since 2014. I could not ignore that, because this is a question for the Scottish people.

When the opinion polls turned in 2020, showing more Scottish people in favour of independence, we heard about them all the time. Everyone was always saying, "Oh, the latest polls say this." Then I thought to myself, "Everyone seems to have gone a bit quiet about the polls. Why aren't they mentioning them?" I had a little look on my phone. Of the last 19 opinion polls,

including the most recent one paid for by the Alba party, only one showed majority support for independence. Of the last 44 opinion polls, only four have shown a majority for independence. If there had clearly been an overwhelming shift in opinion that had not been reflected, things would be different, but there has not. The truth is that opinion polls suggest that we are broadly in a similar place.

It is a shame that the hon. Lady did not respond to my question. If 2014 was not once in a generation, as the people of Scotland were clearly told at the time, when will be? When will enough be enough?

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) *rose—*

**Mr Perkins:** Perhaps the hon. Lady would like to answer that.

**Deidre Brock:** I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the hon. Gentleman. Will he accept the words of Ciaran Martin, the former constitution director at the Cabinet Office, who prepared the legal documents for the Edinburgh agreement? He said:

“‘Once in a generation’ was not a legal commitment, believe me...It’s just a slogan.”

**Mr Perkins:** I accept that it was not a legal commitment. I am not suggesting that it was; I am not saying that there is not a legal right for the UK Government to decide that it is time for another referendum. However, we are talking not about the legal right, but about whether there is an electoral argument for another referendum. The question that I have asked three times now, but that no one has been willing to answer, is when the question will be settled. If losing the referendum in 2014 was not enough, let us say that we have another referendum next year: if SNP Members lose that, when will the next be?

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): I have some breaking news for the hon. Gentleman: democracy is not a one-time event. As we are talking about timescales, I would be interested to know something. If his party were to win the next general election on a manifesto commitment to have a referendum on taking the UK back into the European Union, would it not be within its rights to hold that referendum?

**Mr Perkins:** That is a great “gotcha”, but my point is that there is a question here: for people in Scotland, when is enough enough? No one has been able to answer that. Let me return to the point that I made a minute ago. If the referendum in 2014 had had a different result, there would not have been a second referendum; that would have been it. The SNP cannot consistently say, “Every time we lose, that is not the end of it, but the one time we win, that is the end of it”, but those are the rules that they want to play to.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Mr Perkins:** Many of my hon. Friends are waiting to speak, and I want to make sure that they have that opportunity.

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South raised the subject of the SNP’s record on education, because it is a compelling one. For much of my lifetime the Scottish education system has been the envy of us in England, but that is not the case now; in fact, it has gone backwards. It is very noticeable that the SNP seems constantly to want debates about things that are not the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament, but runs away from the subject of its actual record.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) suggested that the Scottish people were entitled to money from the UK Government and should not be expected to be grateful, and I entirely agree with her. I recognise that we are in a Union to which we all make contributions. It is the case that more money is spent per head in Scotland than in Chesterfield, as an SNP Member mentioned earlier; it is also the case that Scotland makes contributions to the United Kingdom, to defence through Faslane and through oil receipts, and that there are other respects in which its contribution is significant. That is why I think we are better together. I reject it when people in my constituency say that they resent the fact that Scotland does well out of the UK, and I also reject it when SNP Members suddenly say that they want to isolate oil revenues as if that were the only game in town.

When the people of Scotland voted in that referendum in 2014, they clearly understood that there would be about 60 Scottish MPs in a Parliament of 650. To consistently suggest that somehow this is news to the people of Scotland who voted in that referendum is nonsense. Only once in the last 47 years have people in Chesterfield voted for an MP who was a member of the party represented by the Government. Quite often in their contrary way, they have voted in a different way from the country as a whole. That is how democracy works.

I do think there is a real bit of cakeism among the members of the Scottish National party. The hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) said bairns in Scotland were better off than bairns in Chesterfield and that was all about the Scottish Government, while the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said there was a lot of poverty in Scotland and that was the fault of the UK Government. When it is good it is to do with Holyrood and when it is bad it is to do with Westminster, and I do not think that that is either helpful or sensible.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) posed the question, “Can Scotland be a successful nation?” He refused to define a successful nation, but he told us that every nation that was independent was successful, having signed a motion which said that the UK was failing. It is clear that, in the SNP’s eyes, the UK is failing. Every single country that is independent, in the SNP’s terms, is successful, and we are asked to say whether Scotland would be successful without any description of what that success would look like.

I do not think that those who believe Scotland is better inside the United Kingdom have any less confidence in the people of Scotland, or any less confidence in the contribution of Scotland, the economy of Scotland, the business of Scotland, the geography and geology of Scotland, or the challenges facing Scotland. We recognise all of those just the same, but we also recognise that it is



[Mr Perkins]

the strengths of Scotland and of the other countries of the United Kingdom that collectively make us as strong as we are.

That is the case that we make, and it cheapens politics for people on the independence side to suggest that they somehow have a greater patriotism than people on this side. I have to say, having watched my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South when Scotland are playing football, that there is no greater Scottish patriot than him—and no more deluded Scottish football fan than him either. People on all sides in Scotland are passionate about Scotland and proud of being Scottish, but many of them also believe that Scotland's contribution to the United Kingdom and to being part of one of the major nations of the world should continue. I am glad that this debate has taken place and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South for the compelling case that he has made today. I look forward to listening to the other contributions.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. Members will have noticed that there is something else going on today, and that various Members have suddenly appeared in the Chamber. The reason is that I am now about to announce the result of the ballot held today for the election of a new Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. I can announce that 436 votes were cast, four of which were invalid. The counting went to four rounds. There were 401 active votes in the final round, excluding those ballot papers whose preferences had been exhausted. The quota to be reached was therefore 201 votes. Steve Brine was elected Chair with 253 votes. He will take up his post immediately and I congratulate him on his election. I know that he is unavoidably detained elsewhere and cannot be in the Chamber at this moment. The results of the count under the alternative vote system will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and published on the internet. We will now proceed.

4.22 pm

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): We spend a lot of time in this place talking about the many faults of Westminster Governments and the constitutional arrangements that we and so many of our constituents object to. Indeed, I will be touching on some of those later, but I want to start by talking about the possibilities, the opportunities, that we can explore in an independent Scotland. It is the possibilities suggested by a fully independent Scotland that I find so exciting. It is not something to be viewed with dread but something to be welcomed as a new start, away from the crumbling ultra-conservative ways of this place. Imagine our small nation not being strapped to the disintegrating dreams of an imperial past, but as a country making its own way in the world, deciding what best suits the needs of its people and being able to act on that, looking outwards to the international community and playing its part in world affairs.

Today, for example, the Scottish Government published their findings from interviews on establishing a feminist approach to foreign policy. This approach to international

affairs not only seeks to improve women's material positions around the world but embraces a reorientation of foreign policy based on cosmopolitan ideals of justice, peace and pragmatic security. With reserved matters returned to us and the powers of a normal, independent country at our disposal, we would be able to fully pursue innovative ideas and build on our reputation as a trusted and valued global citizen. We would no longer be held back by the dead hand of this place clamping down on change, or held back by successive Governments we have not voted for. We would be free from being at the mercy of Westminster Government decisions so often made against our best interests by a Government full of Ministers who just do not get Scotland, its needs or its people. We would be freed from investments made without our say-so on obscenities such as Trident, successive disastrous Ministry of Defence decisions on weapons that waste billions of pounds, and nuclear power with its toxic legacy. We could shift to life-affirming investments in our people, our renewables potential, our health and education systems, our social security, our infrastructure, our research and development, and so much more.

The country I grew up in has flourished since it threw off, for the most part, the influences of mother Britain, although there is still unfinished business, and it has not looked back. If we asked Australians whether they want to creep back to the comfort of the UK's arms, they would laugh at us, because nothing beats being free to make their own decisions for themselves, to suit their own needs. That is as true for countries as it is for individuals, and it goes for the many countries that have extracted themselves from Westminster's grip. I do not recall any of them being incapable of deciding what currency to use, to the point that it stopped them wanting independence.

**Hannah Bardell:** My hon. Friend might have answered this question, but is she aware of any nation that has become independent from the UK and then gone back?

**Deidre Brock:** No, and many of the arguments around this are completely fatuous.

The Tories seem to have forgotten the promises made during the last independence referendum to greatly strengthen devolution and Scotland's powers, but many of us in Scotland have not forgotten. Those promises were as hollow as the promises made to the fishing communities before the EU referendum. We, like them, have been badly let down.

I understand some of the fears we have heard expressed today by hon. Members from other parties about Scotland leaving the Union and regaining its independence. Surely they would welcome the example of a good neighbour to raise all our standards. We could set an example to the world in how we do such things. Should we not all be aiming to move away from the bad example of failed states and their disempowered Parliaments? There must be no more centralising of power in the hands of a very few Government Ministers without parliamentary say-so, and without the say-so of the people of Scotland.

I have spoken before of the bizarre hankering for uniformity across these islands, which is seemingly at odds with traditional Tory thinking. I thought that lot were all for rugged individualism, but I guess this centralising instinct is the kind of thinking we might expect from a team who crushed dissent, removed or sidelined what

was left of their talent and somehow still gaslighted the public into thinking the ship of Government sails on serenely.

The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, for example, was pushed through this place with indecent haste and has sunk its claws into devolved responsibilities, despite objections from the devolved Parliaments. The Act made it clear that this Government seek to bring down Scotland's standards rather than improving England's standards. That poverty of ambition should haunt England for decades, but it must not be allowed to hold back the rest of us.

Under the myth of removing barriers to trade, the UKIM Act ignored those objections and sought to force Scotland and, of course, Wales into a lockstep Union of diminishing standards and lessening protections, with a Government determined to rip away what they call red tape and the rest of us call sensible precautions. That is not respectful co-decision making. *[Interruption.]* It is interesting to hear the Minister getting a bit irate about these points.

Despite all the many ministerial assurances otherwise, the UKIM Act was not introduced with the intention of aiming for higher standards. I have been told time and again in this place that legislation that appears completely disadvantageous to Scotland's interests is not, in fact, disadvantageous and that we should simply trust in Ministers' good intentions, and I was right not to believe it.

After Brexit removed us from the protections offered by the EU, this Government began chipping away at even the limited powers of devolution. The UKIM Act, among many others, changed our constitutional arrangements without asking the people for their approval in a referendum, although they withheld their approval in the most recent Scottish parliamentary elections when, once again, the Tories lost.

Surely higher standards, not lower standards, should be the goal. An independent Scotland could take back control of that, in consultation with our sister countries upon our return to the EU. We could go back to respecting higher standards, and protecting consumers, the environment, brand reputations, our farming and fishing communities, the business and investment sectors, our exporters and jobs.

Following on from my question in Prime Minister's questions today, another area that we would be able to look at once independent is the influence of organisations with opaque funding sources that have wormed their way into our politics. We have seen the recent spectacular crash of libertarian, ultra-right-wing ideas espoused by some of those organisations to gullible politicians just a few weeks ago. For a long time, UK politics has been dominated by a variety of so-called think-tanks, which are set up as a front, opaquely funded and which refuse to declare their financial sources. It is suspected that much of their funding could come from individuals and organisations based overseas, but it is very difficult to prove. Some may have been involved in the Cambridge Analytica scandal which may have contributed to the success of the Vote Leave campaign in the EU referendum. These are the kind of shadowy organisations we would have the powers to take action against in an independent Scotland—not to stop their voices, as the principle of free speech is something I would like to think we can all agree on in this place, but to make clear to the public the

funding sources and possible vested interests at play, so that the Scottish public are fully informed and not played for fools.

To ensure that, of course, we would need a genuinely independent body to regulate elections. In February, the Electoral Commission took the highly unusual step of writing a public letter to the Tory Government to say that the provisions in the Elections Bill were

“inconsistent with the role that an independent electoral commission plays in a healthy democracy.”

The Elections Bill, we might recall, sailed through this place regardless. That is extremely worrying and it is contrary to international norms, and I think we would do much better.

We could take a much larger role in addressing the climate crisis and in fully exploiting our renewables potential. Clearly the existential threat of the climate emergency lies low on the new Prime Minister's list of priorities. Even now, in the year the UK hands over the COP presidency, he demotes both the Climate Minister and the COP26 President from the Cabinet. In the meantime, new oil and gas licences are being issued, even as the Government must now come up with a new net zero strategy by March, after the High Court ruled that their previous plan was unlawful. The equivalent of almost 100% of Scotland's gross electricity consumption is now generated from renewable sources, yet we remain locked in an energy market in which the price of electricity is tied to the price of gas.

Our contribution to the international fight against climate change gives a further glimpse of what might be possible with independence. That is true in terms of not just our action to cut emissions at home, but our proactive role in convening efforts on the world stage. Many of the worst consequences of the climate crisis are being felt in some of the poorest regions of the world, by people least responsible for its causes. So it is very pleasing that young people and women from countries in the global south are being given the opportunity to attend COP27 in Egypt as part of Scottish Government-funded programmes. Scotland was among the first nations to put fairness and justice at the heart of our international climate action. The Scottish Government have trebled the climate justice fund, to £36 million, which includes a financial commitment of £2 million to address loss and damage—we are the first country in the world to do so. That will help to meet the costs that would otherwise be borne by island nations and low-lying developing states. The SNP Scottish Government have also led an international coalition resulting in the Edinburgh declaration, urging increased action to tackle biodiversity loss. It now has 244 signatories from Governments, cities and local authorities representing every continent.

That ambition, innovation and pursuit of justice, which have characterised Scotland's climate policy and international engagement, show us the potential and hope offered by independence. Hope—that is what this place finds so hard to crush in all of us who have that dream of a better Scotland. All we lack now is the final crucial faith in ourselves and our abilities to get there. I so look forward to shaking the dust of this place off our shoes and embarking on that fresh new path, with that wealth of talented people, resources, rich history and culture behind us, granting us fair winds and grasping the opportunities that await us very soon.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. I have tried to allow the debate to develop naturally, without time limits. I had hoped that there would be a few speeches of about seven or eight minutes, which would be perfectly reasonable. Since then, there have been some very long speeches. It would be better if we could manage without time limits, but that would mean people being self-disciplined and speaking for about seven minutes or so, which is actually quite a long time.

4.35 pm

**Allan Dorans** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Madam Deputy Speaker, you will have heard from many of my SNP colleagues this afternoon. They have spoken eloquently and brought to the attention of the House many reasons, backed by an impressive range of views, statistics, hard facts and reasoned arguments, why Scotland should be an independent country.

I want to introduce a bit of history. It is fair to say that the history of Scotland and England has been marked by frequent periods of insurrection by Scots against English domination and frequent invasion of each other's countries, resulting in ongoing wars of independence. From the late 13th century, those include Scottish victories at Stirling Bridge, with the Scots being led by William Wallace, who was tried here in Westminster Hall in 1305 and hanged, drawn and quartered for an alleged crime of treason—an offence for which he could not have been guilty, because he had sworn no allegiance to the English Crown. Following the battle of Bannockburn in 1314, in which the Scots were led by Robert the Bruce, King Edward III and the English Government recognised Bruce as King of an independent Scotland in the treaty of Edinburgh 1328.

It is recognised that the basis for the current Union began with the Act of Union 1707, which is used by Unionists to justify the continuation of this form of government. What is less well known is that, at the time of the Act, the majority of people in Scotland opposed the Union. It was negotiated by a very small minority of wealthy and influential people widely regarded as acting for their own benefit rather than that of the people of Scotland.

Rioting in Edinburgh and towns across Scotland was widely reported when the signature of the Act of Union was announced. Scotland—or the wealthy elite, at least—was also pressurised into agreeing with the Union by the introduction of the Alien Act 1705. That stated that, unless Scotland agreed to negotiate terms for union and accepted the Hanoverian succession by December 1705, there would be a ban on the import of all Scottish staple products into England. Scots would also lose the privileges of Englishmen under English law, thus endangering rights to any property they held in England. Many in Scotland considered themselves betrayed by their own elite. Christopher Smout, the eminent academic and historiographer royal in Scotland, argues that the Act of Union was able to pass only thanks to English bribery.

The point was also recognised by Rabbie Burns, our national bard. He was born in my constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, where he decried and condemned those Members of the Parliament of Scotland who

signed the Act of Union. His poem “Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation”, which he penned in 1791, concludes with the declaration:

“But pith and power, till my last hour,  
I’ll mak’ this declaration;  
We’re bought and sold for English gold—  
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!”

He was clearly referring to the wealthy elite of Scotland at that time.

I turn to the 2014 referendum, when the people of Scotland were bombarded with anti-independence propaganda with the full weight of the United Kingdom Government and other Unionist-supporting politicians in what has rightly become known as Project Fear. During the incessant campaign by a Unionist-biased media, including the BBC, several Unionist-supporting newspapers and an army of clandestine trolls on social media, the Scottish voting public were essentially scared out of voting for independence.

Pensioners were terrified and influenced by the false assertions and the prospect that their pensions would not be paid in an independent Scotland, that a number of large businesses would relocate to England, and that an independent Scotland would no longer be part of the European Union—we all know how that turned out, Mr Deputy Speaker. The people of Scotland are now wiser to this blatant pro-Unionist propaganda, including the discredited vow. The people of Scotland will not be fooled again.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am sure my hon. Friend would agree that what the people in Scotland are now seeing, as they have been since 2014, is that the Tories and Better Together are absolutely in lockstep, hand in glove, working together, exerting every effort, and straining every sinew to keep the people of Scotland trapped in this rotten Union. In the next referendum they will continue going round chapping pensioners’ doors and terrifying them into voting against Scottish independence by telling them lies about losing their pensions.

**Allan Dorans:** I welcome the intervention of my hon. Friend and I totally agree with her.

A significant reason for the need to be independent is the demographic deficit that exists in this United Kingdom. No matter how the people of Scotland vote, they will always be overruled by the Government of the United Kingdom. We are dictated to by a Government for whom the people of Scotland did not vote. This is clearly demonstrated by Brexit where 62% of the people in Scotland in all 32 local council areas voted to remain in the European Union, but, as we all know, Scotland was dragged out of Europe against our will.

**Ian Murray:** I thank the hon. Member for allowing me to intervene. I really take a great deal of offence at what he says about pensioners. While we are on pensioners, if he thinks that they were fearful about voting yes because of propaganda from the BBC and so on, can he tell us now, for the pensioners of Scotland, who will pay their pension in an independent Scotland?

**Allan Dorans:** The people of Scotland have paid into their pensions all of their working lives and will continue to be paid by the Scottish Government after independence.



Scotland has a clear and unprecedented political mandate to be an independent country, as witnessed at the ballot box. This is shown by the number of SNP Members elected to the Westminster Parliament, to the Scottish Parliament and in the Scottish local authority elections.

In the 2019 general election, the SNP won 49 of the 59 available Scottish parliamentary seats in Westminster. This is a clear and indisputable mandate for Scottish independence. Since the elections for the Scottish Parliament in May 2021, the SNP holds 64 of the 129 seats available, with the Conservatives achieving only 31 and Labour 22. That is an outstanding achievement with a voting system designed to prevent a significant majority by any one political party.

In the Scottish local elections held earlier this year, the SNP won 453 of the 1,227 seats available across the 32 local authority areas. Again, this was more than any other single party. It must be emphasised that the SNP MPs, MSPs and councillors won the highest number of seats of any party in every one of these elections and were all elected on a clear manifesto commitment to Scottish independence. In short, Scotland has a clear political mandate to be independent and to hold a referendum on independence, and it intends to do so on 19 October 2023.

Scotland has what it takes to be a modern, forward-looking, successful, welcoming independent country in the European Union, not tied to a Government in London whom they did not vote for and whose decisions and policies are not in the interests of the people of Scotland. We will always have a social and cultural relationship with our neighbours in England, but what we seek to change is the political relationship where decisions that affect the people of Scotland are best made by the people of Scotland. Decisions involving immigration, the economy, the environment, defence and foreign policy should be best suited to the wishes and needs of the people of Scotland.

Some of the unique benefits introduced since the reintroduction of the Scottish Parliament, which are the envy of our neighbours in the British Isles and throughout the world, include enhanced childcare provision, free prescriptions and sanitary products, free bus travel for those over 60, disabled people and those under 22, the Scottish child payment—described as game-changing—and additional support for care experienced young people. They also include free university tuition based on the ability to learn rather than the ability to pay, which has enabled people to obtain university education, and many other outstanding initiatives that demonstrate that Scotland is leading the world as a more equal, caring and compassionate country.

Scotland has a long history of contributing to the modern world. Winston Churchill commented, “Of all the small nations on this Earth, perhaps only the Ancient Greeks surpass the Scots in their contribution to mankind.” It was reported only last weekend in *The Guardian* that the University of St Andrews was assessed as the top university in the United Kingdom, beating Oxford and Cambridge. Scotland also had a further four universities in the top 18 in the United Kingdom.

Most important to the country is our people. They are innovative, inventive people, who have contributed to developing all aspects of the modern world, including the previously mentioned Robert Burns, Adam Smith,

David Hume, Alexander Fleming, David Livingstone, Sir Sean Connery, Sir Alex Ferguson, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, J. M. Barrie—

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Allan Dorans!

**Allan Dorans:** Thank you—James Watt, Andy Murray, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sir Chris Hoy and many more, and outstanding politicians including Keir Hardie, John Smith and, of course, Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) memorably said in the European Parliament in 2019, prior to our having Brexit forced upon us, that

“if we in Scotland are removed from our family of nations against our will—against our clearly democratically expressed view—  
independence will be our only route back...I am asking you to leave a light on so that we can find our way home.”

There is much support in the European Union, which indicates that Scotland will be warmly welcomed back into the European Union as a free and politically independent country.

Scotland has its own unique identity, history and culture and a diverse modern economy, with an abundance of renewable energy resources, a world-class food and drink industry, a booming tourism sector and advanced manufacturing, financial and business services. We are at the cutting edge of the industries of the future, such as life sciences, which are the envy of countries across the world.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): On advanced manufacture, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Allan Dorans:** No, I am almost finished. I will not give way, because the hon. Gentleman has only been in the Chamber a few minutes and this debate has been going on for three and a half hours.

In addition, Scotland has one of the most innovative, highly skilled, educated and resourceful people in the world. With independence, we will always get the Government we voted for; we will not have to waste money on Westminster priorities such as Brexit and Trident and we will be able to have economic and social policies fully tailored to Scotland's own circumstances. Decisions affecting Scotland must be made by the people of Scotland. Our future should be in our hands, not those of a Conservative Government that Scotland—as we have heard many times—has not voted for since 1955.

I confidently predict that Scotland will be a thriving, more equal, fairer, greener and more successful independent country and that we will find our way home and again be part of the European Union very soon. It is only a matter of time.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. Will everybody please resume their seats? Madam Deputy Speaker suggested speeches of seven minutes, and that speech was almost twice the limit she suggested. It is not doing any favours to other colleagues in the SNP, the vast majority of whom would want to contribute in this debate. Please can you look to seven minutes and no more?

4.49 pm

**Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): A few weeks ago, Christine Grahame MSP and I co-hosted a cost of living support event in Gorebridge in my constituency. We invited along energy providers, community groups, food banks and suicide prevention charities. As constituents arrived and were able to access the help they needed, I started to think that it was a great success and that it was brilliant to see so many people there. But then I had to stop myself, because I started to think, “How did we get here? How did we become a society where food banks are normal and where we simply accept that poverty is growing and that suicide prevention charities face record numbers of calls?” The fact that we needed to hold that event at all is an alarming sign that the UK state has failed. When a country cannot guarantee its citizens a decent standard of living, with a roof over their head, heat in their home and food on the table, that country has failed to uphold its end of the social contract.

The most shocking thing about this crisis is that so much of it is inflicted by the Government. For instance, the energy crisis is far worse in the UK than it is elsewhere, because the Government have kept the energy companies private, ensuring that the money from bills goes towards profit, not investment that could help to ensure security of supply. The severity of the cost of living crisis has been exacerbated by the Government’s incompetence, with a kamikaze Budget sending mortgage rates skyrocketing and the pound crashing, which means that there is less money in people’s pockets and that the money that remains is worth less.

The truth is that the UK has been the poor man of Europe for years because the economy is set up to funnel wealth to the super-wealthy—to people such as the current Prime Minister—rather than to distribute it fairly to support those who need it most. Now, we are reaping what has been sown.

There is no doubt that this is a global crisis, but while other societies have been ready to catch the poorest in their safety nets, the net in the UK is a glaring hole. Somehow, British exceptionalism has kept its grip on policymaking, and although we are no longer a particularly well-off society but one where a tiny number of people have immense wealth, the idea that we are exceptional has meant that the Government have refused time and time again to look abroad and follow best practices.

To take the windfall tax, other countries have got serious about taxing the record profits that oil and gas companies have been making, but we have ignored the issue for months. Now we are left reeling from a failed Thatcherite experiment and looking down the barrel of austerity 2.0, with an economy so deliberately trashed that there is little option but to put money directly into people’s pockets, although the Government cannot even get that right. I recently met an 89-year-old constituent who cannot afford to heat her home because she, like thousands across Midlothian, relies on heating oil. The price of heating oil has skyrocketed to the point where she has spent £2,000 on it this year and expects to fork out at least another £1,000 over the coming winter. Yet the Government’s proposed support package for people using heating oil is £100—not even enough to get through a tenth of the winter.

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Constituents in my area of Lanark have written to me about the fact that oil prices have continued to go up

and that Government support is frankly woeful. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must do more to support those who are off the grid, especially in rural communities, because they simply have no other choice?

**Owen Thompson:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The support that is in place is welcome—I do not deny that, and I do not think anyone else here would—but we need much more, because far too many people, and especially those who are off the grid, have been left behind.

At the moment, we are on a sinking ship. The UK’s future is not bright, and there is little reason to doubt that our children’s economic prospects will only become worse than ours. Therefore, the question is whether we look around the sinking ship, shrug our shoulders and say, “It’s been fine up till now. There’s no point trying to change it. We’ll be just fine,” or we try something different. We do not have to go down with this sinking ship. Certainly for those of us in Scotland, there is a lifeboat; it might be smaller than the boat we are currently on, but we get to be its captain, and the folk we share it with have the same direction in mind as us. Once we are out on the open water, we will realise that there are plenty of other wee boats out there that are the same size as us and that they are working together so that they can weather the storms far better than the lonely old SS Britannia ever could.

That is what independence promises; it is not an instant fix, but it is the only reasonable path to a better future. Now, in a context where being part of the UK has left us with record inflation and soaring poverty, the idea that Scotland cannot afford independence is simply laughable. Norway was one of Europe’s poorest countries when it became independent in the early 20th century, and Ireland’s era of independence began with war and destruction. For them, however, independence was not the problem; it was the solution. Independence allowed them to grab hold of all the economic powers at their disposal and to respond to crises however they wished. Now, we look to both countries as models of stunning economic success.

The truth is that we are in pretty dire straits as part of the UK. Even if we choose independence, we will inherit the mess that being part of the UK has left us with. That is not an argument against independence; it is a fundamental part of why we need it now. We can no longer afford to remain a part of this broken Union, and the people of Scotland need to be able to have that say, and have it soon.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. That speech was easily within seven minutes; that is the way to do it.

4.55 pm

**Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, which covers the two crisis issues of our time: the collapse of the British economy and the kick-on effects on our society, and the vital need for Scottish independence. That is encapsulated in the perversity that Scotland is energy rich, yet Scots will be fuel poor this winter. The economy is faltering as a result of the

Truss experiment, but the rot started before that. It started with a hard Brexit forced upon Scotland, and the situation has worsened and the pace has accelerated.

As a consequence, we have another perversity in that, as we have been taking part in this debate in this Chamber, the Deputy First Minister of Scotland has been speaking in Holyrood imposing swingeing public service cuts that will have an impact on Scotland's poorest. What a perversity that that has happened. Of course, the responsibility rests with the budgetary situation in the UK and the Scottish Government's limited ability to react, but it is why we should be moving fast for independence, and that is why we have to ask, "What has been done?"

Mandates have come and mandates have gone, just as mañana follows mañana. We are now told there is to be a referendum next year, just as I was told there was going to be a referendum next year ever since I first went into the SNP group in December 2019. Maybe there will be a referendum next year, but I do not see a great deal of preparation by the SNP or the Scottish Government to ensure that it will actually take place or that we are going to win it. That takes away from the need for Scotland to be sovereign. All the preparation we have had has been a few papers.

I will not go further on that, but the reference to the Supreme Court, far from being a wizard wheeze by the Scottish Lord Advocate, is frankly a counsel of despair. We will see what the outcome of that will be but, at the end of the day, it is the right of the Scottish people to choose their own destiny, and that cannot be usurped either by a UK Supreme Court or by a British Parliament.

The situation has changed as a result of Brexit. We did lose the referendum in 2014, but we came remarkably close. The UK had to call in favours from all and sundry, including President Obama, and just about did it, but we can do it the next time. The risk has also changed, because in 2014 the risk was that we would lose our EU membership. The risk was that people would lose their pension or the NHS that is so dear to us. The risk was having an unstable currency. The risk was not being part of a British force for good. But the situation is that we have had Brexit and been ripped out of the EU, sterling is plummeting, the NHS and our pensions are being privatised and undermined, and Britain, far from being a force for good, is an international laughing stock. What is so great about being British when people can see the turbines turning from their home but will not be able to heat their house this winter?

What is being done? Where is the action? That question is why I have to move on to what needs to be done. First, the Bill for a Scottish independence referendum should be launched in the Scottish Parliament. If the Lord Advocate is not prepared to do it, get a Minister or another member of the SNP to do it. Launch it forthwith, so that when it comes before the Supreme Court for a decision, it will not be a simple referral from the Scottish Government, but have standing behind it the sovereign will of the Scottish people, decided by their Parliament. The Scottish National party still has the time to get out of the fire and ensure that Holyrood passes that Bill.

Secondly, let us call a Scottish constitutional convention. At the end of the day, the people of Scotland are sovereign. As we have heard from speaker after speaker, especially on the SNP Benches, they should be sovereign

through the Government that they elect, not one that they have not elected since 1955. Why do we need our Scottish countrymen? Let us look around. How many people do we have on the Tory Benches? Five. How many are sitting on the Labour Benches? Four. Will that make any difference? What matters is that the people of Scotland's elected representatives should decide.

In February 2020, the First Minister of Scotland said that she would call a constitutional convention. Let us call that convention and make it clear that it is the Scottish people, through their democratically elected Scottish representatives whether in this Chamber or other Chambers or as senior members of local government—

**Mike Kane:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Kenny MacAskill:** No, I am running out time. I am the only speaker from my party. The hon. Member's party has undermined the cause of independence and sided with the Tories, which is why it paid the electoral price.

As I was saying, we need a constitutional convention. We need the First Minister to lead from the front and get active in demonstrations in support of Scottish democratic sovereignty and the legitimate right of our people. We need to pursue this through not just the UK Supreme Court but international courts and aspects. This is a position on which we have to make a stand.

The Scots will struggle this winter. That an energy-rich Scotland will probably see people dying as a result of a fuel crisis is simply perverse. We have had enough mandates; it is time to have our choice, as is our right. That has to be delivered through a referendum. If the Government will not give us a referendum, another route needs to be chosen. The Scottish people will not get any satisfaction from the Government or the Opposition in this Chamber, which is why we have to make sure that there is a convention and that the democratic right of the Scottish people prevails.

5.1 pm

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): I take the opportunity to remind the House that no asylum seeker raided or looted pension funds, no asylum seeker used fire and rehire tactics to sack an entire workforce, no asylum seeker tanked the economy, and no asylum seeker is illegal.

I rise to speak in favour of the motion on the Order Paper. The UK that Scotland voted to remain part of in 2014 has gone—Brexit has seen to that. The security and freedoms of our place in the EU, as promised with that no vote, are gone—Brexit has seen to them. The financial stability of the "broad shoulders" of the UK has gone—Brexit continues to see to that. The previous Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), and her Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), assisted with that in a spectacular fashion for all the world to see.

The Tory cost of living crisis is spiralling completely out of control. It is putting lives and livelihoods at risk, with the poorest households in our communities being hit hardest. The reality is that we can no longer afford not to be independent in Scotland. As things stand, the poorest people in the UK are the poorest people in the whole of western Europe, while the richest in the UK



[Steven Bonnar]

are the wealthiest in the whole of western Europe. That is right: the poorest people in western Europe are in London, not Lisbon or Larn. The hardest working and poorest paid people with the poorest pensions are in Bellshill, not Berlin or Bern.

That gap between the richest and poorest tells people all they need to know about this right-wing Tory Government and their priorities after 12 painful years in power, including the coalition of chaos with the Liberal Democrats. The economy is broken, the NHS is decimated, immigration is out of control and our standing in the world is a laughing stock. It is a shameful record.

If the Government have any desire at all to change that and ease the pressures on Scottish households, it is imperative that they uprate all social security benefits in line with current rates of inflation. All hon. Members, as representatives of the people, must do all we can to support the most vulnerable through this cost of living crisis. The Tories must ensure that the universal credit uplift is reinstated for all and increased to £25 a week, and that it is extended to all those who have been left, as if they are some Tory afterthought not worthy of the Government's attention, on legacy benefits.

We must also protect our pensioners. The Government's triple lock betrayal with regard to the state pension is an undiluted attack on pensioners' incomes. The Prime Minister refused again today to give them some peace of mind by committing to the triple lock. Those same pensioners, who are the poorest in western Europe with the lowest pensions, are among those most hard hit by this cost of living crisis. Over a decade of Tory policies have pushed people deeper into poverty and further into destitution, and families are out there right now fighting hunger. This is the Union.

**Drew Hendry:** My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. He is talking about those people fighting poverty. Does he agree with me that it is a disgrace that, because of the actions of this place and Brexit, we have seen food inflation pushed to such high levels that basic items are now 60% up on a few years ago? It is really hard for people to survive in those circumstances, is it not?

**Steven Bonnar:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. We are being attacked from every possible angle, whether it is food or—in the case of mortgage rates—housing. The Government are sitting on their hands—rearranging the chairs on a sinking ship every now and again—and it is doing no good for the people out there.

The last few months have made it abundantly clear that Scotland cannot rely on this UK Government as we attempt to get Scotland through this cost of living crisis. It is vital that we have a choice, and the choice is thus: we can choose the insular chaos of this place, and to continue to live amid the ruins of this broken Union and among the self-destructive whims of these two parties; or we can choose a different way, and be free from the perennial damage of Brexit, the worst of which is still to bite. We can also have the choice of the Scottish people's priorities, the choice of how we plan and deliver on our green future, the choice of how we treat the most vulnerable in our communities—as I have

said, no person is illegal—and, of course, the choice of the Scottish people to determine their own futures free of Westminster rule.

**Patricia Gibson:** My hon. Friend is making a powerful and impassioned speech. Does he share my deep disappointment that the Labour party in Scotland would rather work with the Tories to keep Scottish households locked into this destructive Union than help Scotland work towards a better future when it governs its own affairs?

**Steven Bonnar:** I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I agree with every single word she said. I am here from North Lanarkshire, and while Labour talks about having no coalitions, Labour in North Lanarkshire Council is being propped up not only by the Conservatives there, but by a sole British Unionist politician. That is the Labour party, and it plays two sides of the same coin because it has to appeal to Tory voters to squeeze a couple of them in and get them through the doors. Would the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) like to intervene? No, so I will continue.

I was talking about choices, and we can choose to be a member of the European Union. We can choose our independence, and with that Scotland could be part of a huge single market that is seven times the size of this shrinking UK market. If we look north to Norway, we see that its national income per head is around 48% higher than that of the UK, while Ireland's is 45% higher, Denmark's 30% higher, the Netherlands's 25% higher and Austria's 24% higher. Those are all nations comparable with our wee bit of highland glen.

**Mike Kane:** On looking north to Norway, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Steven Bonnar:** If the hon. Gentleman wants to get up on his feet, he can intervene, but if he is going to chunter, he can stay sitting down and keep quiet, and we will get on with it.

**Mike Kane:** On looking north to Norway and the Union, I have some statistics. I can tell the hon. Gentleman who looks north to Norway: it is probably Orkney. Orkney voted against devolution in 1997 and it voted against independence. It has never voted for the SNP, and it has a Government it has never voted for, who are in Holyrood. So will Orkney have independence?

**Steven Bonnar:** The hon. Gentleman has made some pretty ridiculous points, which I will not entertain. I am going to move quickly on, because you are really pushed for time, Mr Deputy Speaker, and so am I.

Through its membership of the European Union, independent Ireland dramatically reduced its trade dependence on the UK. It has diversified into Europe, and in the process its national income per head has, once again, overtaken that of the UK. Scotland simply cannot afford to be part of the UK any longer. The positive case for the Union has evaporated. Now is the time to leave the broken Westminster system behind, and to have full powers of independence so we can begin to set Scotland on the right path.

Finally—let me make this perfectly clear—the Better Together no campaign, in which the Labour and Conservative parties cosied up to each other, was based on lies and built on fear. Brexit and its ramifications for our freedoms has rendered the 2014 referendum out of date and, quite simply, to the people I represent the result is no longer valid. No Government in this place—not Tory, not Labour—offer Scotland's people a route back to Europe. They both back Brexit, while we back Scotland, and the only route back to Europe for Scotland is through Scottish independence.

5.10 pm

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It is a great pleasure and privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), and an absolute barnstorm of a speech—excellent. This has been a good debate. I wish to extend a hand and a bit of friendship across the Chamber, as I was particularly taken by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who did at least accept interventions and deal with debate, unlike the Secretary of State who called for a sensible and serious debate, but would not actually debate.

Something interesting happened in this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is to be particularly congratulated, because in one speech he got six unopposed motions through this Parliament. On 2 July 1266, the treaty of Perth joined the Hebrides and the Isle of Man to Scotland. After that speech, perhaps we can add the statutes of Perth from 2 November 2022, in which my hon. Friend passed six motions in his speech, the first being the magnificent achievement of having all parties—perhaps not the Lib Dems—agree that an independent Scotland would be a successful independent country.

We must consider where we were are today and our starting point and, as Robert Burns said:

“To see ourselves as others see us!”

Last week, *The Atlantic* magazine, a 165-year-old publication from Washington DC, had an article about the UK, which Scotland is in. The title of that interesting article was, “How the UK Became One of the Poorest Countries in Western Europe”, and it contained an avalanche of facts and statistics, some of which should be put in front of the House. It states:

“Behind the lurid headlines, however, is a deeper story of decades-long economic dysfunction that holds lessons for the future.”

It says that the UK is “a wealthy nation” that gave capitalism to the industrialised world,

“But strictly by the numbers, Britain is pretty poor for a rich place. UK living standards...have fallen significantly behind those of Western Europe. By some measures, in fact, real wages in the UK are lower than they were 15 years ago, and will likely be even lower next year.”

To see ourselves as others see us. It continues:

“Under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, markets were deregulated, unions were smashed, and the financial sector emerged as a jewel of the British economy. Thatcher's injection of neoliberalism had many complicated knock-on effects...When the global financial crisis hit in 2008, it hit hard, smashing the engine of Britain's economic ascent. Wary of rising deficits, the British Government pursued a policy of austerity—”

the folly of George Osborne—

“fretting about debt rather than productivity or aggregate demand. The results were disastrous.”

I could go on, and I commend the article to anybody who wants to read exactly what is being said about the UK by that influential American publication. It is so unlike what is going on in Ireland and the other countries we have mentioned—such as Scandinavia and the Nordic countries—that are ahead of us in the human development index.

The final excerpt I will read states:

“Take out Greater London—the prosperity of which depends to an uncomfortable degree on a willingness to provide services to oligarchs from the Middle East and the former Soviet Union—and the UK is one of the poorest countries in Western Europe.”

We live in a state that basically governs for London and nowhere else, and demands that the rest of us should be grateful. There is no meaningful engagement with other parts of the UK.

Last week, the University of Parma in Italy published a report on my constituency entitled, “Migrants as actors of Scottish rural depopulation”. In its extensive study, it called for two things. One was to remove English language skills as an entry condition, which is a barrier to people coming to work, and to make them instead an integration goal. As we have seen in the Hebrides, people who come do learn English—some even learn words of Gaelic. It is amazing what happens on the ground outside the fantastical thinking of the Home Office. The other was dealing with an occupation list that shows up regional needs. That can be done in Switzerland, and we could do it in the UK.

If we lived in a proper union, the Home Office would not be a far-away home counties office and we would not need to beseech and send letters to it, deal with the revolving door of Immigration Ministers, or send delegations there. Instead, the Home Office would come to us to find out the problems and to try to deal with them. The fact is that the Home Office and the UK Government are not interested.

As we know, migrants are important. A small stat in the report showed that the 3% of migrants whom we were lucky to have come to Na h-Eileanan an Iar contributed 7% of our island births. Our islands' future depends on them, our culture depends on them and our lives on the islands depend on them, but the Home Office is not interested.

Scotland in the UK will experience a population decrease, with the fall expected to be 2%. Some might think that a unique Scottish problem, but it is not. When we see the difficulties around us, we understand why the UK is failing. Over the next 30 years, the population of our neighbours in Ireland will increase by 20%, in Iceland by 32%, in Norway by 13%, and in Denmark by 10%. That illustrates how, no matter what they say about the statistics, the UK is failing Scotland, and rural Scotland in particular. The best example is the Faroe Islands—the most geographically isolated of all places—whose population will grow by 6% over the same period. Something needs to be done. We need our population to grow. The only thing that will make a material difference is for us to take control of matters in the same sensible way as Iceland, Norway and Denmark. It is reprehensible of the Labour party to go shoulder to shoulder with Better Together and to denude and degrade the rural populations of Scotland. Put simply, it does not care at all.

[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

Whenever we say where Scotland needs to go and what we are going to do, a number of people ask how we will finance it. They never point out that the UK has not paid its own way for 70 to 80 years. In fact, of all the moneys borrowed in that time, it has paid back only 1.7% of them. The UK has been failing. In nine of the 11 years under Margaret Thatcher—one of the people who misleads and beguiles the Tory party—she ran a deficit. Had it not been for the subsidy of Scottish oil, she would probably have run a deficit in all 11 of those years, but she had the bonus of 8% of her tax revenue—one pound in every 12—coming from Scotland's natural resources. Unlike Norway, where the money was saved for the good of the people, she and her party squandered that.

The Supreme Court will very soon decide what will happen in Scotland. It is likely to decide that the Scotland Act 1998 does not provide the powers for the Scottish Parliament to hold a referendum. That will leave us with a choice. Whether it be a referendum or an election, we will have a ballot box event to decide Scottish independence. We could wait for a Westminster election, have a Holyrood election or engineer an election at Holyrood with one simple question on Scottish independence and get ourselves safe and away from the economic extremists in the United Kingdom Parliament and Government. That is a debate for us internally, and it is a debate for Scots. I hope that we have that debate and that we decide rationally and collectively choose together.

It is likely that the Supreme Court will say that the powers do not exist to have a referendum under the Scotland Act. We will have ways and options after that, and the people here who object to Scotland deciding and who think that Scotland does not have a right to self-determination will be sorry and disappointed. We will have our say. The people of Scotland can speak, and they will speak.

Democracy is not a one-term event. Democracy demands that, after the events of 2016 when Scotland was taken out of the EU against its will, Scotland shall speak and Scotland shall decide. None of us can say no to the people. Nobody can say to a nation, "You will go this far and no further," because if Scotland wants to go further, Scotland will, and it will go to independence.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** That was another long seven minutes. Christine Jardine, please show Mr MacNeil how it is done.

5.19 pm

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I will do my best, Mr Deputy Speaker, and thank you very much for calling me to speak.

This is one Scot who can and will speak but who will not repeat the nonsense we have heard from the SNP Benches this evening. When I saw the motion I, like my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), was pleased. I thought that, at last, we were going to talk about the economic damage that has been done to our country—by which I mean the United Kingdom—by the Conservative Government. At last, we were going to talk about the damage done by their financial event, or whatever we want to call it, last month, about the need for the triple lock, and about the damage that has been done to our economy and the mismanagement throughout the pandemic. That is what

my constituents in Edinburgh West talk to me about when I go to their doorsteps. They want a change. They want a different Government. They want a different approach. What they do not want, and what they regularly tell me they are fed up hearing about, is independence. That is why, like my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South, I am disappointed that yet again this obsession is being brought up in the House.

Regardless of what might be claimed, the Scottish National party does not speak for the people of Scotland. The Scottish National party does not even speak for the majority of the people of Scotland. At the last count for Westminster, the hon. Members on the SNP Benches spoke for 45% of the people of Scotland, which means that those of us elsewhere in this House speak for the majority of the people in Scotland. The majority of the people in Scotland want the Government, both Governments in fact, to focus on—[*Interruption.*] I listened to the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), so if he does not mind. The people of Scotland want both of their Governments to focus on the problems they are facing, including the energy prices we all face this winter and the cost of living, which is forcing families to choose between feeding their children and heating their homes. And they tell me that they want the First Minister of Scotland to drop the independence obsession and focus on the problems they face now.

Another issue that has been raised with me recently on the doorstep in Edinburgh is Europe and Brexit, and the SNP claim that the people of Scotland were dragged out of Europe against their will. One of my constituents said to me angrily a few weeks ago, "Can you please tell the Scottish National party to stop appropriating my vote? I did not vote for Scotland to be in the European Union; I voted for the United Kingdom to be in the European Union and I voted to stay in the United Kingdom." I believe in the free will of the people of Scotland and I believe in the settled will of the people of Scotland. I worked for a Scottish Parliament, unlike the Scottish National party until the very last minute. I believe that the people of Scotland have free will and I believe that they exercised it in 2014 when they voted to stay in the United Kingdom.

The second half of the motion talks about the economic plans for Scotland and the Scottish Government's independence papers series. I am well aware that if I now start to criticise those papers and talk about their flaws, I will be accused of speaking on behalf of Project Fear. [*Interruption.*] That is why I am going to quote some independent assessments. David Phillips, of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, said that the Scottish Government's new paper on post-independence economic plans

"skirts around what achieving sustainability would likely require in the first decade of an independent Scotland: bigger tax rises or spending cuts that the UK government will have to pursue."

Richard Murphy, professor of accounting practice at Sheffield University Management School, said:

"I think this paper lays out a policy that would be disastrous for Scotland."

Robin McAlpine has been mentioned, and rather than use unparliamentary language I will not use his full quote, except to say that he does not really have any solutions for the border. Writing in *The Scotsman*, economist John McLaren concluded that

"the report is incoherent as it refuses to acknowledge exceptional circumstances and necessary trade-offs."



The problem that a great many of us in Scotland have is that we believe that the United Kingdom is not perfect. It needs reform. We need to move forward to a more federal system. What we do not need to do is break it up, particularly at a time of economic crisis and hardship for our people, which would only be made worse by some wanting to pursue an ideological obsession that is not in the best interests of the majority of the people of Scotland.

I will make one last point. A Labour Member—the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane)—was ridiculed for using the example of Orkney. I point out to hon. Members that, during the last independence referendum, there was a saying, “It’s Shetland’s oil”. Orkney and Shetland have never voted for the SNP at Holyrood, and for more than 70 years they have voted for Liberal Democrats at Westminster. The people of Scotland are a diverse, wonderful body who have many different voices, which they do not want to be silenced by SNP Members in the way that they constantly try to do. So please have respect for the many voices, listen to the people of Scotland when they say, “It’s the economy, stupid”, and focus on that.

5.26 pm

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): Norway has been mentioned a lot this afternoon, has it not? I had the good fortune to visit Norway last week. I met representatives from Parliament, Government, academia, the civil service, trade unions and non-governmental organisations, and I was struck by the way that they worked together with respect and trust to create a better Norway for everyone. Had I suggested to them that they were too small to be an independent nation, and that they would be better sharing their governance or their financial levers with their Scandinavian neighbours, they would have laughed me out of the room. I noticed that none of the Unionist MPs on the trip with me asked that question either. It is strange how that respect is afforded to Norway—a small, northern European, independent, sovereign nation of 5 million people—but not to Scotland.

Norway has alliances with other countries within which they co-operate. All of that is negotiated between equals who respect one another. Norway became independent in 1905 and has never looked back. It has experienced some tough times, but Norwegians took on the problems and solved them. That is how normal countries work.

That reminded me of Hugh MacDiarmid’s poem, “Scotland small?”:

“Scotland small? Our multiform, our infinite Scotland *small*?

Only as a patch of hillside may be a cliché corner

To a fool who cries ‘Nothing but heather!’ where in September another

Sitting there and resting and gazing around

Sees not only the heather but blaeberries

With bright green leaves and leaves already turned scarlet,

Hiding ripe blue berries; and amongst the sage-green leaves

Of the bog-myrtle the golden flowers of the tormentil shining;

And on the small bare places, where the little Blackface sheep

Found grazing, milkworts blue as summer skies;

And down in neglected peat-hags, not worked

Within living memory, sphagnum moss in pastel shades

Of yellow, green, and pink; sundew and butterwort

Waiting with wide-open sticky leaves for their tiny winged prey;

And nodding harebells vying in their colour

With the blue butterflies that poise themselves delicately upon them;

And stunted rowans with harsh dry leaves of glorious colour.

‘Nothing but heather!’—How marvellously descriptive! And incomplete!”

That is how it works. If the Unionists think Scotland is too small, they make it so because of their crushing lack of ambition and confidence in themselves and their fellow Scots, but they will not enforce their dystopian vision of an impoverished Scotland on me. I choose MacDiarmid’s view of a flourishing Scotland over the barren views of the Unionists any and every day of the week. Maybe they should ask themselves why Scotland has not voted for the Conservatives and Unionists in any significant numbers since 1955.

Among the statistics that outline Scotland’s wealth and, importantly, its potential, it is interesting to note that we have 61% of the seawater of the United Kingdom and the majority of the natural gas, crude oil, coal reserves, timber production and so on. That is not what we would expect of a country that is told that it is dependent on Westminster and that we are too poor to be independent.

As we transition away from fossil fuels, however, there are two figures that interest me more. First, Scotland has more than 25% of all the wind and wave energy potential in Europe. That is where our energy will come from as part of a clean, green, renewable energy package, providing for today’s needs while safeguarding the future for generations to come. The second figure is that Scotland has 90% of all the UK’s surface freshwater. Economists predict that water will be the new oil. We have more water in Loch Ness than all of England and Wales combined. Scotland has 31,000 freshwater lochs, equating to 100 times more water than it uses.

We can be self-sufficient in beef, sheep, dairy, pigs, cereal and potatoes. We are not too poor. We must not allow ourselves to be drawn down into the poverty mindset of the Scottish Unionist parliamentarians. Their poverty of aspiration does not reflect the economy of an independent Scotland; it reflects their desire to maintain the status quo and scare the people of Scotland into compliance with a UK Government who have shown themselves to be economically illiterate, out of touch with the needs of the majority of people and interested only in the inner machinations of their own party.

There is only one way in which Scotland can experience the benefits of our own resources, which is for all political decisions made for the people of Scotland to be made by the people of Scotland. There is only one path that leads to greater ownership and responsibility. There is only one outcome that provides the autonomy and the power required to grow and develop a strong, vibrant, inclusive and sovereign nation: independence from the corrupt and moribund United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

With an independence referendum, we have an opportunity to re-establish an independent nation and, importantly, design that nation. With all the financial levers, together we can design welfare, banking, taxation, land ownership, foreign policy, defence, education, energy, health and transport in a fashion and to a standard that we feel is fitting and appropriate, built by Scotland for all of Scotland.

[Ronnie Cowan]

The wind of change is blowing. It will bring with it a nation full of hope, ambition, opportunity, respect, co-operation and equality. It is up to everyone who believes that Scotland must be a free and independent sovereign nation if it is to reach its potential to work together to achieve that aim. If we allow ourselves to become fractionalised as a force, we are beaten. We must keep our eyes on the prize, and we shall achieve our goal.

5.33 pm

**Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): It is very important that we do not confuse the institution of the UK Government with this shambles of a Tory Government. Their performance over the past 12 years, compounded by the disastrous Budget on 23 September and followed by four weeks of inaction in which they were too slow to stop the damage, has left people up and down the country in real difficulties. It has left our allies shocked and our reputation on the international stage trashed. People now face higher mortgage payments, higher interest rates, a 12-year squeeze on public sector pay and benefits, and rampant inflation—all because of this Tory Government's obsession with tax cuts for the rich.

To that extent, I very much agree with the first part of the motion, but we must separate the failure of this Tory Government from the concept of being in the United Kingdom. I am very proud to be Welsh and to speak Welsh, and I know that Scottish people are rightly proud to be Scottish, but I am also proud to be British. We in Wales and Scotland have so much to gain from being part of the UK. It is not about nostalgia or an outdated view of the United Kingdom; it is about a recognition of the UK's current position in the world.

Admittedly, this Tory Government have done their best to trash our reputation. Nevertheless, we are an important economy—the sixth largest national economy in the world—and we are in the G7. That gives us influence—an influence that Wales and Scotland would never have on their own, and an influence that can be used for good, as we saw when the banks crashed the economy and caused the financial crisis of 2008. The Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, was instrumental in persuading other world leaders to take the necessary mitigating action, showing real leadership. That same Gordon Brown had secured an agreement from the G7 in 2005 to get the debts of the 18 poorest countries in the world cancelled by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. I could go on, talking about his tackling the AIDS and HIV crisis, and providing education for girls worldwide. That is the sort of influence that we can wield as the United Kingdom.

The same applies to climate change, which is of huge concern to many people in Wales and Scotland. We all recognise that tackling it has to be a joint effort, not just throughout the UK but by nations across the world. As the UK we have much greater influence—notwithstanding the appalling pantomime we have seen from the current Prime Minister, first snubbing COP27, the success of which is vital to the very future of life on earth, and then finally being shamed into grudgingly attending—but in the past, we as the UK have used our influence for good. When Labour was in government we passed the Climate Change Act 2008, a world first, and we showed leadership on the world stage in conferences from Kyoto to Copenhagen.

Labour has delivered on devolution to Wales and Scotland, which has enabled us to do things differently. In Wales, for example, Labour placed a moratorium on fracking. It has allowed and encouraged the roll-out of onshore wind. It provides a wide range of additional support grants to help the poorest, and is now consulting on radical changes in business rates. Scottish Labour has called on the Scottish National party to use its power to do more by topping up the Scottish welfare fund, writing off school meals arrears, and providing extra funds for money advice services.

However, critical to getting the best from devolution is a good relationship between the UK Government and the devolved national Governments. Our Labour vision for that relationship is a vision of respect and co-operation—of a Union of nations which want to work together for the greater good of all. Unfortunately, that has not always been the case with this Tory Government, as we saw most recently when the former Tory Prime Minister failed to pick up the phone to the Welsh or the Scottish First Minister during her term of office. That is precisely the sort of behaviour that we do not want, because of course it breeds resentment and makes us feel angry, and the Tory Government are just feeding the calls for independence.

Similarly, with the passing of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 we saw a Tory Government ride roughshod over the devolved nations, driving forward acceptance of the lowest common denominator in terms of environmental standards. We could have had a much more constructive and consensual dialogue. We must not forget that things could be different. At the time of the recent trade treaties with Australia and New Zealand, the officials in the Department for International Trade were helpful in working with the Welsh Government, but that should not be left to chance. We need a proper concordat, enshrining proper processes and consultation, to accord the devolved nations the respect and influence that they deserve on issues that affect Wales and Scotland respectively.

So yes, we definitely need to improve the working of devolution and the relationship between devolved Governments and the UK Government, but the answer is not independence—not because Scotland could not be independent, but because there are substantial issues which need to be considered but which the SNP tends to gloss over. For instance, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) explained so clearly, there is the issue of a new currency being devalued. That would cause major difficulties, with people being paid in the new currency but having to make mortgage payments at the value of the UK pound. There is also the problem of how Scotland would cope with its share of the UK national debt, not to mention, of course, the uncertainty over pensions.

We have all seen the complications that Brexit has thrown up. Given that the majority of Scottish exports go to the rest of the UK, the idea of a hard border, as proposed by the First Minister of Scotland, will be sending shudders through Scotland's economy. Ultimately, however, it is the opinion of the people in Scotland that matters. As has been mentioned already, 18 of the last 19 opinion polls have shown that a majority are not in favour of independence. They want the Scottish Government to concentrate on helping them with their day-to-day problems, and to stop obsessing about independence.

5.39 pm

**Ms Anum Qaisar** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I have to say that I was shocked by the previous speaker's contribution. In 2014, I campaigned for an independent Scotland as a member of the Labour party. I joined the SNP after the referendum; my final straw was when Labour joined the Tories in September 2014 to vote for air strikes in Iraq. Independence is not about the SNP or Nicola Sturgeon; it is about self-determination for the people of Scotland.

From covid contract scandals to people making their rich mates Lords, there is so much that is broken about Westminster and how this place protects the rich. This year, Shell has paid zero windfall tax in the UK despite making record global profits of nearly £26 billion. BP made £7.1 billion between July and September, which is more than double its profits in the same period last year. At the same time, I have constituents who are struggling to heat the food they are getting from food banks. Not only can they no longer afford to buy food; they have to eat food cold because using microwaves, ovens or stoves is simply too expensive. This is not simply a national disgrace; it is immoral, it is evil and it is corporate greed, backed by Downing Street, where people take more and more for themselves and line their own pockets and could not care less about the ordinary person.

This year in the multiple Tory leadership elections we have had—who knows, we might have some more—the Tory candidates completely relinquished the fact that they were in government, that they were making the decisions and that they sat at the Cabinet table and have sat there for years. That lot have had 12 years in Downing Street and they have spent the last decade systematically dismantling the social security system and othering some of the most vulnerable in our communities. We have heard a Tory MP in this very Chamber say:

“We have generation after generation who cannot cook properly—they cannot cook a meal from scratch—and they cannot budget.”—[*Official Report*, 11 May 2022; Vol. 714, c. 185.]

That is revolting. Poverty is deepening, and it is sickening that the people of Scotland do not vote for the Tories yet will be subjected to austerity 2.0. The UK economy and the financial mismanagement from Westminster are simply not working for Scotland. The Tories are delivering low productivity, stagnant wages, high inequality and high poverty rates.

We could use the full powers of independence to build an inclusive, fair, wellbeing economy that works for everyone in Scotland. With independence we can develop an immigration policy that aligns with the values of the people of Scotland. Westminster is broken and this is not limited to the Tories. My immigrant grandfather always voted for the Labour party, yet recently we heard its leader saying that there was essentially little difference on immigration between the two parties. That is shameful. It is not something to be proud of. It is a disgrace. I am so proud—[*Interruption.*] I am not going to listen to the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray); he has had his time to speak, but that is exactly what his leader said.

I am so proud of the rejection from these Benches of the hostile, xenophobic anti-refugee and anti-immigrant policies from the Conservative side of the House. There are

already stark differences on asylum policy between both Governments. The Tory Government want to send people who are fleeing war and persecution to Rwanda, while the Scottish Government's new Scots refugee integration strategy is pushing a trauma-informed approach to ensure that the voices of those seeking asylum are placed at the heart of policy. No human being is illegal. To quote Warsan Shire:

“you have to understand,  
that no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land”.

It is the creeping normalisation of othering from the Tories that is so chilling. I cannot believe that the Home Secretary had the audacity to stand at the Dispatch Box and use the word “invasion”. Forget the context; it is just the fact that she used the word “invasion” that is shameful. We also heard a Tory MP in this Chamber say:

“I do not wake up every day worrying about the welfare of people who have entered our country illegally”.—[*Official Report*, 31 October 2022; Vol. 721, c. 660.]

I feel compassion and concern for those who are fleeing war just as much as I feel compassion and concern for those living in poverty. These are not binary choices, yet this is straight out of the right-wing playbook. Whether people are working class, an immigrant, gay, lesbian or a trade unionist, this is what the Tories do: they pit communities against one another. They tell people that they are poor because they are not working hard enough, that they cannot find work because refugees are not actually fleeing war, that immigrants want to steal their jobs and benefits, or that it is the fault of pesky trade unionists.

The Tories' national minimum wage is not a real living wage. The differing rates for young people are wholly unjust and discriminatory, and they do not account for young people's needs, responsibilities and living costs. This is in contrast to the SNP, which proposes a single rate that better reflects the cost of living, with no lower rates for younger workers. Scotland's gender, disability and ethnicity pay gaps would be addressed, in part, by introducing greater transparency on pay reporting. In an independent Scotland, I look forward to the unfair Trade Union Act 2016 being repealed.

We need an independent Scotland, as Scotland simply cannot afford to be part of the UK any more. Scotland is a country in its own right. It is not a colony or a region. Independence will give Scotland the ability to get rid of nuclear weapons from the Clyde, independence will give Scotland the ability to tackle the climate emergency, and an independent Scotland will always get the Government she votes for.

5.46 pm

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I start with the red wall Tories. Our absent friends in the north are surely on a sticky wicket. For years, and for decades in some cases, they burrowed away in once solid Labour fiefdoms, angry at what was happening to their communities. They created a false narrative that these problems were the result of wanton neglect by their political opponents, rather than the inevitable consequence of being on the periphery of a capitalist economy that is overcentralised and under-regulated. But they broke through in 2019, and they came here. Tribunes of the people, champions of their communities, they came to this Palace to press their case, and they ended up supporting a Government



[Tommy Sheppard]

of spivs and millionaires who are turbocharging the very problems they complain about. Well, their tenure will soon be coming to an end,

If I lived in those working-class communities, I would be equally despondent at the alternative on offer. Today's Labour party, as a Government in waiting, surely has the least ambition it has ever had in its 122-year history. A party that says hardly anything about how it wants to change things, that is terrified of suggesting that the wealthiest in our community should pay more tax, that is terrified of supporting the trade unions that founded it in their struggle for a living wage, that is committed to expanding dangerous and expensive nuclear energy and that is, most of all, committed to the United Kingdom remaining isolated from the European mainstream. What a choice.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you may wonder at the relevance of that for Scottish independence. Well, it is quite simple, because people in my constituency and elsewhere in Scotland look at this duopoly oscillating about a mean point of inequality while never seeking to fundamentally change it, and they ask themselves, "Is this the best that can be done?" People are increasingly saying, "No, we can do better than this. And we can do better than this if we take the power to ourselves and become an independent country."

If those on the other side of this debate understand nothing else, understand this: the debate about contemporary Scottish independence is a debate not about identity but about political power. It is about having the agency to change the world around us and to play our part in a world that aims to be a better place. That is why we argue the case for Scottish independence, and we believe in changing the world with a new vision of how things could be, of a society in which the barometer of success is the wellbeing of the people rather than the profits of City corporations, where we have growth in our economy to afford human leisure rather than human exploitation and, most of all, where our natural resources are marshalled into a sustainable future for our country and the world. That is what we aspire to, yet if you listened to our detractors, you would think it was far from that.

I congratulate the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), on the public launch today of Project Fear 2.0. If we are to take him at his word, a Scottish Government on day one of independence would have five times the economic deficit problem that this Government currently have to deal with and our currency would, at the point of introduction, crash by 30%. Oh my God, who would want even to consider such a scenario? But of course these things are not facts and they are not evidence—they are conjecture and supposition. He makes his case, and in the flurry of the campaign rhetoric he makes it well, but that does not make it true.

Let me use the GERS figures as one example, on which the hon. Gentleman placed a lot of emphasis. He may be interested to know that the Institute for Fiscal Studies, no less—not a fan of independence—says that by next year the structural deficit in the Scottish economy will be the same, more or less, as the structural deficit in the UK economy as a whole. It is not a factor of five more—

Ian Murray rose—

**Tommy Sheppard:** I am sorry, but I am short on time and I am going to annoy Mr Deputy Speaker if I take interventions, so I will decline to give way.

As I was saying, we are not talking about a factor of five. Of course, the most important thing about the GERS figures is that they are not a statement of account of Scotland as an independent nation; they are a statement of what a regional economy looks like within the United Kingdom. Any sensible person would look at that structural deficit and those figures and take that as evidence against the Union, not in favour of it. It is because we can do so much better that we aspire to independence.

As others have remarked, it is unbelievable, is it not, that a country such as Scotland, which is blessed with enormous resources of renewable energy, a talented and skilled workforce and a thriving tourism, hospitality and cultural sector, which is leading the world in new technologies from biosciences to gaming, and which has our world-class academia—a country with all that going for it—can be described as a basket case when it comes to self-government and people suggest it cannot possibly afford it? Of course it can.

This debate is called "Scottish independence and Scottish economy" for a reason. It is because we know and understand that we will not get a majority of people in Scotland to vote to become a self-governing country if we cannot argue that that will make things materially better for them and their communities in the medium to long run. We know that that is the case; we have to connect those things together. I had a whole list of things I was going to go through that show how independence can make things better. I do not have time to mention them all, so I will select a few. These are the arguments and themes that are now being published in these Scottish Government documents that the motion refers to. I advise colleagues to take the time to read some of them. They are part of an ongoing debate that points out the consequences of independence for ordinary people and their livelihoods.

Let us take, for example, fair rights at work, which is apposite because today is the day when the TUC is petitioning and lobbying this Parliament. An independent Scottish Government will make sure that there is a living wage for people in their place of work; that this disgusting separation whereby young people can be exploited at extremely low wages is removed and people are paid that living wage from the point at which they enter the workforce; and that the trade union legislation is repealed and people have the right to organise. We know that we want to do that because we know that all the evidence shows that if the balance in the workplace changes and becomes fairer, that leads to a more prosperous and more equal economy. That is why we want to do it, but we cannot do it without the powers that come from independence.

Let us consider taxation policy. The Scottish Government do have the power at the margins to vary income tax, but no Government without any control whatsoever over the movement of labour or capital can possibly change the taxation system in any meaningful way. We want to see those with the broadest shoulders make their fair contribution. We want to see a much more progressive situation. We want to see business taxes that support small and medium-sized enterprises and help them to thrive,

but at the same time it should be understood that the opportunity to make money comes with the obligation to put something back into the social infrastructure and communities that enabled someone to do so in the first place. This we cannot do without the powers of independence.

Energy has been talked about a lot. Why on earth is it that, in a country that is self-sufficient in renewable energy, people will not be able to afford to pay their electricity bills this winter? It is a scandal beyond recognition. We need to scrap Ofgem and break the link between electricity prices and Putin's gas supply prices. We need to make sure that in a country capable of generating 100% renewable energy from the wind and water, the benefits go to the people who live there and not to the global corporations. This we cannot do without the powers of independence.

I could go on, but I will draw to a close. Those are the reasons why we ask people in Scotland to consider the alternatives. We do not need to have the duopoly of despair being offered in the United Kingdom. We can take matters into our own hands and create a new and better country.

My final point is this. Who gets to choose on this matter? That is the fundamental question and political principle that this House has to confront. In his opening remarks, the Secretary of State, like a broken record, made much of a campaign that happened nearly 10 years ago and a result that happened in 2014, when things were remarkably different from now. The 2014 referendum on Scottish independence might have settled the matter; people might have said, "That's fine. We accept it and move on." It was not us here who did not accept it, but the people of Scotland who put us here to prosecute this case. It is their right, and only their right, to reconsider that matter at a time of their choosing. That is why last year, 10 years after the day they did it the first time round, they elected a Scottish Parliament with more Members committed to independence than there were in 2011. That mandate has been disrespected and refused by this Government. That is why we are now arguing in the Supreme Court. It does not play well in Scotland because every time we deny the voice of the people, we only fuel their ambition to make it louder.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** If my maths is correct, about five Members still want to speak. The winding-up speeches will begin no later than 20 to 7, so Members can do the maths on how many minutes they have. Anne McLaughlin, do you intend to speak?

**Anne McLaughlin** *indicated dissent.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** In that case, four Members want to speak; I call Chris Stephens.

5.58 pm

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard); I will, of course, touch on similar themes in my contribution.

Saturday 29 October would have been the 100th birthday of my grandmother, who was an SNP voter and independence supporter. I am proud to be a third-generation SNP voter and to represent a constituency that had the

second highest number of individual yes voters in Scotland, topped only by Dundee West. Let me assure the House that the competition will be on next time.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** We'll beat you!

**Chris Stephens:** If West Dunbartonshire wants to rise to the challenge, we would more than welcome that.

It is important that this point is recognised: listening to some of the contributions today, we might think that not one constituency in Scotland had voted for Scottish independence, but of course many constituencies did vote for that proposition. What has been fascinating in this debate is that not one speaker arguing against independence or a referendum has told us what conditions they believe would apply for there to be a referendum. I find that deeply fascinating: they say that in their view there is not enough support, but will not tell us what would be required for there to be a referendum. Deeply fascinating indeed. I must say that a number of contributions have been strange. I thought that the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) had left the Chamber, but I can see that he is sitting behind the deputy governor general—I use that particular title as a term of endearment—the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). The hon. Member for Aberconwy talked about the ships that are hosting Ukrainian refugees. I have been on one ship, and it had really good conditions. I can tell him that I have had zero complaints about the conditions on that ship, but every single week I get complaints about the conditions and the overcrowding of Home Office accommodation for asylum seekers. Why is that the case? It is because the Home Office has argued that it does not need to comply with Scottish housing standards, that it does not need to comply with local authority standards. It is quite curious that the hon. Member mentioned that example, when the reality is that it is the conditions that the Home Office applies that cause real deep resentment for those seeking sanctuary in this country.

I was also fascinated by the Secretary of State's contribution about our Union dividend. What has been the largest growing area of the economy over the past 12 years? It is the number of food banks in this country. That is not a Union dividend. We need to reflect on the fact that far too many citizens across these islands are having to depend on food aid, including working people. We have just advertised for a larger project in Cardonald, and we know that many of the users will be working people, which is why we will be opening them in the evenings so that people can utilise their services. The number of food banks in this country is no Union dividend at all.

Let me explain why those of us who have been trying to prosecute the case for Scottish independence are still doing so. Days after the referendum, David Cameron stood up and talked about English votes for English laws and basically said that Scotland had had its fun. That was very much resented by a number of people. It was the nasty campaign, the negative campaign, and, yes, the fearful campaign against Scottish independence that ensured we would still be debating this issue. There was never a positive case put forward during that campaign by those who wished Scotland to remain in the United Kingdom.

[Chris Stephens]

I want to spend the minutes I have left to touch on the issue of workers' rights, which my good and hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) addressed in his speech. It is a key part of the Scottish Government's paper, which, curiously, no one has criticised. We really need to get away from this obsession that the current Government have of always being on the side of the bosses, and always being on the side of making sure that their view of insecure work should be the model going forward. I want to see an independent Scotland saying that there will be no zero-hour contracts in our country. I want to see trade unions have the ability to go on strike without fear of being taken to court on cheap charges. I want to see trade unions being given the right to use online and secure workplace balloting. If it was good enough for the Conservative party to use workplace voting and online voting to select a Prime Minister who crashed the economy then surely it is good enough for trade unions.

We need to change the world at work and to bring dignity and fairness to the workplace. Unfortunately, this place will never articulate a way of doing so, which is why I will continue to argue for Scottish independence and for votes for the Scottish National party.

6.4 pm

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I have sat here for most of the afternoon and listened carefully to all the speeches. I am going to do something slightly different, but I want to make it clear at the start that I am committed to Scottish independence. Anyone who has voted for me three times since 2015 knows that. I have always been returned to this place to represent the people of Motherwell and Wishaw, and I understand that not everyone in Motherwell and Wishaw wants independence, but I also understand that the Scottish Government have a mandate from the last Scottish election, and overall the SNP as a party has a mandate from Scotland to further the cause of independence. We all look forward very much to conducting a referendum next year.

The economic damage this Government have caused since the mini-Budget on 23 September is, as the motion says, truly regrettable. The pound has nosedived, mortgage rates have risen and there is rising inflation. I can remember hard, hard times—I remember Harold Wilson telling me that the pound in my pocket would not be worth any less on devaluation; I brought up a family during the '80s—but I have never known a time like this.

I think that is partly due to my role as disability spokesperson for my party, because as part of my role I meet disability organisations regularly. I will use the example of one particular organisation that helps families with disabled children and children with long-term illnesses, the Family Fund. When I met the organisation earlier this week—or was it the end of last week? Time moves so strangely here—I was shocked, horrified and deeply moved by what I was listening to.

I am grateful to the Family Fund for the statistics I am using, which are taken from its report, "The Cost of Caring", based on its research and published only on 7 October this year. Some 64% of parents with caring responsibilities spend between 35 and 100 hours a week caring for their children—only 50% of them are in work—so they are getting benefits.

Increasing household costs make those families' lives more difficult: on top of pandemic lockdowns and shielding, families have to spend more on energy and the choices they must make are even starker than those of the general population. More than half of parents or carers report skipping or cutting the size of meals; four in five families raising a disabled child or young person are in debt, with debt levels rising for two in five families, and more than 40%,

"report they can't afford to keep their accommodation warm—an increase of 13% since last December".

On average, families raising a disabled child live on £17,000 a year and spend 60 hours a week caring for their disabled child, with one third of families caring for more than 100 hours a week.

Family Fund's report highlights the now unsustainable strain on families raising disabled and seriously ill children and young people, as they try to cover sky-high costs on top of severely reduced incomes due to intense caring responsibilities, the three-times higher costs of looking after a disabled child and critical levels of debt. I could quote Family Fund's chief executive, Cheryl Ward, and people might wonder what that has to do with independence, but we cannot afford to be tied to a system that treats the most vulnerable people in our society in this way. Members will note that one of the statistics I used was from last year—it was not even to do with the so-called mini-Budget.

The harrowing tales and statistics we have heard from the Family Fund are not isolated; other disability organisations I have met in recent months, such as the Disability Benefits Consortium and Muscular Dystrophy UK, have drawn attention to the deteriorating situation that many of the most vulnerable face in the UK. Across the board, these organisations are calling for benefits to be uprated in line with inflation—that will not even take them back to where they were—and additional, targeted support for those with disabilities, whose essential energy needs are much more extensive.

Recently on the BBC, Yvette Clements said that parents are having to consider putting their disabled children into care due to rising energy bills. Can anyone in this Chamber tell me that that is acceptable? Families of disabled children are facing crippling debt. Some might say, "What does that matter?" but I believe—as I know fellow SNP Members do—that a society can be measured by how it treats its most vulnerable. In the vision of chaos that the current iteration of the UK Government perpetuate, the most vulnerable are treated with contempt. Those with disabilities and caring responsibilities face uncertainty, deprivation and attacks on their human dignity.

I want to talk about a family with two young autistic boys who live in West Sussex. One of the boys has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, while the other suffered brain damage at birth and is doubly incontinent. The family have to do frequent food shops tailored to the children's specific sensory needs and allergies, which has resulted in their bills almost tripling. The mother of these poor boys originally trained as a special educational needs teacher, but she cannot work, as she is a full-time carer for one of her sons, and she testifies that the cost of living crisis has impacted on the family in a huge way. Families of disabled children face crippling debt just to provide the care needed for their children, who will otherwise suffer and see their conditions worsen.



In Scotland we seek to do things differently. We offer carers additional support through the carer's allowance supplement, which increases their carer's allowance by 13%—carer's allowance has gone up by £3 in 10 years. We also have young carer grant. The Scottish Government are in the process of delivering the overarching changes needed to replace carer's allowance with Scottish carer's assistance, which will provide greater support, loosening the needlessly rigid criteria that carers must meet and increasing support in the areas of social care, employability and education.

I also note that child winter payments started in Scotland today, and they are of course administered by Social Security Scotland, which aims to deliver social security with dignity, fairness and respect at its core. At present, less than 15% of such social security benefits are devolved to Scotland, and our ability to create a society built on dignity, fairness and respect is severely impacted by a Westminster system built on cronyism, chaos and inequality.

Like my party and lots of people in Scotland, I feel that an independent Scotland is the only way we can take control of our future and create a more equal society for all, upholding the rights of our most vulnerable citizens. In each of the many iterations of the current Government—and there have been quite a number—those with the least have suffered the most as a result of policy choices. Following years of austerity, which have brought public services to their knees, caused 300,000 excess deaths and run the NHS into the ground, we are now hearing calls for further austerity. On top of the real-terms cuts to wages and benefits, and with inflation at a 40-year high, this sustained attack on society's most vulnerable does not appear to have an end goal in sight.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Skye, Badenoch and Strathspey—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ross, Skye and Lochaber."] I am so sorry; I have got carried away with the emotion of what I am saying. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) asked the Prime Minister today to guarantee uprating benefits in line with inflation, but we did not get an answer. The families that I am talking about are depending on that to protect their children.

I now feel that an independent Scotland is a necessity. It is not just something we think we would like; it is absolutely necessary to protect Scottish citizens from even more devastating policies from the Tory Government. I add my voice to the calls on this Government immediately to reinstate the bankers' bonus cap, increase benefits in line with inflation, and protect the pensions triple lock. Scotland cannot afford to be part of the failing UK state. We must be independent for economic stability and for the best future for all our citizens born in Scotland or not, and—I add this for the benefit of my granddaughters and my grandson—for those yet to be born.

6.16 pm

**Stewart Hosie** (Dundee East) (SNP): Several very interesting things have been said today. I have never taken a single vote for the SNP in Dundee East for granted. However, I heard the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine)—she is no longer in her place—talk about Orkney and Shetland, and if I lived on one of those island groups, I would be very cross indeed that the Liberal Democrats took them so much for granted and considered them so much of a personal fiefdom.

We had the Secretary of State for Scotland talk about funding delivered by the UK Government. Indeed, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) spoke about several other UK policy decisions and read out their cost. I thought that was interesting because it was almost like it was discretionary largesse from Whitehall, almost ignoring the fact that Scottish individuals and businesses pay tax. It is almost as if they do not realise that almost every penny is borrowed and that Scottish taxpayers contribute their full fair share to the debt repayment costs. I find that extraordinary.

We have heard other talk during the day about the debt Scotland might have. The Scottish Government cannot borrow. They have no debt. All the debt comes from the UK. The UK borrows all the money, no matter where it is spent. When there is a £500 million overspend on a single tube station, we pay our share of that debt. There is no Union dividend.

We then heard the Secretary of State make some extraordinarily disparaging remarks about education. Scotland has the highest proportion of people with a tertiary education—the best educated country in Europe. Instead of talking it down, why do we not celebrate the pupils and the students, the teachers and the lecturers, and the schools, colleges and universities? He then went on—he must have been having a really bad day—to talk about crime. We have the lowest crime—[*Interruption.*] Ah, he has come in. Welcome, Governor-General; take your seat. Scotland has the lowest crime rate since 1974. It was reported in the last week that barely 5% of reported crimes in England even have somebody charged. To talk down the criminal justice system in Scotland while allowing the utter failure of the criminal justice system in England to go by the book is absolutely disgraceful.

We then had the bizarre sight of the Better Together parties—the Tory-Labour coalition party—pretending to dislike each other, but when I see Labour's immigration mugs and the "Make Brexit Work" slogan, all I see is a red Tory. Whether they are red Tories or blue Tories, it does not matter. They are exactly the same.

We then had—I might not even get to my speech proper, Madam Deputy Speaker—some straw men thrown up about how much Scotland's foreign currency reserve would have to be when we become independent. I checked and the UK's foreign currency reserve is 6.4% of GDP, Ireland's is 2.7% and Finland's is 7%. To be fair, Denmark's is higher at about 20%, but how can it be that a modern advanced economy with huge natural resources and a balance of trade surplus, such as Scotland, would somehow uniquely be expected to hold 50%, 60%, 70% or 80% of GDP in foreign currencies?

**Ian Blackford** *rose*—

**Stewart Hosie:** I think my right hon. Friend spoke enough earlier on, but of course I will give way.

**Ian Blackford:** I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend—I will see him later. He is making a powerful speech. It is worth pointing out to the House that the UK has a current account deficit of more than 8% of GDP. If there is a country that cannot pay its way, it is the UK.

**Stewart Hosie:** That is absolutely true. There will come a time, when we have the referendum next year, to enter into proper, calmer and sensible debates about the minutiae and the technical detail regarding all that—long may that continue.

Basically, what we saw today was a rerun of Project Fear: Project Fear 2. I was struck by the comments of the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), who is also no longer in his place. At one point, he genuinely seemed to suggest that the determination as to whether Scotland should have a referendum should be based on opinion polls rather than real votes. I will take seven, eight, nine or 10 mandates in a row over an opinion poll any day of the week.

Project Fear 2 took me back to the 2014 independence referendum. The yes campaign was characterised by one thing: the absolute determination to answer every question and provide as much information as possible to the people of Scotland. We did that in the face of the constant refrain from Unionism that there was not enough information. Even when detailed answers to every question were tripping off people's lips, we were still asked for more.

We tried to ensure that the answers we gave about the future shape of the Scottish state and policy for an independent Scotland were, to the best of our ability, in the best interests of the people of Scotland and those in the rest of the UK. Nowhere was that clearer than in our proposals for what was then a formal shared currency and our determination to service a negotiated share of the UK's national debt. Both those plans were designed to protect sterling and stop the rest of the UK falling victim to a technical default on its debt obligations. To provide that certainty, clarity and detail, we drew, if not exclusively, certainly heavily, on the 670-page "Scotland's Future" White Paper.

We need to recognise the way in which Unionism behaved and campaign differently and smarter this time. The first thing to recognise is that no matter how detailed and precise our answers were, Unionism continued and will continue to ask the same questions over and over again to give the impression that there are no answers. It was false then and it is false now.

Secondly, we need to recognise that Unionism acted and continues to act irrationally. Next time, next year, whatever policy decisions are finally determined to be best for Scotland, they must be not only technically robust, but politically bomb-proof, so that no indyref2 policy area can ever be held hostage by a Westminster veto.

Thirdly, while we must of course answer every single question that the public put to us, we should make our fundamental case on principle, not detail. That is why the first three papers published by the Scottish Government are first class. A mix of democratic principle and a vivid picture of what Scotland could be is hopeful, upbeat and takes yes campaigners away from the miserable drudge of Unionist whataboutery—we have seen it in spades today—that so characterised the 2014 referendum campaign.

I have one final thought at this point. We know how successful Scotland can be. Is it not time that Unionism was finally challenged? Beyond Brexit, is this really as good as it gets? The first thing we have to do is deliver Scottish independence, and the second, and in many

ways more important, is to describe the kind of Scotland we seek. We have laid out the mechanism by which we will deliver it, we have gone to the Supreme Court to test the legality of the referendum and we have the wonderful fall-back position that the next Westminster election will be a de facto referendum, meaning that the Scottish people's voice will be heard one way or another.

The answer to the second question—what sort of Scotland will we deliver?—is implicit in the motion. Our critique of the botched experimental, Tufton Street economics that crashed the economy in the mini-Budget is stark, and our demands for action to help those most in need are clear, but let me end by answering the question of what sort of Scotland we seek in a slightly more succinct way. The Scotland we will deliver will be the one that the people of Scotland want and choose, because it is with independence and only with independence that Scotland will always get the Government and the policies it votes for.

6.27 pm

**Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP):** I start out in this debate on Scottish independence and the Scottish economy from the fundamental and irreducible point of principle that the best people to govern Scotland are those who have chosen to make their lives there.

I first started taking an interest in politics growing up in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and that was quite a heady political time. It was before there was a Scottish Parliament of any kind. We were seeing the deindustrialisation process at the end of the Thatcherite economic experiment and the ramifications of the poll tax. It was the end of the cold war and the collapse of the iron curtain, with historic realignments as old nations emerged from the stifling power politics of the cold war. Of course, closer to home we had a debate about Scottish self-governance—not just about whether there should be a Scottish Parliament, but about how much power that Parliament should have and, indeed, whether it should be an independent Parliament.

In my particular journey to supporting independence for Scotland, I remember vividly a debate that took place in early 1992 in the Usher Hall in Edinburgh, where the four leaders of the Scottish parties at that time clashed with each other in a major public debate sponsored by *The Scotsman* newspaper. In the aftermath of that clash of visions, Scotland returned 12 Conservative MPs in the general election later that year, in contrast to the 60 non-Conservative MPs, yet still we had a Conservative Government running us with a Secretary of State and his team of Ministers coming under parliamentary scrutiny once every four weeks for half an hour ahead of Prime Minister's Question Time, which seemed to me to be thoroughly unsatisfactory. Looking back to those times, I have a pet theory that if only we could get every single adult Scot of voting age to come down here, sit in the Public Gallery and watch Scottish questions followed by Prime Minister's Question Time, we would not be having another referendum with a 55% vote to stay in the UK, but a near unanimous vote to become independent. That formative set of experiences and references led me to conclude, as Jim Sillars subsequently described it, that Scottish independence is simply the constitutional settlement that is superior to all others. I have been an enthusiastic proponent of that point of view ever since, and I am happy to debate

it with all comers. Indeed, I am sorry that the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) is no longer in her seat, as I have happy memories of debating against her in Victoria Hall in Ellon ahead of the 2014 referendum, before either of us were elected. I am not so sure that the hon. Lady has quite such happy memories of the debate that night as I do, but it was nevertheless a robust act of civic political engagement, which was all to the good.

The constitution is not the only political issue that has animated me over that time. I have also been striving for fairness in our economy, for social justice and equality in our society, and to improve and invest in our infrastructure. I have of course been seized of the urgent need to tackle climate change, and embrace the considerable renewable opportunities that we have in Scotland. Unlike others of different political stamps, for me it is impossible to ignore the clear link between the condition of Scotland and its constitution, and how decisions are taken, by whom, and off the back of what mandate. I do not believe it is possible to separate the need to improve the condition of Scotland from the reality that that constitutional status acts as a huge impediment to doing so. No matter how good an idea, or what people vote to endorse in elections, unless it happens to be compatible with prevailing political ideas at Westminster, and the parameters that sets for policy and also budgetary frameworks, it simply does not happen.

That is not to say that good things have not happened in Scotland since devolution. Since 1999, Scotland has been governed by a Lib-Lab coalition, then by an SNP minority and an SNP majority, and it is currently governed by a coalition between the SNP and the Greens. Each Government have taken and are taking Scotland forward in their way, and I have no hesitation in saying that whatever their stamp, each of those Governments helped to put Scotland into a better condition at the end of their period in government than it was in when they took office, despite the lack of tax, borrowing and welfare powers, which restricted the ability of Governments of all kinds to act as they might have wished over that time.

There is a rather partisan argument that gets made, but it is a bit too clever-clever for my liking. It usually comes from elements in the Labour party, and it states that devolution and independence are different constitutional processes, with no common ground possible between the two. I do not think the people of Scotland have ever seen it in such stark terms, because the immediate point of common ground that I have with anyone who wants devolution, is that every power they wish to be exercised from a Scottish Parliament, I want as well. The difference is that I do not believe that devolution can ever satisfactorily address how to resolve the conflict that inevitably arises whenever the choices and interests of people in Scotland do not coincide with choices made elsewhere in the UK, or the priorities that are divined from that by the UK Government of the day.

In his opening remarks the Secretary of State said that we had a referendum in 2014, and indeed we did. I say to him as gently as I can, however, that things have moved on quite a bit since then. I remember speaking in another debate during the 2014 referendum, not in Ellon but as part of a panel for a debate in Peterhead in the constituency of the hon. Member for Banff and

Buchan (David Duguid). It was in no less a place than the ballroom of the Palace Hotel, and it was extremely busy—again, I have very happy memories of that night, perhaps happier than those on the no side. I was confronted in my summing up by a familiar argument that an independent Scotland would somehow find itself outside the European Union. It was all part of a trope—by that stage it was pretty familiar—of fears and smears, and that somehow an independent Scotland would find itself on the outside, isolated from all that was good and at the mercy of all that was bad.

It was getting late in the evening, so I decided to dispatch that argument as quickly, as cleanly and as humanely as I could by saying that the only way in which we would be in danger of being outside the European Union in the near future was if people voted no to independence and afterwards the Boris and Nigel show was allowed to take over. Now, I freely admit that, when I said that, I thought that I was using a little exaggeration to make the point as best I could—it was an argument that did not seem to have any basis in political reality. Little could I have imagined that, just over two years later, it had turned into the ghoulis, nightmarish reality.

The fact is, in 2014, the no campaign made a number of bold pledges about how being in the UK was a guarantee of economic stability, that we would be progressing to something as close to federalism as possible over that time and that, of course—this is the real pearler—the only way to guarantee our EU membership was through a no vote, when in fact that was what deprived us of it. Practically every single rhetorical plague of locusts or horsemen of the apocalypse prophesied in that campaign as a result of voting yes has come to pass as part of Brexit Britain, so much so that the entire Better Together prospectus to persuade Scots to vote no has been put through the shredder. It is hardly surprising that support for independence has moved in the direction that it has since then.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) could not have been clearer about where he stands. The Labour party now supports Brexit, and it tells us that it will not reverse it. While he is content to excoriate the record of the Conservatives in office, and rightly so, it seems that he would rather persevere with a political system, which over the course of the last century has seen the Conservatives in power for two years out of every three—a party rejected continually by Scotland at the ballot box—simply for the distant prize that he and his party might hold power for one year in every three. That might be good enough for him, but it is certainly not good enough for me—and increasingly, it is not good enough for people in Scotland.

Why independence? Why not try to reform from within? Labour has made it clear that it has no interest in meaningful reform of our decision making process. It will keep the House of Lords and it wants to keep the voting system, because, as I said, having that untrammelled power one year in every three seems to make everything else worth while.

The Lib Dems talk about moving nearer to federalism. Of course, they have spoken about that since the days of William Ewart Gladstone—[*Interruption.*] I hear the hon. Member for Edinburgh West say, “Why don’t we do it?” Quite simply, there is no coherent, credible plan for it. Perhaps she could intervene and tell me how the



[Richard Thomson]

Lib Dems plan to do it. Will there be an English Parliament? Will it be like “Strictly Come Dancing”? BBC regions? How will they do it?

**Christine Jardine:** Actually, the Campbell commission came up with a report on exactly how it could be done and, to give the Labour party credit, Gordon Brown has now issued his proposals, and Scotland’s Futures is working together. The hon. Member asked how we would do it. We would have assemblies for the other parts of the United Kingdom. The metropolitan Mayors are moving towards a more representative approach. It can be done and, if we had the SNP’s support, perhaps we could do it.

**Richard Thomson:** That is the trouble—there is no support for it. I am willing to believe that the hon. Lady has not made a single speech or argument or delivered a single leaflet about that in any of the regions in England that she plans to create. I suspect that, were I to go to the south-east, the south-west or any region of England, it would come as an enormous surprise to people to find out that that is being planned.

The Lib Dems were in coalition Government with the Conservatives from 2010. They had a referendum that was supposed to be on proportional representation, but they could not even get a form of proportional representation on to the ballot paper, and now we are being invited to believe that, somehow, just because Gordon Brown says so, we will be able to rewire the entirety of the British constitution in a way that will satisfy aspirations. I do not believe that. It is just another dead end which Scots would be well advised to avoid.

I return to my central point. The best people to run Scotland and to decide how Scotland should be run are those who have chosen to make their lives there. As the UK post-Brexit turns in upon itself and away from its closest neighbours and the alliances that have served it so well since it joined the European Union, Scotland has a choice: to continue to attach itself to that British Brexit decline, or to take its place on the world stage as an independent country with Governments we elect who are limited only by the constraints of our own resources, the limits of our own imaginations, the limits of our own democratic choices, and by constraints set by nowhere else.

6.40 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I congratulate everybody who has contributed to the debate. It has been an outstanding example of the range of different and very pressing arguments for why Scotland needs to be an independent country. The reality is that no country in history has been better prepared to transition to independence than Scotland currently is. Scotland has a dynamic modern economy, an abundance of natural and human capital, and a globally recognised international brand.

In 2014, like a number of my colleagues on the SNP Benches, I joined the SNP. We were told at that point that only with a no vote would Scots get safer, faster, better change. The events of the last eight years—even the events of the last eight weeks, actually—have shown that to be utter fiction. The Union is absolutely not the

risk-free option that was promised, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) rightly pointed out. It has been stark, but it is surprising what we have not heard. What we have not heard at all today is any case whatever for the Union, and that is telling.

Let me turn to the motion and the most recent “Building a New Scotland” paper. Scotland’s economy is diverse; it has many strengths. We have the best educated population in Europe, with the highest proportion of people aged between 25 and 65 with tertiary level education, and our Government made the political choice to provide free university tuition. In 2020, almost 100% of Scotland’s electricity demand was generated by renewables and Scotland has 25% of Europe’s offshore wind and tidal potential, meaning that Scotland can and will become the renewable powerhouse of Europe. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) correctly noted the positive position of Norway, with its sovereign wealth fund to cushion its population. What a contrast to the approach of the UK Government! We also have a food and drink sector that is renowned worldwide, with Scotch whisky accounting for a fifth of all UK food and drink exports. As my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) said, with such an abundance of resources and talent no one can seriously argue that Scotland could not thrive as an independent country. I was delighted that even the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) seemed to accept that fact, as did, I think, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid).

The benefits of self-government have been evident since the reopening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. The devolution of powers to Scotland has changed Scotland for the better. Just imagine what we could do with the powers of independence. Scottish Governments of different political affiliations have implemented policies that have led to a fairer, more equal Scotland. In fact, often they are mitigating the damaging policies of the UK Government. A good example of that is the Scottish child payment, which has been welcomed by anti-poverty campaigners as a game changer. I note that the Secretary of State for Scotland was signally unable or unwilling to entertain any discussion on his Government’s failure to make that kind of positive choice. The Scottish child payment will rise to £25 a week per eligible child this month. It is at the forefront of Scotland’s fight against child poverty. This is action that our Government are taking within the powers they have. Just imagine what more could be done. Recent analysis shows that even now Scotland has the lowest child poverty rate of any part of the UK. It is still too high, but it demonstrates that interventions by Governments who are willing to make them can drive down child poverty rates.

In Scotland, eligible children benefit from 1,140 hours of free high-quality early learning and childcare. That saves families around £4,000 a year and allows parents, in particular mothers, to return to the workplace if they so choose. The Scottish Government’s commitment to fair work has also seen drastic changes in workplace practices in Scotland, a significant contrast to the UK Government’s gig economy approach set out very eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). Recent figures show that 91% of employees in Scotland receive the real

living wage; again, that is the highest proportion of any UK nation. The gender pay gap in Scotland is 3.7% between male and female workers, which is better than the 8.3% gap across the rest of the UK. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) spoke about the Scottish Government's approach to feminist foreign policy.

The Scottish Government have also committed to improving the lives of LGBT people and will implement a total ban on conversion therapy this parliamentary term, whereas, this week, the UK Government delayed a ban, with the new Minister for Women and Equalities reported as wanting to review her predecessor's work. She was the predecessor very recently—it is quite hard to keep up with the musical ministerial chairs. That delay comes despite the UK Government having promised a conversion therapy ban since the Prime Minister's predecessor's predecessor's predecessor was in office, but that was only a few weeks ago.

While the Scottish Government works hard to continue to deliver that kind of real, tangible progress for all people in Scotland, the same cannot be said of this UK Government. Perhaps the most obvious example of Westminster failing Scotland is Brexit. Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU, but we have been dragged out against our will. It is estimated that that will result in Scotland's GDP being 4% lower by 2030 than it would have been if we had remained in the EU. That is the equivalent of £3.2 billion of revenue lost every single year. Brexit not only damages our economic prosperity, but weakens our society and communities. We have seen fewer EU students coming to study in Scotland. EU students have and would have contributed not just economically, but culturally and socially.

Scotland is the only part of the UK that is forecast to experience population decline in the next 30 years, so we need inward migration to grow our economy and support our public services. We need independence to achieve that, because despite Scotland's needs—without even getting into the horrific narrative coming from UK Government members about invasions—the UK Government continue to pursue a shamefully hostile policy towards immigration. Unfortunately, the Labour party, to its shame, apes that anti-immigrant rhetoric. We need independence to deliver an immigration system that works for Scotland and that recognises the immense net contribution that immigrants have made, and will continue to make, to our country.

A number of Members have pointed out that Scotland has not voted for a Tory Government since 1955, but we still have to live with the damaging policies of Tory Governments. Most recently, there was the mini-Budget, when they crashed the economy with their reckless, unfunded tax cuts. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber described, the pantomime—the circus—of being under Westminster control at the moment is so costly to households in Scotland, particularly to those who can least afford to have that financial wrecking ball inflicted on them.

The consequences of the mini-Budget will be with us for some time. We can think of the spike in interest rates and its impact on mortgage payments, with many of the families impacted already struggling. The Chancellor suggested that there will need to be tax rises at the Budget later this year. Taxes are necessary for public services,

of course, but those rumoured tax rises will be used to plug a self-inflicted black hole caused by the Government's mini-Budget disaster.

The economic downturn caused by Brexit and compounded by the mini-Budget has exacerbated the cost of living crisis. It is really callous, even by the Conservatives' standards, that they flirt with scrapping the triple lock and refuse to commit to uprating benefits in line with inflation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) was absolutely right to point out, the shameful nonsense coming from Conservative Members suggesting that people are somehow better off defies belief. People can see with their own eyes the situation that they in, and they will find that absolutely astonishing.

The thing is, Scotland has a lot going for it. We have a vibrant economy. We have a highly educated, talented population. We have natural resources that other countries are envious of, but we are locked in this trickle-down, doing-people-down UK economic model, which fails to match the economic levels of prosperity and social cohesion that our neighbours of similarly sized independent countries have.

With independence, we can have the Governments that we vote for. We can choose our future. We can choose our priorities. It will not always be easy and it will not happen overnight. It will take hard work, but no country in history has ever been in a better position to become independent.

There are many challenges facing western countries at the moment, including the climate crisis, the war in Ukraine and population movements, but ultimately the question for people in Scotland—and it is a question for them, not for Members in this place—is who they want. Who do they trust to lead the response to the challenges of the situation? Who do they trust to deliver for the people who live in Scotland: Westminster Governments we do not vote for, or a Government in Scotland we do vote for, equipped with the full powers of an independent state?

None of this is news to people in Scotland. They are watching, they see the choices before them, and it is time.

6.50 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont):** It is a pleasure to respond to this debate in my first appearance at the Dispatch Box as a Scotland Office Minister. I am proud to be wearing the “Back British Farming” wheat pin badge tonight; today is Back British Farming Day, and there has never been a better time to show the importance of Scottish and British food producers in our country.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken. I will address in detail as many of their points as I can, but first let us talk about the motion before the House.

It is frankly disappointing that SNP Members selected this subject for debate when there are so many other pressing matters that the people of Scotland view as a priority. SNP Members could have used their time to raise matters of importance to my constituents in the Scottish Borders and their own constituents across Scotland, such as the cost of living, health or education. *[Interruption.]* SNP Members can shout all they want, but I know that those are the issues and priorities that the Scottish people want us to talk about, instead of obsessing about referendums.

[John Lamont]

SNP Members could have used the time to encourage their friends in the Scottish Government to set aside their usual approach and instead work together more effectively and constructively with the UK Government; Conservative Members would have very much welcomed that. The SNP could have acknowledged the huge benefits that being part of the United Kingdom brings to the people of Scotland, such as the Union dividend, which means that remaining a part of the UK is worth around £2,000 a year to every person in Scotland. Instead, throughout the debate, SNP Members have focused solely on the issue of another divisive referendum. The SNP Government must get back to the day job and stop obsessing about another referendum.

Many hon. Members today have highlighted the challenges that we face. They are right to have done so. Like the rest of the world, we are grappling with the economic aftermath of covid-19, compounded by the war in Europe, but more division and disruption is not the answer. Now is not the time to discuss splitting up the country, when we should be focusing on pulling together. Now is the time for unity, not division.

**Alan Brown** *rose*—

**Drew Hendry** *rose*—

**John Lamont:** SNP Members are trying to intervene, but they have had six hours to talk about the issues that really concern people in Scotland. I will make some progress, and then I may take some interventions if time permits.

When he took office, the Prime Minister set out clearly that he wants to bring people back together and unite the country. Meanwhile, the SNP's priority is division, division, division. Another divisive referendum is the wrong priority at the worst possible time. It is a distraction from the very real challenges that people across Scotland and the United Kingdom face. With that in mind, I turn to points made by hon. Members today.

The SNP Westminster leader, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), got in a bit of a muddle yet again, frankly, over what currency an independent Scotland would use. The SNP's currency proposals lack any form of credibility. In the same breath, the SNP proposes establishing a Scottish pound and committing to rejoin the European Union. Given that the EU clearly states that adopting the euro is a core requirement for membership, I struggle to find any credibility in that. I suggest that the SNP's proposals to continue using the pound are a subtle admission that the economic benefits of remaining part of the UK are strong.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), whom I join in paying respects to the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) on the passing of his father. The hon. Member for Edinburgh South argued that the best way to protect the Union was to elect a Labour Government. I would suggest that the best way to ensure that Scotland remains at the heart of the Union is to elect more Scottish Conservative MPs in Scotland and to secure the re-election of this Conservative Prime Minister here at Westminster, thereby stopping any grubby deals that the SNP may do with other Opposition parties.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), to whom I pay tribute for his work in the Scotland Office, rightly highlighted some of the important interventions that this Government have made to support Scotland. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) encouraged much audience participation in his speech—it was a bit like an early pantomime performance—but failed to produce any answers to fill the gaping holes in the SNP's argument for another independence referendum.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) did a tremendous job of demolishing the nationalist argument for independence, as did the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), who rightly identified how bad SNP Members are at losing referendums, in that they constantly demand more and more opportunities until they get the result that they want. Similarly, the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) made it clear that the SNP does not speak for the majority of Scots on the question of independence.

We heard from a catalogue of SNP and Alba Members: the hon. Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill), for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) and for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), as well as many others who became increasingly excited about the prospect of another independence referendum but failed to provide any clear answers, any credible solutions or any indication of what an independent Scotland would look like.

Unfortunately time prevents me from referring to all the points that were raised in the debate, but I will happily take some interventions.

**Alan Brown** *rose*—

**John Lamont:** I will take an intervention from the hon. Member.

**Alan Brown:** Earlier, we heard about the benefits to the Union of the levelling-up fund. We keep being told that this is the most successful political Union ever, but if it is so good, why does the UK have the highest levels of inequality in the developed world apart from the United States and the worst pension levels relative to the working wage in western Europe—and why do we need a levelling-up fund if the Union is so successful?

**John Lamont:** My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland set out very clearly the benefits of Scotland's remaining part of the United Kingdom. I strongly reject the hon. Gentleman's assertions about poverty in this country: we are a compassionate Government, working very hard to support the most vulnerable people in our society, whether they are in Scotland or in the rest of the UK.

Let me end by again thanking Members for their contributions, and making a few closing remarks. Scotland voted decisively in 2014 to remain part of the United Kingdom, and the SNP must respect the decision of the people of Scotland. We must now focus on key priorities, and particularly on dealing with the cost of living and tackling the economic challenges that we face. Time and again, in poll after poll, the people of Scotland tell SNP Members, and tell Nicola Sturgeon, that another referendum is not their priority.



**David Linden** rose—

**John Lamont:** If the hon. Member can tell me why we should be having a referendum now rather than dealing with the cost of living crisis, the failing education system in Scotland, the NHS backlog in Scotland and the lack of funding for local authorities, I will happily take an intervention from him.

**David Linden:** If the Minister's party can change party leaders in seven weeks, why cannot the people of Scotland revisit this question more than seven years later?

**John Lamont:** I am grateful for that intervention. I clearly remember taking part in the 2014 referendum, when we were promised by those in the yes campaign that it would be a once-in-a-generation opportunity—

**Owen Thompson** claimed to move the closure (*Standing Order No. 36*).

*Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.*

*Question agreed to.*

*Main Question accordingly put.*

*The House divided: Ayes 38, Noes 0.*

**Division No. 86]**

**[6.59 pm**

#### AYES

Bardell, Hannah	Linden, David
Black, Mhairi	MacAskill, Kenny
Blackford, rh Ian	MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Blackman, Kirsty	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Brock, Deidre	McDonald, Stuart C.
Brown, Alan	McLaughlin, Anne
Callaghan, Amy ( <i>Proxy vote</i>	Monaghan, Carol
<i>cast by Owen Thompson</i> )	Newlands, Gavin
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Nicolson, John
Chapman, Douglas	O'Hara, Brendan
Cherry, Joanna	Oswald, Kirsten
Cowan, Ronnie	Qaisar, Ms Anum
Crawley, Angela	Sheppard, Tommy
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Smith, Alyn
Doogan, Dave	Stephens, Chris
Dorans, Allan	Thewliss, Alison
Ferrier, Margaret	Thompson, Owen
Flynn, Stephen	Wishart, Pete
Gibson, Patricia	
Grady, Patrick	
Hendry, Drew	
Hosie, rh Stewart	

#### Tellers for the Ayes:

**Steven Bonnar and  
Marion Fellows**

#### NOES

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Richard Thomson and**

**Ben Lake**

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House regrets the economic damage the Government has caused since the mini-budget on 23 September 2022, with the pound hitting a record low against the dollar, mortgage rates at their highest level since the financial crash and inflation at a forty-year high; calls on the Government immediately to reinstate the bankers' bonus cap, increase benefits in line with inflation and protect the pensions triple lock; considers that Scotland cannot afford to be part of the failing state of the UK and must be independent for economic stability; and welcomes the publication of the Scottish Government's independence papers series, *Building a New Scotland* and *The Economic Opportunity for Scotland* from Renewable and Green Technology by David Skilling.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am delighted that the House has voted on a motion

"that Scotland cannot afford to be part of the failing state of the UK and must be independent for economic stability".

This indeed is a historic moment. This House has voted in favour of a motion on Scottish independence—this is the first time that that has happened—with a clear majority of those who were elected from Scottish constituencies voting for that proposition. Of course, that follows on the back of the mandate that the Scottish Parliament has and that the Scottish Government have for delivering an independence referendum. I wonder what assistance your office can give to make sure that the UK Government now assist the Scottish Government in delivering on that mandate that we have and the support of this House for Scotland becoming an independent country.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I was doing the arithmetic and I had some doubts as to whether the House was in fact quorate, as I would expect there to have to be 40 votes. But I must clarify that although the Tellers read out that the Ayes were 38, in order to calculate the quorum I have to add in four Tellers and myself, because I am here. Therefore, the House is quorate—only just, but the House is quorate. So I appreciate the point of order that the right hon. Gentleman makes. It is not for me to say anything at all about what the Government might or might not do, but I am quite sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the point he made, and indeed the past six hours of debate, and he will have the opportunity to pursue the matter in the usual way.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Have you received any indication from the Home Secretary that she intends to make a further statement to the House about the detention centre at Manston? You will have been aware that on Monday, the Home Secretary said:

"What I have refused to do is to prematurely release"—

the split infinitive is hers, not mine—

"thousands of people into local communities without having anywhere for them to stay."—[*Official Report*, 31 October 2022; Vol. 721, c. 639.]

It is reported today that last night exactly that happened. A bus full of detainees was taken from Manston to Victoria station, where they were left abandoned; apparently, one was left to sleep rough overnight. That surely contradicts what the Home Secretary told the House. She has something to answer for. It would be useful for the House to know whether she intends to come here and explain herself or whether, yet again, she has to be brought here.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As he will know, the Chair has no responsibility, which is fortunate, for what Ministers say at the Dispatch Box or indeed for what any Member says in the Chamber. [*Interruption.*] I would hope that those currently at the Dispatch Box would have the decency not to speak when I am answering a point of order.

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

The right hon. Gentleman has made his point, which would be better made to Ministers than as a point to the Chair. At business questions tomorrow, he will have an opportunity. If he seeks to bring any Minister to the House to answer a question, he knows the formalities, such as an urgent question, that he can use.

**Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 13 May, I sent a letter to the former Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about the investigation of allegations of sexual abuse in the NHS. Given the gravity of the issues, I have since chased for a reply to that letter by email on eight occasions, and I have raised it at business questions.

Later, I tabled a written parliamentary question asking a Minister to respond. The Minister said incorrectly that he had replied to the letter, when he had in fact replied to a different letter. I believe that that was a genuine mistake, but it is a mistake none the less: the answer to my written question is factually incorrect. More to the point, I have yet to receive an answer to the letter I sent on 13 May—five and a half months ago—on behalf of a constituent who raised serious allegations about sexual abuse in the NHS.

Could you please advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how I may ask the Minister to correct the answer to my written parliamentary question 66030, and how I might finally secure a response from the Department of Health and Social Care to my letter?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Lady for having given me notice of this point of order. She describes the response that she received as having been a genuine mistake. Although the contents of answers to parliamentary questions are not a matter for the Chair, of course, I remind the House that the Government's own ministerial code requires Ministers to correct any inadvertent errors in answers to parliamentary questions at the earliest opportunity. If an error has been made in this instance, I am sure that the Government will seek to correct it as quickly as possible. As far as the continuing delayed response to her constituent's correspondence is concerned, she may, as I said to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), wish to raise the matter at business questions tomorrow.

Having just referred to the fact that it is important that matters are clarified if an inadvertent mistake has been made by a Minister, the same of course goes for the Chair. I should draw to the attention of the House that, earlier today, Mr Speaker made reference

to the Government being a shareholder in Royal Mail. Mr Speaker has asked me on his behalf to make it clear that he understands that in fact the Government are no longer a shareholder in Royal Mail. Bearing in mind the importance that Mr Speaker always stresses about Members correcting the record if an inadvertent mistake has been made, he wishes to lead by example and make it clear that he wishes to correct the inadvertent error that he made earlier today. I am sure the whole House will appreciate that.

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

## Business without Debate

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Drivers' Hours, Tachographs, International Road Haulage and Licensing of Operators (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 5 July, be approved.—  
(*Julie Marson.*)

*Question agreed to.*

### PETITION

#### Pitch Fees for Park Homes

7.20 pm

**Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): I want to present a petition on behalf of my constituents who reside on Ashwood Park in Tatton. This is an important matter to park home residents in Tatton and also to those right across the country. I should also point out that I very much agree with this petition. The petition was started by the Park Home Owners Justice Campaign and is signed by 165 residents of Ashwood Park, Cheshire.

*Following is the full text of the petition.*

*[The petition of the Park Owners Justice Campaign,*

*Declares that the Retail Price Index is no longer fit for purpose as the measure by which to uprate pitch fees for park homes.*

*The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the Consumer Price Index is used as the basis for the annual pitch fee of park homes.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P002778]

## Bus Services: Blaydon

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Julie Marson.)*

7.21 pm

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): I am pleased to have secured this Adjournment debate on bus services in my constituency of Blaydon, although I have to say that I am very disappointed that it is necessary. May I also welcome the Minister and my constituency neighbour to his place on the Front Bench?

Bus services are hugely important to communities across my constituency—from Chopwell and Blackhall Mill, Greenside to Blaydon, Birtley to Kibblesworth, and all the points in between. I know that, whenever changes are proposed to bus services, my office will receive very many phone calls, emails and Facebook comments about the changes.

This time, though, it has been of an altogether different order. There is just one bus company running in my constituency, Go North East. When it started its consultation on cuts to its bus services in May, the implications for my constituents were dreadful. The proposals cut off whole communities, such as Kibblesworth in the east of my constituency, dramatically reduced services to places such as Birtley, and ended popular routes around places like Winlaton, and even the route 69 to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Gateshead. I am sure the Minister knows of the problems with the Red Kite route from the Metrocentre to Chopwell and Blackhall Mill, through to Consett in the Minister's own constituency.

It goes without saying, I hope, that when Go North East made this announcement in May, I began to work with all parties to ensure that communities in my constituency would not be left isolated and without bus services. The village of Kibblesworth is just 5 miles from the centre of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. What kind of position would we be in if such places had no local bus transport? Working with the public and helping to engage in the consultation, I had several meetings with Go North East and with Nexus, our local transport authority for Tyne and Wear. With the help of the public, and with Nexus, we were able to ensure that we could keep essential bus services through local public spending, but, sadly, we have lost many routes and face reduced timetables, resulting in overcrowded buses. The fact is that even those bus services, with support from Nexus, do not meet all the needs of my constituents, and I fear that there are yet more changes to come.

**Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this Adjournment debate and echo what she says about bus services. In the north-west of North Tyneside, Arriva has cut the 43, the 44 and the 45—and now it is not only cutting but cancelling the buses it has cut. Surely people in North Tyneside and in Blaydon deserve better from our bus companies?

**Liz Twist:** I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. Indeed, there are a number of bus companies across the region, but I speak just of my constituency.

I am a bus user myself, in my constituency of Blaydon and here in London, and I have experienced the difficulties of bus cancellations. Only this week I nearly missed my

connecting train to Parliament as the bus did not show up as expected. That is not just my experience, but that of many of my constituents.

Leigh has told me of her difficulties getting to work in the morning, with buses not turning up and, when they do, being overcrowded due to earlier cancellations. She told me that over recent months she has constantly been late for work as a direct result of instability in the local buses. Being late can mean deductions from pay for some workers and a poor work record to boot. Another constituent who has been in touch told me that he missed a hospital appointment, and another said that her son missed football training just this month due to buses not showing up.

Another constituent recently told me about needing to spend £15 on a taxi to get to a dental appointment as the bus was not running in time to make the appointment. The day after, they needed to spend a further £11.80 on another taxi as there was no bus to take them to hospital for an eye appointment. I am sure we can all agree that that is not good enough, and people across Blaydon, the north-east and, I suspect, the whole of England deserve a regular, reliable and affordable bus service to help them to get on with their daily lives. I could replicate those examples many times, as I am sure hon. Members will know.

I know that the bus operators are not causing problems for fun. I know that covid-19 led to restrictions on bus services and that even now many people are reluctant to use buses, despite measures taken to make them covid secure and encouragement from public health specialists to use active transport, including buses. I pay tribute to the bus drivers and other transport staff who did a great job during covid, facing difficult situations and putting themselves at risk in the early days. I want to make clear that I very much support them.

In the north-east, our bus patronage figures are better than those in some areas, but they are consistently still down to around 80% of pre-covid levels, which has had a real impact on the income of bus operators. Given that the bus operators are private companies, lower usage can make buses not viable. The Government did help during covid with the bus recovery grant, but that is due to end completely in March 2023. Sadly, the after-effects of covid on the industry will not have ended by then.

Probably one of the biggest causes of problems for my constituents is last-minute cancellations. I know that the Minister will also be familiar with that issue. For those who rely on buses, a last-minute cancellation of a bus or a route at a particular time can lead to very real problems in missing work or appointments, or just plain getting home from a night out. If we want—as we all do—to encourage greener transport as part of the effort to reduce carbon consumption, we need reliable, regular and affordable bus services. That environmental impact is a real issue. We need to reduce our car usage, not increase it because people do not think they can rely on bus services.

Other issues have emerged that the Government and the Department for Transport specifically can help with. Although I speak on behalf of my constituents, the issues I mention are replicated in many parts of the country. Bus companies face huge difficulties in recruitment. High driver turnover has plagued the sector in recent months and years, along with high levels of sickness,



[Liz Twist]

due to unprecedented backlogs in the NHS, and delays in driver licensing. All of those things have contributed to a growing problem of short-notice cancellations. That, in turn, is doing irreparable damage to the reliability and punctuality of bus services. That has a huge impact on the travelling public, with the latest bus punctuality figures standing at 83%, compared with the 95% target that the traffic commissioner set. That is directly impacting the lives of my constituents, causing the problems that I outlined with people missing appointments, being late for school and being unable to visit family and friends or even do the shopping.

My constituents need better bus services, and I am sure I would not be the only MP saying that if there were others here. In the north-east, the seven local authorities that work as Transport North East have come together to respond to the Government's proposals for bus service improvement plans under the bus back better badge. The local transport authorities, working together and talking to the bus companies in our area, submitted plans for enhanced partnerships that are intended to deliver the aspiration for bus services that cover the routes that people need when they need them, with buses turning up on time and being affordable, and for what I believe are called multimodal, multi-operator fare schemes, which are very much like what we have in London, where passengers can just turn up and get a bus to where they need to be for work, health or leisure.

As the Minister will know, our bid was successful, although sadly at a lower level than we had hoped, with an indicative funding allocation of £163 million. That was last April, but we are yet to have confirmation that the north-east will actually receive that money and, if so, when. That is holding up much of the work on developing those enhanced partnerships—although work is going on between the parties—which would go some way to improving our bus services, bus fares and cross-operator arrangements and to reducing congestion, which also causes problems for bus reliability and which has been made much worse by more people choosing to drive rather than take the bus. So can the Minister please tell me tonight when that bus service improvement plan funding will be confirmed and when it will be released?

I spoke earlier of the bus recovery grant. Although I am glad that it was extended, albeit at a lower rate, we really need it to be extended further if we are not to see even further decline in bus services. We cannot afford to have a cliff edge and a huge drop between bus service improvement plan funding and the current arrangements. I ask the Minister to offer an assurance that the grant will continue and to press the Treasury on that matter.

There is also the issue of driver recruitment. Last year, the Government took some action over the shortage of HGV drivers. It is now time—beyond time, actually—to take real steps to assist with bus driver recruitment and retention. We need to tackle this issue if we are to retain essential bus services. I would be glad to hear the Minister's proposals on that issue.

There is one more issue I would like to raise, and that is the future of zero-emission bus regional areas funding. I very much hope that the Minister can tell us that that funding will continue. Unless more ZEBRA funding is made available, the Government will not hit their target

of getting 4,000 zero-emission buses ordered nationwide by the end of this Parliament, given that the current total is only 1,000 so far.

I want a bold transport plan for my constituency, for the region and for the country—one that improves our bus offer for communities, one that improves fares for my constituents instead of making them more expensive, and one that improves the reliability of local buses and does not frustrate customers. To achieve that bold plan, and for my constituents to benefit, we need the Department for Transport to come forward with clear answers and to allow our local organisations to do what they are so good at: delivering local transport offers that help people in their daily lives. Without those answers, I fear that we will continue to see our bus offer dwindle, patronage levels drop and working people—my constituents—suffer.

7.33 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden):** Madam Deputy Speaker, could you pass on my thanks to the Speaker for his kind letter following my appointment to this role? This is the first time I have spoken from the Dispatch Box, and I am delighted that it is in an Adjournment debate with the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who is my neighbour just to the north. I congratulate her on securing a debate about this vital issue and on the spirit in which she has spoken today.

The hon. Lady works hard to raise the issues that matter most to her and her constituents, and that is why, before focusing on the subject of this debate, I want to take a moment to commend her for her campaign on mental health and suicide prevention, which is a vital matter, particularly for our region. I know that she has spoken candidly and eloquently about it in the Chamber. While we sometimes disagree, we are often in agreement, such as on the European Statutory Instruments Committee of which we were both members for quite a while. I will hopefully be able to show some of that agreement tonight as I go through my speech.

Turning to bus services in Blaydon, I am acutely aware of the issues of which the hon. Lady speaks, because routes such as the 47, X46 and X71 go through my constituency and into hers. We have to work together with leaders from across the north-east to try to address transport issues, and the leader of Gateshead Council, Martin Gannon and I have worked closely, particularly during the pandemic, on the issues facing local transport services. I hope to be able to give the hon. Lady a little more clarity on what is coming forward, particularly on the bus service improvement plan. I fully understand and appreciate the hon. Lady's concerns. In fact, I would probably be raising them myself had I not been moved to the Front Bench. I assure her that my officials have been in contact with Go North East in advance of this debate to understand further the issues specific to her constituency and across the wider north-east.

The Government are clear that we want public transport to be integral to the future of transportation across the country. Transport networks, and local bus services in particular, are vital to ensuring that communities can stay connected, supporting so many industries and getting employees to work, and to the broader levelling-up agenda. That has never been more important as we seek to recover from the global pandemic. After all, buses

are the country's favourite mode of transport, with more than 4 billion journeys made in 2019—twice as much as the next form of transport.

Turning to the hon. Lady's points, I will start with BSIPs and then move on to environmental factors, low emission buses, the recovery fund, short-notice cancellations, driver shortages, and ZEBRA funding. On the broader national bus strategy and BSIPs, the Government have committed to investing over £3 billion in this Parliament to deliver improvements to bus services throughout the country. It is one of the largest investments in buses in recent years, and we are on track to meet that commitment, having already allocated £2.5 billion.

Our national bus strategy, published in 2021, sets out how we intend to deliver better bus services for passengers around the country through ambitious and far-reaching reform of how services are planned and delivered. The NBS is explicit about seeking to ensure that the needs of small towns and rural transport users are given equal consideration to those in urban environments and is supportive of improved connectivity and availability of services in rural areas. To deliver improvements around the country, in urban and rural areas, the strategy sets out how our work will fundamentally change the relationship between local authorities and bus operators. Crucially, we want to ensure that local authorities have a pivotal role, working with bus operators, to ensure the provision of bus networks that meet the needs of the local communities they serve.

As a first step, the Government asked every local authority to work with their bus operators to develop a clear, detailed, and ambitious local bus service improvement plan. BSIPs are intended to set out each local authority's vision for improving bus services in their area over the long term, and to act as a guide to help design local transport networks that are tailor-made for the communities they serve, particularly when it comes to cutting fares and journey times and increasing frequency. In April, after assessing each of the plans, we were pleased to be able to offer indicative funding allocations to support 31 BSIPs totalling over £1 billion in both rural and urban areas.

The hon. Member for Blaydon welcomed the £163 million allocated to the North East and North of Tyne Combined Authorities. We have now confirmed final allocations for the vast majority of local transport authorities that have been selected to receive funding to deliver their BSIPs. The Department for Transport has been clear that BSIP funding is conditional on the submission and implementation of a transformational enhanced partnership or franchising arrangement. We are working with Transport North East on developing their enhanced partnership with a view to delivering funding once we are satisfied that it is in place. I assure the hon. Lady that that will happen in the not-too-distant future, and I will be delighted to write to her when it happens and maybe even come to her constituency to launch it in the next few months.

The hon. Lady also mentioned zero-emission buses and levelling up, which are important, particularly in towns that have had diesel buses causing air pollution for too long. The Government are clear that buses have an essential role to play in achieving net zero, driving the green transformation and creating cleaner and healthier places to live. We have supported bus companies in the north-east to introduce net zero buses.

Between 2019 and 2021, Go North East was awarded just under £3 million through the ultra low emission bus scheme for 18 net zero buses and associated charging infrastructure to operate within the Tyne and Wear region. The national bus strategy further committed to introduce 4,000 zero-emission buses and achieve an all-zero-emission bus fleet. That will support our climate ambitions, improve transport for local communities and deliver higher air quality and green jobs in places such as Falkirk and Scarborough. My right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill), who is chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the bus and coach industry, has already been banging on my door about delivering those jobs in the UK. On my first visit today, to the Euro Bus expo in Birmingham, I saw that there are great opportunities for the UK.

We are making good progress. Since February 2020, we have provided funding to support 2,400 zero-emission buses in England. Our zero-emission bus regional areas scheme has given local authorities nearly £270 million in funding for zero-emission buses and infrastructure. Several buses funded by ZEBRA have already been ordered, including 193 by First Bus, which is the largest single order for electric buses in the UK outside London. I also saw some of the ones that Liverpool has ordered for its metro system today.

I am aware, however, that although 4,000 buses is a good starting point—some of those are still to come—it is only a starting point. We need to go further and faster to decarbonise the whole bus fleet across the whole country. That is why in March, the Government launched a consultation to help to set the legal end date for the sale of new non-zero-emission buses at some point between 2025 and 2032. We will confirm that exact date in due course. We have also launched calls for evidence to decarbonise coaches and minibuses—minibuses are actually one of the big issues.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I am much enjoying my hon. Friend's debut at the Dispatch Box. Having worked with him previously in the Department for Transport, I know that he is a great champion for buses.

I want to confirm everything that I have just heard. My hon. Friend said that the zero-emission bus roll-out, which has been so successful, is not just for the north-east but for the whole country. Perhaps he will take the opportunity, if he wants to visit the leading low-emission town in the country, to visit Harrogate early in his agenda.

**Mr Holden:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I would be delighted to visit Harrogate at the earliest opportunity, and I hope that he will take me to Bettys tearoom as part of that.

**Liz Twist:** Can the Minister confirm that the ZEBRA funding will continue in future? There are concerns about that.

**Mr Holden:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. My understanding is that it is all there. Obviously, the financial statement will happen in a couple of weeks, but my understanding is that, as of this moment, the bus funding is there and there is more to hit that target of 4,000 buses in future.

[Mr Holden]

To return to my previous point about phasing out and how we will deliver things more generally, agreeing a phase-out date will not just boost the transition to clean buses, but create new skilled jobs as operators and manufacturers will have greater certainty to invest. The hon. Lady will know from Nissan, which is just down the road and where many of our constituents work, how transformational the end date for car manufacturers has been. Hopefully, we will have the same when bus manufacturers move in that direction. A further £205 million of dedicated zero-emission bus funding is available this Parliament, which will keep up the momentum. The Department will provide more information on how that funding will be allocated in due course.

I acknowledge that a bid for round two of the levelling-up fund has been received from Transport North East to support zero-emission buses in the region. However, as I hope hon. Members will appreciate, given that the fund is a UK-wide competition and is currently in the assessment stage led by officials, it would not be appropriate for me to comment or express a view on bids at this stage. I wish all areas great luck in realising their local visions.

On service withdrawals and funding recovery, the hon. Lady made an important point. This has been a really difficult time for the bus sector, and we have had to provide unprecedented levels of support for operators—nearly £2 billion since March 2020—to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. The funding was due to end in October. However, while patronage on buses has stabilised at about the 80% figure the hon. Lady gave, and it is steadily increasing, it is still below pre-pandemic levels. That is why in August we brought forward an extra six-month, £130 million extension to that support until the end of March. We will have to see about allocations for the future, but I think we all hope that bus services will actually recover. We have seen that on off-peak services, but not on peak services yet.

**Liz Twist:** I thank the Minister for those comments. I think the concern is that there will be a gap between the BSIP funding and the current allocation. That will be a real problem in our constituencies, with further services being cancelled, and I know my constituents are really concerned.

**Mr Holden:** I totally understand the hon. Lady's concern, but I think we will have to wait for the financial statement to see whether there is anything further in that field. As I have said, however, I hope the BSIP funding will be coming through in the not-too-distant future in advance of that time—by the end of March.

I know that Nexus has been allocated nearly £13 million since March 2020 to help protect bus services in the north-east until December this year, in addition to the recovery funding we have provided directly to operators to keep things running. Over the long term, however, we are clear that the cycle of short-term recovery funding packages cannot continue indefinitely, and that is why we are looking at longer-term packages, including new arrangements between local authorities, whether franchising or closer working arrangements.

Driver shortages have been experienced in many different parts of the country recently. We have already increased the capacity for vocational driving tests, including through

the recruitment of additional driving examiners, to make it easier for operators to recruit and train bus and coach drivers up and down the country. We continue to engage with the bus and coach operators, as well as with industry bodies such as the Confederation of Passenger Transport. In fact, when I was in Birmingham today, I did a video pushing some of its new driver recruitment campaigns, which I am really hoping will be successful. Go North East itself has just increased driver pay rates for existing and new bus drivers by 10%, as well as putting in some bonuses, to help with recruitment and retention.

**Mary Glendon:** I congratulate the Minister on his new role. Pay for drivers is still pretty low, and while some have had their pay increased, others have not. When they are earning only £10 an hour for the responsibility they have, surely the Minister must try to do something to improve that.

**Mr Holden:** I thank the hon. Lady for speaking out. Obviously, the Government have put in place a huge number of measures to help reduce taxes on lower-paid workers, but I think this is something for the bus operators to take up, and the current ongoing disputes with unions need to be talked through. I know Go North East seems to have reached a settlement, and I hope other bus operators will also do so in the near future.

I would like to take this opportunity to place on record my thanks to the drivers around the country for the vital work they do every day. They absolutely were key workers during the pandemic, as the hon. Member for Blaydon said, and they played such a vital role to ensure that those who were required to travel were able to do so. We know nevertheless that driver shortages continue, and we will continue discussions with the sector to do more in this area.

I turn briefly to the issue of fares, which we know with the rising cost of living are a particular issue for people. The schemes that have been put in place, in addition to the funding the Government are providing, are there to help stop fares rising as much as we possibly can. A key ambition of the national bus strategy is to make services cheaper, and the over £1 billion we have allocated to local transport authorities to improve services will also support this, as will the bus improvement scheme we are looking for in the near future. We are already beginning to see a return on this investment, with reduced fare measures being introduced in Greater Manchester and Liverpool, to name just a couple of examples.

As we come out the other side of the pandemic, the Government remain determined that great bus services should be available to everyone everywhere, including in the north-east. I echo the hon. Lady's praise for bus drivers. In addition to the £3 billion that we are providing the sector to support improvements to bus services across the country, and the nearly £2 billion in pandemic funding recovery, the Government continue to provide funding to subsidise local bus services through other routes. We provide more than £200 million every year direct to operators through bus service operator grants, to help keep fares down and help them to run more extensive networks, and a further £42 million is provided to local transport authorities annually through those grants. There are 79 English local transport authorities



outside London, and Nexus has received more than £1 million this year to subsidise services in the north-east. We are also providing funding to local authorities so that old and disabled people up and down the country can travel on buses for free—a scheme that currently costs around £1 billion a year.

Once again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon, my neighbour, on securing this debate and raising this important issue. I hope she will continue to hold my feet to the fire as the new junior Minister in the Department responsible for this issue. I will write to her in due course once the Department can confirm the final allocation to Transport North East to deliver its bus service improvement plan, and I would be delighted to visit her constituency in future. Beyond my own constituency work I will shortly visit the region to look at improvements to the A1 between Scotswood and

North Brunton, to help ease congestion there, and hopefully that will have a knock-on impact on some of those services. I hope the hon. Lady will see that the Government are investing substantially to improve access to transport in the north-east, including our vital bus services, and I look forward to engaging with her in future as we seek to deliver improvements to buses in the north-east as well as the rest of England.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his excellent debut at the Dispatch Box.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.51 pm

*House adjourned.*



## Westminster Hall

Wednesday 2 November 2022

[JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

### Black Maternal Health Awareness Week 2022

[*Relevant Document: e-petition 301079, Improve Maternal Mortality Rates and Health Care for Black Women in the UK.*]

9.30 am

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Gray. I do not want to take too long on my point of order, but I thought it would be helpful for the Chamber to note the fact that it is Wednesday morning and that we are delighted to be here for this debate secured by the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy). I suspect that the hon. Lady will have quite a lot to say over the course of the morning, and I am just keen to ensure that we are all ready to take part in the debate.

**James Gray (in the Chair):** That is very gracious of the hon. Gentleman. It is not actually a point of order. None the less, I am grateful to him for saying it. I think the hon. Member for Streatham has nearly caught her breath, in which case I would like to call her to speak.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Gray. Obviously, this is a subject matter of much importance, and we should be aware of that. I am sure that the shadow Minister and the Minister are preparing copious replies for the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), after she has had a chance to address this really important matter. Mr Gray, you and I and everyone else in the Chamber understand that this debate is vital. Perhaps the hon. Member for Streatham is now ready.

**James Gray (in the Chair):** Again, that is very creditable of the hon. Gentleman, but it is not a point of order. It is worth recording that the hon. Gentleman has made known to me that in this particular debate, uniquely, he does not intend to speak. This is the first occasion I can remember chairing a debate in Westminster Hall when we did not benefit from his words of wisdom. We note that, and we are grateful to him for being here. We now come to the debate on Black Maternal Health Awareness Week, and I call Bell Ribeiro-Addy to move the motion.

9.32 am

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Streatham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Black maternal health awareness week.

Thank you very much, Mr Gray; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank my colleagues for their kind points of order. I am thankful, as always, that this debate has been awarded, so that we can once again have this vital discussion about the issues surrounding black maternal health.

Whenever I discuss black maternal health, I always take time to repeat the statistics around black maternal mortality. The reason I do that is twofold. First, the

statistics are harrowing, and it is only by confronting them that we can truly begin to address the issue. Secondly, the statistics have not changed at all—the findings that I repeat have not improved, despite this issue having been raised for a number of years. I know that it may take time before we see a real change in statistics, but the Government are yet to introduce any meaningful measures that give us confidence that the statistics will change any time soon. Most notably, they will not even look at producing a target.

I repeat it for everyone who may not have heard that black women are four times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth, women of mixed heritage are three times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth, and Asian women are twice as likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth. Black babies have a 121% increased risk of stillbirth and a 50% increased risk of neonatal death. Asian babies have a 55% increased risk of stillbirth and a 66% increased risk of neonatal mortality. Black women have a 43% higher risk of miscarriage, and black ethnicity is now regarded as a risk factor for miscarriage.

The last time we had this debate, one of the key themes that kept coming up was data, whether it was Members such as myself raising the fact that the data exists and research has been done—we just need the Government to engage with it—or the Minister who responded, the right hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), stating that black women are under-represented in the Government's data. I am pleased to say to the Minister responding today that there is now even more research out there.

Since the last time we had this debate, Five X More has carried out and released the findings of its black maternal experiences survey. This is the largest survey of black women's maternal experiences ever conducted in the UK. It gathered responses from over 1,300 women and looked at their experience of maternal care. The report highlights all the negative interactions that women experienced with healthcare professionals, from feeling discriminated against in their care to receiving a poor standard of care, which put their safety at risk, and being denied pain relief because of the ridiculous trope that black women are less likely to feel pain.

The report goes on to reveal how the discriminatory behaviour and attitudes that black, Asian and ethnic minority women face have been shown negatively to impact women's clinical outcomes and their experiences of care. More than half the respondents reported facing those challenges with healthcare professionals during maternity care, and 43% of women reported feeling discriminated against, while 42% of women reported feeling that the standard of care they received during childbirth was poor or very poor, and 36% reported feeling dissatisfied with how their concerns during labour were addressed by professionals.

Further to that, 42% of respondents reported feeling that their safety had been put at risk by professionals during labour or during the recovery period. Of the women who experienced negative maternity outcomes, 61% reported that they were not even offered additional support to deal with the outcome of their pregnancy.

**Jim Shannon:** I am pleased that the hon. Lady has brought this debate to Westminster Hall, and although there might not be big numbers here today to discuss the matter, it is of great importance. Does she not agree



[Jim Shannon]

that health trusts, which she has referred to, must ensure that no matter the level of the black, Asian and minority ethnic population, staff are adequately trained to deal with the differences with respect to different ethnic groups? Does she further agree that the messaging that comes from the Minister and the Department in this debate is the most important tool that health trusts have to ensure that women of all ages and all ethnic groups are clearly understood and supported, no matter where they are and no matter what the statistics and numbers may be?

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and he is absolutely right. I will come to training soon enough, and to what I believe individual trusts should be doing.

In addition to the Five X More report, Birthrights has recently published the findings of its inquiry into racial injustice and human rights in maternity care. The report uncovers the stories behind the statistics and demonstrates that it is racism—not broken bodies, as we are often told—that is the root of many of the inequalities of maternity outcomes and experiences. The study found that on a number of occasions, black women's safety was put at risk while they were receiving care. They were ignored or their pain was dismissed, and they experienced direct or indirect racism from care givers. They were subject to dehumanisation. Their right to informed consent was violated and they faced structural barriers to receiving healthcare. Those women were going through one of the most painful experiences of their lives—one that can leave them at their most vulnerable—yet they faced institutional racism that impacted their health and the health of their babies.

During a debate on this subject last year, I called on the Government to launch an inquiry into institutional racism and racial bias in the NHS, as well as in the field of medical education. I reiterate that call today and hope the Minister will address the issue of systemic racism in medical care.

In addition to those two reports, the Muslim Women's Network recently published a study that reviewed the experiences of Muslim women in maternity care. The report encompasses the maternity experiences of over 1,000 Muslim women, and it once again revealed that a huge proportion of respondents received poor or very poor quality care. There are many examples of substandard care by health professionals, such as dismissing concerns and, again, pain; not offering treatment to relieve symptoms; inconsistency in the way that foetal growth was measured; substandard clinical knowledge; and vital signs being missed, which contributed to poor healthcare.

Some 57% of women felt that they were not treated with respect and dignity in the way they were spoken to or in other acts of care giving, but perhaps the most shocking finding of the report was that 1% of the women who responded reported that their baby had died before or during labour, or within 28 days of birth. In a sample of this size, that equates to 10 women, which is way higher than the three to four who should have been expected.

Those statistics are shocking, but the stories are even more shocking. Each of those reports includes harrowing stories of women being neglected, and of their pain

being ignored and their concerns dismissed, resulting in a near miss or, indeed, the loss of their baby. In one account, a woman was not believed when she informed the midwife that she was ready to push. It states that when she eventually began to push,

“Her baby came out still enveloped in the placenta. Several doctors came and she was taken to theatre as it became an emergency situation. It was touch and go but she survived. Due to heavy blood loss she was in a coma for three days. Her baby had to be given intensive care.”

In another account, a woman reports that her baby was struggling to breathe after birth. She says:

“I was told that it was a normal thing for newborns. No checks were done to put my mind at ease. After about 20 mins, my baby stopped breathing. Efforts were made to resuscitate her, but she later died in NICU.”

One woman recalled that during her first check-up, a nurse said that she was shocked that she knew who the father of her baby was because people like her do not usually know.

There are thousands of similar stories of black, Asian and minority ethnic women having negative experiences with healthcare professionals and maternity care. There is an urgent need to address the crisis in maternity care, and I sincerely hope that the Minister will set out concrete steps that her Department and the Government will take to address the problem.

I sincerely hope those measures will look beyond treating black, Asian and minority ethnic women as a problem. We are not the problem and our bodies are not broken. There is no flaw in our genetics and we do not need to be dealt with in a way that reduces negative statistics by just pushing the problem away. The suggestion that black women should be induced earlier because a lot of these issues present after 40 weeks is ridiculous.

The solutions need to address the distinct problems in maternity care; all the evidence suggests institutional racism. We must address biases and assumptions about black women, train medical staff to recognise common symptoms in black women, and tackle the barriers that prevent black women from receiving the quality of maternity care they deserve. That is where the problems lie, and we will overcome them by directly addressing racial disparities.

Last year when we debated this subject, the responding Minister asked me and others to continue to hold her feet to the fire on this issue. I thought they were really receptive and that we were finally going to see some meaningful steps to tackle maternal health disparities. I left the debate feeling slightly hopeful because so much awareness had been raised by the fantastic campaign groups I mentioned earlier, and there was a lot of support across the House. I was therefore really surprised and quite deflated when the next day the Minister moved Departments in a reshuffle. I know Cabinet reshuffles happen all the time—

**David Linden:** All the time.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** They are a standard part of government, but we have lost count of the Health Secretaries and Ministers covering this brief. Today, we have a Minister from a different Department addressing us. I know it may seem like I am making a party political point, but regardless of reshuffles, Government priorities and resignations, the problems in maternity care continue. Although we cannot have continuity in

Government for whatever reason, we need continuity in care and a strategy for dealing with racial disparities in maternity care.

It is hard to see the Government taking action when things are changing so frequently, but I sincerely hope the Minister will assure us that the Government are focused on this issue, regardless of the changes, and that her time in this role will be spent tackling black maternal health disparities.

Black women cannot afford to wait any longer for action to be taken. I do not want to have to stand up in another debate and cite exactly the same statistics without any improvement. I know things take time, but it would be sensational to come back next year and report that at least something had changed. The best way for Ministers to exact that change is to set out clearly what the Government are doing and set a clear target.

The answer I have been given in the past when I have asked for a target is that this does not happen to that many women, so a target does not need to be set. I would flip that round: if it is not that many women, surely we can set a target to address it.

9.44 am

**Caroline Nokes** (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Thank you—Sir James?

**James Gray (in the Chair)**: Sadly no—not yet. It is in the post.

**Caroline Nokes**: That is a terrible omission. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) for leading this debate on a crucial issue.

The Women and Equalities Committee has twice held one-off evidence sessions—although there is a slight conundrum in twice having one-off sessions—looking at black maternal health. It has taken evidence from campaign groups, such as Five X More, and experts in obstetrics and gynaecology, yet the picture does not change. Looking at the evidence, we have known that there is a disparity in the health outcomes for black mothers since the early 2000s. For 20 years, we have known that there is a problem, yet still it continues. It has been a huge privilege for me to serve on panels alongside people such as Clo and Tinuke from Five X More, who have done so much incredible campaigning to highlight the issue, as has the hon. Member for Streatham. It is crucial that we begin to see progress; we cannot, 12 months or 10 years down the line, continue to have the same debate.

Raising awareness in Parliament is vital, but what we actually need is Government action. The hon. Member for Streatham made a slight dig about Government reshuffles. I am delighted to see the Minister in her place; this is an issue on which we have engaged before and she takes it seriously. I hope that the Secretary of State for Health will himself grasp the issue, and ensure that we drive it forward to see progress.

We have heard that one of the challenges is data, and the lack of specific data being collected on maternal health outcomes for black and Asian women. I pay tribute to Five X More, which carried out its own experiences survey that included 2,000 women—a huge number—reporting their experiences and findings. The

thing that really hits home for me is the repeated use of the phrases, “I didn’t feel listened to,” “We weren’t listened to,” and, “What I was experiencing was being ignored.”

I am loth to say that we sometimes have very gendered healthcare, but look at the evidence. Look at the fact that when there is medical research, it is almost exclusively carried out on men; look at the fact that drug trials are carried out on men; look at the fact that some of the highest backlogs as we come out of the pandemic are in health conditions predominantly affecting women. Whether it is in cardiac, obstetrics or another sphere of medicine, too often the experience is, “I didn’t think they were listening to me.” I am sure every Member hears that from their constituents, and that has been my experience as a constituency MP. I hear from my constituents that, specifically in the area of maternity, “I wasn’t listened to. Nobody paid attention. It was my body, and I knew something was wrong.”

Only last week, I received an email from a constituent who had lost his daughter-in-law moments after she gave birth. He was with his son, helping to bring up a baby and pursue a complaints procedure against the hospital in question. Throughout his email, he kept making the point that they had not been listened to. His daughter-in-law had been a midwife, and even she was not listened to.

Talking to black and particularly Muslim women—I should declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Muslim women—they feel that their voices are doubly ignored, and that there is that intersectionality. Whenever I talk to journalists about intersectionality, they look at me and say, “Please don’t use that word. Nobody understands that word.” It is imperative that we all understand that word. You will be discriminated against if you are a woman, and you will be discriminated against if you are a woman from a black, Asian or other minority ethnic group; when the two come together, as we find in maternity units in particular, women’s voices are not heard or listened to.

When we talk to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, as the hon. Member for Streatham has done, it calls for specific targets for black maternal health outcomes, and it is right to do so. Although it may be a small number as a percentage of births every year, it is still a significant number. The loss of one mother is one too many.

**Jim Shannon**: It is always a pleasure to listen to the right hon. Lady; she brings lots of wisdom and knowledge to these debates. Ministers in other debates we have had in Westminster Hall, in different positions in the Department of Health and Social Care, have always spoken about the issue of data. The hon. Lady is outlining examples of where data could be used to formulate a Government and ministerial response. Does she agree that the Government really need to grasp the data issue? They can then prioritise their strategy to respond.

**Caroline Nokes**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I did not think he would be entirely able to resist speaking in the debate. He is right: policies must be data-driven and evidenced, but the evidence is there and has been for many years. We are augmenting and adding to that body of evidence the whole time.

[Caroline Nokes]

I will not be entirely negative, because we have some great opportunities. I was pleased to see Dame Lesley Regan appointed women's health ambassador earlier this year. I welcome, reinforce, champion and offer anything I can to help the women's health strategy. Finally, we have one of those, and I pay tribute to the Minister who was instrumental in getting that published. What we now need from the strategy is outcomes. That has to be the focus. What is happening to drive outcomes, and to ensure that the disparities we know exist are recognised, acted on and reduced? Our goal has to be to reduce that horrendous figure of four times as many maternal deaths for black women. We have to improve the outcomes for black babies, so that there is not, as I think the hon. Member for Streatham said, a more than 100% likelihood of stillbirth—

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Increased risk.

**Caroline Nokes:** Increased risk. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight that as an imperative. We must ensure that we reduce the inequity, of which there are many drivers. She was with me when the Women and Equalities Committee took evidence from Professor Sir Michael Marmot, who talks so compellingly about health inequalities and their drivers.

I will not say that there is anything wrong with black women's bodies—there is not—but we have to look at housing conditions, air quality and the areas where they live. Air quality is a significant driver of poor health outcomes. We have to look at what we are doing around smoking cessation, which is good for not just black women, but all women. We have to look at obesity, which is, again, a crucial factor for all women.

I look forward to seeing, in the remainder of this Parliament, focused and determined action around obesity, smoking cessation and air quality. There are targets on all those things, but—how can I put this gently?—there has been a little backsliding on some of them. Targets have been pushed into the dim and distant future, and there is less commitment around drives to reduce obesity and smoking, which are incredible drivers of poor health outcomes across the population. We should double down on our commitment to those targets.

I hope that in due course—I get fed up of saying “in due course”, which is a standard ministerial answer—to see a White Paper on health disparities. It is imperative that we get that done, and that the women's health strategy is seen as a driver to ensure that we improve outcomes. First and foremost, I reiterate the calls from the hon. Member for Streatham for targets. I am never a great fan of targets if they are just there for the collection of targets, but if they work, and we see that in many instances they do, we should have them.

We should have time-limited targets, so that in maybe three years we can look and say, “Nothing has changed.” Looking at the data and the evidence from campaign groups, I see that over 20 years, nothing has changed. I do not want to be here in 20 years' time giving the same speech on this important issue, feeling that nothing has changed. I look forward to the Minister's comments, and reiterate my congratulations to the hon. Member for Streatham on calling for today's debate.

9.53 am

**Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Gray, and to be in this debate, although I hope that in future there will be no need for one, because we will have solved these issues, and women using maternity services can expect the same care and equal outcomes. That is why I was keen to be here, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) on bringing forward the debate and on pursuing this issue. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response because it needs to be a priority.

In Wandsworth, 30% of residents are from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, and black maternal health is a big issue for us in Putney. We have a group called Putney Black Lives Matter. We meet to discuss important local issues, and black maternal health was highlighted as an issue of major importance. We are few here today, but across the country it is a big issue for many people: last year's petition to improve maternal mortality rates and healthcare for black women was signed by 187,520 people, of whom 200 were from Putney.

I thank the campaign groups that have raised the issue so strongly: the Five X More campaign, Bliss, Sands, Birthrights, and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. They have raised the issues of systemic racism and structural barriers, which lead to the appalling statistics read out by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham. The statistics are worth reiterating, because they are at the heart of the issue. Black babies have a 50% increased risk of neonatal death and a 121% increased risk of stillbirth. Black women have a 43% higher risk of miscarriage, and are four times more likely to die during pregnancy or up to six weeks postpartum. Women of mixed heritage are three times more likely to die during pregnancy, and Asian women twice as likely. Those are horrendous statistics. Each loss of life is a tragedy, but it is also a gross injustice about which we should all care deeply. The statistics need to be understood, and need to change.

It is important to place those awful statistics in the wider picture of health inequalities. Black women face disparities when it comes to stillbirth, cancer diagnosis and outcomes, and access to fertility treatment. That is entrenched and deep-rooted inequality, racism and sexism. It will be hard to turn that around. The Minister will need to come back to this again and again, and to knock heads together in different Departments across Government to change it. But it must be done.

I have a lovely list of seven things on which I want to see action, and I hope that the Minister will respond to it. First, we need a whole-Government approach that recognises inequalities and their links to wider Government policies, as was mentioned by the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes). We need the White Paper on health disparities, which will look across Departments. We need a new tobacco control plan for England, public health measures to address obesity, and a new air equality target for England, because those are all factors in increased black maternal mortality figures.

Black communities in the UK have an increased risk of poorer maternal and perinatal outcomes, including stillbirth and miscarriage. There are also inequalities in



exposure to air pollution; that is the link between air pollution and maternal health inequalities. We must commit to reaching the interim World Health Organisation targets by 2030, rather than 2040; we can speed that up. What gets counted counts, and if there is a target, people strain to reach it more strongly. Dangerous levels of air pollution, especially in our urban areas, must be addressed.

The second issue is the continuity of carer. I pay tribute to the NHS South West London Clinical Commissioning Group—now the NHS South West London Integrated Care Board—and its chief nurse for what they do to tackle black maternal inequalities, especially in the area of continuity of carer. Women need the same team throughout pregnancy. I also pay tribute to our wonderful Emerald midwifery team from the St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. Where there is continuity of carer, women are 16% less likely to lose their babies. That is a major focus for change in south-west London. Local maternity systems across the country have been asked to implement equity and action plans, which include the target of 75% of women from black, Asian and mixed ethnic groups receiving continuity of carer by 2024. I hope that we can increase that figure. Progress is being made towards the target. However, we must look at the target, find out whether there is enough data to measure it, and ensure that across the country, no matter where people live, we strive towards it. Will the Minister comment on the status of the continuity of carer target?

In their response to the Health and Social Care Committee report on the safety of maternity services in England, the Government accepted the recommendation on training for continuity of carer teams. It is essential that there be training across the board and implementation of continuity of carer teams, but obviously that relies on there being enough staff, which depends on the midwife workforce having enough funding.

Thirdly, I would like an end to charging migrant women for maternity care. Charging for care deters many women from seeking vital antenatal care, and it is shocking that the MBRRACE-UK confidential inquiry on maternal death identified that three women who died may have been reluctant to seek care because of cost. It is shocking that that happens in this day and age, in our communities—that women may be afraid to seek care because of their immigration, asylum seeker or migrant status.

My fourth point is about further evidence, research and data, which was mentioned by other hon. Members. Differences in outcomes and the reasons for them are unclear and under-researched, but we know that what gets counted counts. I join campaigners in calling for an annual maternity survey of black women, and increased research to identify the conditions that disproportionately affect black women. We should improve the ethnic coding of health records, and the system through which women submit feedback, so their voices are heard. It should be as easy as possible for them to provide feedback while they are still in hospital or under maternity care, so that we can hear those voices and they can feed into the survey data.

My fifth point is about maternity bereavement services. As was highlighted last week during the debate on baby loss, there is a difference in bereavement services across the country. On whether there are adequate bereavement

services for those women who, sadly, suffer bereavement, the figures are shocking. St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, of which Queen Mary's Hospital in my constituency is part, now has two bereavement midwives, two specialist consultants and one part-time psychotherapist in the maternity bereavement team. There are dedicated places for those who have suffered bereavement in maternity services across the NHS South West London Integrated Care Board area, which is to be welcomed. However, is this happening across the whole country? That is questionable. That support is very important at the time of loss, but also during care in future pregnancies.

Sixthly, I request, as others have, a White Paper on health disparities. That is important if we are to tackle the issue and look at the many other underlying reasons for the statistics. Seventhly, I ask for a target. In any ministerial meetings on this important issue, I hope that a target will be the Minister's No.1 ask. We need one, followed by a concentrated effort to achieve it. I hope that will lead to the change we need.

In conclusion, black women cannot afford to wait any longer for action. There needs to be a clear action plan, data, transparency and a target. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response, but I look forward even more to action. I thank all the midwives, in maternity services throughout the country, who give extraordinary care, and who go above and beyond.

**James Gray (in the Chair):** The hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) was not here at the start of the debate, but unusually we have plenty time, so I am happy to call her to speak.

10.3 am

**Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind):** You are very kind, Mr Gray, and it is an honour to serve under your chairship. I thank the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) for securing this vital debate.

The health of our nation is reflected in the health of our mothers, and the shocking statistics paint a picture of nothing short of gross negligence. I thank Tinuke and Clo for producing the groundbreaking "Black Maternity Experience Report". Their platform, Five X More, helped to spread information about the survey. I also thank the participants for sharing their powerful testimonies, and the all-party parliamentary group on black maternal health for demanding an urgent solution to the crisis.

It is worth repeating that black mothers are four times more likely to lose their life during childbirth, and they are up to twice as likely to have severe pregnancy complications. Some 42% of women surveyed in the Five X More report felt that the standard of care they received during childbirth was poor or very poor. Successive Governments since at least the 1970s have systematically failed to address the shocking statistics on black maternal health, including on the standard of care they receive during childbirth. The "Black Maternity Experiences" report reveals that, even today, professionals still display racist and white supremacist attitudes and insensitivity towards black mothers without remorse. Black mothers suffer in silence through fear of reprisals, and fear that their care will become worse if they complain.

[Claudia Webbe]

If ever there was a need for the Government's long-promised White Paper on health inequalities, it is now. Will the Minister urge for it to be put back on the agenda? Shelving the health disparities White Paper only compounds the suffering and pain of black mothers. Without it, any progress made by the newly appointed maternity disparities taskforce will be slowed.

There is a crisis in midwifery up and down the country. Home birth teams are underfunded, delivery suites are closing, and the maternity workforce have seen management changes that prevent them from doing their jobs effectively. The disproportionate number of deaths of black mothers and their babies cannot simply be reduced to genetic or cultural factors. Equity in access to first-class healthcare is a must, and that means setting targets and specific funding for highly trained healthcare professionals, as outlined in the Five X More report. We know that black women are poorer, live in inadequate housing and suffer disproportionate environmental pollution, and that their educational chances and outcomes are disproportionately lower. Wealth inequalities are rampant.

The fiscal shortfall of £35 billion that was recently announced by the new Chancellor will drive the Government's tax-and-spend plans; the Government are looking at 101 ways to cut spending. This is the worst news possible for black maternal healthcare. It demonstrates a callous ideology that seeks to cut spending instead of taxing earth-shattering levels of idle wealth—an ideology that risks further harm to black women and other racialised groups by avoiding wholesale investment in healthcare.

As we know, all mothers are superheroes who nurture babies, children and society, but black mothers have to overcome systemic barriers put in place by successive Governments, which result in black women's wealth, health, education and environmental access not being equal to that of their counterparts. Alongside improving treatment and care, we have to start having frank conversations about the racialised distribution of wealth in the UK and what we need to do to tackle it and eradicate race inequalities in health outcomes. Mr Gray, I am sure you will agree that black mothers cannot wait any longer. The time for action is now.

10.9 am

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) on securing the debate and on opening it so well.

I was not due to speak in this debate on behalf of the Scottish National party; it was supposed to be my constituency neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), who has sadly been incapacitated and remains in Glasgow. I hope that those present will bear with me.

I speak primarily from my position as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on premature and sick babies, because our APPG has looked into the issue of racial disparities in maternal healthcare, as well as inequalities more generally in maternal healthcare and neonatal services. These topics merit more attention from the Government. As hon. Members have said, there have been numerous debates, questions, early-day

motions and all those kinds of things on this topic. The benchmark for whether the Government are getting this right is whether we will be back in this Chamber in 10 or 15 years' time to have the same conversation. I certainly hope we will not.

The Birthrights report, "Systemic racism, not broken bodies", outlines the systematic racism in maternity services. That report confirms the devastating fact that black, Asian and mixed-ethnicity women are more likely to experience baby loss and illness, or to become seriously ill, and have worse experiences of care during pregnancy and throughout childbirth. I want to advocate for the report's conclusion, which calls for a commitment to anti-racism by all maternity and neonatal services, and a commitment to ensuring that there are more black and brown women and birthing people decision makers in the wider maternity system. We have to look at the ticking time bomb in the neonatal and maternity workforce; that absolutely has to be in the mix. The report also calls for a safe and inclusive maternity and birthing experience for all parents, which I think we would all want to get behind.

Healthcare is devolved in Scotland, which is largely why I do not want to impose too much in this debate. However, the SNP Scottish Government believe that there needs to be an open and honest conversation about race and institutional racism right across these islands—Scotland is not immune—in order to identify solutions that will lead to equality and positive outcomes for black and minority ethnic communities. Members have asked a number of questions of the Government; for the sake of brevity, and so as not to repeat what has been said, I will just say that I would like to hear the Minister respond to those, particularly the seven points made by the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson).

I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Streatham for securing this debate and giving us an opportunity to focus on this issue. Most importantly, I am looking forward to hearing what the Government have to say, and to seeing what best practice can be rolled out in Scotland, because no part of these islands have a monopoly of wisdom or ideas.

10.12 am

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) for obtaining this debate, and for all the work she has been doing on this issue for many years. I also thank the incredible campaigners who continue to work tirelessly to end black maternal health inequalities.

Maternal health inequalities exist throughout our country. It is very much a case of hit and miss: in some parts of the country the statistics are good, while in others they are not. However, black maternal health inequalities do seem to persist throughout our country. I also thank the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, who talked about the work that her Committee has done, but also noted that although this issue has been discussed for so many years, not much progress has been made on many of the concerns. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) spoke eloquently about the issues in

Wandsworth and generally. In particular, she touched on bereavement services, the quality of which varies across the country as well. I thank the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) for the very passionate speech she made. I agree with her: all mothers are superheroes. I do not think any debate would be complete without an intervention or speech from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is not in his place; I thank him for his intervention as well.

As we have heard repeatedly in this debate, it is shameful that black women continue to be over four times as likely, and Asian women over twice as likely, to die in childbirth or pregnancy than white women. I am very grateful for the work of campaigners, obstetricians, midwives, and black and Asian women with lived experience of maternal health complications for sharing their experiences and expertise on the issue. They are clear that socioeconomic determinants and comorbidity only partially explain those disparities in treatment. Black and Asian women and their partners are not being listened to, they are not being respected and they are certainly not being cared for. When they voice pain or concern during pregnancy or childbirth, they are often branded as aggressive or angry, while dangerous stereotypes about the strong black woman mean that they are often not offered the same treatment as white women. Meanwhile, the lack of cultural competency in medical training in our country means that many complications are not spotted early enough.

That structural inequality exists both inside and outside our health services. Many black, Asian and ethnic minority women experience it long before and long after pregnancy. However, the Government have done nothing to address this outrageous inequality. In fact, on their watch over the last 12 years, maternal mortality for black women has actually increased from 28 deaths per 100,000 in 2013 to 2015, to 34 per 100,000 in the years 2016 to 2018.

Gynaecology wait times are very high. A survey from the charity Five X More found that 27% of women surveyed felt that they received a poor or very poor standard of care during pregnancy, labour and postnatal care. Also, 42% of women repeatedly felt discriminated against during their maternity care, with the most common reasons given being race, at 51%, ethnicity, at 18%, age, at 17%, and class, at 7% of respondents. More than half the women reported facing challenges with healthcare professionals during their maternity care, while over half the black women reported not receiving their preferred method of pain relief.

Where is the Government's action on this? In the last 18 months alone, we have seen their response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities fail to address black maternal inequality, as well as a women's health strategy that completely fails to establish what concrete action the Government will take to protect the lives of black, Asian and ethnic minority mothers. It is hardly a surprise that the women's health strategy has failed black, Asian and ethnic minority women, given that just 2% of the respondents who were surveyed were Asian and 3% were black. I am not trying to be party political here, but while the Government are busy crashing the economy and causing chaos at a time of national crisis, black, Asian and ethnic minority women continue to face the consequences of their inertia and ineptitude.

Last year, in passing the Health and Care Act 2022, the Government had an opportunity to prioritise the health of black, Asian and ethnic minority women by voting for Labour's amendment to mandate the Secretary of State to prepare and publish a report on disparities in the quality and safety of England's maternal services, including maternal mortality rates. However, the Government chose to vote against it. It was a very simple measure that could have helped, but no, they voted against it. The Labour party has committed to setting a target to end the horrendous inequality faced by black, Asian and ethnic minority women as soon as we are in government.

That will be part of our commitment to end structural inequality at the root, with a landmark race equality Act to be introduced by the next Labour Government. We are committed to pulling the NHS out of crisis so that it can deliver for everyone, including black, Asian and ethnic minority mothers. We will enact the biggest extension of medical school places in history. We will double the number of district nurses, train 5,000 new health visitors and, crucially for maternal health, introduce an extra 10,000 nursing and midwifery clinical placements each year. Our fully costed plan will be funded by ending the non-domicile tax status regime, which, it is estimated, would raise more than £3.2 billion every year. Growing the NHS will also grow the economy and eradicate these inequalities once and for all.

I welcome the Minister to her new position. Like me, she has just recently joined this brief. While we wait for these changes, what is being done to address structural inequalities and build trust in maternity services for BME mothers, their partners and midwives from ethnic minority backgrounds? Additionally, what plan does the Minister have to improve cultural competency and unconscious bias training in medical schools and the health service?

There is also the huge issue of the lack of available data, which has not been tackled in either the women's health strategy or the Government's response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. As we have heard, accurate data disaggregated by ethnicity is central to closing the gap in maternal mortalities. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that all maternity services record the specific ethnicity of all mothers? Fatalities are just the tip of the iceberg, with many women speaking of near misses and poor treatment, so will the Minister commit to collecting and publishing that data?

Some midwives also consider that the continuity of carer model could help to end these inequalities. A 2016 study found that women who see the same midwife throughout their pregnancy are 16% less likely to lose their baby. Despite that, the NHS has recently been forced to drop targets included in the NHS long-term plan to ensure continuity of carer for 75% of BME women by 2024 as a result of staffing shortages. It is clear that the Government are failing these women. What steps is the Minister taking to end the staffing shortages in maternity care so that those targets can be reintroduced and met by 2024?

I have to say, it is scandalous that the Government have not yet even set a target to end this inequality. They have been in power for 12 years—that is a very long time in which to have comprehensively changed



[Yasmin Qureshi]

the system. Will they now commit to doing so immediately? We did it for stillbirths. Why has black maternity mortality not been a priority for the Government?

This is an avoidable inequality. There are many steps we could be taking to end these awful disparities. Instead, the Government have done nothing while the issue has got worse. The Government must take action to address maternal health inequalities. We need a national strategy to tackle health inequality as a matter of urgency, which must include a commitment to eradicating the mortality gap between black, Asian and ethnic minority women and white women. Only Labour can deliver that strategy as part of our plan to tackle structural inequality at the root and lift the NHS out of crisis.

I hope that the Minister will answer some of those questions today and commit to specific action that will be taken, because this cannot go on. These appalling statistics—the fact that black women have four times the mortality rates of others—are not acceptable in a decent, civilised society.

10.25 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) for securing this debate. As she highlighted, we had a similar debate recently. I hope that my comments reassure her that we are taking action and making progress in this area.

I take the issue of maternal disparities very seriously; that is why when I was in post previously I set up the maternity disparities taskforce, which has brought together a range of specialists and campaigners. We have heard from groups such as Five X More and the Muslim Women's Network to hear their views on what is going wrong right now, what systems we need to put in place to improve outcomes and also the experiences of black women in maternity services.

The data shows the disparities in black maternal health. We have heard about them clearly this morning, and I do not think anyone is in any disagreement about the scale of the problem we are facing. As the hon. Member for Streatham said, it is harrowing to hear those figures. The MBRRACE annual surveillance report shows that women of black ethnicity are four times more likely to die from pregnancy and birth compared with white women. I do not think there is a dispute about that; we fully acknowledge it and we want to reverse that trend as quickly as possible.

**Caroline Nokes:** I want to make a quick point about MBRRACE and the data. Data collection remains tricky, with some hospitals not reporting women's deaths—not necessarily maternal deaths—until up to 500 days after they have happened. Then there is a delay with the medical records and notes, which might indicate the reasons for that. What reassurance can the Minister give that she will work to reduce those times?

**Maria Caulfield:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Although Five X More does its surveys about the experience of women, the data on outcomes is very delayed. When we put measures in place, we cannot see the difference they make until the data comes through,

roughly 18 months to two years later, as my right hon. Friend said. That lag does not help us determine whether the measures we are putting in place are actually making a difference. Getting that on track is a key priority for me so that we can accurately measure what is happening.

From the data that we do have, *The Lancet* series in April last year found that black women have an increased relative risk of 40% of miscarriage compared with white women, and the stillbirth rate in England for black babies is 6.3 per 1,000 births, compared with 3.2 per 1,000 births for white women. That is completely unacceptable, and as the hon. Member for Streatham said, we cannot come back here, debate after debate, without seeing those figures move. One potential cause for optimism is that we do not have up-to-date data on the benefits of the interventions that we have put in place, so it might be better than we think. However, we absolutely need that data, not only to measure what is happening, but to know whether we are heading in the right direction if we set targets in the future.

To reassure Members, I want to clarify the point about not setting a target because the problem is too small. I do not agree that the problem is too small; it is a significant problem. Even if it is affecting one or two women, it is a significant problem, so that is not a reason not to set a target. As the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) pointed out, there are multiple factors in why black women often face poorer outcomes in pregnancy and birth, and for their babies. It is a mix of personal, social, economic and environmental factors. Air quality, which the hon. Member touched on, also has an impact on overall health. The maternity disparities taskforce found that being in a lower socioeconomic group has a significant effect on maternal outcomes, and black and ethnic women are often in those groups and so face a double whammy in terms of their likely outcomes.

We cannot just fix this in isolation at the Department of Health and Social Care. That is why I am pleased that in my role for women's health—I am also the Minister for Women, across the board—I can bring in other Departments, because we need to take a cross-Government approach to this issue. Whether it is the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on air quality, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on housing, or the Department for Work and Pensions on employment, we need to work together so that all the factors affecting black maternal health are addressed in tandem to address this issue.

We know from a health perspective that pregnant black women are more likely to suffer from some chronic diseases that will affect their maternity outcomes, and in particular cause poorer mental health. There are health initiatives that we can put in place to ensure that we improve the outcomes for black women, but that cannot be done in isolation from the other factors that also negatively affect them.

Given the risks that such conditions pose in pregnancy, there is a need for safe personalised care for black women and women from ethnic backgrounds, because the needs of women from each and every community are so different. Just nationally introducing blanket systems will not address some of the problems; there is no one single solution that will improve the statistics and improve the outcomes for women.

The issue is not just the outcomes from maternity services. As we heard from the hon. Member for Streatham, the Five X More survey also reflects the general experience by black women of the healthcare system. Although black women are often at a more difficult point to start with, when they engage with health services they often have a very negative experience. We have seen that in the recent publication of the East Kent maternity report and in the Ockenden maternity review, which highlighted that there is racial discrimination present in some parts of the maternity services.

We cannot allow that to continue, because if we want black women to come and engage with services and to come forward when they have concerns, if they feel that they are not being listened to or if they raise concerns and they are dismissed, why would we be surprised when they do not engage with services in the future? Regarding the East Kent report in particular, I will look at the calls for action on how we improve black women's experience of the healthcare system and considering how we can address those issues as urgently as possible.

When we consider the actions that we are putting in place, and I will touch on some of the ones that have already started, I am very much a supporter of Professor Marmot's idea of proportionate universalism, whereby we introduce good services across the country but then we target those people who are most in need; in the case of black maternal health, that is clearly women from the black community. We need to go to them rather than expecting them to come to the health service: we have a universal offer, but ensure that it is targeted specifically at those who do not experience the best outcomes.

On targets, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) touched on earlier, we have an issue with data collection across the board in health services, including in maternity services. Black women often experience the worst outcomes, although some of the data that we are seeing is from 2020. For some of the initiatives that we have put in place in the last year or 18 months, we are not yet seeing the benefit of those initiatives in terms of outcomes. I am being very candid here: we have not got a handle on what is making a difference, or on which parts of the country are doing well—as was acknowledged by the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), the shadow Minister, there are some very good practices in place—and which parts of the country are still not supporting women in the way that women want.

We are working with NHS England, the Office for National Statistics, MBRRACE-UK and the National Neonatal Research Database, because there are also multiple sources of data. We need to pull all the data together and get it as close to real-time data as we can, so that when we introduce interventions and measures we can know whether they work.

As part of the maternity disparities taskforce, I am also keen to make sure that we include black women more in the national patient survey, because the shadow Minister was quite right that we had over 100,000 responses to the women's health strategy but only a small percentage of those responses came from black and ethnic minority women. That illustrates the problem that we are talking about—that black women do not feel represented, or do not feel engaged with the process. So we have to change things and work is being done to address that situation.

We are introducing some measures. First, we have set guidance that each local maternity system is now working in partnership with women and their families and their local areas to draw up equity and equality action plans. For each local maternity system's local area, there has to be a plan in place about how to improve the outcomes for women. The plans are agreed by the local maternity systems and the new integrated care boards, which were set up in the summer. They were published last week, so I encourage hon. Members to look at their local action plans to see what they are putting forward and to challenge them if they feel that they are not meeting local community needs. That is why they are done on a local basis: what is appropriate in my constituency of Lewes may be different to what is needed in Streatham, Putney, Leicester East, or Romsey and Southampton North. It is really important that we look at those action plans to make sure that they address the problems that we are concerned about. Every plan is being reviewed by NHS England, which will identify areas of good practice and the support that is needed to drive them forward.

In addition, we have also commissioned 14 maternal medicine networks covering the whole of England, which will ensure that women have access to specialist management. We know that black women are more at risk of high blood pressure, diabetes and sickle cell anaemia and yet many of those risk factors for their pregnancy and birth are not dealt with or managed. The maternal medicines network will bring in specialists so that, at an early stage of their pregnancy, those women can access those specialists to help them manage their pregnancy. They will also be offered pre-conception advice for further pregnancies. We have never done that before. We are targeting the risk factors of black women, and all women who are at risk, to make sure that they get the medical support and advice that they need during and after their pregnancy.

The Department also launched the £7.6 million health and wellbeing fund last year, which is supporting 19 projects throughout England to try to generate best practice guidelines that we can introduce to help reduce disparities. These projects include supporting expectant young black fathers in child development and providing perinatal mental health support for black mothers. If we can get some evidence-based best practice, we can look to roll that out across the country in the coming months and years. There is a lot of work going on.

I will touch on the issue of racial discrimination. It is clearly unacceptable that black, Asian and ethnic minority women feel that the health service is not accessible or not responsive to their needs. There is education and training for NHS staff on health disparities to eliminate bias and racism in obstetrics and gynaecology. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists' race equality taskforce has developed e-learning cultural competencies. They now form part of the colleges' members continuing professional development. The Nursing and Midwifery Council is also looking at how to promote and embed equality and respect in professional practice, so that they can create an environment where everyone feels that they can access the services they need. We will obviously continue to look at this with the maternity disparities taskforce, which is bringing in campaigners, experts and professionals to try to drive momentum on this issue.

[Maria Caulfield]

Data is the key. I can give a commitment here that has been highlighted already. We need that data. We cannot be working with data that is two years old to see if we are making a difference because, if we are, we will not know about it for two years and will not be able to roll out good practice in other parts of the country. In my brief as the Minister for Women, I am aiming to bring that across other Departments as well.

I hope I have reassured hon. and right hon. Members in today's debate that I am committed to continuing the work to tackle the disparities in outcomes to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to live a long and happy life. I am happy to work with the APPG on black maternal health, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Streatham, because it is only by working together to identify good practice and raising it when things are not working well that we can eliminate the disparity: it is unacceptable that black women are four times more likely to die during pregnancy simply because they are black women.

10.38 am

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I thank all Members for participating in the debate and adding their voices to all those that are calling for steps to be taken to end racial disparities in maternity care. It is always reassuring to hear just how much support there is across the House when the issues are raised. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is always a huge support in a range of different debates, but who has been particularly helpful today. I also thank the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), who does fantastic work as the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee and also as the chair of the APPG on Muslim women.

I will point out some of the disparities that she has touched on, including those detailed in a report from the Muslim Women's Network. That report showed that Muslim Somali women who had given birth in other parts of Europe found that, although they faced worse discrimination in society in those other parts of Europe, they received much better maternal care in hospitals in those other European countries, namely Norway and Sweden, than they did in the UK. They had better outcomes as well. That is definitely something for us to look at.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North pointed out the different factors that affect black maternal health outcomes, which all come full circle to point to the institutional racism that black women face across society. I thank the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) very much for raising the issue of the health disparities White Paper. We absolutely need to see the White Paper soon. Without it, I am not sure how we are going to set a benchmark for things changing overall.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) is not here, but she is hugely supportive, and I hope she feels better soon. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) did some great work with the all-party parliamentary group on premature and sick babies, and I was pleased to see the group calling for anti-racism across care. That has been particularly important.

Yesterday, we had a lobby in Parliament in which Five X More lobbied parliamentarians. I thank all those who signed the pledge calling on the Government to use existing data to close the gap and to address overall disparities in maternal outcomes. Tinuke and Clo from Five X More continue to punch well above their weight. Five X More is the only black maternal health charity focused specifically on the outcomes for black women, and also the only such charity that I can think of that receives no funding. It has been able to do all this work off its own bat, which is testament to Tinuke and Clo and their dedication to resolving these disparities.

How could I forget my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi)? I welcome her to her new post of shadow equalities Minister, and I was very pleased to hear her commit the Labour party to bringing about that target. That was very clear, and it shows that the party is listening to what black women have asked for over the past few years when these issues have arisen.

The research has already been done and we simply want the Government to engage with it. While we are calling for more data to be captured, we want the Government to engage with the data that already exists. That is key because so much work has gone on with other organisations, including the Muslim Women's Network and Birthrights, to produce the reports that we have referenced today, and to lobby and campaign. Those things exist and they need to be acted on.

Those organisations have gone out and spoken to a great many women—sadly, women who did not want to engage with the Government's surveys, which is worrying and something that needs to change. I pay tribute to all those women because it is difficult to relive your trauma in that way and to recount all those awful things that have happened. I know it has been for me, but I thank all those women who came forward to share their stories. They need to understand, as I am sure they do, that that makes a difference moving forward.

I thank the Minister for her response to the debate and the detail about what is already being done. That is really helpful, and I am pleased to hear a change in attitude as to how these issues are addressed. I have been concerned in the past, particularly with respect to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report and some of the responses that I have received personally, about the willingness of Ministers to admit that racial disparities exist and to focus on those, rather than saying that they do not exist. I would encourage you to read all the reports I have referenced today, but you say you have, which is great. Not only the statistics, but the personal accounts, do not make for easy reading, but they definitely make for a greater understanding of what has been happening.

I want to touch on one thing or two things that the Minister said specifically. You are absolutely right that people's socioeconomic status has a direct effect on health outcomes, but the Five X More report, and the other two reports, found that black women report the same disparities regardless of their level of education and socioeconomic status. We need to look closely at that and acknowledge that the issue is purely racism: institutional racism goes far beyond all the other factors that we would usually expect to have an impact.

I want to leave the Minister with a few more suggestions about things that you might wish to introduce.



**James Gray (in the Chair):** That she might wish to introduce. The hon. Lady keeps saying “you”, but when you say “you”, you mean me. I am not involved in any of these things. She might do those things.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** My apologies. I would like to leave the Minister with a few more suggestions about measures that her Department might wish to introduce. The first is for the Government to introduce this target. I understand your reasoning—

**James Gray (in the Chair):** Her.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I understand the Minister’s reasoning for not having a target. It may appear logical, but given that the data shows that those women’s children have a 43% increased chance of being miscarried, and a 121% increased chance of being stillborn, I do not understand how the Government can say that they will look at all these measures surrounding the issue but will not specifically set a target to bring it to an end. That is not acceptable, and I do not believe that the women who continuously campaign for a target will accept that, so I ask the Minister to look at it again.

I understand that there are great challenges in looking at disparities across the board. All those things need to be addressed and different Departments need to be brought in, but as I said in relation to socioeconomic status and other factors, there is a culture of institutional racism in our NHS, which needs to be resolved. Obviously, that will start with data. The NHS must improve the quality of ethnic coding and ensure that the data is accurately recorded. I am really concerned about how skewed the recording is.

At our APPG meeting yesterday, we heard that even when it comes to simple things such as trying to find out how many women have claimed compensation for things that have happened, the women’s age and the area they have come from is recorded, but their race is not. That seems like a major oversight, especially when other pieces of data are being gathered.

I support Five X More’s call for the Government to introduce an annual maternity survey targeted specifically at black women, similar to the Care Quality Commission’s maternity survey, because I believe that its results could be used to inform public and parliamentary accountability and improve maternity health services. Although few women contributed to the Government’s survey, there is a willingness among black, Asian and minority ethnic women to record their issues and experiences, as the other campaigns have proved.

I reiterate the call for an inquiry into institutional racism in the NHS. That is the only way that we will change some of the outcomes, especially given the information that has been gathered on what the issues are. Yes, we have to look at air quality and other co-morbidities, but until we address racial bias, assumptions among medical staff, and teaching and training, certain things will just not change.

Finally, please engage with the campaigners. I understand that there is a lot of listening going on. In the past few years, there have been more conversations, and they are more likely to be included in working groups, but it is one thing to say, “Yes, we have to look at this. This is really awful,” and another thing entirely to engage with them, work with them across different issues and show that the things they are asking for are being met within the NHS’s plan. Please do engage with the campaigners. They know what they are talking about and have the data that the Government have not been able to collect from women. They understand the issues and are making the right calls about what we need to do to bring this horrible disparity to an end, to close this racial divide and ensure that black women, Asian women and women of mixed heritage have safe births.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered Black Maternal Health Awareness Week.

10.50 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Derry Addiction Centre

11 am

**Colum Eastwood** (Foyle) (SDLP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered delivering on New Decade, New Approach commitments to a Derry addiction centre.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I will begin with a quote from a service user of the Northlands addiction centre in Derry, which has served the people of our city for almost 50 years. It reads:

“My mother on one side of me, crying her heart out, my elder sister on the other side with a Kleenex in one hand and her head in another. I didn’t know how I felt. I didn’t know how to feel. I was numb. No tears, no emotions, just nothingness. All I could do was stare at a spot on the carpet and try not to look up and see the hurt and pain in my mum’s face.

That was over two years ago, and thankfully, I haven’t had to lift a drink since I came in here. Today though, I can feel, I can cry, and I can see what my mother and my sister meant all that time ago. I can see for myself the hurt and the pain and the despair my drinking was causing to my family and myself. Today, the difference is, I can do something about it. I am learning about myself and this horrible disease every day of the week, and for today anyway I didn’t drink, and for me as an alcoholic, that’s a miracle. The treatment in Northlands along with the help of AA since then has given me my life back; it’s given me a life!”

That is just one of many thousands of stories from people in the city of Derry and right across Northern Ireland who have been affected by the disease of alcoholism and drug addiction, and who have been helped by the wonderful volunteers and staff at the Northlands centre in Derry.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue forward. I talked to him at the airport on Monday, and today as well. Unfortunately, what he is referring to in his constituency is replicated across Northern Ireland and in my own constituency, where there are addiction and drug issues, and where young people are committing suicide. I know that is replicated in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, so I commend him for securing the debate.

My understanding is that the Department of Health is holding the money up. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that, through this debate and through the Minister, we might be able to ensure that the money that was promised can be allocated to the maiden city, and to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, to make things better for them? There seems to be a wee hold-up.

**Colum Eastwood:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the impact of the disease of addiction is felt keenly right across our constituencies. Of course, it is important to say that the Northlands centre, which is referred to in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, serves people from right across Northern Ireland. Every single constituency is affected by it.

Now that I see the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), in the Chamber, I might say a word about how we got to this point. For three long years, we did not have an Executive—it feels a bit like we are approaching that period again. During the long hours of torturous negotiation, there was a lot of publicity around a couple of issues, but some of us were focused on a lot more. We wanted to see an Executive back, but an Executive that actually worked on issues that matter to people.

Late one Friday night, the right hon. Gentleman and I had a long discussion about what it would take to get us back into the Executive if we had a successful negotiation. People will understand that, for me, one of those things was the expansion of the Magee university campus. Another was the Northlands centre, which, after many decades of work, has a strong proposal for a world-class addiction centre in Derry. True to his word, as always, the former Secretary of State got that commitment into the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I was very grateful for it, as were the people of Derry.

However, as we know in Northern Ireland, words on a page are not enough. What we need is money in a bank account and proper commitment. To be fair, we had that commitment from the previous Government in the form of New Decade, New Approach, and I have had support from the current Government. We now really need an Executive in Stormont to deliver that. Unfortunately, even when we had an Executive—and we had a Minister up until last Friday—we still could not get the money out.

There are a number of things that I would like this Government to commit to now. What we need is an understanding of what happens if we do not have an Executive. I think all of us in the Chamber want to see an Executive as soon as possible. I would love to see all parties commit to get into government urgently—to get round the table and do the job that we were all elected to do. However, I want the Minister to answer a number of questions for me in the event that that does not happen.

Are the British Government still committed to delivering on the Derry addiction centre aspect of NDNA? We hear an awful lot about all the commitments, but this is a very important commitment for many people. What is the impact of the political instability on this particular proposal, and how will this Government act if we do not have a functioning Executive? As much as we all will it and want it, if we do not get to the point of having a functioning Executive, will those people who rely on this world-class service, and those who do not even know that they are going to rely on it, be able to access it?

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Last year and the year before, on average almost every day in Northern Ireland somebody died because of the way that they misused alcohol. Does the hon. Member agree that if that number of deaths were caused by any other issue, Government would absolutely be on top of it and we would have the Executive up and running and functioning? Does he agree that there is no excuse for the lack of clarity from Government?

**Colum Eastwood:** The hon. Member is absolutely right; one person every single week dies from alcohol-related disease in Northern Ireland. If we add in drug-related deaths, we are talking about 10 deaths a week. Imagine the outcry if that was happening in full public view; we would be rushing to deal with the issue at every level of Government. Frankly, there is no excuse any more for anybody to stand in the way of this commitment.

New Decade, New Approach was an international agreement, signed off by two Governments and supported by five political parties. Some of us actually went into

government on the basis of this and other commitments. Everybody in the Chamber knows about the cost of living crisis and the time it takes to access the health service. We should all know about the impact of drug addiction and alcoholism in our communities. We should be rushing to get this money out the door and spent.

Northlands has a very proud record. I want to put on record just how grateful the people of our city, and the people of Northern Ireland, are to all the staff and volunteers at Northlands, as well as all the people who put their money in the boxes to support that wonderful service. Over the past five years alone there have been 1,186 weeks of treatment for hundreds of people attending the six-week residential programme at Northlands, and 12,886 non-residential counselling slots have been used. On average, over 35% of people for whom the data is available in that period are in recovery, with an average of under 10% in relapse management.

**Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Will the hon. Member talk a little more about the team behind Northlands? I recall from my time as Secretary of State that it is not a commercial or money-making enterprise; it is local people who understand the specific issues with addictions in Derry and are passionate about those priorities. They are deeply impressive, and I think it would be useful for the Minister to hear a bit more about the people behind Northlands.

**Colum Eastwood:** I am grateful for the right hon. Member's intervention and I want to put on record my gratitude to him for getting the commitment in writing in the agreement. He went to meet the people behind the Northlands centre—people like Denis Bradley and many others, who over many years gave of their time, expertise and love for the people of our city and the people who have been struggling with this disease. The House would not believe the number of people who are very grateful for the work they have done.

It is also important to say that in our city and in other parts of Northern Ireland, we are faced with another problem: the grip of paramilitarism. Paramilitaries use drug addiction and abuse to coercively control communities in a way that needs to be tackled. In my view, the best way to tackle it—because we have tried everything else—is to deal with the root cause, which is addiction. Organisations such as the Northlands centre do that in a way that needs huge support. What better way to do that than to get this money into that organisation's bank account and to get this project delivered?

Before I finish, I ask again: will the Government continue to be committed to funding this service? What will happen if we do not see an Executive formed as a matter of urgency? Will this Government step in if we do not get a Health Minister at Stormont? I hope that we do, and I assume the Minister is going to talk about the need for an Executive. He has no bigger supporter in that call than me, but if we do not get an Executive, what are this Government going to do? Of course, it was this Government who committed to getting this money to Northlands and getting the project up and running. I am grateful to the Minister for being here, but I will be even more grateful if we can get this money spent, as has been committed to.

11.11 am

**The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker):** It is a real pleasure to reply to this debate, Mr Gray, and I am genuinely very pleased that the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) has secured it; in this, we can make common cause. I am also pleased to see the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), in the Chamber today. I pay tribute to all the work he did to get the New Decade, New Approach agreement in place.

The Government welcome this opportunity to make it clear that we are committed to supporting the Derry/Londonderry addiction centre and providing it with £1 million from unique circumstances funding under the New Decade, New Approach agreement. The hon. Gentleman particularly mentioned Northlands. I will come back to that, but I know it is a very valued service, and it seems to me a very sensible approach to use Northlands to deliver what is required.

Health is, of course, a devolved matter in Northern Ireland. The issue of a lack of clarity came up, but we are absolutely clear that health is a devolved matter, and we would like it to be governed, and governed well, in Northern Ireland. It is therefore for the relevant Northern Ireland Executive Department—in this case, the Department of Health—to formulate its proposals on how to use the allocated £1 million of unique circumstances funding to support those experiencing addition in Northern Ireland.

Before I go any further, I want to say that I am personally very committed to this issue, as I know the hon. Member for Foyle and other Members present are. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to participate in an inner-city challenge with the Centre for Social Justice, which saw me spend three days and two nights in rehab with some very serious ex-offenders, including people convicted of murder. It felt like a much longer time. I went through with them, in their counselling sessions, what it means for them to be addicted and how they had come to be in the circumstances they were in. I was particularly moved by the service user's account that the hon. Gentleman shared.

Given the social problems that our country faces—indeed, that all countries face—with drugs, we need to get alongside people where they are and lift them up. It is too easy for people to see the tremendous consequences of addictions on our society and rush to condemn, but people in the grip of an addiction need treatment and sympathy. That is one of the things I saw when I was with those people in that centre. Indeed, I have stayed in touch with one of them, and I was in touch with him last night when preparing for this debate. He has completely rebuilt his life, become a good father and got into work. It is an amazing thing to see.

In thanking the staff of Northlands, and all staff across the UK who deal with addictions, including in Wycombe, I particularly want to acknowledge the point that the hon. Member for Foyle made about the countless people who are grateful. That needs to be understood by everyone. Genuinely, countless people are affected by addictions, because the consequences that spread out as people suffer under addictions are enormous and almost impossible to see. Those consequences spread and spread, generationally as well as geographically, so it is really



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important that we understand addictions and deal with them. As such, I am personally committed that this money needs to get into Northlands and to deliver against NDNA.

I stress that the Government stand ready to provide the funding once we have received and approved the Northern Ireland Executive Department of Health's proposals for the Derry/Londonderry addiction centre. As I said earlier, Northlands seems a particularly sensible way to proceed. The Northern Ireland Office continues to engage with counterparts in the Executive to make that happen.

We do not have an Executive, and we are moving towards declaring an election, as is our legal duty. We fervently hope that a functioning Executive will be in place as soon as possible. Our officials have been advised by the Northern Ireland Department of Health that, at this stage, it is too early to state what impact, if any, the absence of an Executive will have on the delivery of its proposals. However, NIO officials will keep that aspect under review with the Department of Health.

The hon. Member for Foyle asked four specific questions. First, what happens if we do not have an Executive? We will have a response plan, and we will take the steps necessary to ensure that public services continue. However, as he knows, we do not wish for direct rule any more than he does; we wish to have a functioning, stable and high-quality devolved Government. We have to proceed with great caution. I know that he will not expect me today to pre-empt announcements that we will make in due course.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman asked whether we are still committed. I think I have made it absolutely clear that, personally and as a Government, we are absolutely committed. Thirdly, he raised the impact of instability, which is very real and very much felt in people's lives. I absolutely appreciate the strength of feeling and the real concern of Unionists, in particular my friends in the Democratic Unionist party. I am a proud Unionist and a proud Brexiteer, and I very much regret that we have the problems we have with the protocol, which are keenly felt by the DUP.

Let me take this moment to put it on the record that everyone needs to understand that we will be challenged to deliver a devolved Government until the issue of the Northern Ireland protocol is resolved. That, I am afraid, puts things firmly in the hands of the European Union. Until it is willing to negotiate on the basis of regard for the legitimate interests of Unionism—a point I have tried to make clearly, but respectfully so—we will not be able to satisfy the DUP or many Conservative MPs that we have made progress. If we cannot satisfy the DUP, it clearly has the power and the opportunity to prevent a devolved Government from being formed. I wish to be respectful about that, just as I have been respectful—I think famously—to the EU and Ireland about their legitimate interests.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the impact of instability specifically in relation to the addiction centre. Here we see the impact of political instability, which causes real harm to real lives, not just for those who are addicted, but for their family and the many people who suffer the consequences of addiction.

Fourthly, the hon. Gentleman asked what we will do. We will of course proceed to govern as best we can in the absence of devolved institutions, within the bounds of not wishing to institute direct rule. We will announce our response plan in due course. I hope that we will be able to satisfy the hon. Gentleman. As he has raised the issue, I will certainly make it my priority to investigate what is happening with the centre.

This debate is an excellent example of democracy working. We have so many things before us at this time, but this debate secured by the hon. Member for Foyle on behalf of those he represents has raised the matter up my priority list. Working with my officials, I will try to ensure that we drive it forward.

I have a few words to say about addiction, which is a complex and multifaceted issue that affects the whole of our society. It takes a terrible toll on family and friends. It is therefore vital that people in Northern Ireland and indeed across the UK are able to access the right addiction and support services at the right time. As I said, it is a devolved matter, but the Government are committed to providing the additional funding. That commitment reflects the Government's strong desire to see improved health outcomes for everyone across Northern Ireland.

The Government's commitments under the New Decade, New Approach agreement include making £40 million available for a range of projects focused on addressing Northern Ireland's unique circumstances. The unique circumstances projects are aimed at supporting community and reconciliation initiatives to remove barriers, to bring the people of Northern Ireland together, and to build a safer and more secure society in Northern Ireland.

One of the projects identified was the Derry/Londonderry addiction centre. The Government are steadfastly committed to providing £1 million in funding as a non-Barnett addition to the Northern Ireland Executive's block grant. We of course continue to urge all those involved to form an Executive to deliver the proposals but, as I said, I appreciate why that has not proven possible so far. Funding for unique circumstances projects is an important component of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, and the Government remain focused on ensuring the investment of this funding for the benefit of the local community.

It may help to say a little more about the context of New Decade, New Approach. The agreement was reached between the UK Government, the Irish Government and Northern Ireland parties in January 2020, and it enabled the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive after a three-year hiatus. Again, I pay tribute to the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon, for his leading role in that work. The agreement contains commitments for the UK Government, the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to fulfil. This Government have delivered over half of their commitments under the New Decade, New Approach agreement and we will continue to implement the remainder of the agreement to support a stronger, more prosperous and inclusive Northern Ireland in which everyone can participate and thrive.

The agreement was accompanied by a £2 billion financial package, consisting of £1 billion of additional funding and a £1 billion Barnett-based investment guarantee. It is the largest deal from a Northern Ireland

talks process to restore the Northern Ireland Executive. The UK Government have now honoured the £1 billion Barnett-based investment guarantee, as set out in NDNA. The investment guarantee was that the Executive would get a capital department expenditure limit Barnett consequential of at least £1 billion over a five-year period, from 2021 to 2024-25. That has been honoured as, based on the spending review 2021 settlement, the Northern Ireland Executive will receive over £1 billion by 2024-25 in additional CDEL Barnett consequentials.

We expect that £769 million from the £1 billion financial package in the agreement will have been spent by the end of the current financial year. The release of funding has been tied to the delivery of reform and transformation of Northern Ireland's public services, which I will now discuss in a little more detail.

The agreement reflected the unique challenges faced by Northern Ireland. The aims of the financial package were to provide immediate support to the health service and to address budget pressures, to enable investment to transform public services, to turbocharge infrastructure delivery in Northern Ireland, and to address Northern Ireland's unique circumstances. The Government's substantial package played a vital role in supporting the incoming Northern Ireland Executive and in promoting economic growth. Of course, we are deeply disappointed at the continuing lack of a fully functioning Executive, but we will continue to press forward to serve the people of Northern Ireland.

The £769 million spent so far has been used to bring to an end the nurses' pay dispute in January 2020, with £200 million used over three years to deliver pay parity with nursing counterparts in England and Wales; to provide a one-off funding settlement to the Northern Ireland Executive of £350 million in 2021-22 to relieve budgetary pressures and deliver effective public services in Northern Ireland; and to drive the transformation of public services by providing £142 million to support the Northern Ireland Executive in its transformation programme. The Executive have so far directed the transformation funding towards improving health outcomes. The NDNA transformation projects are embedded in the Northern Ireland Department of Health's rebuild framework, "Building Better, Delivering Together," which progresses health and social care system rebuilding work in Northern Ireland.

The funding has supported the Northern Ireland Executive in delivering a fleet of low-carbon buses for Belfast and the north-west, with £50 million invested in low-carbon transport. Government funding under NDNA means that 100 zero-emission buses have been produced by Wrightbus in Northern Ireland. The funding also led to the opening of the Northern Ireland graduate medical school in Derry/Londonderry to students in September 2021. So far, we have invested £11.5 million, with another £48.5 million to be invested, to deliver a brand-new facility and investment for the north-west of Northern Ireland. The training of more doctors will also help address the shortage of medical professionals in Northern Ireland in the long term.

Turning to the unique circumstances money, the Government have committed £140 million to address Northern Ireland's unique history. That consists of £100 million for legacy implementation and £40 million for those unique circumstances. The £40 million in Government funding has been reserved for the themes set out on page 53 of NDNA, in annex A.

The funding is to be deployed in areas including mental health, which I am sure will matter to everyone here; tackling paramilitarism; and tackling deprivation and improving opportunity—of course, one of the major factors leading to deprivation is addiction. The funding is also to be deployed on a culture and community fund; support for marking the 2021 centenary and related projects; support for languages and broadcasting; support for the armed forces and veterans; a fund to promote the competitiveness of Northern Ireland's economy; additional funding to support the Derry/Londonderry addiction centre; and the UK contribution to the international fund for Ireland.

As I run through those commitments, I think the whole House will appreciate the extraordinary work led by the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon, with all the relevant parties, to deliver so much for Northern Ireland. What we now need to do is press forward.

The five parties reached the NDNA agreement, leading to the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive in January 2020. The funding allocations were later agreed by the previous Secretary of State with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Good progress continues to be made, and funding has been approved across a range of projects, including on tackling paramilitarism, support for veterans, the Veterans Commissioner, NIO centenary projects, and so on.

On tackling paramilitarism, the Government's funding has helped to support the Executive's Communities in Transition project, which is designed to support and empower those communities that have been most impacted by paramilitarism, criminality and ongoing coercive control. Many Members present will appreciate the interaction between drugs and paramilitarism; I do not wish to get into that in great detail, but the two subjects are closely related. By tackling paramilitarism and criminality, we will help to deal with the problem of addictions.

The Government's commitment to veterans under the agreement resulted in the appointment of Mr Danny Kinahan as the first Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner in September 2020. As with the release of all Government funding, we undertake robust assessments and business case approvals before funding is provided.

Despite the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive, the Government continue to deliver on their NDNA funding commitments. That includes releasing the remaining £276 million of funding, including £103 million to drive public service transformation; £48.5 million to help fund the graduate medical school at the Magee campus in Derry/Londonderry; £100 million to address the unique history of Northern Ireland, including legacy; and £24.5 million of the £40 million reserved for the 13 themes referred to on page 53 of NDNA, in annex A.

The Government's financial package was accompanied by stringent financial conditions to deliver a greater level of accountability for public spending, and to ensure that the Northern Ireland Executive build sustainable public services for people in Northern Ireland. Members will know that that is extremely important at the moment. It included the creation of the independent Northern Ireland Fiscal Council in 2021. That body is an important component in delivering greater accountability for public spending, and it is already playing a valuable role in Northern Ireland.

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Earlier this year, Parliament passed the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act 2022 to implement the institutional reforms agreed in NDNA. These reforms have included enabling Northern Ireland Executive Ministers to continue in office for a defined period to allow time for Executive formation—although I lament that in this case that has not worked—reforming the petition of concern mechanism used in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and updating the ministerial code of conduct with regard to the expectations and behaviour of Ministers.

The Government's priority continues to be a return to a fully functioning and stable devolved Government as soon as possible, and to ensure the necessary delivery of public services for the people of Northern Ireland. We regret that the parties failed to elect a Speaker and form an Executive before the 28 October deadline. In line with his legal obligation, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will soon confirm the date of the next Northern Ireland Assembly election, as required by law. Following that election, and regardless of the result, the Northern Ireland parties really do need to come together to restore the devolved institutions and lead the people of Northern Ireland through the challenging times ahead. I think we all appreciate the significance of that to people in Northern Ireland; the hon. Member for Foyle made very clear the real impact on people of not having an Executive to deliver.

The significance of NDNA in this context cannot be forgotten. The agreement shows how collaborative working and compromise can create the right conditions for stability—

**James Gray (in the Chair):** Order. I am sorry to stop the hon. Gentleman, but I must now suspend the sitting until half-past 2 this afternoon.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

11.30 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## International Doctors: Visas

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered visas for international doctors.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

This is a debate about doctors, but I want to begin with the story of a hypothetical patient. Let us call her Marjorie and say that she lives in Skegness. She is in her 80s or thereabouts. She is registered with a local GP practice, and she has a trainee doctor as her GP. They have a really good relationship and know each other well. They have the continuity of care that means that Marjorie's needs are looked after. For a couple of years, Marjorie has gone back and forth to her doctor with little ailments, as people often do. In her final consultation, her doctor mentions that she will be moving on relatively soon.

Thereafter, Marjorie finds herself with another GP, and the continuity of care is broken. Marjorie struggles to get the type of relationship that she built up over the past few years, and she finds herself bouncing in and out of hospital. She is fine, but not as well as she would be if her care had been provided by a doctor who was able to make sure that they knew each other well. The reason for the break in continuity of care is that the doctor she had in training was an international medical graduate who was being trained at the surgery in Skegness. Unfortunately, for a whole host of reasons, the surgery was not registered to take international medical graduates once they had qualified, and it was not what is called a sponsoring practice—it was not able to say that it would sponsor the visa for that doctor.

The reason I make that point in such a way is because the people who are suffering as a result of the approach we currently take to visas—on one level, they are doctors who are dealing with the immensely stressful visa process—are ultimately patients, who should be our priority. The doctor I mentioned is one of 40% of trainee GPs who come from abroad. While they are training, their visas are sponsored by Health Education England.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): A result of the difficulties around trainee GP visas is that many IMGs feel that they have no choice but to take on other roles within the NHS, or they leave the NHS altogether. Many may even return home. Does the hon. Member agree that this is yet another area where the Home Office must look at the bigger picture, rather than trying to plug gaps on an ad hoc basis?

**Matt Warman:** Ultimately, this is where we need joined-up government, whereby the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care deliver on the same priorities, and I really do think that they can.

As I say, 40% of trainee GPs come from abroad. In the final months before they qualify as GPs, the last thing they should be doing is dealing with the stress of a potential visa application and considering whether the practice where they might want to apply for a job is



registered on the programme, and whether they can reasonably jump through the Home Office hoops at that precise moment. We are increasing stress for doctors, and we are increasing the risks for patients at the same time.

The hon. Lady alluded to figures from the Royal College of General Practitioners which show that some 30% of GP trainees are considering not working as GPs when they qualify for these visa-related reasons, and some 17% think they might have to leave the UK either temporarily or, at worst, permanently. That is some 1,200 doctors who are considering not working in the health service as a result of this system. In Lincolnshire alone, a third of practices have thought about registering as a visa-sponsoring practice, but just one in 10 have actually done it. We are really limiting the options for GP trainees and for the health service.

This is a political choice, and it reveals an inequality between different sorts of doctors. It will probably take a hospital doctor five years to qualify. After those five years, they will qualify for indefinite leave to remain in a much easier way. Because GP trainees take just three years to complete their programme, they need to go through this visa process, because three years is not five years, and the Home Office has decided that five years is what is required.

There are other associated problems. When it comes to applying for a visa, the GP practice that needs to register will consider whether that process is worth while. It may, in theory, be worth while in advance, and some practices do register in advance, but many do not. They then find themselves confronted with a brilliant candidate, and they try to register, but with the best will in the world, the timescales are very tight for doctors to apply for visas when they have a job offer from a practice that is already registered. There are lots of things to line up, and it is stressful for practices and for doctors. Even if there were no backlog in the Home Office, it would be a very tight timescale.

**Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate him on securing this important debate. I have recently returned from an International Development Committee visit to Jordan, where I spoke to a number of highly educated Jordanians, as well as Syrian refugees. Some of the Jordanians were already doctors and nurses, and the Syrian refugees in the camps in Jordan cannot get an education beyond the age of 18 but wish to become doctors, engineers and so on. They speak amazing English and would love to train here in the UK.

At the moment, Germany is hoovering up a huge number of these doctors and people who would like to study to become doctors, to satisfy the demands of its health service. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be helpful for the Minister to consider opening up more visa routes for brilliant young medical students from countries such as Jordan that have long been strong international partners of the UK, in order to ease some of the workforce pressures on our NHS? It is important that we increase the numbers, and that would be one way of doing it.

**Matt Warman**: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that increasing all those routes is hugely important. Of course, we would all like to see more doctors trained in

this country, and the Government have gone some way towards doing that, but where people want to work abroad, Britain should be as attractive a place as we can be. That is why, on the GP point specifically, the Government should be removing every single barrier in that visa process.

The most straightforward thing we could do, which would remove the need for a practice to register as a visa-sponsoring practice, is simply to say that when a GP qualifies in this country, they get the indefinite leave to remain that other doctors get. These are people in whom the UK has already invested. They are already here; they already have a visa. The extension of that visa into another form seems simply to be a bureaucratic hoop that we are putting in their way as doctors and in the way of GP practices. We are putting extra bureaucracy into a system, while on the other hand the Government say, "We desperately need people to come to this country to work in the NHS, and we will try to do everything we can." The health service does hugely good work to try to recruit such people and specifically encourages them to train as GPs, but then we put an additional barrier in their way.

The response from the Government in the past has been, "Actually, the visa process registration is not terribly onerous and GP practices can do it." They point to the numbers that have and do, which is fine as far as it goes, but it does not answer the question of why we put a barrier in the way in the first place. It should not be a cost of doing business when we say that we really want to make it as easy as possible.

Equally, it should not be a reasonable thing to put different sorts of doctors on different sorts of levels. It is not reasonable to say to people that, just as they have gone through the most stressful part of qualifying with exams, they should also be thinking about their immigration status. That calls into question their probity when we have things such as the General Medical Council making sure that they are upstanding members of our communities, and many of them have tens of thousands of patients to testify to that.

I do not think it really washes when the Government say that we need to put barriers in place, and I do not think that the Department of Health, where the Minister was previously a Minister of State, would agree, in an ideal world, with the Home Office stance. We could work together across Government to try to secure a sensible outcome.

I have talked about GPs, but there are broader issues around visas for doctors, many of which come back to the Home Office backlogs that I know my right hon. Friend the Minister is working really hard to address. There is a good argument for simply scrapping visa fees altogether for people coming to work in the health service. That is an argument for another day, but when it comes to GPs I think that lowering the five-year limit for indefinite leave to remain to three years is the neatest way to address the issue.

On the broader issues, ultimately this comes back to how many doctors we are training in the UK. We all want, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), to see more people trained in this country. That is what we are doing and that is what the Government continue to pursue, but until we reach that moment—the NHS has never reached entire

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self-sufficiency in the UK—we should make it as easy as possible for doctors, dentists, nurses, people working in social care, and all those who work in different parts of the health service, to come to the UK. It is not primarily a question about backlogs; it is a question about process. At the moment there is a degree of bureaucracy that simply does not need to exist.

**Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): It is great to hear my hon. Friend making such an eloquent case, as always—more so than I can. The issue matters for all the reasons he has set out, but would he agree that because of the retention challenge in the health service, the more we pour in at the top is sometimes, in part at least, offset by those who go out at the bottom? There is a wider picture here to do with pension pots—the whole retention piece is part of the wider jigsaw, which I appreciate is not the remit of this Minister, but perhaps was in his previous job.

**Matt Warman:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It is always tempting to ask the Minister to go and have a word with his former self, but we cannot do that. I think he has read the last couple of points that I want to make.

There are a number of relatively low-hanging pieces of fruit that the NHS has repeatedly asked for. I want to thank the RCGP, the British Medical Association, the radiologists, the British Dental Association, and also groups such as EveryDoctor, which have helped me with this debate and have identified the fact, as my hon. Friend implied, that there are a small number of things that could and should be sorted as quickly as possible. Busting the barriers around pensions and the bureaucracy around visas are things that would make a real difference to recruitment and retention across the health service. There are plenty of things that are difficult when it comes to addressing the NHS's challenges, particularly as we approach winter. On the narrow point of GP provision, we have a visa process that puts pressure on, in particular, small GP practices, where the added burden of registering as a visa sponsoring practice is even greater now as they are under such huge pressure. It is also a burden on GPs at what is a particularly stressful point in their careers.

I know the Minister will make entirely legitimate points around putting a process in place, but the reality is that there is a political choice to be made to ease some of those burdens. There is a powerful, compelling case to be made for doing a small number of easy things that could address the GP crisis in particular, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) alluded to, is acute.

I appeal to the Minister and the Government to work as closely as they can with the Department of Health and Social Care to understand these challenges and see what can be done, and I urge my right hon. Friend to take seriously the suggestion that if someone qualifies as a medical doctor in this country, and in particular as a GP, they should have indefinite leave to remain. At the moment, it effectively comes with that if they qualify in a hospital but not in general practice. That is an inequality that the Minister can look to fix, and I hope he will do so as soon as is practicable.

2.46 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank you for allowing me to participate in the debate, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for bringing this matter to light. It is good to see the Minister in his place—a return to duty in his ministerial role—and I am confident that, like the rest of us, he will be keen to address the key issues of the debate and why this issue is so important. I wish him well in this new role and look forward to his response to our questions.

The issue of visas is always a difficult one. I am incredibly aware of the need to protect our country and ensure that only those who have a desire to enjoy British life and to enhance it should be given visas. I understand the system of immigration and agree that it should be rigorously implemented. However, within that, we very much need to have the appropriate systems for the appropriate types of visa. That is why I believe that changes need to be made, as outlined by the hon. Member. Talented and skilled doctors want to come here and contribute to our society but unfortunately, due to the visa system, they are not always able to do so. For me, the issue is: how can we help them to help us in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

**Margaret Ferrier:** As the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) said, a difficulty that many international medical graduates face is that many GP practices do not have a visa sponsorship licence in place, making it harder to meet the requirements before the student's studies end. Does the hon. Member share my concerns about the general level of the Home Office backlog and the associated impact on IMGs?

**Jim Shannon:** I agree with the hon. Lady. I hope that through today's debate and contributions, this issue can be addressed. Again, we look to the Minister to give us some help, direction or support in how we can go through the vigorous bureaucracy that is clearly there. People with talent and skills want to come here; it is about how we can make that happen.

I have raised immigration on multiple occasions with Home Office Ministers—in particular, with regard to visas for those working on fishing boats in my constituency and the skilled work done by Filipino fishermen. The previous Minister was most helpful. That work is undoubtedly skilled, but it is under the pay threshold, so visa requirements sometimes restrict that opportunity.

Junior doctors, nurses and others do work that is not highly paid but highly skilled and necessary. That is why there must be time-sensitive application systems for those vital jobs and staff members. We need flexibility in the system. I say this again because it is important: those highly skilled and highly talented people who wish to come here will add to society and enable us to fill some of the vacancies.

I cannot speak for the United Kingdom mainland, but I can certainly speak with some knowledge of Northern Ireland. I am my party's health spokesperson, and the research we did for this debate shows that 6,613 vacancies are listed for the five trusts in Northern Ireland. I know that they are not entirely for medical staff, but it is clear that we are desperately in need of staff, and there are many opportunities for doctors.

In my constituency and neighbouring constituencies, we are having problems in relation to GPs. I absolutely agree that there is a need for restrictive immigration, but we must not cut off our nose to spite our face. I am sure those numbers are replicated throughout the entire UK; perhaps the Minister will give us some figures for GP vacancies. I know that the Government have set out a strategy for employing and recruiting more GPs—that is good news.

During the Brexit discussions, we were told that there would be distinct differences between the visa systems. That is as it should be. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness said that the system needs to be altered to meet the need, and that is what we need to do today.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned GPs, and we are of the same mindset. In a neighbouring constituency, a GP surgery, which is 10 minutes from my office, is set to close down because there are not enough GPs. In response, the GPs in my area have issued a moratorium on joining or leaving local practices. In other words, they will not take any more patients, and in some cases they are directing patients who live outside the area—that was okay a few years ago—to go elsewhere.

The trust is hopeful that it will get more GPs to take over the practice, but the fact is that we simply do not have enough GPs. That puts more pressure on the existing ones, which leads to more burnout, and the vicious cycle continues. GPs are under incredible pressure. Patients want to meet their GP; they want face-to-face appointments. That has been lost to them over the past two and a half years due to covid, but they are trying hard to get back in the queue.

The hon. Gentleman said that 40% of all GP trainees are international medical graduates—the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) referred to that—but they have difficulties obtaining visas. I do not have the exact numbers for Northern Ireland, but I do know that we cannot afford the loss of any more GPs. I therefore add my voice to those of others in the Chamber requesting that a special dispensation be granted not simply to allow those trainees to stay but to enable us to recruit further.

If there a block of trainee GPs who have almost completed their degrees and courses and are ready to come here, let us encourage them to do so. The question is not why it cannot happen, but how we can make it happen. The thought of training GPs to understand how we do medicine and run our practices, only for them to leave—not because they want to but because the system is not working for them—is madness. That needs to be addressed through this debate.

Recently, medical professionals outlined to me that the mental health and self-esteem of our medical community are at an all-time low because the staff are simply burned out. I have met many nurses, GPs and surgeons who are absolutely exhausted with the work they do. For those who are on call and have a duty rota to complete, being sent an SOS text to cover shifts is no longer exceptional; it is standard. That tells us that the GPs need to be employed and some of the pressure taken off.

We need to change the way that things are done, by giving GPs more admin support and funding for on-site nutritionists, physios and mental health teams, which we need within all health clinics. In my constituency,

they are trying to do that regularly, and it should help to diagnose early, whether the problem is diabetes, arthritis or dementia. Whatever the issue, doing that correctly in GP surgeries is the way forward.

It is impossible to imagine that things can go on much longer the way they have for the past two and a half to three years throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We need change, flexibility and help, Minister. We do not want to put all the pressure on the Minister, but in this case there are ways forward. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness has outlined them, as have I and others. We look forward to a successful conclusion to this debate, with a way forward from which we can all benefit across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

2.56 pm

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I also start by welcoming the Minister to his place. I wish him good luck; he probably needs it, as much as any Minister in Government, because his is an incredibly challenging post. We will, of course, have significant political differences on this topic, but it is an important issue, so if there is an opportunity for constructive and positive engagement, I am up for that, wherever possible. I thank the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) not just for securing the debate but, as ever, for his expert introduction to the topic and advocacy.

Moving to the subject at hand, like other Members I will start by recognising the extraordinary contribution of non-UK nationals to all parts of our NHS. I suspect everybody in the room has benefited from that, never more so than in recent times. GP practice is no different, and nationals of other countries will continue to play an important part, both now and in the future. As the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness alluded to, figures suggest that 47% of new GP trainees in England in 2020-21 were international medical graduates.

Another important context for this debate is the extraordinary pressure that our NHS is under, particularly in the light of covid, but also for all sorts of other reasons, which we could perhaps touch on in another debate. High vacancy rates are among them. As has been mentioned, challenges in recruitment and retention affect GP practices as well as everywhere else.

Against that background, the hon. Member identified what at first seems to be a technical problem in the operation of the immigration system, but one which, when examined, is significant. A failure to solve it leads to some absurd and harmful consequences. As he pointed out, the pain will ultimately be felt by patients. He explained that the three-year GP training regime for IMGs leaves them, on completion, two years short of being able to apply for settlement. That is unlike other specialisms, which have longer training periods.

That requires IMGs to find a GP practice that has become a tier 2 sponsor, which is not easy. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) alluded to statistics highlighting that, with half of all IMGs having struggled with the visa process, 30% having considered moving away from GP practice and 17% thinking about leaving the United Kingdom.



[*Stuart C. McDonald*]

The Minister's predecessors appeared to dig their heels in and say, "We just need more GP practices to become tier 2 sponsors." I agree with the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness that that prioritises Home Office bureaucracy above the health service. Ultimately, it is the wrong answer for patients who are struggling to access a GP. We are going to lose skilled and dedicated GPs as a result.

There is one issue where I do have some sympathy for the Minister's predecessors, and that is the rejection of the idea that a route to settlement should simply be shorter. Settlement is an important and significant thing. There are aspects of that where I am open to persuasion on the case to shorten routes generally and in some specific cases, for example, family members. However, an argument to shorten the route to settlement simply because a training course lasts a certain time is perhaps not the most persuasive. It is not one that I am closed to, but it is not one that I immediately find the most persuasive.

However, the Home Office should be pragmatic about other possible solutions that have been put forward. Its current insistence that 8,166 GP practices right across the UK should just invest time—and over £4 million—in becoming tier 2 sponsors on the off chance that they might want to recruit an IMG is simply not realistic. The £4 million in fees from those GP practices would go to the Home Office—I wonder if that has something to do with its intransigence at the moment.

The alternative approach of a practice only becoming a sponsor once it has already had an application for an IMG is also far from ideal. The delay that that causes is bad for all affected, and the pressure on IMGs to find a tier 2 sponsor to satisfy immigration requirements prior to their existing visa expiring means that they cannot wait. As evidence given to the Health and Social Care Committee earlier this year highlighted, newly qualified GPs have received removal letters from the Home Office soon after their qualification. That is absurd, because we not only need them but have spent tens of thousands of pounds on training them to do a job that we urgently need them to do. I hope good sense will prevail over the Home Office's current intransigence.

I now turn the other solutions, which I think are perfectly reasonable, that the Royal College of General Practitioners has put forward. The first solution is to create a new post-medical training visa that works in the same way as a graduate visa. The second is to create umbrella bodies that could operate as a sort of super-sponsor. That could be the NHS or whichever training body had already sponsored the first three years of the IMG's presence here. Who knows—it could be the Royal College of General Practitioners itself. I do not have the answer as to which option would be best, but any of them would clearly be better than the absurd situation we find ourselves in.

**Steve Brine:** I have a suggestion, at least for England: the primary care networks or the new integrated care boards could quite easily act as an umbrella sponsor, thereby taking the bureaucracy away from the practices, which is part of their purpose.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** That is a valid proposition, and we could do the same with health boards in Scotland. If we knock our heads together, we can come up with a way to fix this. It just requires a little bit of pragmatism.

There is a second issue I wanted to raise—when I saw the motion for this debate, I wondered if the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness would raise it. That issue relates to recent reports from the BBC flagging complaints of poor treatment and conditions for international doctors in private hospitals, as well as highly questionable recruitment practices. I will touch upon it briefly because it has not been raised, although it is important to draw it to the House's attention and to see if the Minister will investigate and respond. There were reports from 11 October suggesting that doctors from some of the world's poorest countries were being recruited, by Nuffield Health in particular, to work in private hospitals under conditions prohibited in the NHS. There are reports of doctors being on call 24 hours a day for a week at a time, not being able to leave the hospital grounds and, unsurprisingly, suffering from extreme tiredness, putting both patients and doctors at risk.

Nuffield Health denies those allegations, but a British Medical Association and Doctors' Association UK questionnaire of 188 resident medical officers adds some credence to the claims. It shows that 81% of respondents were recruited from Nigeria, and most complained of extreme working hours and unfair salary deductions. The conclusion of the Doctors' Association UK was that we now have a two-tier system: one for the NHS and one for other international recruits in the private sector. I ask the Minister to look into that.

That issue highlighted to me another fundamental problem with how the immigration system operates. We have all sorts of checks and regulations that focus on ensuring that people who come to work here abide by their visa conditions, and they include the doctors we have been talking about—the IMGs—where the Home Office is on their case as soon as they have qualified to see what they are doing next. However, little or no checks are done to protect people who come here. That is not just in the NHS and with doctors; I have been firing off parliamentary questions and freedom of information requests in relation to the agricultural sector. That is a sector wide open to exploitation, but as far as I can see there is no concerted effort to protect people from that exploitation.

As the Minister will appreciate, Nigeria is a red-list country for recruitment. According to both the World Health Organisation and the Government, that is not where we should be finding doctors.

**Jim Shannon:** Does the hon. Member agree that, when it comes to the criteria used, one thing we should perhaps be seeking from the Minister is an assurance that greater weight will be given to the skills that people have, as opposed to the money they could earn?

**Stuart C. McDonald:** That is absolutely fair. The point I am making is that we should also consider—and in fairness, we do—where it is that we are recruiting from. We do not want to leave some of the poorer countries in the world without the skills they need.

Nigeria is a red-list country, but the report highlighted that both the General Medical Council and the British Council are involved in establishing and overseeing a professional and linguistic assessment board test in Lagos. I encourage the Minister to look into those reports. I appreciate that he might not be able to tell us about them today.

Various broader issues have been raised, including visa fees, pensions and so on. We could talk about the impact of free movement and how that has mired certain services, including GP practices, in red tape and bureaucracy, but we will keep that discussion for another day.

I again congratulate the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness on securing the debate. Throwing out skilled and desperately needed GPs in whom we have invested tens of thousands of pounds in training is utterly absurd. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) put it very nicely, as he always does. The question is how we can help them to help us. There are pragmatic solutions available. This is an early test for the Minister on whether he will be a pragmatist or take what I would characterise as the more dogmatic approach of the previous Home Office regime. I very much hope it is the former and that he is a pragmatist.

3.5 pm

**Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for securing this important debate. His speech was an excellent example of a constructive critique of where his own party is on the issue, and he put forward some practical and thoughtful ideas. I hope the Minister has taken note. I suspect there is more chance he will take note of the hon. Member's comments than he will of mine, but we never know. This debate is a great example of the cross-party discussion that we can have in this place.

Let me start by setting out the Labour party's position on work-based migration in Britain, as it is important to set the context before drilling down into the specifics of the issue we are discussing today. In a nutshell, we support the points-based immigration system for migrant workers; it was of course the Labour Government in 2008 that introduced that system for immigration from outside the European Union. We are clear that there will be no return to the European Union's freedom of movement. We want to build on and improve the points-based system currently in place. It is a very blunt, one-dimensional instrument that could be significantly improved.

Our long-term ambition is to make sure that every employer across the private and public sectors is recruiting and training more home-grown talent to fill vacancies before looking overseas, but we recognise that simply turning off the tap of labour from other countries without having the appropriate workforce structures, plans, training, skills and productivity strategies in place, our private sector and our public services will deteriorate, our businesses will struggle to meet the Labour party's ambitions to make, buy and sell more in Britain, and we potentially risk jobs disappearing overseas.

We cannot have a situation like the one we have had in the farming sector over the past year, where 30,000 pigs were slaughtered and £60 million-worth of crops were burned. Indeed, we cannot have a situation in the NHS where we are short of doctors, all because our immigration system puts up red tape and barriers that prevent, or at least severely discourage and disincentivise, doctors who have come to the UK from overseas to do their three years of general practitioner training from

staying on to fill critical vacancies in the job market. That is utterly counterproductive, not least because 47% of new trainees in England in 2020-21 were international medical graduates. Labour's shadow Health Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), has been clear that it is madness for the NHS to lose GPs whom the British taxpayer has paid to train.

Successive Conservative Governments have already cut 4,700 GPs over the last decade, meaning that patients are finding it next to impossible to get an appointment. There is a chronic lack of doctors, nurses and healthcare staff in the NHS. Staff shortages are reaching dangerous levels, when the need for NHS treatment is incredibly high, with huge backlogs and millions of people forced to wait for treatment. Patients are finding it impossible to get a GP appointment in many cases, and GPs are leaving the health service at an alarming rate. Last year, one in six people who tried to speak to a nurse or GP were unable to get an appointment at all. The hurdles placed in front of international medical graduates are a barrier to our NHS filling vacancies and providing the medical care that the British public deserve.

A survey by the Royal College of General Practitioners found that around 30% of all IMG trainees consider not working as an NHS GP because of all the difficulties and red tape with the visa process. The first of those difficulties is that IMG GPs are not eligible to apply for permission to stay permanently until two years after completing their training. GP training takes three years to complete, and it is only after five years that IMGs can apply for indefinite leave to remain, in line with wider UK visa rules. That problem is unique to general practice: other medical specialty training takes a minimum of five years to complete.

The second difficulty is that international GPs must find employment with a GP practice with a visa sponsor licence before their existing visa expires in order to be eligible for a visa that allows them to stay and work as a GP after their training, and ultimately apply for permission to stay permanently. However, practical and bureaucratic obstacles can make that extremely difficult, because GP practices may struggle with the costs and bureaucracy associated with obtaining a licence to sponsor a foreign worker. The Royal College of General Practitioners warns that the cumulative effect of visa difficulties on IMGs is that some are

"feeling forced to take roles elsewhere in the NHS and others considering leaving the NHS, and in some cases the UK, altogether."

The Government have so far been utterly intransigent on the issue of IMGs, and on tweaking the visa system to remove the red tape. Labour would look closely at the issue as part of our wider improvements to the points-based system. Those improvements would involve the Government working hand in hand with employers, trade unions and other key stakeholders to ensure that we have a properly planned, sector-by-sector approach, with a proper strategy that works for businesses, workers, the public sector, customers and patients alike. As part of that, we will review the length of work visas, processing times and the existing path to citizenship to ensure that they are all working for our economy and for the public.

Labour already has a long-term workforce plan for the NHS. That involves doubling the number of medical school places, which in turn will deliver more home-grown GPs. At the heart of the plan is the doubling of medical

[Stephen Kinnock]

school places—an increase of 7,500—which means we will double the number of doctors trained in a year. Our shadow Health Secretary will also produce long-term workforce plans for the NHS for the next five, 10 and 15 years, which will ensure that we always have the NHS staff we need to get patients treated on time. The plans will not only provide good jobs for British workers and fill shortages in our NHS, but prevent us from having to do dirty deals, as mentioned earlier, with some of the poorest countries in the world—those on the WHO red list—and from recruiting medical professionals from impoverished communities that desperately need that medical knowledge locally. That is exactly what the British Government have done recently with Nepal.

In the short term, Labour has consistently pushed for a fix to punitive doctors' pension rules. The fix would do away with the cap above which NHS workers incur additional tax burdens. That would support short-term recruitment and prevent the exodus of workers. The Government are yet to deliver on that.

The Labour party is committed to making the points-based system work, and to our NHS workforce plan. The current system is simply not fit for purpose, and at this time of crisis we risk losing newly qualified GPs because of unnecessary red tape. The Conservatives have broken promise after promise on GPs. Their 2019 manifesto promised to deliver 6,000 more GPs by 2024-25. The former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), admitted that the Government are not on track to deliver that.

In contrast, the next Labour Government will put patients first, ensuring that they are able to get a face-to-face appointment when they want one, bringing back the family doctor to deliver continuity of care and implementing our workforce plans. The current Government are out of ideas, and we need practical solutions.

**Steve Brine:** It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman mentioned continuity of care, because he will be aware that that came up yesterday during Health questions. Would the Opposition introduce direct management of lists back into the GP contract from when it is next renegotiated? That is how we achieve continuity of care.

**Stephen Kinnock:** The key piece of our plan is to cancel non-dom status, which is estimated to generate approximately £3.2 billion for the Exchequer, and to use that money to invest in more GPs, doctors and nurses—indeed, doubling the numbers. We can have the best plans and legislation in the world, but we need the resources to deliver them. That is how we will pay for our plans and generate the kind of care that we need for our public. It is time for that Labour Government, so that we can clear the backlogs holding our country back, which we see right across Government, and get Britain's public services back on track.

3.15 pm

**The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for securing this important debate, and all Members who have contributed. The Government recognise the vital contribution that doctors

and other health and care professionals make to the United Kingdom and our NHS. Of course, Dr Rachel Warman is my favourite doctor, and she has no doubt helped to inform the quality of my hon. Friend's remarks.

By happy coincidence, I am both the Minister for Immigration and formerly the Minister responsible for the NHS and the recruitment of doctors domestically and internationally, so I understand and appreciate the importance of the issues raised. This is clearly a timely debate, because the NHS faces a significant workforce challenge. About 10% of the roles in the NHS are vacant, and a larger number are vacant in social care. We all need to be focused on creative ways to resolve the challenge, including, as has been said, on retaining more of our existing GPs and other health and social care professionals.

Last month, the former Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), and I announced changes to the pension provision for doctors to encourage more of them to stay in the NHS for longer, to work longer hours and not to resort to private practice as quickly as some are doing. Those changes will make a difference, although I appreciate that the BMA and a number of organisations wish the Government to go further.

We are keen to recruit and train more GPs and doctors in the UK. Persuasive arguments have been made for raising the cap on medical school places, including by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). That is an important debate to have, and one that I am sure will find favour with the new Chancellor, who has raised the matter many times in the past. In the interim, it is clear that we will need to rely on more international recruitment of doctors and nurses. That is exactly what the NHS is doing at the moment. For example, as a result of significant retention issues the Government are succeeding in recruiting a large number of nurses internationally. We need to make that process as simple and efficient as possible for the benefit of the NHS and trusts that are undertaking that recruitment exercise, but also for patients.

Hon. Members will be aware that in 2020 the Government delivered and built on the commitment in our manifesto to introduce a route that made it quicker, easier and cheaper for qualified medical professionals to come and work in the UK. That was the health and care visa, which provides a significantly reduced visa fee and a dedicated Home Office team to process the applications. A number of Members understandably referred to Home Office backlogs, which do exist in some areas; most vividly, in the last week, we have had a national conversation about the backlog of asylum cases.

Applicants for the health and care visa get a gold-plated service. Health and care visas provide cheaper fees and quicker processing, and the aim is to process applications within three weeks. Understandably, there has been an impact on processing times this year, primarily because the Department chose to redeploy so many of its professionals to work on the Homes for Ukraine scheme and other refugee and resettlement schemes, but it is our intention to get back as swiftly as possible to the service standard. In fact, we have set a target of reaching that by the end of the year and continuing to meet it into next year while continuing to manage the very large number of individuals coming from Afghanistan, Ukraine and other parts of the world that are in distress.



**Jim Shannon:** I recently chaired an event in Portcullis House on a completely different matter. When I came out, the people taking over the room were getting ready to give a presentation about how Ukrainians with medical skills could help the UK. I am not sure who the sponsor was, but I will try to find out, and the Minister's staff might do the same. It took place at 2 pm in room Q in PCH. I had to go to another event, so I could not stay, but it seems that there are a number of Ukrainians here who have medical skills that could be used in the NHS. That is just a thought.

**Robert Jenrick:** Of course, adults who come to the UK on the Homes for Ukraine scheme have the right to work, and we actively encourage them to do so while they are here. There has also been an exercise across Government, which I have not been personally involved in, to help them to find equivalent professional qualifications while they are here, and to break down any barriers. I would be happy to look into whether there are remaining issues for doctors and nurses from Ukraine while they live here on the three-year visas that we are granting.

Some 30,700 nurses and 14,900 doctors obtained a health and care visa up to the end of August this year. In total, including care workers and other professionals, 96,000 such visas have been issued—a very significant number, which accounts for 52% of all skilled worker visas that have been issued to people taking up work in the health sector. I would like to think that that innovation has been a success, but we take seriously the legitimate concerns that have been raised in the debate and that we have heard from royal colleges and others. Let me now turn to some of those concerns and what we might be able to do to assist.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness said, the Royal College of General Practitioners has made a number of suggestions. We believe that the best way to increase the number of international GPs taking up places in the UK is for GP practices to register as Home Office-approved sponsors. The Government have run a number of engagement events that aim to explain the sponsorship process. Sponsorship is not supposed to be onerous, and the Home Office believes that it is not as onerous as some people clearly perceive it to be. Over 48,000 organisations are licensed sponsors of skilled workers, and many are high-pressure, small organisations, such as GP practices. However, there is clearly an issue—whether in reality or in perception—so I have two proposals to answer the concerns raised by my hon. Friend.

First, I am prepared to consider other sponsorship arrangements suggested by the sector, provided that they are consistent with the sponsorship system and that the sponsor can continue to discharge the important duties of a sponsor, which enables us to ensure that the overall system is robust and defensible. In principle, the sponsor could be an appropriate national body, such as Health Education England. It has not approached us to ask to be such a body, but I would be open to considering that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) suggested, the sponsor could be an integrated care board in England or an appropriate body in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, or it could be a royal college. I will therefore ask my officials to work with the sector to see whether there is a way forward to create umbrella bodies, if there is mutual support on both sides,

with the caveat that any umbrella body would need to discharge the required duties in law to ensure the robustness of the system.

Secondly, in the interim my officials would be happy to run further engagement events with the sector to talk them through how straightforward they believe it is to be a sponsor. I encourage anyone listening to the debate to get in touch with the Home Office if they would like us to host an event in their area or with their part of the health sector. I have asked my officials to organise at least one such event in the weeks ahead. We will take account of any feedback that we receive at these events, and if it is true that the system is simply too complex and burdensome, I have asked them to report back to me with that feedback and we will take it into consideration.

The shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Aberavon—and others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness, raised the fundamental question of whether five years is the right length of time to demonstrate an individual's commitment to the UK. That is a profound question, and it is important that we approach it fairly, rather than hiving out individual sectors, however important they might be for our economy or our public services. Although I am sympathetic to the arguments around granting GPs settlement on completion of their training, my view today is that it is better to stick to five years because that has been, by the long-standing convention of this Government and their predecessors, considered the right length of time for an individual to demonstrate sufficient commitment to the United Kingdom to obtain indefinite leave to remain. We should value indefinite leave to remain, because it is an important and significant moment for anyone committing to life in our country.

**Stephen Kinnock:** I thank the Minister for setting out that clear position, but does he agree that the nature of that kind of commitment—the three years, and the type of work that somebody studying to be a general practitioner is looking into and wants to do—is in itself a demonstration of something extra in terms of commitment to the United Kingdom? It is not as if they are coming here to work for a foreign company. Should such people not be given some kind of exceptional treatment because of the nature of the work? That is an open question.

**Robert Jenrick:** The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. Of course, one could apply that to a number of other regulated professions, whether that be lawyers, nurses or others making significant contributions to the United Kingdom. It is an important step to obtain indefinite leave to remain, and not one that we should give away lightly. Asking an individual to spend five years here in order to demonstrate that level of commitment to the UK feels to me about the right length of time, but I am open and interested to hear other contributions on that point. At the moment we do not have plans to reduce the length of time that skilled workers would need to complete in the UK in order to apply for settlement.

The SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), raised a number of cases that I am aware of from my former role at the Department of Health and Social Care about allegations of the mistreatment of foreign workers—including doctors and nurses—coming to the UK. That is something we take seriously, and the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England

[Robert Jenrick]

are investigating. If I receive further information from the Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care, I will be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman.

On the broader question of the ethics of recruiting healthcare professionals internationally, the NHS takes that responsibility seriously. We have ethical guidelines nationally that are set by NHS England and individual trusts in England—that may well be the case in Scotland as well—and of course we take heed of the red lists, which give a strong indication of countries from which we should not be recruiting healthcare professionals because they clearly need them to satisfy their own healthcare requirements. The NHS proactively works with countries that have an excess of doctors and nurses, or that train individuals specifically for export. In fact, one of the last meetings I had as Health Minister was with the Chief Minister of the state of Kerala, which specifically trains nurses to be exported to other countries around the world.

That sort of arrangement is sensible and defensible by the UK, although it is not a sustainable answer in the very long term because we live in a globally ageing society; there will be competition from other states to recruit professionals. That is one of the many reasons we should be training more doctors and nurses in the UK and considering measures such as raising the cap on medical school places, if we are able to do so. That, of course, is a matter for the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care, not my Department. It is worth saying that it is an extremely expensive measure over time, and that the Opposition's proposal would cost several billion pounds to deliver. That is not to say that it is not an important step, but it is worth bearing in mind the significant outlay.

**Steve Brine:** The Minister is responding very clearly to the points raised. What we really need is an independent health workforce assessment, supported by the Treasury. He will be aware that that was called for by some Members who are no longer on the Back Benches. Dare I say that he could encourage that through his good offices, because only once we have the answer will we get to a better place. If we ask the NHS what we need it will answer with what we can afford. Those are not the same questions.

**Robert Jenrick:** For a long time I have believed that one of the virtues of a national health service is that it should be able to plan for its workforce needs long into the future. My hon. Friend raises the specific campaign of our right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), when he was Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. I am sure that he will consider that carefully now that he has his hands on the controls as Chancellor of the Exchequer.

**Stephen Kinnock:** The Minister rightly mentions value for money. The British taxpayer pays for the training of international medical graduates in this country. Will the Government consider doing a value-for-money assessment of what the British taxpayer pays for people who train

to be GPs but end up leaving our system all together because of all the visa issues? Is that not a waste of taxpayers' money?

**Robert Jenrick:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. It really is a matter for the Department of Health and Social Care. I do not want to stray too far into policy questions that are rightly its domain, but clearly the UK benefits from retaining as many doctors who train here as possible. Staying will not always be the intention of those coming to the UK—many clearly want to make use of our world-class medical education and then return to their country of origin, or other countries that, for lifestyle reasons, they want to live in—but we benefit from encouraging more to stay.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** I have one final thought. I appreciate that the Minister will go away and task officials with looking at a possible umbrella sponsor—that is very positive news. The other issue is the length of visa for IMGs. From the Health and Social Care Committee inquiry, it appeared that there is a severe pressure between finishing up and being able to find a job. Extending the grace period a little might allow more people to stay.

**Robert Jenrick:** I will happily add that to the list of homework for my officials after the debate.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness for securing this important debate, and the many colleagues on both sides of the House who have attended to register their interest in the topic. I assure them all that we will reflect carefully on the points raised, and in particular that I will task my Home Office officials to work with stakeholders in the sector to give greater consideration to the central question of whether there is a simpler way in which GP practices can apply for relevant visas. If that can be delivered by appropriate umbrella bodies, we would be pleased to see whether it can be taken forward.

3.34 pm

**Matt Warman:** We are all hugely grateful for the fantastic work that doctors do for us all, as the Minister alluded to. I do not just say that because I am married to one, although it brings it home—literally. In the course of the debate, the Home Office has been accused of intransigence. Within days of his arrival, the Minister has demonstrated more progress on this important issue in the commitment that he has made to us today than we have seen in some years. He is the human embodiment of cross-Government working in the sense that he brings together the Department of Health and the Home Office remits. We could all learn from the value of cross-Government working. I am immensely grateful to all Members who have brought the issue to life, and I look forward to continuing to work with the Minister on the outcome of the review, which will make a real difference to our constituents, and to doctors up and down the country.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered visas for international doctors.

3.35 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Airport Parking Charges

4 pm

**Sir Bill Wiggin** (North Herefordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered airport parking charges.

Drivers are being forced, tricked or directed to pay extortionate amounts to drop off or collect passengers at airports. To make matters worse, two thirds of the UK's busiest airports have put their prices up. Of course, airports are entitled to charge when the land is privately owned, but the taxpayer has already paid for the road up to the airport. Yet the signposts do not send the driver to a safe and free place for drop-off or collection. No-stopping zones on the roads leading up to the airport mean that the principles of choice and safety are not obvious. That means that drivers are being deliberately exploited.

Airports must be required to offer drivers a free and safe place to drop off and collect passengers, and, where they do, that must be clearly signposted on the approach to an airport. Although it may seem that there are craftily many different options for parking at airports, given the pressure of traffic, it is chaotic and stressful for drivers to locate the correct one.

The increasing number of train strikes mean that many passengers depend on a friend or relative to drop them off at an airport. As a result, those drivers suffer, rather than the actual holidaymaker. In that sense, the drop-off charge is a small tax on generosity. Failure to signpost free options effectively means that drivers are at risk of breaking the law either for stopping on a nearby roundabout or for dropping someone off on a red route leading up to the airport; such routes are rightly enforced for reasons of security. Indeed, drivers caught stopping on those red routes are fined £100.

In 2019, the Parking (Code of Practice) Act received Royal Assent, promising greater regulation to prevent motorists from being treated unfairly by private parking companies. Airports were considered as part of the code of practice. However, this June, the private parking code of practice was temporarily withdrawn, "pending review of the levels of private parking charges and additional fees."

It would be welcome if the code of practice brought greater clarity and consistency to airport parking charges to better regulate the industry for both airports and motorists, which I believe the Government have a duty to do.

Ironically, the Civil Aviation Authority, in its review of market conditions for surface access to airports, claimed that environmental factors played a part in airport parking decisions. The Airport Operators Association, which represents over 50 UK airports, claims that high airport parking charges are there to force consumers to travel to and from airports sustainably. Nice try, but everyone knows that aeroplane journeys emit far more carbon dioxide per passenger than cars over set distances. Who are airports trying to fool by claiming to be going green by charging higher parking fees to deter a few short car journeys while air travel accounts for 2.5% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions?

It is right that the Government encourage people to use public transport, which does not incur a drop-off fee. However, with the looming threat of militant unions striking, would you really rely on public transport to get to the airport on time, Mr Stringer?

Last week, I met Nicholas Lyes, head of roads policy at the RAC, who informed me that in theory, some airports provide free drop-off options. However, Heathrow and Gatwick airports, which used to provide free drop-off points, now charge £5 to enter the drop-off zone by the terminal. Imagine if people knew they had a choice—which they do not. On top of that, at Gatwick, people are then charged £1 for every minute over and above the allocated 10 minutes at the drop-off site. To enter through the barrier—again, with no choice to escape—find a parking space, park, unload baggage, say goodbye, and exit through the barrier all within the allotted 10 minutes seems optimistic for anyone, let alone those who are elderly or families with young children. Most expensive of all is London Stansted, which charges £7 for just 15 minutes' parking and £25 for more than 15 minutes in drop-off zones. In the case of Exeter airport, there is no free option at all. Do the Government really expect someone to throw their loved one out of the car miles away from the terminal in order to avoid being fined?

With flight delays becoming increasingly common, those collecting family and friends who must find a place to wait could end up paying through the nose through no fault of their own. The UK Civil Aviation Authority has recorded that in 2022 the average flight delay has increased to 25 minutes per flight, up from 15 minutes in 2019. At Bristol airport, those giving a lift to friends and family are required to pay £5 for just 10 minutes to drop off or collect them. That fee increases to £7 for between 10 and 20 minutes, and £20 for between 20 and 40 minutes. That seems excessive for someone who is merely trying to collect someone whose flight has been delayed for half an hour, yet drivers collecting passengers from delayed flights are left with no viable alternative.

Recent airport staffing shortages have also led to lengthy delays of several hours at passport control in airports such as Heathrow and Stansted. With delays at airports becoming increasingly commonplace, those collecting passengers are left unsure of how long they will be required to wait—what initially seemed like a 10-minute wait might quickly become an hour. Where are those people supposed to wait that does not charge extortionate prices?

Additionally, not all taxi drivers are exempt from the charges. In the event of a long delay, a taxi driver on a pre-booked job might see his profit completely slashed because of the waiting times, meaning that through no fault of his own, he would have done better to have stayed at home. Bristol airport is one of the very worst offenders, using vans with cameras to follow drivers and try to levy fines for stopping, irrespective of how confusing that airport's signage is.

Airports are exploiting their own regulations just as rogue parking firms used to. Drivers are forced to find the nearest free drop-off zone, which of course is impossible, as those zones are hidden. Where airports provide free options they tend to be far away from the terminal, and a shuttle bus to the terminal is not always provided. As a result, passengers with mobility issues or heavy bags are bound to struggle. Is my hon. Friend the Minister aware that, allegedly, the free option for drop-off at London Heathrow is located far away from the terminal, in the long-stay car park? I suggest that if someone were driving into an airport and looking for a place to park for a short amount of time, the long-stay car park would be the last place they would look. Passengers are



[*Sir Bill Wiggin*]

then expected to take a shuttle bus to the terminal, only adding to their stress and to the extra time needed to catch a flight. I know that many airports are struggling for money, but do the Government think it is right that they attempt to hoodwink airport visitors to make up for it?

**Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con):** I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, and for his very powerful words on the subject. In Woking, we have both Gatwick and Heathrow within a reasonable distance, and I have had a lot of correspondence from constituents about the removal of free drop-off parking. I am also a great supporter of aviation. During covid times, I helped my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) with his excellent efforts to support the aviation industry—both airlines and airports. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin) said, airports have had a difficult financial time, but will he look to the Minister and, indeed, to airports to ensure that when we reach a new normal—as things might not go back to where they were before covid—that airports reinstate free drop-off parking, so that this ridiculous removal of any sort of free parking does not continue?

**Sir Bill Wiggin:** I agree with my hon. Friend, who quite naturally has delightful constituents who generously want to take their friends and family to and from the airport. Of course, that may not be an option for people who live further away. He is right to speak up for those people and insist that normality, which we all now enjoy, is returned to on parking as quickly as possible. When I finish this last blast, I know the Minister will do all he can about the theft from these poor, innocent and good people, who are just trying to do the right thing. That is why I believe it is essential that airports provide free and safe drop-off and pick-up points for motorists, as well as clear and helpful signs.

The Department for Transport must make it clear on approach roads where these free and safe options can be found. The Government need to ensure that the road tax payer has the right to remain on public roads, which we have paid for, rather than be herded onto private land where we are exploited. No amount of hand-wringing is acceptable, otherwise airports will continue to close. The greenwash, fudging and theft are wrong, and I know the Minister will do all he can to correct that as soon as possible.

4.12 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin) on securing the debate on airport parking charges and delivering his asks with his usual robust purposefulness. I recognise that the issue will be of interest to many people who use our airports, in particular those travelling abroad again for the first time to see friends and relatives or go on a much deserved holiday. I have listened to and had the opportunity to speak to my hon. Friend. I have certainly taken into account his comments and will try to address most of them.

I will say at the outset that, in years gone by, I was involved in many consumer campaigns with Which? on the benefits of free access to airports and other transport modes. I agree that it can be frustrating when we use something that was previously free and then it is charged. As my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Lord) said, while many of these charges came in during the covid period, many had actually been planned in advance around the sustainability point and decarbonisation. I will touch on that later in my speech.

Increasingly, we are seeing airports transform into regional transport hubs that support multiple businesses, labour markets and population centres. They provide significant economic benefit to their local areas, and reliable and efficient surface access connections play an important part in achieving that. I am pleased, as I hope we all are, to see an increased demand for aviation and air travel as the sector continues to recover from the covid-19 pandemic, and I certainly recognise the contributions of both my hon. Friends on what they did to make that happen. It is important that we aim to balance the sector's recovery with the UK's environmental goals, as I touched on previously. We therefore expect that airports, through their surface access strategies, set targets for sustainable passenger and staff travel to the airport. These targets should, where possible, meet the ambitions set by Government and be monitored by their respective airport transport forums.

**Mr Lord:** I am rather disappointed in the Minister's opening remarks, which seem to be on the side of the airports on sustainability grounds. When a family is going on holiday, perhaps with a frail elderly person or someone who is disabled, does it make any sense to have to go to the long-stay car park, unload all the baggage and try to get the disabled or frail elderly person on to the bus—only to have to do it all again on the way back? That is not right. I was not aware that the airports were thinking of introducing this pre-covid. The letter that I got from Heathrow when I wrote on behalf of constituents placed the main emphasis on the financial shortfall over covid and said that the airport therefore needed to introduce the measures. I am surprised that the Government might support that.

**Huw Merriman:** I am sorry to be a disappointment to my hon. Friend. The situation we have is that unlike, for example, our rail provision, airports are private organisations and there will be a direct contract between those using the airport and the airport operators—it is down to them. I have indicated my sympathy as regards the requirement to put charging in. Heathrow's expansion is predicated on its ability to reduce air pollution; that is one of the key issues in allowing Heathrow to expand. What the aviation industry and the airport operators are doing is responding to the need to reduce the carbon emission footprint around the airport. That is one such measure.

Drop-off and parking arrangements at most airports are subject to contractual agreements between airport operators and car park companies. Those arrangements are covered by consumer laws. Most airport websites contain information on the drop-off and car park options available at the airport, and recommendations on the best options depending on length of stay. I will go on to talk more about signage and information shortly, because that was one of the key requests from my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire.

Most airports in the UK choose to charge a premium for drop off at their terminals. I understand that Cardiff, Bristol and Birmingham airports, all of which are closer to my hon. Friend's constituency, charge fees for the use of drop-off zones. I recognise that the introduction of a charge for dropping off passengers, when it might have been free of charge previously, may be frustrating to some motorists. However, the provision and charging of car parking at airports, including drop-off charges—this comes back to the point I made to my hon. Friend the Member for Woking—is a matter solely for the airport operator, as a commercial business, to manage and justify.

The arrangements for drop-off charges at airports are not a tax on the motorist; they are a contractual arrangement between the airport, the car parking company and the driver. That is the same as the different charges for the use of short and long-stay car parks, which can be located further away from the terminal buildings. It is a choice that the driver can make when planning their trip to the airport, but I recognise that some people have more choices than others because of mobility. I recognise the points that have been made about that.

**Mr Lord:** I have two points. On the point the Minister just made, normally a service provider will provide a service for which they charge. There is no service being provided. We just want an area where we can drop off our passengers. To go back to the earlier point about sustainability and air quality around Heathrow: if that was a main driver, should not electric and low-emission vehicles be able to drop off for free?

**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that interventions should be short and to the point.

**Huw Merriman:** I will go into detail on the second point, but to come back to the point about electric vehicles, that is something that airports are developing. They are slightly hampered by the lack of HGVs, but it is something that they are working on in conjunction with other matters.

Let me address the point that drop-off zones were supposed to be temporary during covid. Airports have been implementing drop-off zones and charges since before the pandemic, as part of their work on delivering sustainable and affordable travel options. Charging for the use of drop-off zones may encourage airport users to make more journeys to airports by public transport, which will assist with the wider sustainability ambitions of the Government. However, I recognise that at airports such as Bristol, rail options are few and far between. As demand for air travel returns, with people understandably keen to resume their lives, airports have further indicated that drop-off charges will help to avoid a car-led recovery.

I know that information and signage is important to my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire. Given the choice for drivers, it is even more important that airports are transparent in their parking offer. The Government expect and encourage airports to be clear on the available choices for parking on their websites, along with information on how to access them. I agree with my hon. Friend's comments on this matter. This information must ensure that there is a clear and visible signage point at the airport to ensure that drivers are

well informed and aware of the arrangements and requirements, as well as the other parking options. I have raised this matter with my colleague, the aviation Minister, Baroness Vere, to see whether we can underline the importance of this matter in our communication with airports, and she has confirmed she will do just that on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire.

**Sir Bill Wiggin:** I thank my hon. Friend for that. I want to say a huge thank you. What upsets us is that we have paid for a public road and then we are fined for parking, and there has been no opportunity to choose. Choice is the key. I do not mind if we have to pay for environmental things, or if we are being distracted or even being sent places we do not want to go. However, we really do need a choice, because, as taxpayers, we have already paid for the road. I thank the Minister very strongly indeed.

**Huw Merriman:** That is very kind of my hon. Friend. As a constituency MP who has long been frustrated when people are not treated as they should be, I know that information is key, so I completely agree with him.

Government guidance on the use of signage on public roads can be found in the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2016, which prescribe the design and conditions of use for traffic signs, including road markings. Parking trade associations such as the British Parking Association provide guidance in their codes of practice to their members on the use of signage, with due regard to the existing regulations. All of that goes alongside the assurance I have given my hon. Friend.

Earlier, I mentioned that airports are responsible for setting their surface access strategies. I encourage airports to set out their intentions in respect of drop-off charges and parking, and to use specific airport transport forums to develop and oversee the implementation of plans for future surface transport provision. That will help not only to prevent confusion and the risk of drivers inadvertently entering drop-off zones, but to reduce the chances of accidents due to drivers taking evasive action to stop themselves entering such zones. All of this will, I hope, assist in making each stage of the journey to an airport as easy as possible. If drivers feel that signage at airports does not make them aware of the arrangements and requirements for drop-off charges, they can submit an appeal to the Parking on Private Land Appeals Service. We will continue to keep this provision under review as part of the Government's work on a single code of practice for parking companies.

On the provision of alternatives, I welcome the consideration my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire has given to alternatives to drop-off zones, including the use of other car parks, both short and long stay, although I hear his point about how far away long stay actually is. While I accept that additional transfers are required, I would make the point that, at the very least, long-stay car parks provide an alternative to paying. Airports including Gatwick, Manchester and Bristol offer free drop-off zones at designated car parks a short walk from the terminal or with the option of a shuttle bus service. I encourage airports to ensure that such options are readily available to drivers so that they can plan their journeys in advance.

[Huw Merriman]

I note the concerns raised by my hon. Friend that motorists may incur additional parking costs through no fault of their own when delays or disruption caused by late flights or industrial action result in a longer than expected stay. I note his example of the charges at Bristol airport, where the drop-off zone charges are £5 for up to 10 minutes, £7 for between 10 and 20 minutes and £10 for between 20 and 40 minutes. I note that Bristol's short-stay car park is often cheaper for the same amount of time—having done some earlier research, he will be glad to hear—costing £5 for up to 20 minutes or £7 for between 20 and 40 minutes.

Airports already highlight the potential disruption to passengers and how that might affect their journeys. Again, I would be happy to raise with the aviation Minister what more airports can do to ensure that drivers and passengers are well informed and offered flexibility of provision if there is disruption. I acknowledge that at some airports, such as Bristol, there are no rail links and alternatives to cars are more limited; Civil Aviation Authority figures for 2019 highlight that 68.3% of passengers arrive by car.

On the regulation of airport parking, if an airport contracts a private parking operator to manage parking on the land, the parking operator must be a member of a trade association and follow its respective codes of practice and appeals procedures. The two trade associations are the British Parking Association and the International Parking Community. Their codes set out the requirements that parking operators must follow, including on signage, if they wish to access the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency data to issue parking charges to the owner of a vehicle. Both associations offer, on behalf of their members, an independent appeals service to motorists who receive a parking charge and wish to dispute it. On my hon. Friend's point about the proposed parking regulations being withdrawn, that has indeed been the case due to judicial review, but I look forward to the regulations coming back, to see how they can be further improved upon.

I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire on securing this debate. It has been an opportunity for both him and my hon. Friend the Member for Woking to draw attention to expectations for car parks at airports—that they should be managed appropriately and that consumers should be treated fairly. I assure my hon. Friends that the Government are keen to improve the regulation of the parking industry. We continue to consult on changes to parking charge levels and additional fees with the industry, with the aim of reissuing the parking code of practice as soon as possible.

The charges associated with car parking at airports are solely a matter for the airport operator to manage. Airport users entering into parking arrangements are covered by consumer law. We will all ensure that such arrangements treat the airport user fairly and respectfully, and we will see what more can be done on the points that have been raised.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## International Students: Contribution to the UK

4.29 pm

**Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of international students to the UK.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer, and to see so many colleagues here today.

The contribution that international students make to our domestic society and economy is a subject close to my heart. I was an international student and did my Erasmus year at Heidelberg University, and I did a master's at the College of Europe in Warsaw. Prior to that, I studied in Scotland's near abroad—Yorkshire—at Leeds University, and at Nottingham Law School. We must not lose sight of the important fact that so many of the world's best and brightest are willing to come to our countries and work with us towards the light of science.

I declare an interest as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary university group. It is a pleasure to see so many good colleagues from the group present, and I look forward to the discussion. I am grateful to a number of organisations for the briefs that we have had prior to the debate, particularly Stirling University in my constituency, Forth Valley College, Universities Scotland, Universities UK, the Russell Group, Imperial College London and UCAS. I refer colleagues to the House of Commons Library brief, which provides a really good state of play on where things are and a very helpful overview of the situation.

I stress that this is a good news story. Since I came into the House of Commons in 2019, I hope it has been clear that I do not do point scoring. I am here to work towards a common ambition: I want to see the UK do well. Global Britain is not the Scottish National party's project. I believe that Scotland's best future is as an independent state back in the European Union, and we will have a referendum about that in due course—it is not for today. In the meantime, it is important for me to say to colleagues that I do not wish global Britain harm. If I were trying to undermine global Britain, I would cut the international aid budget, defund the BBC World Service, shut down British Council organisations worldwide and jeopardise our contacts with the European Union. All those things are happening under the Government right now, and I ask the Minister, whom I do not regard as part of the problem, to urge his colleagues to stop them.

This is a success story and a good news story. The contribution that international students make to Scotland and the UK is significant, but it is a success story that cannot be taken for granted. Scotland and the UK have a huge interest in this issue, although Scotland's interest is disproportionate. In 2020-21, 24.1% of university enrolments in Scotland came from outwith the UK, compared with 22.2% in England, 21.3% in Northern Ireland, and 14.9% in Wales. All the home nations have a significant interest in retaining and attracting international students, but Scotland has a disproportionate interest in doing so. We have an interest in the UK Government's policies, particularly on immigration, that threaten progress on this matter, which is surely in all our interests.



In 2020-21, we had 5,000 international students based at Stirling University—30% of the campus-based student population. UK-wide, the number is obviously bigger, with 605,100 international students at various higher education institutions across all our constituencies and countries. We are talking about hundreds of thousands of the world's best and brightest, who have paid us the supreme compliment of coming to our home to work with us. I am conscious that a number are watching, and I say to them, "You are welcome here. You are welcome in our society. You enrich our society by your presence, and you enrich the institution that you are committed to. You are working with us towards a global science."

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors at Manchester Metropolitan University. I agree with much of what the hon. Member is saying, except about independence for Scotland. I believe we are stronger together.

I endorse the hon. Member's point about the value that is added by international students, particularly in commuter universities such as Manchester Metropolitan. Our students may have less opportunity to travel abroad because of caring and other responsibilities, and being able to mix with international students who come to our country to study gives them an important connection to the global economy into which they will graduate.

**Alyn Smith:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, except for the part about independence, which we will probably come back to at some point. I strongly agree with her, and I pay tribute to her for the power of work she has done in the all-party parliamentary universities group.

I thank the international students who so enrich our communities and institutions by their presence—and that is before we get on to the economics. It is the dismal science, but the economic impact is considerable. To be clear with colleagues, that is not my starting point; I do not regard universities as money-making widget factories. Universities are seats of learning, seats of exchange and seats of research. They form a globally interconnected network of the exchange of people, ideas and knowledge.

There are only two things that drive human progress—science and art—and universities have a crucial role to play in that. It was Isaac Asimov who said:

"There is a single light of science, and to brighten it anywhere is to brighten it everywhere."

Science is global. Universities are global by their very nature, and the exchange of students, people and ideas is fundamental to what they do. However, I am Scottish, and the money does not hurt.

The contribution of international students is significant. We have calculated that international students contribute £66.4 million net to the Stirling economy. For the whole of Scotland, their contribution is £1.94 billion net, and for the UK economy, a single cohort of international students contributes £25.9 billion net. At a time of straitened budgets and economic turbulence, we need to safeguard that progress, not undermine it either deliberately or by accident.

I am conscious of time, so I will wrap up on two particular points about the Government's rhetoric, which risks undermining progress, and about EU relations, in which there is huge opportunity that the Government could unlock by changing course.

The comments by the Home Secretary and various other members of the Government about limiting international students are wrong politically, societally and economically. Limiting international students would be a "hammer blow". Those are not my words, but those of Vivienne Stern, the chief executive of Universities UK. I will ask the Minister some questions from Universities UK that I think it is worth putting on the record—I appreciate that I am blindsiding him slightly, so I will happily accept a letter after the debate.

What assessments have the UK Government made of the economic cost—including the loss of tuition-fee income, living cost expenditure and knock-on expenditure—of restricting the number of international students and their dependants entering the UK's world-leading university sector? Are the Government committed to retaining the graduate visa route established in 2021? That fact that it is under threat is utterly wrongheaded, but it has been called into question by some senior people, so I would be very grateful for reassurance that it is safe. Are the Government committed to the successful international strategy outlined in 2019, including the target to host 600,000 international students, which has since been achieved, and to bring in £35 billion of export income every year by 2030?

Before turning to EU links, I declare an interest: I was a Member of the European Parliament from 2004 to 2019, and as a member of its Committee on Industry, Research and Energy, I helped draft some of the regulations on Horizon Europe and on student and educational exchanges, so this matter is close to my heart. Scotland and the UK are research-intensive places, and Scottish and UK involvement in the EU frameworks for this stuff is a win-win-win for everybody. I regret deeply that the UK has left the European Union, but I am not here to fight old battles. There are ways of interacting with what is going on in the EU that stop short of EU membership.

I was in Brussels recently and in Berlin just the other week. There is a real willingness on the part of our European friends to see the UK play a full part in institutions and networks such as Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, Copernicus and Euratom. As I have said, it is a win-win-win to be part of those projects, but a chill is under way: in Erasmus, there has been a huge reduction in the number of EU nationals applying to UK institutions, which is deeply regrettable.

On 22 July, the EU announced the cancellation of 115 grants for UK-based scientists because they were not part of the reference networks or frameworks. There is a big prize here: Horizon Europe is worth €95.5 billion, and that money could—but does not—work towards not just the EU's science but our own. The single biggest thing blocking progress on all those fronts, and that holds back our universities and academics, is the lack of trust between the UK Government and the EU.

That lack of trust has crystallised around the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. The fact that the UK introduced that Bill, which has been passed by the House of Commons and is now in the other place, calls into question the UK's good faith on all of this stuff. The EU will not allow us an ad hoc, legally undefined membership when the UK is clearly willing to rip up legal order, as it has done with the Bill.

[Alyn Smith]

Let us scrap the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. That would unlock progress on all these real-world opportunities and give our university sector and our students an advantage. There is a huge prize to be won. Global Britain is not part of the SNP's project, but academic exchange is. We very much want to be part of the exchange of ideas and people, and I want to see the UK play a full part in that. I am grateful for the discussion, and I look forward to questions and comments, and, above all, to the Minister's response.

4.39 pm

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer, and to welcome the Minister to his position; his is probably one of the better appointments made recently. I am pleased to contribute to the debate as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international students, a role that I share with Lord Bilimoria, the former president of the CBI. An important part of our role is celebrating the contribution of international students, so I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) for securing the debate and for many of the points and questions he raised.

My constituency of Sheffield Central—as you well know, Mr Stringer, as one of our graduates—has more students than any other constituency. We know the huge value of international students, but it is important that we do not stop the discussion at their contribution to the local economy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said, they also enrich the learning experience of UK students—what an extraordinary opportunity for UK students to study alongside students from so many other countries and continents, all providing their input to classroom discussions. In addition, they enhance the cultural vitality of our city, and they provide us with ambassadors for Sheffield when they move on and continue their lives in business, politics and other areas.

Recognising those benefits, our APPG makes the case for policies that encourage and support the recruitment of international students. It seems obvious that we would want to do that, but that has not been the case. Back in 2010, when David Cameron was elected with a pledge to reduce immigration to tens of thousands, the then Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), went for easy wins on immigration numbers—despite the damage to the UK—by cutting the number of international students, removing the graduate visa route and putting in place other barriers. That was celebrated by our competitors in Australia, Canada and the US. I remember hosting an event with the former Australian higher education Minister, who began by saying, “I would like to congratulate your Home Secretary. Without her efforts, we wouldn't be doing so well in recruiting international students to Australia.”

With strong, genuine cross-party support, the APPG campaigned for seven years for change, and in 2018 we produced our inquiry report, “A Sustainable Future for International Students in the UK”. I am pleased that our two main recommendations—to set an ambitious target for growth of international student numbers and

to offer a new post-study work route—were embraced by the Government in their 2019 international education strategy, which set

“an ambition to increase the value of our education exports to £35 billion per year, and to increase the number of international higher education students hosted in the UK to 600,000 per year, both by 2030.”

All of us on both sides of the House celebrated the Government's ambition, and I thought that was the end of the argument—after seven long years, we had finally convinced people—but recent comments by the new Home Secretary provoked an awful feeling of déjà vu. Lessons learned have been forgotten; instead of tackling the real issues facing the Home Office—passport delays, visa delays, the asylum backlog, the failure to end dangerous channel crossings—the Home Secretary has turned to the distraction technique employed by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead.

Recent rhetoric has included tired tropes about overstaying and suggested the illegitimate use of visas. That has caused enormous offence in India, one of our most crucial markets not just for growing international student numbers, but for reducing our dependence on China, which dominates the market at the moment. It will also impact the Government's attempts to secure a trade deal with India. If the Home Secretary tells international students that they cannot bring their families to the UK, as she seems to be suggesting, they will simply turn to one of the many countries that will say, “You're welcome here.”

The problem is not only the policies but the rhetoric, which is beginning to undo the work that many of us who support the cause of international students have done to repair the damage that the Government caused. After so many years of international students being told that they are not welcome here, we have all come together, as the hon. Member for Stirling said, singing one song: “You are very welcome here.” The Home Secretary's recent rhetoric undermines those efforts.

Although this is not just an economic argument, research from the Higher Education Policy Institute last year shows that international students bring nearly £30 billion a year to the UK economy, supporting jobs and businesses across the country. They play an important role in our universities and in enriching our campuses, and they bolster Britain's place in the world at a time when we need it.

Locally, an economic impact assessment commissioned by the University of Sheffield, based on 2018-19 data, found that overseas students at the university—it is just one of our two universities—support £184 million gross value added and just over 3,000 jobs in the Sheffield city region. That is more than we employ in the steel industry in Sheffield. Those jobs are across a swathe of industries, from transport to hospitality, food and retail.

More recently, “The costs and benefits of international higher education students to the UK economy,” published by the Higher Education Policy Institute and Universities UK International, analysed the 2018-19 international cohort. I should probably declare an interest, because it found that Sheffield Central remains the top parliamentary constituency for net economic benefit. Every person in Sheffield and its surrounding area is £2,520 better off on average because of international students. They are

hugely important for the university's financial stability and for the sub-regional economy. That is the critical point.

We should recognise that universities are a unique public asset. They are distributed around all the regions and nations of the United Kingdom; the economic benefit is not concentrated in London and the south-east. Obviously, there is a significant number of fine institutions down here, but the benefit is shared around the country. If the Government are serious about their levelling-up agenda—obviously, we doubt they are—universities are a critical driver of economic activity all over the country. At a time when the Government claim to be focused on growth, it is utterly incoherent to reduce the benefits from one of our strongest exports—higher education.

**Kate Green:** My hon. Friend makes an important point about the wider benefits to local and regional economies. Part of the economic contribution comes from our universities' capacity for research. Does he share my concern that if the number of international students declines, the contribution they make to subsidising the cost of research in universities will also decline, and that will make our regional economies and our national economy poorer?

**Paul Blomfield:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. That is absolutely correct, and it complements what the hon. Member for Stirling said about the way our research base is threatened outside Horizon Europe.

Frankly, the UK needs all the help it can get on the international stage. Given that the Government cannot decide whether it is worth turning up to key global events such as COP and are trashing our reputation by claiming that the jury is out on whether our key partners and neighbours are friend or foe, we cannot afford further mishaps. The QS World University Rankings assess universities on six key indicators, one of which is the international student and international faculty ratio. A highly international university demonstrates the ability to attract quality students and staff from around the world, and implies a highly global outlook and diversity of culture, knowledge and thought. It makes us more competitive. It is therefore hugely important that we maintain those numbers.

As for soft power, when I was campaigning for change I met the ambassador from one of our important allies in the far east, an important economic partner. We were talking about these issues and he said, "Paul, do you realise that three quarters of our Cabinet were educated at UK universities?" That is soft power that the rest of the world would die for, and it is hugely important. The 2022 HEPI soft power index shows the benefit of international students, with 55 world leaders having taken advantage of UK higher education.

I hope the new Minister will take on board these arguments and, with his colleagues in the Department for Education, do all he can to make the case to colleagues in the Home Office that we do not want to go through this again. Let us not have that whole seven years of making the mistake, trawling back from it, and then setting an ambition to do what has been undone by such negative policies.

I hope the Minister will not only answer the questions posed by the hon. Member for Stirling, but reflect on the implications for our universities, our regional economies

and our international standing if we go back on the Government's own ambition, set out in the international education strategy.

**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** I intend to call the SNP spokesperson at 5.10 pm at the latest. If Members wish to speak, whether or not they have written to Mr Speaker, will they stand to indicate that? That is a help to the Chair.

4.52 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who genuinely brings knowledge to these debates, not just because he represents a university town but because he knows his subject. I want to put that on the record and thank him for it. It is also nice to see the Minister in his place. We have had a long friendship in this House, and it is not before time that he has been elevated to Minister. I am pleased to see him as a Minister for a subject in which he has a deep interest. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) on bringing the debate forward. For the record—I am sure he knew I would say this, but I have to say it—I disagree intensely with him on one matter that he referred to. He said that we should do away with the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. No, no—we should get the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill put through this House. Then we can be equal to everybody else in the United Kingdom—those in Wales, Scotland and the rest of the UK mainland. It is not a matter of either/or. I want to speak about international students, the subject of the debate, but I also want to say very clearly that Northern Ireland MPs are anxious to see the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill go through as it is. Then we can all have the same level of representation and the same Britishness that we all love to have.

I am proud to hail from Northern Ireland. Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster, as well as our other higher education institutions, are world class and attract a large number of international students. Northern Ireland has a sterling reputation for providing a high-class education, which others wish to feed from. Since the peace process and the cessation of troubles, we have seen a dramatic increase in international students coming to our shores, an unsurprising number of whom wish to stay on. We have many students who come to Northern Ireland, get good jobs, and stay there. How could they not, with all that we have to offer?

The latest statistics show that of the 66,245 students enrolled in Northern Ireland's higher education institutions in 2021, 74% were from Northern Ireland, 5% from GB, 3% from the Republic of Ireland, 1% from EU countries and 17% from non-EU countries. They also suggest that international students from outside the EU are worth about £102,000 each to the UK economy for the duration of their study. That is not something we can ignore. There is a financial impact, and we want to continue to gain from it. Non-EU students typically pay much higher tuition fees than local, EU or UK students: they can pay between £15,000 and £30,000 a year for courses in Northern Ireland. We have a thriving higher education sector, which we wish to see retained and built upon.



[Jim Shannon]

Analysis suggests that international students delivered a net benefit of almost £26 billion to the UK in 2018-19. As the hon. Member for Sheffield Central referred to, this is a market that should clearly be encouraged, especially at our two local universities, Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University. International students account for about £49 million of those universities' income through fees and grants—a substantial amount of money for us in Northern Ireland—showing the importance of us having education at that level in Northern Ireland. The accounts of Queen's University Belfast show that international students generated some £43.8 million in fees and grants in 2019-20, while Ulster University received just under £5.1 million in overseas student fees in the same period.

When we have education debates in this place and are talking about universities, I often refer to the partnerships that Queen's University Belfast in particular has with big business, finding cures for illnesses across the world such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Those partnerships are incredible, and international students are part of making them happen. There have been a great many success stories over the past few years, and Queen's University plays a critical part in those, as do other universities across the United Kingdom.

The students in Northern Ireland come from 135 different countries and are certainly a welcome addition. I am very pleased to see them coming, and I would like to build on that for us back home. I believe more should be done to encourage others like them to see the potential of study in Northern Ireland, with low rent, low-cost food—the past couple of months might not suggest that, but the costs are low compared with some places—and friendly locals with a warm and welcoming culture. I believe we are missing a trick by not promoting that more robustly. I think that, as other hon. Members have rightly said, we could do that for the whole United Kingdom.

Northern Ireland boasts world-class research facilities at Queen's University and Ulster University, with both universities ranking in the top 10 across the UK for bioscience research. I referred to some of their research on cures for the ailments that plague us, not just in this United Kingdom but across the world. Their researchers are recognised as being at the forefront of technology, health data analytics, statistics, modelling, simulation and the use of artificial intelligence, which I know the Government here are keen to promote as well. Those are the good things that universities do, quite apart from their cultural value. The hon. Member for Stirling referred to the fact that when students come here, they bring much to this great United Kingdom culturally, individually, socially and emotionally. That is something we should cherish and try to build upon.

Northern Ireland has several unique advantages for medical research and clinical trials, with a small population of just under 2 million, an integrated health and social care system, and the electronic care record, which makes it possible to access digital health from cradle to grave. We have such a technological advantage in Northern Ireland, given our universities and the research they are involved with to try to find cures. We have much to offer, and now it is on us to promote that effectively.

I know the Minister always seeks to give us answers, so let me ask him whether, in the short time he has been in post, he has had any discussions with his colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to secure funds to promote our UK-wide education system globally. If he has not had those discussions yet, I know he will. We have a great education system in Northern Ireland. I want to see it grow and thrive, and I believe this debate gives us an opportunity to help it do just that.

4.59 pm

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and to catch your eye slightly spontaneously—it is much appreciated. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) on securing this important and timely debate. I did not necessarily need to speak, because I basically agreed with every single word that he said.

Like the other speakers, I am proud to represent a university constituency, and the University of Glasgow has an incredibly long and proud international history. I do not mean that as a cliché—it was literally founded by a papal bull in 1451, so it has a very long history indeed, and it is proud of its international outreach since that time.

One of the outstanding points in its history occurred in 1837 when it awarded James McCune Smith his medical doctorate. He was the first African-American to be awarded a medical degree, and went back to the United States, where he practised medicine and pharmacy and was an absolute pioneer and champion of the anti-slavery and equal rights movements in those days. Today, the James McCune Smith learning hub bears his name and sits proudly on University Avenue in the west end of Glasgow. It is testament not just to his achievements and to the university's achievements over all the years, but to the very presence of the international students in such great numbers that have made the institution what it is today—as many of 14,000 of them, if I am reading the statistics correctly, across undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research courses. They come from dozens and dozens of countries; as far as I can tell, practically every country in the world is represented by at least a handful of students on the campus and in our city, and that is testament to all the points that have been made by Members today. That is true of the city as a whole.

I am proud to represent the University of Glasgow. I am also proud to be a graduate of the University of Strathclyde, and everything that I say about what international students bring to the city and the country applies equally to the University of Strathclyde, to Glasgow Caledonian University, to Glasgow School of Art, to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and to the many further education institutions that the city and the country are so rightly proud of. As I say, that impact is visible across the city as a whole, in the shops, in the catering outlets and in the visible presence of the cultural festivals that the student cohorts bring to the city. It is present and visible in the way in which the campuses themselves have been shaped, with the incredible new facilities provided in the new buildings, many of which are available for use by the public as a whole, contributing to the society and economy of the communities to which the universities belong in exactly the way that we have heard.

The presence of international students, as other Members have said, raises ambitions and standards in the institutions and in the communities as whole. That is not without its challenges. Anyone, particularly students trying to find accommodation in Glasgow over the last few months, will be able to testify to that, and that is true of other cities as well. However, that speaks to the importance of creating a welcoming environment and the importance of having the infrastructure in place to support the presence of so many students. A big part of that involves providing certainty about numbers and certainty of access.

That starts to speak to the UK Government's policies on funding for institutions, and particularly on access to visas and country entry requirements. It is not just about study visas, but about post-study work visas. This is not purely transactional, and students should not just come for three or four years, then leave again, but can be inspired to settle, make their home here and continue to contribute to our economy and society.

Sadly—and I suspect anyone with a university in their constituency will find this—the casework continues to suggest that is not always the case. I remember one of the very first constituents who came to see me in 2015 was literally a rocket scientist and could not get a visa to work here. In the end, I think we managed to make some kind of progress, but the people we want to attract are banging their head against the wall of the universe of the UK Government's hostile environment policy. This is where, as with so much of the new Government's agenda, the reality of their stated ambition is going to have to confront the practice of what they are trying to input because, if they really do want growth and a global Britain, putting up barriers to people coming here is contradictory to both of those things. It will not achieve either the outcome that they want to see or the outcome that those of us who believe in multiculturalism and internationalism want to produce: a growing and diverse society.

The main Chamber is currently discussing the concept of independence, and Government Members—and indeed some Opposition Members—want to make the case for the strength of the Union. However, limiting and undermining the ability of further and higher education institutions to attract students from all around the world is not an argument in favour of the Union. That does not speak to the strength of the UK.

Again, if strengthening the Union is one of this Government's priorities, they need to look at their policies in these areas. I echo all of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), and, indeed, much of what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said. I pay tribute, once again, to the incredible community at the University of Glasgow. Long may that internationalism—that outreach to the world and that bringing of the world to our fantastically diverse city—continue.

**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** I would just say, for the future, it really does help the Chair to allocate time if hon. Members stand if they want to make a contribution.

5.6 pm

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I take on board your advice about making use of the

time and ensuring that the Chair is aware in advance. However, since we have almost four minutes spare—you indicated that the Front Benchers would start speaking at 5.10 pm—this is an opportunity for me, on behalf of the universities in our city of Manchester, of which we are immensely proud, and the universities right around the country, to endorse the comments made by the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) in opening this debate.

Our universities are economic, social and intellectual powerhouses in cities and communities up and down our country. We should welcome the diverse ideas, thinking and vision that international students contribute. However, we also know that the sector faces financial challenges. In England, where university student fees for UK students have been effectively reduced in real terms as a result of freezing, the financial contribution from international students becomes all the more important to support both the teaching of UK and international students and the vital research work of our universities.

Of course, the research programmes carried out in universities also help to power our economic success. The financial contribution that international students make, both directly, to the financial stability and success of higher education institutions, and indirectly, to the greater success of our whole economy, cannot be overestimated.

I strongly endorse what my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) said about the importance of soft power and the relationships that are established when international students come to this country to study, and indeed when international academics come here to teach and research with UK colleagues. The influence, relationships, and opportunities for using soft power that that creates for this country is an immense asset to us. We should recognise and celebrate the contribution of international students to that.

Mr Stringer, I very much welcome this afternoon's debate and I am grateful to you for giving me the opportunity to contribute briefly to it. I know that I speak for university vice-chancellors up and down the country when I say that we want to welcome international students to our higher education institutions. I also know that I speak for communities that are home to universities up and down the country when I say that we are delighted to welcome our international friends into our communities.

5.9 pm

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) for securing this debate. It is unusual that we have so much consensus in a debate. Mind you, we do not have any speakers on the Government's side other than the Minister. I hope that we get some consensus from him as well.

I do not have a university in my constituency, but I do have a huge number of international students living there. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) has pointed out that, in Glasgow, as well as the University of Glasgow, we have the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow Caledonian University, the Glasgow School of Art and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and, of course, very close to Glasgow, we have the University of the West of Scotland. We also

[Carol Monaghan]

have Glasgow Kelvin College, Glasgow Clyde College and City of Glasgow College within the city, all of which attract huge numbers of international students. It is impossible to underestimate the contribution that they make to the economy. All Members have made that point, but I think the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) really hammered home the financial aspect and the economic multipliers that come as a result of having those students in our communities.

It is not just about the financial contribution. International students make critical contributions, particularly in areas such as science, technology, engineering and maths, where we are short of skills. They also contribute to the teaching staff of many universities. It is impossible to overestimate the damage that this Government have done to our international student community. As a result of this Government's actions, the demographic has changed considerably. We have heard mention of the make-up of international students. We have seen a huge increase in the number of Chinese students coming to our universities. While, of course, they are very welcome, we have to appreciate that if the geopolitical situation is changed or disturbed we suddenly have a huge shortfall because we have not been recruiting actively enough in countries where we would have recruited in the past. That has to change. All the eggs have been put in one basket, and it is a pretty shaky basket at the moment.

The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) made a point about the decision made by the then Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), to scrap the post-study work visas. That decision was entirely illogical; it spoke to a certain type of person, but it certainly did not speak to anybody who was hoping to develop new businesses or to bring in new skills and talent. That decision exacerbated skill shortages, again particularly in science and technology. That hostile immigration policy worked against the public interest.

I am pleased that the Government have finally recognised their short-sightedness and reintroduced the post-study work visa. However, the ramifications of that initial decision are still being felt. When the UK closed its doors to that talent, individuals looked and went elsewhere, as the hon. Member for Sheffield Central mentioned. Other countries recognised those skills and benefited from them. As mentioned by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), it is not just our academic institutions that are casualties of that policy; it is also the wider community. We have lost brain power and entrepreneurs—we are still on the back foot today. Our academic institutions are trying to re-establish links with those countries, but that will take time. At a critical point, when we are trying to re-establish those links, the Home Secretary talks about reducing numbers. It is economically stupid, and it causes more reputational damage.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling talked about the European institutions that are under threat, and our membership of those institutions is not guaranteed. That is not just about the money that we get from Horizon Europe, it is about the rich collaborations with organisations such as Euratom, Copernicus and Galileo. As a result of Brexit, EU students are now forced to pay

international student fees and, as a result, we have seen a 73% decline in EU students coming to the UK. That is a huge hit to us and changes our demographic. Students from the EU are more likely to come and contribute and stay longer. If we do not have them here in the first place—not to mention the loss of Erasmus—we have a problem.

I will finish by talking about the rhetoric. Both my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and the hon. Member for Sheffield Central talked about the Home Secretary's recent comments. The rhetoric is problematic and it has to change. International students enrich our campuses and make a vital, positive contribution to our economy, culture and society. Research from Universities UK found that in my constituency alone, for one year, the economic benefit of international students was nearly £50 million. The fact that the Home Secretary may seek to limit international students and the wealth of knowledge and talent that they offer this country is hugely damaging. I welcome the Minister to his place; will he make representations to the Home Secretary in his new role to ensure that we can keep the flow of international students coming to enrich our communities?

5.15 pm

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. Let me express my thanks for the way that you have chaired the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) for bringing this debate about, and I welcome the Minister of State, Department for Education, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), to his new role.

We have heard widely about the passion for higher education across these islands. The hon. Member for Stirling talked about its importance and power to inform, enlighten and aid discovery. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) not just about the economic contribution that universities make, but about how they are cultural, social and economic powerhouses. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) talked about the soft power that our institutions have earned among Governments and institutions around the world, and the great achievements of the APPG. It is not just the size of the contribution that our institutions make that is so impressive; their cultural, societal and economic value cumulatively adds to the UK's global reputation.

Let us be clear: the UK is the aspiration destination for most international students. Through a powerful combination of our world-class lecturers, leading facilities and institutions' international standing, UK higher education is the benchmark around the world. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central said, that is clearly seen in the Higher Education Policy Institute's soft power index, in which the UK is positioned second.

The virtues of British higher education are reflected and amplified through Governments and leaders around the world. Closer to home, international students turn university campuses into melting pots of cultures, traditions, languages and thinking. Only two weeks ago during a visit to Oxford Brookes University, I sat around a table with half a dozen students hailing from Bulgaria, Nigeria and Hong Kong, as well as from the UK, all studying international development and sustainability. They were



using their individual experiences from back home to help to shape their learning and that of their fellow students. Many expressed a desire to return to their country of birth to show what they had learned from their lecturers and fellow students, but many want to stay.

International students add enormous value to the UK economy and research base. The Entrepreneurs Network estimates that nearly half of Britain's 100 fastest-growing start-ups have at least one immigrant co-founder. That leads me nicely on to the economic value of international students. Their precise economic value is really secondary to the wider social and cultural benefits that they bring, but it is still an important contribution to the UK.

Research conducted by *The London Economic* and HEPI, commissioned by Universities UK, found that the 2018-19 cohort of international students delivered a net economic benefit of £26 billion to the UK economy. Although our economic benefit is most concentrated in London, as we have heard, the material benefit to each of our constituencies is marked, ranging from £460 per constituent in the north-east and Scotland to £330 per constituent in the south-east, and a staggering £2,200 in Sheffield Central. In spite of the clear and obvious benefits that international students bring to the UK, Government rhetoric on migration, including international students, has tarnished the UK's reputation as the aspiration destination—a point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan).

I note the fiscal black hole caused by the recent Budget, which hovers at £40 billion to £50 billion. Let us put that into the context of the £26 billion that international students bring to the UK. It is important that we welcome international students and do all we can to enhance our reputation rather than to trash it. Two weeks ago it was suggested that the then Home Secretary was set to announce sweeping reforms that would have seen international student numbers capped and limits imposed on the number of dependents that international students can bring. Not long before that statement was due, she resigned. Policies such as those, circulating in a sea of chaos at the heart of Government, dent the UK's international reputation and risk putting off international students. I urge the Minister to set out his Department's commitment to international student numbers and to seek a commitment from the Home Secretary that international students will not be the latest front in her culture war.

In contrast, Labour is fully committed to protecting, encouraging and advancing the interests of all students, including international students. A simple comparative approach between the replacement Erasmus+ scheme in Labour-run Wales and SNP-run Scotland shows that, where action is required, Labour will always put opportunity for our young people ahead of political manoeuvres. Earlier this year, the Labour Government in Wales launched Taith.

**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** Order. Can I ask the hon. Gentleman to bring his remarks to a conclusion, so I can bring in the Minister?

**Matt Western:** I will. Gambling on our young people's prospects with politics is short sighted and narrow. The same could be said of the UK Government's decision to withdraw from the European University Institute, a

university based in Bologna that provided opportunities for young people, free of charge, to study for masters degrees and PhDs. Guided by our beliefs in opportunity, collaboration and partnership, Labour will support international students and continue to champion their worth, because, put simply, universities are forces for public good, and we should all champion and be proud of the international students who contribute to that good.

**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** Minister, before I call you, can I ask you to leave a couple of minutes at the end for the winding-up speech? That will be at about 5.28.

5.21 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Education (Robert Halfon):** It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) on a very thoughtful speech. I love what he said about science and technology. I have a picture of President Kennedy on my wall in the Department for Education, because he put a man on the moon, and moved the whole engine of government, universities and science to achieve that purpose.

There has been a fair bit of doom and gloom, but our higher education sector has an extraordinary reputation. Four of the top 10 universities in the world are in the UK. It is no surprise that Britain is such a destination of choice for students around the world. We had the ambition of housing at least 600,000 international students in the UK per year by 2030, and we met it, for the first time, nearly 10 years early. There are 68,180 international students in Scotland. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) talked about EU students, but my figures show that, according to data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, EU-domiciled student entrants increased by 4% in 2021 compared with the previous year. I am guessing that the hon. Lady's figures are based on UCAS applications.

It has rightly been highlighted that international students contribute £25.9 billion to the economy, which is quite extraordinary, and are the source of over 60% of the UK's education export earnings. Every resident is about £390 a year better off as a result. On the question asked by the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), the net economic impact per student was estimated to be £95,000 per typical international student in the 2018-19 cohort. In other words, every 11 international students generate £1 million-worth of net economic impact for the UK economy over the duration of their studies.

I want to be clear that the target remains 600,000 students. That is something to be proud of. I am as keen on soft power as the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). She gave an example of meeting somebody who had studied in the UK. I have met many people as well. When I was over in Taiwan, I met an incredible person who started showing us slides of the Beatles. He was in charge of national security, and we were wondering what was going on. He said, "I went to the University of Liverpool, and that is why I love your country." I get it. I have seen people from Iraq—I know that the hon. Member for Stirling has been involved in Iraq. I have seen the incredible work that goes on with Kurdistan in northern Iraq, particularly; so many of the leaders came to this country. I completely understand

[Robert Halfon]

why international students are so important. I am a liberal interventionist: I believe in soft power as much as hard power.

I accept what the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West, said about relying too much on one cohort, or on people from certain countries. Just as a business should be cautious about being overly reliant on a single supplier, universities should be cautious about having a single source of income.

I remind Members that the Government appointed Sir Steve Smith as the UK's international education champion. His job is to make the most of the opportunities in key priority regions. We have roughly 84,000 Indian students in our country, and he is exploring the opportunities for UK skills partnerships.

The Government should be proud of the Turing scheme. I know it is for students further afield, but it supports our students to go to places such as Germany or Spain, and all over the world. The Turing scheme is much wider than the Erasmus scheme and has students in vocational education. Some £100 million is being invested in it, and it has more than 38,000 students—not just from universities, but from further education providers and schools.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) talked about Glasgow City College in his constituency, which was very interesting.

**Carol Monaghan:** City of Glasgow College.

**Robert Halfon:** Sorry, the City of Glasgow College, which has worked with Indonesian polytechnic colleges on skills for the maritime sector. That is what motivates me—skills and apprenticeships, and higher education—which is why the Turing scheme and other schemes are so important.

Of course, there are pressures on the overseas aid budget. I absolutely get that, and hopefully things will return to normal as soon as the financial conditions allow, but look at what we are doing to support Ukrainian students in the UK. A lot of work has gone into that. There is a twinning initiative set up by Universities UK and the Cormack Consultancy Group, which partners with a Ukrainian university. There are partnerships with higher education providers, including the University of Glasgow, Cardiff University, Queen's University Belfast and Sheffield Hallam University, and there is the work of the University of Stirling. I saw that it won sporting awards not so long ago, and it is offering Ukrainian students the opportunity to apply to transfer on to courses matching their original programmes.

In England, we have extended access to higher education student support, the home fee status tuition caps, advanced learner loans, and further education funding for those

who are granted leave under one of the three schemes for Ukrainians that have been introduced by the Home Office. If that is not soft power in action, I do not know what is. It is all about spending our overseas aid money wisely, and migration changes.

I want to make it absolutely clear in my last few seconds that we remain committed to working towards our ambitions, which are set out in the international education strategy, to host at least 600,000 students per year in the UK by 2030. We will continue to welcome and attract international students to the UK in order to enable our domestic students to experience and hear fresh perspectives, and to allow our HE sector to thrive.

5.28 pm

**Alyn Smith:** I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. It is good to see the emergence of an SNP-Labour-DUP coalition on these matters—together at last. Perhaps we are having a glimpse into the future. Who knows? Aside from our domestic world views, there is a lot of consensus among Opposition parties.

I am grateful to the Minister for his thoughtful response. If he has President Kennedy and the moon landing on his wall, he cannot be all bad. I did not think he was part of the problem before the debate, and he has confirmed today that he is not. However, I have to say that there are elements of the Government and his party who are. There are people who are trying to misrepresent student immigration by talking about the wider problem of immigration. I acknowledge that that needs to be addressed but, as the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) said powerfully, the failure to address it does not mean that students should bear the brunt of that limitation. I was glad to hear the Minister's confirmation that the 600,000 target remains in place.

I say to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that David Hume, a great Scottish philosopher, said that the truth emerges from an honest disagreement among friends. We sincerely disagree on the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, but I do not doubt for a second the hon. Gentleman's sincerity. I acknowledge concerns about the Northern Ireland protocol and how it is operating, but there are lots of ways in which it could be reformed within the protocol. The European Commission has put forward a number of proposals that would go a long way to address those concerns, and the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill is holding back progress in so many other crucial and important aspects of the higher education sector, for Northern Ireland as well as for the rest of us. We disagree and will have further discussions on this issue, but I do not doubt his sincerity.

5.30 pm

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).*

# Written Statements

*Wednesday 2 November 2022*

## DEFENCE

### Type 26 Batch 1

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):** Today I wish to provide an update on the progress of the first batch of Type 26 frigates.

The Type 26 frigate is an advanced anti-submarine warfare warship designed for the critical protection of the continuous at-sea deterrent and carrier strike group. The manufacture of ship 1, HMS Glasgow, is progressing in BAES's Govan shipyard and is expected to be in the water by the end of 2022. The manufacture of ship 2, HMS Cardiff, commenced with a steel-cutting ceremony in August 2019, and the manufacture of ship 3, HMS Belfast, commenced with a steel-cutting ceremony in June 2021 conducted by HRH The Prince of Wales.

The Type 26 reference design has been successfully exported to Australia and Canada, which are developing the Australian Hunter class and Canadian surface combatants respectively. Winning these export deals has demonstrated the world-class credentials of the Type 26 design, as well as further securing thousands of highly skilled UK jobs and strengthening strategic alliances with our close allies.

HMS Glasgow's Royal Navy ship's crew have already started to join. They are providing vital Royal Navy expertise to deliver the ships and have already met HMS Glasgow's sponsor, HRH The Princess of Wales.

Type 26 production is well under way as evidenced by completion of the platform design, joining the fore and aft sections of HMS Glasgow, successful gearbox installation and shaft alignment work in readiness for float off to the Scotstoun yard around the end of this year. The gearbox for HMS Cardiff (ship 2) has been successfully tested at the factory, delivered and installed, along with the major propulsion components (e.g. diesel engines, electric motors, gas turbines) and the fore and aft sections are on track to be joined together early next year.

BAES, the Type 26 prime contractor, and the MOD are also working on improving ship build productivity through the introduction of updated welding machines and technology, digital ways of working to enable the workforce timely access to build data, and more efficient sequencing and automation of production line work for block construction. As a result, significant improvement has already been witnessed in ships 2 and 3.

Due to the impact of covid-19, where the Govan yard was required to shut down for a number of weeks, and challenges typical of those experienced with the first of class ship, including finalising the ship design and timely delivery of key new to service equipment, the Department is forecasting a 12-month delay to the Type 26 initial operating capability (IOC) from October 2027 to October 2028. A proportion of the associated cost growth will fall to the contractor as part of the target cost incentive

fee (TCIF) commercial arrangements. The resultant cost growth for the MOD is 4.2% over forecast, which is £233 million over the life of the programme.

Work is already under way to increase productivity and improve on the revised forecast IOC date. In addition, an investment in a new shipbuilding hall to build ships undercover and to further improve build efficiency is in progress, with the planning application submitted to the local authorities. BAES is also working closely with DE&S and the Royal Navy to streamline the trials, testing and acceptance into service plans. Examples include using Royal Navy procedures and ways of working during shipbuilder acceptance trials to avoid the need to repeat these activities after vessel handover to the Royal Navy. Plans are also in place to have DE&S and Royal Navy personnel present and engaged with test and commissioning activity to grow Type 26 ships' staff experience and de-risk the successful in-service operation and maintenance of the class, providing another opportunity to bring forward the IOC date.

The Type 26 programme remains on track to meet all user requirements and deliver world-class anti-submarine warfare frigates in time to replace the anti-submarine warfare Type 23s.

[HCWS352]

## Defence Electronics and Components Agency

### **The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Alex Chalk):**

I am today confirming the Department's intention to merge two of Ministry of Defence's (MOD) arm's length bodies (ALBs), which will see the Defence Electronics and Components Agency (DECA) merge into Defence Equipment and Support (DE&S).

This follows the UK Government Investments (UKGI) tailored review of DECA, 2021. The review confirmed the continuing value and need for DECA to be retained within MOD as a strategic second source, in-house provider of maintenance, repair, overhaul and upgrade (MRO&U) services. This decision reflects the need for the MOD to widen DECA delivery across defence to achieve even greater savings.

Consistent with the Government's public body reform agenda, we have investigated a number of potential governance and operating models and concluded that merging DECA into DE&S provides best overall value to the taxpayer. This will be achieved through improved governance structures and an operating model better aligned with Government policy and defence planning outputs. This will put DECA on a stable, sustainable footing and achieves greater savings through increased utilisation of DECA across defence.

The merger option has been developed with a wide range of defence stakeholders, with other Government Departments, and with the two ALBs themselves. A key aspect has been to protect those elements of DECA's current operating model that have proven valuable in the delivery of defence outputs.

The merger will also sustain and grow highly skilled jobs at DECA's main site at MOD Sealand, north Wales, its other existing locations across the UK, and provide further opportunities to develop a DE&S hub in support of wider defence work.

[HCWS351]



## INTERNATIONAL TRADE

### International Trade Week

**The Secretary of State for International Trade (Kemi Badenoch):** On Monday, I launched International Trade Week 2022, which will run until Friday with events taking place across the United Kingdom. Now in its second year, International Trade Week is my Department's largest showcase of trade, exporting and investment potential in the UK.

The week is designed to inspire businesses throughout the UK to pursue global opportunities, understand the UK's investment potential and connect directly with trade industry experts. It will showcase key initiatives from my Department's export strategy and provide an opportunity to hear from business about its work to support the UK's race to £1 trillion worth of exports by the end of the decade. This Government continue to be committed to championing businesses to grow internationally and my Department will evidence this through our events throughout the week.

With more than 10,000 business registrations to over 120 events across the week, there is clear appetite among British businesses to take advantage of the growing demand for UK goods and services, particularly from

some of the world's fastest growing economies. UK exports were £728.1 billion in the 12 months to end of August 2022, up £116.0 billion (19.0%) compared to the previous 12 months.

Last year, the Department for International Trade also launched our export strategy and the "Made in the UK, Sold to the World" marketing campaign. One year on, we will celebrate successes to date and further promote our new products and services to business, as part our continued effort to deliver through the export strategy framework.

On Tuesday, as part of the week, I also hosted the green trade and investment expo (GTIE) in Gateshead. The expo will inspire and encourage more high-quality, sustainable investment into UK businesses creating jobs and generating growth to benefit people across the UK.

With increased investment in UK businesses, and by supercharging our exports, we will create jobs, increase energy security and resilience, boost productivity and build the expertise that will benefit the world. The expo will also demonstrate how the UK is bringing innovation and creativity to life, and how the ingenuity of British inventors, innovators and entrepreneurs is unlocking new growth, new jobs and new investment in clean and renewable technologies.

[HCWS350]

# Ministerial Correction

*Wednesday 2 November 2022*

## DEFENCE

### Topical Questions

*The following is an extract from Defence questions on 18 July 2022*

**Dan Jarvis:** Will we be left without a low-level parachute capability when Hercules goes out of service? If so, can Ministers say how long our airborne forces will be grounded while Atlas is upgraded?

**Mr Wallace:** I took steps immediately **to close the gap, if there was one, in that last year we purchased a significant number of new parachutes off the shelf.** The hon. Gentleman will be aware, given his interest in airborne forces, that both the German and French air forces have on numerous occasions jumped out of A400s, and it is odd that we have not yet done that, so that is not the reason why this matter has not progressed. We are making sure that we

have the right equipment and the right training for pilots. We are on track to do that, but I will give him an update. Just like him, I think it is incredibly important that the RAF gets on and does this.

*[Official Report, 18 July 2022, Vol. 718, c. 698.]*

*Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace):*

An error has been identified in my response to the topical question asked by the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis).

The correct response should have been:

**Mr Wallace:** I took steps immediately **to close the gap.** The hon. Gentleman will be aware, given his interest in airborne forces, that both the German and French air forces have on numerous occasions jumped out of A400s, and it is odd that we have not yet done that, so that is not the reason why this matter has not progressed. We are making sure that we have the right equipment and the right training for pilots. We are on track to do that, but I will give him an update. Just like him, I think it is incredibly important that the RAF gets on and does this.





# ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 2 November 2022

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# MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Wednesday 2 November 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>DEFENCE</b> .....	3MC
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Wednesday 9 November 2022**

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