

**Tuesday
8 November 2022**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 8 November 2022

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Ukraine

1. **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): What diplomatic steps his Department is taking to support Ukraine. [902103]

2. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of humanitarian support to Ukraine. [902104]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, after coming into their roles, made their first foreign counterpart calls to President Zelensky and Foreign Minister Kuleba of Ukraine, respectively. Last week, at the G7 in Germany, the Secretary of State, with other leaders, expressed solidarity with the Ukrainian people and condemned Russia's outrageous invasion of Ukraine. Our total economic and humanitarian support to Ukraine has been more than £1.5 billion, with vital humanitarian aid helping more than one in four Ukrainians.

Duncan Baker: This week, a group of my constituents will journey to Ukraine to deliver urgently needed humanitarian support for what will be a very cold winter. They are not alone, as great swathes of the British public have done extraordinary acts of kindness to help Ukrainians in desperate need. Will my hon. Friend please commend my constituent Rob Scammell from North Walsham for what he has done, and comment on the steps his Department is taking to help Ukrainians in the light of Russian attacks that have damaged civilian heating and water supplies?

Leo Docherty: I join my hon. Friend in thanking Rob Scammell and others who are providing important aid to Ukraine. Although our strong advice is that individuals do not travel to Ukraine and find other ways to support Ukrainian civilians, I want to put on record my thanks. Such humanitarian aid is very significant, and electricity generators are also being sent to Ukraine to help people keep warm over the winter. This reflects the tremendous

spirit of generosity within the British public, which my hon. Friend, who I think was the first Member of Parliament to receive a Ukrainian family into his home, also demonstrates. I thank him for that too.

Mark Pawsey: Almost daily, we see Putin's army targeting civilians: the young, the elderly and the vulnerable. I am very proud, as I am sure we all are in this House, that the UK is the European country providing the most support—from not only the Government but, as we have heard, teams of volunteers. Will the Minister welcome the work done by Bags of Joy in my Rugby constituency, which is sending bags of treats and goodies to some of those affected by this most appalling war?

Leo Docherty: I join my hon. Friend in thanking Bags of Joy for sending those products to Ukraine, which is good to see. I think the generosity from his Rugby constituents shows that Ukraine has many friends and Russia in this instance has none.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Part and parcel of our support for Ukraine is how we look after Ukrainian refugees. I know of examples in the north of Scotland of their finding the bureaucracy involved in accessing universal credit very difficult. Although Work and Pensions is not his Department, does the Minister agree that a one-point telephone number and a dedicated team in that Department would help sort out this problem?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Member is right to point out the amazing scale of the issue, with more than 140,000 Ukrainians having received visas and living in the UK, but I will take away his helpful suggestion and we will see whether that is in place.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Whatever Americans vote for today, I hope they stick with supporting Ukraine over the next few months. May I ask a question I have asked the Minister before—so I hope he knows the answer by now—about the Abramovich money? Chelsea was sold for £3.5 billion many months ago. Has that money yet got to Ukraine, and if not, why not?

Leo Docherty: I am very pleased to be able to provide an answer. The money is still frozen in a UK bank account. The administrative work is being done and a licence is being applied for, but we hope it is on the start of its journey to Ukraine to help the people where they need help.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know the resolute support across the country, and across the House, for Ukraine. The people of Ukraine should know that and, indeed, Vladimir Putin should know that. However, there are unfortunately some siren voices suggesting otherwise, including from the far right of the US Republicans, and this is hugely dangerous. What are the Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister doing to challenge those who would give encouragement and succour to Putin in his barbarous actions?

Leo Docherty: On all three fronts—diplomatic, economic and military—I think the whole world has come together. That was made very clear by the Foreign Secretary at the G7 last week. Looking at some of the statements about solidarity at COP today, I think Russia has a very long border and very few friends. We are stronger because we are together, and I think that is very clear.

Nigeria: Flood Relief

3. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to support flood relief efforts in Nigeria. [902105]

The Minister for Development (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Nigeria is one of the world's most vulnerable countries to climate change, and it is experiencing the worst floods in a decade. The UK is providing support through the multi-donor Start fund, which has allocated £580,000 so far this rainy season. That funding is supporting 26,288 people affected by flooding. We will continue to help Nigeria make progress towards long-term climate change adaptation and resilience.

Kate Osamor: I welcome the Minister to his place. The floods in Nigeria have already left more than 1 million people displaced, 200,000 homes destroyed and, sadly, 600 people dead. In the wake of those floods, cholera cases are skyrocketing in some areas, due to a lack of access to clean water. Will the Minister assure me that the Government will be focusing aid to help ensure access to water and sanitation, and prevent the death toll from rising further?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and her question. Over the past five years, Britain has provided £425 million of humanitarian support, which has specifically reached more than 2 million people in north-east Nigeria, including individuals affected by the flooding. I give her a commitment that, working with Nigerian agencies, we will seek to strengthen flood risk management. Prior to COP26 we supported Nigeria's national adaptation work to help cope with climate change.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his Cabinet role. I know that he believes in the difference that international development can make, and I wish him well in persuading his Cabinet colleagues. Asylum applications are delayed by the thousands, spending on temporary hotels is soaring, and the Home Office is in turmoil. To bail it out, the Minister has seemingly written the Home Secretary a blank cheque out of Britain's aid budget, spending £3.5 billion that is meant to be tackling the root causes of mass displacement. Since 2008, 41 people have been forced from their homes every minute by the climate crisis, and the floods in Nigeria, where 200,000 homes are under water, surely show that the climate emergency is here, it is now, and UK aid is needed more than ever. Will the Minister agree to carry out an urgent review of all Home Office official development assistance expenditure, and consider whether it is delivering value for taxpayers' money? Will he please tell the House how long he is happy to let the Home Secretary have free rein over his budget to mop up a domestic crisis of her Department's own making?

Mr Speaker: Please, it is questions. Other people have to get in as well. It is not just a Front-Bench show; this is for Back Benchers.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady, whom I thank for her generous remarks, did not really refer to Nigeria. In so far as the budget is being spent in Nigeria, I assure her that we are very focused on the effects of those floods. There are people now in category 5 starvation in north-east Nigeria, and I assure her that we will do everything we can to help them.

Mr Speaker: I call Alyn Smith, the SNP spokesperson.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I, too, welcome the Ministers to their place, and I look forward to working constructively with them. I am glad that aid is going to the dreadful situation in Nigeria, but surely that illustrates the wider point that we cannot do more with less. Surely now is time to reinstate the 0.7% aid allocation, because these events will increase going forward.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman makes a lot of sense, and he knows where I stand on these matters. Fortunately, collective responsibility is not retrospective, and I assure him that we are focused on the issues he has raised. I hope very much that when we have the autumn statement next week, there will be encouraging news.

Somalia: Hunger

4. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of hunger in Somalia in the last 12 months. [902106]

The Minister for Development (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The humanitarian situation throughout Somalia is grave and has worsened significantly over the past 12 months. The number of people affected by drought has more than doubled since January, with more than 7.8 million people—almost 50% of the country—now in need of humanitarian assistance. More than 300,000 people are facing catastrophic levels of food insecurity.

Mr Dhesi: Mortality and malnutrition are at alarming levels, with 300,000 people expected to face famine in Burhakaba and Baidoa. Sadly, children in Somalia are bearing the brunt, with half a million needing treatment for severe acute malnutrition, and they are much more likely to die of diarrhoea and measles. As families make desperate survival decisions, women and children will face gender-based violence and child marriage. Rather than continuously, callously cutting aid budgets, what will the Government do to honour their commitment to protect women and girls before it is too late?

Mr Mitchell: Under the category 5 definition—those people who are on the brink of starving to death—there are nearly 1 million people in the world today, and 300,000 of them are in Somalia. There is, therefore, no question at all about the need. I hope to go to Somalia before too long to see for myself what more we can do, but I should emphasise that UK-funded programmes are ensuring that emergency cash transfers, which are very important, are reaching 310,000 people. On the hon. Member's specific point, in terms of water and sanitation, we are helping 483,000—

Mr Speaker: Order. This also goes for the Government side of the House: we have to get Back Benchers in; it is not just a show for Ministers and their shadows.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's much overdue return to the Front Bench. His return is to the Government's advantage but also to the advantage of millions of men, women and children who rely on Britain's leadership in aid, which he has been singularly forthright in pursuing.

May I bring my hon. Friend back to the issue raised by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) about the resources available for aid? Yesterday, the front page of *The Times* told us that millions if not billions of British money is being diverted from aid, saving the lives of children in north-east Africa, to the Home Office—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not just about shadow Ministers and Ministers; it is also about ex-Ministers. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Mitchell: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for his kind remarks. He knows a great deal about this area, and the House benefits from his judgment and experience on it. In respect of *The Times* yesterday, all I can tell him is that these matters are very much the subject of discussions between the Foreign Office and the Treasury.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I also welcome the Minister to his post. Across east Africa, somebody is dying of hunger every 36 seconds. One hundred people will die in the time that Ministers are at the Dispatch Box. At COP, countries such as ours are urged to cover the cost of adapting to global heating in extremely vulnerable nations, but, despite soundbites from No. 10 about helping countries with the existential threats that they face, our Government are cutting support for countries such as Somalia. Will he demonstrate that he understands the real human cost of climate change by promising immediate assistance for food and climate support in Somalia?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind remarks. The international community is scaling up in Somalia and in Ethiopia. The World Bank and the African Development Bank have announced more than \$35 billion of funding for food security across the region.

Relations with China: BNO Visa Scheme

5. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What assessment he has made of the impact of the British national overseas visa scheme on diplomatic relations with China. [902107]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): We warmly welcome all those who have taken up the BNO visa route. This route is about our relationship with Hong Kong and its people. The BNO visa scheme was introduced in response to China's breaches of the Sino-British joint

declaration, including its imposition of the national security law, which has been used to undermine rights and freedoms in Hong Kong.

Alexander Stafford: I deeply commend the Government on implementing the impressive, tailor-made British national overseas visa and standing up for the Hongkongers in the face of growing repression from Beijing. British nationals overseas are Britons, and it is important that we defend them at home and abroad. In the light of the recent assault on a Hongkonger inside the Chinese consulate in Manchester and the increasing harassment of Hongkongers by the Chinese state all over the world, will my right hon. Friend commit to protecting the British Hongkongers?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We are steadfast in our support of the Hong Kong BNO community. Those who choose to live their lives in the UK should enjoy the same freedoms that are afforded to any nationality. As British nationals, BNO passport holders are entitled to consulate assistance from our diplomatic posts overseas.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): For years, the Conservative Government have failed to act strategically on China. Most recently, the Foreign Secretary ducked responsibility by letting officials meet the Chinese embassy over the Hongkonger beaten in Manchester and gave no answers about the troubling reports alleging that Chinese police stations are operating in the UK. Our allies and partners around the world are taking major strategic steps on China. Last month, the US announced the CHIPS and Science Act 2022. Last week, the German Chancellor got Xi Jinping to publicly oppose the use of nuclear weapons. The UK has not even published a long-promised strategy. Do the Government still plan to publish a China strategy and, if so, by what date?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UK is clear that China remains in an ongoing state of non-compliance with the Sino-British joint declaration. We have also been clear that the imposition of the national security law and the overhaul of Hong Kong's electoral system have undermined the rights and freedoms promised to Hongkongers. We continue to work with our international partners to hold China to its obligations. We will continue to work across Government on the question of a China strategy.

HIV/AIDs

6. **Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress he has made on ending the HIV/AIDs pandemic by 2030. [902108]

The Minister for Development (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The UK is committed to working in partnership to deliver on the global AIDS strategy and ending the epidemic of AIDS by 2030. We provide substantial funding to the World Health Organisation, UNAIDS, the Robert Carr Fund and the Global Fund. Together, we are working towards ensuring that all can access the prevention and treatment services needed to ensure progress on HIV/AIDs.

Florence Eshalomi: I welcome the Minister back to his place. Globally, the number of new infections dropped by only 3.6% between 2020 and 2021, which is the

smallest decline since 2016. The data shows that it disproportionately impacts adolescent young women and girls. We must do and can do more to help those girls if we are truly to end new HIV transmissions. What plans does the Minister have to ensure that the Global Fund receives a pledge, so it can carry out vital programmes if we are to end new transmissions of HIV by 2030?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about the critical importance of the Global Fund's work. The Global Fund has saved more than 50 million lives. It was very heavily reformed in 2010. Two thirds of the money goes towards the Commonwealth and it is brilliantly effective. She can rest assured that we are looking very carefully at the pledge we are going to make.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I welcome the Minister for Development to his place. As a Back Bencher, he spoke passionately and frankly in holding his party to its manifesto commitments on international development, and I applaud that. Indeed, in July he said:

"I urge the Government to ensure that we are as generous as possible on the replenishment of the fund".—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2022; Vol. 717, c. 922.]

Yet today, under his ministerial role, not a single penny has been pledged to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. I just heard him say on the record that it will continue to be supported substantially, so he may wish to correct that. Words are deeds, so will the Minister put money where his mouth is and join the other G7 countries by making a late donation to the Global Fund and delivering what his party promised?

Mr Mitchell: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that our support throughout the whole House for the Global Fund is absolute and intense. Discussions are ongoing on the subject of money. I hope very much it will not be too long before I can come before the House and answer his very specific questions on both the money and the results that that money will achieve.

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Jamie Wallis. Not here, but can the Minister answer as though he was?

Human Rights

7. **Dr Jamie Wallis** (Bridgend) (Con): What steps he is taking to help protect human rights across the world.
[902109]

15. **James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): What steps he is taking to help protect human rights across the world.
[902117]

The Minister for Development (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The UK puts human rights at the heart of what we do. That includes: leading efforts to hold Russia to account over its actions in Ukraine and at home; leading on United Nations Human Rights Council resolutions, including on Syria, Sri Lanka and Somalia, and a joint statement on Xinjiang; and sanctioning officials involved in human rights violations in Iran.

James Daly: Thousands of my constituents are concerned about the ongoing human rights abuses in Indian-administered Kashmir. What steps are the British Government taking to raise those concerns with the Indian Government and ensure that human rights are protected and respected for all throughout the region?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. Any allegations are deeply concerning and must be thoroughly investigated. We raise concerns with both Governments, and we can do so because relations are so close and mutually beneficial.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, to his place. Our ability to act as human rights defenders around the world would be much stronger if we collectively hit the G20 target of lending \$100 billion of the special drawing rights issued last year. To date, the UK has committed to sharing only 20% of its special drawing rights. That fraction is much lower than France and China. What is he doing to get a grip of the Government achieving the aim of sharing a much higher proportion?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, has raised with me privately the issue of SDRs. I agree that there is much more that the international community can do to use those SDRs for the benefit of the poorest people in the world, whom we wish to help. All I can say today is that those discussions with the Treasury are ongoing.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I welcome the Minister back to his place. Today will be the third day that Alaa Abdel Fattah—a pro-democracy activist and British citizen—has not consumed any water. The Minister will know that he has been in prison in Egypt for nine years and that he has been on hunger strike for more than 200 days. With the eyes of the world on COP27, will the Minister confirm that the Government will not allow Egypt to get away with using the summit to paper over human rights atrocities and that every UK channel is being used to secure Alaa's release? And will he make really clear the consequences if Egypt were to allow Alaa to die in prison?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind remarks, her question and her concern. That matter was raised specifically by the Prime Minister at Cabinet this morning. He spoke to the Egyptian authorities and I have no doubt that the arguments that she put were strenuously emphasised by the Prime Minister in those discussions.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Iran has one of the worst human rights records in the world, and I am sure that is one reason for the extensive protests. Will the Government ensure that if the joint comprehensive plan of action is revived or replaced, it will place strong obligations on Iran to repair its appalling and shocking human rights record?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend raises a most important subject. What is going on in Iran is of immense concern to the Government. I will ensure that her comments are carefully recorded for the Foreign Secretary.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister will be aware of the tremendous work done by the charity Open Doors over a number of years. Will he ensure that when cases are brought to him about human rights abuses against Christians and other religious believers across the globe, they will receive his attention and that appropriate action will be taken in respect of the nations that carry out those abuses?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman raises a most important point, and the answer is yes.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, David Lammy.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Let me return to Alaa Abdel Fattah, a British citizen and democracy campaigner who was imprisoned in Egypt for sharing a Facebook post. His mother waited outside Wadi el-Natrun prison on Monday for the weekly letter from her son, but no letter came out. He has stopped drinking water and his life is now in grave danger. For too long, the Government's diplomacy has been weak. The Prime Minister raised the case yesterday but failed to secure consular access before he did so. What diplomatic price has Egypt paid for denying the right of consular access to a British citizen? Will the Minister make it clear that there will be serious diplomatic consequences if access is not granted immediately and Alaa is not released and reunited with his family?

Mr Mitchell: The shadow Foreign Secretary is absolutely right to raise that case. For that reason, the Prime Minister made a particular point of making representations to his opposite number in Egypt, and I very much hope that those representations will be heard.

British Embassy Relocation: Jerusalem

8. **Kim Leadbeater** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of relocating the British embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. [902110]

Mr Speaker: Welcome back, Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): There are no plans to move the UK embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv. Israel is a close friend and a key strategic partner, built on decades of co-operation. We will continue to strengthen our relationship with Israel through our embassy in Tel Aviv.

Kim Leadbeater: I am very pleased to hear that, as I know my constituents will be. However, why was that move ever under consideration, given that last month at the United Nations, 143 countries, including Israel and the UK, voted to reaffirm that any unilateral annexation of territory by another state is a violation of international law? Navi Pillay, the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has observed that unless that principle is applied equally to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem, it would become meaningless. Is this not just another example of the Conservative party's chaotic approach to international relations that has so badly undermined the UK's reputation on the global stage?

David Rutley: The Government have looked at this issue. There are no plans to move the British embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv. We will continue to work to ensure that we are in the best position possible to continue promoting peace and stability in the region and supporting a two-state solution.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I welcome the Minister's update. Will he reaffirm that that is the long-standing position of our country; that it is the right position internationally; that the work done by our consulate-general in Jerusalem is extremely valued and complements what is happening in our embassy in Tel Aviv; and that that will continue to be the case?

David Rutley: My hon. Friend has real expertise on the issue. Yes, I completely agree with him.

Sudan: Humanitarian Crisis

9. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): What discussions he has had with his international counterparts on the provision of aid to help tackle the humanitarian crisis in Sudan. [902111]

The Minister for Development (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The UK remains a committed donor to Sudan. This year, the UK has provided £10.8 million in humanitarian assistance, helping more than 300,000 Sudanese people with life-saving support including food, nutrition and safe drinking water. Furthermore, the UK and other donors have agreed with the World Bank to unlock \$100 million of committed but unspent donor funds to address urgent food needs.

Clive Efford: According to the UN, the number of people facing severe acute food insecurity in South Sudan has reached its highest level ever. Mass displacement and destruction of property and livelihoods has increased the risk of disease and famine, particularly for women and children. What assessment has the Minister made of the risk to children from malnutrition? What discussions has he had with international partners to scale up the response to this impending disaster?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Because of the tremendous food insecurity in that part of the world, discussions are very much ongoing. Some 16 million people—nearly a third of the entire population—will require assistance next year. This is the highest level of insecurity since 2011, when I was last there as part of the troika on Sudan: the US, Norway and the UK.

Iran

10. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the human rights situation in Iran. [902112]

13. **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What representations he has made to his Iranian counterpart on the (a) excessive use of force against and (b) deaths of people protesting the death of Mahsa (Zhin) Amini caused by security forces in Iran. [902115]

14. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the recent protests in Iran. [902116]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): The death of Mahsa Amini and of all those who have lost their lives standing up to the authorities is a tragedy that shows the regime's shocking disregard for the rights of the Iranian people. We have made our views clear to Iran in the strongest possible terms. We have robustly condemned Iran's actions, including at the UN Human Rights Council, and we have sanctioned the morality police and seven other officials responsible for human rights violations.

Bob Blackman: Thousands of Iranians have been arrested for just demonstrating their support for people who have been murdered. I have been supplied with a long list of people who have been sentenced to death just for protesting. Even worse, British-Iranian reporters who are now sited in the UK have been issued with credible information by the police that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps threatens their lives. What more does the IRGC have to do before we proscribe it in its entirety?

David Rutley: I know that my hon. Friend feels very strongly about these issues and has raised them at the highest level with FCDO Ministers. We have been clear about our concerns about the IRGC's continued destabilising activity throughout the region. The UK maintains a range of sanctions that work to constrain that destabilising activity. The list of proscribed organisations is kept under constant review, but we do not routinely comment on whether an organisation is or is not under consideration for proscription—I know that my hon. Friend understands the reasons.

Rushanara Ali: Iran Human Rights estimates that more than 300 people, including 24 children, have been killed in Iran in the protests that followed the death of Mahsa Amini. In the words of the song "Baraye", which has become the anthem of these protests, the protests are

"for my sister, your sister, our sisters".

In Farsi, the protesters shout "zan, zendegi, azadi"—women, life, freedom. I am sure that the whole House shares our solidarity with all those who are protesting for freedom against this brutal regime. In the light of these brutal attacks, will the UK Government support measures to expel Iran from the UN Commission on the Status of Women to show that the UK stands firmly with the women and children of Iran and the protesters who have joined them?

David Rutley: The hon. Member has made some important points about the grassroots nature of the protests. As I have said, we are taking strong action against the Iranians, but I will raise her points specifically with Lord Ahmad, the Minister for the Middle East.

Cat Smith: I recently met a group of Iranian refugees and asylum seekers at Global Link in Lancaster. They shared with me testimony and videos of the protests and the women across Iran who are daily putting their

lives at risk for their fundamental rights. Does the Minister accept that the UK has a responsibility to support these remarkable women, and can he explain how the UK intends to do so?

David Rutley: They are indeed remarkable women, and we want to underline the fact that these are grassroots protests in Iran. We have taken strong action: we have sanctioned the morality police in its entirety, as well as both its chief and the head of the Tehran division. However, it is not our practice to speculate on future sanctions designations, as doing so would reduce the impact of those designations.

Chemical Weapons Investigation: Northern Iraq

11. **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): If his Department will request that the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons conduct an investigation into the alleged use of chemical weapons by Turkey in northern Iraq. [902113]

17. **Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): If his Department will refer allegations of the use of chemical weapons by Turkey in northern Iraq to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons for investigation. [902119]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The Government are aware of reports that Turkish forces have used white phosphorus in northern Iraq. However, we have no direct evidence to support those claims. Of course, we take all allegations of this nature seriously, and we are committed to upholding the chemical weapons convention.

Kim Johnson: A Turkish CHP opposition Member of Parliament who asked the question about the alleged use of chemical weapons has received a summary of proceedings to prosecute him for terrorism. Does the Minister agree that it is time for us to follow in the footsteps of the Belgian Supreme Court by revisiting our designation of the PKK as a terrorist organisation? Does he also agree that not doing so gives cover to Turkey's human rights abuses against Kurds living both within and beyond its borders?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Lady mentions the PKK. We should be very clear that we regard the PKK to be a terrorist organisation—that is why we have proscribed it—and that we believe Turkey has a legitimate right to defend itself against this form of terrorism.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Sezgin Tarikulu—the Turkish MP to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) has referred—said: "I watched the footage of the alleged chemical weapons. Chemical weapons are crimes against humanity. Tomorrow I will submit a PQ on the accuracy of these allegations." For saying that, and that alone, he has been indicted for terrorism and supporting PKK rhetoric, despite the fact that a Turkish Minister has confirmed that Turkey does use gas. Sezgin is a member of the CHP, the founding party of Turkey; he is not of the Kurdish party. Does the Minister not recognise that the overreach

of the PKK terrorist definition is shutting down democracy in Turkey and hurting our allies in Syria, Turkey and Iraq?

Leo Docherty: As I have said, we have no direct evidence to support the allegations to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but we are of course committed to upholding the chemical weapons convention. I myself met the director general of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons last month, and we will keep these issues under review.

Pakistan Flooding: Climate Change

12. **Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the impact on Pakistan of flooding caused by climate change. [R] [902114]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The UK is of course supporting Pakistan following the disastrous floods, and has committed £26.5 million towards the immediate response. The effects of that on the ground were seen by our Minister in the other place, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad. This catastrophe shows how climate change is making extreme weather events more intense, which is why we have doubled our global climate finance commitment to £11.6 billion and, in Pakistan itself, have pledged £55 million to support climate resilience and adaptation.

Yasmin Qureshi: I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Pakistan.

Experts have called the flooding in Pakistan a "climate catastrophe". Millions have been displaced, more than 1,700 people are dead, and there has been \$40 billion-worth of damage to livelihoods and infrastructure. Over the summer, Pakistan experienced the hottest temperature on the planet. Pakistan and other countries are bearing the brunt of the climate crisis and will continue to do so, although they contribute the least to global warming. Can the Minister assure us that his Government, rather than cutting aid, will make a serious commitment to the long-term support of communities in Pakistan to enable them to weather the coming storms?

Leo Docherty: We are indeed overwhelmingly committed to Pakistan. In 2020, our aid was £200 million and we have committed £55 million specifically for climate resilience. Lord Ahmad saw on his visit the life-saving impact that all this money achieves, including the £26.5 million towards the immediate response. The broad point is that tackling climate issues is now woven through the fabric of our policy making.

Sri Lanka: Human Rights

16. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help address human rights concerns in Sri Lanka. [902118]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): In October, the UK and our partners within the UN Human Rights Council led a new resolution—resolution 51.1—on

Sri Lanka. It renewed the international framework to report on Sri Lanka and preserve evidence of past human rights abuses to use in future accountability processes. We call on Sri Lanka to make progress on human rights, justice and accountability.

Elliot Colburn: As chair of all-party parliamentary group on Tamils, and also through hearing from Tamils in Carshalton and Wallington, I am clear that the economic situation in Sri Lanka is allowing human rights abuses against Tamils to continue. I welcome the UK's efforts in the UN to bring about the peace, accountability and justice that the Tamils are fighting for, but what assurances can my right hon. Friend give me that any economic support given to Sri Lanka will be dependent on—and will be expected to come with—progress on implementing the UN resolutions?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The UK is working with international partners, including at the Paris Club, to facilitate economic support for Sri Lanka through an International Monetary Fund programme. The IMF does not have the ability to impose political or human rights-linked conditionality; it can only impose conditionality linked to economic policy or tackling balance of payments challenges. An IMF programme is contingent on progress on reforms, including a comprehensive anti-corruption agenda.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Very often, the suppression of human rights walks hand in hand with the persecution of Christians and those of other faiths; when human rights are suppressed, so too are Christians' rights to their beliefs. Within any deals that the Minister has with Sri Lanka, will she ensure that the issues of human rights and the persecution of those with Christian beliefs and other beliefs are taken into consideration?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I am sure that my noble Friend Lord Ahmad will take note of the hon. Gentleman's comments. Lord Ahmad spoke with the Sri Lankan President and Prime Minister in August, and he continues to highlight the importance of that inclusive approach in trying to provide the political stability needed for the country to make progress across all these issues.

BBC World Service

18. **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): What funding his Department provides to the BBC World Service. [902120]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is providing the BBC World Service with a flat cash three-year settlement of £94.4 million annually. Since 2016, the FCDO has provided over £468 million to the World Service via the World2020 programme, funding 12 language services and enhancements to BBC Arabic, Russian and English.

Sir John Whittingdale: Does my hon. Friend agree that the BBC World Service plays an ever more important role in countering disinformation, particularly from Russia and elsewhere? Will he therefore look to increase the amount of support that his Department gives to the

World Service, and does he share my concern that the BBC is proposing to reduce funding by £28 million with the loss of 10 radio services?

David Rutley: I recognise my right hon. Friend's long-standing interest in this issue. The FCDO greatly values the World Service's role in countering disinformation, particularly President Putin's harmful narratives, and it has provided an additional £1.44 million this year to support this work on top of our annual £94 million funding. The changes reflect the BBC's ambition to become a digital-first organisation and, as a result, audiences will still retain access to all 42 language services.

Qatar World Cup: LGBTQ+ Fans

19. **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment his Department has made of the safety of LGBTQ+ football fans attending the World cup in Qatar. [902121]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): Ministers and senior officials have raised the concerns of LGBTQ+ visitors with Qatari authorities at all levels, and will continue to engage on this issue ahead of, and during, the World cup. Qatar has repeatedly committed that everybody is welcome to the tournament, and we will continue to encourage equal treatment and the respect of individual rights, and to identify what action the Qatari authorities are taking to match their commitment.

Luke Pollard: I declare an interest as a massive gay. As an England-supporting homosexual, it is not safe for someone like me to watch the World cup in Qatar. Because of the human rights abuses of migrant workers and of Qatar's LGBT population, I personally do not think Qatar should ever have been awarded a major sporting competition. Will the Minister back the home nations captains in wearing a rainbow armband when they play at the World cup? Will he also apologise for the Foreign Secretary's remark that LGBT fans should somehow show compromise, because it is never acceptable for a Government Minister to force LGBT people back into the closet?

David Rutley: I respect the hon. Gentleman's comments. He and I have worked together on many issues in the past, and I understand his campaign on this issue. Our priority is, of course, the safety of all British nationals who travel to the World cup. The UK prioritises the issue of LGBT+ rights internationally, and we continue to engage with the Qatari authorities on this issue. Many sportsmen and women use their platforms to do important work across a range of issues, which is their personal choice. The UK Government stand by our values, and our team stands by the values of our home nations.

Chinese Consulate: Violence against Demonstrators

20. **Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the violence against demonstrators at the consulate of the People's Republic of China in Manchester on 16 October 2022. [902122]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The apparent behaviour of Chinese officials in Manchester is unacceptable. We have made it clear to China that freedom of protest must be respected. If the police determine that there are grounds to charge any Chinese diplomats, we would expect China to waive immunity. There will be diplomatic consequences should China not agree to co-operate in this way.

Graham Stringer: I do not think that is good enough. The violence by consular officials on the streets of Manchester is unacceptable, as the Minister says, but this is just the visible tip of the iceberg of secret police stations—consular activities by the Chinese to police and intimidate people in this country. To stop this unacceptable activity, will she consider reducing the number of Chinese diplomats who are allowed into this country?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: This issue is with the Greater Manchester police and, because we are a country that believes in following the rule of law, we are waiting for it to complete its investigations. At that point, the Foreign Secretary will determine how to proceed.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that we are not making the same mistake in respect of China that we made in respect of Russia, which is to believe that increasing our economic ties and interdependence will enable an authoritarian country to mend its ways? It did not work in the case of Russia, and it will not work in the case of China either.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My right hon. Friend is extremely knowledgeable and thoughtful on these issues. I offer him this thought as we await the completion of the police investigation: our approach to China is co-ordinated across Government, and the FCDO is at the heart of the cross-Whitehall strategic approach to China in line with the integrated review, which is presently being refreshed. I know he will understand that, in due course, our position will be set out clearly.

Topical Questions

T1. [902128] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The Foreign Secretary is at COP27 in Egypt to continue to provide UK leadership on the global transition to net zero and to help vulnerable countries adapt and build resilience to climate shocks. Since our last oral questions, the UK has continued to work with international partners and allies to address all threats to international peace and security. The Foreign Secretary held discussions in Germany with his G7 counterparts last week, including on Russia, Iran, China and North Korea. All G7 partners reaffirmed their strong sense of unity and their unshakeable commitment to upholding the rules-based international order.

Mrs Murray: My right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has built up a fantastic relationship with the Ukrainian President, and I thank him for his lead. Has his advice and expertise been sought as we work to continue this excellent relationship into the future?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip has led the world in our collective determination to ensure that Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine will fail. The work led by the Ministry of Defence to provide defensive weapons to the Ukrainian army and the sanctions work led by my team at the FCDO are both part of the legacy he leaves in Government as we continue to stand alongside our Ukrainian friends. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) is absolutely right that his commitment to the Ukrainians and his friendship and support to President Zelensky have been unwavering. I have every confidence that he will continue.

Mr Speaker: Order. Come on, it is topicals—let us try to help each other. Let us have a perfect example from Fabian Hamilton.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I hope the whole House will join me in congratulating Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on his recent victory in the Brazilian presidential election. As we know, Brazil is home to the lungs of the planet, the Amazon rainforest, but because the previous Administration in Brazil turned a blind eye to deforestation, it has been systematically destroyed. Does the Minister agree that now is the time to support Labour's call for an international law of ecocide, to criminalise the widespread destruction of the environment?

Mr Speaker: Order. This is not acceptable—I am saying it now, and I mean it. Other Back Benchers have waited and waited, and this is selfish and unfair. I expect better treatment. I have to represent the Back Benchers, and I expect the Front Benchers to show the same respect.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), who raises an important point. We also welcome and congratulate President-elect Lula, and we will be working strongly with him on formal partnerships on not only trade, but climate change. I look forward to meeting the hon. Gentleman to discuss this more fully.

T5. [902133] Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Not content with being the world's largest state sponsor of international terrorism, Iran is using its same terror enforcer, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, to brutally repress its own people. It is also now arming and training the Russian army in its barbaric invasion of Ukraine. So in the same vein as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), may I ask whether the Minister thinks it is now time to proscribe the IRGC?

David Rutley: The Government share my hon. Friend's concerns about the regime's shocking disregard for the rights of the Iranian people. I have to give him a similar answer to the one I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, and I will follow up with him later on.

T2. [902129] Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that given everything we put into Afghanistan over the past 20 years or so, we have a particular responsibility not to look away, not least given that 6 million Afghans are living on the brink of famine?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, which is why this year alone we are committing £286 million of humanitarian aid that is being disbursed through international organisations. That is all the more needed because of the deprivations of the Taliban regime.

T6. [902134] Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Images of thousands of peaceful protestors in Iran, young and old, male and female, of all religions and beliefs, are heartwarming for those who choose democracy and civil liberties and despise authoritarianism. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the Iranian regime will bow to the demands of liberty and freedom of the great Persian people?

David Rutley: The death of Mahsa Amini was a shocking reminder of the repression faced by women in Iran. The continuing protests send a clear message that the Iranian people are not satisfied with the path their Government have taken. We have given a robust response; we have summoned the Iranian head of mission to the UK to express our concerns and we have designated new sanctions. We will continue to monitor the situation closely.

T3. [902130] Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Afghans are starving, women's rights are in reverse and the economy is in freefall. The United Nations has warned that if insufficient action is taken now to treat the causes of the crisis, not just the symptoms, next year's humanitarian funding needs could double to \$10 billion. So what is the Minister doing to convene international action to unlock Afghanistan's economy and secure a long-term solution for millions of Afghans on the brink of crisis?

Leo Docherty: We bring a huge amount of diplomatic pressure to bear. Clearly, it is difficult countering the deprivations of the Taliban regime, but we have a huge stake in the game because we disbursed £286 million-worth of aid this year alone. That is the right thing to do, because we know that women and children are disproportionately affected by this kind of conflict.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): When Kabul fell, the Government rightly undertook to assist in the relocation of courageous Afghan judges who had taken a key role in the fight against the Taliban. Since then, however, a High Court decision has ruled against the operation of the latest resettlement schemes and there is concern that the level of support initially given is drying up. Will the Minister meet me to discuss, with members of British judiciary, schemes and ways by which we might improve and revise the system?

Leo Docherty: Of course, I am happy to meet. We have had some success extracting judges, but if my hon. Friend would like to meet me to furnish me with those specific details, I will try to try to expedite a response.

T4. [902132] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): In the last two Foreign Office questions sessions, I have raised the issue of the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Today, again, Members on both sides of the House have raised it, asking us to follow our allies in the United States and ban the IGRC. The IGRC are the protectors of the Iranian clerical fascist regime. Will the Minister go back to his Department and tell the officials to get on with banning the IRGC?

David Rutley: The right hon. Member raised his strong concerns about the Iranian regime's disruptive activities in Yemen at last week's important debate, for which I am grateful. The list of proscribed organisations is kept under constant review, but we do not routinely comment on whether an organisation is or is not under consideration for proscription.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Crown dependencies and overseas territories are an important part of the Commonwealth. The UK Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, on behalf of the Government, provides essential services, including audits, scrutiny and election observation, but there are gaps. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how we can tackle that, because those territories and countries deserve the best?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I would be delighted to meet my right hon. Friend. We are committed to deepening our ties with all our Commonwealth partners. For the past five years, the FCDO has provided funding to CPA UK to strengthen the ability of legislators in the overseas territories to hold their Governments to account. I look forward to discussing the matter with her more fully.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry the joint ministerial conference did not go ahead.

T7. [902135] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): For the 30th consecutive year, the United Nations voted overwhelmingly to condemn the US embargo and sanctions on Cuba. Given the importance of tourism to the Cuban economy, can the Minister or the Foreign Secretary indicate what steps are being taken to restore direct flights between the UK and Cuba?

David Rutley: The hon. Member raises an important point. I will pick that up with our ambassador over there and follow up with him directly.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The Europe Minister will be familiar with the case of my constituent Mr Thomas Toolan and the ongoing retention of his daughter in Poland. This is a heartbreaking case that has been going on since 2018. Will the Minister meet me and other Members of this House who have similar child abduction cases in Poland, and will he please raise this case with his Polish counterpart?

Leo Docherty: I am aware of this case, and I thank my right hon. Friend for her advocacy on it. I know that she met our ambassador to Warsaw and, of course, I would be very pleased to meet her to see whether we can make some progress.

T8. [902136] **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): The United Nations Population Fund estimates that among the millions of people severely affected by floods in Pakistan, at least 650,000 are pregnant women. Last month, the then South Asia Minister announced an additional £10 million for flood relief efforts. Can the Minister tell us how much of that funding is being used to ensure that women who have lost everything can at least have access to maternal health services?

Leo Docherty: I am happy to write to the hon. Member with a specific breakdown, but I think that it is the majority, because women and children are disproportionately affected. We are proud and pleased that we have committed £26.5 million in our immediate response to the tragic flooding.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What consideration have the Government given to opening two new high commissions in the two newest Commonwealth countries, Gabon and Togo?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Mr Speaker, if I may, I will ask the noble Lord Goldsmith to write to my hon. Friend with the details.

T9. [902137] **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): UK Foreign Secretaries of every political hue thrive on declaring themselves defenders of democracy the world over. I am sure the Minister would agree with Aristotle that the absence of democracy leads only to oligarchy or tyranny. Given that democracy is a continuous process and not a single event, does the Minister accept that Westminster's continued denial of Scottish democracy makes a laughing stock of UK foreign policy, and is it oligarchy or tyranny, when an argument for both could easily be mounted?

The Minister for Development (Mr Andrew Mitchell): No, Mr Speaker.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I attend the meeting that the Minister is going to have about judges, so that the plight of Afghan interpreters and others who helped our forces can also be considered?

Leo Docherty: Yes.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It has been well reported that a very sizeable proportion of the UK's international aid budget is being spent within the UK on the costs attributed to Ukrainian and small boat refugees. The OECD Development Assistance Committee rules on spending are clear, but the Government's spending is less clear. Will the Minister commit to publishing a breakdown for this financial year of how the UK's in-country refugee costs are being spent based on the DAC eligible costs guidelines?

Mr Mitchell: Yes, I will, Mr Speaker. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for the work that she does through her brilliant International Development Committee. I should make it clear that this expenditure is allowed under the OECD DAC rules. We cannot pick and choose; it is either allowed or it is not, and this expenditure is allowed.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Benjamin Netanyahu on his recent election victory in Israel and in wishing for Bibi to form a broad-based coalition across Israel, so that there is a proper stable Government for our key ally?

David Rutley: We congratulate Benjamin Netanyahu on his election victory. As one of Israel's closest partners, the UK looks forward to working with Israel to ensure that our relationship continues to flourish.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Pakistan and Somalia are at the extreme ends of the climate crisis and face dire humanitarian consequences. Can those on the Government Benches tell me how cutting international aid will help them to help those countries—and do they have no shame?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that those are two terrible crises, and money is important. It is not everything, but it is important. We will have to wait until the outturn from the autumn statement to see where we stand on that.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) has just pointed out, the IRGC has led and organised the brutal crackdown on protesters in Iran. What do those fascist thugs have to do to get themselves designated a terrorist organisation?

David Rutley: I understand the point the hon. Gentleman makes, and it has been made with real passion, but we are not able to add anything to the points we have already made to hon. Members on this issue.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Last week I had the immense pleasure of visiting Japan with the British Council. I put on record my sincere thanks to the ambassador Julia Longbottom, Matthew Knowles and the entire British Council team in Japan. I got to see first-hand the brilliant work that the British Council does in Japan, educating people in our English language and using our arts and culture for the greatest good. What more can the Government do to support the British Council, not just in Japan, but across the world?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: It is lovely to hear that and I know the team in Japan will be very pleased to have welcomed the hon. Lady there. Our bilateral relationship with Japan continues from strength to strength in every possible area, and we will continue to work closely with them.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I was contacted by a constituent from Devon whose sister died in east Africa while working for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation. Joanna Toole was serving humanity and our environment when Ethiopian Airlines flight ET302 crashed near Addis Ababa. Will the Minister commit to lobbying the Ethiopian Government to release the air accident report so that an inquest in the UK can proceed?

Mr Mitchell: I am extremely sorry to hear that terrible news from the hon. Gentleman's constituent. I suggest we have a meeting outside of the House to discuss the best way forward; I will be very happy to meet him to do that.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): What assessment have the Government made of the role of far-right parties in Israel's new Government, as they are Netanyahu's principal coalition partner? Will UK Ministers be meeting representatives of those far-right parties?

David Rutley: As I have already highlighted, Israel is one of our closest partners and we will continue to have a close working relationship with the new Government. It would be inappropriate to comment further at this stage, ahead of the Government's formation.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): What does the Minister for Development think are the biggest challenges to the effective use of the aid budget: the fact that it is facing further cuts, the fact that so much of it is being double counted against Defence expenditure or the fact that, as the Chair of the Select Committee said, it is being increasingly spent in the UK?

Mr Mitchell: The aim of the international development budget, every penny of which is spent in Britain's national interest, is to prevent conflict and to build prosperous societies. That is the aim, and that is what we seek to do with every penny we spend. All that expenditure is completely in the interests of the British taxpayer.

Points of Order

12.33 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, yesterday the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), in response to my oral questions on the medallic recognition of nuclear test veterans, stated that I

“must not confuse commemorative coins and medallions with medals. Medals are worn on uniform; medallions and commemorative coins of the sort that other countries have issued cannot be worn.”—[*Official Report*, 7 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 5.]

It is my understanding that New Zealand provided full medallic recognition in 2002 to nuclear test veterans who served in Operation Grapple and at Mururoa through the New Zealand Special Service Medal, which was established by royal warrant by Queen Elizabeth II. I am sure the Minister would not want to inadvertently mislead the House, so can you advise me how I can ensure that he clarifies his comments to the House? I might add that, if he would like to apologise to the UK nuclear test veteran community for any frustration caused, I will be meeting some of them in Parliament Square at 1.30 pm, if he would like to join us.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving me notice of the point of order. May I check that she has informed the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) of her intention to raise this matter?

Rachel Hopkins indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: Thanks for that. If the Minister wishes to correct the record, they may do so in the usual way, and I look forward to seeing them when they do.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): On a point of order, yesterday during Defence oral questions, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) said “why does it take BAE Systems 11 years to build a ship”, that

“the Japs can build in four?”—[*Official Report*, 7 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 2.]

Mr Speaker, you rightly and regularly remind us to use respectful language in this House, but unfortunately this outdated and crass racial slur falls well below the bar we should expect.

At the weekend, we saw an article in *The Times* asking why only two MPs identify as east or south-east Asian in this place, despite making up 1.2 million of the country. Perhaps it is because of such comments by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, or the “little man in China” trope trotted out last week by a Government Minister, or the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) saying the words “yellow peril” from the Dispatch Box. It is an unacceptable undercurrent of othering that is rightly called out for other protected characteristics and ethnicities, but not yet for ours. Mr Speaker, can you please advise me on how we can discourage all Members of the House from using ethnic slurs such as those? Progress is not inevitable; it is something we must consistently and constantly strive for.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving me notice of the point of order. May I check that she has informed the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois)?

Sarah Owen indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has done—excellent. I recognise, as she says, that the casual use of racial terms causes upset, and they should not be used. What I would say is that “Erskine May” states:

“Good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language.”

I ask all Members to remind themselves of that principle in choosing the words they use carefully. Also, people reflect the language that we use. If we set the best of language, others might follow.

BILL PRESENTED

REFERENDUMS (SUPERMAJORITY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Ian Paisley presented a Bill to require a supermajority of votes in favour of a proposal for constitutional change on which a referendum is being held in order for it to be decided in the affirmative.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 January 2023, and to be printed (Bill 182).

Employee Share Ownership (Reform)

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

12.36 pm

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for a new employee share ownership scheme allowing preferential access for lower income workers; to reduce the Share Incentive Plan holding period from five to three years; to require companies to include declarations in annual reports about the type of employee share ownership plans that are operated and the level of employee take up; and for connected purposes.

This Bill has broad support across the House, as the list of sponsors will demonstrate. Politically, it fits neatly with most ideological traditions. From a Conservative viewpoint, it chimes with the ambition for the UK to become a property-owning, share-owning democracy. From Labour's perspective, it resonates with the historical commitment to co-operation, although by different means from the traditional par value model, and it provides a means by which the relationship between capital and labour can be modestly realigned.

As I will demonstrate, the Bill has the support of nationalists and Unionists and Liberal Democrats, who see the benefits to employers and employees as being consistent with their respective political outlooks. Employee share ownership has been supported by a diverse range of organisations, including the CBI, the Social Market Foundation, the TUC and the Co-operative party. The CBI, for example, has stated:

"The moral case for financial inclusion is a compelling one—people have a right to their dignity and financial exclusion denies them that right."

Similarly, the Social Market Foundation pointed out:

"As the UK economy emerges from the Coronavirus pandemic, now is a good time for government to push for higher rates of employee share ownership."

The TUC has said that, subject to certain conditions—for example, a preference for collective schemes and them not being used as a substitute for collective bargaining and trade union involvement—it supports employee share ownership.

This Bill aims to update two of the current share ownership schemes—the share incentive plan, known as SIP, and the save-as-you-earn system, known as SAYE or Sharesave—and proposes a third scheme. The reason the two existing schemes need to be updated is that, over recent years, the number of such plans has been plateauing and, in some cases, falling. The Treasury's own data acknowledge that trend. The number of firms that granted a new SAYE option in 2021 was 260, a fall from 340 in 2007. Overall, employees were awarded or purchased shares in 400 companies, compared with 570 in 2011-12.

There are several reasons for that decline. First, SIP and SAYE were introduced 22 and 42 years ago respectively. In the intervening years, employment practices have undergone significant changes, and the schemes no longer reflect those changes. For example, the length of time an employee spends at a company has markedly reduced. Indeed, young people are often encouraged to move jobs more frequently to secure career advancement. The Social Market Foundation has said:

"Among the poorest half of people aged 25 to 34, typical net financial wealth among those who are not employee shareholders was just £77. But among employee shareholders, wealth stood at £750."

That being the case, the five-year minimum investment commitment for SIP schemes, to ensure maximum tax efficiency, is no longer realistic.

The fact that the Government offer tax advantages to employee share ownership is, of course, welcome. The risk, however, is that without updating them, they could become increasingly obsolete. For that reason, the Bill would reduce the commitment from five years to three, to achieve maximum tax efficiency, as advocated by ProShare, the industry representative body. Moreover, many employers believe that such a change would make them more likely to offer SIP schemes.

Another problem is that current plans apply only to those on pay-as-you-earn. There are now, however, some 4 million people who work in the so-called gig economy. A further provision in the Bill would create a new plan that does not depend on regular monthly contributions and is accessible to those in less regular forms of work. It would enable employers to give a free share award to their employees, to be held for a year, after which it could be realised at a discount value, as in SAYE schemes currently. That would be attractive to younger staff, who may not envisage staying at a company for three years, let alone five.

The other provision in the Bill is to require the Treasury to carry out a consultation with all the relevant bodies, including those I have referred to, with the aim of modernising employee share ownership to reflect the changes that have taken place since the existing schemes were introduced. One new idea that could be consulted on is allowing employees to access the holding built up in their share incentive plan in a tax-efficient and advantageous manner that, under the current scheme, is only available after five years, with regular contributions made over the last one year, without a penalty being applied.

Before concluding, I would like to say a few words about the benefits that such schemes bring to employees and employers. Two examples illustrate the benefits to employees. First, Pets at Home staff—mainly shop floor staff working in retail—who participated in the company's SAYE scheme have made an average gain of £21,000. That is a healthy return on their investment and an increase in their financial resilience. Secondly, as ProShare's annual survey shows, the average value of a participant's shareholding at the end of 2021 was £10,295—again, a significant sum.

Employers gain too. As the CBI and the Social Market Foundation pointed out, employees having a stake in the company they work for provides important productivity gains, as well as boosting innovation and corporate long-termism. I hope this Bill will be a good starting point in encouraging and expanding employee share ownership and enabling the potential benefits to all concerned to be realised.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sir George Howarth, Margaret Beckett, Kirsty Blackman, Sir Graham Brady, Philip Davies, Mr Jonathan Djanogly, Dame Margaret Hodge, John McDonnell, Esther McVey, Sarah Olney, Jim Shannon and Gareth Thomas present the Bill.

Sir George Howarth 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 183).

Opposition Day

[7TH ALLOTTED DAY]

State Pension Triple Lock

12.46 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to commit to maintaining the state pension triple lock in financial year 2023-24 as promised in the Conservative and Unionist Party manifesto 2019.

I hope not to detain the House long, because the proposition before it this afternoon is very simple: we are asking the House to stand firm in instructing the Chancellor and the Prime Minister to honour the triple lock promise and uprate the state pension in line with inflation for the next financial year. The motion should not be controversial; indeed, every Member should be able to endorse it in the Division Lobby this evening.

The reason we have tabled this motion is that pensioners deserve certainty that the promise of protection offered by inflation-proofing the state pension will be honoured. Let us remind ourselves of the facts. Pensioner poverty is up by 450,000 since 2010. Prices in the shops are up. Energy bills are up. The Office for National Statistics found that between June and September this year 3.5 million pensioners had already been forced to spend less on food and essentials because of the soaring cost of living. Over half of pensioners are cutting back on gas and electricity in their homes, and Age UK has projected that 2.8 million older households are set to be in fuel poverty this winter—1.8 million more than in previous years.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Did my right hon. Friend read the reports in *The Times* that the Government are in fact going to follow our example and to confirm that they will increase the state pension in line with inflation? Does he agree that the Minister could intervene now and save us several hours debating these issues by just confirming that the Government do in fact intend to do that?

Jonathan Ashworth: I have read not only *The Times* but the 2019 Conservative manifesto, which committed Conservative Members to maintaining the triple lock, so I look forward to their joining us in the Division Lobby this evening—[*Interruption.*] I look forward to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Gary Sambrook) joining us in the Division Lobby.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Did the Institute for Fiscal Studies not say that the 2019 Labour party manifesto would benefit high earners rather than low earners on pensions, so is the biggest threat to UK pensioners not the Labour party?

Jonathan Ashworth: On the topic of manifestos, the new Prime Minister tells us that we do not need a general election because the 2019 manifesto gives the Conservative party a mandate. If that is the case, Conservative Members should not break their promise on the triple lock, and the hon. Member should join us in the Lobby this afternoon. Indeed, those in his marginal constituency will be watching carefully to see which way he votes later.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman, who by the way—and I do not want to lower his reputation on his own Benches—is a friend of mine, has given way. He knows very well that today is not about a lasting decision by Government but about political theatre. When we vote this afternoon, we will not be voting for what happens in practice; we will be voting because Labour has chosen to try to make political capital out of a difficult issue. I simply say to him that if the Government were to propose breaking that promise, they would not have my support, and they know that, by the way. I would stand by the triple lock. But will the right hon. Gentleman just answer this: was he not the adviser to the former Labour Chancellor Gordon Brown, who awarded pensioners a 50p increase?

Jonathan Ashworth: On the latter point, the right hon. Gentleman will recall that the state pension rose by over 50% under the last Labour Government and has risen by around 40% under this Government. I do not want to make an enemy of the right hon. Gentleman, because I know that he agrees with me; I read his comments in the *Daily Express* yesterday. Indeed, I suspect that he will agree with probably 90% of my speech—so much so that I was tempted to email it to him in advance of this debate, but I did not want to be removed from the Front Bench.

Let me make a bit of progress. The real-world impact in our constituencies of cutting the state pension again means more and more pensioners turning to food banks and more pensioners shivering under blankets in cold, damp homes, putting themselves at risk of hypothermia. It means more pensioners cutting back, at a time when they have already had to swallow a real-terms cut in the state pension of around £480. Breaking the promise on inflation uprating for next year amounts to a further real-terms cut in the value of the full state pension of £440. We are talking about a £900 cut, around £37 a month in the fixed incomes of Britain's retirees; a cut in the fixed incomes of groups of the population who cannot easily earn a wage; a cut in fixed income when one in three relies solely on the state pension; and a cut that is punishing at the best of times, but is more devastating when prices are rising and energy bills are increasing.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Does the shadow Minister agree that we are talking not only about a cut, but about the uncertainty that the Government have created over the weeks, with their U-turns upon U-turns? Pensioners do not know whether to trust this Government and they have no certainty, even despite what has been reported this morning.

Jonathan Ashworth: We have had continued mixed messaging from the Government, which is why today is an opportunity for Conservative Members to send a clear message to their constituents about their position on the triple lock.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a broader point here? A couple in their 70s in my constituency have contacted me to say that they are concerned about their pensions for themselves, but that they also care for members of their extended family who have physical

ailments, autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. As the costs of that care are increasing, the impact of reducing their pensions becomes a massive factor. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the Government abandon their triple lock promise and inflict this real-terms pensions cut, that will have a knock-on effect on some of the most vulnerable people in our society?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend has described with great eloquence the real-life impact that this cut will have on our constituents. Although I do not know the particular circumstances of the family she refers to, they may well be reliant on other social security payments, and we have no clarity from the Government about whether they will also be cut in real terms.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that those other social security payments also need to be uprated in line with inflation? If so, should Labour not have made the motion wider to include that?

Jonathan Ashworth: Today's debate is about the triple lock, but we do agree that payments such as universal credit should be uprated in line with inflation and not suffer a real-terms cut.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose—*

Jonathan Ashworth: I give way to my fellow Leicester City fan.

Jim Shannon: We are on a roll: three games we have won in a row.

Some people believe that retired people live a wonderful life, but the reality is often much bleaker: less heat, less food and making the most out of a meagre income. Does the shadow Minister agree that the Government must honour those who have paid tax and national insurance contributions over their lifetimes? Now is the time to support them, when they need us.

Jonathan Ashworth: My friend and fellow Leicester City fan makes his point with the same force and precision as Yuri Tielemans putting one in the back of the net against Everton at the weekend. He is absolutely right.

Let me make a bit of progress. A cut in the pension will also disproportionately hit retired women, who rely on the state pension and other benefits such as pension credits for more than 60% of their income. This £900 cut in income is for those who have worked hard all their lives, who have paid their dues and who, as my mum would say, have paid their stamps.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab) *rose—*

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con) *rose—*

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to my hon. Friend from Leicester, given that I am a Leicester MP, and then let the hon. Gentleman in.

Liz Kendall: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. I am sure he knows that half of all Leicester pensioners live in the most deprived 20% of the country,

and one in five live in the most deprived 5% of the country. They are frightened for their future and will feel betrayed by Conservative Members if they do not walk through the Lobby with us tonight.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on, as she always is. May I also say what a pleasure it is to see her back defending the people of Leicester West after her maternity leave.

David Johnston: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, given that the Government are making their announcement about the triple lock next week and that it takes effect in April, it is therefore irresponsible to suggest that pensioners will face the sort of cuts that he is talking about? We should just wait for the announcement.

Jonathan Ashworth: I do not know if the hon. Gentleman was in the House about three weeks ago, but that was when the then Conservative Prime Minister committed from the Dispatch Box to maintain the triple lock. If the hon. Gentleman wants to stand up for the 21,000 pensioners in the Wantage area who are set to lose £425 from a real-terms cut, he should vote with us in the Lobby this afternoon.

Let me make a bit of progress. A £900 cut in income, around £37 per month, is punishing at the best of times, and it is a cut for people who feel they have paid their dues—people who, like my mum, feel they have paid their stamps. It is a cut for those who have worked all their lives and who often live now with a disability or in ill health because of their hard work. Whether because of the hard, unyielding occupations that they may have worked in, they might live with chapped hands, sore backs and sore knees. They deserve a retirement of security, dignity and respect. It would be a betrayal of Britain's almost 13 million pensioners to cut the pension a second year in a row, and this House should not stand for it.

Why has the triple lock been in the Chancellor's crosshairs? It is because Conservative Members presented, cheered and welcomed the most disastrous Budget in living memory. It was a Budget so reckless and so cavalier with the public finances that it crashed the economy with unfunded tax cuts, sent borrowing costs soaring, gave us a run on pension funds, and forced mortgage rates to ricochet round the money markets, costing homeowners hundreds of pounds extra a month, and now they want us all to think it was just an aberration—that it was all just a bad dream; that Bobby Ewing was in the shower all along. But for the British people it remains a real nightmare, and now the Government are expecting pensioners to pay the price. Well, we will not stop reminding them of the Budget that they imposed on the British people.

In recent days, ahead of this debate, I have been inundated with messages from Britain's retirees saying that that price is far too high. This was what Hilda wrote:

"We believed that with the triple lock in place, our state pension would keep pace with wages and inflation... This government cynically dismantled the triple lock and threw state pensioners under the bus".

This was what Mary wrote to me:

"I am in tears of frustration and anger... Not all pensioners are well off. I for one am really struggling".

[Jonathan Ashworth]

This was from Patrick, who is aged 73:

“How can a responsible government minister welch on a promise?”

That is the crux of the matter, because every Government Member stood on a manifesto in 2019 that made a clear promise to the triple lock.

Six months ago, the Prime Minister, when he was the Chancellor, told us from that Dispatch Box that the promise of inflation-proofing the state pension would be honoured for the next financial year:

“I can reassure the House that next year...benefits will be uprated by this September’s consumer prices index”.

He went on:

“the triple lock will apply to the state pension.”—[*Official Report*, 26 May 2022; Vol. 715, c. 452.]

Those were the Prime Minister’s words six months ago. He tells us that we should not have a general election because that 2019 manifesto gives him a mandate, but he will not give us a straight answer to a very simple question: will he honour the promise he made from the Dispatch Box six months ago? So much for his promise to restore “integrity and professionalism” to Downing Street.

A year ago, the House debated breaking the triple lock. The then Pensions Minister, now promoted to Minister for Employment as Minister of State—I congratulate him of course, and I am pleased that he is back in the Department after a brief period away—last year justified cutting the state pension, telling us it was only for one year. Just a year ago, on 15 November 2021, he said:

“The triple lock will, I confirm, be applied in the usual way for the rest of the Parliament.”—[*Official Report*, 15 November 2021; Vol. 703, c. 372.]

So what has changed?

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I repeat that this is political theatre and, for those in doubt, whatever the vote is today, it will have absolutely no impact on the legislation whatever. I just want to know if the right hon. Member is aware of the very good House of Commons briefing on the triple lock, which compares the basic state pension with average earnings over the last 30 years. The low point of it was between 2000 and 2008, when it went down to 16%. That is the lowest the basic state pension has ever been compared with average earnings, and who was in power at that time? It was the last Labour Government. In fact, the previous Conservative Government and successive Conservative Governments have been more generous on the basic state pension compared with average earnings than the last Labour Government.

Jonathan Ashworth: If we want to go down memory lane, a previous Conservative Government broke the earnings link and that is why we need to keep the triple lock, so it builds up its value. The reason those inflation upratings were so low is that we had inflation under control under that Labour Government; we had not lost control of it. We introduced the minimum income guarantee, which the Conservative party voted against, and we introduced pension credit, which the Conservative party opposed at the time, in order to improve the

incomes of the poorest pensioners. We brought pensioner poverty down and it is increasing again under this Tory Government.

As I have said, the then Pensions Minister said that the triple lock would

“be applied...for the rest of the Parliament”.

I was sceptical about that. We have these debates across the Dispatch Box and he will recall my scepticism. He is always very noisy on the Front Bench and, when I was asking questions, he was shouting at me and said, “No, we’ve committed to the triple lock. You shouldn’t have to worry.” I asked the then Work and Pensions Secretary, the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), and she told me at the time:

“I am again happy to put on record that the triple lock will be honoured in the future.”—[*Official Report*, 21 March 2022; Vol. 711, c. 99.]

That was in March 2022 from that Dispatch Box, yet here we are with the prospect of another real-terms cut in the pension on the table again. Breaking such a promise two years in a row in a cost of living crisis is surely unacceptable.

That brings me to the new Work and Pensions Secretary, who of course prior to his elevation just a month ago, when real-terms cuts to the pension and other benefits were raised, led the charge at the Tory party conference. He undermined the position of the then Prime Minister and the then Chancellor, telling Sky News it was

“one of those areas where the Government is going to have to think again.”

But of course this morning, he did not repeat his line that the Government should think again, because now he is saying we have to wait until next week’s emergency Budget. So we have a U-turn on the U-turn. In fact, the Conservative Twitter account is still saying:

“We will protect the Triple Lock”.

The Conservative Twitter account is still repeating what the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), told us from the Dispatch Box three or four weeks ago. So it is a U-turn on a U-turn on a U-turn, and it makes us all dizzy just watching it.

After all this Conservative party triple lock hokey-cokey, today is a clear opportunity for Conservative Members to finally tell us where they stand. Today is an opportunity for Conservative Members to finally end the uncertainty, finally end the mixed messages and finally end the worry for millions of pensioners who have seen their state pension cut while their cost of living soars, and confirm that the pension will not be cut next year. The uprating of the state pension is crucial to millions of today’s pensioners, but it is also about protecting the incomes of tomorrow’s pensioners. It is about ensuring that the state pension recovers its value relative to wages. Given the move away from final salary schemes, it means certainty for tomorrow’s pensioners as well.

In the name of today’s pensioners and tomorrow’s pensioners, Conservative MPs should offer us certainty. Our retired constituents have worked hard all their lives, contributed to national insurance and served our communities. They deserve security and dignity. As the former Conservative Pensions Minister Baroness Altmann warned this week:

“Short-changing pensioners during a cost of living crisis should be unthinkable...Snatching protection away this year could be the biggest betrayal pensioners have ever known.”

I could not put it better myself. Ministers should stop dithering. They should reject the cut in the state pension and support our motion in the Lobby tonight.

1.5 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): Can I open by saying that it is a pleasure to at last stand opposite the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) in debate at the Dispatch Box? We have heard a lot of sound and fury from the Opposition Benches, but not much illumination and light. Indeed, the entire speech was predicated on a perceived answer to the question that he has put in the motion—namely, that we will short-change pensioners in some way—and that is far from necessarily the outcome we will see.

The right hon. Gentleman’s speech started pretty well—he read out the motion and so far so good—but it was on the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who claimed him as a close friend, that he started to go down hill and lose his politics bearings. I should just correct my right hon. Friend, who I think was being over-harsh on Gordon Brown by suggesting that, in 1999, Labour put up pensions by 50p. It was, of course, 75p—a full 50% more than he suggested.

Sir John Hayes: I am immensely grateful to my right hon. Friend for correcting the record. I did say we were friends and I was trying to be generous to the right hon. Member for Leicester South, but adding the extra 25p would have come as cold comfort to the pensioners who suffered under Labour. We should remember that the triple lock was a Conservative policy, which is why we must stand by it.

Mel Stride: I thank my right hon. Friend, and given the impact his intervention had on a speech that deteriorated very rapidly thereafter, he will now be my secret weapon in every debate now; he will be there, poised.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am actually quite offended by the idea that this is theatre and knockabout because my constituents do not see that way. Can I bring some facts to this debate? The Labour Government took 1 million pensioners out of poverty. This Government have put half a million into poverty. Does the Secretary of State not feel that this is just outrageous, and that he needs to make it clear today that the promises of his manifesto will be fulfilled?

Mel Stride: I will of course come on to the issue of the impact of the Government’s huge commitment to pensioners over the years on issues such as poverty that the hon. Lady has raised. However, may I begin by saying that I am slightly surprised the right hon. Member for Leicester South should have come forward with this motion at all? He was present at departmental questions just a few days ago, when the question about what the Government would do in respect of the triple lock, and indeed the uprating of benefits, was put on many occasions to me and my fellow Ministers, and we gave a very clear, rational and sound response. It is that a fiscal event will

take place soon—on the 17th of this month—and, as he will know, it is completely out of order for Ministers under those circumstances to start giving a running commentary on what is expected to be included in that fiscal event. Indeed, in the event that he was in my position, stood up and pre-announced measures that were coming forward in the Budget, he would rightly be required to resign from his position. No doubt that is something that, in my case, would please him no end, but I am afraid I am not going to give him that pleasure.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): On the autumn statement coming on 17 November, which is next week, it is accompanied by a full forecast from the Office for Budget Responsibility. Is that not the responsible time to talk about the uprating of pensions and benefits? It is irresponsible of the Opposition to bring this forward ahead of the full OBR forecast.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. That is precisely the point I am making. It would be entirely irresponsible for any member of the Government to prejudge or give a running commentary on anything that may appear in that statement.

Alan Brown: Can the Secretary of State outline why it would be irresponsible to confirm that the Government are keeping a manifesto commitment and promise?

Mel Stride: As I have set out, we are facing what is being called a Budget. It is a major fiscal event and many decisions will be taken within it. It would not be right for a member of the Government at the Dispatch Box to prejudge what may be included in it.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his first Department for Work and Pensions debate. Surely he is not suggesting that the current Prime Minister was irresponsible when he said last May that the triple lock would be honoured for next April. Will he confirm that, if the triple lock is not honoured for next April, it will be almost without precedent, going back 50 years or more, for the state pension not to be uprated at least in line with inflation?

Mel Stride: I welcome the question from the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee. As a former Pensions Minister, he will know that, in the situation we are in at the moment, right hard up against a major fiscal event that is about to set out major tax and spending decisions, it would simply not be right, as I have said on countless occasions, for any member of the Government to prejudge and pre-empt the measures that the Chancellor will be coming forward with.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Secretary of State talks about prejudging, pre-empting and following due process, but he knows that, if the Department was intending to suspend the triple lock, his officials would already be preparing the relevant legislation, as was brought forward by then Pensions Minister, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), when the triple lock was last suspended. In the interests of being transparent and following process, can the Secretary of State see whether those officials have been instructed to draft that legislation?

Mel Stride: That is simply an ingenious way—I congratulate the hon. Member—of asking precisely the same question. I have noticed that Members do that in this House from time to time, sometimes quite effectively.

The process is extremely clear. I have a duty under legislation to assess the triple lock and the uprating of benefits and, taking into account the September CPI figures and the average wage increases in the preceding period, and in conjunction with the Chancellor—because these decisions have a major impact on the Department's annual managed expenditure—to come to a decision. That process is ongoing and will be concluded by the 17th, when the hon. Member will have the answers to all the questions he asks.

Let me focus on part of the central charge from the shadow Secretary of State regarding what this Government have or have not done for pensioners over a long period. As has been pointed out by Conservative Members, the triple lock was brought in under a Conservative-led Government in 2011. As to what has happened to the pension in that intervening period, the basic state pension has increased by £2,300, outperforming inflation by £720. We spend £110 billion a year supporting pensioners through the pension and £134 billion if we take wider measures into account. That is more than 5% of the entire output of the economy dedicated to supporting our pensioners.

Gary Sambrook: Talking of wider measures, pension credit can be worth up to £3,300 for individual pensioners, and it can open the door to many other benefits such as free NHS dental treatment and other cost of living measures. There are 800,000 people in the UK, many of whom will be in Birmingham, Northfield, who could claim pension credit but do not. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to encourage as many people as possible to claim pension credit?

Mel Stride: That is a truly constructive intervention because, as my hon. Friend points out, not everybody who would be qualified for that benefit has applied. About 70% of those who we believe are eligible receive pension credit, but 30% do not. My hon. Friend the Minister for Employment did an extraordinarily good job in June in encouraging people to sign up to pension credit, through the campaign that the Department launched, and I believe there was an increase in take-up of 275% due to his efforts. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Gary Sambrook) is right: this is important not just for the benefits that we think of, and the credit itself, worth £3,300, but in terms of recent measures that the Government have announced, the £650 of support, which is available to pensioners only if it is unlocked by access to pension credit. It is an important credit to apply for.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): The £650 cost of living grant to those on pension credit is great, and would have been a great incentive to get that other 30% to 40% to sign up for pension credit. We know that some people feel that they should not do it, and we need to persuade them. Unfortunately, however, unless someone applied successfully by 19 August, they can no longer get that £650. My campaign to extend that deadline to 31 March has been running for a couple of months, and I have had some positive responses.

Will the Minister consider meeting me to talk about the possibility of extending the deadline to the official end of winter, so that we can convince people to take it?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention and I recognise the solid and important work that she has done in this area. I can correct her, and hopefully please her, by saying that the deadline is 18 December, because pensions credit can be applied for three months retrospectively, which would bring it into the reference period for the £650 payment.

Anne McLaughlin: The 19 December deadline only allows people to get £324. I will be getting my constituents to sign up for that on the basis of the £324, but I am asking whether somebody who applies until the end of March can get the whole amount of £650, which is a bigger incentive than £324.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for that clarification and I accept the point she makes. I would be happy for the Minister for Pensions to meet her to discuss the issue she has raised.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The key point my right hon. Friend is stressing is that a huge amount has been done consistently by this Government to help pensioners since 2011—innovations that the Opposition opposed at the time or certainly did not come up with, including benefits for women who can claim pension years when they were bringing up children, and auto-enrolment with 20 million new people. I hope that the one-off payment my right hon. Friend just alluded to will be valid for a bit longer, and there is the increase of £3,200 per pensioner on the state pension alone. Does my right hon. Friend agree that today's debate is largely designed for the Opposition, and about the shadow Minister who was behind the 1999 75p increase—*[Interruption.]*—trying to park his tanks—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Graham, when I stand up I expect you to sit down and not carry on your speech. Do we understand each other about the rules of this House?

Richard Graham: We do.

Mr Speaker: Right. So in future please sit down.

Mel Stride: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) are well made. This Government have done a huge amount over many years to do what we can.

Ms Lyn Brown: So why is poverty going up?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady asks from a sedentary position why poverty is going up, and I will come to poverty in a moment. There is no doubt that my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester is right: for a long time the Government have stood up for the interest of pensioners as one of our prime priorities, and we know why. Many pensioners are particularly vulnerable. When

economic conditions are difficult—as they are at the moment—it is hard for them to adjust their economic circumstances, to re-engage with the workforce and so on, so it is important that we have that duty.

I turn to poverty. Since 2009-10, 400,000 fewer pensioners are in absolute poverty—before or after housing costs—and the proportion of pensioners in material deprivation has fallen from 10% in 2009-10 to 6% in 2019-20. Over the much longer sweep since 1990, relative poverty has halved, but there is still more to be done.

Alan Brown: Does the Secretary of State accept that poverty analysis figures lag real time and that poverty figures are going up? We only have to look at how an estimated 6.7 million households are in fuel poverty. Will he remember that when he stands at the Dispatch Box and talks about figures coming down?

Mel Stride: Those figures are simple facts about what has happened to absolute poverty across the period that I quoted.

I turn to an important issue: the economic circumstances in which the country finds itself.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mel Stride: In a moment. That is a difficult situation, largely visited upon us through a major pandemic that shut down a substantial proportion of the economy, followed by a war between Ukraine and Russia. That, of course, has had a huge impact in terms of inflation, the cost of energy and people's bills. It is only right that we are honest with the public and honest in the House about the ramifications of that situation. On 17 November, we will see some difficult choices brought forward by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on both tax and spending. We have to understand why that is. They will be brought forward because the country must demonstrate that it will live within its means and act fiscally responsibly. As a consequence, we see bond yields and interest rates softening, which will be good for mortgage holders, good for businesses who are borrowing and good for the servicing costs of the Government and their national debt.

Those hard choices must be made, but within them the Government have a core mission to look after the most vulnerable. Those who say that we do not do that are simply wrong. The evidence bears out my statement. The £650 cost of living payment that we have discussed is there for pensioners through pension credit and is there more widely for 8 million low-income households up and down the country. There is the £300 payment to all pensioner households. There is the £400 reduction in fuel bills, which comes through the bills themselves. There is a £150 reduction for those living in houses in council tax bands A to D—many of them will be pensioners—and a £150 payment to those who are disabled. That is on top of the household support fund administered by local authorities, who perhaps have a better grip of local need than those at the centre, which was recently expanded by £500 million to over £1 billion. Of course, there is also the energy price guarantee holding average fuel bills for the average family at £2,500, saving £700 across the winter. All those measures

and more are clearly indicative that the Government care about those who have the least and are there to protect them at every turn.

David Linden: Going back to what the Secretary of State said earlier, one would think that before covid and the war in Ukraine everything was hunky-dory and there were no problems at all. The reality is that the cost of living crisis is not recent but a result of 12 years of Conservative austerity. *[Interruption.]* If only Conservative Members got so outraged about pensioner poverty. When he talks about the hard fiscal decisions that will have to be made on 17 November, does he understand that my pensioners in Belvidere are shocked that the Government are not doing enough while lifting the cap on bankers' bonuses?

Mel Stride: I am surprised by the hon. Gentleman's intervention. When a pandemic comes along and contracts the economy by a greater level than at any time since about 1709—the year of the great frost—and a war breaks out that has a huge impact on energy costs in electricity, oil and gas, very few of our constituents up and down the country would not accept that those have been major contributors to the inflation and other challenges that we face. Only yesterday, the International Monetary Fund stated that about a third of economies in the world will be going into recession. We are not an outlier; we are right in the middle of the pack of nations who are suffering the consequences of the events that I described.

Margaret Greenwood: The Secretary of State has been telling us that the Government are committed to protecting the most vulnerable and looking after pensioners, but that will ring hollow to pensioners in my constituency who are devastated at the squeeze on public services. They see libraries closing—places they rely on as social hubs where they can go and interact with people—and the local authority having problems providing the social care that they need. Those issues really affect them. I know that they do not come under his Department, but will he commit to speaking to the Cabinet about them?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises a perfectly legitimate concern. We are all concerned about public services, and certainly those of us on the Government side care deeply about public services, but we must be honest with the British public in saying that times are extremely difficult and there will be some tough decisions.

Margaret Greenwood indicated dissent.

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady shakes her head, but economically there are really three choices: we can either raise taxes, cut spending or borrow more money. The Labour way, we know, is to borrow, borrow, borrow. Unfortunately, we all know where that leads. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Secretary of State needs to calm down. He is getting a bit excited. What we need—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Ashworth, you need to calm down. *[Interruption.]* No, no. I will make the decision on who needs to be calm, and it is you who is going to be calm.

Mel Stride: Mr Speaker, you are a man after my own heart. We are on the same page and I could not agree with you more. Thank you very much indeed for that timely intervention.

That brings me to my closing remarks.

Alan Brown: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mel Stride: I will not.

I respect the fact that the right hon. Member for Leicester South brought forward the motion and, to the extent that it underlines the absolute importance of standing up for our pensioners, I welcome it. Government Members will always be there to support pensioners. We always have been in the past, we are now and we always will be.

Mr Speaker: We come to the SNP spokesperson.

1.27 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I will pick up some of the Secretary of State's comments. He started off by trying to claim that there was not much illumination from the shadow Secretary of State's speech, but we got absolutely no illumination from his speech, either. There is still no clarity on what the Government are going to do. As I said, it is just not adequate to say, "It's irresponsible to come forward and provide clarity on what is going to happen on the triple lock." The Secretary of State kept talking about being honest with the public, so he should be honest and tell us what will happen with the triple lock.

The Secretary of State attacked Labour with the old trope about Labour doing borrowing. I am sure that, not that long ago, he was backing the mini-Budget that was all about borrowing to give tax cuts to the rich. That was economic madness. Does he want to come back to the Dispatch Box and apologise for that?

I am happy to support the motion. It is simple and, as it references the Tory manifesto, it should win the entire House's support—hopefully without the chaos that we witnessed in the Opposition day debate about fracking. I note that that was also the day when the former Prime Minister was questioned at the Dispatch Box by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford); she did her 55th U-turn and said that she would protect the triple lock, so it should be easy for the Government to further confirm that, rather than holding on to the line about waiting until next week.

Last year's breaking of the triple lock cost each pensioner £520 on average during the cost of living crisis, and the Red Book shows that it will take £30 billion in total from pensioners by 2026-27. At least uprating the state pension this year in line with September's 10% inflation rate would give certainty of income to its recipients.

However, we should also look at the reality. If the triple lock is reinstated and pensions are uplifted, we are actually almost celebrating not cutting pensions in real terms in the Budget. That is how desperate things are. If that is the measure of compassionate conservatism—not making further cuts to pensions—then it shows the reality of where we are with this Government.

In terms of inflation in the here and now, we know from the Office for National Statistics that tea is up 46%, pasta is up 60% and bread is up 38%. The price of budget food in supermarkets is up an astonishing 17% in the year to September. On energy costs, the average bill, based on the previous cap, was £1,100 a year just a year and a half ago. Now, with the so-called energy guarantee, we are supposed to be pleased that bills are now, on average, £2,500 per year during the winter period.

For the Energy Prices Act 2022, the Government's own figures estimated that energy bills would go up on average to £4,400 without the support package. That is almost 50% of an average state pension. Given that it is perfectly obvious that pensioners are more likely to use more energy than an average household, it is not just the triple lock that needs to be reinstated; we need this Government to come forward with confirmation of what the future energy support package will be for those who need it. The Secretary of State talked about protecting the most vulnerable. Well, they need to know what is happening with energy going forward as well.

In Scotland, average usage already means that bills are in the order of £3,300 per annum even with the current energy support package, so for people on fixed incomes it really is unaffordable.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is telling it like it is for people in their homes just now. He is talking about energy costs. That does not include those people, including pensioners, who live off the gas grid and are therefore paying far, far more than those he is quoting.

Alan Brown: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. The £100 payment to those off gas grid is almost an insult, because it does nothing to help them fill their oil tanks.

In a similar vein on inflation, petrol prices are still massively up compared with recent years. I drive an Insignia, which is not a huge car, but last week it still cost me over £100 to fill the petrol tank. That is clearly unaffordable for those on a fixed income, and it would account for 55% of one week's full pension.

When we look at the UK in the round, we see that it is one of the most unequal countries in the world. Unfortunately, that inequality continues during retirement. The Gini coefficient shows that the UK is 14th out of 14 north-west European countries. It is the same for the S80:S20 quintile share ratio; when we compare the ratio of the poorest to the richest, the UK has by far the worst ratio and is again 14th out of 14. Scandinavian countries—all small, independent countries—lead the way on these measures.

Poorer pay and lower incomes for those struggling also means that later on in life they are less likely to have private pensions and so are reliant on the UK state pension. Again, the UK state pension fails in comparison with those of other countries. When we look at the proportion of earnings derived from state pensions, the UK sits 30th out of 37 OECD countries. I understand that there is an argument that it can be good to move away from dependence on state pensions, but the UK is clearly among outlier countries near the bottom of the pile, and way below the OECD average. Many people

are using occupational pensions and capital as sources of income, but that increases inequality in pension age for those without access to such means.

If we look at the UK's flat pension rate and compare it with other countries that pay a flat rate—Ireland, Denmark and the Netherlands—we see that the UK rate is again lower and fails in comparison. If we look at state pension expenditure compared to a country's GDP, we see that the UK is again way below the OECD average and is ranked 28th out of 38 countries. Ministers might say that those measures can be somewhat subjective, but the UK trails in each one, so there is a common theme. One other measure is the replacement rate that compares all sources of pension income versus previous earnings. On this measure, the UK, with an average over 10% less than those of the EU27 and the OECD, is ranked 19th out of 37, so still in the bottom half of the table.

As I have stated, this means that inequality in the UK continues into retirement and the UK has the 12th highest pensioner poverty rate out of 35 countries measured by the OECD. What that means, if we turn that around, is that in terms of disposable income to support a standard of living for those aged 66-plus, the UK is ranked 24th out of 35 countries, while Iceland, Denmark and Norway occupy the top spots. Ireland is in eighth place. And those statistics are based on comparisons before the UK broke the triple lock and the link to earnings last year. It is absolutely critical that the triple lock is restored. Independent Age emphasises that:

"With more than 2 million pensioners already living in poverty and the cost-of-living crisis hitting hard, we know people are being forced to make impossible choices on how to cut back to be able to afford heating, electricity and food".

One additional income support measure is pension credit, but we know that take-up levels are still too low—the Secretary of State acknowledged that. Previous research commissioned by Independent Age estimated that full take-up of pension credit could lift 440,000 older people out of poverty. So when will that be tackled by the Government? The unclaimed £4 billion in pension credit could make the lives of hundreds of thousands of pensioners more bearable. It is also money that would then be recirculated within local economies as it is spent on vital household needs.

David Linden: Does my hon. Friend think that banks have a role to play? Given that the vast majority of pensioners receive their pension payments from the Department for Work and Pensions into their bank accounts, banks have the ability to identify where payments are coming from and the amount. Does he agree that there is an opportunity for banks to play a role in promoting pension credit?

Alan Brown: That is a very good point. I agree with my hon. Friend that that is an ideal way of managing that. I urge the Secretary of State to take heed of that intervention and work with banks and other organisations to try to increase pension credit take-up.

In terms of pension policies, of course I have to refer to the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—scandal and the fact that the Government are still not moving forward on fast and fair compensation, given that the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman found there was maladministration.

The PHSO made it clear that the Government do not have to wait for the end of its investigation to take action to remedy this injustice.

There is also the frozen pensions scandal, whereby whether your pension gets uprated or not is arbitrary, depending on which country you reside in. It is also scandalous that the UK Government have yet again rejected offers from the Canadian Government to enter into reciprocal arrangements. I urge the Secretary of State to reconsider that and engage in meaningful talks with the Canadian Government.

All those aspects show that the state pension in the UK is not the safety net we are told it is. It shows clearly that the Better Together mantra of staying in the UK to protect pensions in Scotland was a cruelly false premise. Indeed, with private pensions nearly collapsing after the Tory mini-Budget, that claim looks even more ridiculous. It also shows that when Gordon Brown, at a Better Together event, said:

"Our UK welfare state offers better protection for pensioners, disabled and the unemployed",

he was, frankly, lying.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It would be better if the hon. Gentleman found other words—perhaps a little gentler—rather than those he has just used.

Alan Brown: I take your point, Madam Deputy Speaker, but of course I was not referring to any hon. Member in this place.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I fully appreciate that and the hon. Gentleman is technically correct, but I take the view that anyone who has been a right hon. Member, and held a most senior position in this place, should be treated with respect even after they have left. A different form of words would therefore be appreciated.

Alan Brown: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I respectfully say that his comments were misleading because, as I have outlined, the UK pension is not as good as it is made out to be and is one of the poorest in north-west Europe.

Moving on, it is little wonder that the Scottish Government have been publishing papers comparing the UK to comparator countries for an independent Scotland. Scotland has a lower pensioner poverty rate than the rest of the UK at present, but we want to do much better than that. We want to match or better the comparator countries, reduce inequality during working life, and allow a more dignified and enjoyable retirement for all. We no longer want to be left here hoping, yet again, that Westminster will make the right decisions on such measures as the triple lock. We want to do things for the betterment of the citizens of Scotland.

1.39 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): This is my first Opposition day speech in a while and I welcome the opportunity to speak on an issue that is so important for Torbay. It will perhaps be unlike some of my previous speeches in that, first, I am not following the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and secondly—I see the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the

[Kevin Foster]

Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), on the Front Bench—this will not be quite as thorough an analysis of the issue as some have occasionally enjoyed from me on a Friday. It is a particular pleasure to see the Secretary of State on the Front Bench; I know that he will be a doughty champion for our beautiful county and its people, and that he will ensure that the most vulnerable are protected.

Turning to the motion, it is fascinating to see the huge enthusiasm from Labour Members for our 2019 manifesto. I cannot remember the same enthusiasm three years ago, when they were not that enthusiastic to have a general election in the first place. This measure was a key part of the pledges that we made. We have heard some knockabout today, but we have to remind ourselves that the pension triple lock was introduced in 2010 and not before. For the 13 years prior to that, pensions had been linked to the rise in inflation and in prices, rather than the position adopted under the triple lock.

We know why we introduced the triple lock. As has been referred to, the inspiration came from the 75p increase some years earlier. It aimed to give a clear sense of the direction in which state pensions would go. It would either be in line with prices, as was done previously, or earnings—by reinstating a link to those—or it would be a minimum of 2.5%, providing clarity for those looking ahead to their retirement. As that was done in a simple way, it meant that pensions would be protected against price shocks and that they would keep pace with earnings as they went up. Since 2010, the level of the basic state pension has gone up by £2,300.

The measure also has to be seen in the light of other changes, such as the end of opting out and the introduction of the new state pension, which is clearer about what people will get when they retire. As has been touched on, it allows more years in which, for example, someone is bringing up children to count towards the state pension. The changes were about making what people have clearer and simpler so that they can plan in their retirement.

That was very welcome in Torbay. Those commitments were probably a reason why a seat that was held by another party for 18 years is solidly Conservative again. Most pensioners and those who vote in Torbay are realistic people. They recognise the impact of the pandemic last year and the odd outcomes it produced for earnings—for example, in the previous year when earnings went down, and last year when earnings jumped up. The double lock was therefore introduced for one year last year, using the CPI rate for the increase in the state pension.

Some people say, “If inflation was good enough to be the rate of increase last year, it should be good enough this year, not least given the impacts we are seeing on prices.” I accept that there is a need for balance and the Secretary of State’s point that he cannot pre-empt what will be said next week. We cannot have a running commentary in the run-up to a fiscal event, with a different Department every day ruling something in or out, or putting something in or out. I take his point, but those of us who are not on the Front Bench can make our comments more freely about the outcome that we would like next week.

On the position in Torbay, the Secretary of State was right to highlight other benefits and support that is being offered to pensioners. The second cost of living payments are starting today, not just for pensioners; I think 16,300 families in Torbay will start to get that payment, taking the total up to £650. Members have rightly touched on the energy price guarantee, which helps to cap the price being paid for energy. On top of that, there were such things as the council tax rebate earlier this year. Councils have discretionary funding to apply that to those in band E and above when they have particular pressures. Therefore, when we discuss the triple lock and the state pension, we have to consider some of the other support. Of course, I have not mentioned the £400 per household energy bill discount from which pensioners will innately benefit.

It is interesting to hear people making comparisons with other countries and talking about wanting to emulate some of them. I would be interested to hear whether SNP Members would like to emulate the situation in many European countries whereby, although the position on the pension might be different, pensioners have to pay certain medical charges and there are social care levies applied to pension income and taxes that would not be paid here. Certainly, many services that are provided free at the point of use and point of need under the NHS are charged for in other jurisdictions. If we make comparisons and say we want to emulate other countries, we need to be conscious of what we are arguing we should emulate. We can do more to help people to get pension credit.

Alan Brown: I used a whole suite of comparators to make my point, and the key thing is that the UK has the 12th highest poverty rate out of 35 countries. That is shameful, is it not?

Kevin Foster: The hon. Gentleman made the point in his speech that he was looking to emulate the packages given to pensioners in other countries. If he wants to emulate them, he should look at what those packages include, such as charges for medical services and tax rates that we do not charge here. The council tax rebate of £150 did a lot for my constituents. As for whether that applies in Scotland, that is a devolved matter.

On the triple lock, the rise in prices has hit many people. Many people over the state retirement age are unlikely to have the type of options that others may have to meet some of the rising costs. It is therefore vital that we look to honour our pledge to them. I accept that that pledge cannot be made immediately today, but I look forward to hearing further clarity on that next week.

About £4.7 million of pension credit went unclaimed in Torbay last year. That could have gone to some of the poorest households in the bay. When the Minister sums up, I would be interested to hear about the Government’s thoughts on that issue, particularly when so much data is available. The era of people filling in paper forms or going to a post office with a pension book is long gone. The vast majority of that is done through electronic means. This is about what could be done to fill the gap so that more people can get the support to which they are entitled, not least because once someone is assessed as being eligible for pension credit, it opens the door to a range of other benefits and support.

Anne McLaughlin: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the work done by Loughborough University that was commissioned by Independent Age? It stated that if everybody who was entitled to pension credit claimed it, that would cost an extra £2 billion. I understand that that is a lot of money, but it also stated that the extra cost to the NHS and social care now is £4 billion, so if we could find a way of making sure that everybody got it, we would put more money into the Treasury's coffers.

Kevin Foster: I do not recognise the statistics from that report, but I welcome the overall thrust of that argument. When we as a Parliament have decided that we want people on a low income to receive a particular type of support, we want them to be able to get that.

I was interested to hear the suggestion that the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) made about working with banks. An institution that might be slightly easier to work with is post offices, where many people on lower incomes go to collect their pension and do other banking. The Secretary of State, who represents the rural constituency of Central Devon, will be aware of people going to post offices to withdraw the exact cash amounts that they need. Cashpoints mostly operate with multiples of £10 or £20, which may be difficult for someone who has to budget tightly for their bills and spending, whereas at a post office counter they can withdraw amounts literally to the penny. That allows very precise budgeting for those who need it.

This is a welcome debate. I must say that I am interested to hear Opposition Members' comments on who they expect to oppose the motion. We may hear one of those suspicious shouts of "No!" that are not followed by anyone showing up to vote in the No Lobby.

Pensioners in Torbay put their faith in this Government back in 2019. I believe that they put their faith in a manifesto that offered them a positive choice, and I continue to believe that that is the right basis for us to move forward. I hope to hear next week that we will honour that commitment to them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many Members want to speak this afternoon, but we have limited time. I intend to conclude the debate at about 4.30 pm. I hope that imposing a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches—not immediately, but after the next speaker—will give everybody who wishes to speak the opportunity to do so.

I call the Chairman of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions.

1.59 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). I thank him for the help he gave me when he was a Minister, and I agree with what he says about pension credit. I think the key is probably for local government to work more closely with central Government, because local councils have the pensioner income data to work out whether pensioners are entitled to pension credit. If we could improve co-operation, judgments could be made much more automatically.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) that this debate is happening only because of the catastrophic Government blunders in September. Before then, there was no issue; there was a very clear commitment from the then Chancellor, who is now Prime Minister, that the triple lock would be honoured. Unfortunately, what happened in September has created the very difficult situation that the Secretary of State rightly described.

It is important to remember that there has already been a big real-terms fall this year in the value not only of the state pension, but of working-age benefits, which were increased by 3.1% in April when inflation was at nearly 10%. That was justified at the time on the basis that that is how the usual uprating formula works: pensions and benefits are uprated in April by the rate of inflation in the previous September. The then Chancellor acknowledged that the effects would need to be addressed next April, so he gave an assurance in May that the same formula would be applied again for next April's uprating. We now know that pensions and benefits will be uprated by 10.1%, which was the rate of inflation in September.

On pensions, as we have been reminded, there is also a Conservative manifesto commitment. As I said in my intervention on the Secretary of State, if the promise on pensions is not kept next April and pensions are instead uprated by less than the rate of inflation, it will be almost without precedent.

Since 1977, there has been a statutory obligation, defined in a variety of ways, to uprate in line with inflation. It has been honoured every year since then except 1986, when the rate of inflation was 1.1% and the decision was made to uprate the state pension by 1%—0.1 percentage points less. Apart from that, there has been uprating by at least the rate of inflation every single year. To depart from that approach now, on the scale that has apparently been considered recently, would be absolutely without precedent in 50 years. In November 1980, inflation was at 16.5%; the state pension was uprated by 16.5%. In April 1991, inflation was at 10.9%; the state pension was uprated by 10.9%.

It is clear why there has been that commitment all the way through: because people who have given a lifetime of work and have retired from working have already made their contribution, so there is nothing that they can do to make up the difference if the value of their state pension falls. I think we all recognise that there is an obligation on the state—a social contract—to maintain the value of the state pension. That contract should not be breached as a result of the Government making catastrophic errors in their management of the economy in September.

The considerations with working-age benefits are different. They have also been sharply reduced in real terms this year, but over the years they have frequently not been uprated in line with inflation. As a cumulative result, according to the Library, they are now at their lowest level in real terms in the 40 years since 1982-83. Trussell Trust food banks gave out 2.1 million emergency food parcels in 2021-22; they gave out 60,000 in 2010-11. They have reported that demand in August and September this year was 46% higher than last year. Why is the economy failing so many people? How many more are the Government willing to push into destitution?

[Sir Stephen Timms]

The annual family resources survey has started to collect data on food insecurity to get a handle on what is going on with food banks. We now have results for the first two years, 2019-20 and 2020-21; the Secretary of State and I had an exchange about them at Work and Pensions questions recently. Food insecurity among universal credit claimants fell from 43% in 2019-20 to 27% in 2020-21, reflecting the £20 universal credit uplift introduced in March 2020, just between those two financial years. Now that that has been taken away, food insecurity will have shot up again. We will have to raise the level of universal credit to address the current mass dependence on charitable food banks.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is outrageous that we now have more branches of food banks than of McDonald's?

Sir Stephen Timms: It is a great shame on us all that so many people are dependent on charitable food banks, and the numbers are still rising. We certainly must not fail to uprate social security, universal credit and pensions in line with inflation in April, because otherwise there will be yet another big surge in demand. That is why it is so important for the Prime Minister to honour the promise that he made as Chancellor.

There is one more uprating we need that cannot be ignored. The benefit cap was introduced in 2012. At the time, it was based on the level of median earnings. It has never been uprated. It has changed only once: in 2016, it was reduced. Its value has lost any connection with the earnings level to which it was supposed to be linked when it was introduced. If it is not uprated next April, whatever level of uprating is decided on, thousands more families will crash into the cap for the first time and many will have to start going to a food bank to keep themselves alive.

It is time to recognise that mass food bank dependence is not inevitable. We can turn back from this. We can do much better than this. In the decisions announced next week, we must—at the very least—not make things worse.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We will now have a formal limit of five minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

1.59 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms). I was brought up in the area that he represents, and I have fond memories of his part of the world. Let me also welcome the Secretary of State to his place, and, indeed, welcome the whole new Front Bench.

As we all know, our country finds itself in an incredibly difficult economic position, and I look forward to the Chancellor's fiscal event next week. My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson), in an intervention earlier, made an important point about why the slight delay was required, namely to ensure that we have the OBR figures that Members in all parts of the House have requested during previous debates on our finances.

My party has a strong record of supporting older people, and I hope that that record will continue: we need it to do so now more than ever. One of the highlights of our Government over the last 12 years has been auto-enrolment for employees in small companies, which means that 88% of eligible employees now have savings pots that they would not have necessarily been encouraged to have before. During the pandemic, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks)—now the Prime Minister—took the necessary steps to keep our economy afloat, but those decisions came at a cost. In the wake of that spending, coupled with the awful Putin's illegal war in Ukraine, we now face a cost of living crisis. Sacrifices must be made. The Chancellor has some extremely difficult decisions to make, the results of which we will hear in nine days.

Given the cost of living crisis, and notably the hike in energy bills, it is more important than ever to protect the most vulnerable members of our society, and I am grateful to the Government for the work they are doing to support pensioners at this difficult time. As we enter the colder months, I am particularly proud of their commitment to help keep energy bills as low as possible and the additional support that is specific to pensioners, including the £300 winter fuel payment.

Like many of my colleagues, I have received countless items of correspondence from constituents pleading for the triple lock to be retained, and I trust that that decision will be made in nine days' time. I hope that the Chancellor will continue the good work that he is already doing, and I look forward to our honouring the commitments that we have historically made in our manifesto. I agreed with the right hon. Member for East Ham when he said that when people have done the correct thing before, we should ensure that we protect them as much as possible. We should always seek to incentivise good and indeed best behaviour, and I hope that next week's statement will demonstrate that that is being done.

2.2 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): The Prime Minister recently appeared on the front page of *The Times* beneath the headline "State can't fix all your problems". While that may be true in the absolute sense, I think that the British people are right in making two basic assumptions. First, they rightly assume that the state will not make life harder, and secondly, given that the very essence of politics is priorities, they rightly expect their welfare, financial security and basic dignity to be the prime concerns that govern our actions in this place and the Government's actions across Whitehall Departments. On both counts this Government have failed miserably, and have done so for 12 long years. In response to today's motion, they have a golden opportunity to be unequivocal in stating that the triple lock on pensions is here to stay and will be protected.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I have been inundated with emails from pensioners in my constituency expressing a mixture of anger, fear and despair at the removal of the triple lock. A 70-year-old woman has described sitting in her living room with only candles for heat because she cannot afford to pay her energy bills. That is unthinkable. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government must consider the full impact of removing the triple lock on our most vulnerable?

Paula Barker: I entirely concur with what the hon. Lady has said. My inbox, like hers, is full of emails giving examples similar to that of her 70-year-old constituent, from people who are choosing between heating and eating.

Why is it so important for the triple lock to be protected? The answer is quite simple. Our elderly people are suffering under this cost of living crisis, and have been suffering under Tory austerity for much longer. Pensioner poverty has been on the increase since the first half of the last decade: this is not something new. It is now widely reported that the number of pensioners living in poverty has topped the 2 million mark, including an extra 200,000 more poor pensioners in 2021 alone, according to the Centre for Ageing Better. That is a figure that should bear the hallmark of deep shame for any Government, and not least for a Prime Minister who was in No. 11 while the problem was becoming worse. Pensioners are falling into debt for the first time in their lives, with all the anxiety that that brings in later life.

Anthony Browne: Is the hon. Member aware of a report on the triple lock that I mentioned earlier, produced by the House of Commons Library? It shows that as a proportion of average earnings, the basic state pension is now higher than it was at any time under the last Labour Government, and that is a result of Conservative policy.

Paula Barker: I refer the hon. Member to the response from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) to that very point, which I think was more than eloquent.

It is good, decent, working-class pensioners who are suffering, along with many more who may be asset-rich yet cash-poor. People who have worked for many decades are being denied the basic dignity of living free from fear. In the north-west region alone, nearly half a million pensioners are living in some form of poverty, including too many in my own constituency. Inflation is due to start falling; the Government know that. We already know that it would not be right to scrap the triple lock, nor would it make for sound economics—especially at this moment—to hit pensioners in the pocket with a real-terms cut in their incomes. People need support now, rather than the drawbridge being pulled up. The shift of wealth from working and middle-class households upwards has never been as great, and those inequalities are borne out in the way we treat our older people.

When Ministers hold great offices of state and lecture the British people about tough choices while dishing out billions in failed public sector contracts to their friends, removing the cap on bankers' bonuses and increasing the cost of mortgages to pay for unfunded tax cuts for the few, it is particularly galling that the Government cannot come out and unequivocally back our pensioners today. If they can prioritise all that in times like covid and during these economic headwinds, the very least they can do is walk through the Lobby with the Opposition today. The last thing that our pensioners need now is uncertainty, and I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to join us in the Lobby this afternoon.

2.7 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): Some Members might say that I have something of a vested interest in this motion, given that I represent the oldest cohort of residents in the country. I will say more about that in

a moment. I have often stood in this place over the last year and called for the triple lock to be restored, but before that debate is had, I think it important for us to remember why we are having this one. It is important to put on the record again that it was this Government and the then Chancellor, now our Prime Minister, who intervened to provide what were widely deemed to be some of the most comprehensive packages of support not just in this country but in the world to look after the livelihoods of people up and down the land so that they could cope and get through the period of the pandemic financially.

At the time when the Office for National Statistics was considering figures that would make it possible to generate the triple lock uplift last year, it was abundantly clear that a statistical anomaly resulting from people coming off furlough and returning to normal wages had created a bump which meant that, while we were in the grip of a pandemic and did not know quite where the virus would go next, it would be simply unfair not to make a one-off decision to revert to the double lock. We on this side of the House understood that, and I dare say we reluctantly accepted it, but we just did that. It was a year ago on 15 November—which I would just add is my birthday—when I said, on the record, “woe betide us” if we let our pensioners down again. So here we are once more, and in just nine days—that is, two days after my birthday—we will again be listening to the autumn statement that comes along. As my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford said, it is absolutely right that we consider this in conjunction with the OBR report rather than prejudging the event that will take place in nine days' time.

This is quite some statistic that I am about to give the Secretary of State. Across England and Wales, we in North Norfolk are the oldest local authority with the highest percentage of the population aged 65 and over—33.4% of my population. That is 15% higher than the national average. One in three of my constituents is over the age of 65, and in the last decade alone that figure has increased by 17.8%. So I am not just standing up here and saying this; it really does matter to my constituency, because 27.8% of those constituents are retired, and that alone is roughly double the national average. Even further than that, 4.8% of my constituents are over the age of 85.

The argument has already been made that with inflation running at 10%, it is unfeasible for people who are on a fixed income, and certainly those who are 85 and over, to go out and earn their way out of a difficult set of bills, even though the Government have enormously supported them with many interventions to help them at this difficult time. The Prime Minister has stood at the Dispatch Box and said many times that he will protect the most vulnerable and that he will be fair and compassionate. I believe that he will be; he certainly was during the pandemic when he was Chancellor. So I do believe that in just nine days' time the right decision—the moral and ethical decision—will be made, that the triple lock will be returned and that the one in three constituents I represent in North Norfolk who are affected will get what they have paid into all their lives.

2.12 pm

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Everyone deserves financial security in retirement and should be able to rely on a decent state pension, but currently around one in six older people is living in

[Mrs Paulette Hamilton]

poverty and over the last decade pensioner poverty has risen by almost half a million. People in Erdington, Kingstanding and Castle Vale have been contacting me, worried about the impact the cost of living crisis is having on their finances. Many older people in my community are facing tough choices between heating and eating and they simply cannot afford a real-terms cut to the already limited state pension and pension credit they receive. One of my constituents, an 87-year-old living with significant health issues, said to me:

“I am careful now about the electricity and try to use the microwave instead of the oven. I haven’t put the heating on because I am frightened of the cost.”

This is not a new issue. Pensioners across my community were struggling to make ends meet in the spring and summer, yet the Government have still failed to clarify their position. Despite winter now being just around the corner, we are now seeing a summer of Tory chaos coming home to roost. The Conservative Government made a manifesto commitment in 2019 to maintain the triple lock. This would have seen the state pension rise with inflation every year of the current Parliament, but conflicting statements from Ministers about where cuts might be made are hugely worrying for many across the country, and the prospect of another round of devastating austerity is looming large. My constituents need clarity, reassurance and stability to help them to manage through this crisis.

The Prime Minister has claimed that his Government are compassionate, but we are yet to see any compassion for the most vulnerable, older people in our society. The public deserve to know what options Ministers are considering, with reports that they may again refuse to apply the triple lock to pensions in the future years. If this does happen, it would be yet another breach of their 2019 manifesto commitments. Up to 850,000 older people in the UK do not receive the pension credit they are entitled to, and older people on low incomes are falling through the cracks.

If the Government are serious about supporting older people, they should now commit to targeted financial support for those in later life. We all have an interest in ensuring that older people in our communities live in dignity. The 13,000 pensioners in Erdington, Kingstanding and Castle Vale will be over £900 worse off if the Tories break their promise on the triple lock. Across the UK, older people are being overlooked and the Government must now step in and give them the support they need to stay warm and safe this winter.

2.16 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. We have heard some great speeches today about the importance of the triple lock and the pension. One thing that unites the whole House is the need to look after the most vulnerable in society, and this Government have done that over the past three years and over the past 12 years: they have always put the most vulnerable at the heart of everything they have done. They introduced the triple lock in 2011, which in itself put the most vulnerable at the heart of things to ensure that there would be no more of the insulting 75p rises that happened under the last Labour Government.

This Government decided that we needed to look after our pensioners, but why are we having this debate today? Some would say it is because of the Labour party’s political games and its impatience to wait nine days. Nine days might seem like a long time to Labour Members, but it really is not if we are to get the right sort of information from the Office for Budget Responsibility. Some might say it is a political game to create noise and scaremonger pensioners, but I do not believe that; I think there is genuine concern on both sides of the House about looking after the most vulnerable. That is why I say that people can rest assured that this Government have stepped in and will step in.

One of the reasons we are here today is what the Government did to step in and help people during covid, when £400 billion of Government money was spent to help people to keep their jobs, to help the most vulnerable and to help some of the poorest and the eldest. Now it is right that we are looking at all aspects of how things are financed. There is no such thing as a magic money tree, and we need to review everything. Nevertheless, those on fixed incomes, especially pensioners, are some of the most at risk from our rising inflation. We have to be sensible about this.

When I give speeches in my constituency, I always say to people that the best way to deal with inflation is to get better jobs, good jobs, which is why I have organised three job fairs already this year and have more lined up. We want to get more people in Rother Valley into jobs, which is why our rate of unemployment is significantly lower than the national average. However, I appreciate that pensioners cannot do that, because they are on a fixed income, and although I would like to see more older people in work—they offer many benefits to the job sector—most people on pensions are reliant on fixed incomes and inflation hits their savings hard. They cannot make sacrifices on food and heating, and they cannot make sacrifices on their necessary transport, so it is important that we stick with them and look after them. However, I am not a Government Minister—[*Interruption.*] I know; it’s a shame—so I do not have to say that I am not going to back the triple lock. I back the triple lock, because I think it is incredibly important. I also know that the Ministers on the Front Bench are listening to the conversation. They cannot say what we want them to say, because they have to wait, but they are listening intently.

Pension credit is incredibly important to my constituents and to constituents across the country. This pension top-up is a vital lifeline, worth up to £3,300, and it is a great initiative introduced by this Government. Unfortunately, take-up is not nearly as high as is needed or as it should be. I urge Ministers to listen carefully and to try to get more people to claim the money owed to them—it is their money and it is ringfenced for them—because this Government have put in the money to help the most vulnerable.

Finally, auto-enrolment is probably the biggest success of the past 12 years of Conservative Government. We have already heard that 88% of people now have an auto-enrolled pension. This is not one-off help for pensioners; it will revolutionise how people of my generation and my children’s generation access their pensions. Pensions are a long-term, fundamental benefit and, frankly, we probably will not need to have this conversation in 30 or 40 years’ time, because the auto-enrolment scheme

introduced by this Government will have solved the long-term problem. We have had this problem for decades and, over the past 12 years, this Government have provided long-term help. The triple lock provides medium-term and short-term help, and I hope it is retained—I am sure it will be—but the auto-enrolment scheme is one of the best out there, and I hope the Government expand it to self-employed people and continue to emphasise auto-enrolment.

2.21 pm

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): In a speech earlier this year, the Prime Minister said:

“I believe that a wealthy and civilised country should offer older people dignity in retirement.”

I completely agree but, from the dozens of emails and letters I receive, it is clear that the elderly are facing anything but the dignity they deserve. Doreen from Hall Green told me:

“We will go hungry and cold, and this is what we get for working from 15 years old and paying into the system.”

Maureen from Wakefield city centre told me:

“We either live in warm homes and struggle to feed ourselves...or turn off the heating.”

It is truly shocking to hear these stories in 2022.

Voters took the Conservatives at their word when, in 2019, they committed to the triple lock. Since then it has been U-turn after U-turn, whether on income tax, fracking or their disastrous mini-Budget, and it is hard-working families and the elderly who are paying the price. More than 17,000 pensioners in my constituency could be £915 worse off overall compared with what the state pension would have been if the triple lock were fully applied in 2022 and 2023—of course, the triple lock was broken last year, too.

This matters a lot in Wakefield, where incomes are below the national average and where in parts of my constituency, even back in 2019, 26% of older people were living in poverty. That number must have risen dramatically during the pandemic and during the cost of living crisis, and it will only rise further if pensions do not keep up with inflation. In an area where long-term illness rates are high, it terrifies me to hear Age UK saying that older people are now risking their health by switching off their heating and essential medical equipment because they worry about the cost and because they fear that worse is to come.

Our older generation raised us, taught us, served us and cared for us, and in return it is only right that they should have the security they deserve in retirement. Their ask is simple. As Doreen says, they have paid into the system all their lives, and they want to be assured that they can continue to afford to live with dignity. That is why I will stand with our pensioners and support the triple lock by proudly voting for the motion this afternoon.

2.23 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is wonderful to see Labour, the Conservatives and the SNP, and the Liberal Democrats at one point, so united not just by a successful Conservative policy but by a Conservative manifesto commitment. It is delightful to speak in a debate in which the Opposition are calling for the Government to support their own manifesto commitment.

Another thing that unites the House is that we all support dignity in retirement and financial security in old age. The Government have an absolute duty to support pensioners and to reduce pensioner poverty. Pensioners, as various Members mentioned, are on fixed incomes. During a cost of living crisis, as we have at the moment, they cannot go out and get a second job, work extra hours or demand that their boss gives them a pay rise. They have to live on their state pension or their occupational pension, which is why I am so grateful for all the measures that the Government have introduced during this cost of living crisis, including the energy price guarantee, the £300 winter fuel payment, the £150 increase to the warm home discount and the £400 energy bill support scheme for all homeowners. Pensioners and those on means-tested benefits will also receive an extra £650 of cost of living support.

All those measures are very welcome, but this debate is about not the Government's emergency tailored support but the state pension. At what level should it be? Should we keep the triple lock? These questions have been at the centre of a political tug-of-war for a decade. In recent times, as I mentioned in my interventions, the state pension has been at record lows as a proportion of average earnings. Under the last Labour Government, it went down to around 16% of average earnings between 2000 and 2008—that is the lowest rate of the modern era. Various colleagues mentioned Gordon Brown's offer to increase pensions by 75p a week in 1999, which is a derisory amount.

The whole House has spoken in praise of the triple lock, which was introduced by the Conservatives and has been a manifesto commitment ever since. I point out to the Opposition Members who deride the Government's track record that, actually, the state pension is now far more generous than it ever was during 13 years of Labour Government. Labour's state pension increases were initially by inflation only, which led to the 75p increase, and then in 2002 Gordon Brown introduced an increase by either a 2.5% upper limit or inflation. Labour never brought back the earnings link, which first came back in 2011 when we introduced the triple lock.

The triple lock has worked well. Since 2012-13, pensions have gone up by 2.5% four times, by earnings three times and by the CPI rate three times, which shows that the triple lock does kick in. Since 2010, we have increased the state pension by £2,300, which is 31% more than if the state pension had increased by just earnings or inflation—that is £720 more. As a result, the basic state pension as a proportion of earnings is at its highest rate for more than 30 years—higher than at any time during the last Labour Government. The new state pension is now 25% of average earnings, a historically high level.

There is no doubt that the triple lock is expensive, which is why we are having this debate. We spend more than £100 billion a year on state pensions, which is £7.9 billion more than if the triple lock had never been introduced by this Government. We clearly have an economic black hole at the moment, and we need to work out where the money comes from. I am very supportive of the triple lock, and I was elected on that manifesto commitment. I know all my colleagues are very supportive of the triple lock, but I am also not a Minister, so I am free to speak out in support of the triple lock. I fully appreciate that the Government are

[Anthony Browne]

going through a budgetary process for the autumn statement, so they cannot say, “Yes, we support this.” They have to look at everything in the round and make sure that we live within our means. As a result, I fully support the Government’s position of not stating their position on the record at the moment. We will hear the autumn statement next Thursday, and I look forward to the Government’s pronouncements.

2.28 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I would also like to quote the Prime Minister’s first speech from the steps of 10 Downing Street on 25 October, only a few weeks ago:

“I will unite our country, not with words, but with action... This government will have integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level. Trust is earned. And I will earn yours.”

Well, I am not sure how long those promises have lasted. It is certainly clear that the Prime Minister is avoiding a general election. In truth, he can claim no personal democratic mandate to be Prime Minister. He bases his authority on the Conservative manifesto on which he and his colleagues were elected in 2019:

“the mandate my party earned in 2019 is not the sole property of any one individual, it is a mandate that belongs to and unites all of us.”

By “us”, I think he is referring to members of the Conservative party. He continued:

“And the heart of that mandate is our manifesto.”

The Prime Minister bases his legitimacy on the Conservatives’ 2019 manifesto, so may I remind the House of what it said about the triple lock? Many Opposition Members have already said this, but let me do it again for the sake of completeness. It said:

“We will keep the triple lock, the winter fuel payment, the older person’s bus pass and other pensioner benefits”.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) said he was gratified that Labour Members were supporting the Conservative manifesto. Can I tell him that the Conservative party was not alone in making those promises? In fact, 626 hon. and right hon. Members of this House, including myself, were elected on a manifesto commitment to maintain, retain and protect the triple lock. So it is in order for us to make reference to that.

Other colleagues, including the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), referred to the relative position of the UK. The UK has one of the least generous state pensions in the developed world, as is demonstrated by the OECD figures, which show that the UK spends less on old age pension benefits as a proportion of GDP.

In April, when the Prime Minister broke the Conservative party manifesto pledge, the state pension increased by only 3.1% instead of the 8.3% due under the triple lock. That has cost someone in my constituency on the new full state pension £487 a year. I am sure Conservative Members are going to be concerned. I lived through the days of terrible pensioner poverty and I felt that the last Labour Government went a long way to address that, through not just the basic state pension, but the supplements introduced by Gordon Brown and others.

I would be terribly embarrassed if my Government’s legacy was one of pensioner poverty. However, the groundwork for poverty has been laid by the current Government; those foundations have been laid over the past 12 years. It has left groups such as the WASPI—I know that the Minister and others do not like to hear that term—cohort of working women born in the 1950s and 1960s in desperate hardship through no fault of their own.

Fifty of the UK’s areas most at risk in the cost of food crisis have been identified and not surprisingly the north-east and my constituency are among the worst affected. This year, our communities will see the introduction of “warm spaces” to help those who are unable to heat their homes because of spiralling energy costs. Our Government and the economy are failing to meet the most basic needs—food and warmth. A real-terms cut to the state pension, alongside soaring energy and food costs, will force many more pensioners into poverty. So I urge Conservative Members to do the right thing, back their own manifesto commitment and vote to retain the triple lock.

2.33 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): Today’s motion is curious because, next week, we will get the decision on this issue, but let us leave that aside for a moment. Last year, I spoke in a debate on the triple lock. At that point, we had the highest level of basic state pension in relation to earnings in 34 years. At that point, it had increased by £2,050—it is now £2,300. Along with auto-enrolment, that has been one of the most significant policy decisions taken by this Government not just in pension policy, but in domestic policy much more broadly. We now have more than 19 million people auto-enrolled in workplace pensions, which is a fantastic achievement. But of course we do not just support our pensioners via the triple lock, generous though that has been. We know that pensioners spend a higher proportion of their money on energy, and there they have had a £400 reduction. They have had an energy price guarantee, which will save, on average, £700, and a winter fuel payment topped up by a pensioner cost of living payment, worth up to another £600.

We have to think about the poorest pensioners and not just think about pensioners as one big group. There we see a further cost of living payment of £650. We see cold weather payments if the temperature of their homes drops below a certain level. Underpinning both those things, we see pension credit. We have to get more people to claim it who are eligible for it because it is worth on average £3,300, which is yet more support. Time and again, both on the triple lock and on the other support the Government give, they have been very generous and constantly thought about how best to support pensioners.

When it comes to Labour motions and Labour Front-Bench speeches, I look for what is not there as much as what is. The motion is specifically about keeping the triple lock for the coming year. As I say, we will get the decision next week. The motion does not say where to get the money for that, but let us leave that to one side for now, even though it is several billion pounds. More importantly, it does not say anything about what should happen beyond that. I listened carefully to the shadow Secretary of State to see what his view on future pension

policy might be, but I am afraid that I did not hear much. That is notable because week in, week out in this House what we are hearing from the Front Benchers is, “The next Labour Government will do this” and, “The next Labour Government will do that” but we did not hear that today on pension policy.

Pensions are the second highest category of expenditure after health, so a party that hopes to form a Government ought to have a view about what it wants to do on pension policy that is not just, “We will continue Conservative policies” or “We will support all the expenditure but we will not support any reductions in other areas.” I hope that in his wind-up we might hear from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), for whom I have a lot of time, what Labour’s view of pensions might be. If the answer is, “We would have to look at the finances to understand what we will do” that is precisely what the Government have been doing to form their decisions next week.

2.36 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): When I talk about poverty in this House—let us be clear that that is what we are talking about today—I usually refer to the fact that some 40% of our children in the north-east live in poverty. Not for them will be the grandparent trust fund or gift of tens of thousands of pounds for a deposit to buy their own home, and not for them the holidays or trips to theme parks with grandma and grandad—some of the things that many children in our society enjoy and even expect. That is because huge numbers of our pensioner generation, who have worked hard all their lives, are struggling to get by. It is only because they make sacrifices that they are able to ensure their grandchildren get a gift on their birthdays or at Christmas.

The state pension is the largest source of income for most older people. For some, particularly women, it is their only source of income. Meanwhile, the number of pensioners living in poverty has been rising since 2013, with the figure exceeding 2 million last year. What kind of society are we that allows our senior citizens to simply exist through their later years, rather than enjoy their reward for decades of service to our country? Is it not a great sadness that those self-same pensioners are more likely to be in ill health after a life of struggle?

Pensioner poverty is a disproportionate risk, affecting 34% of private tenants and 29% of social rented sector tenants, compared with 12% of older people who own their home. In April, the state pension increased by 3.1%, instead of the 8.3% due under the triple lock formula, costing someone on the full new state pension a real-terms income drop of £487 a year and someone on the full basic state pension £373 a year. Some Conservative Members may say, “Well that’s only £10 a week.” But Labour Members know the value of £10 to a struggling household. Energy bills typically make up 6.6% of weekly spending for the over-75s, compared with 4.2% of weekly spending for households of all ages. Without certainty from the Government over whether they will be protected, those constituents are having to enforce their own cutbacks.

Then there are those not in receipt of the full state pension. Around 1.4 million older people receive pension credit—a vital top-up for people on the lowest incomes. If pension credit is increased only by earnings, rather

than inflation, an older person living alone could be missing out on a further £400 a year, rising to more than £600 for a couple. Is there no end to the dependency of this Government on those with the lowest income to pay for the mess of the past 12 years? With people choosing between heating and eating, there is an impact on public health, therefore putting even more pressure on our overstretched NHS workforce.

Reinstating the triple lock is a practical choice. Even so, it leaves the UK’s level of spending on older age benefits below that of comparable countries. According to the latest OECD figures, at 7.1%, the UK spends less on old age benefits as a proportion of GDP than the average of 7.7%. Why is that? We are one of the richest countries in the world, but, sadly, what we see is the gap between the rich and the poor widen year on year.

Time and again, Government MPs say that their latest Prime Minister has the 2019 mandate to remain in power. That mandate includes the promise to retain the triple lock, as did ours. Now Conservative MPs can pick and choose which of their promises they will keep and which they will not. The pensions promise has been broken once. Can Conservative Members really believe that any little credibility that they have left can be retained if they break it again?

2.41 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): At a time of challenges at home and abroad, it is vital that we support our pensioners through this winter. I understand the concern that is felt by many people across the country, and I am grateful to the many constituents across Guildford and Cranleigh who have chosen to share their circumstances with me. My office will do all that it can to support any constituent who reaches out for support in the coming months.

This compassionate Conservative Government have not stood by when it comes to supporting those in need. Since 2010, the Government have increased the state pension by £2,300, giving pensioners dignity in retirement and ensuring that their buying power has kept pace with inflation. It is important to note that, had the state pension solely risen with inflation, it would be £720 lower than it is today.

I am also grateful to this Conservative Government for simplifying the state pension regarding the years spent at home for women raising a family, ensuring that they are better off. I chose to spend 16 years at home raising my children and that sort of policy impacts someone like me. These reforms mean that more than 3 million women will, on average, be £550 better off per year by 2030 than they would have been under the policy that we inherited from Labour. The years spent raising a family will now count in full towards the new state pension. As colleagues have already mentioned, automatic enrolment has helped millions more people save for retirement and that is something of which we should be very proud.

I look forward to hearing from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in due course on the findings of his annual review of the state pension. I am confident that he will make the right decision that protects and supports our pensioners. I am also looking forward to the Chancellor’s autumn statement. It is only nine days away and I can exercise patience in waiting to have that alongside the full OBR forecast. He is no longer in his

[Angela Richardson]

place, but I worry that the Christmas presents of the shadow Secretary of State will not survive until Christmas day without being picked up, felt and shaken about. It is not long to wait. At least I hope he will get some Christmas presents this year.

Although it is important to highlight the bigger picture, the unprecedented support that the Government are providing this winter cannot be ignored. First, I welcome the introduction of the energy price guarantee, which today—this very minute—is providing certainty to pensioners with their energy bills. I welcome the fact that the Government have gone further, and that pensioners are eligible to receive up to £850 of additional support. That support comes from a further payment as part of the winter fuel payment, the £400 discount on energy bills as part of the energy bills support scheme and the £150 council tax rebate for eligible properties.

Starting today, many households who claim the qualifying means-tested benefit, including those on pension credit, will receive their second instalment of the cost of living payment. In Guildford, 6,800 families are eligible for that payment. There are many ways that the Government are supporting those in need this winter: income support with pension credit; increasing the warm home discount; and delivering cold weather payments, to name just a few.

Locally, I welcome the support that is being provided by the Conservative-run Surrey County Council to help those who need it the most. I understand that all households will receive a cost of living directory of support that outlines the assistance that is on offer this winter. If anyone is in need of advice or help, I urge them to reach out. This Conservative Government will always support the most vulnerable in our society and I am confident that that commitment will endure.

2.45 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Like so many of my colleagues, I have been overwhelmed by the number of constituents who have been in touch with me over the past few weeks. They are terrified about the consequences of the triple lock being scrapped—terrified because of what they are reading in the newspapers. One article in *The Times* today says that the Bank will raise interest rates again. Another article tells us that food price inflation will cost shoppers another £682 a year. Such headlines should be taken very seriously.

The cost of living crisis and soaring inflation are pushing food and energy prices to unprecedented highs. The decision to suspend the triple lock last year cost someone on the full new state pension £487 a year, and someone on the full basic state pension £373 a year. With inflation set to exceed 8% this year, pensioners are already facing a significant real-terms fall in income. We do not need a crystal ball to see where this is headed: the most vulnerable pensioners look to be plunged further into poverty.

The Cabinet seem to have wiped their memories of their involvement in the previous Government, and indeed in the Governments of the past 12 years, but let me remind them of the fact that it is not only the disastrous mini-Budget of a few weeks ago that has brought us here, but pensioner poverty, which has been rising for a decade.

Anthony Browne: The hon. Member said that it was terrifying that we may not have the triple lock. I agree that it is terrifying not implementing a Conservative policy. She said that she wanted to remind the Government of what has happened. Let me remind the Labour party, which has been criticising Government policy, that we have systematically, over the past 12 years, had a far more generous state policy scheme than we had under 13 years of the last Labour Government, when we only had inflation of 2.5%, and we never had the triple lock.

Tonia Antoniazzi: The hon. Member's intervention misses the point by quite a margin, because pensioner poverty has been on the rise regardless.

The promise of this society is that we support everyone not just to survive, but to thrive. The Government seem to believe that pensions are some sort of nice extra, but that is not the case. The UK's state pension, which is one of the least generous in the developed world, is seen as something for which pensioners should be grateful. No, they should not be grateful, because they have paid into it.

The audacity of the Government is clear. In the midst of a cost of living crisis, the like of which we have not seen for decades, they turn around to people who have paid their taxes and earned a decent retirement and tell them that, instead of the state supporting them in their retirement, they will plunge them into poverty. Breaking the 2019 Tory manifesto commitment to the triple lock for the second year in a row will leave more than 18,000 pensioners in Gower, on average, £905 worse off. Those are the statistics for my constituents.

When my constituents write to me asking how they will pay their bills this winter, how they will put food on the table, and why they are paying the price for Tory economic incompetence, what would the Minister tell them and what would she have me tell them?

2.49 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I am not the first Member of the House to recognise that this motion is not a serious request of the Government, because we have the autumn statement in just nine days' time. It is blatantly a political stunt to gain headlines.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I was going to make reference in my speech to Conservative Members saying that this debate was a stunt. It is not a stunt; it is a political lever. This is an Opposition day—this is what we do in this place. I ask the hon. Gentleman please to correct the record.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention; it brings to mind a number of the interventions and speeches from Labour Members talking about pensioners' fears as they consider the outcome of the triple lock decision. Surely this debate, called by Labour, does not reduce fear but increases it, and that in itself is wholly irresponsible. It is scaremongering.

I am surprised that Labour wants to draw attention to pensions policy, because the Government's activities over the last dozen years put Labour to shame. Let us look at pensions more widely, because pensioners get income from multiple sources. We have the state pension, but there are also private and company pensions, individual personal savings and other state benefits in addition to the pension.

I will focus first on auto-enrolment. Under Labour, members of the public increasingly just could not afford to save for their retirement—either that, or Gordon Brown’s famous tax raid on pension pots simply made it not worthwhile to save for a pension. If we look at the data, during the 2000s private sector pension membership declined. In the year 2000, 47% of people had private pensions, but by 2012 that had fallen to 32%—a decline of 47%. By changing from an opt-in to an opt-out system, auto-enrolment, brought in by the Conservative-led Government, transformed pension saving in this country. In my view, it was perhaps the single most important intervention of Government policy over the past decade.

The figures speak for themselves: now, 75% of employees are regularly saving and benefiting from tax-free employer contributions. I used to be an employer before coming to this place, and I employed hundreds of very young people—typically 18 to 25-year-olds. We had a company pension scheme and, as a responsible employer, I tried to persuade them to start pensions, but the take-up was very low. The impact of the change to auto-enrolment was amazing, and that has been backed up by our company contributions. It is a wholly beneficial thing and it has reversed the roles.

The other point worth making is that this is Conservative values in action. Not for us the state’s putting its arms around people and being wholly responsible for individuals’ futures; we want to see people’s being helped to take responsibility for their own futures, with the state there to help the most vulnerable, and that is exactly what the Government have done in this case.

It has also been mentioned multiple times that the state pension was not a Labour idea; it was instigated by the Conservative-led Government. The right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) is no longer in his place, but I sometimes wonder what conversations in the Treasury were like in 1999, when he was part of Gordon Brown’s inner circle. Presumably, the debate was, “Do we raise the pension by 75p or 50p, or shall we push the boat out and increase it by £1?” It is rich for the Labour party to start lecturing the Conservative Government, whose policy the triple lock actually is, given its own lamentable record on pensions. Labour has nothing to teach us here.

Anthony Browne: My hon. Friend has made some interesting points, and I think this debate has been useful to remind the Chamber that the triple lock is our policy. Given the point he has just made, and continuing the Christmas theme, does he agree that Labour attacking our track record on the state pension is a bit like Scrooge attacking Father Christmas for not being generous enough?

Jerome Mayhew: I will let that intervention speak for itself, but I entirely agree with the sentiment behind it.

Since 2010, because of the Conservative triple lock, pensions have increased by £2,300 in cash terms and by £720 in real terms. There will come a point when the triple lock will need to be reviewed; because of its statistical ratchet effect, there will come a time when we should properly remove the triple lock to maintain balance between the various cohorts of society. To date, however, it has been a powerful tool to raise pension values above those Labour lows in the 2000s that we have heard about.

In addition to the triple lock, Labour also ignored the problem of people’s—overwhelmingly women—child-rearing years not counting towards the state pension. I am delighted that, again, it was the Conservative Government who stood up for women and for the family and the importance of child-rearing, so that now raising a family counts towards the new state pension. More than 3 million will now be £550 better off as a result.

I have a minute and a half left, but I will not use it all, because others have set out the long list of additional benefits devised by the Government to assist with the cost of living crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We Conservatives recognise that pensioners are particularly vulnerable because they are on a fixed income, but there has been an additional £300 for winter fuel payments, the £400 discount on energy bills, £150 for affected council tax payments, and £650 additional means-tested support, as well as the additional payment for those with disabilities—and the list goes on.

On the triple lock, we will have to wait and see for nine more days, but even without it pensioners have been looked after by this Government. As the Prime Minister has repeatedly said, and as his record shows, all decisions taken by this Government will be compassionate and will look after the most vulnerable in society.

2.56 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): As I said in my intervention on the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), we all in this House, as the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) said, have supported the triple lock. However, we need only google “*Daily Mail*” and “triple lock” to see that in recent days Government Ministers have been on the news saying things to suggest that it is under threat. On the Government side, it is clear that there is a desire among Back Benchers for the triple lock to stay, but I do not think it is very fair for pensioners to have to wait and do this hokey-cokey to hear what is going to happen.

In February 2021, when this House considered the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2021, the then Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), spoke in favour of that year’s triple lock increase as

“upholding our commitment to the country’s pensioners”.—[*Official Report*, 9 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 186.]

We know that by September of last year the Government had turned their back on that lock, implementing a double lock only. The hon. Member for Easington reminded us that that uprating of 3.1% means that when we discuss maintaining the triple lock now, it is not about keeping pensioners up to speed with the cost of living; they are already behind the cost of living as a result of that earlier U-turn.

We were told that the downgrading was just for one year. I said then that I was wary of trusting that the Government would keep that promise, and it increasingly seems that pensioners feel that way too. Many have said that this feels like a broken promise, and we are seeing different Ministers here giving different views. I know we are supposed to now wait nine days, but I do not accept that this is not a debate we should be having.

As the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) said, Opposition days are given to the official Opposition and the third party so that they can hold the Government

[Wendy Chamberlain]

to account. We are Opposition MPs; that is our job. When we are hearing from constituents about their anxieties regarding the triple lock and the energy price guarantee, it is right and proper that Opposition time be used to debate such issues. I must also say that I have also been present in this Chamber when the Government have tabled motions designed to trap the Opposition. This debate is part of what we do; it is part of how we oppose and how we get answers from the Government.

Away from politics, I want to pick up one message from a constituent who says:

“My wife is 80 and disabled and I am 81 and act as her full-time carer. We receive our bills for both gas and electricity on a monthly basis and the last 2 months have seen them triple-fold...keep in mind that these were summer-time readings. God only knows how we are to fare as things continue in this manner. Once again I plead with you to help in whatever way you can to save the Triple Lock.”

The Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association, in its paper “Five Steps to Better Pensions: Time for a New Consensus”, highlights that pension inadequacy is an increasing issue. The state pension makes up the majority of most people’s retirement income, and given how sluggish wage growth has been in the last 15 years, it is now harder for people to make adequate pension savings. It is important that we keep the state pension to protect current and future pensioners from poverty. As the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) said, it is a social contract, and that is true for private pensions, too. We all know that there is not a pot—as a Scottish MP representing a UK party, I know there is not a pot—but we do put into pensions and national insurance on the understanding that when it comes our time to draw down, we can do so. We need to ensure that we do not break that social commitment and that social contract.

I conclude by saying that I believe firmly that the triple lock is about intergenerational fairness. If we devalue our state pension, we are also letting down young people and people of working age. Some of those of almost pension age will have seen the value of their pensions fall as a result of the recent economic turmoil, and for those people a state pension will never be more vital. For young people and people of working age, keeping the state pension viable now for those not retiring for decades to come is the right thing to do. Younger people face so many difficulties—on the housing ladder, and with increasing rents, the lowest levels of social mobility and insecure employment—so we need to ensure that we keep a pension for them to look forward to in the future.

I finish by turning to the words of Muriel, another of my constituents who has written to me. She asked:

“How are we to survive without being able to depend on our Government to do the right thing by us?”

Those are words for us all to keep considering.

3.1 pm

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). It is also a pleasure to see the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), in her place, and I congratulate her. I also thank the right hon. Member for Leicester South

(Jonathan Ashworth) for his tub-thumping support for a Conservative policy. There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents.

There is never a bad opportunity to talk about this Government’s inestimable record when it comes to helping pensioners. Instinctively, everyone on the Government Benches wants to ensure that those in receipt of state pension get the best possible deal from the Treasury. Many of us will already have made representations to the Chancellor in one way or another, and I am pretty sure he will be making pensions a priority come the 17th.

At a time when every one of us, especially those on low and fixed incomes, is feeling the pinch as a result of the perfect storm caused by Putin’s illegal war in Ukraine and the economic shock of covid, it is right that we continue to support the most vulnerable with the limited resources we have available to us. That is why I am proud that this Government have introduced the triple lock, when no such innovation was ever introduced by a Labour Treasury. A lot of us have already mentioned Gordon Brown’s generous increase of 75p a week back in 2000. That was at a time when Labour was borrowing like it was going out of fashion and spending like a drunken sailor in a brothel. It caused so much offence that one pensioner wrote Gordon Brown a cheque to return the 75p. Gordon Brown cashed the cheque.

It was this Government who responded to the current economic challenge with the energy price guarantee to keep bills as low as practically possible. This Government provided up to £850 of additional support to most pensioners in the face of rising energy costs. This Government increased the warm home discount to £150 and extended eligibility by a third to 3 million of the most vulnerable households. Since 2010, the state pension has increased by £2,300. That is £720 more than if it had just been uprated by simple inflation alone. We have brought in automatic enrolment for workplace pensions, so that more people have extra support in their old age.

This Government take pensioners seriously. We do not treat them as tools in a now all too predictable cycle of gamesmanship that we get with every Opposition day debate. I can practically see the paid content on social media already, with a black and white photo of each of us and a misleading statement underneath, and I can see the emails coming in tomorrow morning from frightened pensioners who want to know why we have done this terrible thing we have been accused of, and that they reckon we are going to do. It is absolutely shameless, but all too predictable.

The Opposition know there is a statement coming in a few days’ time, on the 17th—as my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) had to get his birthday in, it is actually five days after mine—but that means nothing to the Opposition, as there are games to be played and points to be scored. The truth is that poverty figures show that there are 400,000 fewer pensioners in absolute low income after housing costs than in 2009-10. There are 1.2 million fewer people in absolute low income before housing costs than in 2009-10—that is 200,000 fewer children, 500,000 fewer working-age adults and 400,000 fewer pensioners. That is in part because of what we have done as a Government to increase participation in private pensions. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) mentioned,

under the last Labour Government, the actual participation rate went from 47% down to 32%. Under this Government, thanks to auto-enrolment, that is now around 75%.

When the economic truths are complex and difficult, we deserve better than the glib sixth-form politics of the Opposition. The Chancellor is absolutely right to take the time to finalise his spending decisions as part of the autumn statement, so that we can take a compassionate Conservative approach to target our cost of living support to the most vulnerable.

The truth of the matter is that we know why we have not heard anything from the Opposition: they do not have a plan. The Prime Minister made the point at Prime Minister's questions last week that you cannot oppose a plan if you do not have a plan. We have not heard a bat squeak from the Opposition about their policies for the next election. We know that the Leader of the Opposition has already binned all the pledges he was elected on, so we have no idea what the party stands for. I will wait for the Chancellor's statement on the 17th, and in the meantime, I will be talking to and working with colleagues to ensure we put the case for the people we have the privilege of representing, because that is what they deserve: MPs who put them first, not politics.

3.5 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): As I was leaving my office to come across to the Chamber, I received an email from a couple in their late 70s that said:

"We need you to protect the triple lock for our wellbeing."

This debate and this decision about the triple lock matter to pensioners in Barnsley. By threatening to break the triple lock, this Government are instead turning their back on older people, just when times are harder than ever. Indeed, alongside working families, pensioners are already struggling with the spiralling cost of living. One constituent in her sixties told me that she sat shivering as she wrote to me about not being able to afford heating. Another, aged 98, got in touch having received an energy bill of £3,700 for the next 12 months. In the context of this storm of energy bills, inflation and food prices, the Resolution Foundation has said that any cuts to pensions would be disastrous. After their reckless mini-Budget and the economic crash that followed, this Conservative Government are forcing older people to pay the price for their own economic incompetence, despite promising to protect them.

Indeed, the 2019 Conservative manifesto vowed to keep the triple lock in place, saying that under a Conservative Government, pensioners could be confident that they would receive support, security and the "dignity they deserve". We have seen time and again that instead of keeping to their commitments, this Government prefer to U-turn, backtrack and break their promises. Certainly for many people in Barnsley East, it will not be the first time that the Government have gone back on their word regarding pensions.

During the last general election, the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) made a categorical promise to retired mine workers that their money would be returned. To date, the Government have taken £4.4 billion from the mineworkers pension scheme. A cross-party Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee report concluded

that the Government should not be in the business of profiting from miners' pensions and should end the 50:50 sharing arrangement. A Labour Government would do just that.

This Government should stop taking money from miners' pensions, and they must recommit to the triple lock to keep vulnerable pensioners above the poverty line. As we live through the worst cost of living crisis in modern times, the Government must stop making older people and working families pay the price for their reckless economic decisions.

3.7 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What a treat to be the tail-end Charlie on the Government Benches, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and the very thoughtful speech from the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), which shows that on the substance of the policy we all hope to hear announced on 17 November, there are few differences among the Members of different parties in this House. It is worthwhile, particularly with my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) in her place—I warmly welcome her as the new Pensions Minister, and earlier she was sat beside the former long-serving Pensions Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman)—just to run through how and why we are where we are.

The truth is that the story starts in December 2010, five months after the coalition Government were elected to take over from the previous Labour Government of some 13 years. The then Pensions Minister, the former right hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate, Sir Steve Webb, introduced it by pointing out that the first thing he was doing was reintroducing the link between the state pension and earnings—something that Labour had unfortunately failed to do during its 13 years in government. It was wrong to do so, and he was right to reintroduce it, but he went further, with the full support of the coalition parties, and linked pensions to a new triple lock of earnings growth, inflation or a minimum of 2.5%. That promise was part of ensuring that we would never again see a weekly rise in pensions of just 75p, which has been much alluded to today. No one should ever underestimate the impact that that had on pensioners around the country.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): Can the hon. Member confirm that the triple lock was introduced as the result of a commission that was appointed by Gordon Brown, and Gordon Brown was the one who set up the reasoning behind and the institution of the triple lock, but it was the Government after him who actually introduced it?

Richard Graham: No; I am sorry, but that is a historical rewriting of facts that does not wash. Gordon Brown was Chancellor and then Prime Minister for all those 13 years. He had many, many opportunities to reintroduce the link to earnings and spectacularly failed to do so. With apologies to the hon. Member, I do not accept that. It is true that a lot of consultation went on at that time, but the fact is that the coalition Government reintroduced the link five months after coming into government. That is important, because the link is responsible for today's state pension being worth over

[Richard Graham]

£720 a year more than inflation, which was the link under Labour. The whole point of the triple lock was that Labour's policy was inadequate and had to be corrected by the new coalition Government.

Indeed, on 17 February 2011, at the first social security benefit uprating after the triple lock was introduced—the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) will be interested in this—what did Labour Members do? They abstained—all of them except for 11, who voted against the uprating. Those who voted against included the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who was shadow Chancellor at the time of the last Labour manifesto. Not one Labour Member, including the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), voted in favour of the uprating that came from the triple lock. They were wrong not to do so.

There was, of course, more to it, because the basic state pension has risen considerably, and as Sir Steve Webb put it then, the strengthening of pension credit enabled the Government to

“focus resources on the poorest pensioners.”—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2010; Vol. 520, c. 310.]

As he pointed out at that time, when both you and I were here, Madam Deputy Speaker, this is ultimately about

“a more appropriate, consistent and stable basis that is fair to individuals and the taxpayer.”—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2010; Vol. 520, c. 311.]

We come to the issue today. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor have both highlighted that in their decisions to be announced on 17 November, they will act fairly and compassionately. I have no doubt that they will, and for the avoidance of doubt, that does imply, to me, maintaining the triple lock—no Minister can possibly anticipate what might be announced in the future, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State rightly explained.

Over the last 12 years, the record of this Government is that they have introduced the triple lock and the important new policy of auto-enrolment for almost 20 million people, whereas Labour's legacy is the 75p a week increase. That was not done while the right hon. Member for Leicester South was an adviser to Gordon Brown, but he has two more issues to face when the announcements of 17 November are made. In the Labour party's 2019 manifesto, it committed to £58 billion for the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign group. I have warned that group time and again that it will be led up the path and nothing will be delivered. The shadow Secretary of State needs to answer on that, and he also needs to answer on what Labour's policy will be on universal credit, which it pledged to abolish in its 2019 manifesto. For today, I agree: let us keep the triple lock.

3.14 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I commend my colleagues on the shadow Front Bench for bringing this debate to the House. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), though I fundamentally disagree with most of what he said, but there we are; that is what Opposition day debates are all about.

Like many people in Newport West, including those who have written to me about this issue in recent months, I believe that everyone deserves financial security in their retirement. It is a long-standing feature of our contract with the people that the cornerstone of that security is a decent state pension, and it must be a properly indexed pension, because that is how we ensure it keeps its value for future generations of pensioners in Newport West and across the United Kingdom.

I note that Government Members were elected on a manifesto commitment in 2019 to keep the triple lock, so today should be easy for them and for all of us. The Opposition support a triple lock on pensions, and the Conservative party suggested that it did in 2019, so today should see a unanimous vote in support of the motion. Ministers and Conservative MPs need to be held to account on their promise, and today provides an opportunity to do just that.

I was elected in April 2019, and in my first few months in this place, it was clear that Conservative Members supported Labour's intention to continue the triple lock across future years of this Parliament. I am determined to keep making the case to Ministers on behalf of those Newport West residents who have been in touch in recent weeks and months. One such constituent, Christine Kemp-Philp, wrote to me and told me this:

“As a full time family carer since 1991, having given up a good career to care, and with my caring responsibilities becoming more and more difficult, I am myself disabled and a pensioner, and am finding less and less help available. With the cost of living going up and the threat of our pensions going down in real terms, I am worried for our future.”

It is important to acknowledge that the UK state pension is relatively low by international standards, and there are important differences between those who qualify for it. For example, I went back and read some excellent research from Age UK in 2020, which highlighted that 34% of private tenants and 29% of social rented sector tenants lived in poverty compared with 12% of older people who own their home outright. In addition, 33% of Asian or Asian British and 30% of black or black British pensioners were living in poverty compared with 15% of white pensioners. This is a problem for real people, who are losing real money and having to pick up the consequences.

I am also grateful to my constituent Dennis Bellew, who shared his story with me. He wrote:

“I am 77 years old...It is important to me that the government keep their promise of protecting the pension triple lock. Times are difficult for me at present and I shudder to think what it would be like if this promise was not kept. With old age comes the worsening of my asthma, arthritis, diabetes and lack of mobility, in these ailments I am no different from the thousands of pensioners in the U.K. How would I be able to keep my head above water with the ever increasing energy and food bills. Life is tough for us pensioners at present, please do not make it worse by allowing the government not to keep its promise.”

That is why I am speaking in this debate.

The Government need to consider what the current crisis means for the 1950s WASPI women affected by the change to the state pension age. I urge Ministers, as I did in Work and Pensions questions last week, to find an opportunity to bring forward more support for those women in Newport West and across the country, and to set out what immediate action could be taken and when. The treatment they have received has been disgraceful, and I have repeatedly spoken out and called for action.

I look forward to meeting the new Minister, the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), and eagerly await her response to my letter confirming the meeting she agreed to. As Labour calls for a pensions system that is sustainable, sufficient and able to meet the challenges of an ageing population, I urge all colleagues to support the motion today and to give our pensioners the dignity in retirement they so richly deserve.

3.18 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) and the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham); they are both my friends. I was glad to hear the hon. Member for Gloucester refer to Steve Webb, who I thought was a fine Pensions Minister and deserves credit for his work in bringing in the triple lock in the first place. My party has always pressed—as well as we can from this small part of the Bench—for pensions to be linked more to earnings, which, on the whole, would ensure that pensioners were not continually in poverty, and the triple lock does that to an extent.

Around one in five people in Wales lives in relative poverty. Pensioners are among the groups hardest hit by the jump in energy and food prices, and there are severe long-term consequences to being unable to afford food and heating. Public policy, social policy and health policy in Wales are very much geared towards the concept of wellbeing rather than the separate headings of health, benefits or whatever. That is the thrust of policy in Wales, but the severe consequences of being unable to afford food and heating very much militate against it. The income squeeze is also preventing some people from engaging in social activities, which are crucial for wellbeing. The cost of those activities might be small, but they are often the first things to go when people have to economise.

As has been said, the UK spends below the OECD average on state pensions, which compare poorly relative to average earnings. The UK also compares poorly on the net replacement rate, which I do not think has been mentioned. That measures pensions as a percentage of previous earnings, and the difference is quite significant: for mandatory pensions at least, the UK stands at 58.1%, the OECD is at 69.1% and the EU is at 70.8%.

As a number of Members on both sides of the House have said, the triple lock ratchet has been very effective, and abandoning it will trap some older people in persistent poverty. That would make the case for a fundamental review of the state pension even more pressing than it is now, and such a review must be aimed at eradicating pensioner poverty.

Meanwhile, auto-enrolment to pension credit should be introduced, and mechanisms for doing that—using the Post Office or perhaps banks—have already been suggested. That would be a way of providing direct financial support and a gateway to further benefits and support. In Wales, it would mean immediate financial relief for more than 70,000 households who are eligible for pension credit but who do not claim it at present.

I want to refer briefly to two pension scandals—“scandals” is the correct term—both of which need immediate action. I will not go into any detail about the plight of WASPI women, as that has been referred to already, but the Government really should set out the steps they will take to compensate 1950s-born women.

The second scandal, which has not been mentioned and which has been pressing for many years, is the plight of former Allied Steel and Wire workers, who lost their livelihoods and their pensions when the firm went bankrupt in 2002 in very distressing and suspect circumstances, which I will not go into now. Under the financial assistance scheme and the Pension Protection Fund, any money paid in before April 1987 was not fully inflation-proofed, and many ASW pensioners have been severely impacted, with some receiving only half the value of what they are actually owed. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) asked what that meant in real terms, the response from the DWP was that it would be too costly to find out. Well, the ASW pensioners are actually paying that cost, and the response from the DWP was a disgrace, so I press the Government to look at that case yet again.

3.23 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I was quite alarmed by some of the comments from Conservative Members about why we are discussing this issue—some even described this debate as theoretical, while others said it was irresponsible to discuss this issue. My response to that is that we should ask the millions of pensioners who are affected whether it is worth discussing this issue and whether this debate is irresponsible or worth while.

The pension triple lock is vital to the wellbeing of millions of retired people across the country. I speak on behalf of pensioners in my constituency, and I would like to express the absolute importance of the Tories not breaking their manifesto pledge to protect the triple lock pension guarantee. Just three weeks ago, they were stating that there was a commitment to maintain the pensions triple lock; now, the Prime Minister refuses to guarantee that it will remain in place. That is understandably causing uncertainty and distress to millions of pensioners.

By now, we and the public are used to the Tories continuously going back on their word. That is why they cannot be trusted to run this country or to look after the interests of pensioners. The cost of living is already rising rapidly because of the economic mess that they have got us into. That crisis has been engineered in and delivered from Downing Street.

Pensioners rely on the state pension to help them make ends meet, no matter how difficult that is. The fact that the Government are even considering putting that minuscule security blanket in danger is ridiculous and incredibly scary for pensioners who need the triple lock in order to live a simple life. Many pensioners are not eating properly or putting the heating on in order to make ends meet.

I know only too well the concerns that many pensioners have. I recently received a letter from a constituent who has retired. He said:

“I am afraid in these dire times. My outgoings are exceeding my incomings. It is getting worse daily and utility bills are rising again. The future looks very bleak. No one mentions the pensioners. It seems we are being brushed under the carpet”—

that has certainly been the case with the way some Conservative Members have responded to this Opposition day motion. The hopelessness and fear that that person expressed to me is shared millions of times over.

The pandemic and the cost of living crisis have hit our most vulnerable the hardest. We cannot allow more pensioners to be pushed into poverty because of the

[Tahir Ali]

outrageous decisions of this incapable Government—a Government whose decisions are, in reality, costing lives. Pensioners are frightened and living a reduced quality of life. They are distraught and living in severe uncertainty because this Government cannot keep their priorities in check.

The Prime Minister claims that the Conservative party is a compassionate party, but his actions speak louder than his words. The Tory manifesto clearly promised that the triple lock would be protected. Now, the Prime Minister is considering not only breaking another promise but breaking all the pensioners across the UK.

3.27 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Many residents in Wirral West have written to me and spoken to me about their extreme anxiety about the cost of living crisis and what they see as the Government's lack of commitment to maintaining the state pension triple lock for the next financial year. They are desperate for certainty and they need help.

I note the Secretary of State's remarks about the forthcoming fiscal event, but surely he or the Minister can give some comfort to retired people who are anxious about this issue. They need that reassurance because there has been so much turmoil in the Conservative party—turmoil that has been accompanied by numerous policy U-turns. It is vital that the Government retain the triple lock, as it was a Conservative party manifesto commitment and must be honoured.

As we know, last year the Conservatives broke that commitment. At the time, the Government said that they “can and will apply the triple lock as usual from next year for the remainder of this Parliament, in line with our manifesto commitment.” —[*Official Report*, 7 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 185.]

It is therefore vital that they keep their word. People are struggling with the cost of living crisis, which has been made far worse by the chaos that the Conservative Government of just a few weeks ago brought to the financial markets with their mini-Budget. Through sheer recklessness, their policy choices sent mortgage rates soaring, brought the pensions industry to the brink of collapse and crashed the economy.

Despite the comments that we have heard from the Government today, pensioner poverty is an extremely serious and live issue. This year's “State of Ageing” report by the Centre for Ageing Better found that almost one in five people over the age of 65 were living in poverty in the 2019-20 period. That is 2 million people. Age UK has said that malnutrition is a growing risk for older people, and that if the UK Government fail to raise the state pension and benefits in line with inflation, they will plunge many people into a genuinely desperate situation. Pensioners are struggling with soaring food prices and increased energy costs.

I would like to share with the House some of my constituents' experiences and fears, because they have asked me to represent their concerns. One woman who is in her early 80s has written to me to say that she suffers from a number of health issues, including rheumatoid arthritis. It is vital for her to keep warm, and even though she is cutting back on using the heating, her energy bills keep rising alarmingly. She says:

“It's hard to imagine where it will all end.”

Another constituent told me that she and her husband are currently struggling with a huge increase in the cost of living and out-of-control heating bills. They sit at night with blankets wrapped around themselves, as they cannot afford to put on the central heating. Their fuel bills have increased to more than £270 a month, and they are worried that they will go up again next April. Another constituent whose partner has a number of long-term health conditions has said that she is

“petrified to put the heating on and the hot water is only put on once a day for a short period.”

She is really concerned that her partner's health will get worse because they cannot heat their home. One woman in her mid-70s told me that she worries every day about heating and food. She asked for the triple lock to be protected simply so that she and other pensioners can afford to live.

It is clear that the triple lock on the state pension must be maintained for my constituents and for people across the country. It is about dignity and security for older people and about protecting them from poverty. I also ask the Minister to set out what action her Government will take to encourage greater take-up of pension credit. The Government must do the right thing and come forward today with a commitment to protect the triple lock.

3.31 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): We all know that this is an alarming time for our constituents, as we face a winter of soaring energy, food and necessities costs, but it is even more so for pensioners on a fixed income. In the past few weeks, we have heard Tory Ministers giving their out-of-touch solutions for the cost of living crisis: “Get a new job,” or, “Work more hours”. That is patronising and unhelpful advice for desperate people of working age, but it is even less helpful for the elderly.

The number of pensioners in poverty has risen by almost half a million in the last decade, and now the Conservatives will not even commit to maintaining the pensions triple lock. They have already broken and back-tracked on so many of their 2019 promises that they have no mandate for what they are doing, but I warn them that if they abandon this commitment as well, the pressure for a general election will be unstoppable. With rising prices, hits to private pensions and the crisis in the NHS and social care, pensioners face a triple whammy if the triple lock is lost.

In recent weeks, I have been alarmed listening to the experiences of my elderly constituents, who, during my regular doorstep surgeries around Warrington North, have reported to me that not only are they not turning the heating on, as they are frightened of the cost, but that their estates have been going dark early in the evenings, as even keeping the lights on is becoming too expensive for too many. That is not just in the central six wards of Warrington, which have historically faced higher levels of deprivation, but even in our ostensibly more affluent areas, such as Rixton-with-Glazebrook, Culcheth, Woolston and Croft, where incomes and rates of home ownership are higher, and which we would not typically associate with fuel or food poverty. That pain and anxiety is being felt right across the board by our elderly residents in Warrington.

I want to draw the House's attention in particular to the mineworkers' pension scheme and the report published last year by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

Committee, on which I serve. We noted that the 1994 scheme's sharing agreement allows the Government to keep 50% of any surplus from miners' pensions. Since then, the Government have received over £4.4 billion from the scheme without contributing a penny, while former miners receive an average pension of only £84 a week, leaving them dependent on the maintenance of the state pension. This is intolerable. We made a clear cross-party recommendation that the scheme should be reviewed and the £1.2 billion reserve fund be given back to pensioners immediately. No progress has been made in the past year. I urge the Minister to get this done. Retirees in coalfield areas such as mine deserve better, and righting this wrong will be a huge boost at a most needed time.

As one of the younger Members of this House, I can report that many of my generation despair of ever receiving a state pension worth the name. They may think that this is a debate that does not affect them and is just another example of the Government taking from the young and poor to give to the elderly and wealthy, but they are wrong. If we do not fight for pensions to be protected and maintained now, we really will not have a worthwhile income in retirement tomorrow. The real-terms impact of a cut now affects future retirees even further—in cumulative lost interest in every future year—than the impact on pensioners today. I want to see social security for old age for people like me, born in the 1990s, and younger, not see it wither away now. This is even more vital as house prices have prevented many young people from stepping on to the housing ladder, so we will be carrying debts and mortgages to an older age. The way we challenge generational unfairness is by doing more to tax accumulated wealth, particularly wealth that is hoarded rather than invested.

The whole country knows that this Conservative Government have crashed the economy. They know that the Government are desperately looking for soft targets to make cuts, but there are not any more after a decade of failed austerity. The Government cannot be allowed to use this as an excuse to desert their triple lock promises as well. Old and young, we will be watching closely to see how Conservative MPs vote today on this basic issue of generational fairness and giving people the reassurance they need at this difficult time.

3.36 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): A number of Conservative Members have asked why we are having this debate today, and given the events over the last few weeks, I agree we should ask why we are having it. It is because only a few weeks ago the Prime Minister said he was "totally committed" to protecting the triple lock for pensioners. Subsequently, we have had Ministers refusing to answer direct questions: "Will you protect the triple lock?"—"Well, it's under review."

As I say, only weeks ago the Prime Minister said he was "totally committed" to the triple lock, so I suspect another reason we are having this debate today is that the beauty contest in the summer, with very bold statements, has left a number of areas now under review, and that does not give us any confidence at all. The Government took a huge gamble in September and made a complete mess of it, and that is why we are here today. Unfortunately, there is a chance that pensioners and less well-off people will pay the heavy price for the mistakes that were made.

In April, the state pension rose by 3.1%; it should have been by 8.3%. A number of Conservative Members have spoken about the party that protects the triple lock, but it was broken last year and it is in real danger of being broken this year. Last year, that left pensioners £487 worse off. This year, if the same applies, that will be another £480. We have heard Conservative Members talk about covid, and I accept that the Government stepped up and delivered support for many across this country. We have heard about the war in Ukraine, which is a terrible situation. Putin's war is absolutely terrible. However, these facts were of course known before the Prime Minister gave that total commitment to the triple lock, so what happened in that period of time?

In Blackburn, 13,694 pensioners will be left £900 worse off, right in the middle of a cost of living crisis. We know that pensioners are particularly vulnerable in the energy crisis. What is the sense of giving support for pensioners to brave the energy crisis—only partial support, because they will still pay £1,000 more than they would have done—and then to take it back with the other hand?

Pensioner poverty has been on the rise since 2013, despite the broad statements from Conservative Members. The facts speak for themselves, and this information can be checked. More than half a million pensioners across this country are living in poverty, and we should hang our heads in shame at that, given the wealth this country actually has. The triple lock has been so important in holding back those numbers, and not only do we not want them to increase, we want them to be drastically reduced. These people have worked all their lives and deserve better. They have been penalised for mistakes made by members of the Government.

Is the Minister concerned about breaking the triple lock? I would like an answer to that. What assessment has he made, should he break that promise, of the potential for pensioners dying in poverty? How many Conservative Members agree with what the former Chair of the Conservative party said, which is that people should work more hours and go for better jobs? Tell that to pensioners. The Government made this promise for good reason, and Conservative Members stood on that promise to ensure that older people have the security and dignity they deserve. What has changed? Does the Minister still believe that voters deserve security, dignity and peace of mind in their old age? Will he accept that a second year cut or change to the triple lock is not acceptable?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): After the next speaker the wind-ups will begin, so anybody who participated in the debate should make their way to the Chamber now.

3.41 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern). My constituents of Enfield North simply cannot afford, and do not deserve, to pay the price for this Government's mistakes. The Tories have crashed the economy, and now pensioners could be paying the price. As Members across the House have said, people who have worked hard their entire lives rightly expect

[Feryal Clark]

security in retirement, and the only reason that the Government are considering not protecting the triple lock is due to the mess they have pushed our economy into.

The economic crisis created in Downing Street means that, in addition to the triple lock, every pledge made in the summer leadership contest is now under review. In my constituency, abandoning the 2019 Conservative manifesto commitment to the triple lock on state pensions for a second year in a row could leave almost 13,000 pensioners £900 worse off on average. The past 12 years of Tory mismanagement have left more and more of my constituents in poverty. Over the past decade, pensioner poverty has risen by almost half a million people. Since 2015, Enfield has risen from being the 12th to the 9th most deprived London borough, and since 2021, homelessness has risen by 250%. One in three workers in Enfield is paid below the London living wage, and one in five workers is low paid. Now, the Government are considering enforcing an average cut of £408 next year on pensioners in Enfield North, if the triple lock is broken again when pensions are uprated in April.

How can pensioners in Enfield North and around the country ever trust a word the Conservatives say when the Prime Minister just weeks ago committed to the triple lock? When the then Chancellor suspended the triple lock last year, he promised to reinstate it the following year. He now refuses to give certainty to pensioners, leaving them wondering whether they will be betrayed yet again. However, trust is not the issue here—we all know we cannot trust this Government. They tell us that they are doing something one day, and the next day it is gone. Pensioners in Enfield North tell me that they are already struggling with soaring food and petrol costs. Pensioners are already staying on the bus all day just to keep warm, and they are terrified of turning their heating on this winter, due to the costs that will incur.

A 73-year-old constituent wrote to me this week, concerned about how they will manage their Raynaud's disease this winter, after receiving a large bill for their consumption and the rocketing cost of living. Pensioners should not now pay the price for Tory mismanagement of the economy. The Government must commit to keeping the triple lock, and not keep my constituents, and pensioners across the country, waiting. My constituents deserve not just to survive this winter, but to thrive, and that is why I will be backing the motion today.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

3.44 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am pleased to close this important debate for the Opposition. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) said, it is about a simple and very important question: will the Government honour their manifesto pledge to millions of pensioners—13 million, many of whom have no income other than the state pension? As we have heard, the Government failed to raise the state pension in line with the triple lock last year and, to make matters worse, pensioners face in effect a £900 cut to their income if the triple lock is ignored this year.

The state pension matters enormously and, so far, the Government have failed to give pensioners the reassurance that they deserve. As my right hon. Friend said, this should not be a controversial question; it should simply be something that the whole House can agree with, yet that request for simplicity, clarity and reassurance at a difficult time has been met with a lack of understanding. I hope that the Minister in responding will think again, treat pensioners with more respect and reassure them that the Government will stick with the triple lock. The uncertainty of the last few weeks has put pensioners under terrible stress. That should never have happened. The Government should now reassure pensioners. As food and fuel bills soar, the very least that Ministers can do is give the simple answer that they will keep the triple lock in this difficult situation.

The debate has been an important opportunity for Members from across the House to remind Ministers of their duty to pensioners. Powerful arguments have been made for openness and clarity. We have heard that, at a very difficult time, pensioners and others on fixed incomes are under real pressure. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) reminded the House that pensioners face a desperate situation with bills rising and called for clarity. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who is in his place, stressed his support for the triple lock and the importance of the state pension to many of his constituents. He also called on the Government to do much more to encourage pensioners to claim pension credit.

The Chair of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), made some excellent points, including that the Government, sadly, made a series of serious blunders in September. There has already been a big fall in the value of state pensions and the Government gave an assurance that pensions would be uprated. That was a manifesto commitment. He also gave us historical context, going back as far as the 1970s. Pensions have been uprated over a long period. Further, he went on to make the telling point that there is a social contract between people in work, the Government and pensioners.

Other Members made excellent points. The hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) called for the triple lock to be retained. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) made a powerful speech in which she talked about the importance of protecting the most vulnerable and the Government's duty to do that on behalf of society as a whole.

There was a huge number of other contributions, which I cannot refer to in great detail. However, in summary, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) made an excellent speech, the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) spoke, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood) also spoke powerfully. The hon. Members for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne), for Wantage (David Johnston), for Guildford (Angela Richardson), for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson) spoke, as did my hon. Friends the Members for Easington (Grahame Morris), for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and a number of others.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) made a fascinating and important point about the miners' pension fund and the need for the Government not to take money out of it. The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) spoke, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones). The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) made an important point about ASW, the issues with the Pension Protection Fund and those pension funds that got into difficulty before the PPF was set up. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) made some powerful points as well, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), who pointed out the pressure on pensioners from the cost of living crisis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) made some powerful points, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), who talked about pensioner poverty rising, affecting half a million people. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) spoke eloquently about the need for security at this time.

Time is pressing. Today's debate has been full and frank, and I hope Ministers will now respond with the honesty and transparency that pensioners deserve. As my hon. Friends and Members from across the House have said, this is a very important issue. The Government made a manifesto pledge and, last year, Ministers broke that pledge. Pensioners across the country are now facing unprecedented levels of inflation, particularly in food and fuel. Given that, it is vital that Ministers keep the triple lock and that they reassure pensioners of their intentions before the financial statement at the end of this month. Quite simply, pensioners have waited for too long, suffered too much uncertainty and put up with far too much stress for the Government to do anything less.

It is, as hon. Members have mentioned, the first duty of Government to protect the most vulnerable. I hope the Minister will now offer clarity and reassurance for millions of people across the country.

3.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): I thank all hon. Members for their valuable contributions to the debate.

Since 2010, pensioner incomes have gone up, absolute pensioner poverty has gone down and we have corrected the historic inequalities towards women in the state pension. That is a record that we on the Government Benches can be proud of. The decision on how to uprate state pension for this year is taken by the Secretary of State at the same time as the uprating decision on all benefits for those of working age and over state pension age.

Alan Brown: The Minister is repeating what the Secretary of State said earlier about pensioner poverty going down. The reality is that it is down only on old statistics. Pensioner poverty is increasing. Fuel poverty is increasing. So will the Government update the House on what the true figures on poverty are in the UK?

Laura Trott: We absolutely recognise that this is a very difficult time for pensioners. That is why we put a substantial package of support in place, which I will come on to later.

The Secretary of State set out, when opening the debate, that the results of his uprating review will be announced alongside the autumn statement on 17 November. To nobody's surprise, I will not be pre-empting the outcome of that review today. However, reflecting the debate this afternoon, it is important to highlight how pensioners have been supported since 2010.

The yearly amount of the basic state pension has risen by over £2,300 in cash terms, rightly highlighted during the debate by my hon. Friends the Members for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne), for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson). Average weekly pensioner incomes have increased by 12% in real terms and as a result absolute pensioner poverty has fallen by 400,000 since 2010.

We are forecast to spend over £134 billion on benefits for pensioners in 2022-23. That amounts to 5.4% of GDP.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): If everything has been so good since 2010, why did the Government stand on a manifesto commitment in 2019 to protect the triple lock? What was the point of that?

Laura Trott: We have been absolutely clear about our record since 2010. I have been clear that I cannot pre-empt the decisions of the Secretary of State. The point is that we on the Government Benches have put plans in place to help pensioners this winter. We are not waiting until next April.

Mr Mohindra: I welcome the Minister to her place. Can the Minister confirm to the House again that, if we wait nine days, we will be given all the information this House seeks on the financial statement, which is due next week?

Laura Trott: My hon. Friend, on this as with so many other things, is absolutely right. I will make some progress now on my speech.

At the heart of the 2016 reforms we made to the state pension was a correction of some of the historic unfairness in the previous system, particularly for women, the self-employed and lower-paid workers.

Paula Barker: Will the Minister give way?

Laura Trott: I am just going to make some progress, I am sorry.

That means women no longer need to rely on the pension contributions of their husbands, and it is more generous to those who spend time looking after their children, as my hon. Friends the Members for Guildford (Angela Richardson) and for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) pointed out. As a result, more than 3 million women stand to receive an average of £550 more a year by 2030.

Paula Barker: Will the Minister give way?

Laura Trott: I am sorry, but as I said, I will make some progress.

Under the state pension, outcomes are projected to equalise for men and women by the early 2040s, more than a decade earlier than they would have done under the old system.

[*Laura Trott*]

The other important pillar of the 2016 state pension reforms was automatic enrolment. That was raised by my hon. Friends the Members for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), for Broadland and for Heywood and Middleton. Automatic enrolment into workplace pensions has had a transformative effect on pension-saving participation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland pointed out, private savings for pensions went down under Labour.

Over 10.7 million people have been automatically enrolled into a pension by more than 2 million employers in every sector of the economy, seeing an additional £33 billion saved into workplace pensions each year compared with 2012. Automatic enrolment has helped many previously under-represented groups to begin pension savings, such as low earners, young people and women.

Margaret Greenwood: The Minister is being generous in giving way. It is good to see her being so keen on auto-enrolment. Will she be clear with the House that that policy was designed by the Labour party?

Laura Trott: But it was not implemented under the Labour Government.

In 2012, 40% of eligible women working in the private sector participated in a workplace pension. As of 2021, that had increased to 87%—higher than for eligible men.

Paula Barker: Will the Minister give way?

Laura Trott: I will make a bit of progress; I have been quite generous on interventions.

We know that the coming months will be tough for everyone, but especially for pensioners. I thank all hon. Members who have raised cases on behalf of their constituents. The Government fully understand the difficulties that pensioners will face this winter and will stand by those in the most need. That is why the Government have made substantial support available for pensioners struggling with the cost of living this winter. As my hon. Friends the Members for Wantage (David Johnston) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham) pointed out, we have not heard much from the Labour Front-Bench team today about what their plan would be for this winter.

We have a plan that includes the £650 cost of living payment for those on pension credit to help with the rising cost of living. There is a £400 reduction on energy bills for all domestic electricity customers over the coming months and the £150 council tax rebate received by 85% of all UK households. Those on state pension will also receive an increased £500 winter fuel payment if they are under 80 or a £600 winter fuel payment if they are 80 or over. In total, that will mean that all pensioners receiving the state pension could receive up to £850 of additional support in the coming months and that pensioners on the lowest income who are claiming means-tested benefits will receive up to £1,500.

Alan Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Laura Trott: I will make a bit of progress and then come back to the hon. Gentleman.

Pension credit was raised by a number of Members, including the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton), my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley and the hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood). My predecessor—the Minister for Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman)—put in a huge amount of work to increase awareness of pension credit. We have seen a significant increase in the number of claims, peaking at a 275% increase year on year during pension credit awareness week in June. We know, however, that only seven out of 10 people who are eligible to claim it do so. That means that £3,300 of additional support is not being claimed by around 850,000 households. Clearly, it would make a significant difference if even some of that money—totalling £1.7 billion—made its way into the pockets of the poorest pensioners.

The benefit of pension credit is that, as many Members have mentioned, it passports to an array of additional support, even when a person's entitlement is very small. A pension credit recipient will receive a TV licence if they are over the age of 75 and get access to housing benefit and council tax support. The second half of the Government's cost of living support—worth £324—will also be paid to all pension credit recipients. However, time is running out for those who have not yet claimed pension credit. The crucial date is 18 December. If someone claims pension credit by then and is eligible for the maximum three-month backdating, they will receive £324 of support to which they are entitled. It is therefore essential that all of us here urge our constituents to visit the pension credit page of gov.uk or to call the number listed to check eligibility of claim.

On automatic enrolment, the right hon. Member for East Ham and my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay raised an interesting idea. From the information that I have, the Government do not have the data to be able to do it, but I will definitely explore further the point about local government and what more we can do with data.

Alan Brown: The Minister spoke about the extra support for pensioners—I think she said it was £850. Does she realise that that does not even cover the increase in the average energy bill, which has gone up from £1,100 to £2,500? More importantly, what does she think energy bills will be when the Government's support ends come April?

Laura Trott: That does not include the energy price guarantee.

As the Secretary of State set out to the House and as I said at the start of my speech, we cannot pre-empt the fiscal statement, but it is the Conservatives who have increased the state pension, it was the Conservatives who introduced automatic enrolment and it is the Conservatives who have reduced absolute pensioner poverty. This Government have always protected and will always protect the most vulnerable: that has been our track record since 2010, and that is what we will continue to do.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 218, Noes 0.

Division No. 87]

[4.1 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Fleur
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flynn, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stuart C.

McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paisley, Ian
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Sarah
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

Tonia Antoniazzi and
 Gerald Jones

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:

Lilian Greenwood and

Mark Tami

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to commit to maintaining the State Pension triple lock in financial year 2023-24 as promised in the Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019.

Jonathan Ashworth: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Given that the House has just endorsed our motion opposing a further real-terms cut in the value of the state pension, and given that every Conservative Member who spoke endorsed the sentiment of our motion opposing a further real-terms cut to the state pension, could you advise me on how, should the Chancellor of the Exchequer ignore the will of the House next week, we could bring back this motion so that those Conservative Members who spoke out do not need to sit on their hands and could vote with us for their own manifesto commitment?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order—he is such a gentleman. The House has clearly expressed its opinion today but, as he has rightly pointed out, there will be a financial statement on 17 November. We will wait to see what that financial statement says. I am absolutely certain that, should the Chancellor not do what the House has expressed, the right hon. Gentleman will be back at the Dispatch Box forthwith.

Papers Relating to the Home Secretary

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Some Members may have noted that the motion on the Order Paper is for an order, rather than for a Humble Address. As “Erskine May” says, the formula used simply depends on whether the motion is directed at a Department headed by a Secretary of State. A Humble Address may also be appropriate for matters closely connected to the prerogatives of the Crown, but in practical terms there is no difference between an order and a Humble Address.

4.16 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That, given the exceptional security concerns raised regarding the Rt Hon Member for Fareham serving as Secretary of State for the Home Department, this House:

(1) orders that there be laid before this House, within ten sitting days, a return of the following papers:

- (a) any risk assessment of the Rt Hon Member for Fareham by the Cabinet Office or the Prime Minister's Office relating to her appointment
- (b) any document held by the Cabinet Office, the Home Office or the Prime Minister's Office containing or related to
 - (i) any security breaches by the Rt Hon Member for Fareham
 - (ii) any leak inquiries regarding the Rt Hon Member for Fareham, including during her time as Home Secretary and Attorney General
- (c) the minutes of, submissions relevant to and electronic communications relating to, any meeting within the Cabinet Office or the Prime Minister's Office at which the appointment of the Rt Hon Member for Fareham, or advice relating to that appointment, was discussed in a form which may contain redactions, but such redactions shall be solely for the purposes of national security; and

(2) recommends that where material is laid before the House in a redacted form, the Government should at the same time provide unredacted copies of such material to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament.

It is 15 days since the Prime Minister appointed his new Cabinet, and 14 days since it was reported that he had been advised not to reappoint certain Ministers, including the Home Secretary and, it was rumoured, the Minister without Portfolio, the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson), to their posts on the grounds of standards and of security. Fourteen days in which it has been reported that the Home Secretary breached Home Office security arrangements not just once but seven times; that she may have also broken insider trading rules; that as Attorney General she was investigated several times by leak inquiries; that she ignored legal advice on Manston, contrary to her statement to Parliament; and that she failed to take the action needed to solve the dangerous overcrowding at Manston, leaving her successor and predecessor to pick up the pieces, and that she may well have run up a huge legal liability for the taxpayer as a result, breaching the ministerial code again in the process.

It has also been reported that the Minister with Portfolio sent abusive texts to the then Government Chief Whip, that the Prime Minister was told about this and knew the former Chief Whip had put in a formal complaint, and that there are other complaints against

the Minister without Portfolio including, most seriously, words used towards a civil servant about slitting his throat or jumping out of windows—words that it is reported the Minister with Portfolio has not denied using.

This is in the space of two weeks. Many people have been appalled by these appointments, and serious doubts have been raised by many Conservative Members who believe standards need to be maintained. The Prime Minister promised us that this would be a break from his predecessors, from the favours-for-mates culture of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and from the chaos of the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss). Instead, the opposite has happened.

People have been appointed to senior jobs in the Cabinet, running the country, not because they can do the job or because they will maintain the high standards and security that the Government need but because of dodgy political deals. Here is what we know: the Home Secretary breached the ministerial code, sent Government documents not only to her private email but to other people outside Government who were not authorised to receive them, including a Back-Bench Member, his spouse, and someone else entirely by accident. She was forced to resign and then, six days later, she was reappointed.

That, in itself, is extremely hard for people outside the Conservative party to understand. For a police officer who breached their code of ethics or who was responsible for security lapses to the point of being forced to resign, or for a civil servant, public appointee or company employee who was found to have broken their employment code or security rules to the point of being required to resign, the idea that they could be reappointed to that same job just six days later is unthinkable—the idea that somehow, because they had apologised in the meantime, six days off is just fine.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I have had letters from upset civil servants who have seen colleagues make lesser misdemeanours and lose their jobs, yet seen the Home Secretary, the woman in charge of national security, hold on to hers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this shows that there is one rule for the Home Secretary and one rule for everybody else?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right on that. It is worse, as the Government do believe that standards on ethics and security should be upheld throughout the public sector or across the economy, just not, it would seem, in the Cabinet—not in the post responsible for upholding the law and for maintaining our security. It really is one rule for them and another for everyone else.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I am hearing what the right hon. Lady is saying, but is this motion not an obvious attempt to divert attention away from the fact that the Labour party simply does not have any alternatives or policies in home affairs, or any other area for that matter? This is a simple, naked attempt to play the man not the ball—or in this case, the woman not the ball.

Yvette Cooper: The Labour party has set out a whole series of policies, both on what needs to be done to get neighbourhood police back on the beat—I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman's party has cut 6,000 neighbourhood

police from our streets over the last five years—and with the measures to set out a National Crime Agency unit to take on the criminal gangs who, unfortunately, the Conservative party has allowed to proliferate and set up a multimillion-pound criminal industry in the channel.

There is also a responsibility on the Government to maintain standards, including security standards. It is not just about what happened before the Home Secretary's breach; since she was reappointed, a Home Office review has found that she had, in fact, sent Government documents to her personal IT seven times in six weeks, which is quite a rate. There have also been reports that when she was Attorney General she was involved in not one but several leak inquiries, including one involving briefing to a newspaper about a security service case. Notably, that briefing was later quoted in court against the Government and made it harder for them to get the injunction they were seeking. Another case involved the leaking of legal advice on the Northern Ireland protocol and another involved the early leaking of a court judgment.

It has also been reported that both the Cabinet Office and the Cabinet Secretary advised against this appointment. Obviously, this is serious. The Home Secretary is in charge of security and has to show leadership on this issue. She has to be trusted by the intelligence and security agencies, and by senior police officers, not to be careless with information. She has to show that she takes security and standards seriously, because that is what she has to expect of others.

So this is an exceptional situation, which is why we have laid this motion. If the Prime Minister does have confidence in the Home Secretary not to be careless with public safety or with issues around security, he should release the facts. What other security lapses by the Home Secretary was the Prime Minister informed about before he reappointed her? Did he ask whether there had been other lapses in the Home Office or as Attorney General before he reappointed her? What information was he given about the other reported leak inquiries and whether she might have had a role in them? Was he advised against reappointing the Home Secretary on security and standards grounds? If the advice and the information he was given was all fine, tell us, show us. If it was not, start explaining why on earth the security and public safety of our country is put in careless hands.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Talking about “careless hands” is an appropriate way of starting this intervention, because before 2019 the then Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), actually cast doubt on our security services by questioning the intelligence on the Salisbury poisoning. Did every Labour MP not try to make him Prime Minister of this country? Is the real threat to our national security not Members on the Labour Benches?

Yvette Cooper: Members will know that, at the time of the Skripal crisis, I disagreed with some of the words used by the right hon. Member for Islington North, and I was very clear about that in this House and about the importance of backing our security services. However, I would say to the hon. Member that I have a lot more concerns about his right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, who, at the height of the

[*Yvette Cooper*]

Skripal crisis, chose to go to a place called the Russian Mountain, to a villa in Italy, where he met an ex-KGB agent without his officials. He took a guest, but he did not report who that guest was. He did not report the meeting with the ex-KGB agent to the Department when he returned, nor can he remember whether any Government business was discussed. I suggest to the hon. Member that he should be extremely worried about his right hon. Friend's careless approach to security and to our national security.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I have allowed a bit of ding-dong there, but please can we now focus on the motion before the House today?

Yvette Cooper: This motion provides for redactions if there are any national security concerns about the content of the information requested, and it provides for unredacted information to be sent to the Intelligence and Security Committee instead, so there can be no security objections to this motion—quite the opposite. If Conservative Members care about credibility and security, they should support the motion now.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Is it not rather more fundamental than that? If a constituent comes to me with something important and I have to sort out the problem, it is crucial that that remains confidential. If I break that trust, I will be letting my constituent down, and also damaging democracy itself, because we must trust our politicians. Is not that really what is at stake here?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right that there are standards that have to be followed. When the issues are around important Government business, it is a problem when somebody has breached those standards to the point of effectively being sacked and then is reappointed just six days later. That is what people across the country will not understand.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I apologise for interrupting my right hon. Friend. She is making an excellent speech. This is an incredibly important debate. Is not the problem that the standards being observed in the Government have just sunk too low? Reappointing somebody six days after such serious security breaches brings into question the level at which the Government think it appropriate to guard our national security. The response of Members on the Conservative Benches today suggests that they do not take it seriously either, and that needs to change urgently.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. There has been a real sense over many years now that the respect for standards in public life from the Government and the Conservative party has been deteriorating and has been undermining standards in our important institutions. The Prime Minister promised us that there would be something different. Instead, what we have is more of the same.

The Cabinet Office has already recognised that the Home Secretary broke sections 2.1 and 2.14 of the ministerial code. There are further serious concerns that she may have broken it a third time and also ignored legal advice that the Home Office was breaking the law.

Yesterday morning, her successor and predecessor, now the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, said that he had had clear advice—legal and policy advice—about dangerous overcrowding at Manston, about being in breach of the law, and about the need to take emergency measures, which he then took. We have deep concerns about how the Government could have allowed this situation to develop in the first place, why they badly failed to crack down on the criminal gangs that have proliferated in the channel and why they allowed Home Office decision making to collapse, so that only half the number of decisions are being taken each year compared with six years ago and only 4% of last year's small boat arrivals had their claims determined, so that there is now a huge backlog of cases that has led to overcrowding and the last-minute use of costly hotels in inappropriate locations.

However, there is also a serious question whether the Home Secretary has just made things worse by ignoring legal advice and allowing dangerous overcrowding, leading to even more last-minute inappropriate procurement and running up substantial legal liabilities when she should have an alternative plan to cut the backlog and cut hotel use instead.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Plaid Cymru supports this motion. The context here is the reappointment of the Home Secretary, and the appointment of a Minister without Portfolio despite bullying allegations against him—and all that after one Prime Minister was brought down by scandals and another due to ineptitude. Is it not the problem not just those specific individuals, but the fact that the very systems of accountability here in Westminster are fundamentally unfit for purpose, save for maintaining the thinnest pretence of competency from this Tory Government?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Lady makes an important point, because the standards in our public life and public institutions have depended on people respecting them and on people across public life believing in them and taking them immensely seriously. That is why it is so corrosive when, bit by bit, they are undermined, and why it is so damaging when a new Prime Minister who promised us he would be so different from his predecessors is simply reinforcing the same problems and the same damaging situation.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Home Affairs Committee has just returned from a visit to Manston this morning. We heard that the numbers have reduced from over 4,000 at the end of October to just over 1,200 today. What perplexes the members of the Committee is that we do not understand how the number of people could reach 4,000 in a facility designed for only 1,600. How was that allowed to happen? I am very interested in what my right hon. Friend says about Manston and about getting some answers; we very much hope that the Home Secretary will come to the Home Affairs Committee to give those answers shortly.

Yvette Cooper: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. I hope the Select Committee will be able to get answers, because if the then Home Secretary, now the Business Secretary, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), was clear on 20 October that overcrowding was getting worse and that emergency

measures were needed to stop the Home Office breaking the law, why on earth did the current, and former, Home Secretary fail to act in her meeting on 19 October, just the day before—a meeting on Manston that she told us about in her resignation letter to my right hon. Friend?

It has been reported that the Home Secretary was warned in the middle of September about the deteriorating circumstances, the fact that things were going to get worse and the high risk of successful legal challenge because the Home Office was breaking the law. She was warned on 1 October and again on 4 October, but she still failed to take the emergency measures that her successor was forced to take. She told the House:

“I have never ignored legal advice.”—[*Official Report*, 31 October 2022; Vol. 721, c. 639.]

The advice made clear what the law said and how things would get worse unless she acted, so what on earth is her definition of the word “ignored”? The definition I looked up says, “To disregard intentionally”, and that appears to be exactly what she did.

If the Home Secretary wants to claim it was not intentional, but somehow accidental—that she just did not really have a clue what the consequences were of her inaction—I think that makes things worse.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): If my memory serves me correctly, the right hon. Lady brought an urgent question to this place about a year ago opposing the use of Napier army barracks for those who enter this country illegally. She has just said she also opposes costly hotels. Just where would she accommodate those who have entered our country illegally?

Yvette Cooper: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will recall that what happened at Napier was that the Government ended up with a huge outbreak of more than 200 covid cases, at the height of a covid crisis, because they were failing to follow basic public health rules and requirements. To be honest, it was an incident that the Home Office again does not seem to have learned from, as we have had outbreaks of diphtheria, MRSA and scabies at Manston. Frankly, if the Home Office and the Government want to solve this properly, they need to address the total collapse in decision making, with just 14,000 decisions being made a year, which is half the number being decided just five or six years ago. That huge backlog has increased as a result of Government legislation that has added to the bureaucracy and made those delays much worse.

Dame Meg Hillier: The backlog is a hugely significant issue. Among my heavy case load, I have a surgeon who cannot move hospitals because he cannot get his visa turned around, families who are separated and spouses who cannot live together. That is the real human impact. We are turning our back on good people who want to work and live in this country because they are caught in the backlog as a result of the Home Secretary's actions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Just before the shadow Home Secretary responds, I say to Members on both sides of the House that this is quite a specific motion on the papers relating to the Home Secretary. It is not a general debate on the Home Secretary or other Government Ministers, so please be mindful of that in any interventions from either side of the House, so that we can focus on what this motion is about.

Yvette Cooper: The issue is about whether or not the Home Secretary is continuing to breach the ministerial code. We know that on 19 October she had already broken the ministerial code twice, and she may have done so again in a subsequent meeting, also on 19 October. How many times can a Minister break the ministerial code in a single day and still be reappointed six days later?

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My right hon. Friend notes that the Home Secretary says that she did not ignore the law, but she does not say that she followed the law or complied with the law. Yesterday, a Minister appeared to be saying that the Home Secretary chose to break the law in one way, rather than another way, which was to put people out destitute on to the streets of Kent. Is that not almost an admission that there has been lawbreaking in this case?

Yvette Cooper: The important point here is that Ministers have a responsibility for public safety, security and meeting and upholding standards. Part of the reason we are seeking this information and these facts about the decisions that were made is to find out whether any of these issues and concerns that have been raised in the Home Office were raised with the Prime Minister at the time, or whether the way in which the Home Secretary had behaved was raising concerns within the Cabinet Office and with the Cabinet Secretary.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On what occasions during the previous Labour Government did the Government release legal advice they were given? In particular, did Tony Blair release the advice given to him on the Iraq war?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Gentleman is rewinding 12 years. We have had 12 years with a Conservative Government in place, and we have been very clear that this is about exceptional circumstances. He will know that a similar motion was supported by this House about Members of the other place, similarly in exceptional circumstances. We have also been clear that if there are any security concerns around the advice or information given to the Prime Minister, that should be shared instead with the Intelligence and Security Committee—that is the responsible way to do it.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): As someone who spent a few years working as an official in the Home Office, I am all too aware of how important it is to protect our national security. Is it not the case that the Government failing to provide the report to the Intelligence and Security Committee indicates that this Government are not serious about national security?

Yvette Cooper: That is the problem. We have these reports in the papers and the allegations that have been made, and we must bear in mind that this is not simply about the security lapses that the Home Secretary herself has recognised and admitted to; it is also about reports of further leak investigations during her time as Attorney General. We are simply asking for factual information about whether or not these were raised as concerns and whether or not this was an issue of concern for the Cabinet Office and the Cabinet Secretary when the Prime Minister made his reappointment decision.

[Yvette Cooper]

This goes to a wider problem about the way in which the Prime Minister appears to have been taking his decisions. The Government have confirmed that the Prime Minister knew about the complaint from the former Chief Whip, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), against the Cabinet Office Minister, the Minister without Portfolio, the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson), which also involves very serious allegations, including about the use of language. We should remember, too, that that Cabinet Office Minister was previously sacked from the Government by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for leaking information from the National Security Council. He has now been reappointed to the Cabinet Office—the very office that is responsible for supporting the National Security Council and leading on cyber-security. This matters—maintaining standards, maintaining the ministerial code and showing leadership on security matters.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Is not the reason that we have to ask for these papers to be laid before the House and put in the public domain that, time and again, those on the Government Benches have shown that they lack any judgment on national security, probity and integrity? They had a Prime Minister who had to resign in scandal, and there have been numerous scandals and leaks and a dangerous lack of regard for national security. In normal times, the Prime Minister would be able to see these documents, and they would not need to be presented to the House because this would have been dealt with, but these are not normal times, because the Conservative party has shown that it does not regard national security in the same way that we do.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes a really important point: national security matters for all of us. This is a time when the national security threats that our country faces have changed. We face new threats from hostile states who wish to do our democracy harm. We face cyber threats from those who want to undermine our national interest. Cabinet Ministers are the custodians of that national interest, and we need all of them to take that seriously and not be careless about the risks that we face and the impact of a lack of leadership on these kinds of issue.

Sadly, the reality is that we have had a series of Conservative Prime Ministers who have not taken these issues seriously. The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), at the height of the Skripal crisis, as I said earlier, wandered off to a Russian villa in Italy, met an ex-KGB agent, took an unknown guest, did not report it to officials and still cannot remember whether Government business was discussed. The right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) was accused of using her private phone for sensitive Government business, and the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) has defended them all, reappointing as his Home Secretary someone his own Back Benchers refer to as “leaky”.

If this is all nonsense, then Government Members should support the motion and show us that there is not a problem—show us that the Prime Minister does take this incredibly seriously, has asked the right questions and has got the right reassurances. He has only been in

post two weeks, and already we have this chaos. He said he wants to stand up for integrity, so enforce the ministerial code. He said he wants professionalism, so appoint people who can do the job. He said he wants accountability, so support this motion and show some accountability to the House.

4.43 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): It is, as ever, a pleasure to reply to the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). I was pleased to hear from the Chairwoman of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), that her Committee visited Manston today and saw, I assume, at first hand the improvements there. What a pity we are not discussing that today. What a pity we are not discussing the many pressing issues on matters of home affairs. What a pity that the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford did not choose to talk about policing and the matters that affect the people on the streets of this country. I know how disappointed my hon. and right hon. Friends in the Home Office will be that they have not had the opportunity to cross swords with her this afternoon. Instead, she has chosen to debate this motion—a motion for return. She ranged far and wide, touching on rumour and speculation but rarely on the specifics of the motion, and I was grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your guidance.

However, I am pleased with the debate. In the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), we heard that, somehow, a self-confessed error of judgment relating to an email not on an issue of national security represents exceptional circumstances, in the view of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford, but that, in the last Government, the fact that this country was going to war did not represent exceptional circumstances, according to the right hon. Lady.

I would like to bring the debate back to the motion before the House. In her letter to the Home Affairs Committee on 31 October, the Home Secretary set out in considerable detail the circumstances and sequence of events that led to her resignation. She explained that she made “an error of judgment”. She recognised her mistake and took accountability for her actions. Her letter noted that the draft written ministerial statement “did not contain any information relating to national security”.

As I set out to the House in response to the urgent question tabled by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford, the ministerial code allows for a range of sanctions in the event that a breach has occurred. In the light of the breach, the Home Secretary stepped down and her resignation was accepted by the then Prime Minister. The appointment of Ministers is a matter for the Prime Minister, in line with his role as the sovereign’s principal adviser. On appointing the Home Secretary to the Government, he received assurances from her. He was clear that she had recognised her error and had accepted the consequences. He considered that the matter was closed. He was pleased to be able to bring the Home Secretary, with her undoubted drive and commitment, back into Government and to be working with her to make our streets safer and to control our borders—matters that could have been discussed this afternoon.

I understand the desire to see inside the process of ministerial appointments and to make public discussions that may form part of any appointment. However, there are compelling and common-sense reasons why that desire should be resisted.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Many a person who has gone through our court system will get 12 months' probation. Why is six days good enough for the Home Secretary?

Jeremy Quin: I do not know the cases to which the hon. Gentleman refers. Every case must be looked at on a case-by-case basis. What we are dealing with here is a circumstance in which a breach of the ministerial code happened. The Home Secretary accepted that. She acknowledged her error; it will not happen again. The Prime Minister had to take a judgment on that basis, and he did.

Dame Meg Hillier: Once again, the Government have put out the man who defends anything, however bad it is, to speak for them. This is not just a matter of a security leak; it is a fundamental matter of the judgment of the woman who is responsible for our national security—the Minister cannot just brush it under the carpet as a six-day matter. The Home Secretary's judgment is at stake, and there is no evidence that that judgment is any better today than it was when she made these leaks.

Jeremy Quin: The Home Secretary does not deny that it was an error of judgment; she made that absolutely clear in her letter to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North, the Chairman of the Select Committee. It was an error of judgment; she recognised that error of judgment, she apologised for it and it will not be repeated.

However, coming back to the motion for return, it is critical to the functioning of government that conversations that occur around appointments are able to take place in confidence. There is therefore a long-standing practice, implemented by Governments of all political persuasions, of protecting that confidentiality. Without the ability to speak freely ahead of an appointment on matters that will be personal, that can be sensitive and that can even relate to personal security, the ability for meaningful advice to be delivered would be massively undermined. Individuals being considered for appointment need to know that they can speak freely and without reservation to the Prime Minister and officials, and if necessary share concerns, without the prospect of confidential information being placed into the public domain.

I wish to reassure hon. Members that appointments in Government are of course subject to advice on matters of propriety. In the formation of this Government, the usual reshuffle procedures were followed, as is appropriate, but the Government firmly and resolutely believe that any information relating to those procedures is not appropriate for publication, either now or in the future.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): After the recent chaos and crashing of the economy, I was most heartened when I heard the Prime Minister declaring to the country that he would be conducting proceedings with integrity and professionalism. Yet the day after, he appointed as his Home Secretary somebody who had to

be removed from Government just six days earlier for having breached the ministerial code, and now he has included in his Cabinet somebody who was sacked from office for leaking information from the National Security Council. So much for national security and acting with integrity and in the national interest. Does the Minister agree that the British public will simply conclude that it is the same old Tories, making the same old grubby deals to desperately cling on to power?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman's intervention started so well. Like him, I greatly appreciated the words of the Prime Minister on the steps of Downing Street. He set out clearly what his Administration would stand for, and he was right to do so. He made it absolutely clear that Ministers in his Administration will have to adhere to the ministerial code. That is what is expected of us all.

I also believe there is a role for redemption. The Home Secretary made it clear that she had made an error, she apologised for that error, and she gave assurances to the Prime Minister, who is at liberty in forming his Administration to take a view and to decide to give someone a second chance. It is his right and his ability as Prime Minister to take those decisions.

Yvette Cooper: The Minister is very kind in giving way. He will know that it has been reported in the papers that the Home Secretary, when she was Attorney General, was interviewed as part of several leak inquiries. Has the Minister seen the conclusions of those leak inquiries, and did the Prime Minister see the conclusions of those leak inquiries before he made the appointment decision?

Jeremy Quin: The right hon. Lady turns to leak investigations, to which I was also about to turn my remarks. As she knows, it has been the policy of successive Governments not to comment on the specific details of leak investigations, to protect the sensitive techniques and procedures involved. What I can say is that all Ministers and the officials and advisers who support them most closely have, on occasion, access to large amounts of sensitive Government information. Regrettably, at times, some of this information is leaked. When this happens and inquiries are launched, all individuals in Government who had access to the information would fall within the scope of such an inquiry. That does not mean that they are guilty or necessarily personally even under investigation; it means simply that they had access to the information in question.

The Home Secretary has given a full account of, and has taken responsibility for, the events that led up to her resignation. The Prime Minister is satisfied with that account and considers the matter closed. We believe that the proposal in this motion is inappropriate and would set a deeply injurious precedent for important procedures, not only now but long into the future. I know that the right hon. Lady is upset that Home Office Ministers are not in the Chamber to debate with her this afternoon, but she could have chosen this evening to debate the Labour approach to stopping small boat crossings, which I am sure would have been enlightening for us all. She could have chosen to debate the fact that this Government have recruited over 15,300 extra police. Labour Members could have probed the campaign that

[Jeremy Quin]

has closed 2,400 county lines, with over 8,000 related arrests. Instead, they are concentrating not on home affairs but on a fishing expedition. I trust the House will reject the attempt.

4.53 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I think nobody in this Chamber will be surprised to hear me say that I think there are a million reasons why the Home Secretary should be nowhere near the office that she currently holds—whether it is her atrocious rhetoric about Rwanda, her desperate smears about a “Benefits Street” culture, her trashing of the Attorney General’s office or the fact that, as far as I can tell, she still thinks that the infamous mini-Budget was brilliant and worth sticking to.

This morning, I joined colleagues from different Committees to visit Manston. I hate to report to the Minister that we did not notice an improvement there; rather, we noticed a significant deterioration, not because of the hard work of the staff there, but because of the overcrowding. As the shadow Home Secretary said, it is fair to say that the Home Secretary has significant questions to answer as to why Manston was allowed to move from being a strict 24-hour short-term facility to a place where families are having to spend days and weeks living on mattresses on the floor, not because of, but despite the efforts of staff, who have been placed in an impossible position by the Home Secretary.

This afternoon, the Labour Opposition have raised security concerns, and of course they are perfectly entitled to do so. Indeed, it is something of an open goal given not only the Home Secretary’s own words, but those of many of her former and current colleagues—none of whom is here today, it has to be said—who have expressed doubts about whether they could accept what the Home Secretary says, publicly questioned a serious breach of security, and suggested that multiple breaches of the ministerial code occurred. In her words:

“Pretending we haven’t made mistakes, carrying on as if everyone can’t see that we have made them, and hoping that things will magically come right is not serious politics.”

But that seems to be a very good description of precisely what she is trying to do now, hoping that people do not fully understand what happened or that they forget.

In fact, the only objectionable thing about those words is her characterising what happened as a mistake—and the Minister veered towards that description today as well—but she did not resign because of a mistake. Her own resignation letter confirms that she resigned because she quite intentionally used her personal email to share a sensitive Government document with someone outside Government. She knowingly and deliberately broke the rules, and she was therefore right to resign.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): On 20 October, I raised with the Minister whether the Home Secretary had shared documents not just by email, but on WhatsApp, Signal or Telegram. Does the hon. Member agree with me that the Home Secretary’s letter to the Home Affairs Committee only talks about email, but there has been no certainty over whether any document—confidential, secret or otherwise—might have been shared on other social media messaging apps?

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Member raises a very fair point. There are all sorts of things missing from the Home Secretary’s letters—both her resignation letter and her letter to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee—which raises all sorts of questions, some of which I will come to.

The fact is that the Home Secretary took an incredibly blasé attitude to sensitive information. When the incident that prompted her resignation happened, unlike everybody else involved, she just carried on as if nothing of note had occurred. Her resignation letter downplayed the incident as “technical” and did not in fact present the full picture, as we have just heard.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend is telling it like it is. When I asked both the Home Secretary and the Minister responsible for national security if they would countenance an employee—a civil servant—being re-employed after such a breach, neither of them would answer the question. Is it not the case that they would not accept that in any circumstance, and it is just a disgrace that she maintains her position as Home Secretary?

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely valid point, in that we are holding staff to a much higher standard than the standard to which the Home Secretary appears to want to hold herself.

The other point I want to make is the contrast between how others responded on the day of these events and how the Home Secretary responded. When the staffer who was the accidental recipient of the draft ministerial statement picked up the email, he or she understood that it was an important matter. That staffer flagged the issue both directly to the Home Secretary and to his or her boss. In contrast, the Home Secretary just asked them to delete it and carried on with routine meetings, alerting absolutely nobody.

When the Home Secretary’s colleague who employs that staff member saw what had been sent and how it had been sent, he too understood the significance. He emailed the Home Secretary directly to express concern about security and the ministerial code, and he made clear her response so far had been unacceptable given

“what appears, on the face of it, to be a potentially serious breach of security.”

He was concerned enough to consider a point of order in this very Chamber, and he approached the Government Chief Whip, yet while he was taking all these very significant steps, in contrast the Home Secretary had wandered off to Westminster Hall to meet a couple of constituents, still having alerted nobody.

When the Chief Whip heard what had happened, she understood the significance. She WhatsApped the Home Secretary and then, along with her colleague, seems to have gone to track the Home Secretary down. More than that, the Chief Whip notified the Prime Minister’s private office. In contrast, the Home Secretary failed to notify anybody, until of course it had been taken out of her hands. Only on being confronted did the Home Secretary do anything about it, and she went off to speak to her special adviser.

None of these events supports the Home Secretary’s claim of a rapid report to official channels. As one of her own colleagues expressed it, the evidence was put to her and she had to accept the evidence, rather than the other way round. Her sluggish response has only

two explanations: either she was simply hoping to get away with her breach, head in the sand, or she totally failed to understand the significance of it. Perhaps it was both: she thought she could get away with it precisely because she thought it did not really matter. Indeed, I have heard almost nothing since to suggest that, if she had not been caught, she would not still be operating in precisely the same way today.

Not only did the Home Secretary's actions at the time show little regard for the seriousness of treating sensitive information in that way—so did her subsequent attempts at an explanation. Her resignation letter totally failed to mention that a sensitive Government document had been sent to an accidental recipient, referring instead only to the “trusted colleague” she sent it to. She claimed in that letter to have reported the breach “rapidly” on official channels, when in reality she carried on as if nothing had happened until she was caught. She talked of a “technical infringement” and she has since been at pains to point out that this was not top secret information. However, at paragraph 28 of her letter to the Committee Chair, she acknowledges that “of course” a draft ministerial statement is sensitive. Indeed, it was so sensitive that she could not append it to the letter to the Home Affairs Committee Chair. What is more, it could not even be shared with the Chair, except on a confidential basis. Yet she was happy to batter that off from her Gmail account to a trusted colleague with a quick, “What do you think?” Extraordinary complacency.

To emphasise the point, next week, we will almost certainly pass legislation promoted by the Home Office that would see some people leaking protected information like that imprisoned for life, depending on the reasons they were doing it. I am not remotely suggesting that what the Home Secretary did is remotely comparable to the offences we will be passing in relation to the National Security Bill, but the fact that her own Department wants to protect that information from foreign state actors, with sentences of up to life imprisonment, puts quite a perspective on it. As has been pointed out, that is a double standard when compared with how other people would be treated in similar circumstances.

There are still many questions to be answered. In her letter to the Committee Chair, the Home Secretary said that the document was emailed to her Gmail account simply because No. 10's proposed edits had come in “too late” to print them off. So why not just email it to her Government account? The letter also says there was no market sensitive data in the leaked document. Why then did No. 10 apparently repeatedly brief that there was?

The letter to the Committee Chair also reveals that a Home Office inquiry found six further uses of personal IT to look at sensitive Government documents. Despite efforts to downplay it, that is more than once a week. Is the Home Secretary really arguing that neither she nor the Home Office could come up with a better way to allow her to view documents while taking part in online meetings? As she notes in her letter to the Chair:

“The Guidance on ‘Security of Government Business’ makes it clear that you should not use your personal IT...for Government business at any classification; and the Government's stated position is that Government systems should, as far as reasonably possible, be used for the conduct of HMG business.”

She knew all that, yet she deliberately and repeatedly sent those documents in breach of those rules. More importantly, how often did this happen in previous roles? The inquiry

we have heard about clearly relates only to Home Office documents and her time at the Home Office alone. Are we really to believe this was the first time she had shared sensitive information with her “trusted colleague”?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My hon. Friend is right to highlight the absurd excuse from the Home Secretary. Is not it the case that she could use an iPad for a phone call and a Government-issued phone to view documents? She clearly has access to more than one parliamentary device, so to say that she had to use her personal device is ridiculous.

Stuart C. McDonald: A whole host of arrangements could have been made that would have been far preferable to what the Home Secretary did, and it is extraordinary that she thought that was something she could do week in, week out.

The shadow Home Secretary highlighted other reports of investigations: first, an apparent probe into whether the current Home Secretary, while Attorney General, leaked sensitive details about the Northern Ireland protocol; secondly, a probe by the Government security group at the Cabinet Office into leaks about the Government's plan to seek an injunction against the BBC in relation to reports of a spy accused of abusing his position to mistreat a former partner. Apparently, that leak caused MI5 “concern”. According to another report, the Home Secretary has been subject to three official Cabinet leak inquiries this year alone.

I appreciate that, ultimately, no conclusive evidence was found in these cases, but it is fair for us to ask whether these events and inquiries formed part of the Prime Minister's deliberations before the Home Secretary's reappointment. Did he seek advice from agencies? What precisely was the view of the Cabinet Secretary? Is it correct that he advised against her reappointment? All those are absolutely legitimate questions that the motion would help us find answers to.

The ultimate question, though, is about the Prime Minister's judgment. Given all these issues and concerns, the outstanding questions and the resignation just one week before, how on earth could he think it sensible and appropriate to reappoint the Home Secretary to such an important role in charge of national security? No doubt the Prime Minister thought it in his interests to appoint her—we all know why that was—but it does not seem that he weighed up the UK's security interests in coming to that decision. It was, in the Home Secretary's words, “right” for her “to go”. It is not right that she is back in the same post, and so quickly. In fact, it is ludicrous and everyone knows it. That, in a nutshell, is why we need to support the motion.

5.5 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me so early in the debate. When it comes to standards in public life and adhering to the ministerial code, my constituents are very quick to let me know if they think that something is not right, and my record on issues that have happened in the last couple of years shows that I would be the first in line to make a statement on that. I have had nine emails in my inbox on this issue—not the hundreds that I would normally expect to receive—and some of them

[Angela Richardson]

are supportive of the Home Secretary. The Opposition are allowed to have a number of Opposition day debates. I am disappointed that they have not used this one for something that really matters to my constituents.

What really does matter to my constituents in terms of what the Home Secretary is trying to tackle is the small boat crossings, which we talked about yesterday in the Chamber. They want to see that dealt with so that those who need our help and support can have it and we have the capacity to offer safe and legal routes. My constituents want the Home Office to ensure that asylum claims are processed fairly and efficiently and that we can stop the criminal gangs taking advantage of vulnerable people with those unsafe boat crossings.

Today and this week, on the M25 not far from my constituency, Just Stop Oil protesters have been climbing gantries. My constituents are concerned about having their journeys disrupted as they go about their business. They want the Home Secretary to be providing our police with the powers they need to ensure that the protesters who have chosen to sit on motorway gantries can be removed swiftly and the roads reopened.

My constituents care about antisocial behaviour. I know of the widespread distress of individuals who have been affected by antisocial behaviour in neighbourhoods in my constituency. I welcome the addition of 155 new police officers in Surrey, which will help to combat crime and make our community safer. They are visible. A young girl had someone expose themselves to her on a local bus. She sat at a bus stop in distress and tears. Two female police officers saw her, pulled over and helped and supported her. We are improving policing and I am seeing the results in my community.

My constituents care about violence against women and girls being tackled and want our Home Secretary to get on and deliver the strategy to tackle that. They welcome the safer streets fund and the safety of women at night fund. I also welcome that almost £1 million of funding has been provided by the Home Office to Surrey police as part of the what works fund to provide a package of support for—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I have given a bit of latitude, but speeches should be about the motion before us. This is not a general debate on home affairs.

Angela Richardson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. As a result, speeches will be short. It is not appropriate for the Government to publish information relating to confidential advice, which is sought by the Opposition's motion. Were they fortunate enough to be in government, that advice would need to be given to them. They are asking us to publish these papers. They have to accept that we would ask the same of them if we were in opposition. On that note, I will not support the motion.

5.9 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I want to begin by congratulating the Home Secretary on doing the right thing by resigning just three weeks ago. The holder of that great office of state is responsible for Great Britain's national security and

oversight of all security services. After the first breach that Parliament and the public became aware of, the Home Secretary considered the impact on our country of that major breach and resigned. How did the Prime Minister satisfy himself that it was unlikely to happen again? He reappointed her and now there are six allegations of full breaches of security that we know of. How much more do we not know? Do the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and Cabinet members expect Ukraine, the United States and the European Union to trust Great Britain with their security?

On his appointment, the Prime Minister promised that

"This Government will have integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level."

What is worrying is that, just six days later, he reappointed the Home Secretary with full knowledge of the first security breach. It now turns out that the Home Secretary is alleged to have committed at least six full breaches, yet how come he trusts the Home Secretary with our national security? Does he really expect and believe that Parliament and the public will forget a breach of national security and trust this Government?

The reality is that the Home Office does not have the time to be part of a psychodrama. We all saw over summer how much chaos the passport backlog caused. We have seen the events at Manston caused by the lack of processing of applications. Thousands of asylum seekers are living in inhumane conditions, with children imprisoned for months, and now there are radicals throwing firebombs at them. We all know how intricate security and confidence must be maintained so the security services can keep this country and its people safe.

The Prime Minister needs to start putting the country before party. The deal with the Home Secretary to help him become Prime Minister is not worth compromising our national security. Is it true that the Prime Minister is now coercing other Ministers to do the media rounds and defend the indefensible? This is not a one-off. The Prime Minister also decided to reappoint the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson), a former Defence Secretary, to the Cabinet—a Defence Secretary who was sacked by a previous Prime Minister for leaking information from a top-level National Security Council meeting. As a Minister of State in the Cabinet Office, he will now be responsible for our national cyber-security. I wonder what the Prime Minister found so appealing about a man who has helped to run two successful Conservative leadership elections.

For all the talk of trust and getting back on track, the Prime Minister has put himself and his party above our country. This House and the country need to know what information the Prime Minister had before reappointing the Home Secretary. Did he know of all the security breaches? Could he come clean? Was there any consideration or risk assessment prior to the reappointment of the Home Secretary, who looks after our national security and has oversight of all security services? Was there any risk of breach of confidential material? Yes. Was the risk identified? Yes. The Home Secretary herself identified it and resigned. She recognised that she was not up to the job and that there was a risk of it happening again.

How did the Prime Minister satisfy himself that it was unlikely to happen again? He reappointed the Home Secretary, and now there are six allegations of full

breaches. How much more do we not know? Do the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and Cabinet Ministers expect Ukraine, the United States and the European Union to trust Great Britain with their security? They should be able to expect that.

Our country is entitled to have a Government with a Prime Minister, a Home Secretary and Cabinet Ministers who put the country first. Integrity, professionalism and accountability need to be far more than words and more than a newspaper headline. It is time to clean up our country and this Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Tom Hunt.

5.15 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): You caught me slightly off-guard, Mr Deputy Speaker—I do not think that I have ever been called so early. It was quite dramatic, but one will have to do what one can. Bearing in mind that I have spoken quite fluently on many of these issues recently, it should not be too much of a challenge.

I note that I did not have an answer to my question, when I made an intervention on the shadow Home Secretary, about quite where these individuals should be based. She has opposed former Army barracks being used. She has opposed costly hotels being used. We do not know what the answer is.

I have slightly lost track—I do not know whether the approach of the Opposition is to go through every single mechanism for debating the same issue over and over again—but I think we have had an urgent question; maybe we have had a statement and had it raised at Prime Minister's questions; and now we are having an Opposition day debate. It seems ever so slightly extraordinary. I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) has had nine emails on it. Perhaps we should not use our phones in here but sometimes we do to communicate with our staff on important matters, so I did say to my team, "How many emails have we received?" The answer was, actually, zero, so we will have to confirm that that is the case. But what I have had emails about is the small boats crisis. What I have had emails about is the use of a hotel in the town centre in Ipswich by 200 of these individuals and the impact that that could have on the local area. That is what they have raised. That is what they would much rather we discussed in this Opposition day debate.

Forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, but perhaps we are ever so slightly at risk of certain colleagues on the Government side of the House occasionally straying into topics that are slightly beyond the strict remit of this debate. But that is because it is incredibly difficult to debate something that we have already debated about eight times. What is there to say about it? Ultimately, it is difficult, when we are dealing with what is quite clearly a highly personalised political campaign against the Home Secretary, not to talk about the wider issues.

Why is it that those on the Opposition Benches dislike the Home Secretary so much? Actually, I took part in an interesting debate yesterday with a Labour shadow Minister who said that the reason why the Home Secretary was in place was that there was some sort of shabby deal with the extreme far right. I thought that it was interesting that the mask slipped there,

because the Home Secretary's views on immigration are actually, I think, shared by tens of millions of people up and down the country. The fact that there are shadow Front-Bench Members who think that many of their constituents' views are actually the views of the far right is shocking. That tells us everything that we need to know about the Labour party's approach to immigration—where there is an approach. It suits the Labour party to talk to death this issue about emails, because it has absolutely nothing to say when it comes to tackling the small boats crisis. Labour Members do not know where they would accommodate the individuals in question. They talk vaguely about speeding up the process for dealing with the applications, because we know what their approach to speeding up the applications would be: to grant everyone immediate refugee status, whether they are or not. So admittedly, there would be no queue, but we would also have huge numbers of people staying here indefinitely who quite probably are not refugees. I do not think that is the appropriate approach.

You have allowed me to discuss some of these issues, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I think that is necessary, because we are dealing with a highly personalised campaign against a Home Secretary who Labour Members do not like because they do not like her views. But the news is that those views—a belief in controlling our borders, a belief in controlled immigration, and a belief in distinguishing between genuine refugees and those who illegally, by choice, enter our country from another safe European country—are shared by, I believe, the majority of the country.

My political advice to the Labour party is that its current approach of ignoring the debate is not sustainable in the long term. We would like to know what its approach is. What we do know is that it opposed the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and opposed the Rwanda scheme, but I assume we will be back here soon discussing the same issue about emails.

I think I have concluded what I have to say—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]—much to the enjoyment of the Opposition. In my Westminster Hall debate earlier today, I spoke at length about my concerns about the Novotel situation in Ipswich. I have also made lots of interventions in statements from the Home Secretary in which I have made my support for her clear.

Ultimately, I take issue with the fact that so much parliamentary time is being spent on doing this issue to death. I have received no emails about it. What my constituents are concerned about is illegal immigration and how we tackle it. If we had spent these two or three hours talking in depth about how we can put rocket boosters under the Rwanda scheme, that would have been much more appropriate.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Will the hon. Member give way?

Tom Hunt: I am not giving way—I am simply not giving way. I have said my piece and I look forward to the wind-ups.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I do sympathise with hon. Members, but it is quite a narrow motion. I am really pleased that I am sitting in the Chair and not on either side of the House.

5.20 pm

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The Prime Minister faces serious questions about security concerns relating to the appointment of his Cabinet Ministers. The Home Secretary resigned only 20 days ago, saying:

“Pretending we haven’t made mistakes, carrying on as if everyone can’t see that we have...is not serious politics. I have made a mistake; I accept responsibility; I resign.”

In a letter to the Select Committee on Home Affairs, she then admitted to six separate breaches of security—one for every week she was in post. The Prime Minister’s decision to reappoint her as Home Secretary six days after she broke the ministerial code, and to appoint the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) as a Minister after he was sacked for leaking sensitive information, was irresponsible and reckless. Once again, it showed the Tories putting party before country.

We need to know whether the Prime Minister even considered questions of security or the ministerial code when he made his Cabinet appointments. That is why Labour is calling on the Government to publish the papers relating to those decisions. Labour has called this debate because our constituents deserve to know what the Prime Minister was advised, whether he knew about security lapses at the Home Office, and whether the Home Secretary was involved in other leaks when she was Attorney General.

We all watched with horror as recent events unfolded at Manston asylum centre. It is disturbing that even though reports say that the Home Secretary was repeatedly warned, yet again she did not act quickly enough to make sure that vulnerable people were being held safely. In fact, on her watch the Home Office dumped some of those vulnerable people on the streets of London in the middle of the night.

The Prime Minister and his Cabinet have overseen constant chaos since he was imposed on us, but the Government are unable to be straight with us about whether their own Ministers are fit for the job. At a time when the public desperately need reassurance, the Prime Minister’s actions have done absolutely nothing to reassure my constituents.

5.24 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): The Home Secretary made an error of judgment, recognised her mistakes, and took accountability for her actions. Now we need to get on with tackling the significant challenges facing our country in general and my constituency in particular. The Home Secretary is entirely focused on delivering on the people’s priorities, and that includes taking further action to stem the number of people arriving here illegally in small boats, getting more police on our streets, and cracking down on crime.

Taking account of your admonishments, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will now focus on the issue at hand. Let me say first that it is not appropriate for Government to publish information relating to confidential advice. Breaching the confidentiality of advice regarding appointments will weaken the advice given to future Prime Ministers. Such advice can include sensitive information which may include matters of national

security, and publishing it would set a precedent that would reduce the ability of future Prime Ministers to seek meaningful advice.

Our national security has always been protected. The documents in question did not contain any information relating to national security, the intelligence services, cyber-security or law enforcement. The data concerned was already in the public domain. The Home Secretary clarified that in her letter to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, in which she wrote:

“It did not contain any market-sensitive data as all the data contained in the document was already in the public domain.”

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Does that mean that it is okay, if the material shared was not a matter of public security and was not secret or anything? Surely the code of practice for Ministers applies to everything. We cannot pick and choose between what is and what is not sensitive information. It is the behaviour that matters, not particular content.

Simon Baynes: I would like to make a general point here. When I look to the Opposition Benches, I see many people who have had problems—I will not go into the details—and I think that, as a centre of democracy, we should try to focus positively on the important issues that face our country rather than always denigrating anyone in a position of authority, which seems increasingly to be the only way in which the Labour party is prepared to conduct politics.

We are delivering on the people’s priorities, including cracking down on illegal migration by co-operating with the French authorities to dismantle international people-smuggling gangs and stopping more than 29,000 illegal crossings since the start of the year—twice as many as last year. We have passed our Nationality and Borders Act 2022, introducing new and tougher criminal offences and deterring illegal entry to the UK, and we have given Border Force additional powers, ensuring that our authorities are fully equipped to prevent illegal entry to the UK. We are putting more police on our streets and cracking down on crime by recruiting more than 15,300 additional police officers since 2019, including 145 new officers in north Wales, making our communities safer; and we have passed our Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, strengthening police powers. By contrast, the Opposition’s cupboard is bare of policies to deal with illegal migration. There is plenty of talk, but very little in terms of specific policies. I therefore strongly support the Home Secretary’s policies to combat illegal migration and crime and make our country a safer place for us all.

5.28 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): On 5 April 1982, three days after the invasion of the Falkland Islands, the then Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, resigned. He took full responsibility for a failure by the Foreign Office. The Foreign Office had not signalled in advance of the Argentine invasion that the UK would stand resolutely by the people of the Falkland Islands. The Franks inquiry, in the following months, had access to some of the relevant papers. We later learned that the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, had asked Lord Carrington to stay on, but Carrington had decided to do the decent thing. He resigned.

Just imagine what would have happened if Lord Carrington had returned to office six days after his resignation. The Government would have barely had time to work out where South Georgia was, never mind give orders for its recapture—yet a Cabinet Minister's return to office six days later is the situation that we see in this Government in 2022. This was just six days after she, by her own admission, deliberately emailed sensitive documents to a friend on the Back Benches without clearance. Since then, we have also heard about six further data breaches. What do they relate to? We do not know, so sensitive are they.

Lord Carrington understood a phrase that I was reminded of by a constituent from Axminster recently: *noblesse oblige*. One must act in a fashion that conforms to the position and privileges that have been bestowed upon one. This Government cannot seem to recognise that with privilege comes responsibility. We are in this place to act on behalf of our constituents and the country, not our own vested self-interest or party political interests. This exposes something about the Prime Minister. In spite of a myth crafted by a slick PR campaign, he is just as complicit as Conservative Prime Ministers before him.

It is clear that the Government have learned little from the past two years, including the by-election in Tiverton and Honiton this summer. Voters overwhelmingly said that they had had enough of sleaze and cover-up, yet to coin a phrase from one former Prime Minister, nothing has changed. This Home Secretary readily uses inflammatory language to exacerbate anxiety about inward migration. There is a real issue relating to inward migration that has developed while the Home Secretary has been in government, but instead of whipping up fear by speaking of an "invasion", she should learn from Lord Carrington who, when faced with a real invasion—that of the Falkland Islands—did the right thing and resigned. So, too, should she.

5.31 pm

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord). I was not planning to speak at length, because this all has an air of *déjà vu* about it, and apparently that is also true for official Opposition Members because there are so few of them here. I mean, this is an Opposition day motion and we are outnumbering them here by two to one. They are fed up with hearing about this too. It is not as if this topic has not been hashed and rehashed ad nauseam, but I suspect that Labour Members will continue to bang this particular drum for a while because, let's face it, they have absolutely nothing else to talk about.

The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has taken on the demeanour of the witchfinder pursuivant lately: "I saw Goody Braverman talking to the ERG in the Aye Lobby—she must be hanged!" It is not like we are looking at the second coming of the Blair era here. We are not faced with bright, intelligent people bringing alternatives to this country; it is just more carping. They are a tired, lazy Opposition. I was going to call them beige but I think they are more of a Farrow and Ball crowd. I had a look through the range and the closest colour to beige I could find was called smoked trout, which I think is quite apt.

Mr Deputy Speaker, with your indulgence I am going to get to the motion via a slightly circuitous route. I am headed there and I am developing my argument en route. I think Labour Members might want to reflect on why they lost supposedly safe seats at the last general election, including mine in Heywood and Middleton. I know it is very easy to blame Brexit and that is of course their go-to: it must have been Brexit because everything was fantastic and they had such a good manifesto and everyone agreed with it; that is why people did not vote for them. We saw the first signs of that in 2017. There is a clear values dissonance between the Opposition's increasingly metropolitan and *louche* outlook and what used to be their core vote.

When I knock on a door in my constituency I can guarantee that if I mention the Home Secretary, the first words out of someone's mouth will not be, "Well, there was a data breach." The first words out of their mouth will be "small boats". Of course we are not talking about small boats today, but people want to know what we are doing to stop that influx of illegal migration. They want to make sure that our rightly generous and welcoming asylum system is not being abused by people coming here to take the mick. The fact that Labour Members care about what we are talking about today more than that issue should be extremely telling for the people who voted Conservative for the first time at the last election. My constituents want more coppers on the street and fewer boats in the channel, and I think we have the team in place to do that.

Turning to the motion, I would love to say that I was surprised by it, but yet again we have sixth-form politics. The official Opposition are asking to breach the confidentiality of advice regarding appointments. Officials should be able to rely on the advice that they give being done in a private and confidential way. Setting a precedent that their advice could be published as a matter of course would inevitably weaken the quality of the advice that they give to Prime Ministers of all parties.

We already know quite a lot of the salient details that the Opposition are asking for in this motion. The Home Secretary's letter to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee—the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) is unfortunately not in her place—said:

"The draft WMS did not contain any information relating to national security, the intelligence agencies, cyber security or law enforcement. It did not contain details of any particular case work."

The letter also points to the fact that the data in question was already in the public domain.

I hate to labour the point, but I feel I must in the vain hope that the message starts to percolate through to the Opposition. My constituents want more police, like the 15,300 we have already put on to the streets. They want to stop illegal crossings, and they want to stop the evil traffickers who exploit and endanger the most desperate. They like the Rwanda plan and they like the tough measures in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, both of which the Labour party voted against.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Clarkson: No, I will not.

[Chris Clarkson]

My constituents think we should be banging up people who glue themselves to the roads and vandalise buildings and monuments. They want fair, controlled migration, not open borders. Any of those things would have been a worthwhile use of an Opposition day but, again, we are talking about a process issue—the same thing we have talked about half a dozen times. It is a waste of parliamentary time. Sadly, it is predictable, wearing and utterly ridiculous. Get a grip.

5.36 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): What a debate this is turning out to be on one side of the House. I cast my mind back to last week's SNP Opposition day debate, and to other Opposition day debates. A single transferable speech seems to be rattling around about all the things that the Opposition could be talking about. The clue for Conservative Members is in the name. If they want to be in charge of choosing the topics for Opposition day debates, they should simply call a general election, which would be welcomed by the country.

Opposition day debates are about the things the Opposition want to talk about, which are very often the things that the Government desperately do not want to talk about. I do not blame the Government or the Paymaster General—the Paymaster General always seems to be the one sent out to defend the crease, even when the post holder changes—for not wanting to talk about the Home Secretary's shockingly casual approach to security protocols, her apparent disregard for her officials' legal advice or her extreme rhetoric, which is creating security risks and surely makes her completely unfit for any kind of public office.

We are often told that there are two things we should never see being made: laws and sausages. After the Paymaster General's remarks today, we might need to add ministerial appointments to that list. It is astonishing that, six days after admitting she had broken the ministerial code and resigning, the Home Secretary was able to saunter back into her old job, off the back of her grubby deal to endorse the Prime Minister in the Conservative party's leadership election.

It has been obvious in recent years that, whenever a Minister transgresses badly enough, even under this Government, to have to leave office, the time they have to spend in the ex-ministerial sin bin has diminished. I am not sure if that is always because standards have dropped, but the half-life of the radioactivity that results from political misdemeanours seems to have markedly reduced.

The Home Secretary's reappointment to Government, never mind her reappointment as Home Secretary, raises some extremely serious questions, because there is not one but two emerging scandals surrounding her. Each one, in its own way, not only calls into question her competence and integrity in office but raises extremely serious questions about the judgment of the Prime Minister himself.

Members have spoken about the woeful situation at Manston and, with your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to move away slightly from the discussion of the unauthorised release of information

and talk about the obstinate refusal to disclose relevant information—surely that is completely the wrong way round for how Ministers should be operating. We have heard the Home Secretary's approach to defending the way she dealt with legal advice; she did not, apparently, ignore it, but simply chose to act in a contrary and potentially unlawful fashion having read it.

What cannot be in dispute is that a facility designed to hold up to 1,600 people for no more than 24 hours at a time as a short-term processing facility became, under this Home Secretary's watch, severely overcrowded. The result has been what the Prison Officers Association assistant general secretary Andy Baxter described as a

“humanitarian crisis on British soil”,

with people sleeping on cardboard in tents amid outbreaks of covid, diphtheria, scabies and hepatitis. David Neal the chief inspector of borders and immigration told the Home Affairs Committee that we are now past the point where we can describe Manston as being a safe facility.

All of that coincided with the Home Secretary's first period in office. Although she denies this, numerous sources, both inside and outside Government, have stated that one major factor for that overcrowding was that the new Home Secretary was refusing to sign off on hotel accommodation—or “alternative accommodation”, call it whatever you like—that would have allowed people to move on from Manston. I tabled a named day question last week asking how many people had been rehoused in that alternative accommodation and how many such alternative places had been approved by the Home Secretary. Remarkably, the answer that came back refused to divulge that information, because, apparently, it could be obtained only at “disproportionate cost”. I do not think that disproportionate cost is something that can be measured in financial terms, but I hazard a guess that this would have come at a greatly disproportionate cost to the remaining credibility of the Home Secretary.

I go down that byway because paragraph 1(c) of the motion calls for the “minutes”, “submissions” and “communications relating to” the Home Secretary's appointment or

“advice relating to that appointment”

to be disclosed. It would be extraordinary if the advice that we have been told was being proffered to the Home Secretary was dealt with and treated by her, through her actions, in the manner that many of us believe it was.

This debate is, of course, concerned with security rather than Manston itself, and the reason for that is simple: we know that, by her own admission, the Home Secretary sent confidential information from a secure government IT environment to her own personal Gmail account. She also sent information to another Member of this House, who was not authorised to receive it in that form. Incredibly, she also tried to send it on to the Member's spouse's email account and the only reason they failed to receive it was that the Home Secretary accidentally sent it to a different unauthorised recipient, a member of staff of a different parliamentarian. So there were two unauthorised recipients, one of whom it was sent to deliberately and the other of whom was an accidental recipient, every bit as unauthorised as the other intended recipient.

In her resignation letter, the Home Secretary claims to have “rapidly reported” the breach when she realised it. However, a former chairman of the Conservative party has said:

“As I understand it, the evidence was put to her and she accepted the evidence, rather than the other way round.”

In a letter to the Home Affairs Committee on 31 October, the Home Secretary wrote that she realised her error at 10 am and that by 10.2 am had emailed the staff member involved asking them to delete the document—whoop-de-doo. Despite that, the Home Secretary apparently did not think to email or contact the Chief Whip—this further contradicts her claim of rapidly reporting the breach—or, perhaps more pertinently, the permanent secretary or the Cabinet Secretary. It was nearly lunchtime when the Home Secretary said that, by coincidence, she saw the Chief Whip, who by then was already aware of what had happened. It is impossible to square the Home Secretary’s explanation of her actions and motivations with the timeline and the information that we now know. What I think is perhaps hardest to accept is the complete and utter insouciance of the Home Secretary in this matter. Indeed, if we were to take both her resignation letter and her letter to the Home Affairs Committee at face value, we could be forgiven for imagining that this was the first Home Secretary who had ever been forced to resign for doing absolutely nothing wrong.

To take the two most high profile resignations from this Government of late, there is some quite remarkable language used in the letters. The Home Secretary said that she was

“choosing to tender her resignation”,

when she should not even have been given the luxury of that choice. That is almost as good, if not better than, the line in the letter of resignation from the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng). He said:

“You have asked me to stand aside as your Chancellor. I have accepted.”

My goodness, how gracious of him! Nevertheless, there are serious discrepancies in the Home Secretary’s version of events around this breach.

When it comes to that laxness in IT and informational security, we know, of course, that the Home Secretary has form. She herself has conceded that, on six separate occasions, between 15 September and 16 October, she sent documents from her UK Government email environment to her personal Gmail account. That gives rise to a much, much wider issue, which is that, as a result, the UK is now in the absurd position where the Minister responsible for national security has, by her own actions and admissions, proved that she cannot be trusted with the integrity of sensitive documents. That has very serious implications—whether Conservative Members wish to hear it or not—for what the security services can be confident in sharing with the Home Secretary and consequently, flowing from that, serious issues about the accountability that there can be of the security services to Ministers. International partners will also have taken note, and I suspect that the explanations that have been given will cut little ice. They will simply see a security risk.

If the Prime Minister wants to restore some level of confidence in national security and in the office of Home Secretary, he now needs to remove this Home Secretary from office and commit to a full investigation

and to the release of all the relevant documentation to establish what exactly took place. If the Prime Minister was in the least bit serious when he talked of integrity and accountability in his Government, he needs to match those fine words with the reality of his actions: release that information and sack the Home Secretary.

As I have said, this matter raises very serious concerns about the Prime Minister’s judgment. That is why the information must be released. That is why the Government must release information also made available to the Prime Minister in deciding whether to reappoint the Home Secretary. That would allow us to get to the bottom of it. It would allow us to reach an informed judgment and see whether it is justified that so many Members on the Opposition Benches take the view that the appointment of this Home Secretary was a very, very serious misjudgment indeed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I was very pleased that the hon. Gentleman brought his speech back neatly to the motion. This is another reminder that we have in front of us quite a narrow motion. I trust that hon. Members will adjust their speeches accordingly.

5.48 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I am afraid that we just have to ignore the shameless politics of this motion. It is, of course, the job of the Opposition to bring this sort of motion before the House. There may come a day—a very distant day—when we sit on the Opposition Benches and make similar attacks on the Government. If the Labour party is the Government, we will have plenty of material to work with based on its last stint in office. There will be new names to add to the illustrious roster of Hinduja, Ecclestone, Mittal and so on, and perhaps even some old names will be coming back. I have the fortune of representing the noble Lord Mandelson as a constituent. I dare say that he will be back on the Front Bench of the Labour party if it is ever back in power and he, no doubt, will be resigning two or three times during his next stint in office. Our Home Secretary has only ever had to resign once, compared with him.

We should not complain, even if it is very thin stuff that Labour Members are bringing. What is going on here? Is it the context or the subtext of this motion? Labour is not attacking the Home Secretary because she shared a policy document with a fellow Privy Counsellor and a former security Minister. The document itself contained no security information. In fact, all the information in the document was already in the public domain. There was no national security breach and no private data involved. That is not the purpose of their attack. The attack is because of her approach to immigration, and I suggest that that is not a subject for this sort of political knockabout, because the topic matters to us all. Despite the knockabout, I think both sides have a legitimate concern and legitimate points to make in this debate, and deep down we all want the same thing.

It is easy to caricature one another’s positions: the Opposition say we are heartless; we say they are naive. They say we are against refugees altogether; we say they want open borders—I said that last week, and it is true of some of them, but let me be fair to the majority of our opponents and try to represent their view fairly.

[*Danny Kruger*]

They want us to play our part as a country—a leading part, given our history—in the management of the great people movements of the world. They want our attitude as a country to those people huddled in boats in the English channel to be one of compassion. They want our responsibility—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman is straying—

Danny Kruger: I am straying, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman needs to sit down when I am standing. Thank you. He is straying away from the terms of the motion, and he should be quite careful what he says about other Members of the House.

Danny Kruger: That is a fair point, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I thank you for that guidance. I do not have much more to say, then, because the topic of the debate should have been the question of how we manage migration—that is the real purpose of the Opposition's attacks on the Home Secretary.

It is right that we on the Government side represent citizens who believe strongly in the importance of protecting our borders against illegal migration. It is preposterous that the Opposition think the Government should reveal legal advice. They cannot attack the Home Secretary for her plans on migration, because those plans are popular and right, so they attack her. I wish they would recognise that we all want a humane asylum system and secure borders; they could even work with us to secure that.

5.51 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): This debate has as its core the issue of standards and integrity in our politics. When he was appointed as Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) proclaimed that he would bring integrity back to Government. He certainly had a front-row seat to its disappearance, seeing that he served faithfully next to a previous Prime Minister with form on the issue. Yet one of his first acts as Prime Minister was to bring back a Home Secretary who just six days before had quit for not one, but two breaches of the ministerial code. They were not accidental breaches or a one-off mistake where an official forgot to tick a box; they were clear breaches of the ministerial rules.

The issue of standards relates not just to emails and the use of personal IT, but to the ethics of how the Home Office works as a Department. Like all of us, Ministers are public servants. We all sign up to the seven Nolan principles of public life: integrity, openness, selflessness, objectivity, accountability, honesty and leadership. Ministers also have a duty to this country on public safety, national security and human rights and a duty to the taxpayer. Have we seen that from the current Home Secretary? No—and that is what this debate is about.

I want to focus on the record and decisions of the Home Secretary and the Home Office in relation to their approach to the crisis in the UK response to asylum seekers. For instance, last week the Home Secretary played to the

anti-immigration gallery by implying that asylum seekers had to be stopped from wandering our streets—hence the Government's policy on Manston—yet her Department was responsible for two groups of destitute asylum seekers being found wandering the streets around Victoria and having to be picked up by a small charity to ensure that they had warm clothes, warm shoes and food.

I also remind the Conservative party that asylum seekers are seeking refuge. They are fleeing—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am afraid the hon. Lady is also going a little wider than the terms of the motion. If she could bring herself back to the motion, that would be very helpful to everybody.

Ruth Cadbury: I appreciate that, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I hope you will let me continue, because I will bring my speech back to the point about standards in public life, which is where I started and what I think this motion is fundamentally about.

Just to give some background, if you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, in Hounslow there are currently almost 3,000 asylum seekers in nine hotels, and more than 500 in dispersal accommodation, which are mainly rundown houses in multiple occupation with shared kitchens and bathrooms. There are 140 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The challenge locally is not asylum seekers roaming the streets causing problems for the community, because by definition asylum seekers want to play by the rules because they want to be given asylum. They do not want to cause trouble, and they are not going to cause trouble. The problem is the challenge for our public services in making sure that these vulnerable people have the right to education and social services to ensure that they are safe and comfortable while they are waiting in the ever-lengthening queue to get their status. The Home Office—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Lady absolutely must come back to the terms of the motion, because she is roaming much wider, and I have pulled up other Members for that. She must come back to the motion itself.

Ruth Cadbury: The Home Office has contracts with organisations such as Clearsprings Ready Homes, which then has contracts with a network of other agencies that are providing a terrible service. One person who works with these services said that asylum seekers receive food not fit for a dog and accommodation not fit for animals.

The hotels—I am coming to my point, Madam Deputy Speaker—receive £40 a room, yet the agencies are receiving Home Office money and taxpayer money at £130 a room, and they are pocketing the difference. The agencies are getting £15 a meal, yet the caterers are receiving £5.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am sorry, but the hon. Lady is not talking about security, as set out in the motion. If the hon. Lady can tell the House how what she is saying relates to these issues of the release of papers, that would be very helpful.

Ruth Cadbury: All right, Madam Deputy Speaker. I take your point and I will keep my notes on that level of misuse of taxpayer money for another time.

I will conclude by saying that perhaps the Prime Minister could finally appoint an independent ethics adviser to ensure that when we see serious breaches of the ministerial code, they can be investigated impartially and a report can be published. I fear that we have returned to an outdated and old-fashioned approach to standards—an approach that simply says, “Trust us, don’t worry, we’ll look after it”, yet surely we and all those who we represent deserve so much better.

5.57 pm

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): We all know in this House that it is not appropriate for the Government to publish information relating to confidential advice, so why are we here today, again wasting parliamentary time when we could be talking about real issues? I am just looking at the Labour Benches opposite, and seven Labour MPs have turned up for this debate that they asked for. They cannot even be bothered to turn up to a debate.

Why are we actually here? It is nothing to do with security. It is nothing to do with standards. It is nothing to do with wanting to do the right thing. This is a bullying campaign to get rid of the Home Secretary. That is all it is—it is a relentless bullying campaign to get rid of our brilliant Home Secretary. I can tell you now, she is going nowhere. In the real world where I live and where I represent, I have not had one single email. If you are talking about releasing documents, how about you lot over there—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. How about Opposition Members releasing their emails to show how many emails they have actually had on this subject? I suspect it is not very many at all. They do not live in the real world.

Like I say, it is a relentless horrible bullying campaign to get rid of the Home Secretary. The Home Secretary needs to have the backing of this place. She needs the backing of Parliament. She needs the backing of the whole country. She needs people to get behind her so that we can sort out the migrant problem, crime on the streets and these silly protests that we have outside, but that will not happen unless the Opposition get behind her and unless we all get behind her. They are just playing politics—that is all they are doing. I used the word “bullying”. That is all they are—a bunch of bullies. I have been bullied before by the Labour party. I was bullied out of the Labour party, but thanks to them, I am stood here now, sticking up for my residents in Ashfield and Eastwood.

The British people get it; they understand. Like I said, I have not had one single email on this subject. Why are we here today, wasting taxpayers’ money, when we could be talking about the boat crossings, crime on the streets or saving lives? We could be talking about the important stuff. You can sit there with glazed expressions on your faces again like you normally do, looking at me as though I have just landed from a different planet.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): No, I am not looking at all glazed. Please follow proper parliamentary procedure.

Lee Anderson: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. You may be aware that Opposition Members are looking at me like I have landed from a different planet, but I have not—I have landed from planet Ashfield, and this is where real people talk common sense. This lot on the Opposition Benches need to visit my constituency, if they ever get the chance. At the next election, I challenge them to come up, knock on some doors and speak to some real people in the real world of Ashfield, and they will go away knowing that that seat of Ashfield is going to stop blue for a long time. I cannot talk any more, because this is a very narrow debate, but what I will say is that they are nothing but a bunch of bullies, and they should be ashamed of themselves.

6 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am going to branch out in a different direction and speak to the motion. It is very precise and quite narrowly drawn, but it goes to the conduct and character of the Home Secretary, which is an important matter for us to discuss, and that is possibly why so many, if not all, Government Members have found it difficult to speak to the motion. They can talk to the Home Secretary’s policies—failed as they are, they are ones that appeal to them—but they find it difficult, perhaps, to defend her behaviour.

The serious issue here is not the course of conduct that led to the Home Secretary’s sacking; we know about that. It is the way the Home Secretary has conducted herself since that sacking; it is her refusal to answer questions. That is why these documents and reports need to be asked for. As always, it is the cover-up that is the problem as much as, if not more so than, the offence itself.

The Home Secretary has form on this issue. She was Attorney General on and off for well over a year. I had the chance to observe her behaviour then, and I am afraid to say that there were regular reports of her being investigated for leaking sensitive Government information. On 22 January, *The Daily Telegraph* reported that the Attorney General would be seeking an injunction against the BBC over a case involving the Security Service. I asked her about that at Attorney General’s questions. It was reported on 26 October in the *Daily Mail* that the Attorney General had been investigated as part of a leak investigation, and it was reported on 29 October in *The Sun* that she had been subject to official Cabinet leak inquiries three times in one year.

I have tabled questions, including as recently as today, to try to get to the bottom of this. I asked the Minister for the Cabinet Office

“whether the Government Security Group conducted an investigation into release of information relating to Government plans to seek an injunction against the BBC over concerns of national security.”

The Minister replied that it is their policy

“not to comment on leak investigations.”

That is just not good enough in this case. That is why this information is being requested. It should not have to be, because it should have been put in the public domain already by the Government.

Let us come on to the more recent conduct and the resignation. I have tried several times over the past week and a half to get answers from the several statements we have had from the Home Secretary and others, usually in response to urgent questions in the House. The first

[*Andy Slaughter*]

point is that there are stark contradictions in the versions that the Home Secretary herself has given—for example, between her resignation letter and the much more detailed letter that she then voluntarily sent to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). She said in her resignation letter:

“As soon as I realised my mistake, I rapidly reported this on official channels, and informed the Cabinet Secretary.”

However, when she wrote with a detailed timeline to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, she revealed that she actually waited several hours before making any such report. She revealed that she was confronted by other members of the Conservative party outside this Chamber and that matters were put to her; it was not that she volunteered them. When, after that, she finally decided to report her breach of security, for which she was sacked, she did not go to the Cabinet Secretary; she went to her own special adviser. The question is, why did events unfold in that way and why was her account so different in her letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and her political grandstanding resignation letter?

The second point is that the Home Secretary is very selective in the denials she makes in her letter to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. She says that 19 October was the only time she used her personal email to send Home Office documents to people outside Government. She talks only about email; she does not talk about other non-secure networks, such as messaging services. She talks about insecure communication outside Government, but what about insecure communication inside Government, which would equally be a breach of procedure? She talks about insecure communication inside Government, but she does not relate that to anything other than her tenure at the Home Office; she does not relate it to her much longer tenure as Attorney General, when, as we have heard, she was accused several times of leaking.

Then we come to the matter that was raised in the urgent question yesterday, which has been raised on several other occasions as well, which is the Home Secretary’s statement—again, I think it is very carefully worded—that,

“I have never ignored legal advice.”—[*Official Report*, 31 October 2022; Vol. 721, c. 639.]

My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) asked about that yesterday, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North, the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, and there has been some debate as to what the Home Secretary means by it. As I pointed out in an intervention earlier, she does not say—this would be much more straightforward—“I followed legal advice.” There was clear legal advice as to whether detention at Manston over 24 hours was legal, and it clearly was not. She could have said, “At all times I complied with legal advice,” but she said, “I didn’t ignore legal advice,” which could cover a multitude of circumstances. It could mean that she considered that advice and then rejected it, notwithstanding the fact that it was sound and solid legal advice. It could mean that she took another course of action, and I think we are getting near to what actually happened there.

Indeed, I think the Minister who answered the urgent question yesterday got close to what actually happened when he said:

“There are competing legal duties on Ministers. Another legal duty that we need to pay heed to is our duty not to leave individuals destitute. It would be wrong for the Home Office to allow individuals...in a condition of some destitution, to be released on to the rural lanes of Kent without great care. That is why the Home Secretary has balanced her duties”.—[*Official Report*, 7 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 30.]

Leaving aside the fact that, on at least one occasion, individuals in a state of destitution were released on to the streets—the streets of Victoria rather than Kent—it does appear that, in the majority of cases, the Home Secretary decided to allow Manston to fill up to two or three times its capacity and to allow people to be contained there not for hours or days but for weeks and, in doing so, knew she was breaking the law. She decided that she would break the law in that way rather than in another way. Again, that is not good enough. She had the option of not breaking the law; she had the option of finding hotel or other accommodation for the people who were stacking up at Manston in appalling conditions—we have seen the reports and the photographic evidence—so they could have been placed elsewhere.

What it comes down to is that, throughout this process, since she was reappointed, the Home Secretary has dodged questions again and again. Whether that has been by using weasel words, contradicting herself or using a bit of legal sophistry, the fact of the matter is that she will not answer these questions. I have asked her again and again, including in written questions, to specifically address the deficiencies in the letter she sent to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, and the same reply comes back. Indeed, I received a reply to another question yesterday which said:

“I refer the Hon. member to that letter.”—

that is, the letter of 31 October. It is just not good enough. Of course, we are not naive enough to expect to always get answers to questions we ask here. It is the job of Government to try to evade answering questions, but not on matters as serious as this, and not when specific and direct questions of fact are asked and not responded to.

I think we know enough, without having those questions answered, about where the Home Secretary has been coming from in these events. We have to have, in the terms of the motion, these inquiries made and these documents released, because we have a right to know. That is the reason why my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has tabled today’s motion. However, I do not think the jury is out any more on the judgment or conduct of the Home Secretary. What this points to more is the judgment and conduct of the Prime Minister, who, knowing all this and knowing who he was reappointing, went ahead and did just that, in the same way that he appointed the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) to a Cabinet position. Incidentally, when questioned about the breach of security for which the right hon. Gentleman was previously sacked, the Prime Minister said that that was “four years ago.” If being four years ago is an excuse, what is being six days ago?

Let us look in more forensic detail at the conduct of the Home Secretary, but let us not let the Prime Minister off the hook either. He must take responsibility for

those appointments that he has made. Even the Business Secretary, the man of a thousand name badges, could not defend the Home Secretary in the comments that he made. The Prime Minister should not be doing that either.

6.12 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). I congratulate him and my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes), who is not in his place, on sticking closely to the script and looking at the issue of papers in some detail. This is indeed a narrow debate, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), whose comment about it being a thin debate made me think of thin gruel. I must, though, commend my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson) for managing to work the word “louche” into the debate. He has a skill that I can only aspire to.

This is a serious issue, though, so with your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will set out some of the context. I would first point with pride to the UK's history of aiding those in genuine distress. In the last two years, we have opened our doors to an unprecedented 350,000 people fleeing conflict around the world, in Ukraine and in Afghanistan, or persecution in Hong Kong. It is the disposition of the people of these islands to be welcoming. It is also their expectation that laws be upheld and the character of our country preserved.

It is the work of Government to balance these desires, but this is an Opposition day debate, and regrettably they have turned instead to the study of the smallest part. That is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, lessons are there to be learned, and I am grateful for their concern for the speck in our eye, but it is the responsibility of Government to keep sight of the big picture and real-world context, so let me briefly set this debate in the real-world context of what is happening in communities up and down the country.

Last Sunday evening, I received a wave of concerned messages and phone calls from constituents of mine living in the community of Dolgarrog, and they were not about papers. I must explain that Dolgarrog is a rural Snowdonia village of around 400 residents. It is a tight-knit, deeply hospitable and Welsh-speaking community. It has its own rich history, woven with aspiration and with tragedy, and it has been my privilege to get to know this during my time as MP. By way of setting this in context, residents there address each other by name and children walk to their school. It came as a shock to them, and this is the reason for the calls to me on Sunday evening, when they discovered that the local hotel had been procured as overflow accommodation for asylum seekers. Overnight, the community found that its population had increased—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I fear that although the hon. Gentleman keeps saying he is setting this in context, he seems to be taking it to a whole different area from what is in the motion, frankly. So could he return very quickly to the motion? I think we have got the gist of what he is saying about what happened the other night, and it is quite important that he addresses the motion.

Robin Millar: Madam Deputy Speaker, I am grateful for your guidance and your indulgence.

When I spoke to residents last night, they did not vent their complaints in questions about papers. They did not hold ideological positions, they did not speak with hatred in their hearts and they did not question the process of ministerial appointments. They did not even question the individual appointments themselves, and they did not ask to see any classified papers. They did not concern themselves with petty party political point scoring. Instead, the overwhelming sentiments and questions were: “How long will this last, should we walk our children to school, can I walk my dog, are my windows and doors secure, and will my son get his job back?” There was no mention of papers. These are the concerns of a community whose future hinges on debates and decisions here in this House, and any of us in the same position would feel the same way.

However, the Opposition have sought to detain the Home Secretary. They want to waste finite time and resources for the sake of pursuing political point scoring. They want to look at papers. They want to remove the speck in our eye, but they have forgotten the beam in their own. Labour has, after all, no plan to reduce the number of dangerous small boat crossings in the channel, and it voted against our Nationality and Borders Act 2022, siding with people smuggling networks and blocking the removal of those with no rights to be in the UK. While serving as shadow Immigration Minister, the Leader of the Opposition said he wanted any migrant who said they were scared to return home to stay in the UK—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is whizzing off again in a completely different direction. I really think he needs to come back to the motion in front of us.

Robin Millar: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. If I may, I am simply drawing attention to the things the Opposition could have chosen to discuss in the House, but did not choose. They have chosen instead to discuss papers.

It is clear that Labour Members are detached from the priorities of residents in their homes and of this country at large. They fail to understand both the magnitude of the crisis and the moral duty towards the estimated 80 million people on the move around the globe. Instead, they wish to talk about papers. It is imperative that the Home Secretary receives the support of this House in the execution of her duties, so I end my speech with a plea that Labour Members take a step back from party politics, debate serious matters and work with us to deliver the protections this country and communities such as Dolgarrog demand.

6.18 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar).

Trust is a really important value, and it something that I fear people listening and watching outside, and perhaps even people in here, feel is deserting this place, particularly after the last three years of what could be described as virtual mayhem, a certain amount of lawbreaking and a certain scandal. The new Prime Minister promised “integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level”,

[Matt Western]

and I think all of us wanted to take him at his word—the country certainly did after the complete and utter chaos of the previous six or seven weeks. We know that as Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) was guilty of six separate breaches of security in six weeks. Previously, as Attorney General, her record showed Cabinet leak inquiries on three occasions in the past year. How many breaches would there have been during the 133 weeks that she was Attorney General?

The Prime Minister should have done due diligence. He has an investment background, and we would have expected that in who he appointed to the top three or four roles in Government. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said, there is evidence of insider trading, and if we were talking about a football manager, they would have been sacked a long time ago. We know the Home Secretary has broken the ministerial code at least twice. These are not one-off mistakes, so why was she reappointed after just six days? That calls into question the judgment and credibility of the Prime Minister, after three years of a Prime Minister trashing the office of No. 10.

Indeed, we know that the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) restricted the access of the then Foreign Secretary to papers while he was in that position, and she did the same for the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson). We then had six weeks of chaos, with the Prime Minister and Chancellor trashing the economy. The country demands integrity, but it is not getting it in the shape of this Home Secretary. Businesses, public sector workers, and in this case civil servants expect professionalism. They expect decency, integrity and standards in public life.

The hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) asked for common sense to be applied, and whether we had visited Ashfield. I have visited Ashfield recently, as he will know. He accused us of being a bunch of bullies. I have never been accused of being a bully in my entire life, yet he asserts that. On behalf of the public we are seeking to understand the degree of breaking of the ministerial code that is going on, and the sense of judgment of the Home Secretary and, by extension, the Prime Minister. I speak to ordinary people on the street, to businesses and others, and a director of a business would have been struck off for this pattern of behaviour. A doctor would have been struck off. This kind of behaviour does not meet the test of being fit and proper to practise.

The motion before us asks whether the Prime Minister undertook a risk assessment. That is critical to understanding what he understood at the moment when he appointed the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham to her position, and back into the Home Office after six days. His leadership has to be understood. Judgment is critical to that, and I am afraid that he failed in that not just once, with his appointment of the right hon. and learned Lady, but a second time with the appointment of the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire. Once upon a time, when Ministers broke the ministerial code or were found to be enmeshed in scandal, they would walk. The Prime Minister talks about integrity, professionalism and accountability, but I am afraid the Home Secretary fails on all three.

6.24 pm

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): This is quite a narrow motion, and I will try not to veer away from the subject at hand, but I need to address some points that have been made. My hon. Friends the Members for Guildford (Angela Richardson), for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) and for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) talked about the amount of correspondence they have received regarding papers. Along with my hon. Friends on the Government Benches, I have not received a single email on papers, the Home Secretary or the behaviour of the Home Secretary. What I have received is hundreds of emails from people who are really concerned about the small boats issue. That is really getting under the skin of my constituents. Not only that: they want to see more police on the street. That is what they are writing to me about, not papers and the hearsay of Opposition Members.

The contributions to the debate from Government Members will be quite short, because ultimately the papers that Opposition Members are referring to are confidential and therefore, based on legal advice, we cannot publish them. So we will keep the debate narrow, but what I find astonishing is that the Opposition talk about national security when we have the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) on the Opposition Benches. We can talk about Chinese money—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Did the hon. Member notify the hon. Member for Brent North that he would refer to him?

Mark Eastwood: No.

Madam Deputy Speaker: In that case, he will not refer to him.

Mark Eastwood: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Ultimately, it is not appropriate for the Government to publish information relating to confidential advice. Despite what the Opposition say, the documents in question did not contain any information relating to national security, the intelligence agencies, cyber-security or law enforcement. In the Home Secretary's letter to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, she clarified:

"The draft WMS did not contain any information relating to national security, the intelligence agencies, cyber security or law enforcement. It did not contain details of any particular case work."

The data in question was already in the public domain.

Stuart C. McDonald: If it was already in the public domain and there is nothing to hide, does the hon. Member agree that we should at least get to see that ministerial statement?

Mark Eastwood: As I said, my constituents are just concerned about the subject at hand, which is illegal immigration and the small boats and dinghies coming over. So no, I do not think that that is correct.

In the Home Secretary's letter to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, she clarified:

"It did not contain any market-sensitive data as all the data contained in the document was already in the public domain."

That concludes my speech.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

6.28 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I am extremely pleased to close this debate on an important motion. It is important to my constituents in Putney, Southfields and Roehampton, who have stopped me on the tube recently and said, “What is going on?” They are perplexed about what is being allowed to happen and especially about the issues around the recent reshuffle and its returns.

Lee Anderson *rose*—

Fleur Anderson: I am just starting off.

The public look to the Home Office to keep them, their families and their communities safe, but the Prime Minister’s decision to reappoint the Home Secretary against advice just six days after she broke the ministerial code and had to resign, and in the light of the further reports about security and code breaches, is shockingly irresponsible. We have heard a full, detailed list of questions that we still do not have answers to. I hope to hear answers to them in the Minister’s closing speech.

We heard powerful speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), who listed several serious questions that need to be answered, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton), who outlined the serious concerns raised by her constituents that need to be addressed, and my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who raised the questionable decisions made by the Home Secretary—that is what is underneath this whole debate today—and the need to appoint an ethics adviser. Perhaps we will hear about that from the Minister later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) gave a forensic analysis of the current Home Secretary’s history of leaking being investigated, and the discrepancies in the timeline: when she reported the mistaken email, the selective information given in the letter to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), and the deficiencies in those letters. That letter and the deficiencies in it are one of the reasons why the Opposition called for this debate and for the documents to be made public.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) underlined the importance of trust and the need to rebuild the trust of our constituents in the Government after recent months—years even—of the Conservative Government. We need to rebuild trust and that is why we need to see the documents. The judgment of the Prime Minister is being called into question, as my hon. Friend outlined, and the country deserves high standards.

Let me be clear: these are serious questions for the Prime Minister. This month’s Prime Minister promised “integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level”,

but the unravelling of the Home Secretary’s story throws all three of those into doubt. There are serious discrepancies in the letter to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, which I think releasing the documents would help to show. The written ministerial statement leaked by the Home Secretary, which is central to these allegations and issues, was sent on purpose to a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, the right hon.

Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and, by mistake, to someone else. That surely throws up lots of questions about what else the Home Secretary is sending out and to whom.

Did the Prime Minister know that the Home Secretary had previously used her personal email on six other occasions when he made this appointment? Did the Prime Minister know about the review into her use of personal and Government IT, and was he presented with the findings before he reappointed her? Did he know about the very serious allegations that the Home Secretary was repeatedly leaking sensitive information when she was Attorney General? Did he know of any other breaches that are not currently in the public domain? Has he seen the contents of the Cabinet Office leak inquiry report? Has he been advised of any further breaches of the ministerial code over the handling of events at Manston? Why has the Prime Minister appointed someone with such a cavalier approach to the security of documents and such a history of leaking, to such an important position for national security? All those questions could be answered right now by the Minister without making any personal information about appointments public. They could just be answered right now and I think that would go a long way to restoring trust. The Prime Minister has an opportunity today to definitively prove he has nothing to hide, or he can Whip those on the Government Benches to vote against this motion. We would then have to assume that there is something to hide.

This is a narrow debate, as has been said many times, and specifically so. It asks only that certain papers be laid before the House within 10 sitting days, so that the decision to reappoint the Home Secretary just six days after resigning can be made fully transparent. We are asking to see only the risk assessment, the documents about security breaches and any leak inquiries, submissions made or advice relating to the appointment, and that if redactions need to be made, understandably so, any unredacted materials are made available to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament.

In his opening remarks, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) said that sharing appointment documents would undermine the appointment system. We are not asking for all documents in all cases to be shared. This is a very exceptional and unusual appointment just six days after a ministerial resignation, so the process is already undermined. The allegations will continue to dog the Home Secretary unless we can fully find out what has been going on. I hope that those documents would restore the trust that has been lost.

It is not just the Opposition who are asking serious questions. The Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), also wrote to the Cabinet Secretary on 3 November to ask many questions about the reappointment of the Home Secretary and about many procedural issues. He has written a list of six serious questions that I hope will be answered soon.

Amid all the chaos, it is timely to remind ourselves that there is still no ethics adviser in post. The Prime Minister said that one of the first things that he would do was to appoint a new ethics adviser. The previous Prime Minister said that she did not even need one, but no one believed that. A Cabinet Office Minister also

[*Fleur Anderson*]

promised me in a Westminster Hall debate on Monday 17 October that an ethics adviser would be appointed very shortly. The Prime Minister has so far not appointed one, but has instead appointed a Home Secretary who resigned over security breaches and an Immigration Minister who admitted acting unlawfully in office. The Minister at the centre of all these allegations remains on the Government Front Bench—it is just “Carry on Conservatives”. Where is the promised new ethics adviser? Why the delay when we are again seeing breaches of the ministerial code left, right and centre? Has the position been offered to anyone or to a succession of people who have said, “No, the work load is too much. We can’t take this on”? Will the Minister update the House today?

The Conservative Government have instead relegated national security to an afterthought, at times an inconvenience and something to be worked around. The Opposition have secured this debate not only because the allegations are very serious in their own right and we need to know more, but because the Home Secretary’s actions and appointment indicate a pattern of behaviour by the Prime Minister in the way that he is making decisions.

There have been allegations that the former Prime Minister used her personal phone for Government business. There are now revelations about the actions of the Cabinet Minister—the Minister without Portfolio, the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson)—and that is relevant to this motion, because that pattern of behaviour cannot become normal. We have to draw a line.

Robin Millar: Have we not just heard the real reason for this motion? It is nothing to do with the Home Secretary or even immigration; it is all to do with trying to establish a pattern of behaviour in the Prime Minister, because the Labour party is playing political games.

Fleur Anderson: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, because we are absolutely seeking to establish whether there is a pattern of behaviour by the Prime Minister in appointing people to the Cabinet who should not be there because of their history of leaks and misbehaviour. That cannot be acceptable. It undermines integrity, which the Prime Minister was talking about. Let me remind colleagues, including the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar), that the Prime Minister has reappointed to Cabinet the man who, in 2019, was sacked as Secretary of State for Defence after a leak investigation. That pattern of behaviour cannot be allowed to continue.

What does this pattern of behaviour show? It appears to indicate that there is no sin too serious, no leak too large and no text too ill-tempered for a Tory to find their way back to the Cabinet table. That is no way to run a country. Is there just a chronic shortage of talent in the Conservative party? Do those who seem to find their way back know where the skeletons are buried? The public will ask those questions unless the documents are made public, and we need to hear them. Unless we see the papers and have reassurance about national security concerns, the public will be left fearing the worst. It is time for the truth. I challenge Government Members to vote for the motion, make the documents public and prove that the Prime Minister has nothing to hide.

6.39 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): It is a pleasure to respond to this Opposition day debate, 10 days into the job though I am; this is a very important subject. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson). I should say at the outset that I can answer one of her questions: the Prime Minister will appoint an independent adviser in the very near future. I am sure that the House will hear about that in due course.

We have had a far-ranging debate. At times it ranged slightly further than you might have liked, Madam Deputy Speaker, from some very interesting insights into the thoughts of constituents in Guildford and Aberconwy to a minor digression on sausage making from the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson). Central to the motion, despite the digressions, is a serious issue that affects the very real business of government and how it is conducted: the question whether advice given to Ministers and Prime Ministers in private, in confidence, should be made public. Conservative Members are clear that it should not.

These are very serious matters that the Government take seriously. It is because we are taking them seriously that we cannot agree to the disclosure of the information set out in the motion. The thrust of this debate is that the Opposition seek to see inside the internal processes of ministerial appointments and to make public the discussions that may form part of any appointment. As my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General said, there are compelling and common-sense reasons why that desire should be resisted.

Lee Anderson: I am very confused. I have sat through this debate for three hours now. Can my hon. Friend explain why the Opposition are hearing from people in their droves asking to see these documents, yet nobody is asking Conservative MPs? Are the Opposition just playing politics?

Alex Burghart: I am shocked and surprised to hear that my hon. Friend has views. It is the first time that he has ever shared them with me. The Opposition have not entirely turned out to take part in this Opposition day debate, it is true.

Hon. Members will know that it is essential to the functioning of government that conversations that occur around appointments can take place in confidence, as my hon. Friends the Members for Devizes (Danny Kruger), for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) and for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson) mentioned.

Stuart C. McDonald: Let us say that we accept that the Government do not want to release these papers. As a compromise, will the Minister undertake to ensure that the new independent ethics adviser looks retrospectively at the appointment? Then everybody could be happy.

Alex Burghart: That is a matter for the last Administration. Also, as hon. Members across the House know, it is a very long-standing practice observed by Governments of all types that they do not give over advice given in confidence. It is a practice that respects the confidentiality of the advice given and the confidentiality owed to the adviser. To place all advice in a position in which it might subsequently be published and made

public would have an absolutely deadening effect on the business of government, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) says.

What this really amounts to is gameplay by the Opposition. It is Labour Whips' trick No. 666: ask the Government for information that they know but that Governments never release, and then feign horror and surprise when they do not release it. The fact is that a Labour Government would never publish such information. If the Opposition commit tonight to releasing such information should they be in power in future, the next Labour Government—may they never come—will bitterly regret that decision.

The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), can say that it is a simple matter of showing us what happened, but as a highly experienced legislator, Minister and Select Committee Chair she knows that this is not a simple matter. It was not a simple matter for the Labour party when it was asked to reveal the legal advice on Iraq, but in opposition it suddenly decided that it was a simple matter to get the Government to display their legal advice on Brexit. Several Members have noted that it is the case that Governments of all stripes do not release such information, and those on the Opposition Front Bench know it to be the case as well.

There is, as we have said, a very long-established process for the appointment of Ministers. It is the Prime Minister who decides who sits on the Front Bench. The Labour party knows as well as we do that Ministers hold office for as long as they retain the confidence of the Prime Minister, that it is for the Prime Minister to decide who sits in the Cabinet, and that it is for the Prime Minister to pick the best team to solve the problems that the country faces. If the Opposition do not like his choices, it is normally a sign that he has picked the right team. On immigration, the Prime Minister has picked my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) because he knows that she has the talent and knowledge that are necessary to help him to solve the small boats crisis in the channel. It is pretty clear tonight that the Labour party knows that too, and that is why it is seeking to undermine her. As we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) and for Ashfield, Labour is doing that because it is scared that she will get the job done.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) and a number of others have said, many important issues could have been debated tonight other than a motion asking for the release of papers that the Opposition know will not be released. The shadow Home Secretary said that “bit by bit” trust was being undermined. I will tell the Opposition what causes trust to be undermined: political games which call for the release of papers that cannot be released and which report rumours as facts, double standards which call for the release of papers that Labour would not have released when it was in power, and double standards which say that Ministers cannot be rehabilitated. I remember the very great Peter Mandelson being brought back on two occasions, but Labour will not forgive this Home Secretary once.

The truth is that this is a motion tabled with the aim of playing political games to try to tie up Ministers in process and reporting, to try to hurt the Government by asking them to deviate from long-standing practice that

has previously been respected on both sides, and to try to distract attention from the fact that while the Government are busting a gut to solve the problems in the channel, the Opposition have no solutions. There is a reason why they want to talk about personnel, process and appointments: it is because they do not want to talk about policy.

The House divided: Ayes 208, Noes 300.

Division No. 88]

[6.47 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara	Elliott, Julie
Ali, Tahir	Elmore, Chris
Anderson, Fleur	Eshalomi, Florence
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Evans, Chris
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Farron, Tim
Barker, Paula	Farry, Stephen
Beckett, rh Margaret	Fellows, Marion
Begum, Apsana	Fletcher, Colleen
Benn, rh Hilary	Flynn, Stephen
Betts, Mr Clive	Foord, Richard
Blackford, rh Ian	Foxcroft, Vicky
Blackman, Kirsty	Furniss, Gill
Blake, Olivia	Gill, Preet Kaur
Blomfield, Paul	Glindon, Mary
Bonnar, Steven	Grady, Patrick
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Grant, Peter
Brock, Deidre	Green, Sarah
Brown, Alan	Greenwood, Lilian
Brown, Ms Lyn	Greenwood, Margaret
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Griffith, Dame Nia
Bryant, Chris	Hamilton, Fabian
Buck, Ms Karen	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Butler, Dawn	Hanna, Claire
Byrne, rh Liam	Hardy, Emma
Cadbury, Ruth	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Callaghan, Amy (<i>Proxy vote</i>	Hayes, Helen
<i>cast by Owen Thompson)</i>	Hendry, Drew
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Hillier, Dame Meg
Chamberlain, Wendy	Hobhouse, Wera
Champion, Sarah	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Chapman, Douglas	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Cherry, Joanna	Hollern, Kate
Clark, Feryal	Hopkins, Rachel
Cooper, Daisy	Hosie, rh Stewart
Cooper, rh Yvette	Howarth, rh Sir George
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Hussain, Imran
Cowan, Ronnie	Jardine, Christine
Coyle, Neil	Jarvis, Dan
Creasy, Stella	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Cryer, John	Jones, Darren
Cummins, Judith	Jones, Gerald
Cunningham, Alex	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Daby, Janet	Jones, Ruth
Davies, Geraint	Jones, Sarah
Davies-Jones, Alex	Kane, Mike
De Cordova, Marsha	Kendall, Liz
Debbonaire, Thangam	Kinnock, Stephen
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Kyle, Peter
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Lake, Ben
Dodds, Anneliese	Lammy, rh Mr David
Doogan, Dave	Law, Chris
Dorans, Allan (<i>Proxy vote cast</i>	Leadbeater, Kim
<i>by Owen Thompson)</i>	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Doughty, Stephen	Lewis, Clive
Eagle, Maria	Lightwood, Simon
Eastwood, Colum	Linden, David
Edwards, Jonathan	Lloyd, Tony
Efford, Clive	Long Bailey, Rebecca

Lucas, Caroline
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell

Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Liz Twist and
Navendu Mishra

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Ben
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony

Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Marcus Jones*)
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter

Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan

Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cheryl
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McVey, rh Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mitchell, Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Morrisey, Joy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, rh Chris
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, rh Victoria
Quin, rh Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Roberts, Rob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David

Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Julian
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, rh Rishi
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Andrew Stephenson and
Scott Mann

Question accordingly negated.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Victoria Atkins relating to the Carer's Leave Bill.—(*Mike Wood.*)

CARER'S LEAVE BILL (MONEY)

King's Recommendation signified.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Carer's Leave Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Alex Burghart.*)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 4 to 6 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

MARINE POLLUTION

That the draft Merchant Shipping (Control of Harmful Anti-Fouling Systems on Ships) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 17 October, be approved.

BRITISH NATIONALITY

That the draft Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (Consequential Amendments) (No. 2) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 13 October, be approved.

CIVIL AVIATION

That the draft Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (No. 3) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 7 September, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 7 to 14 together.

Ordered,

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

That Kevin Foster be a member of the Backbench Business Committee.

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

That Mark Jenkinson be a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

DEFENCE

That Andrew Bowie be discharged from the Defence Committee and Sarah Atherton be added.

EDUCATION

That Tom Hunt be discharged from the Education Committee and Mrs Flick Drummond be added.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

That Kirsty Blackman be discharged from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and Steven Bonnar be added.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

That Helen Whately be discharged from the Health and Social Care Committee and Chris Green be added.

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS

That Mr Gregory Campbell and Fay Jones be discharged from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and Carla Lockhart and Sir Robert Buckland be added.

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS

That Andrew Bowie be discharged from the Scottish Affairs Committee and David Duguid be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITION

Early General Election

7.3 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): In the course of campaigning in the Parkhead area of my constituency yesterday, a number of my constituents were asking why the Government have changed Prime Minister twice in seven weeks. They are determined to see a general election to get rid of this rotten Government. The petitioners therefore

“request that the House of Commons urge the Government to call an early General Election.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Glasgow East,

Declares that the appointment of two Prime Ministers in just seven weeks and significant departures from policy based on the Conservative Party's 2019 manifesto is sufficient cause for His Majesty's Government to seek a new mandate from the electorate.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to call an early General Election.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002779]

Night Flights: Impact on Communities

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Mike Wood.*)

7.4 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting me the opportunity to have this debate on this issue. It is quite well attended, which is nice to see. I welcome the Minister, my former colleague on the Public Accounts Committee, to his place. It is a pleasure to see him here. I understand that he is going to be the Minister for Hammersmith Bridge, so I look forward to our many constructive communications.

Night flights are the most intrusive form of aircraft noise and there is clear evidence that they harm both the physical and mental health of residents who live under flightpaths. This summer, the delays and chaos at Heathrow airport resulted in an increased number of flights landing through the night. For my constituents and for many others across west and south-west London, that disturbance resulted in countless sleepless nights.

This disturbance is completely avoidable. Night flights are by no means essential for airport operations. These flights can and should be moved and it is within the Government's remit to ensure that that happens.

I therefore have two asks of the Department for Transport. My primary call is for a ban on scheduled flights at Heathrow airport between 11 pm and 6 am. That is the only way we can be sure that residents will not continue to suffer from noise disruption. If the Government will not commit to that, they must commission a full independent analysis of the impact of night flights on the health of local communities, the environment and the UK economy to inform future policy development.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) *rose—*

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) *rose—*

Sarah Olney: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) first.

Munira Wilson: It is as if we were co-ordinated.

I congratulate my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour on securing this important debate. My constituency of Twickenham is, of course, that bit closer to Heathrow and further along the flightpath, so I wholeheartedly welcome and support the two asks that she is making of the Minister today about trying to balance the economic benefits of night flights against the health risks and the distress that they cause to constituents. Does she agree that the Government could start by looking at extending the night-time restriction to 10 pm, from 11.30 pm, given the large number of frequent late-night departures that are blighting my constituents' sleep?

Sarah Olney: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We would like to see night flights restricted as much as possible to increase the amount of sleep that our constituents can get.

Christine Jardine: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and an excellent point on an issue that is pertinent to her constituents with regard to Heathrow, and affects

my constituents in Edinburgh and, I am sure, people surrounding every other airport in the country. Night flights are a constant problem. I find my constituents constantly facing the problem of disturbed sleep—more so now that flights are increasing again post pandemic—which has both a physical and an emotional impact on them. Perhaps what we really need is some way of being able to control this, because the airports themselves at the moment cannot seem to control night flights.

Sarah Olney: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent point. She is right, which is why we are calling for independent analysis and tracking so we can see exactly what goes on.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. I spoke to her earlier in relation to this. Belfast City airport is an example of where things can happen. It is in a built-up area. Local residents were unhappy with night-time flights, which are not allowed into Belfast City airport after 9 pm and there is a fine if that happens. Does she not agree that, although people may live under a flightpath, it does not mean that they should simply be expected to live through ever-increasing mayhem? It is a case not of buyers' remorse, but of mental health impact, which should necessitate regulation. Does she agree?

Sarah Olney: I agree 100%. It is important to think about the mental health impact as well as the physical impact.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady may not know this, but my staff and I became somewhat expert on this matter in 2015 when there was a flightpath consultation by Edinburgh airport. My Livingston constituency has, I believe—although it may be debated—around 70% of Edinburgh's flight traffic during the day, but also at night. What we learned from that experience was that there was a complete lack of community consultation. Would she include in her asks of the Government that community consultation, compensation, proper structures and oversight of that must be implemented? You would not put a road through somebody's constituency without proper consultation. Why would you put a flightpath over people's homes without consulting them properly?

Sarah Olney: That point is powerfully made. The Government set the current night flight regime at Heathrow airport, but the restrictions are simply not stringent enough and the true number of night flights is significantly higher than the quota allows. An average of 16 flights per night are permitted to land at Heathrow each year between the hours of 11.30 pm and 6 am, but flights may receive special dispensation not to be counted towards the overall quota if they are delayed due to specific reasons such as weather conditions or air traffic control disruption.

From July to September this year, 231 flights were granted dispensation. That is between two and three additional flights per night on average. In total, 475 unscheduled night flights arrived at or departed from Heathrow airport due to extreme delays and disruption. At times, my constituents would suffer almost continuous noise from aircraft overhead. That is partly due to the Government's complete lack of long-term

planning, which saw airports engulfed in chaos and flight schedules thrown into the air. However, it also proves that the current restrictions are insufficient to limit the impact on residents when disturbances to flight patterns occur.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The eastern fringe of my constituency, my home town, is directly under the flightpath of Glasgow airport. A local group in my constituency, the Whitecrook Aircraft Noise Association, has been fighting for years for local residents affected by noise to be given the necessary support to alleviate its effects. When the hon. Lady asks her questions of the Minister, one of the most important and basic questions is what the Government are going to do to stop night-time flights across our constituencies.

Sarah Olney: Indeed, that is the pertinent question: what are the Government going to do?

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady, my neighbour, for giving way. To answer her question, we know what the Government are doing: they are increasing the misery for our constituents. The southern part of my constituency is already under the flightpath and the whole of it will be if, God forbid, the third runway is ever built. There is a totally cavalier attitude, particularly to depriving people of sleep. No other country, certainly in Europe, would put up with an airport like Heathrow's being expanded and the transgressions that night flights in particular make on the people who have to live with them.

Sarah Olney: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about expansion, and I will come on to that later.

The current night flight quotas are in place until October 2025. The Government have agreed to consult on proposals for the next regime over the course of 2023, but that will be of little comfort to many Londoners facing a further three years of disruption. Night flights are becoming an increasing issue across London. Data from the Civil Aviation Authority shows that night-time noise events from Heathrow affected 974,000 people in 2018—that is 140,000 more people than in 2006.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The hon. Lady may be coming on to this point, in which case I apologise, but over the years we have been arguing that this issue is not just about the numbers, but about the impact on physical health and mental health in particular, the stress and lack of sleep it causes and the consequences of those things for people's quality of life. The Government have never really taken that into account, so I hope that she will be able to at least focus their attention on the real effects that this issue is having on people's lives.

Sarah Olney: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention; he is absolutely right. The Government state that their policy is to

"limit and, where possible, reduce the number of people in the UK significantly affected by aircraft noise."

We can see from the numbers already that the policy is not fit for purpose, but he is correct that it is not about the numbers, but about the impact on those who are affected.

[Sarah Olney]

Long-term exposure to nocturnal aircraft noise is strongly linked to sleep disorders, and lack of sleep or disrupted sleep can have a direct impact on people's health. One study found that, for each additional 10 dB of night-time aircraft noise that communities are exposed to, there is an increase of between 14% and 69% in their risk of high blood pressure, increasing the risk of strokes and heart attacks.

A World Health Organisation study from 2009 also found that an individual may suffer from negative health impacts of sleep disruption even if they do not wake up at night. Other researchers have found links between long-term exposure to aircraft noise and an increased risk of obesity, depression and cardiovascular issues—and I do not need to cite a scientific study to explain the impact that a lack of sleep has on mental wellbeing, as so many right hon. and hon. Members have already mentioned it.

Hannah Bardell: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Olney: Does the hon. Lady mind if I make a bit more progress?

In children, sleep disruption makes it more difficult for them to retain focus throughout the day. Studies have suggested that that has a negative impact on reading comprehension and memory, which can have a knock-on impact on their academic performance and general wellbeing. The human impact of night flights only intensified over the summer months, during which temperatures reached record highs. Many Londoners were left choosing between keeping their windows shut and suffering with unbearable heat or opening them and hearing the full roar of jet engines overhead. This opposition to night flights does not arise purely out of annoyance or inconvenience.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The hon. Lady is being incredibly generous with her time. She is making the point that we have all been making: it is not about numbers; it also has to be about one's quality of life. It is about family life, and we all have a right to that quality of life. Does she agree that the Government can no longer continue in this way? They must bring in this night flight restriction as soon as they possibly can, because my constituents in Battersea are also being impacted by this issue.

Sarah Olney: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point and I thank her for intervention. What we are hearing from all parts of the House—well, certainly all the parties on the Opposition side of the House—is that night flights pose a real risk to the physical and mental wellbeing of thousands of Londoners and other communities across the country of all ages.

That brings me to Heathrow expansion. The Conservative Government's constant mixed messaging and refusal to rule out Heathrow expansion is causing further anxiety for my constituents. Just four weeks ago, the former Prime Minister voiced her support for a third runway at Heathrow, having previously stated she would even support a fourth being built. That followed her predecessor, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), stating that he would lie in front of the

diggers to prevent such an expansion. I would therefore appreciate it if the Minister clarified the Government's current position in his remarks. Will this Government, the third Administration in as many months, rule out Heathrow expansion?

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank my neighbour, the hon. Member for Richmond Park, for securing this debate. The overflying flights into Heathrow go over her constituency before mine. Does she not agree that we need to be concerned not just about Heathrow expansion meaning a third runway, but the possibility that the airport will try to get more flights on the existing two runways in breach of the 480,000 cap? It could of course do that if it did away with alternation, which provides respite to our residents, and had more flights during the night-time period.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): On that point, will my hon. Friend give way?

Sarah Olney: Yes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I think the hon. Member needs to answer one intervention before taking another.

Sarah Olney: The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) makes an excellent point, and she and I share views on this issue.

Wera Hobhouse: I apologise to my hon. Friend.

Many of my Bath constituents have expressed concerns about the increasing number of flights taking off from Bristol airport late at night. Does she not also agree that the climate emergency compels us to look at an overall reduction in flights, particularly internal short flights where rail is available as an alternative?

Sarah Olney: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. She is precisely right. Our concern relates not only to night flights, but very much to the fact that Heathrow expansion would lead to increased noise levels and around 6 million additional tonnes of carbon being pumped into the atmosphere each year. The UK cannot properly tackle the climate crisis if we continue to expand our airports, especially when we should be promoting greener transport.

Hannah Bardell: Will the hon. Member give way?

Sarah Olney: Very briefly.

Hannah Bardell: I promise this is my last intervention. On the point of greener transport, does the hon. Member agree that freight flights, which are particularly noisy and polluting, should especially be banned at night? We discovered in studies and the work we did in my constituency that they were the noisiest and most problematic. We are all compelled to look for alternatives, as is the aircraft industry.

Sarah Olney: The hon. Member is particularly right on that. Where particular types of flight are known to be noisier, there should be additional restrictions. Members listening to the scale of disruption caused by night

flights might wonder why they are still allowed to continue, and that is precisely the question to which I am seeking an answer.

Heathrow bosses have argued that night flights are vital to the UK economy, but there is a serious lack of evidence to back that up. The Heathrow Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise and other campaigners' groups have argued that the economic benefit of night flights is exaggerated. Heathrow claims that the direct benefit of night flights operating at Heathrow was £325 million in 2011, supporting 6,300 jobs, but its estimates are based on a report that expands the definition of jobs supported by night flights significantly and includes the many day workers who clock in before 6 am.

The positive economic benefits of night flights are not certain. Researchers at CE Delft found that a ban on night flights would only harm the national economy if none of the passengers who currently arrive on scheduled flights before 6 am were transferred to other flights. There is simply not enough data at present to claim that night flying is essential to the UK economy. The studies we have are more than 10 years old and have not taken into account the changes to the aviation sector since the pandemic.

London is one of the most overflowed capital cities in the world. Millions of people across the city experience the negative impacts of night flights, such as on their health, sleep quality and mental wellbeing. What my constituents really need is a complete ban on flights between the hours of 11 pm and 6 am. That is the only way to prevent continued disturbance. Despite the vast amount of disruption caused by night flights, no independent analysis has ever been conducted to show the impact of night flights on London's health, economy or society. If the Government refuse to legislate to ban night flights, they must at least look at tightening the current restrictions, to limit the human impact on local communities.

For the Government to make an informed decision, we need accurate, independent data on the negative impacts that these flights have on the surrounding communities, as well as the supposed economic benefits. Will the Government commit to commissioning a full independent analysis on the impact of night flights? The Department for Transport must listen to the concerns of local communities and take those into account to devise a night flights policy that works for both residents and the aviation sector.

I would like to take a moment to thank the Members who attended the debate and have added so much emphasis to what I wanted to say.

7.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on securing this debate and on her informative, constructive speech. It has been a well-attended debate, with contributions from the hon. Members for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), and the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell).

On the Hammersmith bridge point, I have written to the hon. Member for Richmond Park today; she is correct about that. I did it just before I left the office. I enjoyed my time with her on the Public Accounts Committee, and it is nice to be able to communicate with her today in a slightly different way.

The hon. Lady asked for two specific things: a ban on night flights, and analysis of the full health impacts. I will go into detail on those in my speech. It is worth noting from the get-go that night flights do bring a positive impact to the UK economy and connectivity benefits with the world.

Ruth Cadbury: Is the Minister aware that, some years ago, the Government had to defend a case on night flights and did not have the evidence to justify the position he is taking on the economic advantage of flights arriving before 6 am? The reason the Government did not provide that information is that it did not exist.

Mr Holden: My understanding is that the statistics from the York Aviation report in 2021 on the economic impact of night flights in the UK said that it was about £8.7 billion of gross value added to the UK economy, with tens of thousands of jobs supported in the UK.

The time differences of an interconnected global transport system, particularly with the far east, mean that it is difficult to avoid all flights at night and early in the morning. As I said, the recent research from York Aviation estimates that in 2019, flights during the night quota period had a total impact of over £8 billion. Heathrow airport accounts for a significant proportion of that value. However, we also recognise that the noise from aircraft at night brings significant negative impacts to the local community. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park made clear, exposure to aviation noise at night can impact on physical and mental wellbeing, and I agree with her that sleep disturbance can have a negative impact on health, increasing the risk of daytime sleepiness, hypertension and cardiovascular disease.

We need to strike a fair balance between the positive and negative impacts of night flights. With that in mind, for several decades the Government have set noise controls, including restrictions on night operations at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted. Those airports are designated for noise purposes under the Civil Aviation Act 1982. That reflects their strategic importance and the need to balance the impact on communities with the impact on the UK economy and jobs. At other airports, noise controls are best set locally, and there are regulations in the devolved Administrations enabling them to look at some of the environmental impacts.

Last year, we consulted on night flight restrictions at the designated airports and on a night new night flight regime. Following that consultation, we announced that existing night flight restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted will be rolled over for three years. That will allow the Government to develop a more meaningful evaluation of the cost—which the hon. Lady asked for—and of the benefits of night flights, taking into account the effects of the pandemic and the extent and speed at which aviation demand returns.

Sarah Olney: You talk there about a full analysis. I just wonder whether you can confirm that that will include—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Whether he can confirm.

Sarah Olney: I beg your pardon, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether the Minister can confirm that that will be a full analysis of the health and mental wellbeing impacts and of all the other things we have been talking about today.

Mr Holden: I thank the hon. Lady for that point, and I will address that exact issue later in my speech.

As the hon. Lady said, the night flight regime is now in place until October 2025, and we intend to consult in late 2023 on proposals for the next regime. I urge hon. Members who are interested in this issue to take part in that consultation, and I look forward to the hon. Lady's feelings and those of her constituents being made known.

The night flight regime limits the number of flights for the purpose of noise management. The restrictions significantly reduce the number of flights that would otherwise operate because of the quota. At Heathrow, the number of movements permitted has not changed for many years. Although I admit that there are occasional extra flights, they are not something that the Government want to see expand in the future.

The new generation of aircraft, such as the A350 and the Boeing 737 MAX, have a significantly smaller noise footprint on departure and on arrival—it is about 50% smaller on departure and 30% smaller on arrival—than the aircraft they are replacing.

Christine Jardine *rose—*

Mr Holden: I am sorry, but I have to get through my speech.

Overall, aircraft noise is expected to continue to fall in the future. The last consultation on night flight restrictions did implement a ban on QC4-rated aircraft movements at the designated airports during the night-time quota period to specifically address some of the noise concerns. Prior to the pandemic, departing Boeing 747-400s were the noisiest aircraft in regular service at those airports. Although they could not be scheduled during the night quota period, they could still operate if delayed, although there were only very few of those delays. The operational ban on QC4-rated movements came into effect for the most noisy aircraft at the end of last month for the winter 2022-23 season. It will help in limiting the number of people significantly affected by aircraft noise by preventing those aircraft from operating.

On the dispensations, I know that Heathrow would be keen to meet the hon. Lady and other colleagues to discuss the issue further. I am aware of the issue she raises. Section 78 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982 sets the legal framework through which the Government set the night flight operating restrictions at the designated airports. That allows the airport operator, or the Secretary of State for Transport, to disregard certain movements, providing that they meet specific criteria. Those dispensations are granted by the Secretary of State and include flights by senior members of the royal family, UK Government Ministers or Heads of State on official visits. Humanitarian relief flights or exceptional circumstances could also be covered. Dispensations under a notice granted by an airport manager, which would include emergencies where there is immediate danger to life or health, are also

included, as are delays as a result of disruption that lead to serious hardship and major congestion at an airfield or terminal.

This summer was particularly challenging from an air traffic control perspective and resulted in an increase in late-running flights. Widespread and prolonged air traffic disruption accounts for the majority of the 415 flights that the hon. Lady mentioned, which qualified for a dispensation at Heathrow. Any movements that are granted a dispensation in this way do not count towards an airport's movement allowance. I appreciate that that creates uncertainty about the night flights that communities can expect.

Sarah Olney: It is very kind of the Minister to give way again. Will he elaborate slightly on some of those numbers and whether it might be possible for members of the public and Members of Parliament to get a better understanding of when dispensations have been granted?

John McDonnell: And why.

Sarah Olney: And also why, because they have no visibility, which makes it very hard for us.

Mr Holden: I fully take on board the hon. Lady's points and would recommend that she takes up the opportunity to meet with Heathrow officials, who have offered to meet her, because they will be able to explain in full detail. If she wants to write to me after that meeting, I will obviously write back with as many details as I have in the Department.

We remain committed to revising our night flight dispensation guidance—perhaps the hon. Lady can also write to me about that after those meetings. This will be done following a review of the number of night flight dispensations made this summer, because it was higher. I would like to reassure the hon. Lady that all night flight dispensations granted by airport managers are subject to monitoring by the Department for Transport.

To respond to the issues the hon. Lady raised about night flights, there is a study currently under way. Exposure to aviation noise at night can impact on physical and mental wellbeing, as well as sleep disturbance. To better understand this, the Department has commissioned the aviation night noise effects study to examine the relationship between aviation noise and sleep disturbance and annoyance, and how this varies by different times of the night. The study is a collaboration between St George's University of London, NatCen Social Research, Noise Consultants Ltd and the University of Pennsylvania. It is the first study of aviation noise effects on sleep disturbance in the UK for 30 years. The first stage of ANNE will involve a cross-section of 4,000 people who live near eight of the major UK airports, to assess the association between aircraft noise exposure at night and subjective assessments of sleep quality and annoyance.

Martin Docherty-Hughes *rose—*

Mr Holden: I am very sorry, I am going to have to keep going. The second stage of the study—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman can write to me, as he asks from a sedentary position.

The second stage of the study will involve an observational study of individuals recruited from the survey to assess the association between aircraft noise exposure and objective sleep quality. This will involve psychological assessments of sleep disturbance and sound level measurements in participants' bedrooms. That evidence will be used to inform future policies for night flight aviation noise exposure, and assist with the management and mitigation of health impacts on local communities, as part of a wider assessment of the costs and benefits of night flying.

In conclusion, the Government recognise that noise from aircraft taking off and landing at night is often regarded by communities as the most disturbing form of airport operations. At the same time, we live in a fully interconnected and global world, and the aviation sector

has material value to the UK economy. Night flights are an important contributor to that. The Government continue to strive to find the correct balance between the negative impacts of aviation and the positive economic benefits that night flights bring to the British economy, as can be seen from the fact that we are conducting this important study. The findings of the aviation night noise effects study and the consultation on the future night flight regime will be the next steps on that important journey. I hope that, going forward, that survey will also play into our consultation on night flights.

Question put and agreed to.

7.33 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 8 November 2022

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month

[*Relevant document: e-petition 560539, Increase investment in Pancreatic Cancer research.*]

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered pancreatic cancer awareness month.

It is good to see everyone here. I thank Members for attending and look forward to their contributions, especially those from the shadow Ministers. In particular, I look forward to the contribution from the Minister, who is back in post again. I wish her well and look forward to her summing up of the debate.

It is a pleasure to speak on the subject and I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on pancreatic cancer. I am pleased that my application to the Backbench Business Committee for a debate was successful, and I have a number of asks. I pay special tribute to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), who is sitting to my right. She was chair of the APPG, and when her health was not the best, she asked me whether I would take it over. That seemed to be the unanimous opinion of the members of the group, so I was pleased to do so.

I owe the hon. Lady a special thanks. She is the lady, as she always is, who presented the issue and pushed it, and I just follow in her footsteps. That is a fact. I am pleased to see her getting back to health and strength, and look forward to her contribution, which I am sure will be factual and helpful to the debate.

With pancreatic cancer, silence is deadly. That is where we are—very much conscious of pancreatic cancer and what it does. It is a disease that gets too little attention and too little funding. That is one of my asks of the Minister, and I prepare her for it in advance. Later, I will refer to some stats and figures, which will reinforce the issue. Thousands of people die of pancreatic cancer every year, so it is critical that we secure early diagnosis and ensure that the funding for research is there. Ultimately, we must raise awareness of the disease—for example, through today's debate.

Pancreatic cancer is the deadliest common cancer of all, which underlines the importance of the debate, and the stats surrounding it are truly shocking: 10,000 people across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are diagnosed with the disease every year, and half the people diagnosed die within three months of their diagnosis. That is alarming, and I want to present some evidence about how the disease affects people, particularly those in my constituency.

Sadly, only 7% of those who are diagnosed survive five years, and even fewer survive longer than that. The five-year survival rate for pancreatic cancer in Northern Ireland is one of the worst in the world at 4.9%, and it puts us 32nd out of 36 countries in the survival charts. That tells us all about where we are. The Minister is not

responsible for health in Northern Ireland because health is a devolved matter, but I want to use the debate to highlight the issue and to show where we can push for the improvements that we would like to see and wish we could have. Back home, I have been pushing the Minister of Health on that for a long time, and I want us to have such a strategy on the UK mainland in the hope that we can do the same in turn in Northern Ireland.

When I am in my constituency office, my heart sinks when people come in for help with their personal independence payment form and inform me that their illness is pancreatic cancer. I feel my stomach sinking and my heart dropping, and I take a deep breath, because I know that I am looking across the counter at someone—man or woman—who, unfortunately, has limited time left in this world. Much more often than not, pancreatic cancer is a death sentence. My office helps people with benefits, PIP forms and universal credit, which eases them through the financial issues. There is a health burden, but the other burden is finance—when someone can no longer earn the money that they need to pay the bills and get through.

November is many things, but we are here because it is Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month. All around the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, people have been lighting up their homes and local landmarks purple, holding fundraising events for charities such as Pancreatic Cancer UK, and having conversations. It is so important to have conversations to raise awareness of the deadliest common cancer of all.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on the work that he is doing in the all-party parliamentary group. He is highlighting the importance of November being Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month. Does he agree that early detection is key? Unfortunately, at the moment pancreatic cancer has the lowest survival rate of all common cancers. Awareness is critical in assisting people, moving toward early detection and trying to get those figures down.

Jim Shannon: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. I will give an example and mention a lady's name; I have her permission to do so. I am pretty sure that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire knows this lady, and others may also know her story, which illustrates where early detection and diagnosis can make all the difference. We need to focus on the three symptoms to look out for, which can lead to the early detection and diagnosis that are so important.

Pancreatic cancer is a brutal illness, and there is no better way of understanding how brutal it is than by hearing how it impacts an individual and their family. To that end, I will take the opportunity to share the story of Rebecca Buggs, who is the face of the Pancreatic Cancer UK campaign this Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month. She is a nurse, who looked after pancreatic cancer patients and was well aware of the symptoms. Ultimately, her awareness of those symptoms saved her life.

The Pancreatic Cancer UK campaign is called “No Time to Wait”, and there is no time to wait. There must be an instantaneous response to symptoms—my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) mentioned the importance of that—because for patients

[Jim Shannon]

with pancreatic cancer, delay means disaster. Rebecca, who is 43, knows that all too well. She has been a nurse for 21 years, and over the course of her career she has prepared many patients for the Whipple procedure—the only operation that provides a possible cure for pancreatic cancer. When Members hear her story, they will understand the importance of that.

On Christmas day last year, almost 11 months ago, Rebecca began to feel very unwell. She believed it was just a covid-19 infection, as many do; if someone is not well, they think it must be covid, because covid has been prevalent for the last two and a half years. Three days later, her husband noticed that she was jaundiced and said, “Becki, you look like a Minion”—not because that is a derogatory term, but because Minions all have yellow faces. After contacting the on-call registrar, whom she fortunately knew because of her role as a nurse, she was told to head straight to her hospital for blood tests and scans.

On 4 January this year, 10 days after her symptoms began, Rebecca was told the devastating news that she had pancreatic cancer. Luckily, her cancer was caught early enough for her to have the Whipple procedure, for which she had prepared many patients over all those years in her job. For most patients, it is far too late; only 10% of people are able to access that surgery. One of the things I will ask the Minister about is access to surgery; I know that she will have an answer to our queries, as she always does.

In the campaign, Rebecca talks incredibly powerfully about how this time was for her and her family. It is not just about the impact on the person who has the disease; it is about the impact, in this case, on her husband, her children, her mum and dad, and everyone else. She talks about how scary it was to be the one on the operating table after preparing so many for the procedure herself, highlighting the experience of so many with this devastating cancer. She said:

“These were the hardest 11 days of my life. I was away from my children, Jacob who’s 9 and Georgia who’s 8, and they couldn’t come and visit me because of COVID.”

It is vital that we drive improvements so that more people like Rebecca can get access to life-saving treatment for this cancer. That is why Pancreatic Cancer UK’s “No Time to Wait” campaign is vital. We need to ensure that people can get a diagnosis and treatment or surgery—whichever is the case—as soon as possible in order to give them the best chance of survival. I share Rebecca’s concern that so many people are struggling to get GP appointments or referrals for the right tests when they have concerning symptoms such as stomach ache, backache and indigestion. As Rebecca says,

“they become so ill and jaundiced that they get admitted to A&E and by then it’s too late.”

When the symptoms and the diagnosis are there and the tests are done, access to surgeons and surgery is so important.

Rebecca’s point about people with pancreatic cancer being diagnosed in A&E is particularly important. We often think in this day and age that if someone receives a cancer diagnosis, that will happen in a quiet consultation room in a hospital or perhaps in their local GP surgery, but more often than not it happens in a crowded room. More often than not—I say this with respect to doctors

and GPs—it may become repetitive for GPs to tell patients that they have a diagnosis of whatever it may be, but that is a life-changing statement for the patient.

A person came to see me this week and told me that his wife had been diagnosed with cancer, albeit not pancreatic cancer. The doctor had told her very matter-of-factly that she had it, and she was absolutely devastated. What the doctor perhaps could have done was told her husband, who could then have conveyed the news to his wife in a way that would not have been such a shock.

People might expect that the doctor will give them their diagnosis and follow that up with a clear treatment plan for how they will treat and beat their cancer. In 2022, we expect that there will be a clear path to a cure and a good chance that, eventually, the person will be given the all-clear. But with pancreatic cancer, that just is not the case. More than 60% of patients with pancreatic cancer get diagnosed only in an emergency setting. I think that if anything at all indicates pancreatic cancer, the doctors and those who are aware of it need to prioritise it immediately, because speed is of the essence. Some 70% of people do not receive any active treatment at all, because they are too unwell by the time they are diagnosed; it is almost too late for them. Let that sink in. Imagine receiving a pancreatic cancer diagnosis and then immediately being told, “By the way, there is no possible treatment plan or cure.” That is devastating.

We have to improve; we have to make the situation better. We have to try to respond in such a way that we add comfort, compassion and understanding—and, more importantly, the opportunity for surgery. It bears repeating that more than half of people who receive a pancreatic cancer diagnosis will die within three months. Wow—that is another blinder of a statement. It really underlines the seriousness of the matter. For people with pancreatic cancer, there really is no time to wait.

What is the reason behind my saying all this? Primarily, it is that people with pancreatic cancer are being diagnosed far too late. We are all familiar with the fact that the earlier someone is diagnosed, the better their chances of survival. But some things are needed before people can get that crucial early diagnosis. I will outline some of them, and I hope that the Minister will be able to respond in a way that is helpful.

First, we all need to spread awareness of the symptoms of this cancer, which are stomach and back pain, indigestion, unexplained weight loss, and jaundice. The colour caused by jaundice would obviously be noticeable right away, but all the other things are more difficult. Someone might have a bit of backache and a bit of indigestion now and again. People should always look out for any weight loss, and sometimes even weight gain. Of course, it is striking how common the symptoms on that list are. We would not naturally associate them with pancreatic cancer, but it is vital that people get checks if they experience those symptoms with no explanation. It might not be just backache or a bit of indigestion; it might be more.

Secondly and simply, there needs to be a test. It is all well and good going to the GP with these types of symptoms, but we also need to equip GPs with the tools that they need to start ruling things out. Will the Minister tell us how we can help our GPs to have all the equipment in place to make early diagnoses, and to refer people for the right test as soon as possible if they have even a minute suspicion that a person might be

facing pancreatic cancer? Currently, there is no such test, but research is ongoing to try to create one, which could make a huge difference by allowing people to be diagnosed at an early stage.

We often speak about research and development. I probably mention it in every health debate—not to be repetitive, but because it is a real issue. Research and development is so important to find a cure and a way to help patients. Will the Minister tell us what can be done to increase research and development in this area? I will give a shocking figure that underlines the importance of research, which is the third key to unlocking earlier diagnosis. Currently, pancreatic cancer is the fifth most common cause of cancer death, but it receives just 1.4% of cancer research funding in the UK. Without sustained investment in innovative research, we will not be able to improve survival rates at the pace that we must.

To date, Pancreatic Cancer UK has invested over £10 million in pancreatic cancer research, including research that aims to develop a simple test for the cancer, but it is a charity, so its funds are limited. Will the Minister tell us what can be done to help pancreatic cancer research and development? It is sometimes easy to say this, but I genuinely believe in my heart that the Government have to step in and help, because pancreatic cancer is so brutal and singular, and it ends life very quickly. Can we please have some direction on what can be done to help?

To achieve major breakthroughs, we need the research and development upgraded. We need extra money spent, well above the 1.4% of cancer research funding that pancreatic cancer receives at the moment. I say with respect that if Pancreatic Cancer UK can raise some £10 million, which is quite a bit for a small charity, the Government need to match that and do a wee bit better. Despite everything we have heard today, we need the charity's ambition and spend to be matched by the Government and other national research funders.

In addition to driving crucial research breakthroughs, the Government must ensure that they take action to improve outcomes for people with pancreatic cancer. I know that lots of cancers are deadly, but pancreatic cancer is the deadliest. Because of that, it needs a wee bit of extra assistance. That is particularly important at the moment, as we are heading into what will be a very challenging winter for the NHS, with the pandemic, staff shortages and underfunding pushing it to breaking point. By its very nature, the press is quite negative, and it is sometimes hard to be positive about all the different news that we hear in the media, on TV and in the papers, but we need to have pancreatic cancer research and development, and response, at the centre of our cancer strategy.

Without action, there is a risk that things will get even worse for people with pancreatic cancer, as any additional delays to vital appointments, tests and treatments—the three things we need, along with an assurance on the speed of response—will have an adverse impact on people who have no time to wait. There has been inaction on pancreatic cancer for too long, but together we can change that. Indeed, I believe it is our duty to push for better for those who are faced with this deadly cancer.

We need to see urgent action, and there are things that the Government could do now to start shifting the dial. First, they must publish the 10-year cancer

plan as soon as possible. Back in January, the then Health and Social Care Secretary, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), committed to publishing a 10-year cancer plan that would transform this country into a world-leading force for cancer care and treatment. Our previous Prime Minister recommitted to doing that, but we have since had silence—I say this with respect—from the new Prime Minister, who has had plenty on his plate, and the new Health and Social Care Secretary. Pancreatic cancer has been neglected by successive Governments, as have cancer plans. As a result, survival rates have not improved in decades. There has been a lack of action over time on pancreatic cancer, and we really need to ensure that work is put in place.

A funded and ambitious cancer plan would be a real step in the right direction, demonstrating our national ambition. I am proud to be British and proud to have a Government that lead. We need to lead on this, and we need to do so very quickly. That will give us something to aim for in driving up outcomes and survival, and it will help us to give people hope. That hope has not been there for years, and it needs to be there now. I say this very politely but sincerely and firmly: currently, we are a rudderless ship, and a cancer plan would give us direction and hope. The World Health Organisation advises that all nations need a cancer strategy to give this killer disease the attention it deserves. Through this debate, through our Minister and through our Government, let us become a country that can do better and does not fail to meet that standard.

To make a real difference, the cancer plan must have a specific focus on less survivable cancers, including pancreatic cancer—the ones that kill the most and kill the earliest. Unfortunately, it is possible to receive a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer and, within three months, to be no longer in this world. The plan must include investment in the workforce so that everyone can have a diagnosis and treatment plan within 21 days. That is the best practice that Pancreatic Cancer UK and clinical experts believe should be the reality everywhere. I make a special request for the Minister to address that. I say this often, but it does not lessen the issue, because it is important: I am proud of being in this Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but we need to share what we have done regionally in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England in order to do things better. There may even be a necessity for a UK-wide policy and strategy.

Getting a diagnosis quickly is crucial in ensuring people can get the treatment they need as soon as possible. In addition, the cancer plan must deliver the funding needed to enable specialist cancer nurses to support everyone with pancreatic cancer as soon as possible after their diagnosis, helping them manage their symptoms and maintain a good quality of life. We must ensure that, when the family and financial pressures are gathering around someone and they sometimes feel like it is just them fighting the disease, that is not the case. We need to wrap our arms around people and tell them that they are not on their own.

I hope the Government will commit today to publishing the cancer plan. That is critical; it is at the core of the issue, and we need it. I encourage the Minister to meet Pancreatic Cancer UK and people affected by this awful disease to find out more about the “No Time to Wait” campaign and how the 10-year cancer plan can

[Jim Shannon]

finally shift the dial. I know the answer will be yes but, for the purpose of having it in *Hansard*, will she commit to having that meeting, which I think will enable Pancreatic Cancer UK to press, push, emphasise and raise awareness of the matter?

There has been silence around pancreatic cancer for too long, but through this debate, together—collectively as MPs, with the Minister and regionally—we can change that attitude. We need to speak up and demand immediate change on behalf of those who have already lost their lives and the families left to grieve, those who are living with pancreatic cancer right now, and those who face a diagnosis in the coming months. We want to give them hope. We want them to know that if they get the disease, their treatment will be prioritised through A&E, their diagnosis will be quick, the response will be equally quick, and surgery will follow.

We have work to do in Northern Ireland, and I understand that—the figures I gave earlier emphasise it only too well—but we also have work to do across this great United Kingdom. I am asking for attention to be paid UK-wide in the form of a pancreatic cancer strategy, with information and guidance shared in every area of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I am conscious that others want to contribute and I very much look forward to their contributions, including those of the shadow Ministers and, in particular, the Minister. I know that she, along with all of us, will want to do all she can to save lives. I look forward to her response, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the opportunity to speak on this subject.

In Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month we have a duty as elected representatives in this House to deliver a message. With respect, we hope that the Minister and the Government will respond centrally, with a pancreatic cancer strategy that we can all look up to, so that when people with pancreatic cancer come to my office, as they often do, to fill in PIP forms, I can then tell them that there is some hope and show them what they need to do.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 11 am. I am obliged to call the first of the Front Benchers no later than 10.27 am. Guideline limits are 10 minutes for the SNP, 10 minutes for His Majesty's Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Jim Shannon will have three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. The next 30 minutes are Back-Bench time. There are three Members seeking to speak, the first of whom is Siobhan Baillie.

9.56 am

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate in an important awareness-raising month for pancreatic cancer. I meet hundreds of people each month as Stroud's MP, and I am asked to take up thousands of issues and causes. Sometimes people demand that I take up causes, and my team get fed up with me, because I want to help everybody, and they say I generate work whenever I leave the house. I know that many MPs across all political parties will share the same experience.

When constituents come with very clear asks and a constructive approach, it makes it easier for us as MPs. I have found over time in my still relatively new role in the past three years that everybody who comes to talk to me about pancreatic cancer comes with that constructive approach and a clear set of asks about what they want to happen. It does not matter how personal it has been for them, or whether they have had loss or are cancer survivors themselves. Pancreatic cancer is something that people want to see changed. They are going about it the right way, by bringing matters to us, so that we can raise issues with Ministers. I thank them for that, as well as the charities, Pancreatic Cancer UK and others.

The more I have looked into the subject, the more I have understood why it needs to be addressed. Campaigners and families affected by pancreatic cancer talk about the failure in our NHS medical system. As wonderful as the NHS is, there is a failure to detect this cancer earlier. They raise the failure to get people properly to understand the symptoms of this cancer. One of my constituents says, "The clue is in the loo," which I like as a slogan. They also raise the failure to prescribe medicine that will help people, which I will come to separately.

If there are clear asks in this area of medicine, people are confused why they are not being met. The medical healthcare system is failing our constituents at the moment on pancreatic cancer. I know that Stroud people, whom I love dearly, will die of this most deadly common cancer, if the health care system does not change.

I want to talk about one of my constituents: a young woman, my age, a mum, businesswoman, super-bright cancer survivor. She is a young woman with what was thought of as an elderly person's cancer. For about five years, she went to her GP with fatigue, bloating and general lethargy, but a further investigation into cancer was not done. She went backwards and forwards with a list of symptoms, but it was not picked up. Her tumour was the size of a walnut and internal, so that it could not be felt. We have got used to checking our bits and bobbins, as my wonderful hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) tells us to do, but where there is an internal walnut-sized lump—not lumps on breasts or testicles—we are stuck, and people are not detecting it. If our medical system is not detecting it, we are in difficulties.

My constituent's experience highlights the need for people and health care professionals to be alert to smaller symptoms that could be a sign of pancreatic cancer. We need to talk about poo—the clue is in the loo. We need to raise awareness of this silent cancer. If the general population is not aware of symptoms, we will miss it and will get further into difficulties with that devastating loss.

My constituent also asked me to campaign on the issue of PERT—pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy. There has been a push from cancer charities to try to get PERT prescribed more frequently, because three in four people with pancreatic cancer reported that PERT improved their quality of life. It is about 60 tablets a day and not an easy thing for people to take, but it improves their quality of life. It reduces the weight loss, the appetite loss, the abdominal pain and the bloating or wind. It reduces pale, oily and floating poo, and it reduces diarrhoea. All of that enables patients to regain some normality in their day to day lives, and it helps food to be digested and absorbed by the body. That means they

gain strength to undergo potentially life-saving treatment. Given that we know about that treatment, why is it not prescribed as frequently as campaigners suggest it should be?

We understand there is a lack of awareness among healthcare professionals about what PERT can do, and that the levels of nutritional expertise among healthcare professionals are quite low, particularly in general hospitals. We know, as the hon. Member for Strangford has set out, that the stage that people are diagnosed with pancreatic cancer is incredibly late.

I have six key asks: to raise awareness among healthcare professionals; to place PERT at the heart of pancreatic cancer treatment improvements; a top-down prioritisation and approach that tackles the entire pathway of treatment and care; to make PERT a UK-wide priority in pancreatic cancer care; national targets for the use of PERT; and local health bodies to ensure the effective prescription of PERT.

I want to hear from the Minister today in relation to PERT and the prescription—or lack—of it. I also want to draw her attention to a study into pancreatic cancer—there is not enough time to go into it today—by Oxford University and Pancreatic Cancer Action, which was released last week. I read it last night and it is excellent. The founder and CEO, Ali Stunt, is an incredible woman. In fact, we are surrounded by incredible women campaigners, and we should pay homage to the late, great Dame Deborah James. I am sure all of us have been moved by seeing what she managed to achieve on social media. I know her family are continuing with the campaign.

All of my Stroud constituents who brought these issues to me want to see action and they want to hear from the Minister. I am really pleased we are having this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for securing it. I hope that we can all come together to reach agreement about what should happen.

10.3 am

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate today, and on all the work he does in raising awareness of pancreatic cancer.

I do not need to tell anyone here how cruel an illness pancreatic cancer is. We know it from experience, whether that be personal or from hearing the tragic stories of our constituents. My parents lost one of their closest friends to the disease 20 years ago, and yet we are nowhere near as far forward in treating and, crucially, diagnosing it as we could be in 2022.

I see the purpose of today's debate as awareness raising. Too many lives are lost to pancreatic cancer, so let us try to save some by getting people diagnosed earlier. There are numerous ways of doing that. People need to be more aware of the signs and symptoms, which I will come to shortly and which other hon. Members have outlined. GPs and other healthcare professionals need to be able to recognise the symptoms once presented, and we need incredibly speedy action if pancreatic cancer is suspected; there must be urgent access at the point of diagnosis.

That is not happening right now. Only 16% of people with pancreatic cancer are diagnosed at an early stage, and emergency presentation remains the most common route to diagnosing it. There is still too low an awareness of it across our communities: 76% of people in the UK are unable to name a single symptom of this terrible disease. Worse still, it is not easily recognised when presented to our healthcare professionals.

The story of my constituent Barbara sadly emphasises that point. She was 65 years old when she first experienced pains in her abdomen—the first symptoms of her pancreatic cancer. She had not long retired, having been a PE teacher for 40 years. She played hockey for Scotland. She was fit, active and not overweight; she ate healthily, did not smoke, drank in moderation and walked her dog every morning.

Barbara saw her GP within a week of first having pain. They prescribed an indigestion remedy and suggested paracetamol for the pain. She saw her GP at least once a month over the next year as the pain intensified and spread to her back. Her GP referred her for blood tests, X-rays, ultrasound, a colonoscopy and an endoscopy, but all tests were negative. None of the NHS practitioners who performed the tests recognised the symptoms.

After a year, the GP put in a referral for Barbara to be seen by a consultant. By that time, the pains were almost so unbearable that she was more or less confined to her house. She arranged to see a private health consultant and paid to have a scan. Within two weeks, she was told that she had a cyst in her pancreas, and further investigation three weeks later diagnosed a cancerous tumour on her pancreas, and she was told immediately that there was no cure.

Barbara received chemotherapy for six months. At first, the treatment caused the tumour to shrink a little, but it soon began to grow again. The treatment made her feel very ill. Barbara made the decision to discontinue the chemotherapy. It took almost 18 months for Barbara to have her condition diagnosed, and that happened only after a private healthcare consultation. She died two years and two months after experiencing her first symptoms. I thank her family for allowing me to share her story today to help raise this crucial awareness.

By raising awareness, we can help people get diagnosed earlier and live longer lives. For those diagnosed in time for life-saving surgery, five-year survival increases significantly. Raising awareness of an issue or illness comes in a multitude of ways. I congratulate my constituent Lesley Irving on the power of work she has done to raise awareness of pancreatic cancer since losing her mum to the illness on 6 June 2020. Lesley has got public and private buildings across Scotland to light up purple, and she assures me that this year will be the best one yet. I look forward to meeting her next week to recognise her achievements and celebrate the memory of her mum.

If anyone watching this debate is experiencing a loss of appetite, upper abdominal or mid-back pain, fatigue, unexplained weight loss, jaundice, nausea and vomiting, they should please see their GP and explain that they think it could be pancreatic cancer. It could just save their life.

10.8 am

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate, and I

[Elliot Colburn]

thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) and the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) for their contributions. I am delighted to be taking part in this debate, not just because I am the new chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer, but because my borough is home to the excellent Royal Marsden Hospital, the Institute of Cancer Research and the London Cancer Hub.

Colleagues have set out the key issues very well indeed, but they are worth repeating. Out of all the common forms of cancer, pancreatic cancer remains the deadliest. More than half of all patients die within just three months, and only 7% live beyond five years. It is always difficult for an individual to go through a cancer diagnosis, but the statistics make a pancreatic cancer diagnosis particularly hard on the individual, their friends and family, so it is right that Government redouble their efforts to work with the NHS and the third sector, particularly with Pancreatic Cancer UK, in order to improve survival rates.

I join colleagues who have reiterated key calls made by Pancreatic Cancer UK. They include providing a clear and urgent national-level focus on pancreatic cancer and other less survivable cancers, investment in targeted innovative pancreatic cancer research, producing more and better data, publishing the 10-year cancer plan and improving access to PERT. However, I would like to focus on an additional call in my speech today.

I acknowledge the good work the Government have done in this space already, including trying to raise awareness of PERT, conducting better data audits, looking to see how we can improve diagnosis and providing a commitment to look at that in the 10-year cancer plan. I hope the Minister can provide us with some assurances about the publication of that plan. We know that health disparities exist across the country and between people with different protected characteristics, but I hope we can learn from an example of best practice in my own constituency.

In Carshalton and Wallington, we are lucky to have the Royal Marsden on our doorstep, along with the Institute of Cancer Research, where world class research is happening, and the London Cancer Hub, which I would be delighted to invite the Minister to come and visit whenever she is free. That site is truly a world leader in cancer research, second only to those in the United States. The Royal Marsden is currently being refurbished, and it is looking to increase its capacity and work with partners to deliver new and innovative treatments.

One of the most exciting projects coming down the line is the partnership with the Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust. That project plans to invest in the existing two hospitals and build a third acute hospital, which will be a specialist emergency care hospital, on the old Sutton hospital site, next to the Royal Marsden. As well as providing state-of-the-art acute services, that will also help the Royal Marsden with capacity to provide cancer surgery on the Sutton site, rather than sending people covered by that catchment area up to Chelsea, which can sometimes be difficult. That means local cancer patients, and cancer patients from across south London, Surrey and parts of Sussex, will be able to conduct most, if not all, their cancer journey right on their doorsteps.

I welcome the work the Government have done to increase investment in the NHS and develop strategies in this area, but a major barrier that prevents optimal care, not just for pancreatic cancer but across the NHS and social care sector, is workforce. I know the Minister knows that already. Yesterday, I had the honour of chairing a roundtable event with the Westminster Health Forum to discuss how we tackle cancer backlogs and how we optimise cancer care in the UK. Again and again, workforce was brought up as the major barrier to improvement. We can invest as much money as we like, develop new strategies and, of course, find efficiencies and better ways to do things, for example by investing in digital and information technology, but without the workforce on the ground to deliver it, much of what we do will not create an impact, at least from a patient perspective, for a long time.

It must be stressed that workforce does not just mean doctors. Of course we need more doctors, and I am glad to see the progress the Government are making on our manifesto commitment to recruit more doctors, but it must also include nurses and allied health professionals, such as oncologists, pathologists, data scientists and all the specialists involved in the cancer pathway. I appreciate that creates a massive challenge, because we cannot magic a skilled workforce out of nowhere: it takes years to train the staff required. There are a few things the Government can do in the short term to encourage recruitment and retention—I reiterate calls to look again at NHS pensions, which are incentivising early retirement—but workforce options are few and far between, without training the next generation of the NHS workforce.

As the Minister may have guessed, my fifth call to Government is that a specific NHS and social care workforce plan is developed, alongside the cancer plan, in order to take advantage of the measures available in the short term and to increase the number of people in that highly trained workforce. That will help to fill the vacancies that it is necessary to fill and deliver first class, nationwide cancer care, including for pancreatic cancer patients.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the calls from colleagues and from Pancreatic Cancer UK, because as has been set out so well, a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer can be truly devastating for people. I hope the Government can offer some assurance and some hope to patients today, and to future cancer patients, about the work they are undertaking to improve patient experiences.

10.15 am

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Thank you for your indulgence in allowing me to speak, Mr Hollobone. I commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate; he is a tireless champion for his constituents and for many issues that impact the lives of people across the United Kingdom.

The words pancreatic cancer strike fear into us all, as it is widely recognised to be the most deadly form of this terrible disease. We all know of people in our own lives who, when faced with that diagnosis, have fought valiantly, but ultimately have succumbed to this aggressive form of cancer. Sadly, I know of some who are no longer with us, who were diagnosed during the pandemic and so received the devastating news alone. They were

not allowed to have anyone there to comfort them, offer spiritual support or bring someone with them on their treatment journey. That is cruel in the aftermath of such a cruel diagnosis.

As with all cancers, early detection of the disease and the resumption of treatment is of fundamental importance. It is when considering this aspect that we must look closely at access to GPs. As Members across the House have said, over the last two years we have seen how obtaining any appointment, even by telephone, is increasingly difficult. Face-to-face appointments are almost impossible to secure for many people. The vague symptoms that often present for those with pancreatic cancer are unlikely to trigger any form of consultation, particularly face to face. They are also most likely to lead to a patient giving up the fight to see their GP, given the barriers to consultation.

We have rightly spoken today about the awareness of symptoms and the importance of early detection. My concern is the pathway to investigation of symptoms; detection is blocked off at that first point of community healthcare. We need to focus on GP services and ensure GPs are resourced and then willing to return to pre-pandemic practices. Colleagues have rightly spoken about research and the importance of increasing funding. We have seen encouraging developments in recent years, including in the research led by Queen's University Belfast. I join others in asking for increased funding towards treatments to help save lives.

I will finish by commending some of the charities in my own constituency and in Northern Ireland, which are so forward thinking in raising funds to support those who receive a diagnosis, as well as the families who have to live with that diagnosis. They also help to fund research. I commend NIPANC, a charity headed up by Mr Mark Taylor and supported by a family in my constituency, Mrs Susan McLaughlin and her two sons, Aaron and Adam. They lost a father and a husband, Colin. Adam was just three when Colin died very suddenly from pancreatic cancer. I want to commend Mrs Victoria Poole, who volunteers with Pancreatic Cancer UK and who also lives in my constituency. They are all strong advocates who want to see change and to see the Government stepping up to the mark with regards to pancreatic cancer research.

Jim Shannon: I am reminded of a lady I met when I was a Member of the Assembly between 1998 to 2010. Her name was Una Crudden, and she brought the issue to my attention. She was a great advocate of how to deal with pancreatic cancer; she was raising awareness, even back at that time. I often think of her because she was a determined lady and a great supporter of her family. They were a family who were very much together. I am minded that she struggled with that disease for four or five years and ultimately passed away, but it is the Una Cruddens of this world—my hon. Friend referred to some of her constituents—who bring this matter to the fore.

Carla Lockhart: Absolutely. I knew Una from my Stormont days as well—she was a courageous lady who deserves to be mentioned in this debate.

I pay tribute to all those who are involved in charities. They support our healthcare system and I commend them today because they are the true heroes. The NIPANC

motto for Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month is “Time Matters”, and the message today is that time matters: understand the symptoms and seek urgent, early diagnosis.

10.20 am

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate on Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month and setting out matters in such great detail for us. We have heard from hon. Members about a wide range of issues faced by constituents across the nations of the UK in dealing with this type of cancer. The hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) spoke of how well informed her constituents are and the asks they have of the Government in this area. My hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) spoke of her constituent Barbara and her experience of NHS services failing to identify and diagnose her cancer in time. We also heard from the hon. Members for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), and I thank all Members for their contributions.

November is Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month and 17 November is World Pancreatic Cancer Day 2022. It is so important to raise awareness through these days and through our debates to improve early diagnosis by ensuring that more people know the early symptoms of pancreatic cancer. It has the lowest survival rate of all common cancers and is the deadliest common cancer in Scotland and across the United Kingdom. There are around 10,500 new cases in the UK each year. That equates to 29 cases every single day. It is the 10th most common cancer in the United Kingdom, accounting for 3% of all new cases, and the fifth biggest cancer killer with 9,000 deaths each year. In Scotland, there are around 900 new cases per year, with an incidence rate of 15.5 per 100,000 people.

Pancreatic cancer is caused by the abnormal and uncontrolled growth of cells in the pancreas—a large gland that is part of our digestive system. In the early stages, a tumour in the pancreas does not cause any symptoms, which can make it difficult to diagnose, as we have heard. Symptoms can vary from person to person and may include jaundice, indigestion, stomach or gut pain, back pain, diarrhoea, constipation or weight loss. Pancreatic cancer is particularly difficult to diagnose early, as we have heard so many times, and Pancreatic Cancer UK reports that 80% of cancer patients are not diagnosed until the cancer is at an advanced stage. While the causes are not clear, it is most common among those aged 75 years and over, with almost half of all new cases diagnosed falling in that age demographic.

Early diagnosis is crucial to improving survival outcomes, with one year survival rates for those diagnosed at an early stage being six times higher than those diagnosed at stage 4. However, most people with pancreatic cancer are unfortunately diagnosed at that late stage. At present, surgery is the only treatment with curative intent for pancreatic cancer, while chemotherapy and radiotherapy have been shown to improve survival in those with late-stage pancreatic cancer. If it is diagnosed at a late stage, surgery to remove the cancer is usually not possible.

The Scottish Government are committed to diagnosing cancer as early as possible, which is why they continue to invest in their detect cancer early programme, or

[Steven Bonnar]

DCE, and are rolling out rapid cancer diagnostic services across Scotland. We know the earlier that cancer is diagnosed, the easier it is to treat. That is why the Scottish Government continue to invest in that programme, which adopts a whole-system approach to diagnose and treat cancer as early as possible. They are developing a new plan for early diagnosis as part of their new cancer strategy to be put in place in spring.

The new 10-year strategy will take a comprehensive approach to improving patient pathways from prevention and diagnosis through to treatment and post-treatment care. That follows on from the establishment of three rapid diagnostic services centres, developed within the NHS infrastructure. The centres are in Ayrshire and Arran, Dumfries and Galloway, and Fife. They will play a key role in delivering early diagnosis and improved care, with fast-track diagnostic testing at the first appointment wherever possible.

The First Minister announced as recently as 10 October that the next two rapid cancer diagnostic services centres in NHS Scotland will go live in my own NHS board of NHS Lanarkshire and in NHS Borders. Through the NHS recovery plan, the Government in Holyrood have invested £29 million to provide an increase of 70,000 diagnostic procedures next year and 90,000 by the end of the plan in 2026. A new DCE awareness campaign is also under development to empower people with possible cancer symptoms to act early. That is due to be published in spring 2023.

In Scotland, it has been recognised that the impact of the covid-19 pandemic may have exacerbated inequalities within cancer screening, and the Scottish Government have committed up to £2.45 million to the screening inequalities fund over the past two years. Public awareness campaigns and messages have run throughout the pandemic to encourage those with possible cancer symptoms to seek help. To support scope-based diagnostics, the Scottish Government have published a £70 million endoscopy and urology diagnostic recovery and renewal plan, focusing on key areas such as balancing demand and capacity, optimising clinical pathways, improving quality and efficiency, workforce training and development, and infrastructure and innovation redesign. A further £9 million has been allocated this financial year to support diagnostic imaging capacity, with six mobile MRI scanners and five CT scanners in place across Scotland's NHS.

Despite all that work and all the amazing work of charities and activist organisations, and their dedicated supporters, which has been placed on the record today, there is still so much more for us to do. Investment in facilities, improved treatment options and early detection are all necessary, but it is also vital that research into alternative cancer treatments continues and expands. The Scottish Government provided an average of £2 million each year to cancer research causes in the five years before the pandemic, and that remains our priority.

According to Pancreatic Cancer UK, research into the disease has been underfunded for decades. The charity estimates that pancreatic cancer receives 1.4% of cancer research funding and yet is the fifth biggest cancer killer. Just recently, to mark World Cancer Day, Cancer Research UK delivered a cash injection of £12 million to the Cancer Research UK Scotland centre, supporting the work of cancer researchers from the

University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow. Professor Ian Tomlinson, who is co-director of the centre, welcomed the finance but highlighted how challenging the previous year had been and the fact that covid-19 has slowed down research.

Finally, we in the SNP commend all the charities and activist organisations and their dedicated supporters for their tireless efforts to raise awareness of pancreatic cancer. We have called on the UK Government to support Cancer Research UK and other research charities throughout the pandemic, while their funding activities have been curtailed by restrictions, and now in the face of people being more cautious with their money. With the Tory cost of living crisis continuing to undermine people's financial security and their ability to support charitable efforts, it is more important than ever for the Government to step in and support charities in their work and to directly fund cancer research.

10.29 am

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I start by thanking and paying tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this morning's debate to mark Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month.

As other Members have done, I pay tribute to the brilliant work of Pancreatic Cancer UK. Such organisations are vital in raising awareness of this awful disease. I also praise the important contributions made by all Members, and thank them especially for sharing the touching stories of their constituents.

As we have heard throughout the debate, pancreatic cancer is the deadliest of the common cancers. It affects about 10,000 people a year across the UK, with three in five of those being diagnosed at a very late stage. More than half of those people will die within three months of diagnosis, only 7% will survive for more than five years, and 5% will survive for 10 years or longer. The figures are even worse in Northern Ireland, as we have heard.

In the North Central London integrated care board area, within which my constituency of Enfield North falls, 161 people were diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2020, and there were 153 deaths due to pancreatic cancer, so I sympathise profoundly with anyone who is affected by pancreatic cancer and with the family members of those who are suffering. Those statistics are shocking, but even more shocking is the fact that they have barely changed in the past 50 years, and that the UK ranks 29th of 33 countries with comparable data on five-year survival for people with pancreatic cancer.

One reason for the tragically low survival rates is the stage at which people are diagnosed, as was mentioned by the hon. Members for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) and for Strangford, and other Members who contributed. Only 16% of people with pancreatic cancer are diagnosed at an early stage. For many, it is simply too late, so I would be grateful if the Minister outlined how the Government intend to improve the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer.

One thing we cannot ignore is the cancer backlog. Over the past decade, pancreatic cancer mortality rates have increased by a fifth. Waiting lists have risen to record levels and the proportion of people waiting less than 18 weeks for treatment is at its lowest in a decade.

At the end of July 2020, waiting lists had risen to a record 6.8 million people, with almost 400,000 patients waiting more than a year. The Government are missing their target to eradicate the two-year wait, and analysis produced in May by Macmillan found that it could take more than five years to clear England's cancer treatment backlog. For pancreatic cancer patients, that is simply not good enough. They cannot afford to wait.

Many Members have spoken about the workforce element, which underpins all the issues outlined in the debate. As was eloquently described by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), without a robust workforce strategy, our NHS will simply not be in a place to provide the support that pancreatic cancer patients need, yet Ministers continue to ignore those calls—even calls from their own Chancellor, who is the former Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. A recent report by the Committee said that the absence of a “serious effort” from the Government to tackle gaps in the cancer workforce is jeopardising earlier diagnosis, so I am keen to hear from the Minister what plans the Government have to ensure that staff are trained and retained sustainably, such that pancreatic cancer patients can always access care in a timely manner.

Labour has already set out its plans, pledging the biggest expansion of medical school places in history to give the NHS the doctors it needs so that patients can be seen on time. That commitment also includes creating 10,000 new nursing placements every year and training 5,000 new health visitors. Labour will also produce a long-term workforce plan for the NHS for the next five, 10 and 15 years to ensure that we do not find ourselves in this position again.

Members also mentioned the 10-year cancer plan. In February, the then Health Secretary announced a new war on cancer and launched a call for evidence to inform a new 10-year cancer plan for England. That call for evidence closed in April. We are now on our fourth Health Secretary since April, but there is still no sign of the plan. That is not good enough not just for those suffering with pancreatic cancer, but for those with all forms of cancer. Will the Minister set out exactly when we can expect this cancer plan? As we emerge from the pandemic, people living with pancreatic cancer need an NHS that has the time and resources to support them. It is about time that the Government delivered on that.

10.35 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Helen Whately): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate, and for his work as chair of the APPG on pancreatic cancer. He is right: we should talk about pancreatic cancer; we should talk about how to improve survival rates and diagnosis rates; and we should talk about how we can raise awareness of pancreatic cancer. As we do so—including in this very debate—that in itself will make a difference, and if we do not debate this now, during Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month, then when? I believe in seizing the moment.

I welcome the speeches from the hon. Members for Strangford, for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) and for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and my hon. Friends the Members for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) and for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), who

also seized this moment to speak about pancreatic cancer. The hon. Member for Strangford spoke movingly about Rebecca Buggs, whose children were just eight and nine years old at the time she had surgery. I am very glad that because she was diagnosed early, she was able to have surgery, but we know that, sadly, her experience is the exception not the rule.

The hon. Member spoke about the importance of raising awareness of symptoms such as stomach and back pain, indigestion, unexplained weight loss and jaundice, and the importance of getting those symptoms checked if there is no explanation. He also spoke about research as the key to earlier diagnosis. On one of his questions, I will answer straightaway that, yes, I would be delighted to join him for a meeting with Pancreatic Cancer UK. I will come to his other questions as I go through my speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud mentioned that she wants to help everybody and, knowing her well as a colleague, I know that that is absolutely true. She also mentioned the catchphrase, “The clue is in the loo,” as mentioned by other hon. Members. She spoke movingly about one of her constituents, a young woman who spent five years going to and from her GP with symptoms, including fatigue and bloating, which brought to life how hard this cancer is to detect. She also talked about the PERT treatment, which I will come to in a moment.

It is very good to see the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire, a former chair of the APPG, here and to hear her speaking so eloquently in this debate. She spoke about Barbara, a PE teacher, and about the healthy life she lived. Barbara went many times to get a diagnosis, but it took almost 18 months to get one. Again, sadly, that brought to life how hard this cancer is to detect.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington for acknowledging the work that the Government have done, particularly on raising awareness for pancreatic cancer. He talked about the importance of the workforce, which I will come to. He also asked me to visit the Royal Marsden, of which he is rightly proud, and which I would be delighted to do.

The hon. Member for Upper Bann spoke about the importance of access to GPs. She called for more funding into research, and said, rightly, that time matters.

I will come to many of the points that hon. Members have raised, but first, I believe in saying it as it is. Nearly 10,000 people a year are diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and that figure has steadily increased since 2013. Diagnosis rates increase with age, and from the mid-40s onwards pancreatic cancer is more common in men than in women. Just under a quarter of pancreatic cancers are diagnosed at an early stage, so three quarters are not. About 40% of diagnoses follow an emergency presentation. The one-year survival rate is just 27% and the five-year survival rate is only 7.8%. Although those figures have improved in the past 10 years, they are still bleak for anyone who receives a diagnosis and for their loved ones. That is why it is right to talk about pancreatic cancer.

As with many other cancers, early diagnosis of pancreatic cancer is crucial so that there is the opportunity for successful treatment. One of the Government's healthcare priorities is to improve early diagnosis of all cancers,

[*Helen Whately*]

and to achieve 75% diagnosis at stage 1 or stage 2 by 2028, compared with the current rate of about 50%. We have opened 91 community diagnostic centres, which have carried out 2 million extra scans, tests and checks, including cancer tests. We are rolling out non-specific symptom pathways so that people with symptoms such as weight loss or fatigue are either diagnosed or have cancer ruled out. We are encouraging people to go and get their symptoms checked. The NHS's "Help Us, Help You" campaign tackles the barriers that prevent some people from getting their symptoms checked, such as fear about what might be found.

The hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) talked about waiting times, and I assure her that we are tackling them. This August, more than 19,000 patients saw an upper gastrointestinal specialist, compared with 17,600 last August, and 17% more patients have seen a specialist within the two-week performance standard. That said, I recognise that the NHS is still not hitting the standard for enough people—it is currently 83%, compared with the 93% standard—so we will continue to support the NHS's efforts to tackle waiting lists and backlogs.

On treatment, credit is due to hard-working NHS staff who have increased cancer treatment levels to 107%, compared with pre-pandemic levels. The cancer drugs fund has helped more than 80,000 patients, and we are investing £5.4 million in five new national clinical audits of cancer, one of which is focused on pancreatic cancer.

As several hon. Members said, the key to making a big leap forward in survival rates for diseases such as pancreatic cancer is research—research into tests that will achieve earlier diagnosis and research into treatments. The Government spend £1 billion a year on health research through the National Institute for Health and Care Research. The NIHR has funded seven research projects for pancreatic cancer since 2019, with a committed spend of about £3.6 million. That is about 5% of the NIHR's total funding for cancer research, which is over £73.5 million.

Jim Shannon: I referred to the fact that Pancreatic Cancer UK has raised £10 million for research every year, and one of its requests is that the Government match that. I thank the Government very much for the £3.6 million that is going to pancreatic cancer, but is it possible for that extra bit of effort to be made and for the Government to match the charity's £10 million? I do not want to put the Minister on the spot, but I really do think that is an important issue.

Helen Whately: I absolutely hear the hon. Gentleman's request, which is for match funding for the funding contributed by Pancreatic Cancer UK. I will say two things about that. Another function of the NIHR is to support research where the funding comes from other organisations; it already does that. In fact, it has supported 70 pancreatic cancer-related studies that have been funded by others.

The other point, which the hon. Gentleman may be aware of, is that the NIHR does not actually ringfence funding for specific diseases. That is similar to his match funding point. The NIHR is ready to fund research. It looks at applications for funding from the

research community and then allocates that funding by looking at the merits of the proposal. We should encourage more bids for funding for pancreatic cancer research and more bids to go into the NIHR, which would then enable it to allocate more funding. I am assured the NIHR stands ready to fund pancreatic cancer research; it is about getting those applications in to carry out that research. I could publish a highlight notice to flag to the research community the importance of pancreatic cancer, which may go some way to achieving what the hon. Gentleman seeks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud spoke about PERT and asked why it is not prescribed for more people. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guideline NG85 recommends that PERT be offered to patients with inoperable pancreatic cancer, and NICE includes PERT in its quality standard for pancreatic cancer. NICE guidelines do not replace clinical judgment. They are not mandatory; they are guidelines. However, it is clear that PERT should be discussed between a doctor and a patient so a clinical decision can be made. I heard what my hon. Friend called for and I will look into whether there is evidence that such discussions between doctor and patient are not happening.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington spoke about the importance of the workforce and, as the daughter of two NHS doctors and a former Minister for the NHS workforce, I agree with him. In essence, the NHS is its workforce, and I am proud that we are on track to achieve our ambition of 50,000 more nurses. Talking specifically about the cancer workforce, the workforce plan published in 2017 set an ambition to increase the workforce by 1,500 full-time equivalents by 2021. That has been achieved and, in fact, exceeded by 226 staff members.

Since then, Health Education England has been taking forward the priorities in the cancer workforce plan, with an additional £50 million of funding in the last financial year and this one. Also, a significant proportion of the elective recovery funding—£8 billion in the next two years—will be spent on workforce, both on capacity and skills. I assure my hon. Friend that, as the Minister with oversight of cancer care, I will look carefully at whether we have the necessary workforce coming on track now and in the future to achieve our ambitions and aspirations for cancer care.

The hon. Member for Strangford and several others asked about the 10-year cancer plan, and I know hon. Members are keen to hear about progress. More than 5,000 individuals and organisations responded to the Government's call for evidence. The Government are considering the responses and the next steps, so I may have to disappoint some colleagues who may want to know more, because that is as far as I will go today. I assure hon. Members that I know how strongly they and their constituents feel about the matter.

I have welcomed this debate as a chance to talk about all the work going on to improve cancer diagnosis, treatment and survival rates, and crucially, to talk specifically about pancreatic cancer. Not least because raising awareness of pancreatic cancer is, in itself, an important step towards improving people's chances of survival, raising awareness of the symptoms and, in turn, encouraging people to contact their GP and get themselves checked. I pay tribute to everyone involved in Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month, particularly to Pancreatic Cancer

UK and to everyone taking part, whether that is walking 30 km this month or doing their own thing to raise funds and awareness. I thank them all for what they are doing. In turn, I will do what I can in Government to support all those efforts and to improve the chances for anyone suffering from pancreatic cancer.

10.49 am

Jim Shannon: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, in particular the hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie). It is not a great headline, and not one we want to think about, but hers was, “The clue is in the loo.” That is a fact. The hon. Lady also referred to the medical system as failing, and many of us feel the same. We have to highlight the negatives and then ask for the positives. It is not about negativity all the time; it is about looking for solutions, which is what we all try to do. She also referred to people taking 60 tablets a day and nutritional expertise, which is part of the issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) referred to the Northern Ireland statistics and early diagnosis. My good friend, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), referred to raising awareness of the signs and symptoms: 16% of pancreatic cancers are diagnosed at a very early stage. She referred to her constituent Barbara, as did the Minister. It is humbling to think that that lady had all the symptoms but, after various investigations, nobody could find what was wrong. The hon. Lady and others, including the Minister, referred to better GP awareness, as well as a test that works, which is really important.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) rightly referred to the good work that has been done. We often focus on the negatives rather than the positives, but many people are doing good things. He also referred to awareness of the publication of the plan, and he clearly made five calls. He also referred to digital and IT and the steps forward, but we need a workforce of people physically on the ground. He also referred to the good work in his constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) referred to the impact on families, which is sometimes forgotten when the focus is on individuals. She also referred to contact with GPs and hospitals, and a pathway to detection, focusing on the GP service. She also mentioned research at Queen’s University Belfast. Her headline was, “Time matters,” and so it does.

As always in these debates, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) and I are together. We are mostly on the same side, unless we are discussing constitutional issues, but that is by the way. He referred to pancreatic cancer being the

deadliest cancer—the fifth biggest killer in the UK. He also referred to some good work in Scotland with its 10-year strategy. I am a bit envious of some of the things that Scotland does. I thank him for sharing that with us. He also referred to the good work done by charities.

I always look forward to contributions from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), which always get close to the heart of things. She referred to pancreatic cancer as the deadliest of common cancers. The figures from her constituency—I think this is right or not far away—of 161 people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and 153 deaths are shocking. She implored the Government to bring in early diagnosis and improve the cancer backlog. She referred to nearly 400,000 people waiting for a cancer diagnosis and other things. She referred to the workforce, with more nurses needed. Her headline was, “War on cancer.”

Lastly, I thank the Minister, as I always do sincerely, as we all do. We understand the Minister’s deep interest in the subject matter. She grasped the issues we want addressed and said to seize the moment. She also referred to Rebecca Buggs, the lady I mentioned. There is a need for research and development. The Minister referred to the bleak figures of 25% diagnosis, with 75% not diagnosed. She recognises the issues and I believe she also recognises the solutions. That is why I welcome her commitment, when she said that more is needed.

Matched funding for Pancreatic Cancer UK was referred to, with a figure of £10 million, and £3.5 million or £3.6 million committed by Government. The Minister will do that. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire and I and others have a meeting with the Minister, and I thank her very much for that. We look forward to it and thank the Minister for that commitment.

We also welcome the 50,000 new nurses that the Government have committed to. It is important to have a knowledgeable workforce. We also welcome the 10-year cancer strategy. Those are things that we all agree on. We look to the Minister to lead the charge for the 10-year strategy, because it is important to have that in place. I conclude by thanking everyone for their contributions, especially the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered pancreatic cancer awareness month.

10.55 am

Sitting suspended.

Asylum Accommodation: Novotel Ipswich

11 am

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the use of Novotel Ipswich as asylum accommodation.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Hollobone.

It is difficult for me to stress how big an issue this is in my constituency. It is something I have been aware of for some time. Before it became public, I was made aware of it as the local Member of Parliament, so that is not my complaint—I was aware of it. There is a paper trail that shows me strongly opposing the use of the Novotel for the purposes in question, and I have worked with Ipswich Borough Council on it. There are many issues on which the Labour-run council and I do not see eye to eye, but on this matter we have been on the same side.

In keeping with what many other local authorities have done, the council has, on planning grounds, secured a temporary injunction, and there will be a court hearing later today—it was meant to be yesterday. What the outcome will be I do not know. What I am saying today is less of a legal point and more of a political point on the ins and outs of whether this is the right thing to do, and I will give my views as the local Member of Parliament representing my constituents.

The Novotel is a town centre hotel in Ipswich. It is a good quality hotel in an incredibly important location, linking the waterfront to the Saints, which leads up to the town centre. It is an area of the town that has been at the heart of our regeneration efforts. My right hon. Friend the Minister might remember his visit to Ipswich to talk about the town deal. A significant part of the town deal is about regenerating the part of the town where the Novotel sits, and that is one of my concerns. I am already hearing stories about the way in which the building and the upkeep of it has deteriorated since it was acquired by the Home Office for this six-month period.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an important point. Does he agree that often we are talking not about budget accommodation, but about accommodating those who come over here illegally on small boat crossings in smart hotels in city and town centre locations? What sort of message does he think that sends to those living on modest incomes in the middle of a global cost of living crisis?

Tom Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. In answer to his question, I think it sends all the wrong messages. The cost to the taxpayer at a national level of putting up many illegal immigrants in hotel accommodation is huge. To say that it grates with a large number of my constituents would be an understatement. The Novotel is a nice hotel. I have been there before and my family have stayed there. I have spent time there. The issue is not in keeping with what we should be doing. My personal view is that if someone has entered this country illegally, they are not welcome and virtually all of them should be deported. But if we are going to have them staying here for a short term, it should be in basic, safe and secure accommodation, not hotels.

In addition to the Novotel with its 200 spaces in the town centre of Ipswich, there is a Best Western hotel in Copdock, which is not technically within the boundaries of Ipswich borough or my constituency, but for all intents and purposes it is within the urban area of Ipswich, so this is already causing concern for my constituents and having an impact on local public services. We are looking not just at the 200 in the Novotel, but the 150 in Copdock, so we are talking about 350 individuals who are overwhelmingly young men and who have all entered this country illegally.

Why is the Novotel the wrong location? Why is the decision to acquire the use of the Novotel for 200 individuals the wrong thing to do? Why has it united virtually everyone in the community against it? It has united the Conservative Member of Parliament, the Labour-run borough council, and the local business improvement district. It has united all sorts of people whom I do not often agree with, but we are all of one view: this is not the right location to be accommodating these individuals.

Something that I also find desperately concerning is the way in which 20 constituents of mine who worked at the hotel have been treated by Fairview Hotels (Ipswich). They were given five and a half days' notice that their jobs were on the line, and many of them felt pressured into resigning under the vague promise that they might get their jobs back after the six-month period. I have one constituent whose daughter came home and broke down in tears because of the way she had been treated by those who manage the hotel. My responsibility is to her. My responsibility is to those 20 constituents. My responsibility is not to think about the welfare of those who have entered our country illegally, and I make no apology for that.

In terms of the economic impact of using this Novotel, a huge amount of effort is going into promoting Ipswich as a visitor destination. Ipswich is surrounded by beautiful countryside. It is the oldest town in the country—I thought it was older than Colchester anyway, but now that Colchester has city status, Ipswich is definitely the oldest town in the country. It was home to Cardinal Wolsey, and soon we will be celebrating the 550th anniversary of his birth. Only a stone's throw away from the Novotel is Wolsey's Gate, which was built by Cardinal Wolsey, and there is a whole operation to try to enhance the area.

What we are talking about is a 200-room, good-quality hotel in the centre of Ipswich that is lost to us and our local economy. It has been described by a business lady who runs a successful shop a stone's throw away from the hotel as being an economic bomb that has landed on the town, and there is consensus within the business community that that is the case.

There is also the other angle: the nature of the hotel means that it is often used by successful businesses in Ipswich to host clients. If they have clients visiting or there are conferences, the Novotel is more often than not the hotel that is used, so losing those 200 beds is a further negative economic impact.

I also want to talk about community tension, which is an important point and I plan to address it directly. Ipswich is a welcoming town. It is a multicultural town and it has benefitted from that diversity. It is an integrated town. We have a history of welcoming genuine refugees—some of them are Conservative councillors, and some are from Albania—but they came here in a proper way.

They came here legally, they were welcomed, and they have thrived in Ipswich. They have been welcomed in Ipswich and have made a positive contribution. The people of Ipswich are welcoming people but, quite frankly, there is a limit. When they see that people who deliberately enter our country illegally from another safe European country are being accommodated at vast expense in a good quality local hotel in an important location, which is costing local jobs and having a spill-over negative impact on the local economy, they are quite rightly furious. It is not surprising—I make no exaggeration in saying this—that at a time of cost of living strain, when many constituents are desperately concerned about getting by, I am hearing more about this than any other local issue in my postbag. I need to make the point that we are a welcoming and compassionate town.

I move on now to the general point. My right hon. Friend the Minister will know that I have been a consistent voice on the issue of illegal immigration since I was elected to this place. I support the Home Secretary fully in her efforts, and I support my right hon. Friend the Minister's efforts fully. I was behind him in the main Chamber yesterday, supporting him. I was proud to do that, and he knows he has my support.

My view is that the situation would be even worse under Labour—there is no one from the party present. I find it somewhat ironic that the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), visited Ipswich last week and commented on this matter, even though about a year ago, when she was Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, she called an urgent question to oppose the use of Napier barracks for those who have entered our country illegally. All I would say is that I would much prefer the use of disused Army barracks for these individuals, rather than good quality hotels in the centre of Ipswich. I also note that the Labour candidate for Ipswich has made multiple visits to Calais. Quite what he was doing there, I do not know, but that is by the by; I will not get distracted by that.

I will finish simply by saying that I acknowledge the fact that, in tackling illegal immigration, there is no silver bullet. I am encouraged by the Prime Minister's meeting with President Macron yesterday, and I look forward to hearing what came out of it. I have confidence in the Prime Minister on the issue. I spoke to him, and supported him. He is a great man. But, ultimately, we have to put turbochargers under the Rwanda policy. That needs to be part of it. Sections of the left deride what happened in Australia; they say that Australia's offshore processing approach was not successful. Everything that I have seen indicates that it was successful. The fact of the matter is that Australia had a big problem with illegal immigration, it started offshore processing, and it now no longer has a big problem. I understand that Australia had two different locations and is not using one of them, and that there might be differences between Australia and ourselves, but ultimately the principle holds. I strongly encourage my right hon. Friend the Minister not just to support the concept in principle but to stress the urgency of delivering it and of doing what is required to deliver it. He has huge support on our Benches to get this done.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) for coming to support me today. He is also a strong voice on this matter. We do not know what

will happen in court later today with the temporary injunction; I hope that it is successful. But if it is not, we must separate it from the bigger issue of how we tackle the crossings. In the short term, we are where we are now. We must look again at the use of Novotel, take on board the view of the local business community and work with and support those 20 employees. They are my constituents, and have been treated very poorly. That is all I have to say on the matter.

11.11 am

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Given your duties as Chair you will not be able to say so, but I know that you also feel strongly about the issue, which affects your constituents in Kettering. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) for raising the matter, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) for supporting him. The issue clearly concerns many Members across the House and millions of people across the country. Resolving it is a first-order priority for the Government.

The ongoing legal action means it is difficult for me to comment on the specific case of the hotel in Ipswich, but I will speak about it in more general terms, and about the wider issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich. I know Ipswich well, and met my hon. Friend for the first time when he was standing for Parliament there, when we toured Ipswich and visited the harbour, where the hotel is. I have seen the good work that he is doing with the council and others on the town deal board to regenerate Ipswich and help it achieve its potential. It is concerning to hear that the actions of the Home Office might, in a small way, be damaging his and the community's wider efforts to boost opportunities and prosperity in Ipswich.

Since we came into office, the initial task for me and my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary has been to resolve the very urgent situation that we found in Manston in Kent, where a large number of migrants who crossed the channel illegally in small boats were being accommodated in a temporary processing facility that was meant for a smaller number of individuals. That was not within the control of the Government. It was the result of thousands of people choosing to make that perilous journey—over 40,000 this year alone, and rising. We had to ensure that the site was operating legally and decently. As a result, we had to procure further hotels and other types of accommodation across the country at some pace. I am pleased to say that that hard work is bearing fruit, and the situation at Manston has significantly improved. The number of people being accommodated there is now back down to the level for which it was designed.

That leads to the second priority, which is to stabilise the situation more broadly, and ensure that we procure hotels in a sensible, common-sense way. The case that my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich raises prompts some important questions. First, when we choose hotels, other than in emergency situations such as the one we have been in with Manston, we need to ensure there is proper engagement with local Members of Parliament and local authorities, so that we choose hotels that might not be desirable but are none the less broadly

[Robert Jenrick]

suitable and can command a degree of public support. In some cases, we have seen hotels chosen that simply do not meet that barrier.

We need to ensure hotels are chosen against sensible, objective criteria. Those criteria might mean ensuring that towns such as Ipswich can continue to carry out their day-to-day business, and ensuring that tourists can be accommodated and that business and leisure travellers can find hotel accommodation in the centre. They will include ensuring that we take into account safeguarding concerns, for example by not choosing hotels that are next to children's homes, schools or places where young people congregate. The criteria will certainly include taking into account community cohesion and the likelihood for disruption, and they should, obviously, include value for money for the taxpayer. On that point, I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend that we should be choosing decent but not luxurious accommodation. People coming here seeking refuge should be accommodated in simple but humane accommodation. He referenced the situation in Calais. The way this country accommodates asylum seekers vastly outweighs the way some neighbouring countries choose to do so, and I am afraid that creates an additional pull factor to the UK.

Deterrence needs to be suffused throughout our entire approach. We can be decent and humane, but we also need to apply hard-headed common sense. Once we have stabilised the present situation, and applied those criteria and better engagement methods, the third strand of our strategy is to exit from hotels altogether. Accommodating thousands of individuals in hotels costs the UK over £2 billion a year. In a time of fiscal constraints, that is an unconscionable sum of money and we need to ensure we move away from that as swiftly as we can.

The strategy that my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary and I are establishing to do that has a number of fronts. One will be ensuring fairer dispersal across the country, so that cities and larger towns do not bear a disproportionate impact of the asylum seeker issue. Secondly, it will involve looking for other sites, away from hotels, that provide better value for money for the taxpayer, which might mean more simple forms of accommodation; we hope to say more on that soon. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, we will accelerate the processing of asylum claims altogether, so that those individuals whose claims are rejected can be removed from the country swiftly and those whose claims are upheld can start working, create a new life in the UK and make an economic and broader contribution to the country.

Tom Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for giving way. There are a great number of Members on our Benches who think that the very act of coming here illegally should prohibit people from making an application at all. Frankly, those people have already broken the law of the land by entering illegally. There is also an issue with the definition of "refugee" and I understand our rates of granting refugee status are much higher than those of comparable European countries. Will he expand further on any work that may be done by Government to make a narrower definition of what a refugee actually is? My concern is that some people are being given refugee status who may not be refugees, if we stick to the sense of the word.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend raises two important points. First, we are very concerned that a large number of individuals, certainly all those coming across in small boats, have transited through multiple safe countries before choosing to make the crossing to the UK. We do not want to be a country that attracts asylum shoppers. We want people to be seeking asylum in the first safe country that they enter. That may necessitate further changes to the law. We want to have a legal framework that is broadly based on individuals who are fleeing genuine persecution, such as war or serious human rights abuses, finding refuge in the UK through safe and legal routes, such as the highly effective resettlement schemes that we have established in recent years for, for example, Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine and Hong Kong. My hon. Friend was right to say that his constituents in Ipswich, like millions of people across the country, broadly support that approach and have played an important role in recent months, for example by taking in refugees under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. We do not want people to be encouraged by people smugglers to cross the channel illegally and then find refuge in the UK.

The second point that my hon. Friend raises, which is equally perceptive, is that the UK's asylum system grants asylum to a higher proportion of applicants than those of some comparable countries, such as France and Germany. The Home Secretary and I are looking at that issue in some detail to see whether we can make changes to the way we manage the process and the criteria we adopt, not so that we become a country that is unwelcoming or ungenerous—that is not the British way—but so that we do not create an additional pull factor to the UK over and above other countries that are signatories to exactly the same conventions and treaties to which the UK is party.

Tom Hunt: To be perfectly honest, I am quite keen for us to be unwelcoming towards those who have illegally entered our country. What is the difference between breaking our immigration law and breaking any other domestic law? From what I see, if someone breaks a law in the country, they get punished. Surely breaking our immigration law is breaking our law, and the people who do so should be treated as such.

Robert Jenrick: I do not want to get into a detailed conversation about our exact treaty obligations and the legal framework, but the issue is that any individual can claim asylum regardless of the means by which they came to the UK, regardless of whether they have transited through safe countries, and even regardless of whether they came from a safe country in the first place. That balance is not currently right, so we need to look carefully at how we can change it.

The most striking issue is the individuals coming from demonstrably safe countries. Today, about 30% of the individuals crossing the channel have come from Albania. That is a first-order priority for the Home Secretary and I to address, because it cannot be right that the UK provides safety and support for those individuals—mostly young men who are healthy and sufficiently prosperous to pay people traffickers, and who come from a country as safe as Albania. We need to change that. We have already returned 1,000 Albanians under the return agreement signed by the previous

Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel). The present Home Secretary and I want to take that significantly further.

The longer-term trajectory obviously has to be moving away from tackling merely the symptoms of the problem—the processing of applications and the accommodation of individuals in expensive hotels—to tackling the root cause itself. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich is correct that a significant element of that will be to make further legal changes to our framework. Another element will be ensuring that deterrence is suffused through our approach so that we do not become a magnet for illegal migrants. We need the UK to be a country that supports those in genuine need, but we must not create a framework that is significantly more attractive than those of our EU neighbours.

That will also require work on the diplomatic front. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has just returned from Sharm el-Sheikh, where he had further positive conversations with President Macron and other world leaders who are dealing with the symptoms of a global migration crisis. It will require tougher action by the security services to address the criminal gangs and gain greater intelligence on their work overseas. It will include tougher action at home on employers who illegally employ migrants who do not have the right to work here.

On all those fronts, the Home Secretary and I are absolutely committed to tackling this issue. I know it is extremely important to my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich, who is one of the leading voices in Parliament on it, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough. They are both simply representing the strong views of their constituents, who, like millions of people across the country, want secure borders and a fair and robust immigration and asylum system. That is exactly what the Home Secretary and I intend to deliver.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.

Labour and Skills Shortages: Temporary Recovery Visa

[JUDITH CUMMINS *in the Chair*]

[Relevant documents: e-petition 621932, Allow EU nationals to come to the UK to work in hospitality for up to 2 Years; e-petition 594747, Allow disabled people to recruit live-in carers via Health and Care Worker visas; e-petition 565316, Seek Europe-wide short term work permits for the photographic industry; e-petition 584585, Relax immigration rules to enable the UK hospitality industry to recover; e-petition 598603, Create short-term visas for skilled abattoir workers to meet labour shortage; e-petition 599620, Ease immigration rules for construction workers to mitigate impact of Brexit.]

2.30 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of a temporary recovery visa for industries experiencing labour and skills shortages.

It is a privilege to serve under your guidance, Mrs Cummins. Before I start, I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and the support provided to my office by the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy project.

As the UK faces its longest recession on record, it is the Government's duty to pull every lever they have to prevent hardship and support businesses, workers, families and the economy as a whole. My contention is that to do otherwise would be reckless, foolish and, indeed, heartless. It is great to see the Minister in his place and I welcome him to his important role. My plea today is for him to recognise the clear fact that hospitality and tourism businesses in my constituency in Cumbria are unable to operate to their full capacity because, despite their best efforts, they cannot recruit sufficient workers.

A recent survey by Cumbria Tourism, our excellent destination management organisation, found that 73% of businesses say recruitment is a problem, with more than half citing it as a significant problem. A lack of job applicants is an issue for 78% of employers. As I listen to employers right across Cumbria—the lakes, the dales and other beautiful parts of the county that are in neither—it is painfully clear that the situation is limiting business capacity and profitability, and forcing temporary or partial closures for almost half of all businesses.

Sadly, it is likely that anyone who has visited the Lake district on holiday, particularly in the last couple of years, saw reduced opening hours and capacity in cafés, hotels, restaurants and other visitor attractions, simply because they do not have sufficient staff. Those businesses came through the challenges of covid despite the odds, adapting to the drop in visitor numbers, but they have since been hit by massive problems with recruitment.

The backdrop to the issue is that Cumbria has a smaller than average working-age population, with 61% of people of working age compared with the rest of England's 64%. It also has lower unemployment than the national average, at 1.5% versus 3.7%. The reality is that we just do not have the people to fill the vacancies. Some 80% of the entire working-age population in the Lake district already works in hospitality and tourism.

[Tim Farron]

In the years that I have been raising the issue with the Government, I have been told repeatedly that the answer lies with the education and training of our UK workforce. A national cross-departmental skills strategy would, indeed, seem to be a reasonable and sensible development. Moreover, we do not want high domestic unemployment while employers take on migrant workers. However, that is not happening, and there is no prospect whatsoever of it happening. Instead, we have very low unemployment locally, so employers in Cumbria have spent the last two years trying a range of things to attract workers, such as increasing wages, adding benefits, providing more training, offering better hours or acquiring accommodation for staff to live in on site.

Cumbria Tourism and individual tourism businesses right across our county continue to work closely with the Department for Work and Pensions, supporting careers events and working with partners to engage directly with schools and colleges. Despite all those initiatives, businesses in our Cumbrian communities are struggling to survive and many are having to close altogether. How tragic it is that we can see the demand and the profit that could be made, or the losses that could be avoided, yet we cannot meet that demand because we do not have the workforce.

Although the lakes and dales of Cumbria have an acute problem, labour shortages are a nationwide challenge. That means that there is not a big reservoir of untapped talent in the UK that might move for work. We therefore need a range of solutions, and short, medium and long-term migration has to be part of that. We have a choice. If we do nothing to change the status quo, many businesses will go under, and then we will have an unemployment problem and rural communities will fall into decline. It could be argued that the market will adapt and that is just the way of things. However, the Government must take responsibility for having interfered to undermine the free market. While land tends not to be all that mobile, capital and labour do tend to be, or at least they were until the Government chose to inflict harm on our economy by cutting off the supply and movement of labour. The party allegedly of the free market has become the dead hand that is killing our economy locally and nationally.

It does not need to be that way. The question is, do we want thriving tourist destinations outside London? Do we want them to continue to be able to offer a fantastic experience for tourists from home and abroad? Do we want that contribution to our economy? Domestic and inbound tourism combined contribute approximately £127 billion a year to the UK economy. Tourism is worth 9% of GDP and is our fourth biggest employer. As we face a self-inflicted Conservative recession, do we think that it might be a good idea to back an industry that is chomping at the bit to mitigate that recession to grow and thrive?

If the answer to any of those questions is yes—and surely it is—then, if we want real, sustainable economic growth and are serious about levelling up, we cannot close our eyes to the stultifying impact of labour shortages. By the way, a Conservative Government that understood and cared about business would not need anyone to tell them that; it would be obvious to them. Such a Government

would also know that welcoming migrant workers into areas such as mine, to complement the local workforce, is part of the action that needs to be taken.

The current work visa situation does not support the labour needs of the Lake district. Again, the Government would know that if they listened to Cumbrian businesses. We need a visa like the youth mobility scheme, which is flexible across sectors. Of course, that scheme already exists for places such as Australia and New Zealand, whose populations are fairly small—places that, to misquote “Father Ted”, are small and far away. How about also developing youth mobility visa agreements with countries whose populations are large and much closer geographically? The youth mobility visa would provide greater work protections than sector-based schemes, so that workers are not tied to a specific employer. The Government could easily impose restrictions on workers’ rights to access benefits, to bring in dependants, or to remain in the UK long term.

In my correspondence last month with the former Minister, the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), he stated that there were ongoing negotiations with both European and wider international partner countries for youth mobility scheme agreements. That was encouraging news. I had a similar response from his predecessor, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), when I met him earlier this year alongside lakes tourism and industry leaders.

Please will the Minister tell us the timescale for those negotiations? Will new schemes be available in time for the beginning of the 2023 season? If the negotiations are stalling because we are seeking bilateral agreements, which may be slowing down progress, could the Minister set out whether unilateral agreements are being considered, given the desperate need of our tourism economy?

The former Minister, the hon. Member for Corby, also stated in his letter that employment is not the primary purpose of the youth mobility visa, and that young people cannot be compelled to work in specific sectors or regions. I did, of course, know those things. However, people who come in through a youth mobility visa will no doubt be seeking employment. We want to give them opportunities in desirable areas such as the Lake district while allowing our economy to benefit. That is exactly how it has happened in the past; migrants have chosen to come to the Lake district and the Yorkshire dales to work, often with accommodation provided.

The Government have made much of the claim that we in Britain can control our borders, but surely we want to control our borders in our own interests, in a way that gives us an advantage, rather than to do ourselves pointless economic harm. The youth mobility scheme enables the Government to control migration and make use of an existing mechanism to bring in those who will allow our businesses to thrive and meet demand, while developing an effective national skills strategy to maximise benefits to the domestic workforce. It is a win-win.

If the Government are not willing to take advantage of that win-win, Cumbrian businesses will demand to know why they are choosing to do active harm to them and our wider economy, rather than taking action that would help them. While employers can make changes to their employment offers—and they really are doing so—a national strategy of skills development, linked to labour market needs, must be led by the Government.

The onus cannot be on small and medium-sized enterprises. The Government have to make a choice: if they do not accept that migration is part of the solution to labour shortages, then reduced economic growth, business failure, and poverty is the choice they have made.

In its report, “Promoting Britain abroad,” published last month, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee stated:

“We welcome efforts to create apprenticeships and the new T-Level in Catering in 2023 but believe that more could be done to support business-owners who are short of staff today.”

The Committee then recommended that the Government “should introduce a temporary recovery visa for industries where there is clear evidence of labour and skills shortages.”

Does the Minister agree with the DCMS Committee on that, and will he introduce a temporary recovery visa?

In the context of a lack of people to fill vacancies, there is, of course, another lever that the Minister could pull. It is staring him right in the face. We have more than 85,000 people who have been waiting more than six months for their asylum claim to be decided and who are banned from working. Many of those awaiting a decision are ready and able to work. It makes absolutely no sense that the Government would prefer them to rely on state support instead of keeping their skills alive.

Forcing people into inactivity is at complete odds with the Government’s stated policy aim to move people away from dependency and into work. Getting into employment at the earliest opportunity will put those people in a much better position to integrate and flourish in the UK when they receive their refugee status—and 76% of them will be given that status by this Government. Giving asylum seekers the right to work would mean that they pay their own way, rather than relying on state finance. It would save the taxpayer millions. There is literally no downside.

Last week, I visited asylum seekers housed in hotels in Cumbria. Some 130 of them are living in limbo, unable to work while they await a decision on their asylum claims. They are from Eritrea, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran—all places with high grant rates. Their professions are catering, architecture, agriculture, construction, aircraft engineering, welding, senior logistics and data analysis, to name just a few. It makes no sense that they cannot work where local employers have vacancies. Public opinion is supportive: a YouGov poll in March found that 81% of the population would support an asylum seeker’s having the right to work after they have been waiting for six months.

It is plainly not the case, as some have said, that that policy would be a pull factor. We are an outlier in having such a foolish policy. Look at all comparable countries in Europe: France grants permission to work after a six-month wait; Germany does so after three months. A six-month wait would safeguard against economic migrants using the asylum system to circumvent the work visa process. Given the current economic climate, the clamouring of our employers, workforce shortages—not just in my communities but elsewhere—and the backlog in the asylum process, will the Minister reconsider the right to work for asylum seekers, as many of his Conservative colleagues believe he should?

There are, of course, other reasons that Cumbria’s workforce has been so drastically reduced in recent times. The other main factor is the rapid growth in

second home ownership in our communities and the collapse of the long-term private rented sector into the short-term Airbnb market. Housing for people who are not wealthy in our area has become such a rarity that hundreds who worked in hospitality and tourism have simply been evicted from their homes and ejected from their communities. It is tragic. I hope the Minister will back my amendments to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which would enable us to guarantee sufficient homes for local people and families by limiting the number of second homes and short-term lets in communities like mine.

The Government’s inaction in tackling the housing crisis is compounding their failure to look intelligently and pragmatically at the matter of visas. This all adds up to a situation where 63% of tourism businesses in communities in Cumbria are working below capacity because they cannot find staff. There is demand, but we cannot meet it. The Government have chosen to allow the growth of Airbnb to eject our domestic workforce and counterproductive visa rules to prevent overseas staff from supplementing our small labour pool.

After London, the lakes is the second biggest visitor destination in the country; at the same time, we have one of the smallest populations. Of course we need to bring in outside talent to work alongside our own; otherwise, the Lake district and Yorkshire dales economies just could not function. I ask the Minister to stop hamstringing our economy, listen to our businesses and adopt a pragmatic approach to addressing labour shortages in the UK, especially in rural communities such as mine.

2.45 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing the debate. I will come to some themes he spoke about in a minute but, importantly, I want to congratulate the Minister not just on being here but on the work he is doing. I will disaggregate some of my remarks because, clearly, I have worked in the Home Office and I know a little bit about certain aspects of policy, but there are wider issues around labour market skills and shortages that I want to air, and those are what brought me to the debate.

It has been a few years since I have been to the hon. Gentleman’s beautiful constituency. I have a bit more time on my hands now and, provided I can get there, I will, because it is a very beautiful part of the country. However, the debate and the issues he raised are incredibly pertinent to the entire United Kingdom. We have seen labour and skills shortages in certain sectors for as long as I can remember as a Member of Parliament, and that is what we need to address.

I will park home affairs issues—particularly visas and things of that nature—for the moment. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, there has already been some work, although not enough, across the whole of Government to put together a wider strategy for the labour market. I have been very vocal about this; when I was Employment Minister, I was one of the few advocates for a labour market strategy for the entire economy. If I may say so, that is something that I have also encouraged our new Chancellor to adopt and champion. We need the Treasury and, in particular, the DWP to be the advocates of a proper, coherent labour market strategy. That is really

[Priti Patel]

important, because we see wage inflation in certain sectors. We know there are shortages in the hospitality sector, which the hon. Gentleman pointed to, but we have to be honest that there is not enough training, investment or career progression in certain sectors, and hospitality is one of them.

I remember from my time as Employment Minister that the hospitality sector did a great deal to develop career paths, to make its jobs much more appealing and to invest in the individuals who got jobs in order that, although they might start behind the bar, they could become general managers of hotels, bars or restaurants, and so on. That is really important. My party believes in the ladder of opportunity. It wants to see people develop their careers and be incredibly successful, rather than the haemorrhaging of staff in certain sectors. My major point is not party political: we should encourage the development of a labour market strategy for the whole country, rather than try to find sticking-plaster fixes of visas and things of that nature, which I will come to in a minute.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the immigration system and some of the changes that have been made, which I was involved in as Home Secretary. Ending free movement was a manifesto commitment and part of Brexit, which the British public voted for. We delivered that at the same time as reforming aspects of the immigration system. The points-based immigration system is there to ensure that employers can sponsor individuals, admittedly not in the sectors the hon. Gentleman spoke about but certainly in other critical sectors, including the NHS, which should not be overlooked. The NHS relies on overseas workers, which are important for its health and wellbeing, although of course we need to grow more talent domestically as well. Those are important areas.

I want to touch on another aspect—youth mobility, which is an important way forward. The hon. Gentleman and other colleagues will know about the scheme for seasonal agricultural workers. That enables workers to come to our country for specific and restricted timeframes in key sectors. That enables workers to come to our country for specific and restricted timeframes in key sectors. Only last year, following a shortage, the seasonal agricultural workers list was expanded to include haulage drivers, key workers in agriculture, but not horticulture, and the farming sector when we saw pressures in the economy. It is right that we have the agility and freedom effectively to determine some of those changes while also—and I am sure that the Minister will agree with me on this—demonstrating to the British public that we are able to invest in our own home-grown skills and in particular parts of the country. I saw this in one of my previous roles in Government—not in my last role, but in employment—where we had pockets of unemployment around certain parts of the country. We must invest in those parts of the country too.

I said that I would talk about youth mobility schemes in particular. I have been involved in some of those discussions, and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale referenced some of the bigger countries and economies; one of those is India, with which we have an agreement to actively bring over young people who are highly educated and skilled. We still want them

to work here; the point of youth mobility is that we can reciprocate, which is really important, with our young people gaining life skills elsewhere in the world and showing what a free and open country we are.

In the interests of time, I will conclude by emphasising that it is quite unfair that a Home Office Minister has to respond to wide-scale labour market issues, which are cross-governmental. One of the biggest takeaways is the need for better integration across Government Departments to address issues with the labour market and skills shortages. When we look at what is happening with the apprenticeship levy, for example, we must ask how we can make that much more effective in different parts of the country. How can it be targeted to key sectors? How can colleges have more bespoke schemes for shortages in the labour market so that we develop a pipeline of young people to come forward? I am a Member of Parliament for a constituency in Essex, Witham. Some 80% of my constituents are employed by small and medium-sized enterprises; that is 20% higher than the national average. By default, we are an entrepreneurial and SME-based part of the country, but at the same time we must look at the needs of many of those small and medium-sized enterprises regarding skills and sustainable employment. That is why I encourage colleagues across the House to work in a united way to look at getting the Government to have a skills and labour market strategy for the entire country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): I call Jim Shannon.

2.52 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mrs Cummins. You caught me out, because I was not expecting to be called; I was just doing my duty of jumping up and sitting down again. You are most kind. I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on setting the scene for the debate. The Minister probably knows what I will ask in relation to the fishing sector, because I asked him last week after the debate; his Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey), was there as well. I have sought a meeting with the Minister and he has agreed to it, so hopefully we will have that in the diary over the next period of time. I will specifically focus on that and explain why it is so important, and reflect on my meetings with the previous Minister, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), and how we move forward on the issue.

One UK sector that most people agree has a bright future following Brexit is our fishing industry. Located in often remote coastal communities, the industry has weathered many challenges over many years, including those that are unique to the sector. The fishing fleet based in Portavogie, in my constituency, probably had its heyday during the second half of the '70s and into the '80s. Good profits were made and shared with the crew, which reflected the hard work and long hours that fishermen put into their profession. My brother is one of them; he worked the fishing boats in Portavogie over a period of time. I could never understand how the guys could get into the fishing boats, never mind get out of them, but that is by the way. It is a dangerous profession. Being a fisherman carried with it a great deal of pride,

but something went wrong. Fisheries management policies were applied that undermined the industry; with hindsight, it is debatable whether those policies were right or wrong. Nevertheless, the policies succeeded in reducing most crew wages. Combined with alternative occupations, this led to a situation developing in the 1990s where there were more crew vacancies than there were crew to fill them. That is a wee bit of background about the sector before I put forward some ideas.

Fishing vessel decommissioning schemes released some crew who found positions in other fishing vessels. At that time, it was migrants from eastern Europe who, although inexperienced in commercial fishing, offered a breathing space when they were recruited to fill the crewing gaps. Then, trawler owners from Portavogie, Kilkeel and Ardglass followed the lead of owners elsewhere in the UK by beginning to recruit new crews from overseas. Those crews were Filipinos, who became a very important part of fishing for nephrops in the Irish sea and the Clyde.

The fishing fleet has never pretended that overseas crews offer a long-term replacement for domestic recruits. I understand exactly that it is not a long-term solution, but it is a short-term solution. It would be great if young people from my constituency were going into fishing, but they are not, and neither are young people from Kilkeel or Ardglass. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) will speak for Scotland shortly, and the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) will speak for Wales. I think both of them will endorse that point.

Overseas crews have filled critical roles, which has kept a large part of the UK's fishing fleet at sea and, in turn, maintained supplies of domestically caught seafoods to markets at home and overseas. Overseas fishing crews have largely been recruited to the UK on the basis of transit visas. I understand that transit visas were never intended for that purpose. Transit visas permit a crew member to join a vessel that is departing the UK and working outside UK territorial waters. It has generally been accepted that the majority of time on a fishing vessel at sea has to spent beyond the UK's—

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): One fishing practice that the Minister might propose is for those vessels to keep their foreign-originating crew offshore, beyond the 12 miles of territorial waters, but that is both dangerous and inhumane.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Lady illustrates the issue very clearly, as well as the concerns that we have. I think there are solutions that all of us here can support. I suspect that, besides fishing vessel owners, many ship operators would find the 12-mile limit challenging, as she mentioned. That is certainly not a new issue.

For well over a decade, the fishing industry has sought to engage with the Home Office to resolve the ambiguities around the matter. Ten years ago, a concession was granted: the option to move crew on to work permits. That was not widely taken up. The situation has changed again, not least because EU crew have left the industry, so there is a dependence on non-UK and non-EU crew.

Geographically, areas such as the Clyde have nowhere outside 12 miles. I am told that, towards the end of 2021 and early 2022, staff from Border Force visited Campbeltown, where they reminded fishing vessel owners about their roles, and effectively told the owners that

overseas crew would have to go home. As a result, boats have been tied up and some have been sold. On 20 August, Border Force visited the fishing community in Mallaig and delivered a similar message to the one that was heard in the Clyde. A virtual meeting was held with industry representatives in Northern Ireland on 15 September.

I arranged a meeting with the previous Minister, the hon. Member for Torbay, and we discussed concessions granted to other marine operators, specifically those engaged in the construction of offshore wind farms and the owners of well boats. The latter are largely Norwegian-owned ships that transport fish between salmon farms in the west of Scotland, which are all within the 12-mile limit. Will Minister tell us the difference between a well boat carrying salmon smolt inside the 12-mile limit and a trawler carrying prawns in the same area? I do not quite understand that, but if we have a meeting, perhaps we can develop that argument constructively and find a solution. For me, it is all about solutions. It is never about the negativity; it is about the solutions. It is about what we can do to make it better. We ask the Minister for that meeting.

The industry is indebted to the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), for his early intervention with the Home Office on this matter. A six-month window has been agreed during which trawler owners are encouraged to pursue the sponsorship route for fishing crew, and the industry is working on that. Although that avenue is being pursued by some, questions are being asked about its applicability to the fishing fleets, especially in respect of the Government's immigration targets.

Fishing vessel operators accept the need for a scheme that is transparent, complies with international law and affords protection to all fishing crew, especially those from overseas. There is no question about what they are trying to achieve. Fishermen and fisherwomen are skilled professionals, as the Government recognised in early 2021, following a recommendation from the Migration Advisory Committee. However, despite the committee's further advice that deckhands be added to the shortage occupation list, the then Home Secretary declined to approve the recommendation, and stated that more time was needed to examine the impact of the covid pandemic on UK employment levels. Again, I honestly believe that the fishing organisations that I and other Members represent have a working solution. The Minister's PPS, the hon. Member for West Bromwich West, is not involved in the debate, but he knows that only too well, so he knows what I am going to say. I also note that it is accepted that skills can differ across the professions on the Government's shortage occupation list, with one being English language fluency. However, the same standard of English is required across all occupations, which is something that we urgently need to examine.

I am nearly finished and am going really fast—I hope *Hansard* can follow my flow of words. The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) says that Jim Shannon gets more words to the minute than any other MP, and today may be one of those occasions.

Leaving the EU creates opportunities for our fishermen, yet they are still competing with EU fishermen. The Home Office's refusal to engage with the fishing industry and consider a bespoke or flexible approach to the issues around overseas crews compares less than favourably

[Jim Shannon]

with the approach taken by others, such as the Dublin Government. In Ireland, a partnership approach has recently resulted in a new policy being unveiled. When we meet the Minister, we might be able to share this example, which is a constructive one. Less than a month ago, on 11 October, the Irish Government approved the publication of the “Review of the Atypical Scheme for non-EEA crew in the Irish Fishing Fleet”. The report and its recommendations followed an extensive consultation process, with stakeholders involved in the scheme. It is that kind of collaborative approach that needs to be pursued by the Home Office, instead of trying to squeeze the square peg of the fishing crew into the round hole of the sponsorship route. A square peg in a round hole really does not work.

The fishing industry remains focused on creating an economically viable sector that will offer financial rewards in order to reflect the hard work that the fishing sector does. After decades of challenges, that ambition will not be met overnight, which is why officials need to work with the industry to develop a visa system that allows skilled overseas crew to pursue their professions on UK fishing vessels in a controlled, transparent and law-abiding way. That would allow our fishing industry to develop its full potential, benefiting the economic life of our coastal communities as well as the whole of the United Kingdom.

What I have said today about Northern Ireland is reflected for our fishermen in Scotland, Wales and England, and I honestly believe in my heart that we have a solution. I know the meeting last week was about a different thing, but none the less I took the opportunity to appeal to the Minister’s good nature and will. I hope to have a meeting shortly, so that collectively we can move forward together in a partnership fashion and solve this problem. If we can do that, it will be a big day.

3.2 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for securing a debate of such importance for my city of York. I will focus mainly on the hospitality sector, but I will also stray into a few other sectors where we are certainly experiencing skills shortages.

To realise York’s potential productivity, and ultimately the value of the pound, we cannot stand still, which is why the debate is timely. We need to move forward by putting pragmatism ahead of ideology in order to understand the reality of particular sectors and local economies across the country, to focus on the data, which speaks so loudly, and to listen to sector leaders across our communities to ensure that their aspirations for their industries can be realised, and that we are not left short of potential opportunities that people want to bring to the economy.

On Friday, I met York’s hospitality sector leaders—people from hotels, visitor attractions, restaurants and others—to talk about the challenges that we face in our city. Of course, the issue of skills shortages was high on the agenda. We have 1,605 enterprises in York’s hospitality sector, which employs 20,000 people, two thirds of them part time. It is growing, which is encouraging. Our

“Skills for Employment” strategy—a 10-year plan for skills that Lee Probert, the principal of York College, assembled for our city—highlights the fact that the sector grew by 7.8% between 2017 and 2020, so we have a great opportunity to consolidate it. However, many places cannot open their doors full time, and with the cost of living crisis hitting hard, businesses are struggling and we need to ensure that we get the labour. They live hand to mouth with the innovation that they are able to bring. They got to the summer, got to half term, and they are going to get to Christmas, but, come January, they are worried not only about the great freeze, but about the freeze in business itself. They are really worried about that, and I hope the Minister will talk to his colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about the cliff edge that the sector faces.

People in the sector do not want to limp from season to season. They want to be able to plan. When they plan, they can put in place their skills strategy. When they plan, they have the headspace and can grow their industry, whether in the supply chain or directly facing their customers. We therefore have to build resilience into the system. We are fortunate. We have around 40,000 students across York, which helps to address some of the capacity issues, but not by itself.

Some businesses are doing incredible work. The Grand in York has taken refugees from Ukraine and supported people into employment, ensuring that there is a labour supply. It has also provided wider skills, including language courses, and has provided support even if people then move elsewhere in the sector. That is a positive sign of a good employer with the ability to invest, but not every employer has the margins to be able to do that.

In York, we have a skills strategy for 10 years in the city, but it will not be enough when we are near 100% employment. That is why we need to look further afield to ensure that we have a supply of labour coming into the city.

The Yorkshire hospitality sector has put together a three to five-year plan, looking at the cliff edges in front of it and highlighting the fact that only 5% of young people see a future in the hospitality sector. Again, we need to ensure that we have a supply of labour. The sector is using innovation as much as possible, with skills camps and academies in order to deliver so much more, but the workforce is not sufficient. That is why I turn, as other colleagues have, to the report by the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. It highlights the scale of vacancies across the economy now, so we know we cannot stand still on this issue.

The youth mobility scheme is excellent. It gives young people the opportunity to come to the UK, learn the language and skills and have vital life experience. When we look at the list of countries we have heard about today—Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, Hong Kong, India, Canada, South Korea, Monaco, San Marino and Taiwan—we do not have any EU countries on that list. With regard to the aim of bringing 1,000 people over to the UK, if we compare San Marino’s population of 34,000 with the EU’s 446.8 million, the Government’s thinking seems to demonstrate a disparity. We need the movement of young people to be expedited so that they come and support our economy and our labour market, and see that investment in their future and our future, too. It is a perfect scheme that would work for my city of York, where people can really enjoy the sector.

We do have a challenge, and I am going to be very straight and honest about this. As has been mentioned in this debate, we need sufficient housing, and we need to address that urgently because of the cost of living in York and the Airbnb situation. The flipping of private rented accommodation into Airbnbs means that we need to ensure we have suitable housing for people when they come and give to our local economies. We must have systems in place to support the city.

I want to highlight an opportunity to the Minister. I know he is working hard on the issue of those seeking asylum in the UK, but these people come with skills. That is why I ask him to look at the shortage occupation list to see whether we can passport people with skills into the economy, so that we can utilise the skills that people bring and ensure that we are not experiencing labour shortages in certain areas.

York is about to receive 450 people into a hotel in the city. They will get an incredibly warm welcome and lots of support from the infrastructure within York. We will provide people with a home for as long as they are with us. However, if they are not able to work, that is a missed opportunity for them and for us. That is why we need to ensure that we enable people to both utilise and gain skills while they are with us. We recognise that people need time to get oriented and to heal their trauma, but engaging in good employment will give them the opportunities that they need and that our city needs. It is such a waste of talent, skill and life if people are just waiting in hotels for their claims to be processed. We want that process to be expedited, but while they wait, we welcome their employment across our industries. Those people then build relationships in the city, which gives greater security not only to them but to all of us. I hope that the Minister will bear that in mind and ensure that there is more opportunity for those individuals in future.

The tourism and hospitality sector has the advantage that it can use its resources to pay staff slightly more than other sectors. As a result, people have been sucked out of the care sector. Indeed, I will end by speaking about the care sector. The scale of vacancies is affecting the delivery of social care and the ability to discharge patients from hospital. That means people cannot get in the front door and we have an NHS crisis. Not being able to bring care workers into the UK because they do not fit into the points-based system seems completely ludicrous and self-defeating.

I trust that the Minister will look specifically at social care and the opportunity to bring highly skilled staff to the UK to deliver that vital role, so that all our constituents can have the care that they need, as we would expect. Not only are we in a crisis now, with 165,000 vacancies in social care nationally; given that 28% of care workers are over the age of 55, will have a greater crisis in future. That must be sorted out. I trust that the Minister will look at ways in which we can bring in young people and other people with skills, albeit for the short term, until we have the labour supply. However long it takes, we need to address those crises.

I am calling for pragmatism over ideology. I am sure the Minister understands that our communities must be heard and that the skills they require must be met. It is for him to deliver that.

3.12 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing this timely debate. Many, if not all, of us are aware that the hard Brexit the Government are pursuing is causing huge damage across many industries. I, too, want to focus on labour shortages as they affect the larger fishing vessels in Wales, just as they do beyond, as we have already heard.

I support local employment on Welsh fishing vessels, as would every local MP, but the simple truth is that the people are not there to do those jobs at present. Fishing vessels therefore need to be able to recruit from abroad to fill the gap in the short and medium term. Much like elsewhere in Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England, the fishing fleet is being reduced. I do not think that is something any of us wants to be seen to be presiding over. Since 2018, it has been reducing by about 6% per year in Wales, possibly as the result of a combination of an ageing workforce, high costs of entry and now a restrictive visa system.

I want to raise the case of my constituent Mark Roberts, as it puts under the microscope something that is affecting a number of fishing vessels. He is a fisherman from Nefyn, a town near where I live, which has a long and proud tradition of both onshore and offshore fishing; it even supplied captains for whaling vessels back in the day. Mr Roberts has been trying to recruit fishing crew members from outside the European economic area. In the past, he has employed local crew, a number of whom have now gone on to own their own vessels. He would like to continue to employ a local crew, but the plain truth is that they are just not there. He faces not being able to go out to sea and operate as a business unless he has a sufficient number of crew members.

Mr Roberts told me that one of the main barriers to employment is the written English language element of the skilled worker visa, for which fishing crew members are eligible. He wanted me to raise the case of a Ghanaian fisherman who recently failed the B1 English exam for a fourth time. He is a highly skilled, highly motivated fisherman and he continues to persevere with the test. However, it has caused additional delay and cost for both him and Mr Roberts.

Mr Roberts and the rest of the crew have been trying to tutor him, in the hope that he will be able to pass next time. They also hope that the Home Office will relax the rule and recognise that written English is not a key skill for this vocational area. Does someone need written English to be a proficient crew member on a fishing vessel, when there is a skipper alongside? If we want our crews and our vessels to survive into the future, is that a skill we need, here and now?

The experience is, of course, far from unique. The fishing industry says that the high bar for English, particularly the written element, goes far beyond that required of deckhands. Mr Harry Wick, chief executive officer of the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation, gave evidence to the all-party parliamentary group on fisheries. He told us that we need a vision of evolution for fisheries. There is no short-term fix, but they still need crew and, in the meantime, those crew will need to come from abroad.

[Liz Saville Roberts]

Earlier this year, Seafish, the public body supporting the seafood industry, noted that only one person had successfully applied using the skilled worker visa route. Will the Minister tell me how many fishing crew workers from abroad have used that route since then? *[Interruption.]*

Because of my cough, I will come to a conclusion fairly shortly and will not be able to say everything I want to say, but I want to close on one thing that Mr Roberts told me. He has spent £17,000 in immigration solicitor fees to recruit crew members, because he is an honest man who wants to follow the post-Brexit rules to the letter. He wants to avoid the enormous fines he would face if he were to operate within 12 nautical miles of the UK with crew members who have transit rather than skilled worker visas.

This situation cannot continue. If we are serious about wanting this vocational area to operate into the future, I agree that we must look at careers, skills, apprentices and training into the future, but they are not here in the here and now. If I could meet the Minister to discuss how we can find a solution for honest, good, well-established family businesses like that of Mr Roberts, I would be very grateful.

3.18 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron)—he comes from a beautiful part of England—for highlighting this crucial topic. Much like a lot of Scotland, his constituency faces the problems of rurality and the challenges of supporting a hospitality industry plagued by labour shortages.

It has been interesting to hear the many views on how we can tackle the issue of labour shortages post Brexit and post covid, especially given the divergence in the types of constituencies we represent, each with its own unique set of labour challenges, be they in agriculture, hospitality, fishing—we have heard extensively about fishing today—transport, construction, health and social care, logistics or food processing. The list goes on, but the core issue at heart remains the same. We have witnessed the doors slam on free movement, which is now a dirty word—well, two dirty words—for both the UK Government and the official Opposition. In addition, the global pandemic saw more than 1.3 million EU workers return home. When they finally thought about coming back, they were locked out by this Government's hugely regressive post-Brexit points system.

If we had stayed in the single market, as the majority of people in Scotland voted to do, free movement would be the perfect solution to the many labour shortages across these islands. It will come as no surprise to hear that I am confident that Scotland will rejoin the EU—and that means the single market—as an independent member soon. Until then, we fully support the call for solutions to labour shortages through visa schemes, including a temporary recovery visa.

This is a crisis of the Government's making. It was completely avoidable. It is a crisis caused by policy, politics and a rhetoric on immigration that is fuelling the right, stirred up by inflammatory language from the Home Secretary. I cannot tell hon. Members how shocked

and disgusted I was to hear the Home Secretary refer to an "invasion" of immigrants to these shores. An invasion—really? "Invasion" conjures up images of insects, wild animals, wars and battles. It is far removed from the reality of the humanitarian crisis that we are witnessing in the channel.

The Minister could argue that the Home Secretary was not talking about migrants per se, just those crossing the channel—I do not think he will—but it is not acceptable, whoever she was referring to. The Home Secretary must understand that using that kind of language and stoking up fear about one set of migrants has an impact on all migrants. That includes the current and future migrant workers that the UK is absolutely dependent on.

It has taken empty shelves and closed restaurants to bring this issue to the public's attention, but business leaders have been warning the Government for quite some time about the dire situation that they would find themselves in because of these shortages. The British Chambers of Commerce has said that of 5,700 businesses, more than 60% need to find more staff in the UK. Kate Nicholls, the chief executive of UKHospitality, pointed out that one in five workers has not returned after furlough, giving the sector a 10% vacancy rate. She agreed with the recommendations from the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee for a temporary recovery visa, and said:

"This would go a long way to helping recruitment challenges and would support the sector's ability to provide fantastic service to all its customers. We would strongly urge the government to consider its introduction as part of a pro-growth review of immigration policy."

Three quarters of UK businesses have said that they are experiencing difficulties filling vacancies. I have received numerous letters from businesses in my constituency that are struggling to get staff and asking what exactly the Government plan to do about it. There is another reason to ensure that we fill those vacancies. As the CBI said recently,

"Guarding against skills and labour shortages can...help keep inflation in check".

At a time when the cost of living is going through the roof, should the Government not heed that advice?

The Scottish Government have tried to help the UK Government out. The First Minister even offered to split responsibility for immigration policy with them, and proposed a Scottish visa, but that was refused. It would solve some of the economic problems in Scotland, but it clearly does not fit the ideology that says that if the Scottish National party suggests it, it must be wrong. The Scottish Government are determined to address these issues but have very limited powers available to them. They are proposing a rural visa pilot, which offers a community-driven approach to migration that can respond to the distinct needs of remote, rural and island areas.

We want to welcome people, not ward them off, because people make communities and keep our economy growing. It makes no sense to stubbornly believe that we can just do everything ourselves, especially when our rural communities—much like that of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, I am sure—face population decline.

Many of the initiatives from the UK Government are very temporary. I understand that the solution is not complete permanence, but they are so temporary that

they offer no real certainty for businesses or workers. They are simply sticking plasters. That is the crux of the issue with so much policy at the moment—the short expiry dates. I have had milk that has lasted longer than some of the previous Cabinet's plans. I hope this one does better.

Business, industry and the workers themselves need certainty. I have been trying to hammer home that point in relation to the six-month energy relief scheme that is on the table for SMEs, public sector organisations and charities. They simply cannot operate in weeks and months. Last year, we saw a three-month visa offered to HGV drivers. What good is a three-month visa? Who in their right mind would move to a country where they face being kicked out in 12 weeks' time? That is a point that I would like to make to Labour colleagues. I am not going to go into how crushed I felt when I heard the Labour leader say that we have too many migrants working in the NHS, though I know I was not as crushed as the migrant workers themselves. Today, Labour's shadow Health Secretary, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), said that if they got into power, they would keep migrant workers in the NHS until they had enough home-grown workers trained for the health service.

Rachael Maskell: I worked in the NHS for 20 years and all I will say is that I know the value of working alongside people who have trained across the world. They bring their skills into the NHS, and it has been a privilege to work alongside them. I think we should aspire to recognise the skills they bring and the opportunities that provides for our patients.

Anne McLaughlin: I really do thank the hon. Lady for that. There will be so many migrant workers who have worked their backsides off in the NHS, especially during the pandemic, and who will be devastated about what has been said, but the hon. Lady's remarks go some way towards balancing that out.

I have to ask: what kind of arrogance does it take to believe that doctors, nurses, radiographers and others are so desperate to be here in the UK that they will fill the positions that we desperately need to be filled in the NHS, knowing that when they are surplus to requirements, they will simply be dispensed with because both Tory and Labour Governments would much prefer the jobs to go to those who were born here? Employment is a two-way thing. Migration is a two-way thing. If we do not meet migrants halfway, they will not come and we will not be able to look after people. Everybody needs to think clearly about that.

We need solutions and ideas. One solution that has been put to the Home Office, certainly by my party—indeed some of my colleagues have private Members' Bills on it—and other colleagues today, is to allow asylum seekers to work. We are facing labour shortages, yet we have tens of thousands of people who are already here, desperate to contribute and integrate with our communities, but they are cut off and left to rely on meagre handouts from the state.

The current situation plays into the hostile environment rhetoric so well. To paint asylum seekers as economic migrants here for benefits is just not true. Nobody wants to live on less than £6 a day, and people should not be put in that situation. Given that 76% of asylum

applications are allowed on the initial decision, not to mention the many more who win their appeals, we are putting thousands of people in an enforced limbo when they could easily be contributing, paying tax and filling the gaps in our labour market.

I would like to know if the Government have any plans to consider this eminently sensible solution. As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale said, there is no downside. If the Minister's answer is, "No, we are not going to consider this solution," he must see a downside, and he must tell us what he thinks that is. My preference, and my fervent hope—I saw him nodding his head earlier when it was mentioned—is that he agrees to look into allowing asylum seekers to work and plug the damaging gaps that are holding the economy back.

3.28 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the second time in two days, Mrs Cummins—it is truly a privilege for me. I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for securing this important debate, and other right hon. and hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for her insightful speech. Her clarion call for pragmatism over ideology is something I hope everyone in this Chamber will support.

I would like to set out the Labour party's approach to work-based migration in the UK. In a nutshell, we support the principle of a points-based system for migrant workers. I will not need to remind hon. Members that it was a Labour Government that introduced the points-based system in 2008 for immigration from outside the European Union. We are clear that there will be no returning to the free movement of labour that was a feature of our membership of the European Union, but we are equally clear that we need to build on and improve the points-based system currently in place. Our long-term ambition is to ensure that all businesses, in every sector, and our public services recruit and train as much home-grown talent as possible to fill vacancies, before they look overseas. For instance, we need to train more home-grown doctors, hence our commitment to doubling the number of clinical placements and to setting out a five to 10-year workforce plan, which is desperately needed when we consider the 7 million person waiting list and the huge issues with workforce shortages and challenges. We know that if we just turn off the tap of migrant labour, without the appropriate workforce structures and adequate training and recruitment in place, our public services will deteriorate and our businesses will struggle to meet our wider economic ambition to make, buy and sell more in Britain. In the end, it becomes a crutch, with more and more jobs eventually disappearing overseas.

Let me address the comments made by the spokesperson for the SNP, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin). I did not hear the comments today from the shadow Health Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), but I know that our policy is very clear. We want to maximise opportunities for home-grown talent—doctors, nurses and care workers—but we absolutely recognise that we have to get the balance right. Where we have migrant workers playing vital roles, that is what we want to

[Stephen Kinnock]

continue to have, but we want at the same time to maximise opportunities for home-grown talent. It is not an either/or question—a binary question. It is a “both...and”. It is a question of balancing—not turning the taps off here and turning the taps on somewhere else.

Anne McLaughlin: I appreciate the clarification, but it was quite clear that the leader of the Labour party said there were too many migrant workers in the NHS. The shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care seemed to be saying—I cannot remember the exact words, but obviously I will go and look again—“Yes, okay, we’ll allow migrant workers to be our doctors, nurses, whatever, until we have got enough of our own.” What does that say to them? “You are here when we need you, but when we no longer need you...” I support training people who want those jobs—training people here. But what does that say to those migrant workers who have committed themselves to our NHS? “As soon as we have got enough of our own home-grown people, we are going to kick you out.”

Stephen Kinnock: I think it would be a caricature of whatever comments were made to say that we are going to somehow stop people who are already here being here. That seems to be the logical extrapolation of what the hon. Lady is arguing, and I do not think that anybody would argue that. We value the workforce that we have, but we also want to build and create more opportunities for our own, home-grown talent. I am sure that that is something we can all agree on.

Let me turn away from the health and care sector for a moment and look at some of the issues that have been raised about the agricultural sector. We cannot have a situation such as we have had in the farming sector where 30,000 pigs are being slaughtered and £60 million-worth of crops are being burned, which is what happened over the past year. We also know that the construction industry lost 175,000 jobs in 2020-21, and that has had a big impact in the form of projects being slowed down. We know that, in September 2021, UKHospitality called for the Government to include the hospitality sector in temporary work visa schemes in the aftermath of covid-19 and reflecting the need to boost our economy. That call was of course echoed in the report by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee that was published on 24 October. It recommended the introduction of temporary recovery visas for industries—predominantly tourism and hospitality in this case—that are experiencing short-term labour shortages for so-called low-skilled roles.

We recognise these challenges and we feel that the way to find solutions is to go to the heart of the system so that it is better positioned and placed to deliver results on a sector-by-sector basis—pragmatism over ideology, as has already been said. The Opposition are well aware of the flaws in the current points-based system. We feel that the Government are failing to balance the need to encourage businesses to recruit and train home-grown talent with the need to use migrant labour to address short-term pressure points in the labour market.

The fundamental weakness is that the Government’s economic migration strategy is not joined up, so they will struggle to meet their economic and public-service

priorities. For instance, we feel that the Migration Advisory Committee and the Skills and Productivity Board are not as integrated as they could be in making decisions on the shortage occupation lists.

We believe that the way to understand the type of short-term support that sectors require, for instance access to temporary work visas, is to get the system working properly, with more flexibility. At the heart of that should be a three-way dialogue, led and convened by the MAC, drawing together representatives from employers speaking for the sector, trade unions, and relevant Government Departments, to look at the sectors on the Migration Advisory Committee’s shortage occupation lists in detail. That dialogue would be the mechanism through which decisions are made around the short-term visa schemes, such the seasonal worker scheme, the youth mobility scheme, and new ideas, such as the temporary recovery visa, which is being debated here today.

The three-way working group would not only look at the shortage occupation lists but set conditions that companies that have sponsorship licences would need to meet on workers’ rights. We are worried that the current points-based system is also failing when it comes to the enforcement of labour standards.

We know, for instance, that Nepalese health workers, Indonesian fruit pickers, and care workers from the Philippines and Ghana, are at serious risk of exploitation through recruitment agencies charging fees, leading to migrant workers ending up in illegal debt bondage through having to repay those recruitment fees. Many of those recruitment agencies operate abroad, and it would be good if the Government were able to investigate whether work could be done by British embassies overseas to look out for problems and red-flag agencies that are suspected of nefarious practices.

We must also clamp down on illegal practices in the UK. Of course, it is illegal to charge migrant workers recruitment fees in Britain, but the Association of Labour Providers said that some employers in the UK are still demanding that workers pay for their recruitment fees. We need solutions to those issues.

Part of the challenge is that, under the past 12 years of successive Conservative Governments, the number of labour market inspectors has decreased to one inspector for every 20,000 workers, when the International Labour Organisation recommends one for every 10,000. I hope the Minister will share his thoughts on that ratio, and whether he believes that it will enable the Government to crack down on exploitation.

In 2019, the Conservative party committed to merging the three enforcement bodies—the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate, the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority and His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ national minimum wage enforcement teams—into one enforcement body. Perhaps the Minister could confirm what progress is being made on that, or is it perhaps another broken manifesto promise?

The main agency involved in the welfare of seasonal workers is the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority. The scheme operators, which are responsible for recruitment, must have a licence from the authority and can have it revoked if they failed to abide by certain standards. However, the regulator does not routinely

carry out inspections on farm premises, and some critics say it lacks the resources to police abuses of workers' rights.

We also need to understand, for seasonal workers specifically, what action is being taken by the Government to ensure that the 40,000 businesses with sponsorship licences from the GLAA are being properly regulated by HMRC to ensure that they maintain high employment standards.

Anne McLaughlin: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of another issue, which the *Daily Record* in Scotland revealed the other day, that delivery drivers for Just Eat, Deliveroo and others—I cannot remember which of the others it was, so I had better not say any names—are able to rent out their accounts? They are told that they are responsible for ensuring that the person they rent it out to is allowed to work and has passed basic health and safety checks, and that is obviously not happening. People are having meals delivered, and do not know if that person has passed the checks that they should have. Just as importantly, some of the workers renting those accounts are not allowed to work and are being exploited. Would the hon. Gentleman agree that the agencies he mentioned should be able to look into that as well?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that there is a vital role to play here, in terms of regulation and enforcement. Our major concern is twofold. There is a bit of a mixture of all of these agencies not necessarily co-ordinating together. There are three main agencies, so, first, let us have a single enforcement body. Secondly, the number of labour market inspectors should meet ILO standards. It is currently one to 20,000 and it should be one to 10,000. Those would be major steps in the right direction, and could be the start of cracking down on the issue the hon. Lady rightly raises.

Maintaining standards is not just important for the wellbeing of migrant workers and preventing undercutting, it is also good for employers, as we need to make Britain an attractive place to work, not least in sectors such as food and farming, where we are clearly more reliant on migrant workers than in other sectors. The National Farmers Union deputy president, Tom Bradshaw, told the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that, although a 30,000 quota for seasonal workers visas in 2021 was a lifeline for the industry, it has not been big enough.

We also know that the challenge for the sector is not just seasonal but year-round. We understand that there are recruitment challenges in relation to the short-term nature of these visas, which the Government must look at closely. Therefore, we need to be sure that the working conditions attached to the visas are as attractive as possible, in order to attract the workers that we need, and to avoid undercutting.

Of course, where sectors and businesses are given permission to recruit from overseas, we need to see commitment to long-term workforce planning. How, for instance, would a company plan to invest in home-grown talent in the long term? What is it doing to invest in research and development, in modernising its technology and machinery to boost productivity? Does it have a skills strategy? Those are the questions that should be asked of companies, as a quid pro quo and part of the conversation about being given shortage occupation

and other permissions to bring labour from overseas. What is it doing to show its long-term workforce plan? How is it boosting productivity? Those are the questions that Government should ask. There should be a proper dialogue, rather than pulling arbitrary numbers out of the air within the Westminster bubble.

Are the Government asking for workforce plans from companies that benefit from the shortage occupation lists? If not, perhaps the Minister might like to say a few words on that. Those are the questions that Labour will ask, as and when we enter Government, committed as we are to ensuring that our points-based system strikes the right balance between incentivising employers to train and recruit locally with the right to recruit internationally where required.

I look forward to the Minister's responses to my questions, in addition to those raised by other right hon. and hon. Members.

3.42 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for calling the debate. As others have said, he represents one of the most beautiful parts of the country and one of my favourite destinations. Any help we can give him to ensure that his hospitality and tourism sector continues to thrive is a priority for me.

I am grateful for comments and speeches from other right hon. and hon. Members, and will try to answer as many as I can in the time available. I am particularly pleased to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) make her debut in Westminster Hall after many years. I know from my new colleagues at the Home Office how much she is missed. I was pleased to hear her thoughts today.

I will begin by addressing the specific question of a temporary recovery visa, and then broaden out. We have had a wider debate about how we handle labour market shortages, the balance between migration and our domestic labour market and how we train people here in the country to meet those challenges. That includes how to balance bringing people into the country versus the significant issue of more than 5 million economically inactive people, and how we can help those individuals back into the labour market, whether they be older people who left the labour market during the pandemic, or younger people who need to get back or into work for the first time.

It is important to say at the outset that an impression has been given during the debate that the visa system is highly restrictive, enabling few people to come into the country, and that essentially migrant labour has been cut off as a result of policy decisions. That really is not true. We have a comparatively flexible work visa system, and the Home Office granted over 330,000 work-related visas in the year ending June 2022, including—I will come to this in more detail in a moment—just over 96,000 health and care worker visas to support the NHS. We have more than doubled the number of eligible occupations for skilled worker visas so that more than 60% of jobs in the UK economy are now eligible. Over 48,000 employers are now on the sponsor register, and we encourage others to join.

[Robert Jenrick]

We have to set today's debate, and the important and valid points that have been raised, within that context. As a country, we are welcoming very significant numbers of people to work and live here as a result of our visa system. Of course, there can be a legitimate debate about who we are inviting in, and whether we address specific concerns, but it is not correct to suggest that we have a highly restrictive system, or that that has been a consequence of leaving the European Union.

In general, I do not think that a temporary recovery visa is the right approach. The points-based system is the right way forward. It supports UK businesses to recruit workers with the skills that they need from around the world, and it is broader than the previous immigration system, with many more jobs now eligible, stretching across all the key sectors of the British economy, thanks to the good work that my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham did during her time in office.

We have a large and growing domestic labour force, which includes UK workers, the millions of people who applied successfully under the EU settlement scheme, and visa-holders with general work rights. It is important to stress that, over the course of the last year or so, we have also had tens of thousands of Ukrainian and Afghan citizens. In fact, well over 100,000 are now living in the United Kingdom, a good deal of whom want to work. We should encourage them into paid employment for many reasons, not least so that we can help them to make fruitful lives here and ensure that they are not living in hotel accommodation, which too many still are. That has been the subject of other debates elsewhere in Parliament this week.

Many of the sectors that have called for a recovery visa, some of which have been discussed today, including hospitality, haulage and construction—all sectors for which I have sympathy; I have been involved in some of them in recent years as a Minister—have long-standing recruitment challenges, stretching back many years. Some of them are essentially calling for a general immigration route, allowing recruitment at or near the minimum wage for roles that have only relatively short work-based training requirements. It could be a choice for this country to welcome workers to that type of role, and other parties may make different choices from us, but it is important not only that we are guided by the Migration Advisory Committee's recommendations, but that we think carefully about the skill and salary thresholds of people coming into this country.

That is for a number of reasons. One reason is so that we can ensure that people who are looking for work in this country are encouraged into those jobs. As Members of Parliament, I am sure that we have all come across employers in our constituencies who in the past have reached too easily for international workers rather than trying to recruit, retain and skill up British workers. I have certainly encountered that in my constituency, which has a good deal of employers in the food processing and agricultural sectors.

Another reason is that we want to encourage the British economy to be more productive. Employers should ensure, where possible—it is not appropriate in every sector—that we are better at automation and have a more innovative economy, not one that is simply hooked on the drug of relatively low-paid and low-skilled

migrant workers. I appreciate that in sectors such as care, and perhaps hospitality and tourism, talk of automation and innovation is not as relevant. I will come to some of the work that we have been doing in those sectors in a moment.

I want to stress that some of the businesses we have been talking about, particularly in hospitality and tourism, although undoubtedly they have been through an extremely difficult period during the pandemic and our recovery from it, have benefitted from substantial Government support, whether through the business support scheme or furlough. Those schemes amounted to hundreds of billions of pounds. I do not diminish the challenges that businesses face, but it is worth reminding ourselves of the scale of support we have given. We are, of course, living in the long shadow of the pandemic and the fiscal challenges it has brought upon us all.

We really need to encourage businesses to play their part by investing in and developing the UK's domestic labour force, rather than relying on immigration policy as an alternative, especially given the 5 million economically inactive people in our economy. That does not mean we should not think carefully about the sectors that face particular challenges. We are alive to those issues and want to adopt a pragmatic approach, but that approach has to be a two-way street. As the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said, it involves businesses themselves working hard to recruit and retain domestic workers and thinking about improving their productivity, rather than immigration being the long-term solution for those sectors.

We must also be alive to the fact that some of the industry bodies and lobbyists who approach the Government, perfectly understandably to represent their members, occasionally overstate the value of migrant workers and their availability in the international labour market. The former Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham, will remember some of those instances. I am thinking, for example, of HGV drivers: there was a concerted campaign—one that ostensibly seemed valid—to create a specific route to bring more HGV drivers into the country to meet the significant issues we had at one stage. We responded to that call and only a tiny number of foreign HGV drivers ultimately applied for the visa, met our requirements and came here.

The lobby groups that raised that issue, although they were perfectly at liberty to do so, were wrong. That was not the route to solve the problem. The long-term solution was to make the industry more attractive to domestic workers, to retain more HGV drivers and to help to put the sector on a more sustainable footing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Robert Jenrick: I will give way to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) and then the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Anne McLaughlin: Could that failure to recruit enough HGV drivers from overseas have been anything to do with the fact that they were told they could come here for 12 weeks and would then have to go home again?

Robert Jenrick: No, that was not the issue. Without going off on a tangent, the root cause of the issue was the aging population of HGV drivers. Many were coming up for retirement and the industry had had poor pay

and working conditions for a long time. There was also a global shortage of HGV drivers, so it was not unique to the UK. We saw it all over Europe.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his interest in trying to solve these problems. In my contribution I spoke specifically about fishing and skills; will he give an assurance that he will meet me, and other Members who wish to join us, to discuss that topic? That would be helpful. I make that request in a constructive fashion—I mean that honestly—because I believe there is a way forward that we can all agree on.

Robert Jenrick: In the time I have available, let me address some of the specific points raised. I am looking forward to meeting the hon. Member for Strangford and representatives from the fishing industry. He has made a number of good points today and I hope we can explore them in more detail when we meet.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made valid points, particularly on health and social care. As a former Health Minister, I hear what she said. The issues she raised are the reason why my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham created the health and social care visa, which has been very successful, and we now see tens of thousands of doctors and nurses coming to the UK. That is not the long-term answer—we want to train more people domestically, and I am alive to arguments made for lifting the cap on medical school places—but in the meantime it is important to bring in those who want to come here to work. That visa is also applicable for care workers, although I appreciate that there are some legitimate concerns about the salary threshold and so on that make it more challenging than we would like it to be.

In opening the debate, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale talked about the broader labour market challenges and how we respond to them—a valid point also made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham. We need to take that up across Government so that we have a far more joined-up approach to these challenges. One way in which we are trying to ensure that skills training more adequately meets the needs of particular communities in England, at least, is through devolution. We now routinely devolve the skills budget for adults to local authorities and Mayors. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale has a new devolution deal in his area; if that progresses to a mayoral deal, I suspect he will see a devolution of skills budgets and training to Cumbria, which may be helpful to him.

A number of colleagues raised the question of youth mobility schemes, which I fully support and would like to see more of. Most recently, we have progressed that idea through the Australia and New Zealand free trade agreements, while negotiations are ongoing with other countries. We are open to more agreements, which clearly must be reciprocal. With respect to European countries, we are open to that debate. The EU is currently seeking an agreement across the whole European Union, rather than on a state-by-state basis; although that does not preclude us from entering into it, it clearly means a longer and more complex negotiation than if we were able to negotiate with individual states.

Several Members raised the question of asylum seekers having the right to work in the UK. I appreciate that there are good arguments on both sides of this debate, which I have considered at length. On balance, I do not agree with doing it because it would add a further pull factor to the UK. The UK already sees a very large number of individuals making the dangerous crossing across the channel. There are a number of reasons for that. The UK is viewed as a more attractive location to come to for work and access to public services because of the way in which we treat those individuals versus other European countries. I do not think it would be sensible for us to add a further pull factor to the many we already have. Deterrence has to be suffused through our approach to tackling illegal immigration. If we undermine that further, we will only find larger numbers of individuals crossing the channel.

With that, I draw my remarks to a close. I look forward to meeting the hon. Member for Strangford to discuss fishing. If the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale ever wishes to take up these matters with me, I would be happy to meet with him to discuss them further.

3.58 pm

Tim Farron: I am grateful to you for overseeing the debate, Mrs Cummins.

I thank the Minister for that offer. Let me cut to the chase: yes, we would love to have a meeting with the tourism leaders for the lakes and the rest of Cumbria Tourism to talk about all the practicalities.

The tone of the debate was good. It is a low bar, I am afraid, but at least there has not been any incendiary language about foreigners and asylum seekers flooding our shores and all the rest of that nonsense, although I did disagree with some of the things that others said.

The right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) made some good points about us training our own staff and ensuring that we develop young people's talent. In my part of the world, Kendal College has certainly added massive value for young people so that they can set up a career in the Lake district. We should not see hospitality just as something that is menial and low paid; it is a real career trajectory that people can follow.

My more general concern about the Government's position is that they have allowed political considerations to overwhelm economic and practical ones. If someone trying to run a business in the Lake district has a workforce problem, that is partly—maybe mostly—caused by the housing disaster, which the Government need to get a grip of, but it is in no small part also caused by inflexibility on migration. It needs to be something that is reciprocal, whereby we give people a reasonable length of time here so that they can contribute. That is what businesses want; I hope the Minister will listen to them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of a temporary recovery visa for industries experiencing labour and skills shortages.

4 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

Bankers' Bonuses

4.10 pm

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): I will call Jon Trickett to move the motion, and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Government policy on bankers' bonuses.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mrs Cummins. It is good to hear somebody from the old West Riding, as we would call it, in charge of the sitting this afternoon. I look forward to fair but firm chairpersonship.

It was the great German playwright Bertolt Brecht who once said that, to make money from banking, set up a bank rather than rob one. People make more money that way. It is clear that there needs to be a wider debate about the role of the financial sector in the British economy, but it is good to start with the remuneration structures in the finance sector. That is what this debate is about.

The previous Chancellor's deplorable mini-Budget, as I would insist it is called, contained a series of clearly mistaken policy shifts. Following the change in Chancellor and then in Prime Minister, almost the whole of that mini-Budget disappeared, except for one thing: the idea that we should lift or remove the cap on bankers' bonuses. I hope that the Minister will be able to change Government policy this afternoon, following my persuasion, but we will see what he says.

We have been here before on the question of bankers' bonuses. I want quickly to recall what happened in the 2008 banking crash. As it happened, I was working in Downing Street at the time and saw clearly that we were on an economic precipice, in part because bankers' remuneration had been allowed to let rip. The crash almost brought down our whole economic system.

When it came time to review how the crash happened, a significant part of it was attributed to the reckless culture of greed in the banking sector, which had exposed the banks to unacceptable levels of risk. Adair Turner, the then chair of the Financial Services Authority, said that

"inappropriate incentive structures played a role in encouraging behaviour which contributed to the financial crisis".

He is hardly a man of the left, and therefore I think his words might be regarded as authoritative.

In 2009, the all-party Treasury Committee returned to the question of remuneration. It said that remuneration in the banking industry had played a role in causing the banking crisis. It questioned whether Turner's response was strong enough and whether

"the Financial Services Authority has attached sufficient priority to tackling remuneration in the City."

As we know, although bankers played a major role in bringing the system to its knees, in the immediate aftermath of the crash no banker was charged with any offence, in spite of their reckless behaviour. Many people in the country, in my constituency and elsewhere—perhaps

in yours, Mrs Cummins—thought that at least some of them should have served time at Her Majesty's pleasure.

It was the European Union that eventually instituted control of bankers' bonuses. The EU said that no banker should receive a bonus of more than 100% of their salary—though where that figure came from I do not know—or 200% if shareholders had voted in agreement. It is that cap that the Government appear to now be intent on removing.

I want to use this short debate to ask three questions. First, how much is remuneration for bankers now, 14 years after the crash? Secondly, who is suggesting that the bankers' cap be removed and why? Thirdly, how do we justify an ethos of greed as a determining factor guiding so many decision makers in a strategically important sector of the British economy?

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very important speech, particularly in terms of who is advocating this policy. When the previous Chancellor made the fiscal statement announcing the policy, I tabled a written question asking how many people in my constituency of Cynon Valley were going to benefit from lifting the bankers' bonus. The response was as expected and inadequate, in that the Government said that they did not know. I wonder whether that was because nobody in Cynon Valley is going to benefit from it. Does my hon. Friend agree that the reason nobody in places such as Cynon Valley will benefit is that the ban is being lifted to benefit financiers and others in the City, when the people who should be benefitting are those in the regions of Wales, the north of England and Scotland and our essential key workers—nurses, teachers and so on?

Jon Trickett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I agree with every point she made and I will develop some of those arguments as I speak.

First, I will address the question of where we are now with remuneration in the banking sector. We know quite a lot about it. The chief executive officer and chief financial officer of Britain's largest bank, HSBC, were paid \$2.2 million and \$1.3 million, respectively, for 2021. The truth is that bankers' bonuses have doubled in spite of the cap since the 2008 financial crash. According to the most recently available data, there are 3,500 bankers working in our country who made more than €1 million—£880,000—in a single year. That information comes from the European Banking Authority. Seven out of 10 of all the bankers who made more than €1 million in the whole of Europe are located in the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, 27 bankers in the UK were paid more than €10 million in a year. Two UK-based asset managers received between €38 million and €39 million in a year—I think that clearly makes the point referred to by my hon. Friend—and at the top of the pops, one merchant banker was paid €64.8 million in a single year, and almost all of that was a bonus.

Those are absolutely outrageous figures. They make me wonder why the Government feel it is necessary to lift the bonus cap at all, given the outrageous sums that are being paid.

That brings me to my second question, which was an attempt to discover who is actually pressing for a lifting of the cap on bonuses. Given the rates of remuneration

I have just indicated, it would take a colossal amount of unrestricted greed for bosses in the banking sector to propose such a thing. However, according to *The Guardian*, sources in some of the City's largest banks are saying, "Not me, guv. I didn't ask for the cap to be raised." Those bankers admitted that they were baffled by the then Chancellor's plan, and I think that they are equally baffled by the current Chancellor's decision to continue with the plan to lift the EU-imposed cap. The bankers said that they had not lobbied for the move, so it begins to look like this was an ideological move by the Conservative Government, who believe as a matter of faith in rewarding the super-rich with additional wealth.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The hon. Member is making an excellent speech. In my constituency of Airdrie and Shotts, 68% of people are cutting back on their essential groceries, and 65% are worried about not being able to pay their energy bills. Is it not simply the case that under the Tories the poor get poorer and the rich get richer, whether they be bankers or oil giants not paying windfall tax? Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the UK Government would do well to adopt the Scottish Government's approach of implementing policies designed to alleviate the cost of living crisis, such as freezing rent and rail fares, expanding access to free school meals and increasing the Scottish child payment to £25 a week, rather than looking after their rich banker friends?

Jon Trickett: The hon. Lady makes a number of important points, and I agree with most of them.

I was asking whether the Government are ideologically committed to this policy, since no banker is prepared to admit that they had lobbied for it. If that is the case, and it looks like it is, there is not a single shred of empirical evidence that money can trickle down from the most wealthy to the rest of society—quite the reverse. Beyond a certain point, it has been argued that the further growth of the finance sector hampers rather than supports the real economy. One study estimated that the excessive size of the UK's financial sector may well have cost our economy £4.5 trillion in lost growth over a 20-year period.

Turning to my third question, there is no evidence to suggest that individualised reward systems for key decision makers are necessarily for the corporate good of the institution for which they work, let alone the common good of the country as a whole. An argument that the Government have developed is that if banks pay more bonuses, they will attract more bankers who will pay more tax. A better argument would be to pay those who are on the lowest pay more money because they will spend it in the local economy and contribute to income for the Treasury.

A Government who set out public policy to raise the incomes of the wealthiest while holding down the wages and salaries of working people are totally at variance with the values of the overwhelming majority of people in this country. How can they justify the multimillion remuneration packages for a handful of people at the top when the number of food banks for working communities is growing? In any event, it seems that avarice in the financial sector is simply piling up the material for the next crash, which will come if we do not change direction fast. The Government need to abandon this policy. That is just plain Yorkshire common sense.

I want to make one further point, and I will be careful how I express it—the House will understand why. The Code of Conduct for Members states:

"Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties."

I quote that because 10% of all MPs have disclosed in the Register of Members' Financial Interests that they have monetary ties with for-profit companies or individuals in the financial sector. The same is true of one fifth of all peers. I worry about how embedded the financial sector is in this very building. Financial institutions and individuals closely tied to the banking and finance sector donated a total of £15.3 million to political parties throughout 2020 and 2021.

Returning to bankers' bonuses, the Government need to take three steps. First, they should immediately announce that they will not lift the cap on bonuses. Secondly, they should appoint an independent commission to examine the whole remuneration structure in the UK, starting with the financial sector. Thirdly, they should make an interim announcement that there will be a suspension of all bonus payments in the City during the current financial crisis, until the independent commission that I have recommended reports.

Beth Winter: In addition, does my hon. Friend agree that a windfall tax on the profits of the banks should be introduced as an alternative to a future round of austerity, as stated by the previous deputy governor of the Bank of England?

Jon Trickett: My hon. Friend has caught my next point. In the interest of social justice, the country feels that a 2% cap on the salaries of public sector employees and the lifting of the cap on already over-remunerated bankers is the wrong way for the Government to go. I agree with the statement made last week by the former deputy governor of the Bank of England, who my hon. Friend has just referred to. He said:

"The British government should raid the banks for tens of billions of pounds to fill a black hole in the public finances".

He argued that the combination of rising interest rates and the money printed as part of quantitative easing has handed banks windfall profits. Those profits are going towards increased bonuses, which is totally unacceptable. Surely the banks and the financial sector should work for the common good, rather than for the private interests of a handful of very wealthy people. I will now make way for the Minister, and I look forward to him attempting to defend the indefensible.

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): Just so Members are aware, the debate will finish by 4.40 pm.

4.25 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) on securing the debate. I accept that he is sincere in bringing forward his concern and that of his constituents, but we on this side of the House believe that he is sadly wrong.

In responding for the Government, I am grateful for the opportunity to lift the lid on what is an important but often misrepresented issue. Let me be unequivocal

[*Andrew Griffith*]

from the outset that the Government are unapologetic about our commitment to the financial services industry, which stretches across the whole of this great nation. If the hon. Gentleman cares to talk to his Front-Bench colleagues, he will find that the policy of both Front-Bench teams is to support the sector in order to help grow our economy and create the prosperity from which we all benefit.

Jon Trickett: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Griffith: I will happily do so. Perhaps we will hear more about the policy of those on the Opposition Front Bench.

Jon Trickett: Does the Minister accept that I am not speaking on behalf of my Front-Bench colleagues? I am speaking about the views of my constituents and others across the country, and in the interests of what I believe the country should be doing. The Government are clearly wrong, whatever those on the two Front Benches are proposing.

Andrew Griffith: It is always a pleasure to hear a Member of this House speak on behalf of their constituents, which is indeed what we are here to do. I stand corrected by the hon. Gentleman: this debate is not about the policy of Opposition Front Benchers. I just thought it was worth setting that in context, because where there is consensus, we should build on it. I understand his views, but the scale of the sector's contribution to the United Kingdom is truly massive.

Financial and related professional services, and all those that are engaged in the support functions, make up 12% of the UK's gross value added—12% of the economy. That is millions of jobs, and not just in the City. Indeed, I actively push back against the idea that I am the City Minister, because that is not the case. The financial sector has to build bridges and reach into every household across the country. To that point, the hon. Gentleman is probably aware from talking to his constituents that there are 145,000 jobs in the financial sector and related industries in Yorkshire and the Humber, and long may that continue. Those are the sorts of high-quality, high-skilled jobs that I am sure he seeks for his constituents, for our generation and for generations to come.

The sector produces prodigious amounts of tax revenues—billions of pounds—without which our public services would be in peril. Because of the financial services sector, I can look our hospitals, schools, police, fire services and all of our brilliant, fabulous public servants in the eye. The hon. Gentleman might tell us that they do not get enough revenues, but one of the ways in which we can continue to make sure that they are sustainably well financed is on the back of the very bankers he decries, and my mission is to continue to grow this wonderful sector.

I return to the subject of the debate: the bonus cap. Although many people are confused about what the bonus cap is, I know that the hon. Gentleman has followed this topic and is not confused. It is not a cap on bonus pay. If he would like to introduce such a measure, Parliament offers many wonderful opportunities

for him to do so, including ten-minute rule Bills and Backbench Business debates. If he would like to propose a cap on bonuses, I am sure that the House would be keen to hear more about how such a cap would work.

I think the hon. Gentleman knows that what we are talking about is not a cap on bonuses whereby fixed pay is inflated and bankers are paid the egregious amounts that he talks about. This did no such thing. It was simply about the composition of pay and how much of it is geared to performance versus a mere entitlement or fact of contractual law. It has never been a cap. The EU directive that the hon. Gentleman talked about relates to the ratio of fixed pay to bonuses. At no point has there been a cap. To be in favour of the status quo is actually to be in favour of higher basic salaries for bankers. Perhaps we should have renamed this debate, "The debate about higher basic salaries for bankers." We may have got more bankers to come and watch, but I am not sure how many hon. Members would have clamoured to support a debate about higher basic pay for bankers. This is a really important point. The hon. Gentleman himself raised the fact that since this so-called cap was introduced, we have actually seen an increase in pay. If it was a cap, by its own definition it has failed.

The consequence of all this is that by removing restrictions, more of bankers' pay can be performance-based. If they do not perform, perhaps their salaries will go down and perhaps the hon. Member's objectives would be achieved by the very measure the Government have advocated. We would be removing the insistence on higher fixed pay, and more of it would be based on performance. If they do not perform or grow the economy, and if they do not contribute the near 50% share that the bankers will typically be paying in tax to our nation, then their salaries will go down. I would offer that to the hon. Gentleman as a reframing of how he thinks about this.

This is a common remuneration structure, not just in this sector but elsewhere in the economy. It is how many industries align performance and incentives in a sensible way. I have heard the argument that removing what we have now established as a so-called bonus cap will see a return to the bad behaviour and perverse incentives that led to the global financial crisis. The hon. Gentleman was there at the heart of that in No. 10, and I can understand that experience, but things have moved on—not just in respect of this cap, but the fourth European directive.

At that point there was no broader remuneration framework for bankers. They could get their entire variable pay on the day it was awarded. There was no element of deferral or additional regulatory requirements, such as those imposed by the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Financial Conduct Authority, to require a significant proportion of variable remuneration to be deferred for a number of years. In those years, firms are able to revisit performance and material events or misconduct and then take account of those within the remuneration framework. Since the hon. Gentleman's service in No. 10, we have seen the introduction of the senior managers regime, which has even greater accountability.

The point is that the regulatory structures have evolved. They were right to evolve in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, but the reforms that work do not include this arbitrary and variable remuneration ratio.

Jon Trickett: The Minister will have heard me talking about a person in the City being remunerated £68 million in a single year. Of that, £200,000 was the basic pay, and the rest was bonus. I think the Minister is resting his case on the expansion of basic salaries, but that is not the case for that person. It would take the average person in my constituency 2,260 years on an average salary to achieve what that person achieved in a year. Is that possibly morally justifiable?

Andrew Griffith: The hon. Gentleman needs to make peace with the benefits of a capitalist, free-enterprise, private, risk-taking economy. I understand that that is a certain distance for the hon. Gentleman to travel. Perhaps we do not have enough time this afternoon for the hon. Gentleman to travel all that distance. By his own admission, he chose the most extreme of the most extreme cases. I celebrate, because in that example, his, mine and your constituents, Mrs Cummins, would be better off to the tune of £34 million, from that single, most productive of financial services employees in that year putting that money back into the Exchequer. I sincerely hope that is absolutely the case, because the Government have made a great endeavour to collect all the tax revenues owed.

I will shortly conclude, but earlier the hon. Gentleman seemed to decry the fact that seven out of 10 of the most highly paid bankers in Europe were based in London in the United Kingdom. I think the very opposite. The Government's view is that, if not seven, it should be eight, and that we should seek to obtain those revenues and grow our economy, reinvesting in the productive and public services.

At the beginning, the hon. Gentleman made great play that this was one of the few surviving measures of the mini-Budget, the then growth plan. I cannot leave

that lying on file, because the biggest single measure, which all our constituents benefit from right now, as the nights grow colder and the temperatures plummet, was the £60 million—

Jon Trickett: Billion—let me help the Minister.

Andrew Griffith: Sixty billion pounds—a little more than bankers' pay. That is now flowing into individuals' heating, fuel and energy bills, protecting every one of our constituents, up and down the United Kingdom. This was not the sole surviving measure that the hon. Gentleman talked about. This was a sensible measure, part of taking an inherited European rulebook that never fitted the fact pattern of the United Kingdom. That is why the Bank of England and the Liberal Democrat part of the coalition all made great protestations at the time that the fourth European capital requirements directive was introduced, because it did not fit the unique fact pattern of the United Kingdom.

Let me conclude. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for bringing these matters to the House. It is absolutely right that we talk about this and understand how we are going to drive our economy forward in the fairest possible way. The City, I hasten to remind him, has a significant duty to society, and must be connected to every part of the United Kingdom, even our wonderful Administration north of the border. The Government's position is that the measure is the right one. The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Government stood by that. It is the case, because we want a productive economy and people to be paid what they earn, but no more than is warranted. That is why we continue to stand by the measure.

Question put and agreed to.

Cryptoasset Promotions in Sport

4.40 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cryptoasset promotions in sport.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I thank Mr Speaker for granting the debate and welcome the Minister to his place. The debate was originally set to be held on 13 September, but the very sad death of Her late Majesty the Queen meant it was rightly postponed, until today. I should also mention the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), who pipped me to the post in securing the first parliamentary debate on regulating cryptoassets, which took place on 7 September. That was a very well informed debate, which I read in *Hansard*. While acknowledging the opportunities that blockchain can present, it foreshadowed some of the issues I will talk about today.

As the Minister and I heard just last night in the Adjournment debate led by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), our sports teams occupy a very special place in our communities. The fans have a special bond with their clubs that goes far beyond being a customer or a consumer. Their loyalties are passed down through generations, and the shared memories of league titles, cup finals and spectacular upsets bond families and communities together in tribal loyalties towards those clubs.

When an individual club or sport as a whole takes its fans for granted or seeks to exploit them, those bonds are not only frayed, but lasting damage can be done to the community as a whole. It is for that reason that the fan-led review, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), is so important, as we also heard last night. It is also for that reason that I urge the Minister and the Football Association to crack down on some of the cryptoasset promotions I will discuss today. Many have been almost entirely exploitative and have traded on fans' love for their club and on the susceptibility of some of those fans, particularly young men, to speculative get-rich-quick schemes.

Cryptoassets are the ownership of a digital entity, whether a currency or some sort of collectible. The formal Government definition is:

"A cryptographically secured digital representation of value or contractual rights that uses a form of distributed ledger technology and can be transferred, stored, or traded electronically."

That definition includes things like bitcoin, the currency, but also tokens that can be traded among people, which is where a lot of the current problems in sport lie.

We could debate on a moral level the fundamental value of such cryptoassets—it is my contention that many I will describe today have zero value—but what is apparent is that their value and their price is often not the same thing. Their prices can be very volatile, which is partly why they have proved so attractive in the field of speculation and in encouraging people to speculate.

In general, the crypto space is growing. There are potential economic benefits to some uses of blockchain technology and I cautiously welcome the Government's announcement of April 2022 to

"make the UK a global cryptoasset technology hub."

However, the field urgently needs better regulation, and the need for regulation comes from the potential risk of people losing all their money. The Financial Conduct Authority has said that consumers should regard such investments in crypto as high risk and speculative and that people

"should be prepared to lose all your money".

The speculation surrounding cryptoassets, with prices often far exceeding any possible intrinsic value, brings to mind previous bubbles, going back to tulip mania. All of these bubbles are examples of the greater fool theory—the idea that someone might pay for an overpriced asset, knowing it to be overpriced, but they hope to sell it for even more to the so-called greater fool, to make a profit. The modern terminology used in forums to boast, by those who get involved in these schemes—the so-called crypto bros—is pump and dump, and the most effective way of pumping a cryptoasset seems to be the endorsement of a sports club or a sports star, which is also known as crypto-washing.

By endorsing these speculative assets and by letting themselves or their players be the pumpers of the assets, clubs are potentially putting their own fans in the role of the greater fool, which is something they do at considerable risk to their reputation and the long-term bonds I spoke about a moment ago.

In calling for better regulation of cryptoasset promotion in sport, there are four significant areas of concern, and I offer my thanks to the journalist Martin Calladine—@uglygame on Twitter—for the taxonomy. I will come to them in turn. They are the misleading promotion of the assets; the lack of consumer protection; the lack of due diligence by the clubs entering into deals; and the problematic nature of their attempts to monetise fan engagement with the clubs.

As I said, I will start with misleading promotion. The widespread and often misleading promotion of crypto has helped it to make it into the mainstream. It minimises the risks involved in so-called investing—in many cases, fans just spending their money on this product. Many sports teams, players and, now, leagues have made or are in the process of making deals with companies in the crypto sector and are using their own social media—clubs or players—to push these items on to people who might not otherwise have been aware of them. We know from FCA research that more than 70% of people are not very aware of what crypto is, but we also know from the same research that 10% of people, as of June this year, have held or currently hold a cryptoasset. That is up from 5.7%, I think, in January 2021, so this is clearly a growing space.

I have also talked about fan tokens: digital assets that allow holders to access a range of alleged benefits. A fan token is a fully fungible digital token giving fans some influence over certain decisions made by a sports team. Quite how valuable that influence is I will come to later, but the fan tokens themselves usually require an intermediary step of buying cryptocurrency to purchase the fan token, thus exposing the fans to the whole world of cryptocurrency and not just the alleged benefits of the fan token. Of course, both the tokens themselves and the cryptocurrency can be traded as a speculative asset.

A few years ago, barely any football clubs were doing anything with crypto. Now, nearly every single club in the top four divisions either has a crypto partner or—in

a few rare cases—has turned down the offer to sign one. Cryptoassets are of course often promoted as a new and exciting opportunity, and the potential downsides are glossed over or downplayed. For example, last year Southampton football club promoted a crypto “education” website by its crypto partner, Yolo Group—Yolo presumably standing for “You only live once”. The content of that website is utterly one-sided and totally inadequate. It is just propaganda rather than education, and it is biased wholly in favour of crypto. For example, its “what is cryptocurrency” page states that €1 invested in bitcoin in 2009 is worth €60 million in 2021—without any recognition whatever that that is no guide whatever to potential future returns from any currency, let alone bitcoin or the one that it is promoting.

Socios, the largest and most famous provider of so-called fan tokens, has repeatedly marketed its products in the UK without proper acknowledgement of the risks. If we look at a recent deal that it did with three English rugby union clubs—Harlequins, Leicester and Saracens—we see that it is clearly promoting the claim that fans can access an exciting new opportunity. Only on a separate webpage, at the very bottom of the frequently asked questions does it say:

“You should not purchase any cryptoassets if you do not fully understand the nature of your purchase and the risks involved.”

Not only are those risks not identified properly, but the benefits—most notably the potential financial returns—are hyped up.

This in particular was the subject of so many complaints that the Advertising Standards Authority drew up new crypto-marketing rules with specific reference to Socios. The ASA ruled in December 2021 that Arsenal FC

“trivialised investment in cryptoassets and took advantage of consumers’ inexperience or credulity”

in a promotion of its Socios fan tokens featuring three first-team players.

Despite my misgivings about its product, I am grateful that Socios engaged with me prior to this debate, and I should say that its official position is that it does not

“market fan tokens as investments. The purpose of tokens is to give fans new ways to engage with their club, be entertained by it and to win rewards that can’t be gained anywhere else... Our marketing materials include warnings about the risks of purchasing fan tokens for any other purpose.”

In the discussion that I had with it over Zoom, it acknowledged that it has come some way, but I still feel, fundamentally, its product is not really worth anything in particular to anybody. I will come to some of those alleged fan engagement benefits later.

The second problem that I would like to turn to is the lack of consumer protection. This is still a very unregulated space—a wild west—leaving fans with no recourse if the scheme collapses or is subject to fraud. I think there is a comparison here with the Football Index scandal, which I raised in this Chamber a few months ago. I mentioned crypto at that point, which is what ultimately led to this debate today. Again, there was no recourse for people who had lost all their money. They were led into believing in something that was regulated in that case, through the Gambling Commission. It turned out it was not, and it has been a real struggle for people to get their money back. There is even less protection in this space, given that the FCA has not regulated firmly yet.

To see the impact on the consumer, we should also look at the profile of the consumers. Socios’s own data shows that 50% of its users are aged from 24 to 34. As with Football Index, those young people interested in crypto are usually men. They usually do not have a traditional finance background and they find crypto attractive because it does look like an opportunity to get rich quick. That is precisely why the companies in turn look towards sports teams and sports players alike—because they have a huge following among young men that they can sell the emperor’s new clothes to.

Numerous non-fungible token schemes, having been pumped and dumped—again, fitting in with the greater fool theory—have rapidly lost almost all their value. The investigations writer for *The Athletic*, Joey D’Urso, who is here today, has covered the topic very rigorously and has set out how these schemes have infiltrated top-flight and lower-league football. He has shown how so many of them have depreciated substantially in a very short space of time, to the disadvantage of the fans who were encouraged to get in at the beginning.

Of the 20 football clubs in last season’s premier league, all but one had at least one cryptocurrency sponsor, and some had several. As I said earlier, the assets are very volatile, so much so that we have seen multiple crashes of the cryptoasset bubble, most recently a few months ago. In June 2022, bitcoin was down 70% from its all-time peak in November 2021, but at least it still has some value. Compared with when the deals were originally signed, the value of nearly all cryptoassets linked with premier league clubs tanked over the course of last season. Some have gone bust completely. Companies such as IQONIQ and Sportemon Go have collapsed totally, which has wiped out the value of any investments fans have made. IQONIQ had deals with Crystal Palace, La Liga in Spain, the McLaren Formula 1 team and several leading European football clubs.

The schemes partner not just with sports clubs but, as I have said, with players. Most infamously, perhaps, the former England and Chelsea captain John Terry launched the Ape Kids Football Club NFTs on 2 February 2022. If hon. Members were not on Twitter, they might have missed that, but those were cartoon monkeys being sold, initially, for an average price of \$665—that was the early peak. They were literally cartoon images of monkeys. They are all slightly different, and buyers allegedly own their particular one, but, of course, anyone can just take a screenshot and claim that they own it too. As the scheme was going well, other footballers endorsed Terry’s project. His former teammates Tammy Abraham and Ashley Cole also posted them on their social media pages. Predictably enough, within a month those NFTs plummeted in value by 90%, and Terry’s former colleagues quietly deleted their tweets of support.

It seems to me that cryptoassets and fan tokens are the only unregulated business that those in the sports industry are willing to endorse to their fans. If a club was sponsored by a chocolate bar, for example, the chocolate bar would be tested and regulated by the Food Standards Agency. More to the point, consumers of that product would be protected by the law. There is nothing like that for crypto: no trading standards, no industry ombudsman, no FCA regulation, no fit and proper persons test and, in the event of a suspected crime—some of these cases are probably criminal—no great likelihood of any police action. In fact, the closest

[Aaron Bell]

we have come to regulation is the Advertising Standard Authority's new rules, which I referred to earlier. It should not fall to the ASA to be an ersatz regulator in this space.

I recognise that the FCA is doing work through its cryptoassets taskforce, and that is a matter for the Treasury, but sports bodies themselves need to do more. That is why I am grateful that we have a Minister from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport here today. I am grateful for his attention.

The third issue with cryptoasset promotion in sport is the lack of due diligence by those who do deals around such investments. The large sums of money on offer, combined with the opaque nature of many of the schemes, has exposed the low quality of due diligence. Football clubs are routinely doing business with crypto schemes that fans cannot interrogate, and clubs themselves often make no effort to assess their partners' integrity.

In yesterday's Adjournment debate, I referenced the example of Birmingham City's ill-fated tie-in with Ultimo GG, but perhaps the most unbelievable example is the story of Manchester City and a company called 3Key. Man City has been at the forefront of football's crypto sponsorship revolution. This time last year, the club announced 3Key as its new crypto partner, only for it to drop the company within a week when it came out that nothing about the company—even the fact that it existed—seemed to be true.

Again, Martin Calladine had the story. He established that 3Key was actually the new name for a massive, rolling crypto pyramid scheme. Man City subsequently refused to discuss the partnership or reveal what due diligence had been done, which for Mr Calladine left some serious unanswered questions. If the club signed a deal with what was, in effect, a criminal gang, and did not take any steps to establish who it was dealing with, it seems obvious that there are money laundering issues. In his article, Martin writes:

"The question is how could City not have noticed when literally just 15 minutes of googling would've been enough to establish that 3Key were not who they claimed to be... They didn't have, or wouldn't give me, 3Key's address, company registration details or even their telephone number. If you were a junior estate agent who rented a flat to someone on this basis, you would get fired. If City actually accepted money from 3Key without having verified their identity, then this could be a breach of money laundering regulations.

In essence, it appears that it is only by luck that Man City failed to become party to a massive fraud, which could've severely harmed their own fans."

I spoke to a number of clubs in the lead-up to the debate. I wanted to establish their intentions in making partnerships with crypto companies. The official line is frequently fan engagement, which I will come to shortly, but I have been told another reason: commercial reality. That applies in particular to clubs that are not at the top table—those outside the gilded land of the premier league. We know from previous debates, and from the work that so many people have done to save their local football clubs—I think of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly)—that it is difficult for those clubs to balance their books. Clubs are keen to get sponsorship. One club told me that crypto companies often offer five to six times more than other companies normally would. I therefore completely understand the

temptation, perhaps even the necessity, to take what is on offer, particularly for clubs on the financial brink, as many are. However, that should not mean that a comprehensive appraisal of such companies—true due diligence—does not take place.

The fourth and last problem I want to raise is the issue of attempting to monetise fan engagement. The promotion of crypto as an alternative way of letting fans contribute, through tokens, is encouraging clubs to monetise fan engagement and replace the genuine consultation that many have pioneered over the past 20 or 30 years with a deeply flawed pay-to-have-your-say model.

Many clubs and crypto businesses that I have spoken with say that their main intention is fan engagement. For example, Manchester United, which has an official blockchain partner, Tezos, provided the following comment:

"Blockchain is a hugely exciting area of technology which, over the long-term, has the ability to revolutionise the way in which we digitally engage with our fans."

On the intentions of crypto companies, Socios stated:

"We are the leading fan engagement and rewards platform in the sports industry. Through digital utility tokens, known as Fan Tokens, we are creating a new form of digital membership for sports fans around the world."

Sorare, a French start-up digital entertainment platform that is allegedly lining up an NFT deal worth £30 million a year with the Premier League itself, provided this comment:

"Our platform connects fans with their passion for sports."

The crypto businesses and the clubs profess that the deals are based on fan engagement, but what do the fans think? I met the Football Supporters' Association, which gave me the following comment:

"We've seen a lot of clubs and players entering into partnership with crypto providers including those selling tokens which provide 'engagement opportunities'. We don't think supporter engagement should be monetised—if an issue is important, clubs should consult with their fans as outlined by the fan-led review of football governance... Fan loyalty is something to be cherished, not exploited."

When we look at the fan tokens, a large number are owned by traders and not fans of the club. There is no limit to the number of tokens people can buy and therefore no limit to the number of votes they can have, and there is no limit to the number of clubs they can hold tokens in. When we look at engagement with polls, the turnout is rarely more than 20%, and the polls themselves often cover ludicrously trivial matters. There was even one that asked token holders to vote on which player's washbag they wanted to see inside.

Tellingly, when the decision is really important, clubs have recognised that a vote via NFT is not appropriate after all. Aston Villa announced last Friday that it wanted to redesign its crest. That is a pretty fundamental thing. I remember that when Chelsea redesigned its crest, there was prolonged fan engagement. Aston Villa has launched a vote for season ticket holders and members, despite having an arrangement with Socios. To my mind, that eminently sensible decision gives the lie to the idea that the tokens are primarily about engagement rather than speculation.

What would go towards fixing these four interlinked problems? The answer is pretty simple: better regulation. That can happen on two fronts: better statutory regulation

by the Government, with the Treasury and DCMS working together, and better self-regulation by governing bodies and leagues.

The independent fan-led review of football governance, overseen by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford, called for a new independent regulator for English football and made many recommendations, which I endorse. My hon. Friend sits on the Science and Technology Committee with me, and she picked up on precisely the issue I am raising today during the evidence session we held on blockchain on 29 June this year. She asked David Gerard, a journalist and author who has written extensively on blockchain:

“Given the volatility that you have spoken about and we have heard about in terms of cryptocurrency and crypto cash and the volatility in football finance, surely this will create the perfect storm or disaster of which the fans of those clubs, who are buying NFTs, for example, will be the victims.”

David answered:

“The fans end up being the victims in this financial issue; they are the public interest here.”

As politicians, we should be mindful of the public interest at all times.

Unfortunately, my hon. Friend is away on other business and was unable to make today's debate. I know she wanted to be here. I pay tribute to her both for the fan-led review and for her tenaciousness on this topic. The Government published their response to the review's recommendations in April 2022, saying that they would seek to implement the proposals. I note the Minister's words at the Dispatch Box last night about the matter. It is my hope that the problems of crypto in the sport of football could fall under the remit of the independent regulator for English football.

The FSA suggested ways to address these problems at its 2022 annual general meeting, and I hope the Minister takes those away. They include engagement on common self-regulatory standards for any cryptocurrency partnership entered into by a football club, so that we see some genuine self-regulation in the sport of football; an information awareness campaign for football fans advising them of the risks to their capital; lobbying of the Government for statutory regulation—I suppose I am ticking that box today—and better due diligence by football clubs before entering into deals, including engagement with their supporters, supporters' trusts or fan groups before they issue any promotional material aimed at their fans.

I hope today's debate will have helped raise the profile and, more importantly, the reality of crypto in sport so that fans and, more importantly, the senior actors in this space think twice. The Premier League really should review that proposed £30 million deal with Sorare. Is that really what it thinks of its fans? If the Government are serious about looking to make the UK a global cryptoasset technology hub, they need to work with all the relevant actors across all sectors to ensure that we have both statutory regulation and self-regulation, but that need is perhaps most urgent in sport.

5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): For the second time today, I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) for leading the debate,

and for his contribution to last night's Adjournment debate on the financial sustainability of football clubs in England. It was an excellent debate. The Minister was there to respond to it, and I know that he is biting at the bit to respond to this debate, too. I am genuinely pleased to see him in his place; we have all grown fond of him, and we know that we will be more than pleased with his response.

I spoke in the recent Westminster Hall debate on the regulation of cryptoassets. It was clear from the contributions of all Members that there are real concerns surrounding the impact that “online money” can have on society. There is uncertainty; people have invested and been caught out. I understand that the figures for crypto investment are higher as a proportion of the population in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. There is an interest for us there, although I am not aware of any football teams or other sporting organisations in Northern Ireland that are involved. That does not mean that they are not, of course; I am just not aware of them at the moment.

As the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme rightly stated, cryptoassets are becoming more prominent in sports, which are a major source of enjoyment for many in the UK. It is great to be here to discuss these issues. The hon. Gentleman has an incredible interest in and knowledge of this matter, so I am pleased that he has set the scene so well. Sports as an industry has realised the potential that cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies can bring to further monetise fan engagement, attract sponsors and engage a global market in ways that were unimaginable decades ago. However attractive that may be, it is not always safe, and that is what I want to focus on. I know that the hon. Gentleman has already done so, and we look forward to the Minister's summing up.

As far as I am aware, there are currently no sports clubs in Northern Ireland enabling the use of cryptoassets; I stand to be corrected, but I am pretty sure that that is the case. As of 6 August, Oxford City became the first football club in the United Kingdom to accept bitcoin for matchday tickets. In March this year, as the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme referred to, Manchester City announced a global partnership with one of the world's largest crypto exchanges, OKX. We have seen incidents in the past where similar online products, such as bitcoin, have proven dangerous but at the same time appealing, as they pose as get-rich-quick schemes. It is a bit like doing the lottery on a Saturday. If anyone is as successful as I am—I have not done it for a long time—they will never get anything.

In 2021, Football Index went bust after its contractor suspended operations, and it was revealed that customers could lose up to £90 million. I remember that well; it was incredibly scary. For some people, it was a get-rich-quick scheme, but it did not work out. Similarly to cryptoassets, these types of investment companies sound fantastic in theory, as people are told that they will make money quickly and profits will increase over time, but it becomes clear that that is not always the case; indeed, many end up losing their life savings. As the hon. Gentleman referred to, and as he reinforced in last night's Adjournment debate, many in sports clubs find themselves in incredible difficulty. Many clubs were mentioned last night—the Minister mentioned some of them—and there is a need to have them regulated.

[Jim Shannon]

Our sporting industry in the UK is so loved by so many. In my constituency, crowds gather every weekend to watch local football matches, and teams of all ages compete in different leagues, tournaments and cups. We have seen the excitement of fans ahead of the 2022 World cup. There are massive calls for a greater review of the Gambling Act 2005, and for a deeper look at blockchain technology—the quicker the better—which allows participants to review transactions made in digital currency without the need for a central clearing authority. Something is just not right about that, and I hope the Minister will listen to our concerns and give us some encouragement.

We have the Financial Conduct Authority to ensure that things are done correctly, but sometimes, as technology advances and rolls on, it is hard to keep up with all the things that are happening. Unfortunately, the promotion of cryptoassets by sports teams poses new, unheard-of regulatory challenges. The Chancellor must take that into consideration and ensure that cryptoassets are brought into financial regulation. I think that might be a solution; it would certainly give us some peace of mind. Some athletes in the United States are already getting part of their salary in digital money or shares. Cryptoassets must be held to the same high standards for fairness to consumers.

Let me conclude my contribution to this worthwhile debate by saying that this is an issue that we must aim to address UK-wide. The issue will be dealt with at Westminster but it is important that the regional Administrations are kept on board. The Treasury must put the correct provisions in place to ensure our constituents' financial security. Cryptoassets are becoming incredibly popular, and not just in sport; many employers are considering them as a payroll method—talk about taking a chance with your pay on a Friday night. If we cannot stop this, it is important that we at least take the correct steps to ensure that it is done in the right way.

I am pleased to see the Minister in his place, but the discussions need to take place with the Chancellor and the Minister with responsibility in DCMS. I hope that the Chancellor will maintain regular contact with DCMS Ministers and with the economy Ministers in the devolved Administrations to ensure that all efforts are made to keep up to date with cryptoassets and their impact on our sporting industries. We cannot rule out, either, the role of the Home Office and the police in this matter—I think it is at that level. Some people have done well out of cryptoassets, but many people have not. We need to protect them, and protect the clubs, too.

5.7 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) for securing the debate, which is important not only because it dovetails with the debate that I secured two months ago, but because I agree with most, if not everything, that he said.

I began my speech two months ago by declaring my interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on blockchain, which has done a most excellent job of examining and understanding the blockchain—or, as I like

to call it, distributed ledger technology. I remind Members who were not in that debate—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was—that cryptoasset promotion in sport was one of the first things I touched on.

Something of a watershed was reached during the January Super Bowl in the United States, as cryptoasset ads took up a large chunk of the lucrative half-time advertising. The adverts starred such Hollywood luminaries as Matt Damon and Larry David. A cross-platform, cross-interest advertising nirvana was reached as some of the most trusted personalities were crossed with some of the most trusted brands in American life. The cryptoasset companies that paid for those lucrative spots surely hoped that would impress the hundreds of millions of viewers in the United States and across the world.

Although I used the Super Bowl as my example in my previous speech, I could have gone for other examples closer to home. After the National Football League, the most lucrative sports competition is the English premier league. As the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme alluded to, there is no shortage of crypto sponsorship there, either. Most if not all clubs have tie-ins as a secondary or main sponsor. Quite simply, sports teams provide perfect synergies for advertisers. Unlike most institutions that command national and international respect, they are open to commercial partnerships, exchanging the cachet that their brand commands among millions of people for handsome pecuniary rewards.

It would be fair to say that issues of morality or due diligence have not always come to the fore when making commercial partnership decisions, as exemplified by the hosting of the world's largest sporting tournament this month in a tiny yet fabulously wealthy sliver of the land in the Persian gulf, or in the way that one of English football's most traditional clubs was purchased last year by a group close to the Saudi royal family. I would not ask Members to just take my word for it. The *Financial Times*, in an article examining the relationships between sports and crypto, said that

“the love affair between sport and crypto appears to be a perfect match, as franchises can deliver a wider audience within the demographic that digital asset players want to reach.”

The article also came up with the astonishing figure of \$600 million spent by crypto firms worldwide on sports sponsorship last year, which is up from just \$25 million the year before. That is an incredible growth that really demands further examination by anyone interested in issues of consumer protection and good governance, as the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme mentioned. The risks are obvious, and I will quote the *Financial Times* article from 27 May one last time to demonstrate that.

“Ronan Evain, executive director at Football Supporters Europe, a prominent fans group, pointed to the risks of ‘an unregulated financial product’. He said teams and players backing crypto assets were ‘considerably irresponsible’, as such tie-ups were aimed at ‘building the legitimacy of the product for an audience that wasn’t necessarily familiar with it’.”

That essentially gets to the nub of my debate in September—the grey areas that are allowed to flourish in the regulation vacuum, the lack of clarity around so many of the products that are being offered, and then the resulting fertile ground for the outright scams that will inevitably follow.

To give just one example, the—how shall I put this—lack of attention to due diligence given by many sporting brands has already resulted in pretty shocking examples of fraud. Take the example of Sportemon Go, something that described itself as an

“NFT-augmented reality sports trading platform”

when it signed deals to appear on the kits of two Scottish Premiership teams, Rangers FC, which I know the hon. Member for Strangford supports, and Hibernian FC, which I know my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) is a big fan of. The company collapsed earlier this year after seeing the value of its proprietary “SGOX” token reduced to zero.

That is far from the only example of bizarre cryptoassets being lent a sheen of respectability by our own beloved sporting brands. *The Guardian* reported last year a press release from English champions Manchester City that trumpeted:

“We are excited to partner with 3Key”,

which I think the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme already mentioned,

“in their journey to simplify the decentralised finance (DeFi) trading analysis user experience through the power of football to engage with our fans with a range of content and activations.”

While that sounds like the marketing babble that most sports fans are used to, the real story was that 3Key lacked what could be called a digital footprint. It was unclear what services and products it sold, and where it was regulated. Websites associated with the company then went offline, and the club had no choice but to suspend the partnership. I could go on, but we have also heard plenty of examples from elsewhere today. I think there is a broad agreement that something needs to be done.

The Financial Services and Markets Bill, which has just finished in Committee—I was on the Committee myself—could have been one such avenue for regulation. However, to go back to the arguments that I made in my own debate two months ago, there is no legislation needed to clamp down on the worst excesses and sharp practices employed by some of those companies. That said, particularly when it comes to sports clubs—and individual athletes, a subject I have not really mentioned—there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the Government could be doing a lot more to protect institutions that ultimately command so much respect in our communities from the worst excesses and temptations that these sorts of bubbles can bring.

There is only one professional sports team in my constituency of West Dunbartonshire, Dumbarton FC—or the Sons, as they are commonly known—and they are celebrating their 150th anniversary this year. There used to be two, but my hometown team of Clydebank FC folded in 2003 after poor financial decisions were taken by the previous owners, so I know, at first hand, the importance of these brands to communities. Thankfully, the Bankies are now climbing up through the leagues and got into the Scottish cup last year, for the first time since they folded, and I was delighted to be there.

We need to make sure that our communities and constituents are protected from the worst excesses of what I would call unregulated capitalism. When the Minister, whom I congratulate on coming back into Government—I know he is all over this and crypto is

way up there at the top of his agenda—rises to his feet, will he therefore highlight the broad range of existing legislation that can deal with fraud and advise how the Government intend to work with sporting bodies across these islands to better understand why they are falling for this fraud and these scams? If necessary, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme, perhaps the Minister could also lay out whether existing regulations need to be improved or new regulations need to be added to the statute book to protect consumers. I know that Members on the Opposition Benches would at least support him on that.

5.15 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is great to see you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) not only on securing the debate, but on what I thought was an excellent speech that really set out the issues. I completely agreed with most of his speech, including, sadly, his criticism of the club for which I have been a lifelong season ticket holder, Man City. We have not covered ourselves in glory on this issue.

Some 2.3 million people in the UK apparently own cryptocurrency or cryptoassets, so it is no surprise that lots of sports teams have seen the financial opportunities and signed up for lucrative deals with the sector. In the USA, crypto sponsorships have been established across Formula 1, the Ultimate Fighting Championship and Major League Baseball, with major venue sponsorships as well. In the UK, most premier league clubs have some sponsorship links with cryptocurrency businesses and some clubs have launched their own non-fungible tokens. As we have heard, the Premier League has just signed a multimillion dollar deal with a blockchain company, Sorare, to deliver its own NFT collection. Alongside several major European teams, six premier league clubs have partnered with the company Socios, which markets itself as a fan engagement platform and also has links with rugby union. By purchasing fan tokens based on blockchain, fans are told they will have more of a say and can vote on club decision making, mostly on issues around the match day experience and so on.

There is a key question here for the clubs, not the businesses. The businesses are just in it for the money, but the clubs should be in it for more than that. In the wake of the fan-led review, if clubs really want to engage with fans and give them a say on these issues, they should do so. Why can they not do that without requiring their fans to sign up to spend money on cryptoassets? In this day and age, it is not hard for clubs to carry out that kind of engagement. Is it, as many of us suspect, just another way to exploit the loyalty and wallets of football fans?

Labour believes that fans should as a right have a say in the direction and decision making of their club, and that they should not have to invest in a cryptoasset to earn that right. I was reassured many times by the Minister's predecessor, the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), that the Government are on board with all the recommendations in the fan-led review. When they come forward with the White Paper and the proposals, I trust that we will see some opportunities to clamp down on this kind of business and really promote genuine fan engagement by the clubs.

[Jeff Smith]

In December 2021, analysis commissioned by the BBC estimated that more £262 million had been spent on fan tokens through Socios. Some producers of football NFTs and fan tokens state that these cryptoassets were never intended as investments, which is fair enough. However, that is certainly not always made clear by all producers. It is clear that some people have felt encouraged to purchase these tokens as investments. If so, they are taking a risk. We have already heard about John Terry's Ape Kids Football Club NFT collection, which was promoted by a number of high-profile football stars, and how the NFTs crashed in value and lost about 99% of their initial price. Several footballing figures have advertised NFT schemes on social media and then had to retract or delete their posts when the schemes nosedived and fans lost money.

As fan tokens are usually linked to volatile cryptocurrencies, which they provide an incentive to invest in, and are influenced by supply and demand, the value of those NFTs has fluctuated wildly. In November 2021, the crypto market was at its peak, with a valuation of almost \$3 trillion; by June 2022, it had lost more than two thirds of its value. As we have heard, fan tokens pushed by premier league teams have often tanked in value. I do not think we have heard about this in previous contributions: the Advertising Standards Authority recently upheld a ruling against Arsenal for its promotion of Socios fan tokens in an advert. It found that the club

"trivialised investment in crypto assets and took advantage of consumers' inexperience or credulity."

We need some action and we need regulation. Labour is not advocating a ban on the ownership of cryptocurrencies. We recognise the opportunities they can create for our economy when done right. Proper regulation of cryptoasset promotions marketed to sports fans is clearly needed, as the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme set out.

I have some questions for the Minister. First, as I have asked many times of his predecessor, can he tell us when or if—I hope it is when—he will bring forward proposals for the independent regulator? Does he foresee an independent regulator of English football having any role to play in the regulation of cryptoassets in football? It might be that the FCA is the appropriate regulatory body. The FCA has indicated that it is working with the Government to target financial promotions and advertising in crypto as a priority. Can the Minister set out a timeline of when those reforms will happen and what the legislative vehicle for doing so will be?

I will conclude with an aside. In the week of COP27, we should probably note that cryptoassets are really bad for the environment. They require huge amounts of power and powerful computer calculations to verify the transactions. They are very carbon-intensive. Will the Government be clear with supporter bodies about at least the environmental impact of crypto technologies? I do not want to let COP27 week go by without mentioning the detrimental effect of crypto.

The clear message from across this Chamber today has been that this is a really worrying development for football fans. It is not something we need necessarily, unless the clubs and businesses are out to make money

and at the expense of football fans. Regulation is clearly needed. That is the message from Members today. I hope the Minister will take that on board.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) for securing the debate. It is clear that he and I share a passion that everyone should be able to enjoy sport safely. That is ultimately one of the things that has motivated him to secure this debate.

We both understand how important it is to protect the integrity of our sports as well as the fans, who are their lifeblood, frankly. In my first few weeks in this job I have been learning an awful lot, but I would say that in the last hour I have learned even more. I am certainly grateful for the focus on this very important area. It will be informing a number of areas I am currently looking at.

It is a privilege as the Minister for Sport to be able to champion a sector that means so much to so many fans across the country, plays such an important part in local economies and has such a rich history in each of our communities. We would all agree that for those reasons and more we should ultimately encourage innovation in sport. Innovations that can harness emerging technologies, providing both new commercial opportunities for sport and greater engagement for fans, should be embraced. That being said, any such innovations should be implemented responsibly, in line with any relevant regulation, and with transparency in how they are advertised and promoted.

As I mentioned in last night's Adjournment debate on the governance and financial sustainability of English football clubs, fans are the lifeblood of sports clubs. That is why they were the first people I met when I took on this role. I met representatives from the Football Supporters' Association as well as a number of club supporters' trusts. I listened to their perspectives, because their needs must be understood and protected and should be central in any decisions we take. That way, we can ensure a sustainable, thriving future for sport in this country.

As part of the Government's ongoing work on football regulation, we are committed to breaking the cycle of inappropriate ownership, financial instability and poor governance practices. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme in congratulating and thanking our hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for the amazing work she has done with her review.

However, engaging with fans' groups goes wider than that, and the growing interest in, and promotion of, cryptoassets issued by sports clubs should clearly keep fans at the forefront. The enthusiasm of fans for sports memorabilia and collectibles is not new, and it is no surprise that this enthusiasm remains undimmed in the digital age through new technologies. It is clear to see that there is a hugely positive potential for cryptoassets in a fan market, with such a latent appetite for merchandise, memorabilia and other opportunities to show one's colours.

A number of sports clubs and competitions have taken early steps into partnerships with cryptoasset businesses, or in developing their own assets. As we have heard,

fan tokens have the functionality of making fans feel more immediately involved in their clubs on a digital platform by giving them a vote on matchday music or entering them into draws for signed shirts. Non-fungible tokens bring traditional collector opportunities into the 21st century, with opportunities to purchase digital cards. That can be at club level or relate to evolving digital assets that chart a team's progress, such as the recent product launched by the sponsors of the 2022 World cup. Sponsor relationships can be as responsibly explored as any other corporate partnership—none of these alone represents a significant risk that needs to be mitigated—but as we have heard today, not all projects launched by the sector thus far have delivered on their potential or done so in a transparent manner.

As I have said, any promotions of cryptoassets in sport should have fans' interests at their heart and must be transparent about any risks, and the sector should be mindful of that as it looks to further develop its digital offers. Cryptoassets should not be viewed in isolation from their wider relationship with a club's fan base and our normal expectations of responsible corporate relationships. It is reassuring to see that clubs are being held accountable on that point—for example, as we have heard, the Advertising Standards Authority ruled that some of the adverts promoting Arsenal's fan tokens through their partnership were “misleading” and “irresponsible”, with insufficient warnings of the risks involved.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme mentioned the incredibly damaging collapse of Football Index, which is an example of the four main problems that he has highlighted. Our independent review into the regulation of Football Index identified lessons to be learned by the Gambling Commission and the Financial Conduct Authority. The commission has taken action, including strengthening its approach to novel products.

As we have heard, cryptoassets can come in many forms, ranging from cryptocurrencies to non-fungible tokens. It is important to note that the Government are taking action on the regulation of cryptoassets and their promotion. In July, the Government set out our vision for the future of the financial services sector, which included a plan to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of technology and innovation. That was one of the four key components of the vision, with the ultimate aim of building a financial services sector that continues to be one that the rest of the world looks towards.

The global and UK cryptoasset markets have evolved rapidly in recent years. In 2021, the FCA estimated that 2.3 million people in the UK hold cryptoassets—up from 1.9 million in 2020. The Government see enormous potential in this innovative market, which needs to be carefully balanced against the risks. We have set out our firm ambition to make the UK a global hub for cryptoasset technology and investment. We want to ensure that firms can invest, innovate and scale up in this country, and we have announced a number of reforms that will see the regulation of cryptoassets and aspects of tax treatment evolve. Our clear message to cryptoasset firms is that the UK is open for business, and these announcements are in line with our objective to create a regulatory environment in which firms can innovate while, crucially, maintaining financial stability and regulatory

standards, so that people can use new technologies both reliably and safely. That is essential for continuing confidence in the financial system.

The Government established the cryptoassets taskforce in 2018, consisting of the Treasury, the Bank of England and the Financial Conduct Authority. The taskforce's objectives include exploring the impact of cryptoassets and the potential benefits and challenges of distributed ledger technology in financial services, and assessing what, if any, regulation is required in response. To protect consumers, the FCA has banned the sale of cryptoasset derivatives to retail consumers. The Government launched a new anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing regime in this area in 2020. The Government will continue to monitor the wider cryptoasset market and stand ready to take further regulatory action if required.

The Government are taking action on the regulation of cryptoasset promotions. In January 2022, the Government published a response to a consultation on proposals to bring certain cryptoassets into scope of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Financial Promotion) Order 2005, which would ensure those promotions are fair, clear and not misleading. The measure aims to improve consumer understanding of the risks and benefits associated with such purchases and to ensure that promotions are held to the same standards as financial services products with similar risk.

The Government have been clear that UK authorities are committed to supporting the growth of the sector in a safe and competitive manner. Certain cryptoassets are already subject to FCA financial promotions rules. A wider array of unregulated cryptoassets, such as bitcoin, are not subject to similar regulation for financial promotions. The Government's proposed measure to expand the scope of the financial promotion order to capture qualifying cryptoassets will bring most of these unregulated cryptoassets into financial promotions regulation. That forms part of the Government's staged and proportionate approach to such regulation, which is sensitive to the risks posed and responsive to new developments in the market.

As is already the case in the application of the financial promotions regime, the Government set the regulatory perimeter while detailed rules for the regime are determined by the FCA. The FCA's consultation on its rules closed earlier this year and it will carefully consider representations from firms. The Government will continue to closely monitor market developments and stand ready to take further legislative action if required.

In summary, the cryptoasset market is an emerging and rapidly evolving one. This innovative market has huge potential, but that must be balanced against the risks. The Government are actively monitoring the cryptoasset market and stand ready to regulate where necessary. The same is true for cryptoassets in sport. There is potential for cryptoassets to enhance fans' experience of sport and make them feel more a part of the clubs they love. However, their use by clubs must be responsible and transparent about any risks involved.

I absolutely recognise the four main problems that my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme highlighted. Misleading promotion, consumer protection, due diligence and fan engagement are interconnected factors that must be considered and addressed in the context of cryptoasset promotion in sport. The Government

[Stuart Andrew]

are happy to engage with the FCA and others on these issues in relation to our work on football governance and in respect of sport more broadly.

The Government will continue to monitor the use and promotion of cryptoassets in sport and will factor this into our considerations around the wider market and its regulation. I will certainly raise the important issues that have been highlighted today with my Treasury colleagues. I assure the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that I will ensure that the issues for Northern Ireland are highlighted. I will come back to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on the current legislative options that may be available following the meeting I have with him.

I knew that I would be asked about the publication of the White Paper. As I said last night, it is a priority for me. I get how important this is to fans. I hope the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) will understand that, as a new Minister, it is important that I get this right and take the time to consider all aspects that have been raised. We are committed to reform, and that will come. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme for leading this very insightful debate. He has certainly given me even more to consider as I make preparations for the White Paper.

5.34 pm

Aaron Bell: It was a pleasure to speak in a debate where everyone seemed to agree with me, which is fairly unusual for this place. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his kind words. He is right to emphasise the impact on our constituents. That is always at the heart of his speeches, whatever the topic—and he speaks on a number of topics. He is right that the public interest point, which I drew out in the quotation from our evidence session, should be at the forefront of what we are doing. It really is about the public interest, and the public interest in this case means the fans.

I am grateful to the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), particularly for highlighting that huge growth figure—from \$25 million to \$600 million in one year. Goodness only knows where it will be next year, though perhaps it will go the other way, given the scale of the crash that has been happening. He also gave us another example of a company going bust—the one that sponsored Rangers and Hibernian. The truth is that there are plenty of examples. I had to cut so many from my own speech. They are all equally jaw-dropping in their way. I focused perhaps on some of the better known clubs and examples.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), for what he said. He is right that it is all very well our criticising the crypto firms, but it is really the clubs that we should be talking about. They should be in it for more than the money. They represent heritage and communities, and they really need to think carefully. Likewise, the Premier League needs to think carefully about what it does, because it is the custodian of the top flight of the game, and the FA is the custodian of the whole game. It too needs to think about what it does in this space.

I thank the Minister for his kind words. He is right that my motivation is that everyone should enjoy sport safely, but my secondary motivation is that clearly we will look back in two years' time and say, "How on earth did that happen?" It is a potential scandal unfolding in real time, and it is for us as Members of Parliament to do and say something about it, which is what I am doing today. I hope that the Treasury does bring forward both the regulation and the consultation that it has promised. In the answer that my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) gave the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) on 22 July, it promised a consultation and legislation this year on this topic.

I look forward to the White Paper, and I hope that the Minister will find some space for crypto in it, and that he will perhaps work with me and my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on that. I hope that he uses his good offices to speak not only to the Treasury but to the Premier League, the Football Association and so on to emphasise that they need to do more in this space.

I thank my staff for helping me put the speech together. It has been over two months in gestation, given the delay. I also thank everyone who took the time to speak with me, including football clubs, some of the crypto firms themselves, and in particular Joey D'Urso and Martin Calladine, who have been extremely helpful. They have been completely on top of this topic as journalists for a long time. The work that they have done has obviously informed my speech and those of many Members present. It is really important to have people standing up for fans and doing that hard work in the sports sector, so I pay tribute to them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered cryptoasset promotions in sport.

5.38 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 8 November 2022

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

NATO Parliamentary Assembly

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge Brownhills (Wendy Morton) has replaced my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson) as a member of the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) has replaced my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) as a member of the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) has replaced my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) as a member of the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

The right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) has replaced the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) as a member of the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly

[HCWS362]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Government Response to House of Lords Liaison Committee Report on Licensing Act 2003 Post-Legislative Scrutiny: Follow Up Report

The Minister of State, Home Department (Chris Philp): The Government recognise that the majority of people drink at lower-risk levels and enjoy alcohol as part of socialising both at home and out and about. However, we also recognise that alcohol related harms remain of concern and need to be addressed.

The Government believe that the Licensing Act 2003 sets out a clear and effective legislative framework to regulate licensable activities nationally balanced with considerable local autonomy allowing areas to develop their own localities and economies based on their unique character and needs. We keep the Act under review and continue to work closely with licensing practitioners to ensure the regime remains fit for purpose and meets emerging challenges such as new digital technologies. There is a considerable body of good practice around implementation of the licensing regime for areas to draw on where needed.

We are taking forward an ambitious programme of work to tackle alcohol-related harms including the biggest reform of alcohol duties for over 140 years, the introduction

of the alcohol abstinence monitoring requirement and alcohol monitoring on licence, and a strong programme of work to address alcohol-related health harms and their impact on life chances.

We welcome this follow up report from the Committee and have given careful consideration to all of the additional recommendations.

The Government Response to the Committee's follow up report (CP 753) has been laid before the House today and will be published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS360]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Liverpool City Council Commissioners

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): On 19 August 2022, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), the then Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, announced he was minded to expand the intervention into Liverpool City Council by appointing a commissioner to oversee the council's financial management and to transfer functions associated with governance and financial decision making to the commissioners together with powers regarding recruitment to improve the running of the organisation. Today I am confirming that I will be implementing these proposals.

The intervention at Liverpool City Council started on 10 June 2021 following a best-value inspection triggered by the arrest of the former Mayor. The then Secretary of State appointed four commissioners with powers over regeneration, highways and property and their associated governance.

The commissioners submitted their second report on 10 June 2022, the anniversary of the intervention, leading to the "minded to" announcement in August. I am pleased that progress has been made and commend the hard work of the councillors and officers to achieve this. Commissioners also report that the arrival of Theresa Grant OBE as interim chief executive in September has brought renewed drive to the transformation work across the council.

The intervention is at a critical juncture as it approaches the halfway point and it is clear significant challenges remain. The commissioners' second report identified systematic, whole-council weaknesses in areas that stretch beyond the existing intervention. It concluded the council is not meeting its statutory duty to provide best value and the council must take urgent, whole-council action to progress on their improvement journey.

My predecessor invited representations on the proposals on or before 2 September 2022. Having considered the representations received from the authority, councillor Richard Kemp and the evidence in the commissioners report, I have decided to implement the proposals. I have made one small modification to remove an errant timeframe attached to a direction.

I am appointing Stephen Hughes as finance commissioner, until June 2024 or such earlier or later time as I determine. Stephen is a seasoned finance officer

who has recently worked as a finance and management consultant and previously worked as interim chief executive at Bristol.

More must be done to embed the desired cultural change across the organisation, to bridge the budget gap and set a balanced budget for 2023-24. My decision, to expand the intervention, reflects the stark situation in the council. The powers provided to commissioners are wide-ranging, but I feel are necessary to deliver the effective, efficient and convenient local government for communities across Liverpool.

The commissioners have agreed to provide their next report to me in February 2023 and I will update the House on further progress with the intervention at that

time. I have published the directions and explanatory memorandum associated with this announcement on gov.uk and placed copies, together with the commissioners' second report, in the Libraries of both Houses.

My predecessor also announced the Liverpool Strategic Futures Panel to craft a vision for Liverpool's future beyond Government intervention, with a plan for driving growth in skills, jobs and opportunities. Liverpool has fantastic potential, and I am considering carefully how we can work together with partners to best support levelling up in the area. I will update separately on these plans in due course.

[HCWS361]

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**not later than
Tuesday 15 November 2022**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

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