

Monday
28 November 2022

Volume 723
No. 80



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 28 November 2022

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Young People's Social Mobility: Student Finance Rules:

1. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of changes to student finance rules on young people's social mobility. [902426]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): We have always believed that anyone who wants to, and can benefit from it, should get access to a world-class higher education. Since we took over from Labour, 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds are 82% more likely to enter full-time higher education—that is for 2021 compared with 2010. Our reforms will make student loans more sustainable and fairer for graduates and taxpayers, and will help to boost learning across a lifetime, not just in universities. A full equality impact assessment of the changes has been conducted and was published on 24 February.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): In his autumn statement, the Chancellor spoke for nearly an hour but failed to mention students once. The Office for National Statistics reports that three in 10 students are skipping lectures to save money and a quarter have taken on new debt because of the dire economic situation. Why are the Government neglecting students who are buckling under the pressure of the cost of living crisis?

Gillian Keegan: I assure the hon. Lady that the Chancellor did mention teaching and all our teaching staff, which of course includes university teaching staff. My Department continues to work with the Office for Students to ensure that universities support students in hardship by drawing on the £261 million student premium. Any student who is struggling should speak to their university about the support it offers. Many universities are doing a fantastic job to provide further support: the University of Leeds has increased its student financial assistance fund almost fivefold to £1.9 million; Queen Mary University of London has a bursary scheme for lower-income families; and Buckinghamshire New University has kept its accommodation rates for halls of residence at pre-pandemic levels, so a lot of support is on hand for students.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to her new role and wish her all success. I strongly

support the reforms to make the student loan repayment system fairer for students so that graduates will no longer repay more than they have borrowed in real terms. That is good news. Does she agree that Conservative Governments have delivered on our commitment to address student loan interest rates?

Gillian Keegan: I thank my right hon. Friend for his welcome. We did commit to address student interest rates and we have delivered on that, which I am sure all hon. Members on both sides of the House will welcome.

Cost of Living:

Government Support for Schools and Parents

2. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What support the Government are providing to help (a) schools and (b) parents with the cost of living. [902428]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): I recognise the current challenges faced by families and public services. We know that things are tough out there, which is why we are acting in the national interest and why we have secured funding to increase the schools budget by £2 billion next year and the year after. All education settings are benefiting from the energy bill relief scheme, which will protect them from excessively high energy bills over the winter. In addition, we are committed to supporting the most vulnerable households through the toughest part of the year with additional direct support, and we are supporting schools and parents to make sure that we can all get through this.

Grahame Morris: I, too, welcome the Education Secretary and her team to the Front Bench. I thank her for that response, but I point out that due to runaway costs, schools can barely stay open for five days a week, let alone provide transport. Home-to-school transport is being pared back and public transport, certainly in east Durham, is unreliable and deteriorating. Can she give us some good news and tell us what she is doing to ensure that schools can afford to pay their heating bills and stay open? How will she guarantee access to education during the cost of living crisis?

Gillian Keegan: I can give the hon. Gentleman good news, because we heard in the autumn statement that education will be funded by an extra £2 billion next year and the year after. We will be working through how that will affect schools; each school will get its individual allocation. School funding is £4 billion higher this year compared with last year, and the autumn statement has confirmed that increase, which takes the core schools budget to an historic high of £58.8 billion. That will deliver significant additional support to pupils and teachers and will, I am sure, be welcomed by the sector.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to promote the Government's Healthy Start scheme, and to ensure that eligible families receive the vouchers to which they are entitled?

Gillian Keegan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The Healthy Start scheme, on which we are working with the Department of Health and Social Care, delivers healthy foods and milk for women over 10 weeks' pregnant or anyone with a child under four. Beyond this, our investment in families is very important, and we are

also investing £300 million in the Start for Life family hubs, which will complement all of the others. We will of course make sure that people are aware of all the schemes in those family hubs.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State to her new position, and indeed her team.

It was deplorable that the Chancellor failed to expand free school meals in his autumn statement. It means that at least 100,000 schoolchildren in poverty in England will continue to be denied a nutritious meal at school, which puts additional pressure on parents trying to provide for them. Will the Secretary of State urge the Chancellor to replicate the work of the Scottish Government, who have committed to providing universal free school meals to all primary children?

Gillian Keegan: We understand the pressures that many households are under, and that is why we are spending more than £1.6 billion per year so that children have access to nutritious meals during the school day and in holidays. The Government have indeed expanded free school meals more than any other Government in recent decades. We have put in place generous protection that means families on universal credit will also retain their free school meal eligibility. We now have a third of children in this country on free school meals, and I know that is very welcome for the families. We will have extended free school meals, and we will continue to support further education students with them as well.

Accessible and Affordable Childcare

3. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure childcare is (a) accessible and (b) affordable. [902429]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): We are committed to improving the cost, choice and accessibility of childcare, and have spent more than £20 billion over the last five years supporting families with the cost of childcare.

Mr Dhesi: The Government are knowingly underfunding the entitlement to 15 or 30 hours of childcare by over £2 per hour, thereby forcing providers to cross-subsidise and leading to astronomical costs for parents. New Ofsted data shows that 4,000 childcare providers closed within the year to March 2022, thereby further limiting access to childcare. When parents are having to pay more for their childcare than on their rent or mortgage, and adults without children are saying that childcare costs are forcing them out of parenting and precluding them from that, does she agree that she and the Government are presiding over a broken childcare system?

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. Childcare is of course enormously important, and it is this Conservative Government who have expanded the childcare offer successively over a number of years. Last year in the spending review, we set out an additional £500 million to come into the sector, and we are also supporting private providers with their energy bills this year.¹

1. [Official Report, 6 December 2022, Vol. 724, c. 4MC.]

SEND Delivery: Rural Areas

4. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the effectiveness of SEND delivery in rural areas. [902430]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): All local authorities, including those in rural areas, are subject to robust special educational needs and disabilities inspections, and Ofsted will shortly be announcing plans for a strengthened inspection framework. This is an area that both the Education Secretary and I are incredibly passionate about, and one which she knows from her time as a Health Minister and I know from my time as the Minister for disabled people. Today, my right hon. Friend has sent letters to those in the sector confirming that we will publish a full response to the SEND and alternative provision Green Paper, with an improvement plan, early in the new year.

Selaine Saxby: Many of my secondary school heads believe that, with the further devolvement of responsibility away from local education authorities, they could significantly enhance provision in their rural area. Would my hon. Friend agree to meet my school heads to discuss their ideas?

Claire Coutinho: I would like to thank my hon. Friend for a productive discussion last week. I absolutely agree with her—I know she is a former teacher—that empowering schools is crucial to ensure we have the right provision for SEND children in rural areas. The SEND and AP Green Paper proposed new standards based on the evidence of what works to make sure that local schools feel the sense of empowerment she so rightly talks about. Of course, if her heads write to me, I would be happy to respond.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The excellent community-run Ted Wragg Trust, which runs all the secondary schools in my constituency of Exeter, recently wanted to take over a failing local school—it started as a Steiner school, was then pushed on to another provider, which failed, and it has now been pushed on to another one—but the Government have decided not to allow that to happen. Could she explain—if not now, then perhaps in writing to me—why the Government did not listen to this very good idea to expand and improve local special educational needs provision in my constituency, but stuck to their ideological obsession with privately-run academies?

Claire Coutinho: I will be happy to look into that in detail and write to the right hon. Gentleman further about it, but I would say that the Department is working to improve all schools in terms of SEND needs across different sectors and we are working with all of them.

Mr Speaker: I call the Opposition spokesperson.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): While this Government have been preoccupied with their own internal disputes, the trashing of the UK economy and an endless merry-go-round of ministerial reshuffles, children with special educational needs and disabilities and their families are left to suffer. It is now eight months since the publication of the SEND and

alternative provision Green Paper and more than four months since the consultation closed. The Minister's predecessor had promised a response to the consultation by the end of the year. Can the new Minister confirm when the full results of the consultation and the Government response will be published, because children with SEND and their families have already been waiting for far too long?

Claire Coutinho: If the hon. Lady had been listening, she would know that I just said we will be publishing early in the new year; if she was not just reading out a scripted question, she might have cottoned on to that point. This is an important area. I have many affected constituents so have seen all of this first hand, as I have in previous roles and from talking to parents across the country. We want to make sure that we are delivering for parents and children with SEND. We will set out that paper early in the new year addressing many of the challenges they are currently facing.

School Places: Pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

5. **Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of school places for pupils with (a) special educational needs and (b) disabilities. [902431]

7. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of school places for pupils with (a) special educational needs and (b) disabilities. [902433]

21. **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of school places for pupils with (a) special educational needs and (b) disabilities. [902448]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): We are making a transformational investment in SEND places by investing £2.6 billion between 2022 and 2025 to help deliver new places and improve existing provision for children and young people with SEND or who require alternative provision as well as up to 60 new special and AP free schools.

Danny Kruger: I welcome that news and investment. Wiltshire Council has a policy of investing, particularly in mainstream places for children with special needs, and I applaud that. Does the Minister agree that that means parents need proper accountability for the performance of the schools their children are going to, and will she encourage Ofsted to do more to appraise mainstream schools on the support they give to children with special needs?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for Wiltshire and I applaud the council on the work it is doing. Ofsted is revising its framework on this area, which was set out in the Green Paper earlier this year. My hon. Friend might be interested to know that we are also looking at better local and national dashboards to improve local accountability.

Dr Evans: I thank the Minister, who has already said that the consultation results will come out in January, but day in, day out in Leicestershire we hear cases involving parents who have had to struggle and fight to

get SEND support, which is one of the biggest problems they face. Will that be put at the heart of the review? Secondly, the Minister talked about the £2.6 billion. How can the likes of Leicestershire get hold of some of that cash to improve one of the biggest areas of struggle in SEND provision?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend is right that many parents find the system adversarial. That is one of the key things we are seeking to address by making what parents can expect much clearer and by simplifying and digitising their EHCP—education, health and care plan—application process, among our other measures. Meanwhile, Leicestershire will continue to be supported through its delivering better value programme, among other things.

Tom Hunt: Since I was elected in Ipswich we have had two new special schools, the Sir Bobby Robson School, which now has 60 pupils, and the Woodbridge Road Academy, currently in temporary buildings and moving into permanent buildings in 2023, with 16 pupils going up to 60 pupils. However, the Sir Bobby Robson School is already very over-subscribed and I imagine the same will be the case for the Woodbridge Road Academy. Will the Minister visit Ipswich to meet me and the heads of both schools to discuss how the funding formula could be tweaked to ensure that Suffolk SEND is fairly funded and that we have more top-quality places in special schools for the wonderful neuro-diverse thinkers in Ipswich?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend has spoken to me multiple times about the excellent school provision in his area, and I would be delighted to visit and see more for myself.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I welcome the Minister and the whole Front-Bench team to their new roles. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that children from low-income backgrounds are more likely to have a special educational need but less likely to receive support or interventions that address their needs. I note the comments the Minister has just made, but given that Barnsley has one of the highest numbers of EHCPs in the country, can she guarantee that she will move heaven and earth to make sure schools have the resources they need for this specialist provision?

Claire Coutinho: We absolutely need to address the plight of low-income families struggling with the system when their children have SEND. The amount of funding that has gone into the SEND high needs block has risen by 40% over the last three years, so we are putting the funding in, but we absolutely need to ensure that it is going to the right families.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Teaching assistants providing one-to-one support are vital for children with additional needs to succeed in the classroom, but many are leaving because the pay is too low for them to survive during the economic crisis. What steps are Ministers taking to improve both recruitment and retention rates for SEND teaching assistants?

Claire Coutinho: I point to the £2 billion extra funding that is going into the schools system next year and the year after as well as the huge increase of funding that I just mentioned going into the SEND sector.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place and indeed the whole ministerial team. I acknowledge the extra money going in from the autumn statement, but when I met the Hoyland Common Academy Trust, I was told that its energy bills are going up by 400% and that budgetary pressures mean that support for all pupils—including those with SEND—will be affected. I have written to the Secretary of State along with my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), so will she meet us to discuss that further?

Claire Coutinho: As I have mentioned, there is extra money going into the schools system, which was set out in the autumn statement. The energy relief scheme, which is helping schools with their energy bills, will also last throughout the winter.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Education Committee. Congratulations.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. High needs pupils need

“the right support in the right place at the right time”.

Those are not my words but those of the Government’s Green Paper, and yet BBC local radio in Worcestershire is reporting today that a nine-year-old with autism missed a year of education because our specialist schools are full and he could not get the support that he needed in mainstream. Instead, he was offered a placement 110 miles away, but that fell through. What progress has been made in spending the billions of extra high needs capital announced at the spending review? When can we expect more provision in Worcestershire?

Claire Coutinho: It is absolutely tragic that anyone might spend that amount of time outside of school. In March we announced £1.4 billion of high needs provision capital allocations, of which Worcestershire is receiving just over £10.7 million between 2022 and 2024 to help create new places in both mainstream and special schools. It is up to the local authority to determine how best to use that funding. However, the practice of sending children very far away is one thing that we would like to address in our response to the Green Paper.

Students: Cost of Living Support

6. **Paula Barker** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help support students with the cost of living. [902432]

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Robert Halfon): I pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns), for her authenticity and passion for skills. My Department continues to work with the Office for Students to ensure that universities support students in hardship by drawing on the £261 million student premium. The Government have also introduced the Energy Prices Act 2022, which ensures that landlords pass energy bill discounts on to tenants, including students.

Paula Barker: The Office for National Statistics has reported that more than half of students are facing financial difficulties and a quarter are taking on extra debts. Indeed, I recently met student union reps who

confirmed that. Students must not be the forgotten victims of the cost of living crisis. The Government claim that they support learning for life, yet part-time, often mature students face particular challenges in the cost of living crisis. Will the Minister look at the Open University’s recommendations calling for the extension of maintenance loans to undergraduate students studying part time, an extension to parents’ living allowance and childcare grant for all part-time undergraduate students and the introduction of maintenance bursaries for undergraduate students who are in most need?

Robert Halfon: I have great admiration for the Open University and will of course look at those recommendations carefully. However, I reiterate that we are doing everything possible to help students with financial hardship. I mentioned the £261 million student premium and the help with energy bills meaning that students who are tenants of landlords will get up to £400. The student loan has been frozen for the past few years. Students facing hardship can apply for special hardship funds and can also have their living costs support reassessed. The hon. Member will know that, as has been highlighted, interest rates over the next couple of years will increase only in line with the retail price index.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I welcome the new Secretary of State and the rest of her team to the Front Bench. On 19 October, in a written parliamentary question, I asked the previous universities Minister, the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns), whether she had conducted an equalities analysis of the impact of rising prices on students. In short, the Government had not, so do they have any idea of how the cost of living is affecting students from disadvantaged and diverse backgrounds?

Robert Halfon: We know that the cost of living is affecting students from all backgrounds, and especially disadvantaged backgrounds. That is why, as I mentioned, students can draw on the £261 million student premium; why students facing hardship can access their university’s hardship fund; why students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who find that their living costs have increased significantly, can apply to have their costs reassessed; and why we have increased the maximum loans and grants by 2.3% this academic year to try to help students. In every possible way we are trying to help students who face financial hardship.

Education Recovery: Support for Pupils

8. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support school pupils with their education recovery. [902434]

Mr Speaker: Welcome back, Minister.

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to be back, Mr Speaker. The Government are spending £5 billion to help children recover from missed education as a result of covid lockdown periods. That includes up to 100 million tutor hours for five to 19-year-olds and a catch-up and recovery

premium paid directly to schools to provide evidence-based approaches to help pupils catch up, and all 16 to 19-year-olds in education will receive an extra 40 hours of teaching a year.

Marco Longhi: Students in my Dudley North constituency need and deserve the best possible education. As they are our future workforce, businesses and public services depend on that. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that all Dudley schools have access to the best facilities, the best funds and the best teachers as they recover from time lost during covid and, moreover, historically poor access to the best lifetime opportunities?

Nick Gibb: Fifty-five educational investment areas, including Dudley, are being prioritised for funding to help strong multi-academy trusts to grow and to help improve underperforming schools. Nearly all secondary schools in Dudley are eligible for the levelling-up premium, which is a £3,000 tax-free bonus for maths, physics, chemistry and computing teachers in the first five years of their careers who work in schools where they are needed most. The Government are using every tool available, including funding, to help ensure that every child can catch up on lost education due to the pandemic.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in welcoming pupils and teachers from Pontypridd High School who are in the Public Gallery? The teachers do fantastic work in trying to catch up from covid, but one of the increased pressures on time is the rise and threat of harmful incel culture in our schools. None of the past four Education Secretaries has made any public comment on the rise of misogynistic ideology in our schools, so will the Secretary of State outline her plans to support teachers, who deal with that day in, day out, in their efforts to tackle incel culture, which poses a unique threat for women and girls across society?

Nick Gibb: I join the hon. Lady in welcoming the school pupils in the Public Gallery today—it is very good to have children visiting the Houses of Parliament, and I welcome all children who love to come to our House. I also agree with her about having a respectful culture in our schools. It is hugely important, both online and offline, that pupils and staff feel safe and respected in our schools.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Headteachers across Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke see the importance of the national tutoring programme, but they were concerned when *Schools Week* reported that £150 million could be clawed back from the scheme through the Treasury. Will the Minister back the plan that I was hoping to initiate when I was in the Department—albeit briefly—and make sure that we reinvest that in the third year of the national tutoring programme to increase the grant to nearly 50%?

Nick Gibb: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the passionate way in which he conducted the role of Schools Minister in the Department and for bringing to that role all his experience as a schoolteacher. We have allocated almost £5 billion to catch-up programmes, including £1.5 billion to tutoring. My hon. Friend is right: because the evidence about the effectiveness of one-to-one and small-group tuition is so strong, we want schools to use

the money we have given them for that. We have been clear that the national tutoring programme funding can be used only for tutoring and that the Department will recover any unspent NTP funding.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Helping children to catch up after the pandemic is partly about providing fit-for-purpose facilities, but the Government's plan to cut education capital spending by £1 billion in real terms puts that at risk. Tiverton High School has been waiting for more than a decade to be rebuilt. Can the Minister guarantee that my constituents will not have to wait another decade? Will they finally see the rebuild approved in the next funding allocation?

Nick Gibb: We have been spending £13 billion on capital since 2015. The Department has met representatives from Tiverton High School to discuss its buildings. We are currently in the process of assessing nominations for the school rebuilding programme; we expect to prioritise up to 300 schools in the financial year to 2023. An announcement of the successful bids under that programme will be made before the end of the year.

Financial Education in Secondary Schools

9. **Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind):** What steps she is taking to promote financial education in secondary schools.
[902435]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): I am a passionate champion of an education that gives children the real-world knowledge and skills that they need for later life. A good grounding in maths for children is essential for understanding things like interest rates, compound interest and the changing landscape of financial products. On Thursday, I was pleased to visit Chesterton Primary School in Battersea with the Schools Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), to mark the first ever set of national data on children's times tables, alongside announcing up to £59.3 million of investment to continue to increase the quality of maths teaching.

Rob Roberts: In conversation with my local Jobcentre Plus team earlier this year, I was told that the No. 1 thing missing for school leavers is employability skills, which are partly about understanding finances, bank accounts, loans, credit cards and taxes—all the stodgy, boring, grown-up stuff. Does my right hon. Friend agree that making sure that school leavers are equipped with information about those things will stop them getting into financial difficulty as young adults and will set them up well for the future?

Gillian Keegan: I agree that understanding finances is essential; I learned that myself in my Saturday job at St John's market, where I worked in a shop from the age of 13. Education on financial matters also provides an opportunity to teach about fraud. Pupils receive financial education throughout the national curriculum in mathematics and citizenship; for pupils of secondary school age, that includes compulsory content covering the functions and uses of money, financial products and services, and the need to understand financial risk.

Degree Apprenticeships

10. **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to promote degree apprenticeships. [902436]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): I am currently the only degree apprentice in this House, but I am determined to ensure that I am the first of many. We have seen year-on-year growth in degree-level apprenticeships, with more than 148,000 starts since their reintroduction in 2014, including apprenticeships in law, accounting and clinical science. We are working in schools and colleges and with UCAS to ensure that more young people are aware of the benefits of apprenticeships. We are making £8 million available to higher education providers to expand their degree apprenticeship offers.

Anna Firth: In Southend West, 830 young people are undertaking degree apprenticeships, including many at our outstanding South Essex College. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if local businesses that require mechanics, bricklayers, lawyers and so on could be incentivised to connect with the college and help to train apprentices, rather than just providing work placements, it would be a brilliant way for local employers not only to headhunt the best students for good jobs, but to provide better-quality apprenticeships, boost opportunities and boost our local economy?

Gillian Keegan: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who continues to champion students and businesses in Southend West. The local skills improvement plans that we have introduced under the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 will place employers at the heart of local skills systems and will facilitate more dynamic working arrangements among employers, colleges and other skills providers. Essex Chambers of Commerce has recently been chosen to lead on the development of an LSIP for the Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock area. It is good to see that South Essex College is working with Essex Chambers of Commerce to achieve that.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State and her team to their new positions, or back to their old ones. From her work on the Public Accounts Committee, among other things, she will know of the desperate need in this country for digital and cyber skills. At the recent Silicon Milkroundabout, a special day called Next Gen was set up to encourage companies to take on new graduates or people with lower qualifications, but companies said that they would only really take people with three years' postgraduate experience. Does she think that there is an opportunity in the sector to boost apprenticeships? Would she be willing to work with businesses in Shoreditch to promote them?

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome. I would be very happy to work with businesses in Shoreditch. When I was the skills and apprenticeships Minister, I worked with Ada, the National College for Digital Skills, and I know that it is vital for digital and cyber offers to be made across the landscape. I recently visited Aston University, which is working with a local

college to develop an institute of technology to provide, for instance, much-needed digital apprenticeships and full-time courses, and I would be happy to work with anyone who wants to ensure that that vital provision continues.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to her latest position—she has had a dizzying array of jobs recently, so it is great to see her in this post, as I know that she has a real commitment to skills and apprenticeships.

I do not know whether the Secretary of State has had an opportunity to speak at length with the new Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), but when he chaired the Education Committee he stressed the need for greater flexibility in the apprenticeship levy. He spoke powerfully about too much of it being spent on managerial apprenticeships, and the Committee agreed entirely, so it was a considerable disappointment to hear last week that the Government now appear to be ruling out reform of the levy. Labour's plan to increase its flexibility has been widely welcomed by employers. Do the Government recognise that the levy is not working, and that we need to give businesses and employers the flexibility they are demanding?

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, and for welcoming me and referring to the variety of jobs that I have had—in fact, I did 30 years' worth of jobs before I came here, so I am used to a lot of change.

The apprenticeship levy was created to support the uptake and delivery of high-quality apprenticeships, and has been set at a level to fund this employer demand. We are making apprenticeships more flexible, providing new flexi-job and accelerated apprenticeships that are accessible to employers in all sectors—something I was working on when I was last in the Department. We have also improved the levy transfer system so that employers can make greater use of their levy funds. More than 215 employers, including Asda, HomeServe and BT Group, have pledged to transfer £14.62 million to support apprenticeships in businesses of all sizes.

West Dorset Constituency: Replacement of Temporary Classrooms

11. **Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): What recent steps her Department has taken to ensure that dilapidated temporary classrooms in the West Dorset constituency are being replaced. [902437]

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Nick Gibb): The Department provides annual funding to improve the condition of school buildings, and has committed £1.8 billion this financial year, including £2.3 million for Dorset Council. The Government's school rebuilding programme will transform buildings in 500 schools over the next decade, prioritising those in the poorest condition and those with safety issues.

Chris Loder: I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind answer. He will remember that I asked him this question when he was last at the Dispatch Box, and indeed I have

asked the Chair of the Select Committee the same question many a time. My former secondary school, the Gryphon School in Sherborne, has reached a point at which the temporary classrooms are so bad that there has been a request for severe needs funding to sort them out. These are temporary classrooms in which I was schooled 25 years ago, and we have been asking about this matter for a very long time. Will my right hon. Friend kindly prioritise our request, so that the school can bring about the vital improvements that are required? I would be delighted to hear when that might happen.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend has meticulously, passionately and repeatedly made the case to Government for investment in the replacement of temporary buildings at the Gryphon School. Bids for the school rebuilding programme are being assessed by officials, and we expect to confirm the selection of up to 300 schools during the current financial year—in fact, we hope to make an announcement by the end of December.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): The issue of school buildings is as relevant in West Dorset as it is in the rest of the country, not least because we do not know how many buildings may pose a risk to life. Given that more than one in six schools in England are in need of urgent repair, will the Minister commit himself immediately to publishing the underlying data from the Condition of School Buildings Survey—or is he happy to sweep it under the carpet?

Nick Gibb: It was this Government who started the national surveys of the condition of the school estate, and we continually keep that data up to date. Well-maintained, safe school buildings are a priority for the Government, which is why we have allocated more than £13 billion since 2015 to keeping schools safe and operational. That includes £1.8 billion in this financial year.

STEM Subjects: Uptake

12. **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase uptake of STEM subjects. [902438]

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Robert Halfon): At every stage, from STEM in schools to STEM in skills, we are boosting careers advice and quality qualifications, through our boot camps, our free level-3 courses, our 350-plus apprenticeships and higher technical qualifications and, of course, our 21 institutes of technology.

Virginia Crosbie: I thank the Minister for his answer and welcome him to his place.

Great British Nuclear is soon to announce plans to get behind gigawatt-scale and small modular reactor nuclear power stations. This massive and exciting clean energy programme is bringing our country back as a global leader in nuclear. The scale of the programme will require tens of thousands of highly skilled people in communities across Wales and England. What is the Minister doing to ensure that we have a skilled workforce

to deliver this programme at pace and to create career opportunities for our young people, such as those on Ynys Môn?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is a human dynamo and a champion of new nuclear. I agree it is essential that we have a workforce to support the nuclear industry and the development of gigawatt-scale and small modular reactor nuclear power stations. She will know that our reforms across the skills system will ensure that we build the highly skilled workforce we need to meet our net zero targets by 2050. If she wants to see at first hand the commitment of this Government and the Department for Education to net zero, both the Schools Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), and I are recycled Ministers.

Early Years Teacher Training

13. **Gary Sambrook** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve early years teacher training. [902439]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): The Department has significantly expanded the number of fully funded initial teacher training places in early years for the next academic year, and it is reviewing the level-3 qualification criterion for early years, both of which are part of our package of £180 million-worth of support.¹

Gary Sambrook: I recently visited Jelly Babies nursery at Longbridge Methodist church. [Interruption.] I did not eat any jelly babies on my visit, but I met the fantastic team who do so much to equip young children with new life skills. The Early Years Alliance is running its “We Are Educators” campaign, which I hope the Minister will support by recognising its work and the benefits for young children across the UK in general, and in Birmingham, Northfield in particular.

Claire Coutinho: I know that my hon. Friend is a huge supporter of Jelly Babies, both the nursery and otherwise. The Government are supporting early years professionals with £180 million for qualifications and specific training, such as on dealing with challenging behaviour following the pandemic and on early communication.²

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): High-quality early years education is vital, and it is the best possible investment in our future—that includes both training and provision for all. Given that school budgets were protected in the autumn statement, where will the two years of real-terms funding cuts set for the Department for Education fall? Can the Minister confirm they will not fall on early years education?

Claire Coutinho: As I said in answer to earlier questions, we put an extra £0.5 billion into the early years sector in the 2021 spending review to increase the hourly rate. We are also spending money on qualifications and training for teachers. This sector is very important to us, and we continue to consider all the ways we can support it.³

1. [Official Report, 6 December 2022, Vol. 724, c. 4MC.]

1. [Official Report, 6 December 2022, Vol. 724, c. 3MC.]

2. [Official Report, 6 December 2022, Vol. 724, c. 3MC.]

3. [Official Report, 6 December 2022, Vol. 724, c. 4MC.]

Undergraduate Degrees: Equal Standards

14. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): What plans her Department has to ensure that the grades of undergraduate degrees in similar subjects on all higher education courses are of an equal standard. [902441]

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Robert Halfon): Our important sector-recognised standards are agreed by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment to ensure that degrees equip students with the skills and knowledge required for them to succeed. Provider autonomy on what and how they teach is vital, and we must avoid driving standardisation over innovation. The Office for Students regulates to these agreed standards and investigates any concerns.

John Penrose: For every other serious qualification, any particular grade is worth the same whether a person studied in Truro or in Tadcaster. Even though universities accept the principle of moderating their standards, no employer or student thinks a 2:1 in English or chemistry is worth the same from every university. Does the Minister agree that equally valuable degrees would give a second chance to anyone who does not get into their first-choice university, would wipe out some of the snobbery that still infects parts of our higher-education system, and would level up life chances across the country?

Robert Halfon: Of course I will consider what my hon. Friend has said, but my priority for higher education was set out in a recent speech—it is skills, jobs and social justice, by which I mean ensuring that disadvantaged people can climb the higher education ladder of opportunity. He will know that the sector regional standards set out the terms of grading and content, but we should judge students on the outcomes: are they getting good skills and are they getting good jobs?

School Attendance

15. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of trends in the level of school attendance. [902442]

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Nick Gibb): Attendance in all state-funded schools in the period 12 September to 21 October was 93.6%. Broken down by school type, attendance was at 94.9% in primary schools, 92.2% in state secondary schools and 88.1% in special schools. Our focus now is to help and support those pupils who face barriers to returning to school following the covid lockdown.

Mark Pawsey: I thank the Minister for his answer. We know that following the pandemic there was an increase in persistently absent pupils, but there has also been a recent increase in the number of children being home educated. I know from meeting constituents in Rugby that that can often arise as a consequence of a breakdown between parents and the school, and it also disproportionately affects children with special educational needs. So what steps is the Department taking to encourage that group of pupils back into the classroom?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is right; attendance at school is key to a child's life chances, but the pandemic has affected some children, particularly some with special educational needs and disabilities. We are working with

headteachers, teachers and children's social care to help to overcome the barriers that those children face in returning to school, be they mental health issues, driven in part by the lockdown, or having fallen further behind in their studies. As I have said, we have committed £5 billion on catch-up programmes and one-to-one tutoring, focused on the children who have fallen furthest behind.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am not sure I do welcome the Secretary of State to her new post, because she was such a good co-chair of the acquired brain injuries programme board in her previous job. The Minister will know very well, as will the Secretary of State, that one thing that sometimes affects attendance at school is kids who have had brain injuries. For the first few months, everybody understands in the school but perhaps a year later their executive function is not as well developed as it might be, they have problems with attendance, they end up being treated like a naughty child and they end up in the criminal justice system. Will the Secretary of State make sure that her Department plays as strong a part as she previously did in making sure that we have a national strategy on acquired brain injury, so that we do not let our kids down?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman is right: we need to make sure that every child, no matter what injuries they have suffered, and what cognitive problems or mental health problems they face, are able to thrive in our schools system, and we will do precisely what he suggests.

Topical Questions

T1. [902451] **Mr Robin Walker** (Worcester) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): I, too, pay tribute to my predecessor and the ministerial team. Last week's national teaching awards celebrated the inspiring work our brilliant teachers do, and I am sure the whole House will join me in congratulating this year's winners and saying a massive thank you to incredible teachers such as Angela Williams, who won the lifetime achievement award, after 37 years of inspiring young minds in the Huddersfield and Kirklees area. During her career, she has helped more than 18,000 young people to achieve their dreams.

This Government recognise that a good education is the closest thing we have to a silver bullet when it comes to making people's lives better. That is why we are investing an extra £2 billion in our schools next year and the year after, and that will be the highest real-time spending on schools in history. That is what was asked for by teachers, heads and unions. Given that, I very much hope that both sides of the House will be united in calling on the unions to end the threat of strike action as our children work hard to catch up on lost learning.

Mr Walker: I welcome this ministerial team, especially my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who did such a brilliant job as Chair of the Select Committee on Education. I look forward to working with them all and seeking to hold them to account. I have heard concerns from both sides of the House, including today from the hon. Member for

Slough (Mr Dhesi), about the affordability of childcare, and I am keen that the Select Committee urgently looks into that matter. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if we are to meet the Prime Minister's objective of education being a silver bullet and helping more people into work, affordable childcare is essential?

Gillian Keegan: Yes, I very much agree with my hon. Friend and I would like to take a moment to welcome him to his place. I congratulate him on becoming the Chair of the Education Committee. I am sure he will do a fantastic job and I look forward to working with him.

The early years are a vital part of every child's education, helping to set them up for life. We are committed to improving the affordability, choice and accessibility of childcare, and have spent more than £20 billion over the past five years supporting families with their childcare costs.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I welcome the new Secretary of State to her position and, I am sure she will agree, to the best job in Government.

Parents in key worker jobs—care workers and teaching assistants—are spending more than a quarter of their pay on childcare. Parents across our country are being forced to give up jobs that they love because of the cost of childcare. Yet, in the last two fiscal statements from the right hon. Lady's Government, there has been no action to support families. Why not?

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and for welcoming me to my place. It is indeed the best job in Government.

We have taken a lot of action in this area. The last Labour Government had 12.5 hours of free childcare. That is now up to 30 hours. We have spent more than £3.5 billion in each of the past three years on early education entitlements and more than £20 billion over the past five years supporting families with the cost of childcare. Thousands of parents are benefiting from Government childcare support, but we will also work to improve the cost, choice and affordability of childcare.

Bridget Phillipson: On schools, Labour is committed to ending the tax breaks that private schools enjoy and to investing in driving up standards for every child. Why should we continue to provide such

“egregious state support to the already wealthy”—

the children of plutocrats and oligarchs—

“so that they might buy advantage for their own children”?

Those are not my words, Mr Speaker, but those of the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Does the Secretary of State agree with him?

Gillian Keegan: I agree that the most important thing is to ensure that we focus on every child who goes to a state school getting a brilliant education. That is about 90% of all children in this country. The policy that the hon. Lady has been talking about and that Labour is developing is ill-thought through. Indeed, it could cost money and lead to disruption, as young people move from the private to the state sector. It is the politics of

envy. We have fought for an extra £2 billion in the autumn statement, the highest per pupil spend in history, and I am sure that the hon. Lady—

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members that these are topicals and we want to get all the Back Benchers in. We do not want Front Benchers to take up all the time.

T2. [902452] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): The further education capital transformation fund is seeing colleges across the country replan their estates and modernise their facilities. In my constituency, Harrogate College has secured £16 million and is replanning its estate around delivering T-levels and the skills for growth sectors. Is the Minister ensuring that these FE construction projects are all focused on creating estates to deliver the skills needed in the growth sectors of the future and their local economies?

Gillian Keegan: Yes, and I am delighted to return to the Department as Secretary of State to find that T-levels, which I launched as a Minister, are off to a great start. They are rigorous courses for young people. It is a fantastic achievement that, for the first cohorts of students, the pass rate was 92%. I urge all Members to visit their local college or institute of technology to see what the future of technical education looks like.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Reports that this Government could cause monumental damage to higher education by restricting international students to so-called elite universities have been described by former Universities Minister Lord Johnson as a “mindless crackdown”. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this Government will not implement such a mindless policy?

Gillian Keegan: I can confirm that we have a world-class education system and we will attract the brightest students from around the world. That is good for our universities and delivers growth at home. We were proud to meet our international student ambition earlier this year to attract 600,000 international students per year by 2030. Today that is worth £29.5 billion and we are now focused on bringing in £35 billion from our education exports, which are the best in the world.

T3. [902454] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Like many parts of the country, Aylesbury has too many people who are economically inactive despite the overall unemployment rate being extremely low. We also have many job vacancies where we need people with new or different skills. How can my right hon. Friend's Department ensure that courses in schools, university technical colleges and colleges equip young people with the right skills for today's job market?

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Robert Halfon): The first thing we need to do is invest, and we are investing an extra £3.8 billion over this Parliament in skills. We have introduced the T-levels and higher technical qualifications. We are strengthening careers advice and, of course, championing apprenticeships. I am pleased to say that apprenticeship starts have increased by 8.9% over the past year.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Schools such as King's Oak primary in Bedford are experiencing significantly increased demand for support around special educational needs and disabilities and social, emotional and mental health needs, due to the cost of living crisis. While additional funding is a relief, the Government need to urgently make clear what the overall funding announcement will mean, to ensure that essential support can be sustained for the most vulnerable children. When will the details be announced?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): We have set out the announcements on funding for SEND, which, as I said, has increased by 40% over the past three years for the high needs block funding. We have also set out spending on capital grants. We are setting out early next year our proposals for the SEND and alternative provision Green Paper to make sure that that money is spent well.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Trentham Academy has recently received a very good Ofsted rating, with a number of outstanding features, following significant improvement. But the school building is in a very serious condition, with rat infestations, a number of areas of safety concerns and more than one third of classrooms below 40 square metres. Will my right hon. Friend agree to support Trentham's being in the school rebuilding programme?

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Nick Gibb): Thanks to my hon. Friend, I am very aware of the serious issues affecting the condition of the Trentham Academy building, and as always he continues to make representations on behalf of the schools in his constituency. We plan to confirm further schools for the school rebuilding programme later this year.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Children growing up in poverty have poorer school outcomes and disadvantage, which often blights lives into adulthood. The autumn statement funding announcements, much vaunted today, will only restore real-terms per pupil funding to what it was in 2010, at a time when experts are urgently calling for a new child poverty strategy to tackle that widening gap. Given the Government's so-called commitment to levelling up and social mobility, when will they announce that new strategy?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Lady should know that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that the additional schools funding announced in the autumn statement—some £2 billion extra on top of the money already announced in the White Paper—and £3.5 billion in the spending review will fully cover expected school costs up to 2024. As she rightly says, it will take spending per pupil back to at least 2010 levels in real terms, which she will recall was the highest ever level of funding.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): One pledge in our 2019 manifesto was the introduction of an arts premium. The British arts are central to our soft power projection across the globe and they start in the classroom. I will be teaching an acting class in Clacton very soon; in case the question is raised, can the Minister tell me that there will be a commitment to an arts premium or an arts-specific package?

Nick Gibb: I would love to see my hon. Friend's acting class at some stage. The arts and music are an essential part of a broad and balanced curriculum. That is why we have published, for example, a detailed model music curriculum based on best practice. Given the significant impact of covid-19 on children's education, priorities were necessarily focused on education recovery in the last spending review, but we—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will just say once again, Minister, please stop taking advantage of these poor Back Benchers, who are desperate to get their questions in.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): It is estimated that 4,000 Muslim young people every year choose, with a heavy heart, not to enter higher education because their faith bars them from paying interest on a student loan. David Cameron said nine years ago that he would fix that. Will the new ministerial team, whom I welcome, commit to introducing alternative student finance and give us some indication of when that will be?

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Robert Halfon): I am strongly committed to introducing alternative student finance, something my Harlow constituents have also lobbied me about. The issue is that we want, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, to introduce the lifelong learning entitlement, and we will introduce alternative student finance in conjunction with that.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Chelmsford, we are very proud that Anglia Ruskin University has more students graduating in health and social care-related subjects than any other university in the country, but the university would not be able to provide such high-quality courses to students from the UK if it did not have the income from overseas students. Can my right hon. Friend categorically confirm that the UK will continue to welcome students from across the world to all our universities?

Robert Halfon: I have good news for my right hon. Friend: we were proud to meet our international target of 600,000 students by 2030; we have actually met that target already. It is currently worth £25.9 billion to the economy and it will be £35 billion by 2030.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): In his autumn statement, the Chancellor said that he wanted to make the United Kingdom a science superpower, yet academic researchers and scientists are being hamstrung by the continued failure to reassociate the UK with the Horizon programme. What discussions are Ministers having with EU counterparts to re-engage the UK in the Horizon programme?

Robert Halfon: Our preference remains for an association to Horizon Europe. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government have committed £20 billion to R&D by 2024-25, and we have just announced the Horizon Europe guarantee, a grant offer with a total value of £500 million issued by UK Research and Innovation.

T9. [902460] **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Good career guidance gives everyone—particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds—the ambition, self-belief and work ethic to take life chances whenever they appear and to level up our country. Will the Secretary of

State consider making it impossible for a school to get an overall Ofsted inspection grade of good or better if its career guidance is not up to standard, in the same way as already happens if its safeguarding regime is not up to scratch?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: careers advice is central to getting young people on the skills ladder of opportunity. We have strengthened careers advice with the Baker clause. Ofsted is carrying out a review of careers training in schools and colleges. We are investing £30 million to support schools and colleges in careers, and setting up careers hubs in secondary schools and colleges.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State and her team to their roles. May I start by congratulating the Government on their international education strategy, which has already been mentioned? The Secretary of State knows that international students contribute £30 billion a year to the UK economy—much of it in areas identified by the Government for levelling up—and that they are vital to the viability of our universities, enrich learning for UK students and strengthen our role in the world. Does she therefore share the concern of Members on both sides of the House about reports that consideration is being given to returning to the failed policy of restricting numbers, and will she raise that concern with the Home Secretary?

Robert Halfon: On the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question, I could not have put it better myself. International students add enormous value. As I mentioned in my previous answer and in the Westminster Hall debate we had a couple of weeks ago, we have met our target of 600,000 students a year early—before 2030—and that remains our target. By 2030, that will mean £35 billion-plus in exports.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I am concerned about the provision of music in state schools. A report by the British Phonographic Industry states that the provision has decreased dramatically in recent years. It estimates that

“30% of state schools have seen a decrease in curriculum time for music, or a reduction in the number of qualified music teachers.”

Can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State assure me that the Government recognise that, and update me on the steps that her Department is taking?

Nick Gibb: The 2021-22 academic year saw more than 86,000 hours of music teaching in secondary schools—the highest number since 2014. They were taught by more than 7,000 music teachers in secondary schools—the highest number since 2015. Schools should provide timetabled curriculum music of at least one hour a week. We have published an excellent model music curriculum that schools can lean on to help to deliver that.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Why will the Secretary of State not listen to her Cabinet colleague the Secretary of State for Levelling Up and the Government's own food adviser by expanding the eligibility for free school meals? Hungry children cannot learn and tend to behave badly, too.

Gillian Keegan: I think we have already discussed this to some degree, but we have extended free school meal availability. Now, more than one third of children in school settings have access to a free nutritious meal. We are spending £1.9 billion on that facility.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): I met a 12-year-old constituent a couple of weeks ago. He has been excluded from school and is now being home tutored, but he is struggling to see where his home tutoring will get him in his aspiration to become a mechanical engineer. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss getting some provision that will suit my constituent and people like him in my constituency?

Gillian Keegan: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend. I thoroughly enjoyed working with her on many things vocational and technical education when I was last in the Department. We very much need more mechanical engineers, so I encourage that young student and very much look forward to working with my hon. Friend.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What steps are Ministers taking to achieve the target of delivering 20,000 defibrillators in schools by 2023?

Nick Gibb: We have been delivering defibrillators in schools up and down the country—it is a successful programme. I will write to the hon. Member with the precise figures that she is seeking.⁴

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): First, I congratulate all the staff and pupils of Ferryhill Station Primary School, where I was once a governor. Led by the head, Joanne Sones, it has now achieved an Ofsted rating of good.

I am sure the Minister would like all pupils everywhere to develop their sports skills and improve their mental health through sport. What is being done to focus the sports premium on schools in challenging areas such as Ferryhill? I would also encourage the Minister to come and—

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister.

Paul Howell—meet our outstanding ambassadors.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, Mr Howell, but you are taking complete advantage. That is totally not fair to others. I call the Minister.

Nick Gibb: Improving school sport and PE is a key priority, and we recognise the important role that they play. We are considering arrangements for the primary PE and sports premium for the 2023-24 academic year. I pay tribute to the headteacher of Ferryhill Station Primary School for achieving “good” in the Ofsted inspection.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The Government funded 128 new special educational needs places at the Austen Academy in Basingstoke, which opened about a year ago, but a new, permanent academy trust is needed to operate the school. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss the importance of making that appointment swiftly?

1. [Official Report, 6 December 2022, Vol. 724, c. 4MC.]

1. [Official Report, 6 December 2022, Vol. 724, c. 3MC.]

2. [Official Report, 6 December 2022, Vol. 724, c. 3MC.]

3. [Official Report, 6 December 2022, Vol. 724, c. 4MC.]

4. [Official Report, 29 November 2022, Vol. 723, c. 8MC.]

Claire Coutinho: I would be delighted to meet my right hon. Friend. She is an incredible campaigner on these issues, which are also important to the Government.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): King Edmund School, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), is currently closed while building materials containing asbestos are removed from the site. Will the

ministerial team look into this situation with a view to getting kids safely back to school as quickly as possible?

Nick Gibb: Yes, I certainly will look into that. The school was initially closed as a precaution while we carried out enhanced testing. Testing is now complete, and the school buildings are safe, but asbestos remains on the site of a previously demolished building, so the school will remain closed while that is removed. However, we are doing everything possible to ensure that the school site reopens by 3 January.

Speaker's Statement

3.36 pm

Mr Speaker: Before we come to our next business, I wish to make a short statement. I have received a letter from the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) requesting that I give precedence to a matter as an issue of privilege. The procedure for dealing with such a request is set out in "Erskine May" at paragraph 15.32. The matter in question is the conduct of the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) relating to private correspondence between him and my office. The House will recall that I gave the hon. Member an opportunity to apologise.

While "Erskine May" is clear that the granting of applications for precedence is a matter for the Speaker, given that the subject relates to my office, I have consulted with the Deputy Speakers before making my decision. It is not for the Chair to decide whether a contempt has been committed, but instead whether there is an arguable case for the House to examine such.

I have considered the issue, taking account of advice from the Deputy Speakers and the Clerks of the House. I have decided that this is a matter that I should allow the precedence accorded to issues of privilege. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden may therefore table a motion to be debated tomorrow. The motion will appear on tomorrow's Order Paper, to be taken after any urgent questions or statements and before Government business. The motion will be available to Members once it has been tabled, which will be before the rise of the House today. If necessary, I will advise the House tomorrow on the usual conduct in debate on such motions. I hope that this is helpful to the House.

Independent Cultural Review of London Fire Brigade

3.38 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on Nazir Afzal OBE's independent cultural review of London Fire Brigade.

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): Let me start by thanking the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) for her question. The report written by Nazir Afzal OBE makes for deeply troubling reading. The behaviour uncovered is totally unacceptable. The London fire commissioner, Andy Roe, commissioned this review due to his significant concerns about the culture in his own service. The review also followed the tragic suicide of Jaden Matthew Francois-Esprit, a trainee firefighter. I know that colleagues will share my sadness and shock at the testimony of those who shared their experiences, as outlined in the review. I pay tribute to them for their courage.

I wish to assure the House that the Government have taken, and continue to drive, action in this area. Through the introduction of the independent inspection of fire and rescue services, we have highlighted issues with the culture in the fire service, and it is clear that these are not confined to the London Fire Brigade. That is why we published the fire reform White Paper in May, which set out proposals to reform the way that fire services support and value their people. At the heart of the White Paper are plans to improve culture and professionalism, and put ethics at the heart of the service.

Furthermore, the Government have funded a number of important change programmes in the fire sector. We have supported the creation of a new code of ethics for fire and rescue services, setting out clear national expectations for standards of behaviour. The fire standards board, which the Home Office funds, has produced a fire standards code to support the code of ethics, as well as a specific safeguarding standard, supported by guidance from the National Fire Chiefs Council. It will shortly publish new fire standards on leadership, addressing issues such as those raised by this deeply disturbing report.

I welcome the fact that the London fire commissioner has committed to addressing and implementing all 23 recommendations in full and note that the National Fire Chiefs Council has also committed to considering the report carefully. Through the White Paper and otherwise, the Government will continue to press to eliminate the appalling behaviour that this shocking report uncovered.

Dawn Butler: Nazir Afzal has found institutional misogyny, racism and discrimination in the fire service. His report is based on the testimony of 2,000 members and contains 23 recommendations, including the introduction of body-worn video by firefighters, an historic review of complaints about racism, misogyny and bullying, and secure facilities for all women.

As the Minister said, the report comes after the death of Jaden Francois-Esprit, a trainee at Wembley fire station, in my constituency in the London Borough of Brent. Two years ago, Jaden took his own life, aged just 21. My condolences go out to his family and friends. Jaden was

[Dawn Butler]

teased about every little thing, even the Caribbean food he brought in for lunch, and he made 16 requests to be transferred to another station. Nazir Afzal's report said:

"Jaden's position was not unique. We have spoken to others that are equally isolated and harbouring suicidal thoughts."

I know some Government Members will accuse the report of being too woke or promoting wokery, but let me highlight some of the incidents. Female firefighters were found to have been groped and beaten, and had their helmets filled with urine and their clothes violated with semen. Some male firefighters who visited women's homes for safety visits would go through drawers looking for underwear and sex toys. A black firefighter had a noose put on his locker, and a Muslim firefighter had bacon and sausages stuffed in his pockets and a terrorist hotline sign posted on his locker. If being more woke will stop this behaviour, then I think we are not woke enough.

As the chair of London Labour MPs, I spoke to London fire commissioner Andy Roe, and he is determined to sack every single firefighter who is misogynistic, racist or homophobic at work, and that sends a strong message. I need to know what strong message the Government will send. We cannot bring back Jaden, whose life was lost, but the Government can make sure that other young people, who are starting out on their career in the London Fire Brigade, are not met with the same experience, but with consideration and acceptance by a service that is alert and awake to bullying and discrimination.

The Government must lead the call for change and tackle structural and systemic discrimination in all our old institutions, and understand that being woke is a good thing. That would be a fitting legacy to Jaden.

Chris Philp: I completely agree with the hon. Lady that the behaviour and the incidents that she just enumerated that were uncovered by the report are completely unacceptable. They have no place in any modern public service, whether that is the fire service or anywhere else. I am sure the whole House will join her and me in condemning that sort of behaviour unreservedly.

I spoke to London fire commissioner Andy Roe on Friday to set out my strong feelings that this behaviour is totally unacceptable and needs to completely end. As the hon. Lady said, he has committed to implementing all 23 of the report's recommendations, including, importantly, outsourcing the complaints service, so that complaints are dealt with externally to the London Fire Brigade, and going back and looking again at all the complaints made over the last five years, to make sure they have been properly investigated—clearly, in many cases they have not been. He committed to ensuring that anyone found guilty of the sort of behaviour that she outlined from the report will be removed from their position. As I say, the behaviour that has been uncovered is totally unacceptable, and I am sure the whole House will join in condemning it.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and agree that there is absolutely no place for racism or bullying in our society or any of our public services. Will he outline what he

might also be doing to ensure that disciplinary measures are dealt with in a timely manner? There was a disciplinary issue in my local police force, as opposed to fire service; that was dealt with well, but it took three years. Will my right hon. Friend try to ensure that such cases will be dealt with in a more timely manner in future, whether in the fire service or police force?

Chris Philp: My right hon. Friend is right about timeliness; that is one of the reasons why the London Fire Brigade Commissioner has said that he will be outsourcing the handling of complaints: to make sure that they are dealt with faster. Things work a bit differently at the police force, but there is an issue with timeliness. A number of police officers, including both the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police have raised the issue with me as well. We are looking at a number of ways of speeding up the process, including potentially through legislation. I completely recognise what my right hon. Friend has said and we are actively working on that at the moment.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Here we have an urgent question on shocking standards in the fire service, and we have a statement later on appalling conditions in Manston. The Home Secretary is not here for either of those—why not? Where is she?

The report is grim: firefighters huddled around a screen watching porn; putting bacon in the sandwich of a Muslim colleague; and hanging a noose around the locker of a black co-worker—a pack mentality and systematic failure to stamp it out. Some 2,000 firefighters in London have told their story, thanks in large part to Linda Francois, the mother of Jaden, who tragically lost his own life. She campaigned for this report, and we welcome the immediate action that Andy Roe, the commissioner, is taking.

However, these shocking findings are not news to anyone. The Government have been put on notice time and again about cultural failings in our fire service. In 2015, an independent review in Essex found dangerous and pervasive bullying; in 2018, the inspectorate found failings in culture, values and the grievance process; in 2019 the inspectorate warned of an unchecked, toxic culture in many services; and in 2021, it found that change was urgently needed.

What was the Government's response? It was a haemorrhaging of the budget on training, ignoring the warnings from the inspectorate and playing politics with our fire service. We have repeatedly said that when it comes to police failures we have had enough of the Home Office sitting back and leaving things to individual forces. Will the Minister immediately commission a fundamental review of national standards and culture in our fire service? Will he agree, now, to publishing national statistics on misconduct and will he today commit to national professional standards?

There were 11,000 fires across London alone last year. Our brave firefighters run into danger every day. We must expect the best from all of them and stamp out this culture of misogyny and racism. The Government must end their complacency and act.

Chris Philp: I assure the hon. Lady that there is not any complacency. She should be aware—I am sure she is—of the White Paper published just a few months ago

setting out a range of measures to tackle shocking cultural issues such as those we have heard discussed this afternoon.

The hon. Lady asked about national standards. As I said in my opening comments, the Fire Standards Board is in the process of publishing a number of standards that will be publicly available and that we will expect fire services to abide by. Those, of course, will be inspected against. She asked about issues outside the London Fire Brigade. I agree that those need attention, and we will be discussing with His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services what work it can do to look at behavioural and cultural issues such as these across the whole country.

Obviously, we will respond to the White Paper consultation shortly. In the meantime, we will of course be working with Commissioner Andy Roe, who I spoke to on Friday, about the issue. As the report relates to London, I will also be in touch with the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, who of course has responsibility for oversight of the London Fire Brigade.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): May I remind the Minister that the Mayor, the Greater London Assembly and the fire services inspectorate ought to have known and done things about this situation years and years ago? Were all these incidents unknown to them? If they were reported, what did they do about them?

Through the Minister, I say to those looking after our great services in London and around the country that they need to be able to answer this question: when will the colour of someone's skin be as important but no more than the colour of their eyes or hair?

Chris Philp: I completely agree with the Father of the House's last comment about the importance of complete equality, whether based on gender, ethnicity or anything else. Everybody should be treated equally and everybody should have exactly the same opportunity. In relation to the work of the inspectorate, one of the reasons the consultation was published a few months ago was in response to concerns previously raised. The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has oversight responsibility for the London Fire Brigade, as my hon. Friend pointed out, and I will raise these issues with him as well.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): This report is a catalogue of shameful and appalling behaviour. In April 2020, the National Fire Chiefs Council committed to publishing an annual report on equality, diversity and inclusion. When the Home Affairs Committee questioned the chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council earlier this year, he told us that he did not know whether the report had been published. When we questioned the chair again earlier this month, the annual report still had not been published. The NFCC does not plan to publish it until April 2023, and it is not sure whether it will publish another. Does the Minister agree that this as yet unfulfilled commitment and the equivocal statement relating to its work to promote equality, diversity and inclusion are concerning? The leadership and commitment from the top of organisations such as the National Fire Chiefs Council is critical to rooting out the sexism and racism evidenced in this review.

Chris Philp: I agree with the Select Committee Chair that this is a vitally important issue. We expect leadership from the entire fire system, including the chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council. She mentioned the question of report publication, and I think she said it intended to publish in April 2023. I am happy to take that away and raise it with the NFCC. I am sure she probably expressed a view in the Committee that it should be published sooner.

Dame Diana Johnson indicated assent.

Chris Philp: The right hon. Lady is nodding, so I am happy to raise that point again and see whether publication can be expedited.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): May I say how welcome it is that Commissioner Andy Roe commissioned this report and is finally leading and gripping this problem? We know that the Fire Brigades Union is particularly strong within the fire service across the country. What evidence is there of the FBU's role in reinforcing or challenging this culture?

Chris Philp: As of when I came over today from the Home Office, I do not think the FBU had published or put out a formal statement responding to the report, so I am sure my hon. Friend and others in the House will study its report or respond carefully when it chooses to put one out.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Confidence in our emergency services is built on trust—trust that they will be there for people in their moment of need and do everything possible to help them, and trust that no matter what they look like or who they are, they will be treated with respect. Sadly, this report brings that trust into question. In moments such as this, my Vauxhall constituents will need confidence in their emergency services, yet when they hear the shocking reports about the fire brigade, soon after revelations about the police, they might question whether there is a wider cultural problem in our services. I salute the 2,000 firefighters who came forward, but recent scandals in the police and fire service reveal the importance of having a strong whistleblowing procedure. Will the Minister say from the Dispatch Box whether he will commission a national review of standards and culture to ensure that no one is afraid to come forward to raise this abuse?

Chris Philp: The hon. Lady is right to say that constituents, regardless of their background, should be able to have full confidence in the service, and that is why I think the Commissioner of the London Fire Brigade rightly said that he will implement all 23 recommendations to deliver that. It is worth saying on that point that on a daily basis firefighters across the country put their lives at risk to keep us safe. While being appalled by this report and absolutely determined to make sure there is substantial change, we should keep in mind at the same time that firefighters are putting their lives at risk daily. In terms of her question about whistleblowing, that is something we can take away and consider. Whistleblowing should be available. Firefighters from all backgrounds should be able to raise issues when they encounter them, and it is vital to make sure that those channels exist, so that is something I will take away.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): As we have already heard, some of the report's findings are utterly shocking. I agree with the Minister, however, that many firefighters are out there across the capital, not least in Twickenham fire station, putting their lives on the line every day to protect us all. Can I clarify a couple of his previous answers? Does he agree with Nazir Afzal's recommendation that we need a national inquiry into the culture of a number of public bodies? Londoners' faith in many of our public services has been shaken, because the findings of this report are reminiscent of what we found in the Metropolitan police.

Chris Philp: In terms of the fire service nationally, as I said, His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services obviously has a role to play. I will be raising that issue with the inspectorate to make sure that it is looking at it. I can speak only for police and fire, but I am sure that ministerial colleagues will want to ensure that such issues are rapidly dealt with for other public services. On a point of clarification, when I said a moment ago that an organisation had not yet issued a statement, I was referring to the union—the Fire Brigades Union.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Ind): Although I congratulate the LFB on having the courage to have Nazir Afzal in to do his work and to find these distressing and troubling conclusions—in the Minister's words—what is to say other forces and institutions are not afflicted by or riddled with the same unacceptable behaviour? As the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) said, examples have been found in the Met police that are way more than just the odd bad apple. What advice does the Minister have for employees elsewhere, who are forced to suffer in silence and hide in the shadows in their workplaces, so that this never happens again anywhere?

Chris Philp: It is a good question, which comes back to the whistleblowing point that the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) raised. It is vital that anyone in any public service, whether fire, police or anything else, can raise concerns—or more than concerns, in the case of the shocking examples that we have heard—and that they are taken seriously, treated confidentially and properly investigated. It is right that the fire brigade is appointing an external organisation to look at the complaints going back more than five years. Every public sector organisation needs to make sure that proper whistleblowing channels are available so that nobody's concerns get ignored or overlooked.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): London is one of the most diverse cities in the world, which we should all be proud of, yet many Londoners listening to this, and those who have heard about and read the report, will have no confidence in our fire service with its racist and misogynist culture. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that firefighters wear body-worn video cameras when they enter families' homes? Confidence will be very low and we need to ensure that we are working not only for all our constituents but for those people who are watching and may not believe that we are doing our job.

Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. On confidence, the commissioner of the London Fire Brigade has committed to implementing all 23 recommendations. From memory, one of those is to introduce body-worn cameras, so I believe that is something that the London Fire Brigade intends to introduce. It is vital that the public have confidence in our firefighters, who work bravely on a daily basis to keep us safe. The public must understand, however, that they do that without any bias or prejudice, which is why it is critical to implement the recommendations.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The circumstances and findings of the report are appalling, and troubling for those of us who have worked closely with the London Fire Brigade in the aftermath of the Grenfell fire, particularly on product and building safety. Poorer and ethnic minority communities are more at risk, so what will the Government do as part of their response to Grenfell in the light of that? I am also now totally confused about where the Government are on a national inquiry. Yesterday, the Transport Secretary said that he did not want people “setting up inquiries all over the place.”

Will the Minister confirm from the Dispatch Box that there will be a national inquiry?

Chris Philp: No: to be completely clear, for I think the third time, I have said that I will ask His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to take a look at these issues. It obviously inspects the 44 fire and rescue services and the 43 police forces regularly. It can also—if it chooses, because it is independent of course—conduct thematic reviews on issues such as this, and I will be raising the issue with it.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I really appreciate that the Minister is appalled by the findings in this report, but he should not really be shocked, as successive reports from His Majesty's inspectorate have shown similar findings. Why does he think that successive Conservative Governments have ignored the warnings in those reports?

Chris Philp: I would say, with great respect, that the reports have not been ignored. As I have said already, a White Paper was published just a short while ago with a number of very detailed and specific recommendations designed to address precisely these kinds of issues, so with respect, I do not accept the characterisation the hon. Lady has set out. Clearly, from this report, urgent action is needed in London, and that is why the 23 recommendations will be implemented in full. I think the commissioner, Andy Roe, has accepted that. I will be discussing the issue with the Mayor of London's office as well.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): This feels depressingly familiar from the many times that Ministers came to this House to reassure us about the culture of the Metropolitan police. Would it not save the Minister and us a great deal of time if he were to agree to the recommendation in the report of a national review, supported by the Labour party, rather than having to come back time and again to repeat these excuses and say there is no complacency, when actually this toxic culture is not being dealt with at local level?

Chris Philp: On the right hon. Member's first point, as I said in response to the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) a moment ago, the Government did bring forward a White Paper with a number of quite important reform recommendations designed to address precisely these kinds of issues. There is a huge amount of work going on in relation to misconduct, which we have debated in this House before, including in the police. Of course, action is now taking place specifically in London on the fire service, and I will be discussing these issues with the Mayor of London, who has responsibility for fire in London.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): It is a sad fact that in Britain in 2022 we will all come across ignorant people who judge others not by what is in their head and in their heart, but by the colour of their skin, their sexuality or their religion. Unchallenged in any organisation, that is deeply damaging and divisive, and it leads to the problems we have seen in this report. Does the Minister agree with me that this is a failing not only of management, but of the Fire Brigades Union, which should have looked after the interests of all its members?

Chris Philp: I think all those responsible for the conduct of the London Fire Brigade need to take responsibility for what has happened. Culture does not come from any one place; it develops in an entire system. That is why I think system-wide change is needed, so I do agree with the point my hon. Friend makes. The 23 recommendations are a starting point, but everyone needs to contribute to changing culture to make sure that gender, race and other characteristics play no part whatsoever in the way somebody is treated.

Saudi Arabia: Death Penalty and Spike in Executions

4.2 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on Saudi Arabia's use of the death penalty and the recent spike in the number of executions taking place.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the urgent question.

Saudi Arabia remains a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office human rights priority country, particularly because of the use of the death penalty and restrictions on freedom of expression. We seek to engage the kingdom and support positive reform, and Lord Ahmad, the Minister responsible for our middle east and north Africa policy, visited the kingdom in February to advance UK strategic engagement on human rights specifically. Key areas included promoting freedom of religious belief, lobbying on individual human rights cases of concern and encouraging justice reforms. Saudi Arabia is committed to an ambitious programme of economic and social reform through Vision 2030, which has already delivered significant change, including increased freedoms and economic opportunity for women. However, the human rights situation is likely to remain a key issue in our engagement for the foreseeable future.

It is a long-standing UK policy to oppose the death penalty in all circumstances in all countries as a matter of principle. The Saudi Government are well aware of the UK's opposition to the use of the death penalty. The Saudi authorities have executed around 150 individuals in 2022, a marked increase on the 67 executions last year. On 12 March 2022 Saudi Arabia executed 81 people in a single day, and the British ambassador raised UK concerns with Saudi authorities at both ministerial and senior official level in Riyadh on 14 March. The then Middle East Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), also raised concern over the 81 executions with the Saudi ambassador to the UK. More recently, Saudi Arabia has executed 20 individuals for drugs-related offences since 10 November despite Saudi Arabia's moratorium on the death penalty for drugs-related offences announced in January 2021.

Lord Ahmad, the Minister responsible for the middle east and human rights, requested a meeting and spoke to the Saudi ambassador last week, on 24 November. He raised UK concern over the recent executions and pushed for the 2021 moratorium for drugs-related offences to remain in place. During the meeting Lord Ahmad also raised an important case for my right hon. Friend, that of Hussein Abo al-Kheir, who is assessed by respected international non-governmental organisations to be at risk of imminent execution. There are allegations of torture and forced confession in this case, and the Minister reiterated His Majesty's Government's long-standing position on the death penalty and the importance of ensuring the 2021 moratorium was upheld.

[David Rutley]

Through Ministers and our embassy in Riyadh we regularly raise the death penalty as a key issue of concern with Saudi Arabia. We will continue to do so, and no aspect of our relationship with Saudi Arabia prevents us from speaking frankly about human rights.

Mr Davis: I thank the Minister for his description of Lord Ahmad's work so far, which is welcome, but I have to say that in the context of the current circumstances we may have to step this up somewhat.

As the Minister said, despite assurances of a moratorium on the death penalty for non-violent drug offences, announced by Saudi Arabia's own Human Rights Commission, Saudi Arabia has executed 20 people for drugs-related offences in just two weeks. We believe there are 55 other people currently at risk of the death penalty.

I wish to raise in particular the case of Hussein Abo al-Kheir. Mr al-Kheir is a poor Jordanian national, who is elderly and in poor health. He was arrested in 2014 for, supposedly, drug offences. He was tortured into a false confession, including being hung upside down from the ceiling and beaten. He has served seven years on death row and was told just days ago that he will be moved to a condemned cell. The UN working group on arbitrary detention has found his detention to be without legal basis and called for his release. He is clearly at risk of imminent execution, possibly with the Saudis thinking that the world's attention is distracted by the World cup or something else. Al-Kheir's case demonstrates the unabashed brutality of the regime: 147 people have been executed this year alone, including 81 on one day.

We know already that being too soft with totalitarian states comes back to bite us. We were too soft over Litvinenko's murder, and we ended up with the Skripal poisonings. We have seen how Saudi Arabia behaves abroad, with the murder of Jamal Khashoggi; it is time to make it clear in no uncertain terms to it that it must abide by international civilised standards. If the Foreign Secretary—and I do say the Foreign Secretary—does so firmly enough, he will almost certainly save 55 further lives.

David Rutley: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising these issues and for doing so with his characteristic passion and conviction. His record on civil liberties and human rights is well known, and I want to reassure him once again that Lord Ahmad raised the case of the Jordanian national Mr al-Kheir with the Saudi ambassador on 24 November—so just last week he requested that meeting and had the conversation—and earlier in the year, on 25 January, Lord Ahmad raised the same case with the Saudi Justice Minister during the Minister's visit to the UK. Our embassy in Riyadh has raised this case with relevant authorities and we will continue to monitor it and raise it at the highest levels.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Labour unequivocally condemns the recent executions in Saudi Arabia and the use of the death penalty anywhere in the world. In the last two weeks, executions

have been taking place on almost a daily basis in Saudi Arabia. In total, according to the UN, 144 people have been executed in Saudi Arabia this year alone, which is a record high for the kingdom, and more than double the number last year. The recent executions have been for alleged drugs and contraband offences following the Saudi authorities ending a 21-month moratorium on the use of the death penalty for drug-related offences. That is deeply concerning, especially after Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's public assurances that the kingdom would minimise use of the death penalty altogether.

The UK should join the international community in condemning these executions in the strongest terms. What steps have the UK Government taken to raise our concerns about the resumption of executions and the wider crackdown on freedom of expression and activism with the Minister's Saudi counterparts? I note the Minister's comments about the meeting with Lord Ahmad, but this needs to be an ongoing process. How do the Government intend to use the close relationship between our countries to press for a change in Saudi Arabia's approach? I join my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) in calling on the Government to do everything in their power to prevent the imminent execution of Hussein Abo al-Kheir. What steps have they taken so far to secure that goal?

We must oppose the death penalty in all countries and in all circumstances. Will the Minister confirm whether the Prime Minister raised the importance of standing up for human rights, which should be at the heart of British diplomacy, when he met the Crown Prince earlier this month at the G20?

David Rutley: It speaks volumes when we have condemnation coming from both sides of the House. I am grateful to the hon. Member for his contribution and for joining us in condemning this spike in use of the death penalty. We are seeking further clarification of its cause at the highest level. That was part of the conversation that Lord Ahmad had, because, as the hon. Member said, that does not sit comfortably with what was previously said by the Saudi Government. We are seeking that clarification as a key priority. As I said, we are raising this matter at the highest possible levels.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It would be good for the House to know whether the Crown Prince—the Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia—thinks that he is personally involved or uninvolved in what is going on. It is now four years and seven weeks since Jamal Khashoggi was murdered. I think it is time that our friend—our ally—Saudi Arabia got to know that whenever a senior member of its country comes abroad, unless such executions stop, they will be associated with them.

May I also make the point that any suggestion that a confession was gained by torture makes it invalid? We know from our past that seven times a year, people convicted of a capital offence were innocent or should not have been convicted. I suspect that the same applies in Saudi Arabia.

David Rutley: The Father of the House makes important points. As he is aware, the UK has always been clear that Khashoggi's murder was a terrible crime. We called for a thorough, credible and transparent investigation to hold those responsible to account and imposed sanctions against 20 Saudis involved. I cannot speculate about future designations or sanctions as that would reduce their impact, but he can be assured that we will speak up clearly and call out any confessions secured under torture, which are abhorrent and against all that we stand for.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): The SNP is a party of international law, and we condemn the death penalty wherever it occurs. We think it is a barbaric punishment that never fits the crime. I must say to the House that, in Saudi's case, it is personal for me: I grew up in Riyadh in the late '70s and '80s and know the Saudis well, so forgive me, but I am immune to the flannel and hypocrisy that we are used to hearing when talking about Saudi in this place.

We are united in our condemnation of the spike in judicial murder. I think we need to see some consequence to what is happening. We have seen 138 individuals executed this year, which must be sending a signal internally on the part of the regime to potential dissidents or somebody else. What is causing the spike now? I would be curious to hear the Minister's assessment of that. If there have been this many judicial murders in a key partner of the UK, does he really think that it is a suitable partner to be receiving billions in arms exports from this country?

David Rutley: I thank the hon. Member for his comments, which are always well grounded, particularly when we talk about the middle east and north Africa—I remember our recent debate on Yemen. He asked a very good question about the spike in executions, on which we are seeking further clarification. As I said, that does not sit easily with what the Saudi Government have said, so we are seeking further clarification—[*Interruption.*] I am grateful for the mobile phone notification that things are happening on the Opposition Benches. That has distracted me from the other points that the hon. Member made. He mentioned his concerns about arms sales. I reiterate that the UK operates one of the most comprehensive export control regimes in the world and that every licence application is vigorously and rigorously assessed against strategic export licensing criteria. Risks around human rights abuses are a key part of our assessment.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) on asking this urgent question, and thank you for granting it, Mr Speaker. The fact that the fate of an elderly impoverished Jordanian in a Saudi jail who has had his confession extracted under torture still matters to the House, and that you are prepared to bring it immediately to our attention as the hook on which to discuss this wider issue in Saudi Arabia, reflects huge credit on the House of Commons collectively under your leadership.

Those of us who count ourselves as friends of Saudi Arabia and who want Britain to have a friendly, close relationship with Saudi Arabia find it astonishingly

frustrating that Vision 2030, under the leadership of the Crown Prince as the executive leader of the Government—that was a great visionary statement, including on the delivery of religious freedoms and the delivery of more freedoms for women—is accompanied by the kind of appalling barbarity that is formally being meted out, allegedly in the judicial system. I want to reinforce the question that the Minister has been asked: what is the explanation for the astonishing schizophrenia in the presentation of Saudi Arabia?

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and question. We welcome the socioeconomic reforms in Vision 2030, but as I said, we continue to have concerns about human rights and we are particularly concerned about the spike. As I said, Lord Ahmad is seeking to understand how that fits with previous statements by the Saudi Government. He will continue to ask those questions, and we will continue to seek answers to them at the highest level.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I echo what the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) said about the case of Hussein Abo al-Kheir, and I pay tribute to the work that Reprieve has done to raise this and other cases. How much can we rely on the Government to do that when the Foreign Office has just doubled the amount of taxpayers' money handed to the Saudis under the Gulf strategy fund? That was after the Saudi Foreign Affairs Minister told the BBC:

"What you...call a dissident, we call a terrorist."

Some of that money is going into counter-terrorism, so are the Government not sending out, at best, mixed messages? Do we not need a much clearer line if we are going to stop further executions?

David Rutley: Our long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia is underpinned by very frank engagement, as the hon. Member can see from points that I and others in the Chamber have raised. We regularly raise concerns when our values differ, as they do on these matters, and no aspect of our relationship prevents us from speaking candidly about human rights.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Minister make a commitment that he and his fellow Ministers will continue to push for progress in Saudi Arabia on all areas of human rights, not exclusively, but including on the death penalty, women's rights and freedom of religion or belief?

David Rutley: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It is not just about the very sad spikes in executions; we seek to engage on a much wider agenda on human rights, not least on the freedom of religion or belief. We will continue in the grown-up relationship that we have, in which we can confront values that we do not think sit with ours and help to move that agenda further forward.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I have lost track of how many times we have been round this course with regard to Saudi Arabia in recent years. Every time, we get the same formulations from those on the Treasury Bench. They are the right things to hear, delivered in the right earnest tone, about raising things at the highest possible level and monitoring the situation,

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

but still the situation keeps getting worse. Surely it is apparent that whatever we are doing, it is not working. Now is the time, before Hussein Abo al-Kheir is executed, to take a different approach and work with other countries, especially in the region, to ensure that there are not just words but consequences for Saudi Arabia if it continues to act as a rogue state.

David Rutley: We continue to raise concerns, as the right hon. Gentleman says. I am pleased that the country is making some progress on economic engagement for women; that is not something that is always talked about, because obviously there are other, wider concerns about human rights, but there is progress there. As I said to the hon. Members for Stirling (Alyn Smith) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), we now need to understand why we have seen this spike in executions, unfortunately, when there is progress elsewhere. There is much more work to be done, for sure, but we do not understand yet the reasons why we have seen this particular spike.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Minister says that we are trying to understand what is going on and that Saudi Arabia is committed to reform. It is pretty clear what is going on: Mr al-Kheir was hung upside down and beaten on his hands, his stomach, his head and his face in order to extract a confession for which he is now at risk of execution. The Minister also knows that we have repeatedly heard how the Saudi authorities use torture in order to prove guilt. I have a very simple question that does not require the Minister to understand further what is going on: do the Government accept that Saudi Arabia uses torture, as all the international non-governmental organisations that have reported on the matter have said? If so, what do they propose to say about that?

David Rutley: We have already expressed our concerns, particularly about Mr al-Kheir's case, in which clearly torture was used. We find that abhorrent. We have raised that issue at the highest level and will continue to do so, not just in his case but in other cases in which that might be happening as well.¹

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I add my voice to those calling for a halt to the execution of Hussein Abo al-Kheir and others who are facing execution for drug offences. I would also like to mention the excellent work that Reprieve does in this area.

May I raise another case with the Minister? The UN working group on arbitrary detention has determined that a child defendant, Abdullah al-Howaiti, who was arrested and tortured into providing a false confession at the age of just 14, is being held without legal basis and should be released immediately. Has his case been raised with the Saudi Government? Will the Minister and the Foreign Office put their support behind the determination of the United Nations?

David Rutley: If the hon. and learned Lady is happy to meet me after this urgent question, I will gladly follow up on that particular case. On the broader point about death penalties for juveniles, the Government raise concerns regarding juvenile death penalty defendants as a matter of priority with the Saudi authorities. The British embassy in Riyadh closely monitors the cases of all known juvenile death penalty defendants and regularly attempts to attend their trials. If the hon. and learned Lady has a minute after this, I will gladly follow up directly with her.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I am afraid that Saudi Arabia has form in carrying out executions when it thinks that the world is distracted and is not looking, as it did in 2016 with the mass executions early in the new year. Past Prime Ministers and Foreign Secretaries have publicly raised the cases of those facing execution in Saudi Arabia and have helped to save lives, as I did in the cases of Ali al-Nimr, Dawood al-Marhoon and Abdullah al-Zaher. Will the Minister do the same today and call for Saudi Arabia to halt the execution of Hussein Abo al-Kheir and others who are facing execution for drug offences?

David Rutley: We join in that call. We abhor the use of the death penalty, and we speak out against it not just in the case of Saudi Arabia, but in the case of all countries that continue to use it, particularly in situations relating to drug penalties and drug crimes. We will continue to speak out: we need to call this out.

1. [Official Report, 2 December 2022, Vol. 723, c. 12MC.]

Manston Update

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister, I want to express my disappointment that copies of the statement were not given to the Opposition in good time. The rules of the House make it clear that copies should be supplied at least 45 minutes beforehand: 10 minutes before we start is not acceptable. I am also disappointed that the shadow Secretary of State will have to try to respond to a statement of which copies have not been provided in good time.

There are no officials in the Box at present, but may I say, through the Minister, that officials need to recognise the rules of the House? If they do not understand the rules, we can help them with a training programme, but I say to the Minister now that I do not want to be disappointed again on behalf of the Opposition. I only received my copy of the statement 10 minutes ago as well, but that does not matter; I am more worried about the Opposition.

4.26 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): May I extend my apologies, on behalf of the Department, to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)—and, indeed, to you, Mr Speaker—for the delay in providing a copy of the statement? With your permission, however, I will now make a statement about the public health considerations in asylum accommodation.

As the House will know, on the morning of 19 November an individual who had arrived in the United Kingdom on 12 November, and who had been staying at the Manston processing site, sadly died in hospital. Initial test results for an infectious disease were negative, but a follow-up PCR test was positive. We must now await the post mortem results to determine the cause of death, and our thoughts are with the individual's family.

There has been speculation about the wider health implications across the asylum accommodation system, so I wanted to come to the House to set out the facts, to outline the steps that have already been taken to protect migrants and the general public, and to reassure the public about the additional precautionary measures that we are now taking.

The control and testing of infectious diseases is led by the UK Health Security Agency and the Department for Health and Social Care. The Home Office continues to work closely with both, taking their advice on all these matters and following it. As part of our ongoing dialogue, the Home Secretary and I were updated on the situation over the weekend by Dame Jenny Harries of the UKHSA, who confirmed to us that 50 cases of diphtheria had been reported in asylum accommodation. It is important to emphasise that the UKHSA has made it clear that the risk to the wider UK population from onward transmission of diphtheria is very low, thanks in no small part to our excellent childhood immunisation programme, and also because the infection is typically passed on through close prolonged contact with a case. The UKHSA confirmed that it considers it likely that these cases developed before they entered the UK.

The Home Office has worked closely with the NHS and the UKHSA to identify and isolate anyone with a diphtheria infection. That includes providing diphtheria

vaccinations and moving confirmed cases into isolation. While these robust processes and plans for a situation of this type are already in train, it is absolutely right for us now to be vigilant: that is what the public would expect, and that is what we are doing. There are, for instance, robust screening processes on the arrival of individuals at Western Jet Foil in Dover to identify proactively those with symptoms of diphtheria; “round-the-clock” health facilities at Manston, including emergency department consultants and paramedics; guidance in multiple languages on spotting the symptoms of diphtheria; and an enhanced diphtheria vaccination programme, offered to all those arriving at Manston. I can confirm that of those who arrived at the facility this weekend, 100% took up that vaccine offer. There is testing for those presenting with symptoms and for close contacts, and those testing positive are being isolated in a designated place.

Today we are going above and beyond the UKHSA baseline by instituting new guidance on the transportation and accommodation of individuals displaying diphtheria symptoms. From today, no one presenting with symptoms will progress into the asylum accommodation system. They will either remain at Manston, isolating for a short period, or they will travel to a designated isolation centre in secure transport, where they will be treated until deemed medically fit. This is a well-practised protocol from covid times.

We will also continue to ensure that all asylum accommodation providers are given access to the very latest public health advice from the UKHSA, and we will ensure that they are aware of their responsibilities for testing and isolating cases of infectious disease. We will continue working with the UKHSA to ensure that arrangements are of the highest standard and that the UKHSA has everything it needs from the Home Office. We are engaging with French counterparts to assess the state of infectious disease in the camps in northern France.

I fully understand and appreciate the concerns that have been raised, and I assure the House that the Home Office is acutely aware of our responsibility both to those in care and to the British public. For me, the Home Secretary and the Government as a whole, public health is paramount. We will take all steps necessary to ensure that the public are protected. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

4.31 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you for your words about the difficulty of responding to a statement with just 10 minutes' notice.

I thank the Minister for the information he has given us, but why is the Home Secretary not here? This is supposed to be her top priority. In the past few weeks we have had two urgent questions, a debate and this statement on the chaos, and she has not done any of them. I have to ask: what is she for? She obviously does not have a grip, and she has made this chaos worse.

The Government have failed to stop the proliferation of criminal gangs in the channel, are still refusing to adopt Labour's proposal for a new National Crime Agency unit to target the gangs, and have failed to sort out the chaos in asylum decision making. They are

[Yvette Cooper]

taking only half as many as they were six years ago, even though they have more staff. Just 2% of last year's small boats cases have been decided, creating a backlog of nearly 100,000 people waiting more than six months for a decision, compared with just 4,000 when they took office. All of this has led to a completely inappropriate use of hotels, at the last minute, with no proper information for local councils or public health officials.

Then, of course, there is the chaotic handling of the situation at Manston. The Minister has just said that there are 50 diphtheria cases. Can he confirm that that compares with just three cases last year? Can he tell us when Ministers were first told of diphtheria cases at Manston? When were they warned? By mid-October, the Home Office admitted publicly that there were cases at Manston, but Home Office officials told the Home Affairs Committee on 26 October that they had sufficient health arrangements in place to address diphtheria. Clearly they did not.

The Government still kept thousands of people in overcrowded conditions, described by one person as "huddled around fan heaters, thousands of people in overcrowded conditions trying to stay warm." These conditions clearly make it easy for infectious diseases to spread. The processes described by the Minister are important, but why on earth were they not put in place many weeks ago? It took until 11 November, after thousands of people had been held there for weeks, for diphtheria screening and vaccinations to be recommended for everyone passing through Manston. What on earth were they doing in the meantime?

Even then, on that same day, the Home Office was moving people who had been in Manston into hotels across the country, without even telling councils or public health officials. In one case, the council was specifically told that people were not transfers from Manston even though they were. In other cases, councils were told nothing at all, and there was no information for public health officials about whether people needed further diphtheria screening and vaccinations; this included leaving people to seek treatment for themselves for diphtheria symptoms at local accident and emergency departments.

The Health Secretary has said that 500 people have now been screened and vaccinated, but what about the other several thousand people who have been in Manston? Wherever they now are in the country, have they been screened or vaccinated for diphtheria as well? If not, why on earth not, because that was the public health recommendation nearly three weeks ago and that was already late? Have all those with possible symptoms now been given precautionary antibiotics? Again, if not, why not? We are told that diphtheria is an easy infection to treat and to vaccinate against, which is why we have a universal vaccination policy in the UK. But that needs proper information for health officials to be able to use and the Home Office to get a grip.

Clearly, the Government have ignored health advice and legal advice. The Business Secretary said publicly that when he was a Home Office Minister he was advised that he had to act as he was breaking the law. The permanent secretary has now said that the Home

Secretary was given the same legal advice, so why did she not act, either on the legal advice or on the health advice?

I am sure that the Immigration Minister is working really hard to try to sort this out. The problem is that everyone else is struggling to clear up the Home Secretary's chaos and she is not even here. It is chaotic. This issue is too important not to have a grip in place, and if the Home Secretary is too frit to attend this House and take responsibility for her decisions, she should get out the way and let someone else do the job.

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for those questions. She asked how long we have been aware of diphtheria cases. When I addressed the House for the first time, on 1 November, I reported that there had been four cases. I am able now to say that that has increased to 50 cases, and I will continue to update the House as this issue develops.

The right hon. Lady asked whether Ministers have followed the advice of the UK Health Security Agency throughout. To the best of my knowledge, they have. We have always sought and followed the advice of Dame Jenny Harries and her colleagues. In fact, the measures I have announced today go beyond the UKHSA's baseline advice, because we want to take a precautionary approach. For that reason, we will be ensuring that further individuals who have any symptoms are not transported around the country; they will either remain at Manston or go to specialist accommodation. That accommodation is readily available, because we made good use of it during the height of the covid pandemic and we will be making sure it is brought into use in the coming days.

The right hon. Lady asked about screening arrangements. Those have been in place for some time. All individuals arriving at Western Jet Foil are screened. That is, by necessity, a relatively simple screening, because on occasion thousands of illegal migrants arrive in the course of a single day, but screening is followed up at Manston and we have asked the UKHSA to advise us on whether further measures are required to ensure that that screening is more sophisticated. Dame Jenny and her colleagues will advise on that.

We have had the vaccination programme in operation for a number of weeks. It is a voluntary programme; we do not compel migrants to take it up. It began at a relatively low level of acceptance—about 45%—but that is now increasing; as I said, I am pleased to say that we have reached 100% for those who came over the weekend. We will do everything we can to maintain it at or around that level, because that clearly is a very important line of defence.

For those individuals who have already left Manston and have flowed into asylum accommodation elsewhere in the country, we and the UKHSA are now going to work closely with local directors of public health to ensure that they have the right guidance to protect those individuals. Those local public health directors will work with local NHS partners to ensure that the individuals have treatment under the NHS and that they isolate in their rooms within those hotels or other forms of accommodation. The outsourced partners will ensure that the people have food and laundry brought to the door, so that there is no reason whatsoever that they should leave their room until they are well again and can re-enter broader society.

If there are further measures that we need to take, we will do so. Dame Jenny and her colleagues are meeting directors of public health this week, as they have been doing repeatedly in recent months, to hear their concerns and ensure that these procedures are progressively improved as required.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Earlier this year, I informed the Home Office that some 30 Albanian asylum seekers had absconded from the Thwaite Hall facility in my constituency. The then Minister for Immigration, the Minister's predecessor, informed me in his reply that asylum seekers

"are not prevented from leaving it, or legally required to stay within its confines."

He might as well have said, "Not my problem, Guv." Considering the reports that there has been an outbreak of a highly contagious and dangerous disease at the Manston processing facility, how can the Minister square this laissez-faire approach to asylum seeker dispersal with any serious concern for public health?

Robert Jenrick: It is for those reasons that I took the decision today that no asylum seeker will leave Manston if they are displaying any symptoms whatsoever of diphtheria, or indeed of other serious infectious diseases. They will either remain there or, more likely, be taken to one of our secure isolation hotels—the type of hotel that we used during the covid pandemic. They will remain there and will not leave while they are being treated. Hopefully, they will make a full recovery and then they will be transported to other accommodation elsewhere in the country. I think that is the right approach. It goes beyond the advice that Dame Jenny and her colleagues at the UKHSA have provided to us, because I want to ensure that we are doing absolutely everything we can to take this issue seriously.

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

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the Minister for bringing his statement to the House, but it is another day and another very disturbing development. Our thoughts and condolences must go to the family and friends of the man who died at Manston.

The Minister is right that it is important to emphasise that there is a very small risk to the UK population, but the converse is that, to those from nationalities that do not have an extensive vaccination programme, this is a very dangerous and contagious infection that can be fatal, as we have just seen.

On the rate of the response, the Home Office seems again to be in crisis mode, having waited until we are in a really serious crisis. Were there no indications from colleagues on the continent that there were rising cases of diphtheria there? It was only a matter of time before cases arrived on these shores, so we should have had plans in place much further in advance. I welcome the work to improve the medical facilities at Manston, which we saw when we visited it as the Home Affairs Committee. The Association of Directors of Public Health has accused the Government of putting

"asylum seekers and potentially hotel workers at avoidable and preventable risk".

Its president says that an offer to help Ministers cope was rebuffed, making the situation "far worse than it could have been."

Does the Minister want to comment on those assertions? He spoke of robust screening but, as far as I can tell, it is still only of people presenting with symptoms. Is there not a case for at least some degree of asymptomatic testing, so that the Home Office has an indication of whether a boat-load would be worth further investigation before onward movement?

Finally, the Minister has spoken about procedures being put in place today, but does that mean that people were moved to new accommodation even though they were known to have diphtheria, or to have been awaiting test results, and how was that managed? What notification was there for health authorities in places of dispersal? Have people with diphtheria been sent to hotels without anyone being told? What protocols are in place to ensure that public health leaders have the information they require, because some have been complaining that there is zero information coming from the Home Office?

Robert Jenrick: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those important questions. The most important point to stress is that the advice of the UKHSA has been followed throughout. With any emerging health issue, the response has to be dictated by medical advice and the response has to increase along with the issue and the challenge. That is exactly the approach we have taken. When there were a very small number of cases, the approach of the UKHSA was that we screened individuals, that we provided medication and support for those who had symptoms, and that we ensured that the directors of public health in the community knew how to treat those people who responded later on with symptoms. Now that the number of cases is somewhat higher, it is clear that we have to up the response, which is why we are now ensuring that no one with symptoms leaves our care at Manston or at the accompanying secure hotel. It does mean that we need to ensure that the right data flows with the individuals—I think that is the point he was making—so that, if migrants arrive in a particular location, the directors of public health and the local NHS know as much as is possible about their pre-existing medical conditions, given the cohort of people.

Now that we are operating Manston in the way that I would wish, meaning that individuals flow through it within a matter of hours, fewer people will be detected at Manston because they will be there for far shorter periods. It is important that we work with directors of public health to put in place the correct procedures in the community so that they can identify people, get them the treatment they need, vaccinate them where appropriate and ensure they are properly isolated.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked a valid question that I too have asked of our advisers: is there a simple test we can apply to all those with diphtheria? It is the advice of Dame Jenny and UKHSA that there is not a lateral flow-style test that could be applied to all individuals while they are at Manston that would provide any degree of accuracy. However, we will be screening people thoroughly and, if there are any symptoms, they will be put into this new procedure.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the assurance he has given to the House today, particularly on the appropriate isolation.

[Craig Mackinlay]

I sympathise that he is on the horns of a dilemma here, because if we were to hold people longer in Manston, we would have the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) coming to this place saying that people had been held for too long. To contrast that with what this House did during the covid period, we enforced vaccinations and we almost enforced PCR tests, so I do not think it would be unreasonable for all of those coming through Manston to be appropriately tested. Thankfully, the incidence of diphtheria is now very low in the background of our population, with very early weeks vaccination, particularly the 6-in-1 vaccine, but we do have a growing number of people avoiding vaccinations—very sadly and very sillily, in my view—so we must make sure that we keep a lid on this disease and that it does not spread. I am relying on his Department to do all that is necessary in this time

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his constructive approach to this difficult issue. We will be ensuring that correct screening is in place; as I said earlier, I have asked Dame Jenny whether there are even more screening procedures that we need to put in place, what those might be and how we can do that as quickly as possible. At the moment, we are following the UKHSA advice to the letter.

I have also asked Dame Jenny to work on monitoring other infectious diseases prevalent in northern France and in the countries from which some of the migrants are coming, and on whether that should guide the further vaccination or screening procedures put in place. My hon. Friend is right to draw the parallel with covid, in that the public will rightly expect that individuals entering the UK should be kept in close quarters while they have infectious diseases, and not be released into the broader population. That is why we have implemented these measures. If we need to go further, he can be assured that we will.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, Dame Diana Johnson.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister has been very energetic in clearing the backlog at Manston, particularly before the Home Secretary appeared before the Home Affairs Committee last week. However, I am very disappointed by the statement from Professor Jim McManus, the president of the Association of Directors of Public Health, saying that,

“we have had no direct engagement from the Home Office, and although we have offered our support, we have not yet received a response”.

I want to ask the Minister about Manston, which he has confirmed is a holding room for just 24 hours, with an extension of up to five days in exceptional circumstances. We know the Home Secretary was warned on several occasions that she was breaching the law and that a potential Windrush scandal could be on the cards. Can the Minister confirm that the Home Office has already tasked officials with assessing and calculating compensation for those illegally detained, and tell us what they have estimated to be the initial compensation amount that they may have to pay for those who are held in excess of 24 hours?

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her kind words. It has always been my approach, from day one, to ensure that Manston is brought into a legal and decent state. I am pleased to say that that is, broadly speaking, where we are today thanks to the hard work of Border Force officers, immigration enforcement and our partners at Manston.

It is a difficult task managing a site such as Manston because of the sheer numbers of people crossing the channel and the irregularity with which they come. Even in my short tenure in the Department, I have seen that we can go for days in which no one comes, and then we can have two or three days in which 2,000 or 3,000 people come. That means that ensuring the appropriate checks are conducted, and that individuals flow out of Manston into appropriate accommodation within 24 hours, is very challenging, and we need to consider whether that is the right approach. But it is absolutely right, of course, that we abide by the law and that is what I have tried to do while I have been in the Department.

I will not get into discussing the legal advice that we have received or the judicial reviews that the right hon. Lady refers to. I would say, however, that people coming to this country illegally—whose lives we invariably save at sea, and whom we then clothe, feed, water and send to hotel accommodation—deserve of course to be treated with decency and humanity, but there are limits to that and we should not shirk from the fact that the UK is doing everything in its power to support these people.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I have often raised concerns about health-based security at the illegal immigration points of entry at Dover. People who come into close contact with people who may be infected—including with diphtheria—include those who work in Border Force, the volunteers at the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, members of the coastguard and many others who are involved in those operations. Can my right hon. Friend provide assurances about the extent to which additional health measures, including potential booster vaccinations, will be provided for people in that situation, for their safety and security and that of their families? May I draw his attention to the NHS guidance? It states that it takes two to five days for symptoms of diphtheria to become apparent, and that someone who had a booster more than 10 years ago may be at additional risk if they are in a situation with a high incidence of diphtheria. Will he consider that?

Robert Jenrick: The UKHSA's advice to me is that the risk to the broader UK population is very low because of the high prevalence of our vaccination programme—over 90% of the British public has been vaccinated for diphtheria. But my hon. Friend, who represents so many people who work at Western Jet Foil and Manston, is right to say that we should be particularly careful to protect people who do that difficult and important work. I will follow up with my officials, and indeed with the outsourcing providers that run our hotels and other asylum accommodation, to make sure that we have all the right procedures in place to protect those people, who are doing an absolutely fantastic job and impress me on every occasion that I meet them.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for coming before the House with his statement, but does he not agree that

it should not have taken a death to make Ministers focus properly on issues relating to infectious diseases at Manston? It is not as if the possibilities relating to infectious disease have not been raised and written about. Does he not agree that it is quite wrong that it took a death for him to come before us and talk about new guidance: new guidance that nobody presenting with symptoms will be progressed on; new guidance about ensuring that asylum accommodation providers get the very latest public health advice; and new guidance about co-operating with the French about infectious disease in northern France? It took a death for the Minister to come before us with that new guidance.

The Minister has also said that there is no risk to the wider population and the House is grateful to hear that. However, does he not accept that, whether these people are deemed to be legal or illegal, we have a basic responsibility for their health? It should not have taken Ministers so long to focus on the well-reported dangers of infectious disease.

Robert Jenrick: I respect the right hon. Lady's point of view and experience, but it has not taken a death for the Home Office to focus on this issue. This individual's death is deeply regrettable, but we have been working on, and alive to, this issue for many months—indeed, for years. The Home Office has had in place procedures to deal with covid since the start of the pandemic. The hotels I mentioned earlier, which we will use to transfer people with diphtheria symptoms, were the locations the Home Office used for those who tested positive for covid.

The UKHSA has been publishing guidance on the treatment and support of asylum seekers and refugees for many months—it may even be years. The latest guidance on this issue was published by Dame Jenny Harries and her colleagues two weeks ago, prior to the sad death of this individual. I am afraid that the connection that the right hon. Lady seeks to draw is not correct. We do not take this issue lightly, and we will continue to follow it and to put in place whatever measures we need to.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): When the Home Affairs Committee visited Manston a few weeks ago, we met the medical team, who spoke about some of the challenges they face. Those are largely born from the fact that people spend the few nights before they make the journey to the UK in open camps in France. They arrive exhausted, their immune systems are depleted and they have lesions on their hands, so they could be carrying and picking up any diseases. What measures is the Minister putting in place to screen more widely for diphtheria and to extend language services so that the cohorts in Manston know what support is available on site?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is right that those arriving at Western Jet Foil frequently present with conditions, some of which have been picked up in the course of their travels. For example, it is striking how many people present with severe burns that they have received through the combination of salty water and diesel fuel in the dinghies. Those are the sort of difficult situations that our paramedics and medical professionals have to deal with immediately when people arrive, even before they get to Manston.

We have already put in place a medical centre at Manston, which I believe my hon. Friend visited, and it is of a high standard. It regularly has doctors, paramedics and emergency department doctors, who are able to support people. We are in the process of building a larger facility, which will enable us to have better facilities still. As I said in answer to an earlier question, I have asked the UKHSA whether there are further screening measures that we should put in place. At the moment, we are meeting all the advice and guidance that it has provided, but if it makes further requests of us, we will of course do everything we can to facilitate those.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): On 3 November, I tabled a series of written parliamentary questions asking Ministers to publish the protocols for screening, immunisation and prevention in relation to outbreaks of infectious diseases at Manston and other immigration centres, as well as the protocols for sharing information with directors of public health and local authorities. More than a week later, on 11 November—it took another week to publish advice—UKHSA said that antibiotics and vaccination would be offered to asylum seekers in Manston and in other places where they had been dispersed “where these are known”. It is now 28 November—more than three and a half weeks after my question—and my local directors of public health and general practitioners are asking how on earth they can deliver a vaccination programme when UKHSA appears not to know where these centres are and the Home Office does not tell them.

Robert Jenrick: I would be happy to look into the example the hon. Lady has given. However, she may also have seen the advice I issued last week to Members of Parliament and local authorities, saying that no individual should be moved from Manston, or indeed now from one of the secure infectious disease centres, to a hotel or other form of accommodation in any part of the country unless the local authority has been informed of who is arriving and whether they have any pre-existing medical conditions. That information is now flowing. If the hon. Lady has examples to suggest that that is not the case and brings those to me, I will be more than happy to look into them.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for setting out a clear plan for screening and vaccinations at Manston. However, as he just said, most asylum seekers spend only a very short period of time at that initial processing centre, so what additional support and resource is being provided to local GP services that take care of the health needs of asylum seekers when they are dispersed to hotels around the UK?

Robert Jenrick: That is an important point, because we aspire to be in a position—indeed, we are now—where individuals spend a very short period of time at Manston, then rapidly move into other accommodation, which places a greater burden on the local NHS and the local authority in that area. We are providing further guidance, in addition to that published by the UKHSA two weeks ago, which will set out what we are asking of those communities. I hope there will be a two-way conversation, so if further support, information or resources are required from central Government to meet those requirements, then of course I will endeavour to provide them.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is not only diphtheria; asylum seekers with other urgent health needs have been placed, without notice, in hotels in my constituency, and without proper clothing, such as shoes and winter clothes. I would like an assurance that those disgraceful practices will also stop. With all due respect to the Minister, I would like that assurance from the Home Secretary. Why is she never here to answer questions on what should be her No. 1 priority?

Robert Jenrick: I am the Minister for Immigration, so it is perfectly logical that I come to the House and answer questions on this area. We provide clothing to migrants when they arrive at Western Jet Foil and while they are at Manston, so it is not correct that migrants would ever go to an area of the country, such as the one that the hon. Gentleman represents, without clothing. I have seen that clothing and it is perfectly acceptable. I am not quite sure what he is expecting us to provide to migrants over and above that—we look after people to the absolute best of our ability.

On a number of visits I have gone into great detail about the quality of care that we provide to migrants and seen incredibly hard-working people, from Border Force and our agencies, going above and beyond, providing Aptamil baby milk and powder, so that young mums can look after their children, providing a broad range of sanitary products for women, and ensuring that men have all the necessary items they need to shave and look after their health and wellbeing. The quality of care is good.

Of course, there are things that we could do better, but we should not make the UK out to be a villain here. In fact the advice from the UKHSA is that the vast majority of the individuals who have infectious diseases contracted them overseas. It may well be the case that many of them picked them up in the genuinely disgraceful conditions in some of the camps in northern France.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Peterborough City Council and I were given merely hours' notice before single men from Manston were transferred to the Great Northern Hotel, a flagship hotel in my constituency. I remain strongly of the view that that is the wrong hotel, in the wrong location, but I did at least have multi-agency meetings that I could attend and listen to healthcare professionals and others talk about the services we were offering. But last weekend I was told that I was no longer welcome at those meetings and that that was standard practice for MPs across the country. I do not want a post-meeting briefing or to be treated like a stakeholder; I want to listen to healthcare professionals on the ground talk about conditions in those hotels in my constituency. Will the Minister, right here, right now—no ifs, no buts—instruct those responsible for organising those meetings to adopt some flexibility and, God forbid, some common sense, and get the local MP at those meetings, listening and contributing? My constituents would expect no less.

Robert Jenrick: I am aware of my hon. Friend's concern and am happy to look into it. From my prior experience in local government, I think it is not unusual for multi-agency meetings to be official meetings; that is how, for example, a local resilience forum would operate in the case of floods or other serious incidents. It is not

ordinary practice for the political leaders of local authorities—or indeed, Members of Parliament—to be part of multi-agency meetings. That does not mean that we should not adapt those processes. As far as I am aware, the instruction that my hon. Friend has received has not come from the Home Office—it certainly has not come from me. I will look into the issue, and if I can change that, I certainly will.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On 2 November, nearly a month ago, I, as Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, together with the Chairs of the Home Affairs, Justice, and Women and Equalities Committees, wrote a long and detailed letter to the Home Secretary posing various questions about the conditions at Manston. We asked for a reply by 16 November, but still have not had one.

When the Home Secretary was before the Home Affairs Committee last week, she said that there was a processing issue at the Home Office and that we would get our response very quickly. We are still waiting. Can the Minister give us an indication of when the Home Secretary will deign to respond to this important letter from the Chairs of four Committees of this House?

Robert Jenrick: I was not aware of that, but if the hon. and learned Lady gives me a copy of the letter—I think she has it in her hand—I will ensure that there is a swift and full response to it.

On the conditions at Manston, I have said this before and will say it again—this is not in any sense to diminish the concerns that the hon. and learned Lady may have set out in the letter. The greatest service that she and her colleagues in Scotland could do on this issue would be to encourage more Scottish local authorities to take asylum seekers into their care. Scotland takes a disproportionately lower share of the burden of this issue in each of our resettlement and asylum schemes.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows that it is unlikely that I would ever call this country a villain on this matter—actually, I think we have been too soft. We need to be much more robust. Does he agree that the way to tackle the problem is to make these tens of thousands of illegal journeys a year unviable? That would deal with overcrowding and all the other issues.

I have promised my constituents that at every opportunity—even every week—I will raise the Ipswich Novotel, which my right hon. Friend knows about. Is he closer to giving us a time scale so that we can move away from the use of four-star hotels to basic and cheap accommodation and, potentially, deport a large number of the individuals who have broken our law and illegally entered our country?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is right. My approach from the start has been, first, to ensure that Manston is a legal and decent site; that has involved taking on other accommodation elsewhere in the country to meet our legal obligations. Secondly, it has been to ensure that we begin to exit those hotels and move asylum seekers to better accommodation, which would be simple and decent but not luxurious, and that we never find ourselves again in the position of using three and four-star hotels, stately homes and so, on for this purpose—

Ms Abbott: Not stately homes!

Robert Jenrick: The right hon. Lady says not stately homes. Unfortunately, there are stately homes being used for this purpose. That is an outrage and we need to change it. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) is absolutely right: these are the symptoms of the problem, but the cause is that far too many people are making these perilous journeys. We need to tackle the gangs that ensure that those journeys continue.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): Revelations that the Home Office allowed 50 cases of diphtheria to spread through Manston processing centre are truly shocking. This latest scandal is the unavoidable result of the Government's endless demonisation of refugees. Will the Minister confirm what action he is taking to test and care for refugees in other processing centres across the country?

Robert Jenrick: With respect to the hon. Lady, I did not say that the Home Office had allowed infectious diseases such as diphtheria to spread through the camp at Manston; I said that the clear advice from the UK Health and Safety Authority was that it was unlikely that those cases had been contracted at Manston and that in the vast majority of instances, if not all, it was most likely, although difficult to prove, that the individuals brought these infectious diseases to the UK as part of their illegal journey here. The UK has good procedures in this area. One only has to go and look at the camps in places such as Dunkirk to see the difference between the quality of care that the UK provides and that of some of our European neighbours. Manston, of course, can improve, but today we have a good medical facility, we are screening individuals and we are providing vaccinations. I have set out further measures that I will implement this week, and I will follow health advice if those need to be increased in future.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): My local authority Cyngor Gwynedd is proud to work with groups such as Pobl i Bobl, Croeso Menai and Cefn to welcome refugees, but they cannot operate effectively at a time of increased demand on services and squeezed budgets if the Home Office does not communicate effectively. When I last raised the matter, the Minister told me that he had postponed a meeting with the Welsh Government to respond in this place. Can he confirm to me that that meeting has taken place? More importantly, did that meeting include a commitment to provide details of the number of asylum seekers and, more importantly, additional funding to the Welsh Government, Welsh local authorities and Welsh health boards?

Robert Jenrick: I have now held a meeting with all local authorities in Wales and across the United Kingdom, and later this week I am rescheduling the meeting to which representatives from the Welsh Local Government Association are invited. That was the meeting I unfortunately had to cancel because the Opposition held an urgent question.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What assessment have the Government made of receiving communities with low vaccination rates? The 90% that the Minister commented on, which is basically the herd—all of us—masks some very low vaccination figures

in certain boroughs, including the London Borough of Haringey. What extra resource can he give to Haringey local authority and the health trusts to get active and make sure, even though the risk is low, that we keep our own vaccination rates as high as possible?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady raises an important point. No doubt it is correct that there will be wide variances across the country, and I will raise that point with the Dame Jenny Harries and the UK Health Security Agency, if I may, and one of us will write back to her with our national strategy.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It obviously should have come as no surprise to the Government that these conditions would break out because the all-party parliamentary group on immigration detention, which I chair, found similar circumstances at Napier barracks, including scabies outbreaks in that accommodation. Can the Minister tell me in a bit more detail what exactly is being done to ensure that the widest possible screening is done, rather than sending people off into the world with conditions such as scabies and no treatment? At Napier, people were forced to share cream between them and did not have proper washing facilities for their clothes and bedding.

Robert Jenrick: As I said in answer to earlier questions, there are thorough screening procedures, both immediately on arrival in Dover and then later at Manston. There is an extensive medical facility at Manston, where anyone presenting with symptoms of diphtheria or any other condition can get access to medical care. That is designed to ensure that they have good care, but also to put as little pressure on the local NHS in Kent as possible. It is frequent that individuals go to local GP surgeries or emergency departments in hospitals, and we make sure that they have access to the NHS, as any member of British society would do.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): The Minister has previously said that he was left speechless by the safety problems at Manston. He also said on 27 October:

“We want to ensure that the site is maintained legally”.—[*Official Report*, 27 October 2022; Vol. 721, c. 403.]

In response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), he said, “we are broadly there”. What does “broadly there” mean? Is the site maintained legally or not?

Robert Jenrick: The site is operating legally now. The current law allows the Home Secretary to detain individuals for 24 hours, save in exceptional circumstances. At the moment, the site has few individuals present at all, and those people are processed, have their biometrics taken for security purposes and flow out into contingency accommodation very rapidly. As I said in answer to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), it is not simple when there are large numbers of people in a very short period. That is the nature of the problem. There is very little that the Government could do to plan a processing centre that was able to flow 2,000, 3,000 or 4,000 people through its doors within a matter of hours. That is the challenge we have been grappling with. It is for that reason that we have made the changes we have already. If there are further changes to be made, I will make them in the coming days.

Points of Order

5.14 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to follow up on the question asked in the statement by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. Four Chairs of Select Committees—the hon. and learned Lady; I as the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee; the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill); and the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes)—wrote a letter to the Home Secretary on 2 November in which we asked for a response by 16 November. At the Home Affairs Committee last week, I asked where the response was. It worries me that the permanent secretary had no idea about the letter, the Home Secretary had no idea about the letter, and today the Minister for Immigration had no idea about the letter. What can we do to assist the Home Office in dealing with correspondence that comes from this place and from four Select Committee Chairs, as it seems not to be able to deal with it?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for that point of order. I can see that it is a serious issue if the correspondence of Chairs of various Select Committees, who are, after all, there to hold the Government to account and to scrutinise Government action, is not getting through. The Minister for Immigration has heard her point and may wish to say that he will look into it.

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick) *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Minister is nodding. I hope that means that a reply will get through as quickly as possible. If there is anything that the Minister wants to add, he can; otherwise, we will leave it at that.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In response to my question at Education Question Time about extending the free school meal entitlement, the Secretary of State said:

“We have put in place generous protection that means families on universal credit will also retain their free school meal eligibility.” That statement is misleading, because it implies that families on universal credit receive free school meals. In fact, more than 800,000 children whose parents are on universal credit do not receive free school meals, because their parents earn more than £7,500. I informed the Secretary of State of my intention to raise this point of order, and I had hoped that she would come to the Chamber to correct the record herself, but perhaps you can enlighten me, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to how I might correct the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of the point of order. I am sure that she meant to say “inadvertently misleading”.

Carol Monaghan: I did.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you. The hon. Lady talked about putting the figures on the record that she might have hoped would have been put, which she has done. I am also aware that Ministers on the Treasury Bench will have heard what she said. I am glad that she notified the Secretary of State. I am sure that it will be fed back and that any necessary corrections will be made by the Secretary of State if she deems it necessary to do so.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We all suffer from false news in the media. Last week, I was accused by the online media of not giving a proper declaration of interest in this place. I checked with your offices as to whether I had made a mistake and it was confirmed that I had not. When an Opposition shadow Cabinet member and Whip repeats such a thing on social media as an attack on my integrity, should that be apologised for here?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. I am not responsible for social media, oddly enough, as he may appreciate.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I totally respect and fully take on board the advice from Mr Speaker's office for conduct in this Chamber, but outside this place thousands of people are struggling to pay their mortgage or to afford one home, let alone 17, and they may have found that not declarable, but relevant. I would be grateful for your advice—[*Interruption.*] I would be grateful for your advice—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has the right to have her say—[*Interruption.*] Members should not challenge me.

Sarah Owen: I would be grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your advice on how Members like me should respond when the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) tells me to “shut up” in this Chamber, where I speak for my constituents. Now he is attempting to shut me up online as well. What message does this send to women who want to be in politics when they see men like that? [Interruption.]

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Sit down!

Sarah Owen: Do you want to tell me to sit down out there?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Gentleman that that is not how we want to behave.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Lady has just turned around and said, “Do you want to tell me to sit down out there?” To me, that sounds quite threatening. Is that in line with the code of conduct of Members of this House?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Well, I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that I found his conduct about 30 seconds ago not very courteous.

I think that the two hon. Members have put their points of view on record, and I suggest that we leave it at that. That was not a very good advert for how our Parliament should work, so we will move on.

Finance Bill

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I must inform the House that the reasoned amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition has been selected, and I will call James Murray to move the reasoned amendment when he speaks in the debate.

5.21 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

In the face of challenging global headwinds, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer delivered an autumn statement that was honest about the difficult decisions this Government will need to take to tackle the cost of living crisis and rebuild our economy. We are not alone in dealing with economic problems. One third of the global economy is forecast to be in recession this year or next. At the same time, while inflation is high in the United Kingdom, it is notably higher in Germany, at 11.6%, in Italy, at 12.6%, and in the Netherlands, at 16.8%.

It is our duty to curb rising prices, restore faith in our country's economic credibility internationally and, ultimately, to deliver growth. The independent Bank of England is responsible for controlling inflation. However, as the Chancellor set out in the autumn statement, monetary and fiscal policy need to move in lockstep. That means, for the latter, taking a disciplined approach and giving the world confidence in our ability to pay our debts. We have been clear that we will be following two broad principles in this consolidation: first, we ask those with more to contribute more; and, secondly, we will avoid the tax rises that most damage growth. With just under half of the £55 billion consolidation coming from tax and just over half from spending, the autumn statement set out a balanced plan for stability.

Today, we are debating a small number of the tax measures that were announced last week. In order to provide certainty to markets and help stabilise the public finances, we are taking forward important tax measures in this focused autumn Finance Bill, ahead of a fuller spring Finance Bill, which will follow the Budget early next year as usual.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): During the autumn statement, I raised the point about High Speed 2 with the Chancellor, and I also wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and, indeed, to the Chair of the Treasury Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin). According to the Office for National Statistics yesterday, annual inflation in the infrastructure sector was 18.1% in September, which is 80% higher than the consumer prices index for the same month. How can the Government continue to bankroll phase 2 of the HS2 project at a cost of more than £40 billion when all the independent advice suggests that it will make rail services to the north-west worse than could be achieved with merely phase 1 and the Handsacre link? Could I also have a reply from the Chief Secretary to the letter I wrote to him?

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and will of course check with the Chief Secretary's office; my officials will have heard the point he makes and will ensure he receives a response. On inflation in infrastructure costs, obviously that will apply across the board and cannot in itself be a reason to reconsider such fundamental investment. There are strong views on this project; from the Government's point of view, it creates thousands of jobs and apprenticeships and builds much greater connectivity. But of course, as the Chief Secretary himself has been clear—I am sure he will emphasise this in the letter to my hon. Friend—we need to see discipline on cost control whatever is happening to wider macroeconomic factors.

Turning to the substance of the Bill and the specific measures, I shall start with the energy profits levy. Since energy prices started to surge last year there have been calls for the Government to ensure that businesses that have made extraordinary profits during the rise in oil and gas prices contribute towards supporting households that are struggling with unprecedented cost of living pressures. This Bill takes steps to do exactly that by ensuring oil and gas companies experiencing extraordinary profits pay their fair share of tax. We are therefore taxing these higher profits, which are due not to changes in risk taking or innovation or efficiency, but as the specific result of surging global commodity prices driven in part by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

The measure increases the rate of the energy profits levy that was introduced in May by 10 percentage points to 35%. This will take effect from January next year, bringing the headline rate of tax for the sector to 75%, triple the rate of tax other companies will pay when the corporation tax rate increases to 25% from April next year or 30% for the largest companies. The Bill also extends the levy until 31 March 2028, but as the Government have made clear, it is important that such a tax does not deter investment at a time when shoring up the country's energy security is vital.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the Minister for outlining the detail on the energy profits levy. Does he agree that the measures he has announced will raise £52 billion over six years? Although in previous debates the Labour party has said that that does not go far enough, it is more than Labour's proposed energy profits levy would raise.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is extremely astute: he has noted the significant contribution these taxes will make to the Exchequer. As I have just said, although this generous allowance is to ensure that we still encourage investment at a time when energy security is critical and where the long-term solution is having secure energy in this country, he is right to highlight the revenue being raised. After all, it goes a long way to funding the support that our constituents are receiving. In fact, they are receiving it this very week: payments are going out to support people facing these very high energy bills. The energy support guarantee this winter will save a typical household £900. We are putting in place extensive support, and as my hon. Friend says, a significant amount of that revenue comes from this new tax.

Putin's barbaric illegal invasion of Ukraine and the utilisation of energy as a weapon of war has made it clear that we must become more energy self-sufficient.

[James Cartlidge]

That is why this Bill also ensures that the levy retains its investment allowance at the current value, allowing companies to continue claiming around £91 for every £100 of investment. This investment will support the economy and jobs while helping to protect the UK's future energy security, and in future the Government will separately legislate to increase the tax relief available for investments which reduce carbon emissions when producing oil and gas, supporting the industry's transition to lower-carbon oil and gas production. Together these measures will raise close to £20 billion more from the levy over the next six years. As my hon. Friend said, that brings total levy revenues to more than £40 billion over the same period—of course he added on top of that the electricity generators levy, which we will be consulting on. The Government are also taking forward measures to tax the extraordinary returns of electricity generators, as I have just said, but we will do so in a future Finance Bill to ensure that we can engage with industry on these important plans.

The autumn Finance Bill also introduces legislation to alter the rates of the R&D tax reliefs. Making those changes will help to reduce error and fraud in the system, ensuring that the taxpayer gets better value for money while continuing to support valuable research and development needed for long-term growth. Over the last 50 years, innovation has been responsible for about half of the UK's productivity increases. That is an extremely important statistic. We all know the value of R&D to all of our constituencies—I look in particular at my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne), who will know of its importance in our university cities and all of our key clusters. R&D is a key way of raising productivity, which is why we have protected our entire research budget and will increase public funding for R&D to £20 billion by 2024-25 as part of our mission to make the United Kingdom a science superpower. These measures are significant, but ultimately businesses will need to invest more in R&D. The UK's R&D tax reliefs have an important role to play in doing that.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The Government are absolutely right on this point. The objective of giving taxpayers' money to companies for use through R&D tax credits is to focus on improving productivity. There were real concerns, particularly in the smaller business segment, that the scheme was not working correctly. One aspect of the scheme that caused some concern to small businesses was the time that it was taking for some credits to be paid out, but I think that is improving. Perhaps in summing up later, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury could point to what recent progress has been made on that.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Of course, he was in the Department and has a business background, so he knows the detail and the importance of R&D tax reliefs. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury will have a chance to look at that later. I believe that we will be having a meeting about a separate issue of concern—a certain railway project that matters to him—when we can also discuss these points.

I turn to the specific detail. For expenditure on or after 1 April 2023, the research and development expenditure credit rate will increase from 13% to 20%. The small and medium-sized enterprise additional deduction will decrease from 130% to 86%, and the SME scheme credit rate will decrease from 14.5% to 10%. That reform will ensure that the taxpayer support is as effective as possible. It improves the competitiveness of the RDEC scheme and is a step towards a simplified RDEC-like scheme for all.

That means that Government support for the reliefs will continue to rise in cost to the Exchequer—from £6.6 billion in 2021 to more than £9 billion in 2027-28—but in a way that ensures value for money. To be clear, the R&D reliefs will support £60 billion of business R&D in 2027-28, which is a 60% increase from £40 billion in 2020-21. The Government will consult on the design of a single scheme and, ahead of the spring Budget, work with industry to understand whether further support is necessary for R&D-intensive SMEs without significant change to the overall cost.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It was indeed welcome to hear the Chancellor talking in the autumn statement about additional money for research and development, but what seemed to be lacking was investment in skills. He talked about skills only loosely, and actually there was not one mention of colleges. Will there be any additional money for colleges as a result of the Bill?

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. In raising education, I hope he will have noted and strongly welcomed the fact that, despite the tough fiscal situation, the Chancellor was able to find additional spending for education—indeed, £2.2 billion this year and next year for our schools. I hope he agrees that that is crucial.

Richard Foord: Colleges?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise further education. We also announced in the statement that there will be a review by Michael Barber looking at the many positive initiatives that the Government have in place for training and increasing technical and vocational skills—T-levels, for example. We want to see maximum support for such schemes, so we will be reviewing them to ensure that we deliver them as effectively as possible. He makes an important point.

I turn to the measures on personal taxation. We know that difficult decisions are needed to ensure that the tax system supports strong public finances. To begin with, we are asking those with the broadest shoulders to carry the most weight. The Government are therefore reducing the threshold at which the 45p rate becomes payable from £150,000 to £125,140.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): What consideration have the Government given to taxation of those who benefited during covid? The National Audit Office states that the Government invested £368 billion in the economy through furlough and various other pieces of support, but the people who received that money passed it on. Far from trickling down, the money has trickled up. During covid, the number of billionaires and millionaires increased to record levels in the UK. They have clearly benefited extraordinarily well from Government investment. Why are we not following the money?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. I, for one, would never resent the fact that someone is successful in life, particularly because of starting a business, working hard, investing in this country and creating wealth. We should always celebrate that. He says, however, that the money and expenditure during covid did not trickle down. On the contrary, speaking from my experience out in my constituency, businesses still express to me their gratitude for the grants and loans, for the £400 billion of support that we put in place that helped to carry the country through the pandemic—

Clive Efford *rose*—

James Cartlidge: I will finish this point; the hon. Gentleman is welcome to come back at me on it. He will recall the estimates at the start of the pandemic that unemployment would be 2 million higher than it turned out to be. That is an entire depression's-worth of unemployment that we saved through our measures, and he should be grateful.

Clive Efford: I absolutely agree with everything that the Minister just said, but the truth is that the money paid to people in furlough and to small businesses was passed on. That money was used to repay loans, to pay rent and to pay the lease. People have paid their mortgages. The people who received that money at the end of the day were those who were already wealthy, as the figures show. We should follow the money. We should not squeeze those people until the pips squeak, but we should make them pay their fair share.

James Cartlidge: By any objective assessment, that enormous support helped our country through one of the toughest challenges that we have ever faced—the biggest crisis outside war in recent memory. We have, of course, moved straight into another one. Across the House, there is recognition that the £400 billion of extra support that we put in place has benefited the country.

The hon. Gentleman talks about business costs. Of course, businesses had costs that we had to help them with, but to protect public health, steps were taken to close parts of the economy. We faced an extraordinary contraction. To avoid that, the Government had to step in and, in so doing, we lost 2 million jobs fewer than were predicted to go.

Clive Efford: Will the Minister give way?

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Will the Minister give way?

James Cartlidge: If the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) will forgive me, we have some interest from another part of the House, so will I take an intervention from Wales, from the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards).

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the Minister. I welcome the announcement in the Bill that reduces the additional rate level to £125,000. The calculations I have seen show that somebody earning £150,000 will pay about 1% more in income tax, so this is definitely a step in the right direction. However, somebody earning £1.5 million will pay only 0.1% more as a result of the proposals. Does that not make the case for a further

band to be created for those earning very high wages? My understanding, if my history lessons were correct, is that the Thatcher Government, for instance, had a 60% rate.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting suggestion. He will not be surprised to hear that I do not announce new tax bands from the Dispatch Box on Second Reading of a Finance Bill. I can confirm, however, that those earning £150,000 or more will pay just over £1,200 more in tax every year. That is the precise figure.

For the final time, I give way to the hon. Member for Eltham.

Clive Efford: Any Government would have given the support that the Government gave at that time, so I accept everything that the Minister said about that, but where is the money now? There has been £368 billion paid into the economy. Who has it now? Who benefited from it? Should we not follow that money and make those with the broadest shoulders contribute?

James Cartlidge: The furlough scheme, on its own, protected 11.5 million jobs. Does the hon. Gentleman seriously think that the Government should expand some extraordinary array of resource to find out what those 11.5 million people did with the money that kept them in work when they could have been looking at unemployment, and we could have been facing the most staggering economic depression in our history? We avoided that and, instead, we reduced unemployment by 2 million more than was expected. We avoided that cut in jobs, which would have been absolutely devastating for communities across the country, and we should all be grateful.

Richard Fuller *rose*—

Paul Holmes *rose*—

James Cartlidge: I have already given way to both my hon. Friends, but I will go to Bedfordshire.

Richard Fuller: That is certainly the best place the Minister can go. He is always welcome in North East Bedfordshire.

The Minister will remember that the additional rate of tax was introduced as a temporary measure by Gordon Brown. When the Conservatives came into government in coalition in 2010, we looked forward to its being scrapped—yet here we are today, proposing that more people on lower incomes, in nominal as well as real terms, be made to pay that additional rate of tax. With the basic allowance tapering off above £100,000, and with the introduction of this rate, does the Minister accept that people in this country who earn more than £100,000 now face effective tax rates of 60% or 50%?

James Cartlidge: As a Conservative who wants taxes to be lower, I do not stand here with any relish in putting forward a Finance Bill that will increase taxes. The Chancellor was very clear that we will have to pay more tax, but my hon. Friend understands the aggregate reason, I hope, which is the need for fiscal stability. The overall rate will have an impact of £1,200 a year, as I have said; I do not deny that it will be significantly

[James Cartlidge]

impactful for our constituents. We want to cut taxes if we can, but before we do so we have to get on top of inflation.

I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes).

Paul Holmes: I thank the Minister for giving way. It is a good job I can remember what I was about to say.

The hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) asked where the money has gone. The support that the Government have given has kept a lot of small businesses in business, as I know he recognises. Does the Minister agree that the money actually went to the medium-sized businesses that keep people in our constituencies employed and on the payroll? That is where the money went, thanks to the actions of this Government. Opposition Members should not pooh-pooh those actions, because they kept businesses going and people in work.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is an absolute champion of small businesses and of businesses of all sizes in his constituency. We and our colleagues believe in free enterprise. We knew that the pandemic was an extraordinary situation in which, to keep businesses and free enterprise going, we had to step in an extraordinary way and be a force for maintaining aggregate demand and expenditure. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What did those businesses do by staying in business? They maintained employment in our communities and maintained the services that they provide. We should all be proud of the extraordinary effort that was made.

We have announced a reduction in the dividend allowance from £2,000 to £1,000 from April 2023 and to £500 from April 2024, as well as a reduction in the capital gains tax annual exempt amount from £12,300 to £6,000 from April 2023 and to £3,000 from April 2024. We have also announced that we are abolishing the annual uprating of the AEA with the consumer prices index and are fixing the CGT reporting proceeds limit at £50,000. The current high value of these allowances can mean that those with investment income and capital gains receive considerably more of their income tax-free than those with, for example, employment income only. Our approach makes the system fairer by bringing the treatment of investment income and capital gains closer in line with that of earned income, while still ensuring that individuals are not taxed on low levels of income or capital gains. Although the allowance will be reduced, individuals who receive a high proportion of their income via dividends will still benefit from lower rates of 8.75%, 33.75% and 39.35% for basic, higher and additional rate taxpayers respectively. These two measures will raise £1.2 billion a year from April 2025.

We are maintaining the income tax personal allowance and the higher rate threshold at their current levels for longer than was previously planned. They will remain at £12,570 and £50,270 respectively for a further two years, until April 2028. This policy will have an impact on many of us, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), but no one's current pay packet will reduce as a result. By April 2028, the personal allowance, at £12,570, will still be more than £2,000 higher than if we had uprated it by inflation every financial year since 2010-11.

I reiterate that these are not the kinds of decisions that any Government want to take, but they are decisions that a responsible Government facing these challenges must take. I remind the House that this Government raised the personal allowance by more than 40% in real terms since 2010, and that this year we implemented the largest ever increase to a personal tax starting threshold for national insurance contributions, meaning that they are some of the most generous personal tax allowances in the OECD. Changing the system to reduce the value of personal tax thresholds and allowances supports strong public finances. Even after these changes, as things stand, we will still have the most generous set of core tax-free personal allowances of any G7 country.

Let me now turn to the subject of inheritance tax. As we announced in the autumn statement, the thresholds will continue at current levels in 2026-27 and 2027-28, two more years than previously announced. As a result, the nil-rate band will continue at £325,000, the residence nil-rate band will continue at £175,000, and the residence nil-rate band taper will continue to start at £2 million. That means that qualifying estates will still be able to pass on up to £500,000 tax-free, and the estates of surviving spouses and civil partners will still be able to pass on up to £1 million tax-free because any unused nil-rate bands are transferable. Current forecasts indicate that only 6% of estates are expected to have a liability in 2022-23, and that is forecast to rise to only 6.6% in 2027-28. In making changes to personal tax thresholds and allowances, the Government recognise that we are asking everyone to contribute more towards sustainable public finances, but—importantly—we are doing this in a fair way.

I am almost there, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will be assisted by an electric vehicle, because I am now moving on to that method of transport. Earlier this month I attended COP27, where I met international finance Ministry counterparts and reaffirmed the Treasury's commitment to international action on net zero and climate-resilient development. The Government welcome the fact that the transition to electric vehicles continues apace, with the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasting that half of all new vehicles will be electric by 2025. Therefore, to ensure that all motorists start to make a fairer tax contribution, we have decided that from April 2025, electric cars, vans and motorcycles will no longer be exempt from vehicle excise duty. The motoring tax system will continue to provide generous incentives to support electric vehicle uptake, so the Government will maintain favourable first-year VED rates for electric vehicles, and will legislate for generous company car tax rates for electric vehicles and low-emission vehicles until 2027-28.

These are difficult times, but that does not mean we will shy away from difficult decisions; it means we must confront them head-on. Today the Government are tacking forward specific tax measures in this Bill to help stabilise the public finances and provide certainty for markets. This is an important part of the Government's broader commitments made in the autumn statement on fiscal sustainability, ensuring that we take a responsible approach to fiscal policy, tackling the scourge of inflation and working hand in hand with the independent Bank of England.

We will do this fairly; we will give a safety net to our most vulnerable, we will invest for future generations, and we will ensure that we grow the economy and improve

the lives of people in every part of the United Kingdom. The measures in this autumn Finance Bill are a key part of those plans, and I therefore commend it to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister.

5.47 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “That” to the end of the Question and add:

“this House declines to give a second reading to the Finance Bill because, notwithstanding the importance of increasing the energy (oil and gas) profits levy, it raises taxes on working people through its freeze of the personal allowance threshold; because it fails to take advantage of other sources of revenue, such as ending non-domiciled tax status and further reducing the tax allowances available to oil and gas companies; and because it derives from an Autumn Statement which fails to set out plans to arrest the 7 per cent fall in average living standards forecast over the next two years, and to grow the UK economy, including through replacing business rates, supporting start-ups, giving businesses the flexibility they need to upskill their workforce, investing in clean and renewable energy, insulating homes across the country, and creating jobs in the green industries of the future.”

After 12 years of economic failure from the Conservatives and 12 weeks of economic chaos, we now have this Finance Bill from a party that is holding Britain back. It is a Bill from a party that has, of course, lost any claim that it might once have tried to lay to economic competence; but more than that, it is a Bill that shows a party making the wrong choices time and again, and a party with no plan to grow our economy and halt the decline in living standards.

As people across the country know, the Conservatives’ economic failure is hitting households hard. We are living through the longest period of earnings stagnation for 150 years, with real wages lower this year than when the Tories came to power in 2010. Living standards are forecast to fall by 7% over the next two years—the biggest fall on record, taking incomes down to 2013 levels. No wonder the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies described the forecast drop in disposable income as “simply staggering”. This will truly feel like a lost decade for people across the United Kingdom: a decade of low growth, with incomes now set to fall back to where they were a decade ago.

I know that Conservative Members are desperate to make out that global factors are entirely to blame for the economic reality of today, but although no one denies the deep impact of covid and of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, it is simply not credible—and it is frankly insulting—to pretend that the occupants of Downing Street, now and over the past 12 years, have had nothing to do with the mess that we face. It was decisions taken by the Conservatives in office that left us uniquely exposed to the inflationary shock of oil and gas prices rising—they took misguided and damaging decisions to shut down our gas storage, to stall on nuclear power and to ban renewable technologies such as onshore wind—and it was decisions taken by the Conservatives in office that have denied the UK the opportunity to grow our economy over the past 12 years as we could and should have done.

Richard Fuller: Will the hon. Gentleman please check his facts? If he looks at the period from 2010 to just before the covid pandemic and compares the UK’s average rate of growth with that of our OECD competitors, particularly the G7, he will find that the UK outstrips all of them bar the United States and Germany.

James Murray: I seem to be engaging more with the hon. Gentleman now that he is on the Back Benches than when he was briefly on the Front Bench. If he looks at the statistics, he will see that, over the last 12 years, the UK’s growth rate has been a third lower than the OECD average, and a third lower than it was during the previous Labour years. I will take no lessons from him or his colleagues on the need for economic growth.

I take this opportunity to give the previous Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), some rare credit. At least he took responsibility for the mess he inherited from his colleagues when he confirmed that our economy is stuck in a “vicious cycle of stagnation.” On that point, he was absolutely right.

Over the Conservatives’ 12 years in power, as I said to the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), the UK economy grew a third less than the OECD average and a third less than during the previous Labour years. What is more, we are now the only G7 economy that is still smaller than before the pandemic. Over the next two years, we are forecast to have the highest inflation in the G7 and the worst economic growth of any country in the G20 except Russia.

What is more, we are the only country in the G7 whose governing party chose to inflict profound damage on its own economy. Although the Prime Minister and the Chancellor refuse to take responsibility, the British people can see through them and will hold them to account. What the British people want and need is a Government who will get on and do the right thing without having to be pushed, dragged and forced into doing so. That is one reason why people across the country have been so exasperated by the Government’s reluctance at every turn to implement a windfall tax on oil and gas producers’ huge profits this year.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) first called on the Government to bring in a windfall tax in January. It took five months of pushing the Government along a painful journey to get them to act. In those months, Conservative Ministers tried to defend their position, saying that oil and gas producers were struggling. They said a windfall tax would be “un-Conservative”, and the current Prime Minister said it would be “silly” to use this money to offer people help with their energy bills. Conservative MPs voted against a windfall tax three times, and then, when they finally realised their position was untenable, they did a U-turn.

Even then, having been dragged kicking and screaming into introducing a windfall tax, the current Prime Minister coupled it with a massive tax break for the oil and gas giants. This tax break will be given to the oil and gas giants for doing the things they were going to do anyway, which helps to explain why some of them have paid zero windfall tax in the UK this year, despite record global profits.

[James Murray]

Despite having another go at windfall tax legislation with this Bill, the massive tax break is still there. It is set at a level that will, to quote the explanatory notes,

“maintain the overall cumulative value of relief”.

This tax break leaves billions of pounds on the table. These profits—the windfalls of war—could go towards helping people facing the difficult months ahead. This tax break is set to cost the taxpayer £80 billion over five years. This tax break was brought in by decisions that this Prime Minister took when he was Chancellor, and it is staying thanks to the decisions of the Chancellor he appointed from No. 10. What clearer evidence could there be that, no matter which Conservative goes through the revolving door of Downing Street, it is all more of the same?

All we get from the Conservatives is the same vicious cycle of stagnation. This doom loop has been dragging wages down, forcing taxes up and hitting public services, all of which come round again and keep economic growth low.

Jonathan Edwards: I agree with many of the hon. Gentleman's points. Much of the narrative around the autumn statement and the Budget is about restoring market credibility after the implosion of the previous Administration. In reality, the one thing we could do to restore market credibility is to have a more sensible trading relationship with the European Union. There is no hope from the Government, but will the Labour party offer us that hope?

James Murray: Later in my speech I will talk about our plan for growth, which will involve fixing the holes in the Brexit deal with which the Conservatives left the European Union. Alongside other measures, it is important to make sure that the deal has a proper plan for growth that is sorely lacking from this Government.

This Finance Bill is a bill in more ways than one, because as well as being legislation, it represents a bill landing on working people's doormats. It is a bill that working people are being forced to pay for the Government's failure. Working people are paying for the Tories' decisions that, for the last 12 years, have held back the economy, and for the last 12 weeks have crashed it.

This Bill freezes the income tax personal allowance, which will leave an average earner paying over £500 more income tax a year by 2027-28. In the autumn statement, the Government announced a council tax bombshell that will force a £100 tax rise on families in the average band D house from next April. As a result of all the tax measures announced in this Parliament, middle-income households will see their tax bill rise by £1,400. That is what it looks like when working people are made to pay the price.

It is all the more galling for people to be asked to pay more when the Conservatives are so slapdash with public money. Today, new figures show that the current Prime Minister wasted a staggering £6.7 billion on covid payments to businesses and individuals that were fraudulent or mistakes. Despite wasting public money so carelessly, he is now happy to put up taxes on working people across the country.

It could have been different had the Government made fairer choices. The Government could have chosen to close the unfair private equity loophole that gives hedge fund managers a tax break on their bonuses. They could have chosen to reverse their tax cut for banks. Perhaps they have forgotten what their position is, having voted for the cut at the start of the year, before U-turning on it a few months ago and then, more recently, U-turning again.

The Government could have finally chosen to scrap non-dom tax status, an outdated and unfair tax break that costs the taxpayer £3.2 billion a year. A tax break for non-doms should have no place in the UK in 2022. As if evidence were needed that this tax break belongs in a different era, the law makes it clear that people can inherit non-dom status only from their father, unless their parents were unmarried. More fundamentally, this loophole ignores the principle of fairness that should be at the heart of our tax system. If a person makes Britain their home, they should pay their taxes here.

There are theories going around about why the Government are so reluctant to modernise the tax system and abolish the non-dom tax break. Perhaps the Minister will be able to confirm at the end of the debate, or in writing afterwards, whether the Prime Minister has been consulted on the option of abolishing non-dom tax status. Perhaps he can confirm whether the option was ever considered. When the current Prime Minister was Chancellor, did he recuse himself from discussions on this matter? I see the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury acknowledging my request, so I look forward to his response either later today or in due course.

We know that the Conservatives' choices on tax are deeply unfair, but we also know that the lack of economic growth is the deep root of the rising tax burden in the UK. Over the last 12 years, the UK economy has grown a third less than the OECD average and a third less than during the previous Labour years. We are now the only G7 economy that is still smaller than it was before the pandemic, and over the next two years we are forecast to have the lowest growth of any country in the G20 bar Russia.

A plan for growth has been missing for a decade, and its absence is having a greater impact than ever. In its report this month, the OBR confirmed that measures announced at the autumn statement will make no difference to growth in the medium term. The CBI's director general, Tony Danker, put it starkly following the autumn statement:

“There was really nothing there that tells us that the economy is going to avoid another decade of low productivity and low growth”.

We cannot afford another decade like the last. We cannot afford another decade of being held back, another decade of lost growth. That is why Labour's plan is so crucial to raising wages and living standards, supporting and sustaining public services and driving business investment and job creation in the decade ahead.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, in stark contrast to what we have heard from the Conservative party. It is about people, working people and building back better. Does he agree that, for the people, particularly young people, who lost out so much during covid and are now facing another decade of low growth, we are particularly

disappointed about the lack of support for further education and colleges to support the skills agenda for both 16 to 18-year-olds and adults who desperately need retraining and skills? That is starkly absent from what we have heard from this Government.

James Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. She is a great advocate for investment in skills training and making sure that young people have opportunities in the decade ahead, which they have been denied in the last decade under this Conservative Government. The points she makes fit well within a wider plan for growth, which is at the heart of what Labour Members are proposing and pushing the Government to adopt.

That plan is wide ranging. It covers business rates being replaced with a fairer system that makes sure that high street businesses no longer have one hand tied behind their back. It relies on us implementing a modern industrial strategy to support an active partnership of government working hand in hand with businesses to succeed. Labour's start-up reforms will help to make Britain the best place to start and grow a new business. Small businesses will benefit from our action on late payments and we will give businesses the flexibility they need to upskill their workforce. As I mentioned, we will fix holes in the Brexit deal so our businesses can export more abroad. Crucially, our green prosperity plan will create jobs across the country, from the plumbers and builders needed to insulate homes, to engineers and operators for nuclear and wind. We will invest in the industries of the future and the skills people need to be part of them. That is what a plan for growth should look like. As John Allan, the chair of Tesco, said recently, when it comes to growth, Labour are the

"only...team on the field."

The truth is that the need for an effective plan for growth has exposed the emptiness and exhaustion of the Conservative party. All we have to show from 12 years of Cameron, May and Johnson is chronic economic stagnation.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that he should not refer to existing colleagues by name.

James Murray: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. All we have to show from those three former Conservative Prime Ministers in the last 12 years is chronic economic stagnation. This autumn, the Conservatives tried desperately to make their economic strategy work, but their decisions crashed the economy, imposed a Tory mortgage premium, put pensions in peril and trashed our reputation around the world. Now they are trying again. We face tax hikes on working people, the biggest drop in living standards on record and growth still languishing at the bottom of the league. It seems that Conservative MPs are beginning to realise they have come to the end of the road and their time is up. In a timely echo of the popular TV show, hon. Members from Bishop Auckland to South West Devon are declaring: "I'm a Tory, get me out of here." It seems the Conservative party is finally beginning to realise what the rest of us already know: the Tories are out of time and out of ideas, and Britain would be better off if they were out of office.

Our amendment makes it clear that, although Ministers have been dragged, kicking and screaming, into action on oil and gas giants' windfall tax, this Finance Bill fundamentally fails the UK economy and comes from a Government holding the British people back. Be in no doubt: the mess we are in is the result of 12 years of Conservative economic failure. With this Bill, they are loading the cost of their failure on to working people. The Government still have no plan to grow the economy and to stop the fall in living standards that is filling people across the country with dread. We need a Government with a plan to get our economy out of this doom loop, to support businesses to grow and to raise living standards again. We simply cannot afford another decade of the Conservatives. Now is time for change, now is the time for them to get out of the way, now is the time to let Britain succeed.

6.4 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak so early in the debate. It is also a great pleasure to have a Finance Bill that is so short. I must have spoken on a dozen of them in my time in Parliament and to have one that has only 12 clauses is some sort of miracle. During this week, we have probably about as much time as we normally have for one of several hundred pages, so we can really scrutinise the 11 substantive clauses. Perhaps that is progress, compared with what we normally expect.

I start by comparing this Finance Bill with ones we had at the start of the previous recession a decade and a half ago and ones we had at the start of previous measures to tackle a large budget deficit. If I recall rightly, the single biggest measure we had 14 years ago was a VAT reduction at the start of the recession, which cost something like £15 billion. I am not sure it had the effect we wanted. Interestingly, as we sadly slip into a recession, which we hope is shorter and shallower than that one, what we have not seen in this Finance Bill is any attempt to boost consumer confidence. We can argue that we tried that in September and it did not go so well, and probably the right thing here is to focus on how we reassure the markets that we can keep borrowing under control and therefore not risk a rise in interest rates.

However, if this recession looks like it might be any longer or deeper than the Government's forecasts, I urge them to think carefully about how we get consumer confidence to turn around. I fear that what we will see in the new year is a big retrenchment in people's personal spending. We will spend the money for Christmas because we have to, but people will then take a very cautious approach in the early part of next year, knowing that energy bills will go up in April and that tax changes are around the corner. We would not want them to go too far and retrench too fast. So I hope the Government will think about the role that tax can play in turning the economy around if we need that next year.

The other interesting comparison is with the approach George Osborne took in his Budgets in the first half of the last decade to introduce austerity to tackle the big public deficit we had. Let us look at what he prioritised. He had a VAT increase, which we are rightly not doing in this situation, but he increased the personal allowance and reduced corporation tax to try to put more money into people's pockets from work and to encourage business

[*Nigel Mills*]

investment in the UK. Interestingly, the Government are doing the complete opposite now. I am not sure whether we have worked out that that plan did not work, but there is evidence to suggest that the lower corporation tax rates we had for a decade did not achieve the additional investment that we wanted them to and we are probably better off sticking at about 25% than going lower.

I am slightly intrigued. The great claim we made was that we were taking people out of the scope of income tax. We are now at great risk of putting them all back into the scope of it again. I accept the Minister's point that the personal allowance by the end of this five-year period will still be £2,000 higher than it would have been by inflation, but I think that is not enough of an increase. I hope that the Government regard these personal allowance freezes for another five years to be a kind of last resort and if we get any improvement in the economic outlook they can be reversed. Especially at the lower end of the level, keeping people out of tax, letting them keep more of the income and making sure that work pays are strong arguments. Frankly, I am not absolutely sure why we need to legislate for personal allowances in five years' time. We will have another five Finance Bills before we get to those and we could have brought those into law at any point. I accept that we want to give the market a clear steer that we are serious about closing the budget deficit. If we need those measures, fine, they are probably less bad than a rate increase, but what is the point of legislating for them in this situation?

There is another contrast with what we have done on national insurance this year. We chose to—and I accepted the argument that we needed to—increase the headline rate of NI, but the compensation for that, when it became clear that that was a real problem at the start of the economic downturn, was to increase the personal allowance for NI—the starting point at which someone pays that tax. Yet now, rather than increasing the headline rate, we are effectively holding back the starting points of those taxes. So we have a tax on income and a tax on wages where we are taking one approach, and on the other tax we are doing something completely different.

As we go forward from what I accept are emergency measures that we need to use to fill a hole, the Government need to have a clear strategy for what our tax system should look like. They should consider the things we are trying to tax and the things we are trying to incentivise. They should try to give people some long-term stability so that they can plan and understand and we can get the behavioural changes and incentives that we want, rather than having a clear direction one way, and then doing a U-turn and wondering why people do not do the things that we would really like them to do. Now we are through the real firefighting, I hope the Government can produce a strategy and plan for where they think the tax system should go, so that people can understand it and respond accordingly. I think that that is what we had under the Gougeon doctrine in 2010. We need to revisit that, now we seem to have changed our mind on so many of those things.

The bleakest bit of news in this Finance Bill was extending the windfall tax to 2028. I was hoping that the energy crisis might be over quite a bit before then

and we would not need to have those measures in place. The fact we have done that suggests we are not expecting energy prices to come back down any time soon. Clearly, the windfall tax is the right thing to do. I have always taken the view that this is a level of profit that nobody could ever have thought they could get. These companies are earning it from extracting our natural resources; they are not their natural resources. We have given them permission to extract them, and they have rightly made some profit from doing so. However, we should limit that profit and accept that those are our resources and that we should take the right return from them, rather than the exploiter doing so, so I hugely welcome the introduction of the windfall tax.

I am quite intrigued by the research and development stuff. It is right, even at the most difficult time, to say that we want to make sure that we are incentivising R&D. That is a sensible, long-term measure that shows some long-term planning. I remember being at work as a young accountant when R&D tax credits were introduced—in 2000 for small companies and in 2002 for large companies. The journey they have been on, with rates going up and down and approaches changing—above the line, below the line, cash incentives and all those things—makes me wonder whether, 22 years on, we are really sure that R&D tax credits are delivering the outcome that we want. I suspect that the speeches in the Finance Bill debates in 2000 were that these measures would make us a science superpower in the next generation. I think that we are still giving those speeches, and we have not quite got the superpower bit. I wonder whether the Government should stop at some point and ask whether those are working. I know that there is an ongoing review on combining the reliefs, but are they triggering the right thing?

One piece of data that did worry me was that a disproportionate amount of those are claimed by companies in London and the south-east and they are not spread around the country in the way we would like. Is there a way we can use these tax measures to encourage that kind of investment and those kinds of skilled jobs in the regions of the UK, and not just focus them in the most prosperous parts?

I have expressed the view previously to many Treasury Ministers that, outside the EU, the one thing that we can do is take a regional approach to certain taxation to encourage activity in different parts of the country that we do not need to encourage in London and the south-east. I urge the Treasury to look seriously at whether we could take a regional approach to some taxes so that we can get those differentiating incentives to move wealth outside London and the south-east. That would fit entirely with our levelling-up agenda, but we have not chosen yet to be that creative with our tax system.

Given that we have plenty of time for detailed questions on clauses on Wednesday, I will just say that I accept the need for this Finance Bill. I will support all the measures in it and I will happily vote for it later. I will not be voting for the Opposition amendment, which I suspect will not come as a great shock. I think I support ending non-dom status, but we should have temporary residence relief. If somebody comes here on a secondment or for a short period, we should not try to force them to move all their tax affairs here. We should tax them on the income that they earn here. There would be a big disincentive

and it would be out of step with other countries if we did not have a short period where somebody had that different situation to reflect the fact that they are not ordinarily resident here.

The fact is that a person's non-dom status depends on where their father was born. In theory, they can become a non-dom even if they have lived here all their life and never been resident anywhere else in the world. That shows how ludicrous those rules are. I urge the Government to look at modernising all our residence tests, including that on non-dom status. They are all far too complicated. We could have a far more effective system that works better and would achieve the advantages of attracting investment here. There is a real problem with just scrapping non-dom status; it may drive some people we do want here to leave. On balance, a change is better and we should continue with the direction of travel that we had a decade ago of restricting the time period. I think that we could restrict it with a more modern relief that would achieve what we want without having the big downsides.

With that, I will happily support the Bill and oppose the amendment if there is a Division later.

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

6.14 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), who gave a characteristically thoughtful speech. How strange it is that we agree on so many things in this debate, and yet on so few other things. It would be nice if those on the Government Front Bench listened to some of the considered and sensible remarks from their colleagues.

This Finance Bill really does illustrate that we are all having to pay more tax, because of the very misguided steps taken by the former Prime Minister and her Chancellor, who crashed the economy in 26 minutes, leaving us all £30 billion worse off. That will have an impact on this broken UK economy not just now, but for many years to come.

Let me start with the energy profits levy. That additional tax on UK oil and gas profits will increase from 25% to 35% from 1 January 2023. As the hon. Member for Amber Valley observed, this is being extended until March 2028, which illustrates the extent of the mess into which the UK Government and their Chancellors have got themselves.

We think that the Government should go in a slightly different direction. They should look beyond just a levy on energy profits. They might want to look at a windfall tax that includes share buybacks as well. That is something that Biden has done in the United States. That has had the effect of bringing more money into the American Treasury's coffers—Canada is also doing this—and encouraging firms to put more money into research and development, into investing in their companies and into investing in the UK, rather than spending all their excess profits on share buybacks. That seems like an entirely sensible thing to do, given the state of the UK economy. This year, BP has earmarked £7.15 billion to buy back its own shares. The Treasury should look at what more can be done here.

The reduction in the investment allowance is to be welcomed, but that it exists at all remains a barrier to decarbonisation. The allowance creates a perverse incentive for companies to favour new oil and gas exploration over renewables by effectively offering them a tax break for doing so. Shell paid zero windfall tax under the previous scheme, as it invested heavily in oil and drilling instead of filing profits to be taxed against. That is hardly worth a candle compared with the net zero commitments that the Government tried to make at COP26 last year.

We are also concerned about the decision to impose a 45% tax on electricity generators as that can then undermine investment into renewables at the same time as allowing oil and gas companies to drill more. The chief operating officer of SSE has said that the company may have to “give up” on some of its plans when the tax comes into effect. He said:

“It's going to take money away from us...and we won't have as much to invest.”

The CEO of Renewable UK also said:

“Any new tax should have focused on large, unexpected windfalls right across the energy sector, instead profits at fossil fuel plants are inexplicably exempted from the levy.”

Scotland has a significant renewables sector. It has been a great success story. Anything that makes that sector less profitable and more uncertain is something that we are deeply worried about.

The ordinary rate of income tax is now frozen until April 2028. Significant stealth taxes are coming in, as the Treasury stands to raise considerable revenue due to inflation. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated that this could raise £30 billion by 2026 due to high inflation rates. It is unacceptable for this money to be raised by taxing those already struggling with spiralling living costs. Of the many options available to the Chancellor, it would have been better to tip the balance more in favour of those who can afford to contribute more, by which I mean greater taxes on wealth and income made from wealth, and also taxes on the non-doms, which could bring in £3.2 billion to the Treasury's coffers. It is unacceptable that the Treasury would turn down the chance to bring in £3.2 billion and instead choose to freeze the thresholds, so that people on lower and middle incomes will receive less in their pay packet each month.

AJ Bell has found that if allowances are frozen rather than linked to inflation, an average earner on a salary of £33,000 in 2021-22, before the income tax threshold freeze began, will end up paying £2,600 more in income tax if the policy is extended to 2027-28. Someone on £50,000 will pay an additional £6,570 in tax because the allowances are frozen rather than being linked to inflation. I ask Ministers to consider the fairness of those measures.

Moving on to the research and development expenditure tax credit rate, the scheme has provided tax reliefs to companies subject to corporation tax that carry out eligible R&D activities. I appreciate what has been said about the efficacy of R&D tax credits and whether they are useful. I hope that topic will receive more consideration in the months and years ahead, because the UK tax code is full of different types of credits, tax breaks and incentives—or disincentives—and we need to properly understand how effective they are.

Small and medium-sized enterprises provide around three fifths of the UK's private sector jobs and have historically been drivers of innovation and growth.

[Alison Thewliss]

They are a significant part of solving the UK's productivity puzzle. SMEs are less likely than larger companies to have access to formal credits to fund R&D, and in the wake of the pandemic and with recession forecast across the next year, it is more important than ever that SMEs are supported in driving growth and investing in research and development.

It is quite perplexing the Chancellor has prioritised R&D in larger firms, which are more likely to invest their profits elsewhere or perhaps invest them in share buybacks further down the road. The Chancellor has said that the aim is to reduce fraud, but reducing the R&D expenditure credit for all SMEs in an attempt to prevent its being abused seems a bit like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. It is quite poor targeting to affect all SMEs rather than just those that might be abusing the system.

The Federation of Small Businesses has said that the cut to R&D tax credits, which the Government presented as a way of tackling fraud, would “crush innovation and growth”, creating a “doom loop” that “makes a mockery of plans for growth.”

The Minister should listen carefully to the FSB when it raises such concerns.

The current situation is quite worrying and will have significant impacts on the Scottish budget. The Fraser of Allander Institute has said:

“The lack of any real ability on the part of the Scottish government to be able to flex its budget within year in response to unanticipated shocks remains a real limitation of the existing fiscal settlement...a strong case can be made for enhancing the Scottish government's ability to borrow and/or draw down resources from its Reserve.”

It concludes that

“this level of inflexibility does not seem tenable.”

The Scottish Government face a £1.7 billion shortfall this year as a result of inflationary pressures, and that is just this year's budget. John Swinney has gone back and tried to strip out anything he can from the Scottish budget to try and deal with the problem, but that shortfall remains. The Chancellor's answer to that was £1.5 billion in Barnett consequentials over the next two years—nothing for this in-year shortfall and half of what we need across two years. That is not going to fix the pressures that the Scottish Government face. It is not going to fix the significant issues with pay deals that trade unions are legitimately asking for in Scotland to support their members. If the UK Government does not come up with that money, it will cause extreme difficulties for the Scottish Government's ability to meet their expectations of what they want to do.

What we are seeing from the UK Government is something of a doom loop. The OECD says that the UK will contract more than any other G7 country and that, of the G20, only Russia will fare worse than the UK. We see stagnant growth and no plans to get the economy back on track. The Chancellor and the Government want to bring forward plans to try to cut their way out of recession. That will not work. As the hon. Member for Amber Valley pointed out, consumers see that, and it affects both consumer and business confidence. Unless we hear a lot more about investment rather than cuts, this Government are going to sink the economy and take Scotland down with them.

6.24 pm

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): Thank you for calling me so early in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker—presumably the answer is that you are saving the worst for first.

I rise to speak in favour of the Bill because in it we have the outlines of the clear steps necessary to ensure a solid financial footing and the path to growth in the medium term. I congratulate both of the Ministers on the Front Bench, my hon. Friends the Members for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who are friends of mine. I am delighted to see them in their place, and I know they will take their roles seriously and deliver that much-needed economic growth.

We have to remember the context in which we find ourselves and this Bill: not just the £400 billion that we have spent on support for businesses and people during the covid pandemic, but the terrible situation we see in Ukraine. Those are the reasons why the nation finds itself in this situation today, as do many nations across the globe. I think the Minister said that one third of the world economy will be in recession over the next year, and that includes the United Kingdom. We need to set out that context and those reasons why we have to take the tough, difficult but fair decisions outlined in the Bill.

I remain convinced that the actions taken last week in the autumn statement and in this Bill put us on a path to growth and to a stable financial footing. I think that is what the public expect. When I go into my constituency every week and speak to people, they now want—dare I say it—boring leadership. They want us to have a stable and sound economic plan for the future, meaning that in the end they will have more money in their pockets and will know what this Government stand for. This Bill, the Minister and the Chancellor last week have all outlined that very clearly. As I say, that is what the public expect. They expect to be treated in a fair way, and this Bill outlines that fair way, with an equal base of spending cuts and tax rises.

I want to focus on some specific things in the Bill that we can achieve because of the tax measures that we are outlining, and what they will deliver. Because of this Bill, the most vulnerable in society will be protected. The announcements made in this Bill and the autumn statement mean that welfare and social security will rise in line with inflation and pensioners will be protected by maintaining the triple lock. That is incredibly important to the 19,500 pensioners in my Eastleigh constituency, as is the £300 they will get this year to support them with the rising cost of energy.

Particularly in areas such as Hampshire, we do not have particularly cash-rich pensioners; they may live in quite large houses in my constituency, but that does not mean they are cash rich. They have invested and saved and they have lived responsible lives. They are people who have paid into the system and deserve to get some stuff out of the system. That is why I am delighted that the Government are protecting the triple lock and have announced that extra support to pensioners, going some way to reassure them as they go through some of the challenges that we all face over the next year or so. We have also seen, through this Bill and the measures that the Minister has outlined, a total of £12 billion of

support for the most vulnerable in our society. I am proud that the Conservative principle of protecting the most vulnerable is in full force.

Added to that is the £7 billion being spent on health services. I am sorry to see the Labour party this evening speaking against a Government measure that will see unprecedented amounts of investment going into our national health service as we come out of the covid pandemic and with the backlogs we have. I never thought I would see the day when Labour Members would stand up in this Chamber and argue against record amounts of investment in the national health service, but they have done so. I hope their constituents will see that when they watch this speech—or when they watch this debate. They will not be watching this speech, but they might watch the debate.

Crucially, we have also outlined £4 billion-worth of investment in our schools. When I went round my constituency during the covid pandemic, many students had missed out on vital schooling. The Government helped with that by putting in place measures such as remote learning, but we have to put in that investment to ensure that those students—often in some of the most deprived areas of my constituency, which does have areas of deprivation—are brought back up to the expected attainment levels.

Again, I am sorry that Members across this House—not on the Conservative side; or not yet, anyway—have again spoken against measures that would see record amounts of investment in our public services. Over the next two years, there will be £11 billion more for schools and the NHS. We will tackle the post-covid backlog and deliver for the future of this country by bringing in measures that we so desperately need after the shock that our economy has gone through in the past few years. The Chancellor has firmly set out the actions necessary for reducing inflation. The Minister has—ably, if I may say so—outlined the measures that the Chancellor has taken. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), who I have a lot of time for—I used to work with him when he was London's Deputy Mayor for Housing—refused to accept, or at least did not put the necessary emphasis on, the fact that the international crisis we are in has caused many countries and many of our neighbours to go through the same issues we are going through.

The Chancellor has outlined measures to bring down inflation, including the £6 billion-worth of investment in capital spending for businesses, which is crucial. I do not expect you to remember this, Madam Deputy Speaker, but you were in the Chair when I made my maiden speech about the crucial investment needed in infrastructure across the United Kingdom. Investing in infrastructure across the United Kingdom means employing people, keeping businesses in work and bringing inflationary pressure down. That is why I am so pleased that the Chancellor outlined that last week, along with the measures in the Bill. The Government are protecting R&D spending and providing £14 billion of relief for small businesses by cutting the rates of tax that they have to pay.

Labour criticised the lack of inclusion of the Office for Budget Responsibility in the financial measures that were taken a few months ago. The Government have now included an OBR outlook, which states that 1% will be added to our GDP over the next year. Now, Labour suddenly wants to say that the OBR is very important.

I agree, but Labour cannot have it both ways by poo-hooing the OBR's findings—that this Budget will help to grow our GDP—and then not necessarily taking its advice as read as we go forward.

Overall, the Bill is hard for now and takes some really tricky decisions, but I am convinced that it will deliver a stable economic outlook for everybody. I will go into a bit more detail on the measures that will reduce inflation. The Bill is split equally between tax rises and spending cuts. We are protecting and maintaining public spending for the next two years at the level set out in 2021, and then increasing spending by 1% in real terms every year until 2027-28. We have invested in our NHS and schools, which is, as I have said, important for the attainment and health outcomes of my Eastleigh constituents.

In the difficult measures that we will go through over the next few months, we are, vitally, protecting people from the shock of their living costs and energy bills going up. That is the most crucial thing: this Government have stepped in. The Labour party might not want to recognise that billions of pounds were spent during the covid pandemic. That has to be paid back at some stage, but we are now spending billions of pounds to protect people from the shock of energy bills.

I say again that I have a lot of respect for the shadow Minister, but I will not take lectures from him when he says that we are not taking the necessary action on nuclear or energy planning. It was his party that preemptively scrapped nuclear energy as an option for this country, which is partly why we are in the situation we find ourselves in today. I think he should go back and possibly rewrite his speech, and then come back and outline that his party is partly responsible for the crisis we are in.

I know that Ministers will not have been immune to hearing the press and some colleagues saying that the Bill, and some of the measures that have been outlined this evening, are not Conservative enough. Despite what many colleagues on my side of the Chamber may think, I am a fiscal Conservative, but I have to disagree with some of those assertions. In the Chancellor's statement and in the Bill, we have framed the narrative on four things that I think are important: protecting the vulnerable, investing in public services, fairness in the tax system and delivering growth in the economy.

Standing here today, I am 100% fine with the measures outlined by this Conservative Government, because they are asking people with the broadest shoulders to pay the most, on a temporary basis, while we look after the most vulnerable in our society and target support during a troublesome time on people who genuinely need our help. If that means I am not a Conservative—I do not think it does, because the Budget and the measures are based on solid conservative principles—I am quite happy with that, but I think that this is a Conservative approach and one that we should be all proud of.

As is usual in these debates, we have opposition from the Labour party. In my seat, I often contest Liberal Democrats, but there are no Lib Dem Members here to outline their lack of plan for the cost of living crisis—but there we go. I am massively in favour of what is set out in the Bill. I am grateful to the Minister for outlining the measures that he has taken, because I know that, over the medium term, we will have growth back in the economy and people will see and be grateful for the Government's actions.

6.36 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): Contrary to what we have heard, the Bill is not about growth. It goes nowhere near what is needed. It is not fair, and it is not just.

The median annual pay per person in my Leicester East constituency is, at £20,300, the lowest in the country according to the latest figures from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which were published in April 2022. The national average for the same period was £31,461, meaning that the people of Leicester East are lagging £11,000 behind the national average, and are losing a third of their income to inequality. People in Leicester East are also paid less than the comparable figure for the east midlands region, which was £24,700. Child poverty in my constituency runs at a horrific 42%, perpetuating and deepening the disadvantages that our children already face. Furthermore, people in constituencies such as mine face a life expectancy 10 years shorter than that of the better-off.

Ordinary people in this country are already struggling after a decade of ideological cuts and conscious cruelty by successive Conservative Governments. Now, their situation is being compounded. The reality is that we face the longest recession ever, coupled with skyrocketing costs of living. That crisis is driven by corporate greed and Government mismanagement, through which the biggest burdens—rampant inflation, soaring interest rates and public spending cuts—are placed on the shoulders of those least able to carry them.

I do not think “cruelty” and “malice” are too strong a set of words for what is being done. What else should we call it when this Government have hunted for ways to make workers and communities pay for the so-called cost of living crisis, instead of getting the billionaires and millionaires, who have flourished and profited during the crisis, to pay up? The mere existence and normalisation of billionaires and millionaires in society and high office shows a broken political and economic system that can never work for everyone in society.

In my Leicester East constituency, people are no longer able to make choices between eating or heating. That choice is no longer meaningful because they are destitute and relying on food banks and warm banks. They need help right now. In communities such as mine the lowest-paid workers are being punished by this Conservative Government. Workers are turning up to Victorian sweatshops and being sent home without work or pay, having been denied their rights. Their contracts are not worth the paper they are written on. My community has been at the epicentre of wage exploitation for decades. There is nothing in this Finance Bill to address that.

The local authority in Leicester is already on its knees. It is still recovering from 12 years of austerity, which saw central Government grant funding cut from £289 million in 2010 to £171 million in 2019, with the shortfall in the current financial year expected to be around £50 million. The council has long since closed all its youth clubs, meaning that not only the people working in public services but the people using them suffer.

The Finance Bill does nothing to address the fact that, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, the Chancellor's autumn statement means that household disposable income will fall by a further 7%. The Chancellor

claims that his mission is to sort out the cost of living crisis, but in reality the Finance Bill is turning the screw on many of the poorest and most vulnerable. Wealth is not meaningfully taxed and fortunes are simply left sitting around idle, enabling a class of people who never have to work for a living to live off interest, rents and dividends now and for the next 1,000 years, while the poorest go under.

This is not a plan for growth. The Office for Budget Responsibility does not forecast any growth for at least another half a decade. It predicts that the autumn statement will deliver economic stagnation, not growth. That means that, under this Government, wages and investment will suffer. In reality, the Chancellor has announced austerity 2.0, with real-terms cuts to public spending, cuts to international aid and cuts to capital spending on infrastructure—[*Interruption.*] Yes, cuts to capital spending on infrastructure. He is also freezing the threshold for paying income tax and national insurance. Thus, the Finance Bill increases taxes for people on low incomes, whose wages are already falling in real terms. This is a stealth tax in all but name, but the Chancellor has barely even bothered to disguise that fact.

The autumn statement is austerity, and the Finance Bill is its delivery tool. It will cause substantial hardship and lengthen the recession, while protecting the wealth of the 1% and allowing corporations to get away with massive profits. At the same time, working people and the vulnerable will suffer.

Uprating pensions and benefits by 10.1% in line with inflation for the first time since 2016, but not backdating that change, just scratches the surface and will not protect struggling families. The standard out-of-work benefit is now worth just 13% of the average weekly wage. The UK state pension lags far behind the average EU pension and is worth just a quarter of earnings, compared with 63% for the average EU pension.

Where is the equality impact statement that should have been published alongside this Finance Bill or the autumn statement? That would have made clear the impact on low-income households and those from African, Asian, Caribbean and other racialised groups, as well as on women and disabled people.

The autumn statement and this Finance Bill do nothing to address precarious and insecure work, zero-hours contracts, in-work poverty, high childcare costs or the rising cost of travel to work. The Government chose to force workers to meet work coaches to increase their hours or earnings, instead of tackling exploitative and scrupulous bosses, bringing rail and other public transport back into public ownership and ensuring that childcare is made affordable.

Private rents are growing at their fastest rate. Families are being driven out and made homeless as landlords pursue ever higher rents and for less space. The autumn statement and the Finance Bill could have offered a ban on evictions and a freeze on rent increases. Instead they do nothing for the millions in privately rented accommodation.

Meanwhile, fossil fuel firms can avoid paying most of any windfall tax by offsetting their investments in more oil and gas drilling. The Finance Bill is meaningless if we continue to subsidise and rely on fossil fuels. We need public ownership of energy to protect jobs, minimise prices and deliver a green, clean and sustainable future.

The effects of the autumn statement have rightly been compared to boiling a frog slowly. However, in Leicester East and places with similar levels of deprivation, the water started deeper and hotter, and the Chancellor has lit a big fire. According to the United Nations, all of this could easily have been avoided.

We need to see problems tackled at their root. We need public ownership of energy, transport and other vital services to keep costs under control and to ensure that profits are invested in improving those services and the fabric of our society. A complete reversal of cuts to local authority budgets is essential. Councils were long ago past the point where they could cope and maintain even essential services at the levels needed.

The Chancellor needs to think again about his plans and about his evident lack of concern or compassion for those who are going under because of the political and ideological choices that Governments have made. We must challenge and change this unjust and unfair economic system, not just put a sticking plaster over it. We need a society that cares for all so that no one is left behind. We cannot be happy that the annual median income in my constituency is £20,300. The Finance Bill fails on all counts.

6.48 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called so early in the debate. At the outset, I want to put on record Darlington's thanks for the £250 million that came to us during covid.

In the autumn statement, we saw increased spending on education, health and social care; the largest ever increase in the living wage, to £10.42, putting us within pennies of our ambition to reach £10.50 in this Parliament; the triple lock guaranteed for pensioners; virtually all benefits, and the benefits cap, increased in line with inflation; and support for those struggling to meet energy costs. The autumn statement and the Bill continue our commitment to deliver for those on the lowest income.

We all know that these are challenging times. We also know that inflation makes us all poorer. However, the challenges of inflation, energy prices and interest rates can all be tracked back to Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. I know the Chancellor has had to make some difficult decisions, but I believe that he has been fair and done much to restore economic stability, while continuing to invest in vital services and infrastructure.

Prior to being elected to this place I was an employer running a small business, and I know that businesses will warmly welcome the news in the autumn statement, particularly those on our high streets facing a much needed reduction in rateable value, and therefore a lower rates bill. That reduction would ordinarily be phased in over three years, so the fact that they will receive the benefit immediately is welcome indeed. That is something that I have been pushing for and that I was delighted to see. In addition, the current 50% discount available to hospitality and retail businesses will now be increased to a 75% reduction, with no impact on income for our local authorities. The Government really are on the side of small businesses.

When the Chancellor comes to visit the Darlington economic campus, where my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was working from on Friday—just as my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury did last

week—I look forward to taking him to see some of our amazing local businesses, such as Origins Home, Leggs Fashion and The Art Shop, and the transformation taking place in the Darlington yards thanks to investment from the towns fund.

We all know that talent and ability are spread throughout the country, but opportunities have not been. The north-east has lagged behind for too long, under Governments of all colours, but this Government's ambitious levelling-up agenda is already paying dividends to communities such as mine in Darlington. As such, I welcome the Chancellor's commitment to infrastructure spending, with continued support for key infrastructure projects, and the protection of the £1.7 billion levelling-up fund. I am keeping my fingers crossed for the forthcoming announcement on levelling-up fund round 2, to which Darlington has submitted an excellent bid.

In Darlington we are already ticking boxes on levelling up: £139 million at Bank Top station, delivering three extra platforms and improving regional connectivity; £35 million invested in our rail heritage quarter, delivering on our commitment to heritage and driving more visitors to Darlington; and £23.3 million invested in our town centre, seeing real change in the High Row yards, Northgate and Victoria Road. I could also point to investment in green technology at Cummins and investment in life sciences, so key to our vaccine success, at the Centre for Process Innovation, together with investment in Darlington College. It would be remiss of me to not mention the fantastic job opportunities afforded to local people through the creation of the northern economic campus, ensuring that people in Darlington can stay local but go far.

Darlington said goodbye to its Labour council in 2019, ending a 28-year period of decline, and it is now going from strength to strength with the Conservatives at the helm, working hand in hand with our Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen. However, the Chancellor knows that my council, the third smallest unitary in the country, faces economic challenges because of a funding formula that disadvantages areas like mine. That is long overdue for reform, and I hope that he will pay that issue close attention. I know that the Exchequer Secretary is making notes, so I hope he is listening too as he works on local government settlements.

The cost of living support payments that have been distributed by the Government over the course of the last year and into this year have already totalled in excess of £39 million for the people of Darlington, and the announcements in the autumn statement amount to a further £18 million for them. At its heart, the autumn statement set out a compassionate plan, meeting the real challenges faced by our public services and the fears of people facing increased energy costs, and continues our commitment to our ambitious levelling-up agenda, including delivering real improvements on business rates for the nation's high streets. This Finance Bill is good for the country and good for the people of Darlington.

6.54 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson).

We have heard a great deal about the recent Budget—the last couple of Budgets, I suppose—and where we find ourselves, but we are not just talking about the events of

[Matt Western]

recent weeks or what could be described as global headwinds. We have to understand what has been going on in the wider landscape—the energy price shocks suffered globally, the supply chain shortages and the rising global interest rates—but beyond what could be described as global factors, we have specificities: the factors that set the UK apart from other nations.

I take on board a lot of the comments that have been from the Government Benches, but as the Institute for Fiscal Studies put it, it is clear that the UK is in a much worse position because of its economic own goals. We could talk about the impact of the bodged Brexit deal, which economic forecasters have shown has impacted our growth figure by 4.5%, or the shocking, catastrophic kamikaze Budget of 23 September, but we have suffered a decade of anaemic growth and now we are set for even weaker growth.

As has been said, of course the pandemic impacted on our economic situation, as it has across the world—we need only look at what is happening in China right now and what will be happening to Chinese GDP as a result of all the measures there. However, we face even weaker growth than others. We will have the weakest growth out of all the major economic nations of the G7, and over the next two years we will have the lowest growth out of all 39 nations in the OECD, other than sanction-ridden Russia. In fact, the Office for Budget Responsibility predicts that over the forecast period growth is set to average just 1.4%, compared to an average of 2.7% that we enjoyed over 13 years under the last Labour Government.

Last week, in its “Economic and fiscal outlook” report, the OBR confirmed that the autumn statement measures added nothing to growth in the medium term. Real wages are lower now than they were when the party opposite entered power in 2010. That is the harsh reality of what we are talking about. We can talk about all sorts of statistics in the abstract, but people will know just how hard this is already hurting and how hard it is going to get. I do not know whether any of us will be able to recall this, but the last time we had such a 12-year period of wage stagnation was back in the Napoleonic wars, which is a pretty damning indictment.

This has real impacts for everybody in our society, and I will set out a few markers. My constituents, along with people across the country, will see a staggering 7% real-terms reduction in their income over the next two years, leaving the average worker £40 worse off. To give a different perspective, the Resolution Foundation said that compared with trends seen when Labour was in government, people will be £15,000 worse off, coupled with sky-high inflation that disproportionately falls on poorer households, as the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) said. While food inflation has increased by 14% across the board, certain basic staple products have increased by as much as 60%, as I can see in the shops in my constituency of Warwick and Leamington.

Businesses are also suffering. I appreciate that measures have been put in place, but the lack of business rate support is a glaring omission by this Government. One of the things that should be concerning them the most is the lack of business investment and the OBR forecast

that we will now see business investment growing by 6.7% less over the coming years. That must give all of us concern for our long-term economic growth.

Something else that should concern us is what has happened to the FTSE 100. Okay, it is just a bellwether indicator, but it is now smaller than the CAC 40 in Paris—the first time that Britain’s stock market has lost its position as the most highly valued in Europe. When we look back to 2016, we see the significant reversal of fortune: London was worth about \$1.4 trillion more than Paris.

Ten days ago, there was a political choice in respect of the Budget: stealth taxes on working people, or a fairer tax system. I fear that the Chancellor has gone in too hard on hard-working people when it comes to footing the bill. He claimed to be fair, but he has not been. The recent Bank of England monetary policy report spoke of the impact of UK-specific factors on borrowing costs. The *Financial Times* estimates at just under £17 billion the real-terms spending increase in the mini-Budget due to the increase in the gilt rate. This economic crisis was made in Downing Street and its cost is being put on the shoulders of working people: the tax burden is the highest since world war two.

The Prime Minister’s decision to give oil and gas giants such large untargeted tax breaks has been surprising. It will cost the taxpayer £8 billion over the next five years. He and his Chancellor could have closed the tax loopholes, introduced VAT on private schools, tightened the energy profits levy, abolished non-dom status, launched a massive, much needed investment in skills and support for SMEs, and turned the UK into a green superpower. What we have instead are stealth taxes, which will take us backwards. I accept and agree with some of points made about corporation tax, particularly those of the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills). We saw a dreadful experiment under George Osborne that actually yielded very little for the UK but lost us a lot of tax take.

Under clause 6, there are changes to income tax, and the concern is how those will affect a lot of earners across the UK. What analysis has been done on the upper decile, or the top 2% of taxpayers? How does the impact on them compare with that on the lowest decile of earners?

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on electric vehicles, I have a particular concern about clause 10, although I make these comments personally. The introduction of vehicle excise duty for zero-emission vehicles risks stalling the entire electric vehicle industry. We have already taken away consumer support, apart from some support for business users; we are the only major nation in Europe that does not provide such support for electric vehicles. There could be a real challenge as a result of the vehicle excise duty supplement, which will unduly penalise more expensive vehicle technologies when we should be ensuring that the sector expands and is successful. If we are to meet our net zero obligations, we have to persuade the consumer to come with us and increase the uptake in new electric vehicles.

We needed a framework that would encourage consumers and businesses to buy electric vehicles and get the industry to invest in the infrastructure network of EV charging points. Like the industry, I am really concerned

that the change will have a serious impact and that investment, including from vehicle manufacturers, will be lost.

Labour's plan would be to reboot the economy, to create the frameworks for businesses to operate within, to scrap business rates and to replace the apprenticeship levy with a skills and growth fund. We need to invest in skills and further and higher education, particularly to address the matter of productivity; it is disappointing that we did not hear about that from the Minister. Productivity is one of the greatest challenges for the UK, yet we have heard far too little over the last 12 years about how that will be addressed.

I will not support Second Reading, although I will, of course, support the Labour amendment. The Bill raises taxes unfairly on working people and introduces what will essentially be a fiscal drag over the coming years. We should have started by going after the easy money—the tax status of non-doms and further reductions in the tax allowances available to oil and gas companies. We should have replaced business rates with something far more progressive that would help our local businesses and maintain and restore our town centres.

Since 2016, 1.2 million zero-carbon homes could have been built; it would have meant zero heating bills for 1.2 million families. Sadly, the legislation got scrapped in 2011—just think of the impact that would have had on our energy demand and the relative prosperity of those households. Instead, we have austerity. Under Obama, the US had the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act 2009—and look at its trajectory since.

I am afraid that this Finance Bill has sold the UK public and UK businesses short. We have had 12 years and the last 12 weeks—far too long. We need a Labour Government.

7.6 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): The Government have made some tough but fair decisions to restore economic stability and tackle inflation. To achieve long-term, sustainable growth, we need to grip inflation, balance the books and get debt falling as a share of GDP. But even with the changes outlined in the autumn statement, which will take effect through this Finance Bill, the UK tax system remains competitive, with a lower tax burden than Germany's, France's and Italy's and the lowest headline rate of corporation tax in the G7. Of course, the UK also has the lowest unemployment rate for almost 50 years.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) referred to the Office for Budget Responsibility, which expects the package to reduce peak inflation and unemployment. It also notes that GDP will be 1% higher due to these measures. The Bank of England expects the package to help tackle inflation and keep interest rates lower for borrowers and mortgage holders. All that is vital to ensure sustained public service support and investment in the years ahead, and it is on those two issues that I would like to focus my comments briefly this afternoon.

On public services, the Chancellor's proposals will increase taxpayer funding for the NHS and schools by an extra £11 billion over the next two years. Looking in more detail, the additional £7.7 billion for health and social care in the next two years means that, despite the

challenging economic circumstances, the Government are providing £2 billion to £3 billion in additional funding for the NHS in each of the next two years to bring down ambulance waiting times, tackle the covid backlog and improve access to GPs. The Chancellor is also providing £2.8 billion next year and £4.7 billion the year after for adult social care, which will double the number of people leaving hospitals on time and into care by 2024, addressing unmet needs and boosting low pay in the sector. I call that a compassionate series of policies.

I am pleased that the chief executive of NHS England has said that the extra funding that the Chancellor is making available for the NHS is

“sufficient funding for the NHS to fulfil its key priorities” and

“shows the government has been serious about its commitment to prioritise the NHS.”

The £4 billion in additional funding for schools will increase the schools budget by £2 billion this year and £2 billion next year. That will mean that the Government have fulfilled their pledge to restore per-pupil funding to record levels, with real-terms per-pupil funding rising at least to 2010 levels, which is more than Labour has pledged to give schools.

The Chancellor's proposals maintain public capital investment at record levels, delivering more than £600 billion of investment over the next five years. Contrary to the remarks by the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe), the Government remain committed to key national infrastructure projects, such as high-speed rail, Northern Powerhouse Rail and Sizewell C. I am pleased that the £1.7 billion levelling-up fund is protected, particularly as I have seen in my own constituency of Clwyd South the unfolding benefits of our successful £13.3 million levelling-up fund bid; it is benefiting numerous projects along the Dee valley.

The Finance Bill also ensures that research and development funding is protected and reformed. It reconfirms the Government's ambitions on research and innovation by recommitting to increasing publicly funded research and development to £20 billion by 2024-25.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that every pound invested in the private sector in research and development returns 25% back every year forever, and that every pound spent by the Government on research and development is met by a 20% increase in research and development in the private sector? Does he agree that this is a down payment on high-paid jobs and growth for the future?

Simon Baynes: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Indeed, it goes to the point made by the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) about productivity. It is through such investments in research and development and supporting major capital projects that we can drive up productivity over the coming years.

As a Welsh MP, I am particularly keen to strengthen the Union of the United Kingdom, and I welcome the £3.4 billion of additional funding for the devolved nations. There is an extra £1.5 billion for Scotland, £1.2 billion for Wales and £650 million for the Northern

[*Simon Baynes*]

Ireland Executive. I am also pleased to see that the Government have announced funding for the feasibility study for the A75 in Scotland, the advanced technology research centre in Wales and a global trade and investment event in Northern Ireland. Making sure that the whole United Kingdom can grow and increase its productivity is a central theme of this Finance Bill and the autumn statement.

In conclusion, the Bill has my full support. It shows that we do not have to choose between a strong economy or good public services—with a Conservative Government, you get both.

7.12 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): We have Schrödinger's Finance Bill. For a while, there was no Finance Bill. Then yes, there was going to be one. Then, no, there was not going to be one. Now, finally, we have come to the decision that the cat is alive and the Finance Bill is here before us.

I am old enough to remember Philip Hammond standing up and being very clear that there would only be one fiscal event in a year, that we would move to having an autumn statement and that would be the fiscal event, and that the spring statement would only be a statement and an update. I would be the first to admit that this year has gone somewhat wrong, so there are some excuses for having a different scenario this year, but I am keen to know what the intention is. Do the Government intend to have one major fiscal event a year, or are they planning to have more than one? If we are going to have a spring statement next year that will, presumably, from what was said earlier, have a Finance Bill attached, will we also be having one in the autumn next year? Will we have an additional one in September that will crash the economy? One would hope not. It would be good to know what the plans are.

We heard from the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), in quite a lot of detail, comparisons of the UK's economy and economic state with that of many other countries. He laid out the figures nicely, which saves me from doing the same thing; I will not repeat what he said. What he said makes it clear that there is a unique issue here. Something is happening in the UK that is not happening in other places, apart from Russia, where there are sanctions, and it is understandable that the Russian economy is not in the best of states. What could possibly be happening to the UK economy? What is it—what uniquely is happening?

I keep wondering what has happened to this Brexit bonus. If our economy is so much better as a result of Brexit—if that has massively helped our economy, and many Brexiteers have made it clear over many years how much of a good thing it would be for the UK economy—can the House imagine the state we would be in if Brexit had not happened? Can the House imagine how dreadful things would be if we had not seen this Brexit bonus, which has still left us somehow, unexplainably, in a worse economic condition than has happened with other countries? I am baffled by this scenario.

We have been hit by a major number of issues. It is absolutely the case that the war in Europe—Putin's illegal invasion—has had a major impact, and it has also had a

major impact on other economies across the EU and the world. It has had an impact not just on energy prices, but on the price of food, for example. All those countries are seeing prices increase, yet none of them is struggling with growth in the way that the UK seems to be. None of them is seeing the level of recession predicted for here, and it is entirely down to Brexit and the decision-making processes of this UK Government. It is also down to the choices made earlier this year, which failed to take into account the scenario we are in. They failed to listen to the situation facing our constituents.

It is all well and good for Government Members to stand up in the Chamber and talk about the importance of growth—I will not for one second deny that growth is important, but if growth means that rich people get richer and people in Aberdeen and our constituencies still cannot afford to buy rice and pasta, that growth is not worth it. It is not worth it to see people get unimaginable amounts of money. Some £29 million in profits from personal protective equipment is an unbelievable amount of money for somebody or a family to get. Most of my constituents and most people across the UK will never see anything like that money in their entire lifetimes, yet it seems to be acceptable to the Government—while the fact that my constituents and people in Aberdeen, across Scotland and across the UK cannot afford to pay for the very barest of necessities is not remarked upon, is not mentioned and does not seem to be happening.

The Conservative Government keep talking about how much they care about vulnerable people—it has been mentioned a number of times—but that is not borne out and it is not what is happening on the ground. People's lives are not being improved as a result of the decisions being made by those on the Government Benches. We are not seeing people better able to afford their energy bills; their energy bills are still significantly more than they were this time last year. The benefit cap still needs to grow massively to keep pace with its 2013 levels. The childcare allowance included within universal credit is at the same level it was when it was first introduced, when universal credit first started. It has never been increased. These are decisions that could be made that would make a difference to my constituents' lives on a daily basis, but they are not being made.

We will not get our way out of this with innovative jam. That is not how it will work. We need to ensure that those who need it most—the people who can afford the increases least—are the ones being targeted by Government support and receiving the funding to help them to afford the basic necessities: food, clothing for their children and energy to get them through this winter. That is why the decision-making processes of the Scottish Government have been the way that they have.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) pointed out, the UK Government have talked about the additional money from Barnett consequential, but that does not assist people this year, because of the constraints on the Scottish Parliament's budget and because of the decisions taken by the UK Government. It will not help us to work on our second child poverty action plan, which we are now in the process of doing. We have put tackling child poverty at the forefront of what we are doing in Scotland. The eligibility of the Scottish child payment increased again the week before last, so more children in more families can get it than ever before.

We in the Scottish Government are targeting our support there, because that is where we feel that we need to make the most difference. We need to ensure that children are not living in poverty or in cold homes that their parents cannot afford to heat. We need the UK Government to step up, and not in an empty way by saying that there is an extra £1.5 billion—I do not know—in Barnett consequential over two years, because that is not helpful. We need the money now—my constituents need the money now—to afford to get through the winter.

Another thing that has been mentioned is that hon. Members regularly use the term “hard-working people”, which is one of my biggest bugbears. When Conservative Members talk about hard-working people, they are talking about people earning £40,000 or £50,000 a year; they are not talking about people working in minimum-wage jobs. When they say that hard-working people have to pay higher taxes in Scotland than the rest of the UK, they are failing to recognise that we have an additional lower-rate tax band that means that people on the lowest incomes pay less in Scotland, and they are denying that people on the lowest incomes are hard-working people. It is the case, however, that a significant proportion of people on universal credit are in work. Just because someone is in receipt of social security does not mean that they are not hard working or that they are less deserving than people earning an awful lot of money from dividend incomes or other sorts of unearned income.

Stats came out earlier this year about the level of sanctions on people receiving universal credit, which said that there had been a monthly increase in the total amount of reductions being levied—money taken back from individuals who are claiming universal credit. Right now, the Department for Work and Pensions should not be trying to increase the amount of money that it is clawing back from people in receipt of universal credit.

We already have the issue that, when the DWP decides to make debt reductions from people’s universal credit payments, it does that not on the basis of whether those receiving universal credit can afford it, but on the basis of an arbitrary 25% threshold. As a result of DWP actions and the failures of the UK Government, we will have a situation where people cannot afford to heat their homes or feed their children purely because of the reductions that are being made to their income.

I have harped on about immigration several times. A number of years ago—I am a veteran of many Finance Bills—the former Chancellor George Osborne stood up and spoke about public sector net debt. In fact, his Red Book that year talked about it specifically and made it clear that an increase in net migration to the UK reduces public sector net debt. By trying to do everything they can to reduce immigration, therefore, the UK Government increase public sector net debt.

The UK Government could decide that one of the best ways to do something about the lack of growth and the amount of debt, about which they are concerned, would be to encourage people to come and live here, and to make that easier. Instead, my constituent is going to move away from the UK because he cannot get a visitor visa for his family to come and visit, so he is fed up and has had enough. As a software engineer, he is

somebody who we need to have and whom we should be encouraging to stay; we should not be as obstructive as possible in our decisions.

The UK Government have also failed to tackle—in fact, they have gone out of their way to oppose—our climate change ambitions and targets in this Finance Bill. We are looking at issues in relation to electric cars, as was mentioned earlier, and allowances for oil and gas companies to extract more oil and gas, rather than the allowances that could be given to companies to develop renewable electricity. The electricity generator levy is also being levied on people who are producing renewable energy, which is the kind of energy that we need. We cannot talk about COP only once a year when it is COP26 or COP27—it should be threaded through every single decision that we make.

We have heard about R&D credits and tax reliefs, which I do not have a problem with in principle, although I am concerned that we need to see whether they work. I do have a problem, however, with how decisions are made to give people R&D tax credits. When the UK Government created the Advanced Research and Invention Agency, why did they refuse point blank any amendments that would have put tackling climate change at the heart of its decisions? We said that it should be climate neutral and that the Government could lead the way with a brand-new Government agency working on a net zero basis, but they refused. We said that they could convince or ask it to focus on innovations and inventions that tackle climate change, but they refused to do that, too.

We need to see an actual effort made—actual things done and decisions taken—to ensure that we tackle climate change and meet our net zero ambitions. If we could meet our net zero ambitions even earlier than we have proposed, that would be the best thing for the planet, rather than trying to push things until the last possible moment. We cannot just ignore climate change and pretend that it is not happening—it is!—so it should be in every Government statement, and the Government should talk about the effect on climate change of every spend that they decide to make. The decisions in the Finance Bill take us backwards rather than forwards.

The Scottish Government are supporting a just transition in Scotland with £500 million of funding to ensure that we move away from the reliance on fossil fuels that we absolutely have in the UK, particularly in Aberdeen, where there are a huge number of jobs in oil and gas. We need to support a transition that is just and fair for my constituents and for people across the UK. We need to ensure that people in oil and gas are given, or have the opportunity to move into, high-earning jobs in the new industries of the future that do not cause an increase in climate change.

Austerity has been levied on the poorest people for years. Conservative Governments have consistently made decisions at the expense of our worst-off constituents. I have never been less optimistic about the future for the poorest people in the UK than now—not even through the Brexit process and decision-making. The Government have shown no willingness to understand the genuine dire straits that people are living in, to take action on that, and to prioritise the most vulnerable people—not just to say it, but to actually do it—by looking at the universal credit system and the decision-making process to ensure that people can afford rice and pasta, and to

[Kirsty Blackman]

heat their homes. How is it that we have to be asking that in 2022? How is it that we have to be living in a situation where the next generation are currently set to be poorer than our generation? We have that lack of optimism, and this Conservative Government continue to hammer that home, rather than attempting in any way to make it better.

That outlines very clearly the difference between the two Governments. The difference is that the Scottish Government are doing everything they can, with their very limited powers and limited ability to do anything in-year with their budgets, to try to make life better for those struggling the most, and this UK Government are continuing to refuse to do so.

7.30 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): On the point that has just been made that those of us on the Conservative Benches have some kind of income threshold in mind when we talk about hard-working people, I can assure the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who made the comment, that that certainly is not the case for me. When I think about hard-working people and hard-working constituents in my patch, I recognise that some of those on the lowest incomes are among the hardest working. They make the decision to get up in the morning, scrape the ice off their windscreen and go to work because they think that is the right thing to do, so that certainly is not my view, and I do not think it is the view of many of my colleagues either.

On the point about Brexit, I think it is beyond the debate in this place, in that we have had Brexit and then afterwards we have had the pandemic and the biggest war in mainland Europe since the second world war. The reality is that it will be a long time before we can truly assess whether Brexit was the right thing to do and come to a conclusion. Coming to a conclusion two to three years after it has been delivered, given that we have just come through a pandemic and we are grappling with the biggest war in mainland Europe since the end of the second world war, is quite childish and not the right thing to do.

I spoke last week about the fiscal statement, and I welcomed many of the measures. I welcomed the fact that universal credit has gone up in line with inflation, I welcomed the protection of the triple lock, and I welcomed the fact that the national living wage is going up. I also spoke about the international context in which this debate is happening, and the fact that when we look around the world, particularly at comparable countries, we see countries that are all grappling with levels of inflation that those countries have not seen for many decades. That is something we have to bear in mind, but at the same time I think we have to be open and honest about some of the mistakes that were made by the previous Administration.

However, it is high time that the Opposition started dealing with what is in front of us, and by what is in front of us I mean the statement that was delivered only a few weeks ago. More often than not, I hear the Opposition engaging with the previous Administration, not the current Administration. The longer this current Administration get going with their package of reform,

the harder that will be for the Opposition to do, because the current Prime Minister was of course the one who predicted many of the negative consequences of what the previous Administration did. When it comes to economic credibility, I say that the Prime Minister, in lockstep with the Chancellor, has by far and away the highest capital when it comes to these issues.

I want to talk about two issues that I did not really talk about last week to do with the Finance Bill. The first is education. I do think it was an achievement: the Government had to make some incredibly difficult decisions to get our public finances on a surer footing, but, even despite that, they were able to bring forward £2 billion of extra funding in education for schools. This is something that I care passionately about. I would, however, say that I have been contacted by Suffolk New College, the principal further education college in Ipswich, which does fantastic work that not just our local area but the country will rely on to equip local people with the skills necessary to make a success of Sizewell C and also of the freeport at Felixstowe and Harwich. I would like to bring forward its request that the further education sector is considered for any potential underspend in the school system between the years 16 and 18. It is right that the Government highlight the importance of skills, apprenticeships and further education. Of course, we have an Education Secretary who was an apprentice herself, and I am confident that the Government will bring forward, in time, solutions to the way in which we fund our further education sector. I made a promise to Viv from Suffolk New College that I would make that point in this speech today, and I have just done so.

I have spoken constantly since I was elected about the importance of special educational needs. I have also spoken about the fact that there are ways in which we can improve special educational needs provision, and it does not all involve more money and more spending. I have come up with ways in which that can happen by reforming the way Ofsted assesses schools, so that it is always an incentive for schools to prioritise first-rate special educational needs and disabilities provision, but a lot of it is to do with resources.

Only recently, I was in the constituency of the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). He allowed me to step foot in his constituency. There is a part of his constituency that is essentially Ipswich—he is incredibly lucky to have a little bit of Ipswich in his constituency—and he allowed me to step foot in a very special school called the Bridge School. I went there to see a community café that has been opened by the Bridge School, and the whole purpose of that café is to increase the opportunities for the pupils at that school to interact with members of the community to build their confidence and their ability to integrate and play a positive role within their community.

I went into the school afterwards, and I saw some fantastic best practice in supporting some of the most vulnerable young people. For example, it has an indoor swimming pool, and I saw the way that that was used. The reality is, though, that all of this costs money, and some of the most powerful interventions for the main special educational needs cost money. My argument would be that this is an investment; it is always an investment. Utilising the talent and the ability of young people with very special needs—neurodiverse thinkers—is an investment. When we look at some of the depressing

statistics when it comes to how many people in the criminal justice system have special educational needs because they have not got the support they need, we know that investment is morally the right thing to do, but it is also the right thing to do from the point of view of the Exchequer. I would also say that at some point I would like to look at the way that Suffolk SEND in particular is funded, because I still think that, when we are compared to other areas, we do not get a fair deal in SEND funding.

Secondly, I would like to talk about devolution. The Suffolk devolution package was announced as part of the fiscal statement, which has confirmed £480 million over a 30-year period. I think this is really good news, and what I quite like about the Suffolk devolution package is that it will not be creating a new tier of bureaucracy. I have intimate or a lot of experience of mayoral combined authorities—I worked at a mayoral combined authority in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough—and I have to say that the structure in place is not working. I think that plonking a new level of bureaucracy on top of an existing local government structure created unnecessary tensions, and having a way of delivering devolution that does not create another tier of bureaucracy, but actually devolves power and funding directly into the existing county council, is the right thing to do. It will save the Exchequer money, it will lead to better and more streamlined decision making, and it will avoid some of the tensions and the conflicts that have come about as result of the devolution in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, so I welcome that.

I also welcome a key aspect: the devolution of the adult education budget. Adult education often does not get the attention it deserves in the educational sphere. I saw the way adult education was devolved in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, when decision making was put into the hands of local politicians and local specialists, and the difference that can make. Money was directed into the areas where it could make the biggest difference, and I saw the transformative effect that that was having in the most deprived parts of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

I think it is important, when we talk about the fiscal statement, that Suffolk was at the heart of it, and it was at the heart of it because of Sizewell C, which could potentially bring forward 10,000 new jobs. So we in Suffolk need the Government's help to ensure we can step up for our education sector to get the high-skill people necessary to make a success of Sizewell C, which will have huge implications at national level. There is an opportunity therefore, and it is almost uncanny that we have the news about Sizewell C while at the same time we have the devolution of skills associated with Suffolk devolution, because by devolving those budgets and powers we are better able to deliver for the country the skills we need to make a success of Sizewell C.

My final point on devolution is that, even with the steps we have made on devolution over the last decade or so, we remain one of the most centralised democracies in the world. Not all my colleagues are supporters of devolution, but I am; I think there is something to be said for the American expression, "Laboratories of democracy". To have proper devolution, we must have an element of fiscal devolution; I know some in the Treasury would be cautious of this movement, but that should at some point be explored. Devolution can work,

because ultimately it is about putting power closer to people, and in principle that is a good thing that no one can disagree with, but we need to do it in the right way.

I have gone on for far longer than I anticipated—11 minutes in total; a precedent was set before my speech. I welcome the fiscal statement and the Finance Bill, which represents a fair and compassionate approach and which, even in the most challenging times, finds a way to invest in education, and that will always have my support.

7.41 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I was struck by a quote I read a while back of the head of the Institute for Public Policy Research centre for economic justice, as it sums up the problem we face as a country:

"There is a massive structural flaw in the economy that whatever the economic shock the wealthier get wealthier. If we're going to get the whole economy into recovery, and leave no one and nowhere behind, we need to change this. Societies that are so unequal are bad for everyone and policymakers need to address this dangerous gap, or risk people losing trust in our economy and democracy."

At the core of that problem is the way we treat wealth in our taxation system. In an earlier intervention on the Minister I mentioned that the National Audit Office says that the total the Government invested in the economy during covid was £368 billion, which is roughly equivalent to £5,600 per head. Whichever Government had been in office at the time would have done something similar; they would have introduced a furlough scheme and helped businesses. That happened under the last Labour Government when there were crises: we stepped in on foot and mouth and the banking crisis, so forms of assistance were put in place. I therefore accept the assistance that the Government put in place, and I am not arguing about it, but it is ridiculous for the Government to argue that that money was paid and is now in the bank accounts of the people who received money during furlough or of the businesses who received assistance. It was paid to those individuals and businesses and it was used, and it has therefore moved on in the economy. That is £368 billion that has gone into the economy, and my question is: where is it now?

Most analyses of what happened in covid that are worth reading find that the wealthiest did extremely well during covid, so my question to the Government—and I would ask this of any Government—is this: what do we do about that? These people were already wealthy and now they are getting even more wealthy, which will drive the inequality the Government themselves say they want to deal with through levelling up.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Is he, like me, thinking about all the people who wrongly profited from selling personal protective equipment to the Government and the lack of proper assessment of some of those offers of help and the lack of proper procurement processes being followed? Does he agree that many ordinary members of the public and NHS staff found that quite wrong?

Clive Efford: My hon. Friend's intervention speaks for itself and I absolutely agree; that is an example of where this Government go wrong by treating the wealthy differently from others.

[Clive Efford]

During covid, the number of millionaires and billionaires grew; we have the highest number of billionaires ever in *The Times* rich list and their combined income during that period grew by one fifth. So we can clearly see that inequality has been turbocharged by the money the Government put into the economy. I do not criticise the Government for putting that money in, but I do ask: where is that money now, where are the people who have benefitted most from it, and should they not, with their broad shoulders, bear more of the burden?

We have consistently had low growth over the last 12 years under Conservative Governments. The Resolution Foundation's recent report "Stagnation Nation?" found that in each decade from the 1970s real wages rose by an average of 33% until 2007, but that that fell to below zero in the 2010s. So today average household incomes are 16% lower in the UK than in Germany and 9% lower than in France, having been higher than both in 2007. Under the Conservatives there has been a consistent shift of wealth from average household incomes to the wealthiest in the country. The policies they have pursued have been driving inequality, and my point is that until we reform how the taxation system deals with wealth we will not address that growing divide between those at the bottom and those at the top. This Finance Bill completely fails to address that problem.

7.46 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I could say so much about what we are debating today that I do not know if I can contain myself. I am fortunate that procedurally there is no time limit for Finance Bills, so I could speak for hours about the Government's proposals, but I will be as circumspect as possible. We have heard some fantastic contributions, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes); I assure him I listened to his speech and it was a fantastic contribution.

We have had the usual back and forth, with Labour playing the blame game while also failing to understand that when we spend £440 billion to keep the economy going—to keep people in work, to keep jobs, to keep people sustaining what they are doing—there is going to be a price to that, as there is from Putin's illegal and aggressive invasion of Ukraine.

We are facing some of the most difficult economic circumstances ever, and it is right that our tax measures have made those with the broadest shoulders carry the largest burden, because they know that is vital to ensure the longer-term recovery of our economy. In doing that, we strike a balance between making sure those people carry that burden and ensuring that the most vulnerable get the support they need.

Hon. Friends have talked about the ways in which that has been achieved, including the £600 million investment in infrastructure. Some suggested that investment was not happening, but I can assure them that it is: my local authority and borough are being supported with £60 million of investment from the Government's towns fund, with a further £20 million in levelling-up funding bid for at the moment, so we have absolutely seen support from this Government. Some 125 small and medium-sized manufacturing businesses in my constituency—or, as

we say in the Black Country, metal bashers, because that is ultimately what we do—benefit from the infrastructure investment and R&D support.

The protections to the triple lock were a dividing line. I point out to the Labour party that when it left power in 2010, we had some of the worst rates of pensioner poverty in Europe, yet Labour Members never talk about that, do they? They never mention that and they have never apologised for it. Under this Government, we have had the triple lock for pensioners—people who worked hard, contributed and have paid in for all their lives.

I have a lot of respect and time for the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman)—I have worked with her on a number of bits of legislation—and when I think of hard workers, I think of the people on the minimum wage in my local factories and those manning shops and working in retail, in unforgiving jobs. It is those people who have paid in their whole lives and want to see that return. Notwithstanding the points that she made about Scotland—I heard and understood them—investing in and safeguarding the triple lock is exactly what we need to do.

I do not wish to repeat too many points made by hon. Members today—I am conscious that at this point in the debate there is a risk of doing that—but it has been vital that we strike a balance in this Finance Bill. That balance is about being fiscally prudent, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made clear, but not on the backs of the most vulnerable. It is also about ensuring that investment in good public services, which was at the heart of the Government's promise and the contract we made three years ago, is maintained. We have safeguarded investment in levelling up, safeguarded investment in infrastructure, safeguarded and increased investment in education and safeguarded investment in the NHS to ensure that our public services are there. As far as I am concerned, if the Labour party thinks that is some sort of abhorrent thing to do, I do not know where its head is at. If it means that my constituents get the services that they want, pay for and rely on—that they can access a GP, get into a hospital and see their kids go through a decent education system—I will back that to the hilt, because ultimately I was put here to safeguard their public services. We know that we are in a tough situation, but my hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench have struck that balance. It is vital that, as we move forward, we continue to assess the situation.

In finishing, I have a few asks, as I often do—I see my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary looking at me in anticipation. I was pleased to hear mootings of an industrial strategy. Those of us in the Black Country, where we are proud of our industrial heritage and our infrastructure, can be at the forefront of the new industrial revolution, particularly on the green agenda. I know that the Government are particularly concerned about energy security, and I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend about that.

My ask is that we ensure that areas where we have good industrial capacity are not forgotten. One point relayed to me is that there is sometimes a feeling that those who are not in financial services or a service industry are a bit left behind. I see my hon. Friend looking at me; it is vital that we have an industrial strategy focused on our manufacturing base—he and I have had discussions about that and are passionate about it—to ensure that

good, strong manufacturing and engineering jobs can be part of our growth and recovery, particularly in the Black Country. We already have the infrastructure, so let us make the most of it.

The Bill strikes the right balance by protecting public services and safeguarding the most vulnerable. As far as I am concerned, we are fulfilling the contract that we made with the people three years ago.

7.53 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak at the back end of the debate following so many fascinating contributions from the Government and Opposition Benches. I particularly enjoyed the comments from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), positioning Labour as the party of small business. I have long believed that that is true—the best way to create small businesses is to start with a big business and then elect a Labour Government.

I support the Government overall and this well-crafted autumn statement. It balances the books in a way that bears down on inflation without harming growth, and it has been done in a fair way, as many hon. Members have said, helping households who are struggling. The energy price guarantee and the retention of the pensions triple lock are particularly welcome. I also welcome the extra money for health and education. Like my fellow Conservatives, I do not like the fact that taxes are going up to the highest level for 70 years, but I accept that that is necessary and that we must accept sound money before tax cuts.

The main focus of my comments will be on an issue raised by several hon. Members: research and development. I very much welcome the fact that the Government are committing to £20 billion a year of public money for research and development, but my concern is about the changes to the R&D tax relief system. The Government have made major changes, with the system becoming more generous to big firms to make them more internationally competitive, but the rate of relief for small and medium-sized businesses effectively being cut in half, from 33% to 18.6%. It is a bit more complex than that, but that is the gist. Why are the Government doing that? As the Chancellor said in his autumn statement, it is to tackle fraud. Indeed, fraud is a problem—I have looked into that as chair of the Conservative Back-Bench Treasury committee—and we do need to tackle it. However, the trouble with this way of tackling research and development fraud is that it punishes legitimate research companies as much as fraudsters and chancers, lumping them all in together. There are better ways of doing that.

I am talking about this because it is a particularly big issue in my constituency. South Cambridgeshire is the life sciences capital of Europe. I have literally hundreds of life science companies, from the global headquarters of AstraZeneca down to the newest start-ups. Almost every village has a science park packed full of life science companies. Those small start-ups are at the cutting edge of research and development in life sciences. More research and development in life sciences is now done in small businesses than by the big pharma companies. Without them, innovation would be very slow and the UK would lose its position as a life science superpower.

We talk about becoming a life science superpower, but we are one already, and most of the rest of the world recognises that.

It is in the nature of those small companies that they are research-heavy, but clinical trials mean that it could take 10 to 15 years to bring a product to market before they make any revenues. They are funded not by revenues from global sales of blockbuster drugs, like big pharma companies, but by investors who fund research for a decade or more before they have any chance of a return. Their financial models depend on the research and development tax credit regime, which is fundamental to them in leveraging funds from investors from around the world. It has been successful in making the UK an attractive place to do research.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is important to have research and development. It is also important that those companies can do their research on Parkinson's, diabetes and heart disease, and all those things must have research and development investment. Does the hon. Member feel that the Government need to enhance that to their betterment and find cures for Parkinson's, pancreatic cancer, diabetes and heart disease?

Anthony Browne: Absolutely. Many companies in my constituency and publicly funded institutes are doing research on those diseases. That is critical to people living healthy lives as well as to the economy, and the Government are absolutely right to support it.

The sudden cutting in half of research and development tax relief is a major challenge to the life science companies in my constituency, which are shocked at what is proposed—seemingly out of the blue. Many, if not most of them, are suddenly having to rethink their research plans. They are in shock particularly because it was proposed at such short notice—it will come into effect next year—and without consultation. They are having to go to their investors now and say that they will no longer have the money they thought they would and that they will have to cut back research and jobs.

Let me give the House a few examples of real companies in my constituency that I have been working with. PhoreMost combines artificial intelligence with drug research. I went to the opening of its laboratories in the village of Sawston. Neil Torbett, the chief executive officer, said:

“The current R&D tax system has been instrumental in our growth as a Cambridge-based Biotech, which has grown to over 50 highly skilled staff, raised £45 million in investment and entered into multiple pharmaceutical industry partnerships. Receipts from R&D tax credits form a critical part of our funding equation, and the proposed SME R&D tax relief cut will materially adversely affect our future growth plans within the UK.”

I opened the offices of bit.bio, another company in my constituency, which does the most amazing genetics research—I have mentioned it before. Mark Kotter, the chief executive officer, said:

“The assistance at the current level is a cornerstone of our financial projections, which also help us to attract equity funding, and any reduction in the claimable amount will have a significant impact on our ability to invest and grow at the desired rate.

As part of our forecast, we will be looking to increase our current headcount of 175 by approximately 30% in the next year, but quite simply this will not be possible if the tax relief changes announced in the Autumn Statement become reality.”

I could give countless other examples. This is dramatically changing the prospects of life science research in Cambridge.

[Anthony Browne]

I know that the Government want to champion life sciences as part of their ambition to ensure that we are a life sciences superpower. I have worked with the Government on that. Indeed, I welcomed the life sciences Minister—the Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince)—to my constituency just last week. I know that they want to tackle fraud in the R&D tax credits regime. As a taxpayer, I very much want us to do that; it is a duty of Government to ensure that the taxpayers' money is well spent. We share those dual objectives, but there are better ways to tackle fraud without harming research. We can throw out the dirty bathwater without throwing out the baby.

Here are some suggestions. We can ban contingent fee—no-win, no-fee—tax agents. A whole industry of people are trying to make money out of encouraging other people to put in fraudulent tax credit claims. We could ban that. We should resource HMRC so that it can scrutinise the claims. Most claims are automated and there is no scrutiny of what is put in. That encourages and gives an easy ride to fraudsters.

We can also limit claims for soft innovation—that is, technical maintenance and updates that would have been made anyway and which people would not normally think of as research and development. They should not be getting research and development tax relief in the first place. Lastly, to distinguish between the life science companies that we all want to encourage and the fraudsters and chancers, the Government could create an R&D tax regime for knowledge-intensive companies, which are already recognised in the tax codes; there would be no definitional issue, because those companies are already in the tax code. I am talking about companies with under 500 employees carrying out work to create intellectual property and expecting the majority of their business to come from that work within 10 years, or companies where more than 20% of employees are doing research roles requiring a master's degree, a PhD or beyond.

If the Government take those steps, they can promote research while tackling fraud. I urge them, on behalf of all the businesses in my constituency—dozens of which have been in contact—to delay the implementation of the change, consult the industry on it and to look at more specific ways to tackle fraud, so that we can distinguish between genuine research that we want to encourage and the fraudsters and chancers. Will the Financial Secretary or the Exchequer Secretary—I am not sure whether this applies to him or her—meet me and industry representatives urgently to talk about the impact of the changes in the regime on life sciences research in the UK? With that caveat—I realise that it is a big one for my constituency members—and assuming a positive answer, I support the Bill overall, and I commend it to the House.

8.2 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): As a dutiful Back Bencher, I answered the call of the Whips and wrote about an hour's worth of speech, but with your blessing, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will restrict my remarks to about five minutes. I suspect that this is the Bill that none of us wanted, but as a pragmatic Conservative, I concede the fiscal imperative. Importantly, this is the

right thing to do for the Conservative party, as the party of fiscal pragmatism, and for the country. I see the Bill as a short-term necessity and not for the long term. We need to put our country back on track and, essentially, steady the economic ship. Fiscal and economic security must be the foundation of all policy and I believe that the Bill provides that.

I do not want to hark back to the ill-fated mini-Budget, but it recognised the basic premise that Governments do not create wealth—businesses and working people do. Therefore, we have to incentivise them to work harder and create more wealth, which, ultimately, represents economic growth. As a low-tax, low-state Conservative, I want to see a low-tax, low-state economy that attracts investment, incentivises growth, rewards workers so that they can keep most of what they earn and ensures that we all enjoy a meaningful standard of living through rising wages. I accept, however, that inflation, borrowing and debt are the elephants in the room.

I wish to make a few points about the clauses. Clauses 1 to 3 relate to the Energy (Oil and Gas) Profits Levy Act 2022 and include an increase in the levy from 25% to 35%, which is the right thing to do. I would much rather, however, that oil companies pass on their profits to the consumer at the pump and not to their shareholders. That is an absolute no-brainer and I ask the Government to keep the pressure on the oil producers to ensure that the money goes where it needs to.

Clause 5 and 6 are on income tax. I do not like the fact that the thresholds are being kept where they are. It is really important that, with rising wages, working people should keep more of what they earn, but I can live with the proposal for the reasons that have been outlined. The same principles also apply to the dividend rate and capital gains tax. We have to incentivise people to work harder, to save and to try to derive extra income from what they do. Again, I urge the Ministers to review those measures in due course, along with the income tax thresholds.

I am a bit concerned about the vehicle excise duty. I completely understand why we may need to bring that in line with diesel and high-emission cars, but we need to incentivise the drive to net zero at the same time. Again, that measure is worthy of review in due course.

Let me turn briefly to Bracknell, which I am very proud to serve. Bracknell is the silicon valley of the Thames Valley. We have 150 international companies with offices in Bracknell and a lot of small and medium-sized enterprises. Bracknell is the archetypal borough where people benefit from low taxes. In deference to my constituents—those who are working really hard to put food on the table—I urge the Government to make sure that the Bill is seen as a short-term, not a long-term measure.

Lastly, I recognise the predicament in which we find ourselves. After all, the Government borrowed an additional £450 billion to look after people in the UK during the pandemic. That was to put food on the table and to support people, and it stands to reason that that money has to come back into the Treasury. However, with the Ministers in their place, I want to make an important macro point. As the Government of this country, we need a discussion about what the future holds for the UK. We are currently living beyond our means and writing cheques that we cannot cash, so we as a nation need a serious discussion about what we want in this

country, for this country and for our people. What will we do in the future? I commend to the Treasury that we need a grand strategic intent that allows us to work out where we will go, because that will drive policy. I also want to see tax reduced at the earliest opportunity, not least to encourage growth and to ensure that the UK remains firmly competitive internationally. That, I am afraid, is a political imperative to ensure that the “Great” in Great Britain stays great.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Following the last Back-Bench contribution, we will go straight to the wind-ups. I call Peter Aldous.

8.7 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): For a moment, I thought that you had forgotten me, Mr Deputy Speaker, but that is greatly appreciated.

The purpose of the Bill, as the Minister—my fellow Suffolk MP—said at the beginning, is to put on to the statute book many of the tax and spending decisions that the Chancellor announced in his autumn statement, with some others being deferred until the spring Finance Bill in 2023. The Chancellor was confronted with an incredibly difficult challenge on 17 November, so in many respects, he was between a rock and hard place. I genuinely believe that he struck the right balance and delivered the statement that the nation required in these very precarious times. He was right to protect the most vulnerable and to provide additional funding for health and social care and education, although on the latter, I think that he should also have included further education and colleges, which are so important in improving the UK’s productivity and providing the many, not the few, with the opportunity to participate in the proceeds of growth that we are so elusively seeking. That said, the Chancellor has appointed Sir Michael Barber to provide a skills reform programme, and he is to be commended for confirming support for Sizewell C, for providing Suffolk with a devolution deal, and for committing to a step change in the drive to improve the energy efficiency of our existing homes and businesses.

I feel that my right hon. Friend had no alternative other than to introduce levies on oil and gas producers and electricity generators. I will focus much of the remainder of my speech on that issue. There is a need to avoid any unintended consequences in the way that the levies operate, which could deter inward investment, which is so important to ensuring our energy security, meeting our net zero targets that enable us to tackle climate change, and regenerating the economies of many coastal communities, such as the Lowestoft and Waveney constituency that I represent.

Clauses 1 to 3 detail the changes proposed to the oil and gas profits levy: raising the rate of the levy to 35%; reducing the investment allowance from 80% to 29%, although it remains at 80% for investment on upstream decarbonisation; and extending the levy to 2028. That last provision appears somewhat random, because it takes no account of the fact that our current very high gas prices may have fallen by then. We should remember that, only a few years ago, gas prices were on the floor. I hope that, if we are in a different place before 2028, the Government will look at bringing forward the sunset clause.

I note that HMRC’s assessment concludes that the “changes to the Energy Profits Levy are not expected to have a significant macroeconomic impact on the level of business investment” and that the impact on business will extend only “to around 200 companies operating in the UK or on the UK Continental Shelf.”

Those findings are very different from those of Offshore Energies UK, which is the trade representative of many of the businesses affected and which provides the secretariat for the British offshore oil and gas all-party parliamentary group, which I chair. It states that

“the tax changes would impact not just North Sea operators but the hundreds of other companies in their supply chains”,

which are so important to coastal communities such as Lowestoft and which extend right across the UK. It notes that such businesses

“provide specialised services such as marine engineering, deep sea diving or subsea communications”,

which are not just important to the oil and gas sector, but vital to the emerging industries of offshore wind, carbon capture and storage, and hydrogen production.

Offshore Energies UK points out that the industry—private business—

“is participating in plans to invest £200 billion by 2030 across all energies, including the lower-carbon ones needed to drive the energy transition.”

There is a real worry that disruption to the tax system could deter that vital investment. Although the Bill does not cover the electricity generator levy—I welcome the Minister’s commitment to engage with the industry before detailing the Government’s proposals—that levy’s provisions and implications should be considered alongside the energy oil and gas profits levy. That is because today’s renewables and oil and gas industries are inextricably interlinked and intertwined.

There is a real worry in the renewables sector that the electricity generator levy may deter the investment needed to end our reliance on fossil fuels. The companies that will be affected are those to which we are looking for investments of billions to accelerate the renewable energy transition. It is only by attracting such private sector investment that the UK can successfully grow its capacity in renewable energy. To meet our 2030 and 2050 targets, we need to attract more private investment, not deter it.

With that in mind, it is concerning that electricity generators are due to miss out on an investment allowance for new wind projects. If we are to be a global leader in offshore wind, including being a pioneer in floating offshore wind technology, there is a strong case for tax incentives to encourage new investment. That does not mean helping energy firms to avoid tax, but it does mean encouraging them to invest in the UK’s clean future for the benefit of the environment, of our future prosperity and of our energy security.

There needs to be a windfall tax, but it must be introduced in a form that is predictable, transparent and fair so as not to undermine investor confidence. I fully recognise that the enormous cost of shielding people and businesses from the worst impacts of the gas crisis requires a windfall tax, but there is a concern that the current and updated proposals for the oil and gas levy and the emerging plans for the electricity generator levy may, or might, have the unintended consequence of deterring investment at a time when we urgently need it, with a negative impact on the key policies of energy security, combating climate change, and levelling up.

[Peter Aldous]

It is good news that the Government have undertaken to carry out a long-term review of the tax treatment of UK oil and gas production. I also ask them to keep the oil and gas profits levy in place only while there is a windfall, rather than until 31 March 2028 if present conditions do not continue until then. There is much work to be done to create the stable, long-term fiscal environment required to maximise inward investment. Moving to net zero is a monumental challenge; the state of the public finances is such that we need more than ever to unlock private finance if we are to meet our targets.

Government and business must work together to put in place the long-term, stable tax regime that will ensure that companies make a full but fair contribution. Until recently, Government and business were working well together and a clear industrial strategy was in place, culminating in the 2019 offshore wind sector deal and the 2021 North sea transition deal. There is an urgent need for the Government and the energy industry to renew their marriage vows. I urge my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and his very good team on the Front Bench to set about the task immediately.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We now come to the wind-ups.

8.17 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): May I put on the record my thanks to the emergency services for their work following the tragic deaths of two 16-year-old boys in my constituency, Charlie Bartolo and Kearne Solanke, which took place this weekend? My thoughts are with their family and friends who have been left behind, who will be coming to terms with their loss.

I am grateful for the opportunity to close this debate on behalf of the Opposition. Britain has so much potential, but right now the Tory economic crisis we face is holding us back. The Conservatives have been in power for 12 years, and what do they have to show for it? A crashed economy and the highest tax burden in 70 years. This Finance Bill fails to make fairer choices on tax, and it follows an autumn statement that failed to set out a plan to grow the economy. Labour will oppose the Bill today because it fails on three counts: it raises tax on working people at exactly the wrong time; it fails to take advantage of other sources of revenue and close loopholes that hit public finances; and it comes after an autumn statement that failed to set out a plan for growth and improve living standards.

I am grateful to hon. Friends for their contributions. Reflecting the concerns and frustrations of their constituents, they spoke powerfully about the need for change and for a new direction. I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), who pointed out that we have the weakest growth in the G7 and the highest tax burden since world war two. The hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) spoke passionately about how the Bill will have a negative impact on her constituents. I was pleased to see the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) supporting the call in Labour's reasoned amendment to end non-dom status; I hope he will support the amendment tonight.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) spoke of the importance of addressing inequality. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray) put it, this Finance Bill is exactly that: a bill for working people to pay for the Government's mess. [HON. MEMBERS: "Rubbish!"] There have been 24 Tory tax rises during this Parliament, so it is not rubbish. The tax burden is the highest in 70 years, and now the Government want to introduce a new stealth tax to turn the screws on working people.

Let me remind the Government of what they have achieved so far. In real terms, wages are lower in 2022 than they were when the Tories came to power in 2010. Tory economic incompetence is doubling spending on the debt interest from last year, and business investment is 8% below its pre-pandemic peak. That is the Tories' record in government—and what is their response to those challenges? To double down and load further costs on to our economy. This is what the OBR predicts their plans will achieve: real wages falling by 7% over the next two years, the UK falling behind the pack with the lowest growth in the G7 over the next two years, and real wages falling further—by 7%—over the next two years, leaving the average worker £40 worse off. The head of the Institute for Fiscal Studies described these numbers as “simply staggering”, and I quite agree. The Conservatives are presiding over a lost decade, with low growth and economic incompetence wiping out people's wages and savings. As the Federation of Small Businesses put it, the autumn statement was

“high on stealth-creation and low on wealth-creation”

—or, to put it even more simply, the Conservatives are building a high-tax, low-growth economy.

The Government will say that they had no choice, but we know that that is not the case. There were so many options that they could have taken to raise revenues. Labour proposed a windfall tax on oil and gas giants, on the profits of rising energy prices and war, back in January. The Government ignored our calls and instead pressed ahead with their own “windfall tax”, which amounts to a huge giveaway of public money to the very oil and gas companies that are making record profits. [Interruption.] The Tories do not want to hear this, but these are the facts. Under that scheme, some oil and gas companies paid zero tax in the UK this year, despite record global profits. This tax break is set to cost taxpayers £8 billion over five years—£8 billion that could be spent helping those who most need it as we move into the winter months.

The list goes on. There were other, fairer choices that the Government could have made. They could have scrapped the non-dom status that costs taxpayers an extra £3.2 billion a year. They could have reversed their tax cut for banks and ended the tax breaks on bankers' bonuses. They could have reconsidered the VAT exemption for private schools. We know that it did not have to be like this, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North explained, Labour has a plan for growth that will get our economy firing on all cylinders. [Interruption.] I will tell the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) about it, if she wants to hear.

Our plan is to replace business rates to support our high streets, to implement a modern industrial strategy to help businesses to succeed, to introduce start-up reforms to make Britain the best place to grow a business, and to fix the holes in the Brexit deal so that we can

export more. That will be complemented by our green prosperity plan, which will create jobs across the country. We will deliver greater self-sufficiency in renewable energy by doubling onshore wind, trebling solar and quadrupling offshore wind, thus reducing people's energy bills and guaranteeing our energy security. We will create half a million jobs in renewable energy, and an additional half million by insulating 19 million homes over 10 years. We will make Britain a world leader in the industries of the future, and ensure that people have the skills to benefit from those opportunities.

Raising taxes on working people, failing to take fair choices and close loopholes, and an autumn statement with no plan for growth—our amendment sets out those three failures that will hold our economy back. The choice is clear: it is a choice between a “vicious cycle of stagnation” with this Conservative Government—and the House should not take my word for it; those are the words of the Prime Minister himself—and an ambitious plan for growth with Labour.

8.25 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): Let me start by echoing the condolences expressed by the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) during what are very difficult times in her constituency. We send, obviously, our sincerest wishes to the families and friends of those two young men, and hope that the rest of the community, who must be finding this a very worrying time, manage to get through it as well.

I thank Members on both sides of the House for their contributions to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) said that the one wish of his constituents was for “boring leadership”, setting a challenge that I will try to face up to in my speech.

The Chancellor set out our economic plan to deal with the financial headwinds that we face now and in the coming months, and the next step in that plan is this Bill. We are taking these changes forward rapidly now because we are serious about fiscal sustainability, economic stability and growth. Before I talk about our plan, however, I will correct some “facts” that were given during the debate.

The Labour Front Benchers and the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) criticised our growth record, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) reminded us, over the last 12 years we have experienced the third highest growth in the G7, behind only the United States and Canada. That is some record of growth, but, oddly enough, it was absent from the speeches made by Opposition Members. The OBR has said that higher energy prices explain the majority of the downward revision in cumulative growth since March. It has confirmed that the recession is shallower, inflation is reduced, and about 70,000 jobs are protected as a result of our decisions.

Matt Western: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I will in a moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) emphasised the importance of growth and levelling up. In his own constituency, he has seen the

positive effects of what the Government have done. Only last week the Prime Minister visited the Darlington Economic Campus, along with the Exchequer Secretary. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), and others, emphasised the importance of further education and, in particular, education for those with special educational needs. By 2024-25, £3.8 billion will have been invested in skills—and, of course, there is the Barber review, about which we have heard today.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) outlined his admiration for the fact that, even in these difficult economic times, we are still protecting public services by investing billions of pounds in the health service and in education. We will continue to emphasise these facts as we move on with this work.

This Bill is part of our plan to deal with the international pressures caused by the invasion of Ukraine, inflation and the hangover from the pandemic. The changes to the energy profits levy will ensure that the oil and gas companies experiencing extraordinary profits pay their fair share of tax.

The changes to R&D tax relief ensure that the taxpayer gets better value for money as we continue to support the valuable research and development needed for long-term growth while cracking down on error and fraud. The changes to personal tax ensure that, although we are asking everyone to contribute a little more towards sustainable public finances, we do so in a fair way with the better-off shouldering a greater burden. The changes to the taxation of electric vehicles ensure that all motorists pay a fairer tax contribution while continuing to provide generous incentives to support EV uptake.

What is Labour's plan? The one thing I heard seems to centre on non-doms. The problem with Labour's plan is that the maths does not add up. Labour says its plan will save £3 billion but, in the last year, non-doms paid nearly £8 billion in income tax, corporation tax, capital gains tax and national insurance. What is more, they have invested £6 billion in investment schemes since 2012, which is precisely why we are taking a careful and considered approach. Indeed, the Chancellor told the Treasury Committee last week that we will continue to look at such schemes. But an interesting fact is that, in 2017, we were the Government who ended permanent non-dom status, which Labour did not manage to do in 13 years.

The energy profits levy and the electricity generator levy will raise £55 billion over the next six years from companies that should not and could not have expected such enormous profits—caused by the barbaric war in Ukraine—when they were putting their business plans in place one or two years ago. The investment allowance remains at its current value to allow companies to claim around £91 of tax relief for every £100 of investment. Again, Labour was against this but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) set out very cogently, businesses have to be able to invest, as that is how we will ensure our energy security over the coming years.

The same is true of R&D tax relief. My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) reminded us of his experience as a trainee accountant, and my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West wants an industrial revolution in the Black Country. I would like one in the east midlands, too. We aim to ensure that

[Victoria Atkins]

we get more bang for our buck from this tax relief by focusing the money where it will bring about the most profit.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) is proud of the life science superpower that is his constituency. We are listening, and we will consult on a single scheme design ahead of the Budget next spring. Of course, I will be delighted to meet him and others—I am already in the process of organising that meeting—to discuss how we can support smaller businesses.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire asked whether tax credits are being paid more quickly. He knows we had to take extraordinary steps in response to a suspected criminal attack on the R&D tax credit scheme earlier this year. The necessary implementation of additional checks created a small backlog of claims, but this backlog has been cleared. We are now processing 80% of claims within 40 days, and we want to improve that figure even more.

Many Members talked about personal tax thresholds. We have tried to balance the needs of the country as a whole with the need to protect the most vulnerable. That is why those with the broadest shoulders carry the most weight, which is the fairest approach. The personal allowance will still be £2,150 higher in April 2028 than it would have been had it been uprated by inflation since 2010.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) expressed concern about the electric vehicle measures. I drive an electric vehicle, and I think it is right that those who drive an electric vehicle on the roads should now contribute towards the upkeep of those roads. We should see that as a success of our plans to encourage more people to drive electric. We have 7 million electric vehicles on our roads, and we have every reason to believe the number will continue to increase, so it is right that electric vehicle drivers contribute towards the upkeep of the roads.

As my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary said at the beginning of this debate, the UK is facing challenging headwinds. That means that difficult decisions need to be taken to support the public finances, providing stability and certainty to markets, and providing the foundation for future growth. This Finance Bill will help to deliver those and, importantly, it will do so in a fair way, with the heaviest burden falling on those with the broadest shoulders. It forms an essential part of our plan for the economy, so I commend it to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 216, Noes 289.

Division No. 99]

[8.35 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan

Bardell, Hannah
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul

Bonnar, Steven
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debonnaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Flynn, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Girvan, Paul
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian

Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate

Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin

Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Mary Glindon

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 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
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony

Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mr Marcus Jones)
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 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
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo

Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 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, Chris
 Griffith, Andrew
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister

Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mr Marcus Jones)
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew

Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham

Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:

Robert Largan and
 Andrew Stephenson

Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 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
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg

Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 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
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 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
 Logan, rh (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
 That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 290, Noes 47.

Division No. 100]

[8.50 pm

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 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
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob

Blunt, Crispin
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman

Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec

Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Robert Largan and
Andrew Stephenson

NOES

Bardell, Hannah
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Doogan, Dave

Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Flynn, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Hanna, Claire
 Hendry, Drew
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Lake, Ben
 Law, Chris
 Linden, David
 MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Mc Nally, John

McDonald, Stuart C.
 Monaghan, Carol
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sheppard, Tommy

Smith, Alyn
 Stephens, Chris
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Webbe, Claudia
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:
Richard Thomson and
Marion Fellows

Question accordingly agreed to.
Bill read a Second time.

FINANCE BILL: PROGRAMME

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Finance Bill:
Committal

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

Proceedings

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken in one day in accordance with the following provisions of this Order.

(3) Paragraph (2) shall have effect notwithstanding the practice of the House as to the intervals between stages of a Bill brought in upon Ways and Means Resolutions.

(4) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion 5 hours from commencement of proceedings on the Bill.

(5) Any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion 6 hours from commencement of proceedings on the Bill.

Programming committee

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House or to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.—(*Julie Marson.*)

Question agreed to.

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, praying that His Majesty will re-appoint Mr William Lifford to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority with effect from 11 January 2023 for the period ending on 10 January 2026.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Counsellors of State Bill [*Lords*] may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 5 to 11 together.

[Mr Deputy Speaker]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

INVESTIGATORY POWERS

That the draft Investigatory Powers Commissioner (Oversight Functions) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 18 October, be approved.

That the draft Investigatory Powers (Covert Human Intelligence Sources and Interception: Codes of Practice) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 19 October, be approved.

ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Road Vehicles and Non-Road Mobile Machinery (Type-Approval) (Amendment and Transitional Provisions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 20 October, be approved.

That the draft Road Vehicle Carbon Dioxide Emission Performance standards (Cars, Vans and Heavy Duty Vehicles) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 20 October, be approved.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Telecommunications Infrastructure (Leasehold Property) (Terms of Agreement) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 19 October, be approved.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

That the draft Biocidal Products (Health and Safety) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 18 October, be approved.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Air Quality (Designation of Relevant Public Authorities) (England) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 27 October, be approved.—(*Julie Marson.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

International day for the elimination of violence against women

9.3 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I present this petition with the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), who is a trustee of

White Ribbon Scotland, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who is an ambassador.

On the third of sixteen days of activism for the elimination of violence against women, I rise tonight to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Glasgow East. This evening, in Barrowfield, Braidfauld and Baillieston there will be women living in fear and under the same roof as their perpetrator. We can all do our bit to stand up and be counted and, most importantly, work together to eradicate violence against women and girls.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons observe and commemorate the international day for the elimination of violence against women and girls.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the international day for the elimination of violence against women and girls takes place on the 25th of November, further declares that 16 days of activism will follow, ending on 10th December, Human Rights Day – indicating that violence against women is the most pervasive breach of human rights worldwide; (notes the United Nations objectives to call for global action to increase awareness, galvanise advocacy efforts and share knowledge and innovations to end violence against women and girls once and for all); and further notes that for 2022 the theme is ‘Unite – activism to end violence against women and girls’, which encourages us all to become activists for the prevention of violence against women and to stand in solidarity with women’s rights activists.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons observe and commemorate the international day for the elimination of violence against women and girls.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray.]

[P002784]

Luton Train Station Redevelopment

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

9.4 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I am pleased to have secured this debate about an issue that is very important to the people of Luton. I am incredibly proud of my town. Luton is an aspirational town, packed to the brim with vibrant cultures and caring communities. It is called a town but is in fact the size of a city; the latest census data shows a population of 225,000 in 2021—an increase of about 11% over the past 10 years.

However, all the great things that make Luton a brilliant place are undermined by the station and rail entrance to our town centre. Whether someone lives in Luton, works in Luton, visits our town or simply travels through, there is a chance they will have to experience Luton train station. Rather than simply putting to the Minister my personal feelings about Luton station—I have put those on the record in the House many times—I asked the good people of Luton on social media for their thoughts. Here are a few snippets:

“The station building itself is dull and decrepit.”

There is a

“Lack of lifts to platforms. Lots of leaks everywhere, platform often gets puddles and it’s easy for travellers to get wet.”

The station

“is completely inaccessible for the disabled, elderly and those carrying luggage”

and a

“Nightmare for families with small children and people with mobility issues...You can’t shelter from the rain because one of the platforms has a waterfall...It’s a terrible first impression for visitors to our town arriving by train.”

It is “Not fit for purpose.”

From testimonies of local people and discussions with Thameslink GTR, Network Rail, past Government Ministers and the Department for Transport, it is overwhelmingly clear that redevelopment is needed. We have only seen basic remediations of the station since the 1950s, with the odd licks of paint here and there. I know the station so well; I am a born and bred Lutonian. When I was a kid, we picked my dad up from the station. I have been a commuter for 25-odd years. I saw the removal of the old Red Star parcel depot and the extension of the platforms for 12-car trains. But fundamentally there has been no real change to the station overall.

I am sure that the Minister’s officials have written a good technical brief on Luton station, but I do not want today’s debate to be about whether Luton train station needs investment—it is clear that it does. Instead, I want the debate to provoke action from Government that leads to a redevelopment of Luton train station. This is not just about providing Luton with the station it deserves, but about the modern station it needs to thrive.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend, who is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that the point about a modern station and the need to thrive applies also to Leagrave

station in the north of the town? It is in desperate need of lifts. The Access for All funding bid has the backing of Bedfordshire Rail Access Network, Network Rail, Thameslink GTR, the council, myself and thousands of our constituents. I sincerely hope that all those who signed my Leagrave petition and those who make the 1.8 million journeys a year from that station finally get the station that they deserve.

Rachel Hopkins: I thank my hon. Friend for that brilliant intervention. She is a fantastic champion for Luton North and Leagrave station; I am sure the Minister has taken note of the points she made so well.

Figures provided to me show that over 3.5 million passenger journeys were made via Luton station in 2019-20. Despite that, as mentioned by so many local people, poor accessibility is preventing many disabled and elderly people, young families, or those with luggage from travelling by train. At the moment, those with mobility restrictions are unable to access four out of the five platforms—and the one external lift to the ticket office upstairs is regularly out of order.

People unable to access the station are often forced to go out of their way to travel via Luton Airport Parkway station. However, Luton Airport Parkway, at the very southern tip of the town, serves Luton airport, both for travellers and workers, as well as associated businesses. It does not provide access to Luton’s town centre or the bus interchange.

Football fans visiting Luton for away games against the Hatters are also faced with the station’s accessibility issues, as well as what it looks like; the criticisms are similar from Luton Town fans. Just recently I was told that when Luton fans who travel by coach to away games are dropped back at Luton station after the game, some disabled fans cannot then access the platform they need to return home. Instead, their journey can take an additional hour or two, often late at night, as they have to go up to Bedford from platform 5, across, and then back down to Luton Airport Parkway or stations further south. It is either that or they have to pay for a taxi.

These transport issues are unacceptable now, but it is important to note that Luton Town are a football club on the rise. The club reached the championship play-off semi-final last year and are currently one point from the play-off places. They are in the process of developing the exciting Power Court stadium, which will be closer to the train station and town centre than Kenilworth Road. It will have an increased capacity of initially around 7,500 more, potentially rising to 12,500 more, than Kenilworth Road down the line. Whether Luton Town are in the championship or make it to the Premier League, we will see an increasing number of visitors to the town, which will further demonstrate the accessibility issues.

I know that the Minister, like my mum, is an Arsenal fan. Just as an example, I ask how an Arsenal fan with a disability who follows their club around the country using the rail network would cope with travelling to Luton. I appreciate that Luton has been allocated Access for All funding, which will be used to create an obstacle-free accessible route from the station entrance to the platform, and that is very much welcome, but there are clear concerns about the delay in delivery and the continual dilution of the design quality.

[Rachel Hopkins]

The funding was allocated to Luton eight years ago. Due to deferrals, work on the lifts may not start until 2024, when we were led to believe that the work would be completed within the current control period by 2024. As well as these delays, there are concerns about the design of the lifts and the associated footbridge. Luton Borough Council has worked incredibly hard with stakeholders to identify preferred options. There are rumours that the roof may be removed from the footbridge connected to the lifts, seemingly without consultation with the council, exposing passengers to the elements. We know that installing lifts now will be more cost-effective over the long term, and the absence of a covered footbridge seems at odds with the design of other stations of similar size to Luton. Will the Minister outline when we can expect work on the Access for All-funded lifts to begin? When can we expect to see the finalised agreed upon design of the lifts and footbridge? I will be very disappointed if a minimal viable product of a footbridge, with no covers, was forced on Luton station to the detriment of local travellers.

That leads to another key point that people in Luton repeatedly raise with me. Shiny new lifts on a decrepit station do not address the overall problem that the station is not fit for purpose. I have some photos here, which I will happily ensure that the Minister leaves the Chamber with, so that he can see for himself. Passengers are not getting the value for money they deserve, whether it is access to platforms or avoiding the long-standing water feature, more commonly known as the rain that pours down from the leaky roof on platform 3. What impression does that give of our town? A train station is a gateway to a town and is key to creating the perception of a welcoming community. People travel to Luton town centre for a whole host of reasons—to work, for shopping, for business, to deliver public services, to study at the university and to enjoy our arts and culture. The station is also part of the walk-through from High Town down to the town centre—the clue is in the name—and it is used by people walking through at all times of day and night. All of these people experience a station that lets down our town.

Luton Borough Council has recognised the importance of increasing investment in the urban areas surrounding the station. Both the Bute Street car park mixed-use development and the Power Court development for Luton Town football club are within a stone's throw of the thoroughly outdated Luton station. To maximise the potential of these developments and the regeneration of our town, we need a full redevelopment of the train station. As someone who says he is passionate about rail—I am, too—I am sure that the Minister agrees that rail can be a catalyst to regenerate areas. For every £1 that is spent on rail, £2.50 is generated for the wider economy.

A 21st-century station fit for the town we are, not the town we once were, could create huge economic and social opportunities for Luton. Improving the station as that gateway to our town centre would increase the attractiveness of Luton to residents and visitors, which is key to creating jobs, attracting investment and encouraging businesses to come to Luton.

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attracting investment and encouraging businesses to come to Luton. Improving Luton's rail offer also aligns with the UK's wider aim of reaching net zero. A positive rail passenger experience is vital to encouraging the modal shift from cars to rail. It is clear that the current experience of Luton residents is not encouraging them to make that shift.

I know that the Minister and the Government recognise that the current situation is unacceptable. A full redevelopment of the station is an essential part of our town centre's revival. Will the Minister outline what discussions he has had with Department for Transport and Treasury officials about a full redevelopment of Luton station? In his recent letter, he offered to have a meeting to discuss Luton station further. I accept his offer and hopefully our teams can liaise to secure a meeting. I also invite him to Luton to see it for himself in all its glory—it is 25 minutes on the train from St Pancras. It is important to Luton that it finally gets the train station that it deserves. I look forward to working with the Minister to find a solution that works for our town.

9.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): It is a pleasure to respond to my first Adjournment debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) on securing today's debate on Luton station in her constituency. I know her constituency well—she rumbled me as an Arsenal fan, but it is fair to say that my nearest top-quality football team would have been Luton, as I was brought up in Buckinghamshire. I have family who live near Luton and, I am pleased to say, are big Luton Town supporters. I wish the team well in their bid for premiership promotion.

This is an exciting opportunity for me to talk about the work that we are delivering across the rail network to enhance stations and bring them into the 21st century. As the hon. Member rightly said, stations act as a gateway to towns and cities, and connect people to new opportunities for work, education and employment. We share her belief that stations must therefore be inclusive, accessible and fit for purpose.

I know that Luton has ambitions for its station to be a gateway to the town, not only to provide a positive first impression for visitors, but to enhance the ambience in and around the station for its residents and rail users. It will also provide an additional reason for potential future investors and businesses to choose Luton. On that basis, I would be happy to come and see the hon. Members for Luton South and for Luton North (Sarah Owen) in their Luton constituencies to see it for myself. As the hon. Member for Luton South said, it is only 25 minutes from London, but it might be even closer if I go and see my mum at the same time.

I assure the hon. Member that Luton is being actively considered in our plans for growth. The Government have demonstrated our commitment to invest in the town. We are delivering accessibility improvements at Luton station, as well as enhancements to bus services across the town and beyond. We are also improving road access to London Luton airport and investing in regenerating Luton's town centre. I will explain further details of our plans for growth in Luton.

On the Access for All programme, our first priority at Luton station is accessibility. No passenger should be inhibited from accessing the opportunities presented by rail travel, whether as a result of a disability or struggling to carry pushchairs or luggage up the station steps. That is where the Access for All programme comes in.

With £383 million available across England and Wales until 2024, Luton station, as the hon. Member pointed out, is set to receive Access for All funding to provide accessible routes to all four of the station's currently inaccessible platforms. To her question, the project is currently in design stage and is due to complete by 2024. I understand that there was a delay due to a lack of planning consent, but if the council agrees and we start next year, we should be able to complete by 2024. I assure her that I will write to her about the specific points that she raised. Our Access for All programme will have delivered more than 300 step-free accessible routes, and smaller accessibility improvements, at more than 1,500 stations by 2024.

We will also continue to invest more widely in Luton town centre. In 2021, Luton Borough Council received £20 million from round 1 of the levelling-up fund to fund the first step in redeveloping the area around Luton station and the entrance to the town centre. This project will set a new standard for redevelopment and provide confidence to the private sector to unlock other key sites that are ripe for development. This will build on the improvements already in place, such as the busway and interchange adjacent to the station and the improved access to the town centre. I know these public realm improvements are all part of the wider masterplan ambition for Luton to create a hub for business and employment, leisure and entertainment.

Through the local growth fund, we have invested £4 million for the development of the Hat district in the town centre, close to the station, providing over 130 new jobs and more than 1,700 new opportunities for skills-based learning; £1.2 million to improve road capacity around Luton airport, which will also enable the development of 800 new homes and the creation of 750 new jobs; and £800,000 towards new bus stops and access points on the Dunstable to Luton busway.

We are also providing—if the hon. Lady does not mind my giving out the shopping list—over £19 million as part of Luton's bus service improvement plan to deliver enhanced bus services across the town. I hope that makes it clear that we are making massive investments across Luton's transport network. In addition, my Department is providing the council with around £10 million for the maintenance and small improvements of Luton's highways for the period 2022 to 2025.

Turning back to rail specifically, I would now like to talk about some of the national programmes that my Department is championing, and that Luton and the surrounding communities could directly benefit from. However, before I do that, I should recognise the plea of the hon. Member for Luton North about Leagrave station. I do not know whether it will be possible to fit in a visit at the same time, but I will look into that application, and see where it currently sits and where we go from there. I know what it is like to be disappointed with applications, because I have had many myself.

More centrally, where communities are not yet served by rail, we are building new stations accordingly. The new stations fund has already delivered eight new stations across England and Wales—most recently, Bow Street station in 2021, with five new stations due to open in 2023 at Portway Parkway, Reading Green Park, Thanet Parkway, Marsh Barton and White Rose.

We continue to make good progress on our commitments in the 2021 plan for rail, which set out how the railway must specifically evolve to meet the needs of its customers. As part of this plan, we are committed to a comprehensive accessibility audit of rail network facilities. Once the audit is completed, publicly available data will enable passengers to better plan their journeys and will enable us in Government to make better investment decisions to bring the entire rail network into the 21st century. We are already 90% of the way to completing this audit of Great British mainline stations, ahead of schedule, and we expect the remainder to be completed by spring 2023. I very much hope that the hon. Members for Luton South and for Luton North will work—I know they will—with local authorities and the rail industry to leverage these opportunities for investment in rail in and around Luton.

The autumn statement recommitted to transformative growth plans for our railways. We are investing significant amounts in rail enhancements across Great Britain to grow and level up the economy and to spread prosperity and opportunity. We will review the rail network enhancements portfolio, and announce the update once this work is complete.

Finally, I am aware of the strong aspirations of the hon. Members for Luton South and for Luton North for a full redevelopment of Luton station. Their advocacy on behalf of their constituents is admirable and genuinely felt and meant. I was concerned to hear that aspirations for full redevelopment may have previously delayed investment in accessibility at the station. I pledge to work with them to work out how we can ensure delivery of the accessibility points while also keeping in mind their aspirations for wider regeneration.

Luton now has an opportunity to become fully accessible in the short to medium term, with benefits to a wide range of users. I hope the hon. Member for Luton South will support those works. In relation to her aspirations for a wider regeneration of the station, I urge her to work with local authorities, the local enterprise partnership and the rail industry to develop a business case for such works, including identifying funding sources for their delivery. Once again, I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate on the redevelopment at Luton station, and I look forward to working with both hon. Members to see how that can be delivered.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I congratulate the Minister on his maiden speech from the Dispatch Box.

Question put and agreed to.

9.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 28 November 2022

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

Legal Rights to Access Abortion

4.30 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 619334, relating to legal rights to access abortion.

Thank you, Sir Graham, for being in the Chair today. It is very interesting being a member of the Petitions Committee. I have had the opportunity to lead e-petition debates in Westminster Hall on subjects where we have a culture war and different opinions. After the last debate that I spoke in, on assisted dying, I feel strongly that across the House we have so much in common, so we need debate that is sensitive but importantly does not leave us in our echo chambers. I was brought up with a Catholic education. I feel strongly about some of these issues, but I also feel that we need to discuss them. I would like to set the tone—perhaps naively, though I hope not—for today's debate, because it means so much to so many, regardless of their beliefs.

I thank Caitlin, who started the petition that we are discussing—she is with us today. In a climate where many are cynical about political institutions and the impact that individuals can make, the fact that this petition from one woman gained over 150,000 signatures is an incredible feat. To make that happen shows what a great democracy we have in this place. I had the pleasure of sitting down with Caitlin to discuss why she created the petition, and why for her it is incredibly important to be proactive when it comes to a woman's right to choose. Caitlin is a dual national—a UK and US citizen—who was moved to start her petition by the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States, which, due to various state-level trigger laws, has overnight stripped millions of women of access to reproductive healthcare, criminalising healthcare providers and snatching away rights that were seen as settled for a generation. *Roe v. Wade* has shown in the starkest of ways the fragility of rights that are not preserved through a positive legislative statement but, like our own Abortion Act 1967, drawn from exceptions and interpretations of the law. It is impossible to think of any other basic health services that are accessed like that, particularly in the United Kingdom where free-at-the-point-of-use healthcare, accessed through the national health service, is a matter of pride.

For Caitlin, abortion as essential healthcare has particularly resonance; her grandmother suffered a late partial miscarriage and required a late-in-pregnancy abortion—a procedure that not only kept her alive but enabled her to have further children. We have all seen the horrific stories emanating from the USA since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. A woman in Wisconsin, left bleeding for more than 10 days after an incomplete miscarriage. A doctor in Texas, told not to treat an ectopic pregnancy until it ruptured. A 10-year-old pregnant with her rapist's child, forced to travel across state lines to get an abortion. Those stories seem a world away from us but, much like the USA in the *Roe* era, abortion in England and Wales is not a legal right.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Member is making an important and powerful speech. Does she agree that it is extremely worrying that a member of public should feel that our rights are so under threat, and there is such a danger of us going down the same route as America, that they felt moved to present the petition? It illustrates just how serious the situation is at the moment.

Tonia Antoniazzi: That is so true, and I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution. This is what is so brilliant about petitions and about Caitlin wanting to make a difference and have her voice and those of over 150,000 heard, because we do not want that to happen here.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I am confused. The reality is that the conditions under which abortions are permitted are set out in statute law. They would require primary legislation to alter them. The petition appears to wish to hand the decisions to judges by establishing a right that will be interpreted by judges in exactly the way that *Roe v. Wade* has been reversed by judges. It is much better to stick with the position that we have, based on democratic provisions in this House and statute law.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I am not presenting my views *per se*; I am presenting the views of the petitioner, and I will go on to discuss how things would work. That is what we have to discuss. The petition presents a particular view and, although I agree with much of that view—not that that is relevant—it is how it would work, as he rightly points out, that we are discussing. It is therefore important that we sit in this Chamber and discuss it, but I thank him for his contribution.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. Is there not something fundamentally naive about a petition that attempts to juxtapose the legal system of the United Kingdom with the very different constitutional and legal system in the United States of America on the basis of fear, misinformation and media reportage, rather than on the basis of fact?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I fundamentally disagree with those comments. As a woman, to see what has happened in America does give me fear. I do not believe that there is a great amount of misinformation, but I do believe that where we get our information from—the hon. Gentleman raises a valid point—is very, very important. We must not stay in the echo chambers that I spoke of at the beginning of my speech. We must discuss and debate, which is what is so good about this opportunity and the petition.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The hon. Lady is incredibly generous in giving way. I applaud the tone in which she is presenting this case. The problem that some of us are grappling with is that, in America, what appears to have happened is that the Supreme Court had its political complexion changed and therefore came to a different decision. I, for one, regret the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

Having said that, it therefore seems strange, as my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), has said, to suggest

[Dr Julian Lewis]

that we should move away from the system that we have where Parliament decides what should and should not happen on a matter of policy of this sort, and hand it over to judges for whatever interpretation of the law they may choose to come up with.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Again, that is a valid point that we can debate and discuss today. Does the policy being enshrined in a Bill of Rights actually work? Is that the political lever that is necessary? I do not necessarily believe that that is the case.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I am very interested to hear what she has to say next. It is not the Opposition who are bringing forward a Bill of Rights, or claiming to do so—I am sure we will get into the issue of whether or not the legislation presented does represent that—but the concept of a Bill of Rights has been brought into British politics. It is absolutely right that we discuss what should be enshrined in that legislation and whether that includes a woman's right to choose to have an abortion, which many of us feel is a human rights issue. It is that piece of legislation—I know she is about to start the debate—that means we need to have this conversation.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. It is the Bill of Rights that is being discussed and brought forward that triggered Caitlin into wanting to protect women in this country, whether that happens or not. That is what I wish to discuss.

Abortion in Great Britain is still a criminal offence; the Abortion Act 1967 simply made abortion legal in certain, fixed circumstances. It is a product of its time, enacted in part to ensure that women no longer suffered serious health problems, or even death, because they were too afraid to seek medical help after an abortion. It is therefore ironic that its requirements, designed to pass Parliament more than half a century ago, risk women's health. As we know, the Abortion Act requires that two doctors approve each request for a termination—a legal requirement that serves no clinical or safety purpose and often delays the process, despite abortion being safer the earlier that it is performed.

The fact that abortion continues to sit in criminal law has a chilling effect on medical practice and the willingness of doctors to authorise abortions. In a conversation earlier with a dear colleague, we discussed whether we actually knew somebody who was unable to access these services. Through conversations that I have had, I have found that there are such cases—that is what we need to discuss and look at.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): In this crucial debate, what about women's aftercare? We are talking about changing the law, and a number of my constituents are concerned that that would lead to abortion up until birth. We know that about 80% of women want the time limit reduced. Beyond that, what about the mental health of women who have had an abortion—where is the care for them? Where does this address things that have never been properly addressed for years and years?

Tonia Antoniazzi: My hon. Friend makes a valid point about the aftercare of women who choose or choose not to have a termination. That is something

that I feel strongly about—it may be years down the line that someone needs that support, and that support is lacking. I agree with her on that point, and it is something that we need to discuss further.

The threat of prosecution is a real fear; it is a fear that also deters doctors from wanting to enter this fundamental area of women's healthcare. We are pleased to see early medical abortions being safely offered by GPs in other community settings, as it is in other countries. The fact that all non-hospital-based services must be specifically licensed and approved by the Secretary of State can be a barrier to improving access. Women who are unable to travel to clinics because of distance, personal circumstances—maybe coercive relationships—and medical conditions are poorly served by the current framework. If they take matters into their own hands by accessing pills online, they risk prosecution and prison. To talk of prosecution in these circumstances might seem laughable to some, but a recent *Sunday Times* investigation found that 52 women since 2015 have been reported to the police for allegedly breaking abortion laws.

I spoke to the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, and it is aware of multiple instances where the existing law criminalising abortion has been used against women who have ended their own pregnancy. Some of the examples given include a migrant woman in Oxford in 2021 who obtained and self-administered medication in a failed attempt to end her own pregnancy. When she was taken to hospital, the doctors performed a successful emergency C-section. Seemingly, they then reported her to the police because they found the remnants of medication in her vagina. She is now a parent to a toddler but is still being prosecuted for the attempted procurement of a miscarriage.

In London last year, a woman was admitted to hospital in need of a surgical procedure to empty her uterus after a stillbirth at 24 weeks as a result of abortion care sought within the formal healthcare system. While she was on the ward post procedure, she was arrested by the police. She was taken to a police station and kept in a police cell for 36 hours.

I cannot imagine any woman or girl ever wanting to be in this situation. When a little girl is growing up, she thinks about her lovely family and the children she is going to have. She says, "By the time I am 24, I am going to be married and have 2.3 children. I am going to live this life." Women have hopes and dreams, and when they find themselves in this situation it is devastating to them, because they do not want to be in the situation and to be treated like that. I feel very strongly that it is really important to have this debate.

Ian Paisley: I actually think the hon. Member is absolutely right about the sheer compassion that this issue has to command. There were something like 800,000 pregnancies in the United Kingdom last year. I think that in the past seven or eight years 17 people have been brought up on the issue the hon. Member has identified, and only two have been charged. We are dealing with such a limited, narrow area—it is not widespread—and we need to keep that sense of proportion. It is important that the hon. Member has put those matters on the agenda.

Tonia Antoniazzi: To be frank, we should have decriminalisation. I do not believe there should be one or two or that any woman should be made to feel like that—

Ian Paisley: How many?

Tonia Antoniazzi: It is very difficult. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member knows that we will disagree but, fundamentally, the fact that we can have this debate is the most important thing. I have to move on because we just will not agree, but it is important that everybody's views are heard.

A 15-year-old girl was investigated by the police after a stillbirth at 28 weeks and accused of having an illegal abortion. Her phone and laptop were confiscated during her GCSE exams and she was driven to self-harm by the year-long investigation. Those are moments in a person's life—in a woman's life—that have been really impacted. The investigation concluded only when the coroner found that the pregnancy had ended as a result of natural causes. Imagine someone going through that while going through their GCSEs, with their whole life ahead of them.

This is the reality of criminalisation for the women investigated: their lives are being picked apart, they are being treated like criminals and it causes huge disruption. They do not feel safe in accessing medical services and their trust in the health service is undermined. These are often vulnerable women—even children—in desperate situations and with complicated medical histories or mental health problems. Because of the approach of the Crown Prosecution Service, rather than being provided with support in the moment these women face a terrifying journey of criminalisation.

We talk about choice when it comes to abortion, but those who are currently empowered to make choices are not the women who need the services but the police, who chose to investigate, and the CPS, which decides to prosecute. The current law takes fundamental decisions about an individual's healthcare and hands it to the state. What is most concerning is that the law as it stands could be overturned by the Government of the day without a vote in Parliament.

This is where we perhaps need to look at the position of the current Cabinet and their views on a woman's ability to access reproductive healthcare, because we can see that the issue is far from settled. I just want to point this out for the record. The Prime Minister has abstained on all votes relating to abortion in England since becoming an MP. That includes the votes on buffer zones and early medical abortion at home—the telemedicine we saw this year.

The Chancellor has been vocal about his desire to halve the time limit in which women can have abortions from 24 weeks to 12 weeks, even breaking the Whip. We say it is a matter of conscience, so I understand. The Home Secretary also voted against telemedicine being made permanent and the legal enforcement of buffer zones in 2022. We need to think about these views. It is right that Caitlin and the more than 150,000 other signatories to the petition are concerned, because if we look at our Parliament, we see that there is a risk of it happening. I totally understand Caitlin's point of view.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): If this legal right to an abortion were to be introduced, would it allow a legal right to a sex-selective abortion as well?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I do not read it like that. I think there is a better way forward. That is my personal opinion.

Chris Green: The motivation would be determined in advance?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I do not see it that way, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing up that viewpoint.

It is incredibly important that we do not shy away from these debates. If there is something we can learn from the United States, it is how not to discuss women's reproductive health. We cannot allow something so important to become yet another salvo in the culture war. This is down to us. Women deserve much better. I would like to end on that note, and I would like to thank everybody for their interventions. It is very important that we discuss the way forward. Decriminalisation is very, very important, because no woman or young girl should feel worry about their future.

4.52 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I apologise that I cannot stay until the end of this debate, but I have to chair a meeting upstairs.

MPs who want even wider laws on abortion recently hijacked the Government's Public Order Bill in an attempt to introduce buffer or censorship zones, the aim of which is to restrict the fundamental freedoms of speech and expression. They are against people's human rights and would deny and criminalise those volunteers who offer support to women going to abortion clinics who do not really want to have an abortion but are forced to, perhaps by abusive partners.

Now, many of the same MPs are seeking to hijack the Government's Bill of Rights, also on the issue of abortion. The Government are introducing the Bill of Rights as they seek to remedy one of the worst mistakes made by previous Governments—namely, that on the undemocratic reach of European human rights laws. The Bill of Rights is intended to deal with situations such as illegal cross-channel migrants using human rights laws to evade justice, or terrorists hiding behind laws that were never meant to shield them from justice and scrutiny in the way that they have.

The Bill, which was in the manifesto that I and my Conservative colleagues stood on in 2019, will give supremacy to the UK Supreme Court—that is all it does—and make it explicit that courts in this country can disregard rulings from the European Court of Human Rights. By the way, those who favour more abortion should note that actually, whatever may be the letter of the law, in practice we have some of the most liberal abortion rights in Europe. I wonder just how many of those people would like to be under the control of the European Court of Human Rights, when many other countries in Europe have far more restrictive abortion laws. I think they may be shooting themselves in the foot.

Christine Jardine: For many women it is not about what happens anywhere else in the world. It is about protecting not a right for us personally—because I do not think that many of us would have an abortion—but the ability of other women, young women, to make that decision if necessary and if they feel it is right. The problem with a Bill of Rights Bill that does not include the right to an abortion is that those women are excluded from having that right.

Sir Edward Leigh: The hon. Lady mentions a worry about what is happening in the rest of the world. We have heard a lot about the United States of America, but we are in an entirely different situation here: if anybody wants to change the effective right to abortion, they have to come to Parliament. Parliament is supreme in this matter, so I am not sure that women need to worry about what is happening in the United States. There is no way in which I or anybody else, or anybody in any court of law in this country, can restrict their effective right to abortion—a Bill has to go through Parliament.

It is disappointing that there are Members of this House, including even those who do not support the intentions behind the Bill of Rights, who see it as yet another opportunity to hijack flagship Government legislation to further weaken the few laws and safeguards that exist in the governance of abortion. It is up to Members of this House to vote to change the law on abortion, which we have a perfect right to do. Those of us who think the sheer scale of abortions represents a failure in how we treat women and how we value life at least know that the law was made by Parliament and so can be changed by Parliament. By making abortion a “right”, in contrast, the present laws would likely be enshrined, and so would be beyond correcting even when plainly needed.

Let me give one widely accepted example. The law was changed in 1990 because the previous limit of 28 weeks was considered too late a limit, given that the science on viability had changed. Now, science shows that babies can survive at 22 weeks or earlier, and there are a lot of people who believe that the present limit of 24 weeks is therefore too high. It is possible for an abortion to be taking place in one ward of a hospital while, in the next ward, huge amounts of public resources are quite rightly being used to save a baby of 22 weeks’ gestation. However, if a right were enshrined, the necessary change to stop the practice of late-term abortions would likely not be possible.

A very interesting point has also been made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) about gender selection. How would that issue be dealt with by Parliament through a Bill of Rights? The trouble is that we cannot frame legislation to cover every eventuality in a Bill of Rights. It is much better that Parliament considers every practice, every change of a law, and every advance of science on its merits.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the hijacking of Bills just makes bad law? In Northern Ireland, we have seen just that: the law has been hijacked, and we have seen a change from life-affirming laws that the people of Northern Ireland support to some of the most liberal abortion laws in all of Europe.

Sir Edward Leigh: I agree with the hon. Lady. It is a very dangerous parliamentary and legal practice for anyone to try to achieve their aims by piggybacking them on a Bill that is designed to deal with a completely different eventuality.

As we know, the law as it stands effectively allows abortion on demand. We have a record 200,000-plus abortions per year in this country—perhaps one in four pregnancies. That is beyond doubt, and in reality every

woman who wants to have an abortion can attain one. We do not need to include it in a Bill of Rights; instead, we need to look at how the state has failed so many women that they feel abortion is the only option available to them, and to look at alternative modes of support. There is no real appetite to make abortion a right, aside from a vocal minority and various lobby groups, including the abortion providers themselves.

A right to abortion would be a very strange thing indeed. It would be the only right that we would regret using, and the only right that we would, ideally, actively seek to minimise. Nobody thinks that abortion is a good thing and wants more abortions—they may think it is necessary in certain circumstances, but it is not the sort of right that we want to extend. That stands in contrast to other fundamental rights that we do not seek to minimise, including freedom of speech, freedom of association and the right to privacy, to name a few. We cherish and value those rights and want to enframe them in a Bill of Rights. I hope that colleagues who want to drag this Bill to a very different place rethink their plans.

Stella Creasy: The right hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. Could he clarify something for me? He talks passionately about the human right of freedom of speech, and I agree with him; I feel very strongly about defending it, and I notice that this Bill of Rights talks about protecting that right from interference. Can he explain how that is different from interfering in somebody’s womb, which is what the human right to have an abortion would address? Why is it that this legislation is right to protect one right, but not to protect another right? Why is it right that this legislation would bring in judges and give direction to courts on one issue, but not another issue?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is an interesting point, but is the freedom to have an abortion at 24 weeks rather than 22 weeks the kind of fundamental right that we believe should be protected in a Bill of Rights? This is a matter for argument. A Bill of Rights is an unbelievably blunt instrument to deal with this particularly sensitive issue. I say to the hon. Lady that if any of us are dissatisfied with this law—and there are probably more Government Members than Opposition Members who are dissatisfied with the present law—we at least have to come to Parliament and convince our colleagues to change the law. I do not believe, and nor do many other people, that the Bill of Rights is the right way to do it.

5 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I hope that this important debate will generate light, not heat—perhaps in the past we have had too few such debates. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) in setting that out so powerfully and making that argument. I also congratulate Caitlin on her incredibly powerful petition, which I think reflects the growing view—indeed, it is the majority view among women in this country—that in the 21st century, their right to healthcare needs to be not just protected but clarified.

Let me start by stating something that it is important for us all to recognise. When you ban abortion, you don’t stop abortion; you simply stop access to safe abortion.

When we talk about having a human right to abortion, the alternative is not no abortion—it is unsafe abortion. There is no pro-life perspective on this. There are only those who recognise the need to ensure safe access in order to save lives by preventing those unsafe abortions, and those who are more comfortable with the risks that may come from not offering such a service.

Secondly, let me provide some clarification. I do not believe that the Government have put before us—perhaps the Minister will tell us whether alternative wording will be brought forward—a Bill of Rights, because it does not lay out a set of rights. I am sure that the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) will regale us with his stories about the American constitution—I am sure that he is more of a scholar on that than I am—but that sets out a series of rights. This Bill does not do that. As the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) very clearly stated, it sets out which place of law should be supreme. That is a different argument from that on whether there are laws to protect our rights. Let us be very clear: we are talking not about a Bill of Rights, but about a Bill of clarity about where rights rest and who has the right to interpret them.

I wish to disappoint the right hon. Member for Gainsborough: we are still part of the European Court of Human Rights. We might have left the European Union but the European Court of Human Rights still applies in the UK. Some of us agree with Winston Churchill that that is quite a good thing and we should uphold it. Indeed, I believe that that is the Government's current view.

Let us also put to bed the idea that passing a Bill of Rights—or a Bill clarifying where rights are being determined—would somehow mean that a particular right would be subject to judicial intervention and other rights would not. All rights set out in this piece of legislation would be subject to the courts, just like freedom of speech and the rights of those people seeking asylum in our country. Abortion would be no different in this legislation. It would simply be another right where we clarified where the balance of rights—

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Does the hon. Member agree that is very little disagreement on the right to protect freedom of speech? On the right to protect freedom of expression and freedom of religion, people can practice whatever they want. Does she agree, however, that the subject of abortion is much more nuanced? There are some people who would never take away a woman's right for an abortion, but it is not a black and white issue and therefore cannot be compared to the right to freedom of speech, expression or religion. It simply cannot be compared to that.

Stella Creasy: I disagree with the hon. Lady, and I invite her to talk to campaigners in my community who feel very passionately about where the line about the right to religious freedom is drawn, or the right to freedom of speech. Those are not uncontested subjects. We all passionately believe that human rights are important, but how they are applied and what they mean in practice can often be a very different thing. I argue that a woman's right to choose is something that the majority of people in this country—multiple public opinion surveys now back this up—believe should be a right for women. Right now, it is not a right for women. A woman does

not have the right to choose to have an abortion in this country—we need to be very clear about that, because that is where this debate is coming from.

It is also why I agree with the right hon. Member for Gainsborough when he says that this should be a parliamentary matter. That is exactly what the petition is calling on us to do, as are those conversations about whether or not the Bill should include that. I simply say to the right hon. Gentleman that I do not know who in this place he means to be a hijacker, but I have never believed that the role of the Opposition is to sit on the sidelines for five years, cheering on the Government's work. The role of the Opposition is to make progress on the issues that we are concerned about. If we can make progress on this very issue, I wager it will make a difference in many ways that he has not yet realised.

We do not have the right to an abortion. Even those women seeking abortions do not have a right to an abortion. They have to secure the support of two doctors who have to act in good faith to agree that a woman should have an abortion because the alternative would cause her mental distress or a physical threat to her life. That is not a right.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I am interested to hear what the hon. Lady thinks the effect would be of having a general right to abortion in statute, because that would not set aside the provisions of the existing statute. Judges would be constrained by statute law. They cannot set it aside. It would merely be gesture politics.

Stella Creasy: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman raises that question, because he need not look far for an exact example of what does happen we have a human right to an abortion. Let us be clear: it is women in England, Scotland and Wales in this nation state who do not have the right to an abortion. Women in Northern Ireland do. We now have legislation on our statute book that directly gives women in Northern Ireland a human right to an abortion, which means—

Sir Desmond Swayne: Without an Act.

Stella Creasy: Well, there was an Act. The right hon. Gentleman is shouting—I guess he missed out on the debates we had on this issue in 2019, when this place did indeed pass legislation. That is a very interesting mechanism for this Bill of Rights. It is why this Bill could be the right vehicle and why a human rights perspective is important. Those of us who believe the time has come to say that abortion is healthcare and to remove the criminal element recognise that removing the criminal element requires us to replace it with an alternative foundation for those rights. Those of us who believe we should make abortion a human right in this country argue that a human rights perspective should be that alternative. We see Northern Ireland, where that has now happened, as an opportunity to learn from that.

Let me preface my statement by saying that just because we have a human right to abortion in Northern Ireland does not mean, as yet, that we have satisfactory legal, local and safe abortion services. Those who are hostile to abortion have used their position to prevent access. However, what is different and so powerful about having that human rights approach is that it is the Secretary of State who has to drive change in Northern Ireland, because he has to defend the human rights of

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women in Northern Ireland as a reflection of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women protocol.

Chris Green: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: I will happily give way, but before I do, I will just clarify for the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) that changing the foundation of that legislation would not change the regulations as to whether sex-selective abortion would ever be legal or the time limits. It would simply be about the fundamental principle. Right now, his female constituents do not have a right to an abortion. They may be able to go and request one, but somebody else makes that decision.

Chris Green: I think the hon. Lady does clarify the point to a certain extent, but in that clarification she also highlights that some people—women, families—choose to have a sex-selective abortion, which is in contrast to the argument being made about abortion necessarily always being about healthcare. There are other factors as well.

Stella Creasy: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that if he is dealing with families where that is a possibility, prosecuting a woman who is being asked to have a sex-selective abortion, rather than supporting her or recognising what is happening, is not the way forward. The cases set out so powerfully by my hon. Friend the Member for Gower show why decriminalisation is a very live issue. Although it is the 21st century, this country is still prosecuting women for having miscarriages and threatening them with investigation for a healthcare issue. Rather than recognising what other pressures might be in their lives and supporting them, we are criminalising those women, as women were criminalised in the 1800s with the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. I wager that the hon. Gentleman would not want to be on the side of arguing that a piece of legislation that put abortion at the same level as setting fire to this place or indeed murder would be the right way forward.

Right now, the penalty under that legislation is lifetime imprisonment. There may be some people who are comfortable with that, but many of us, who believe that when a woman is seeking healthcare, she deserves our support, compassion and tolerance, are not. For those of us who believe that we should be equals under the law, the question is whether the hon. Gentleman would accept being denied the basic right to decide what happens to his body in a particular circumstance, and for that decision to be taken by two other people who could give him that option only if they agreed that he would go mad or lose his life if he did not have it. I wager that he would not find that acceptable if it was perhaps about having a vasectomy.

Ian Paisley: Under the new dispensation that the hon. Member is arguing for, how would she propose to deal with, say, a very difficult case, such as the one brought to prosecution, namely that of Sarah Catt? The judge in that case said that it was not involuntary manslaughter or indeed an offence save murder. How would the hon. Member propose to deal under the new dispensation with a difficult case that the law would ultimately throw up?

Stella Creasy: The hon. Gentleman suggests that difficult cases are the unique preserve of abortion provision; there are difficult cases when it comes to freedom of speech and people's motivation. What I do recognise is that right now there are women on trial for having a miscarriage or potentially being accused of seeking an abortion perhaps when they were further along in their pregnancy than they realised, and it is not right to see these cases as criminal matters when we are talking about a healthcare provision, in which case what we need to do is set out an alternative foundation for the law.

Many of us recognise that the Bill of Rights is not a good piece of legislation and that the things that it does will not achieve the outcomes that the Government hope for. However, it opens the door to a conversation about what rights women in this country should have. If the Government are determined that nobody from Europe should interfere with somebody's freedom of speech, why do they deny the role of protecting women's wombs from being interfered with and why not let women choose for themselves whether or not to have an abortion?

We would not be unique in making that choice; countless nations around the world already do it. Indeed, in the current criminal basis for abortion access, we are behind other countries such as Russia, Australia, South Africa, Vietnam, Germany and Argentina. Countries such as Canada have explicitly classified abortion as a human right; lawmakers in France have just agreed to write it into their constitution. Belgium, Denmark and Sweden are also considering constitutional amendments—

Sir Edward Leigh: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: I will just finish my sentence, if I may. I am desperate to hear what the right hon. Gentleman has to say, but I want to be very clear that this is a debate that is happening around the world.

Roe v. Wade was the spark that reaffirmed that that fire needed to burn, because many of us have known that, even though we have access to abortion in this country, that access is not secure; it can be challenged. Indeed, I have spent 12 years in this place listening to people chipping away at that access and using the fact that abortion is not a legal right to do so.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and I are on different sides of this debate. I would love to hear why he believes he has a right to choose for a woman what happens to her body.

Sir Edward Leigh: I would quite like to ask my own question, if the hon. Lady will forgive me. If the right to abortion is so restrictive in this country, why do we have one of the highest abortion rates in the world?

Stella Creasy: I did not say that it was restrictive; I said that it was patchy, because it is patchy. What we understand is that those who live in rural areas find it much harder to find the two doctors required to secure an abortion, and that is one of the reasons why many of us have fought for telemedicine to help with that process and to ensure that during the pandemic women's rights were not left behind.

The right hon. Gentleman misses a fundamental point—a woman should be able to choose what happens to her body. If we have a Bill of Rights, surely it sets out those most fundamental basic rights.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: I was coming to a close, but I will happily take the right hon. Gentleman's question.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The answer to the question that the hon. Lady asked my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) is that we take this caveat to an absolute right because there has to be a balance of rights, and there is another life involved in the question of abortion. That is why we constrain it by the proper means of parliamentary legislation, rather than handing that decision to an unaccountable judge.

Stella Creasy: On this side, I hope to hand that decision to a very accountable woman, because I trust women to make the right choices for their own bodies. When the right hon. Member says "we", I hope he is not talking about men, because the majority of men and women across this country recognise that they should trust each other to make these very difficult, sensitive decisions, and not deny women that basic human right.

If the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) wishes to look at the example of Northern Ireland—from what he says, I suspect he has not done so yet—he will see that adding a human rights foundation to the legislation does not remove any of the regulations around time limits, any of the importance placed on medical professionals or any of the safety requirements, nor does it introduce sex selection. It sets a foundation that is based in healthcare, not criminal legislation, and—crucially, for many of us—in equality. Were we to say that the right hon. Member could not have basic bodily autonomy, I would venture that he would be as furious and concerned about what that meant for him as we are about what it means for women.

The previous Justice Secretary and the current Justice Secretary have both argued that we do not need to include the right to abortion in the Bill of Rights because that right is settled, but Conservative Members have just shown that it is not; this is a very live debate. It is absolutely right that our constituents have an opportunity to lobby us and that Parliament has an opportunity to look at where we can make progress.

The decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* caused shockwaves, but it also highlighted the fact that that right was written into the legislation in terms of liberty and privacy, not as a basic human right. Including abortion in our legislation, as set out in the petition, would write it in as a basic human right. Many of us do not agree with the Government's piece of legislation; nevertheless, we will not be deterred from seeing how we can make progress to defend and uphold these rights, because what *Roe v. Wade* teaches us is that we cannot be complacent. Indeed, when we have a Government who, as part of an international conference, chose to remove a commitment to the human rights of women around the developing world to access sexual and reproductive services, I know that that concern is merited.

Will the Minister clarify why the sauce is good for the goose, but not for the gander? Why do we have a piece of legislation that will set limits on interference in free speech and on deportations, but the Government can somehow say it would be wrong for the courts to be involved in upholding a woman's right to choose?

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech, although I fundamentally disagree with most of her points. For clarity, will she explain at what point she feels the unborn child gains human rights? Is it at 16 weeks, 24 weeks, 28 weeks—or never, until it is born?

Stella Creasy: I recognise the debate that the hon. Gentleman is trying to tempt me into. I have no problem with our existing legislation, except the fact that it is rooted in a criminal foundation. For me, decriminalisation is of paramount importance and urgency. My point is simply that when we remove the criminal foundation from which all abortion legislation follows, we create a lacuna. I am arguing that entering human rights into that lacuna, as we have done in Northern Ireland, is the right thing to do, because I wish my constituents in Walthamstow to have the same rights as women in Belfast; and right now they do not.

The Bill of Rights—and, I would wager, this petition—is about the 21st century and how those rights are exercised. That does not mean that we would not have controls on how abortion is accessed or that there would not be a right to discussion about time limits; it means that there would not be criminal prosecutions—not just of the women, but of the doctors and medical people involved—and that the legislation would come from a healthcare perspective. We do not have these debates when it comes to vasectomies or ankle injuries, yet somehow when it comes to a woman's body we have determined, as the right hon. Member for New Forest West has said, that Parliament should be involved.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): Did the hon. Lady really compare a vasectomy with an abortion? Does she see those procedures of equal and like standing, when one involves, as has been described by other Members, a second life, and she herself recognises that there is a point during a pregnancy at which those rights are conferred on the unborn?

Stella Creasy: The hon. Member should turn the question around. Why does she believe that it is acceptable for men to be able to choose to have a vasectomy, but a woman cannot choose what happens to her own body? Why do we deny women choice over their bodies, but we do not deny men? Forgive me, but I did biology at school, so I know that there are often two people involved in the creation of a baby. Surely we should hold men equally accountable, yet somehow we do not deny men rights to their bodies and bodily autonomy.

I will come to a conclusion, because I know that Members who have different views from mine wish to make their points. My point is simply thus: to argue that the Bill of Rights is the wrong vehicle for the right to abortion is to miss the point, because this right does not yet exist for women across Scotland, Wales and England. It does exist in Northern Ireland, and if we trust women in Northern Ireland, we should trust women in England, Scotland and Wales. If we recognise a human right in one part of the United Kingdom, surely we should recognise it in all.

I do not wish to be called a hijacker; I think that is slightly disrespectful towards parliamentary democracy. I recognise that there are people here who will never agree with a woman's right to choose, and I believe they

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should be honest about that, because it would not matter whether it was a Bill of Rights, this Bill of Rights or any piece of legislation—they would not support it. But for those of us who do support women and who do recognise that the case for decriminalisation is long overdue, we have a responsibility to set out what comes next. I believe it is a human rights proposal, and I believe that all our constituents would benefit from that perspective and that approach to a healthcare issue. I hope that the Minister will clarify why this piece of legislation is acceptable for some freedoms and some rights, and whether the Government do not believe that a woman has a right to an abortion. If she does have a right to choose an abortion, they need to legislate for it.

5.21 pm

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I commend the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for the way in which she set out the debate. It is a difficult thing to do for the Petitions Committee, and she did an excellent job.

I very much welcome the debate, because legal access to abortion needs to be looked at in this place, and today's debate has demonstrated the pent-up demand to have a clear plan and a clear way forward. However, I want to add a different perspective, which perhaps demonstrates that there is a real need for this issue to be looked at in more detail, because I am yet to be convinced that the change that is needed will be achieved by enshrining the right to abortion in the Bill of Rights, probably because it is far more complicated than that would allow. Change is needed, however, and I commend the petitioners for giving us the opportunity to bring this issue forward. I hope the Government take away the debate not just as a three-hour sitting in Westminster Hall, hearing from people who have a lot of conflicting views, but as a real cry for help. We need a Government who are prepared to put their head above the parapet and come forward with a plan of action on abortion rights.

Change is needed. I believe the change needs to be decriminalisation, but I do not believe it necessarily needs to be done through a Bill of Rights. I believe the debate is driven by real frustration, not just among people in this room, but among the many people who supported a number of the other issues that the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) brought forward. Yes, she did so in a slightly haphazard way, but she has had no choice, because there has not been a way to do it more coherently.

Our abortion law is completely out of date. UK access to abortion is an exemption from prosecution under criminal law, which is well behind other countries in the world. Right hon. and hon. Members need to acknowledge that our legislation is out of date and is governed by offences that date back to the 18th century and which need urgent change, because abortions are criminalised in a way that no other healthcare provision is. The 1967 Act gave a very limited number of exemptions. Other than that, the law even predates when women were able to stand for election to this place.

Christine Jardine: The right hon. Member mentions the 1967 Act. From what my mother told me at the time—I was too young to know about it—the Act

sparked a huge feeling of social revolution in this country and a belief in the rights of women, which many women now feel are under threat. Although *Roe v. Wade* may have happened in the United States, the sentiment that it reflects is something that women in this country feel very strongly is a threat to their rights. In decriminalising abortion, and including it in the Bill of Rights—one or the other, perhaps—we would be re-establishing that social change and that revolution in the position of women in society.

Dame Maria Miller: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She is right to say that it could be one or the other but, currently, we have no clear path to understanding how and when we will have that discussion.

On other point relating to the 1967 Act, too often, when this issue is raised, we are told, "These are issues that are brought up by Back Benchers." Indeed, the hon. Member for Walthamstow has done that on many occasions—brought up issues from the Back Benches—but that has left us with an incredibly piecemeal approach to reform in this area. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister does not say, "This is a matter for Back Benchers," because it no longer is, for the reasons that the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) gave. This is a complicated issue, and it needs to be dealt with by Government in a comprehensive way.

I believe that, as a result of phenomenal change in the way in which women access abortion in this country, the law is lagging well behind the reality for most of our constituents. Some 87% of abortions are now medical abortions. They are not surgical; they are completely different from abortions when the law was put in place. We may agree or disagree with abortion, but the way that the law regulates it is inconsistent with the reality of the medical procedures. Before even contemplating enshrining abortion as a right in the Bill of Rights—which may or may not be the right thing to do—we must completely re-examine our approach to how abortion is dealt with in the law.

As has been said, 52 women have been reported to the police under the abortion law since 2015. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) mentioned, I think, 800,000 births a year, but if you were one those 52 women reported to the police for a procedure that you thought was a medical procedure, that is something that would be quite shocking, and would be to many of the people that we represent. Yes, only 17 of those women have been subject to criminal investigations, but how many other medical procedures have been subject to criminal investigations—not many, I think.

The Women and Equalities Committee, when I chaired it, held an inquiry into abortion in Northern Ireland, which identified the chilling effect of the law on medical practice, in some circumstances, leaving vulnerable women without the help that they needed. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Walthamstow for really building on that and bringing forward measures that meant that we were able, in a piecemeal way, to change the situation for that particular group of women.

I understand why the situation in the US has excited extreme concern in this country. The Supreme Court ruling was extremely worrying, and there will be much discussion on that on the other side of the Atlantic. I can understand why that would trigger a debate today. However, if the motivation is to put abortion on a

firmer footing, we must consider carefully a different approach from just attaching it to the Bill of Rights, which may not give us the opportunity to discuss it in the depth that we need to.

As well as listening to the very principled views of colleagues here today, we must listen to medical practitioners. The British Medical Association is very clear that abortion should be regulated in the same way as other clinical procedures, which are already subject to an extensive range of professional standards, regulations, and criminal and civil laws. Rather than criminalising women, we must ensure that we have the right medical help in place, and that they are not afraid of accessing it. I fear that debates such as today's could unintentionally create more fear among those who need to, for whatever reason, access abortions. I absolutely defend the right of hon. Members and right hon. Members to completely disagree with the idea of choosing an abortion, but every woman in this country must have the right to make that choice for themselves. That is the country that we live in today.

There is no need for that right to be in the Bill of Rights, in the same way that there is no need to put other medical procedures into a Bill of Rights. Changing the basic law has the overwhelming support of the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal College of Midwives and the BMA, so why do we put our views ahead of those of medical professionals on this issue and no others?

In this place we have, I believe, made real progress in a piecemeal way. People failed to see the level of support for buffer zones when that amendment went through the House. I fear that perhaps the voices in the debate today are not entirely representative of our broader group of colleagues, because not only have buffer zones been agreed to but telemedicine and decriminalisation in Northern Ireland have been agreed to. Let us be really careful. The Minister needs to be really careful that he senses the proper mood of the House when he considers such issues because sometimes these smaller debates do not reflect that mood.

In closing, I ask the Minister to shed a little more light on what the Government are planning in this area. It is clear they do not see it as an issue in the Bill of Rights, but what will be done instead? When I probed the Health Secretary on the issue during departmental questions, I received a written ministerial correction clarifying that a sexual and reproductive health action plan is currently being drafted by the Department. I was assured in a letter in August that abortion would be part of that, so the Minister might want to update Members on the progress. We do not need another set of piecemeal proposals; we need a Government who will grasp this difficult issue and put together a proper plan that enables our constituents to see their experience of this very difficult area reflected and heeds the very clear concerns of the medical profession.

5.32 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for setting the scene. Although in all honesty the hon. Lady and I have two very different points of view, I respect her right to have that point of view. I hope she will respect my right

to have a different point of view—I want to make that point today if I can. It is always a pleasure to see the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) in his place. I hold him in high regard; I think we all do, to be fair. I look forward to his comments and also to hearing from the right hon. and hon. Members who will make their views known.

In my time in the House, I do not think there has been a debate in which I have not made the effort to speak and express views on behalf of my constituents. With respect to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), who referred to Northern Ireland, my understanding is that it is very clear in the polls in Northern Ireland that the majority of people are absolutely opposed to abortion on demand and the system of abortion in Northern Ireland. That system was imposed by this House—I will refer to that, of course, but I just want to put it on the record that that is the case.

I have received literally hundreds of emails, as I know others have, on the debate from my constituents of all ages, both genders, of all political opinions and of all religious persuasions on the importance of speaking up for life and, furthermore, the importance of speaking up for the lives of both the woman and the unborn child. The debates always seem to focus—for some anyway—on the rights of the woman, but the rights of the unborn child are disregarded as though they did not matter.

I want to put my position on the record: it is important to protect the lives of both the ladies and the unborn child. I will refer to that later on, too. I will always be a voice for the unborn child. I believe totally in the right of life and I thank Right To Life UK for its help in preparing evidence-wise for the debate and for some of the things it has made me aware of. I will continue to do this; it is the right thing to do.

I want to address an important point that is often misunderstood in the debate. It is fundamental to what we are talking about. There is no right to abortion in international law. The House has come under intense pressure to change the UK's abortion laws so that they conform with international law, but let me be clear—let us all be clear—that the European convention on human rights does not recognise a right to abortion. The UK is under no obligation, as was mentioned by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) in an intervention, to change this law to conform to international law.

Members should not take my word for it, of course. They should look at the evidential base. The European Court of Human Rights has confirmed that there is no right to abortion in international law. It has maintained that position for the last 30-plus years. The USA, which others have referred to, cannot and should not influence the law in the UK. I am glad to say that the UK retains its own jurisdiction to make its own laws, and there is neither the need nor the demand to change those laws to recognise a right to abortion.

We in Northern Ireland have the jurisdiction to make our own laws on most occasions. On other occasions, we do not have jurisdiction, because other Members think it is better for them to make the decision here rather than the elected representatives back home in Northern Ireland. As my party's spokesperson for health, I want to get across that points on behalf not just of my

[*Jim Shannon*]

constituents but of all those in Northern Ireland, a vast majority of whom feel that their democracy has been overruled. The decision could be made in Scotland, Wales and here in England, but somehow not in Northern Ireland. I want to speak for women in my constituency and Northern Ireland who oppose abortion and do not agree with the legislation that has been imposed on them by Westminster.

I ask the Justice Minister how and why it should be right that legislation on abortion should be passed in Westminster that disrespects the animosity and opposition of those in Northern Ireland. It was in the paper last week that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland could not find a way to ensure the money for energy price increases would be available in Northern Ireland, but guess what? He could find the money to finance abortions in Northern Ireland. With great respect to the Secretary of State, how can he do one thing but not another?

With the recent introduction of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 and the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020, women can now obtain abortions in Northern Ireland. Abortion is available de facto on demand up to 24 weeks' gestation. That was opposed in this House by us and by others, many of whom are here tonight. I find it shocking and very saddening.

I have a constituent who had her daughter at 26 weeks. I have met that lady, and I think others have referred to her. When her daughter was born, she could fit in the palm of her daddy's hand. That is how big that wee morsel was. She is now a full-grown lady. She has a job, drives and lives as happily as anyone else. She is alive today because of the NHS and the system we have. In many years past, a premature baby would not have lived. The point I am making is that if she can survive being born at 26 weeks, why are terminations available at 24 weeks? Allowing on-demand abortions up to 24 weeks does not give the baby a right to life.

In Northern Ireland, 100,000 people are alive today because abortion was not available in Northern Ireland. Those 100,000 people have made a significant contribution to society, have married and have jobs, and they have a positive attitude to life because of that. Those people are alive today. I say again that I believe what has happened to us in Northern Ireland is totally outrageous.

Many people on the other side of the debate, particularly those who take a more globalist view—for want of a better description—try to claim a right to abortion in international law, but the European Court of Human Rights has been crystal clear. Its decisions confirm that article 8 of the European convention on human rights, the right to a private and family life, does not confer a right to abortion. The Court has also ruled that countries can pass laws that ban or restrict abortion, even where the health and wellbeing of the woman is at risk. Such laws would and could not offend article 8.

There is a claim that the public and medical professionals overwhelmingly support decriminalisation. That is simply not the case. Evidence shows that 91% of women agree that sex-selective abortion should be explicitly banned by the law. The support of the Royal College of Midwives for the BPAS campaign on abortion up to birth saw a backlash from over 1,000 midwives protesting the

RCM position and faced national opposition. In his two interventions, the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) mentioned that very case of selective abortion. He and I share the same concern over the potential for that in the future and the impact it will have.

This is a sensitive subject, and there are many strong and emotive views. One issue I set out to put on the record is the matter of coerced abortions from home and the issue of easy access to abortion pills. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and others expressed concern directly to the Minister, and we met on a number of occasions to activate that point of view. As became more noticeable throughout the pandemic, women were subjected to phone calls to discuss their options and were sent pills, often without requesting them and usually under duress. Our concern was—it always was—that that approach is being used maliciously and wrongly. No face-to-face discussion or assessment is a step backward, not forward.

It was not and never should have been the position of Westminster to take any decision on abortion for the Northern Ireland Assembly and my constituents in Strangford, who overwhelmingly oppose this legislation and change. They did not want to see the abortion on demand that we have in Northern Ireland; they stand clearly for the right to life of the unborn child. There must be an element of respect for the thousands of my constituents who said that they do not want abortion on demand up to 24 weeks.

I and many others in this debate, I am glad to say, will stand up on every given occasion and speak up for those constituents and the life of the unborn child. I will also speak up for the constitutional value of Northern Ireland in this United Kingdom, and its place as a legislative body where any decisions on abortion should have taken place in any case. I look forward to the Minister's response, ever mindful that we must protect the woman and the unborn child equally—not to the detriment of one against the other, which is what some Members have proposed today.

5.42 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham, and to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I thank the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for the gracious tone in which she introduced the debate—it is so right, on such a sensitive issue. It is encouraging to note how many colleagues are in the Chamber today to express concern about the wording of this petition, and I join them. The idea of a right to abortion not only conflicts with the established position of international law on the right to life, but would cause huge complications for our domestic law. Including abortion in a Bill of Rights is inappropriate, and likely to result in extensive litigation to establish the extent of such a right. Whatever our views on abortion, the petition is therefore misguided from a legal perspective. I agree with the response of the former Justice Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), who said that there is no strong case for change.

Let me refer to one point made by the hon. Member for Gower, who mentioned just one woman bringing forward this petition. It is true that the petition has been brought in the name of one person, but let us be under

no illusion: the move to classify abortion as a human right is part of a well co-ordinated national and international campaign to do so.

First, let me comment on the subject from the international perspective and make a few points about the robust protection of the right to life in international law, and the explicit rejection of the so-called right to abortion. It is important to start with that perspective, because we have heard it said that the UK must adopt more expansive abortion laws because of international law—but why should we? We are not under any obligation to liberalise abortion laws from international legal texts. None of the nine core treaties recognised by the UN have recognised abortion as a human right. By common definition, human rights are inherent or inalienable rights or freedoms afforded to every person without discrimination. They must be upheld and protected by Governments, and I am sure that any new Bill of Rights in this country will seek to robustly uphold those fundamental rights, but international texts on human rights have never included abortion. I shall reference that with four points.

First, the international covenant on civil and political rights affirms the inherent right to life. It contains a provision explicitly to protect the life of a pregnant woman. In the preparatory texts, or *travaux préparatoires*—I think I have nearly got the French right—it is explained that that is to

“save the life of an innocent unborn child”.

Secondly, the declaration of the rights of the child states that

“the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth...the need for such special safeguards has been...recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.

That quote from the declaration of the rights of the child was confirmed by the convention on the rights of the child.

The UK has ratified all three of those treaties. Indeed, the preamble to the convention on the rights of the child was very much the impetus behind our landmark Children Act 1989. Under that convention, all countries are obligated to

“ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child”,

including the unborn child.

Dr Julian Lewis: I have been listening to both sides here and I am not hearing an answer to one question that seems to me fundamental: at what point does a fertilised egg become a viable human being with rights? From one side, I am not hearing any recognition that a baby about to be born is actually viable and has rights; and from the other side, I am not hearing that a newly fertilised egg is not yet a viable human being and therefore does not have the same rights as a human being. It is going to be a dialogue of the deaf until both sides recognise that this is a spectrum and not an either/or.

Fiona Bruce: That discussion has been ongoing for a long time. Many in this room hold different views on the subject. I happen to believe that life begins at conception, but I know that others take a different view.

Thirdly, the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, CEDAW, also does not advance any concept of a right to abortion. Nowhere in the text does it reference terms such as “reproductive rights”, “pregnancy termination” or “abortion”. Instead, it requires states to provide suitable care and services for women during pregnancy. Fourthly, the former UN special rapporteur for health has told the UN General Assembly that there is no international law on the matter of abortion.

It is also important for us to note that the European Court of Human Rights has never ruled that countries in the Council of Europe need to consider abortion as a human right, even though it has considered the matter several times over the past 20 years. Three points are relevant here. First, the Court has affirmed that article 8 of the European convention on human rights, the right to a private and family life, cannot be interpreted as conferring a right to abortion. I will quote from a 2010 case:

“The woman’s right to respect for her private life must be weighed against other competing rights and freedoms...including those of the unborn child”.

Secondly, the Court has ruled that forced abortions are a breach of article 3—the prohibition on torture—noting that forced abortions can have

“long-lasting negative physical and psychological effects”

on women. Thirdly, the Court has reaffirmed that there is no actual right to abortion, even in the—I accept—tragic case of rape.

The UK really is under no pressure from the UN or from the European Court of Human Rights to reform its abortion law by classifying abortion as a human right. I would now like to consider the issue from the domestic perspective. I know that we have already had a lengthy discussion of the subject during today’s debate, but I would like us to acknowledge how chaotic it would make our laws here if we included abortion as a right—as a human right.

We have already had the discussion, and there are different views on what a right to abortion would mean. Would it equate to the wholesale decriminalisation of abortion? Would it create an absolute right to abortion? Could it mean the removal of gestational limits, allowing abortion up to birth? Could it mean abortion based on the gender of the foetus or the removal of medical safeguards, including the involvement of doctors? Would it mean the erosion of conscience rights for medical professionals? All of those questions would be thrown up.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I genuinely thank the hon. Lady for giving way. One of the things I try to grapple with is knowing how women feel. When I was on the Women and Equalities Committee—the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) knows this, because she was the Chair—I listened to the women. Does the hon. Member for Congleton really believe they should be criminalised?

Fiona Bruce: I have the utmost compassion for any woman put in the position of having to make a decision about abortion. I hope that nothing I have said in all my years in this House, when I have stood as the chair and now co-chair of the all-party parliamentary pro-life group, has ever given a different impression. I would never want to do that.

[*Fiona Bruce*]

The proposal risks entirely removing safeguards in our country that relate to abortion, and which I believe are right and proper.

Dame Maria Miller: My hon. Friend is making an important case that she believes has a great deal of strength in terms of the matter not being viewed as part of a human rights argument, but does she not share my concern that every single royal college of doctors—experts in this area—want to see a change in the law? Does she not think that, even if it is not possible to do it through a Bill of Rights, some other piece of Government work is needed to make sure the law is fit for purpose, or does she think they are all wrong?

Fiona Bruce: It is very interesting that a large number of organisations, as my right hon. Friend has mentioned, are joining together in what I referred to earlier as a national and, indeed, international campaign to see the law changed on abortion. It is all part of a co-ordinated move to reduce the protection that already exists in our country today for the unborn child.

Jim Shannon: I fully support what the hon. Lady is saying. In my contribution I referred to the Royal College of Midwives and the 1,000 midwives who expressed concern the direction this is going. Opinion is divided between those in favour of abortion and those who are against. Clearly, we cannot move forward when there is division among the doctors and nurses themselves.

Fiona Bruce: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. In this country we already allow abortions to term where the unborn child has a relatively minor and correctable physical condition. I have spoken about that many times before in the House because I have a son who was born with a club foot. Some 90% of babies with Down's syndrome are aborted. A right to abortion would open the door to even more abortions after 24 weeks—a period of time inconsistent with medical advances that now enable babies prematurely born before that time to survive to 22, and in some cases even 21, weeks.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Notwithstanding my hon. Friend's principled view, which I respect, that life begins at conception, she has now addressed the question that my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) asked: when do rights come to the child? The answer is: on the basis of viability outside the womb. Whether we have got the dates right or not, I do not know, but that is the answer to his question.

[*SIR CHARLES WALKER in the Chair.*]

Fiona Bruce: I am relieved that it is for this House to make a decision on when we review those weeks. I am hopeful that we will continue to be in a position to do so for a long time to come. We now need to look at that issue again, and see a reduction in the number of weeks from 24.

We know that late-term abortions are unsafe for women. Most European countries have abortion gestation limits of 12 to 14 weeks—half of ours—and research shows that late-term abortions are distressing. Finally, polling shows that women do not want a time limit increase. All that would be thrown into the mix if abortion were classed as a human right.

In conclusion, there are many other things I could say against this petition, but I will just ask the House a simple question: what type of society do we want to create for our country? Surely it is one that promotes a culture that upholds and respects life, including unborn life. I am so grateful to live in an age where I know there is science behind me to say that a beating heart can be detected at six weeks' gestation, that the ability to feel pain can be evidenced from as early as 12 weeks, and that the sucking of thumbs can be seen at 15 weeks. I stand for the rights of the unborn because it is undeniable that they have life. As the campaign slogan states, "Both lives matter." Let us develop laws that better protect the life of the unborn child, alongside the lives of women.

5.56 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this timely debate, which we greatly need. I want to put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who is my good friend, for the tone in which she has led this debate. It is incredibly important and powerful, and she has led it with a great deal of respect and dignity. I also thank our petitioner Caitlin and everyone who signed the petition to bring forward the debate. I will keep my comments brief, mostly because I have already spoken at length about the need to keep abortion services available for all women.

Let us be clear: abortion is a basic healthcare right that must be available to all who seek it. We are extremely fortunate in this country to have an incredible NHS at the heart of our communities. Although it may be under severe strain at the moment—that is definitely a debate for another day—it is important that services such as abortion remain properly funded and fully accessible. As others have said, we only have to turn our eye to what is happening across the world, particularly in the United States of America and Poland, to see how easily the fundamental right of what is essentially healthcare can be rapidly dismantled.

We must also acknowledge that abortion is an extremely sensitive and emotive issue that engenders passionate views on both sides. It is vital that anyone considering an abortion receives impartial, non-directive and clinical information on pregnancy in order to make an informed choice. That is why I share the concerns of many signatories of this e-petition.

As the Government consider their position on all our civil liberties in the Bill of Rights, they must consider whether abortion rights are appropriate in that legislation. We all know the many reasons why an abortion might be sought; I do not need to list them. However, we must remind ourselves that behind every abortion is a woman with a story—often a complicated one, at that—and a choice. It is that choice that we are seeking to protect. That is why we cannot bring politics or judgment of any kind into decisions over healthcare availability.

Like colleagues from across the House, I am keen to hear from the Minister about his plans to enshrine abortion rights in UK law. If the Government decide not to bring forward this Bill, where would be the best legislative fit for us to enshrine those rights? We have discussed the need for it to happen. If this Bill is not the appropriate place, will the Minister clarify where exactly would be the best place for Members—hijackers—to settle this once and for all? We need to push for change.

I also want to push the Minister to discuss with his Cabinet colleagues in the Department of Health when we can expect the women's health strategy, because it is vital to ensure that women have access to safe abortions.

We are in the very sad position of needing to have our rights placed on the statute book in order for them to be valid. It should not have to be that way. I wish abortion was an option readily available to everyone everywhere who is seeking support, no matter their circumstances. I hope that the Minister can alleviate my concerns today. I look forward to working constructively with him and other Members across the House to ensure that abortion remains a top healthcare priority for this Government, and a human right. All women should be protected and ensured access to safe abortion.

5.59 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles.

Clearly, those on the opposite side in this debate want to make it seem as if the woman's right to choose is under threat and perhaps becoming increasingly difficult, but when we look at the evidence the reality is that it has never been easier to access an abortion in this country, in particular since the decision to allow medical abortions to happen at home. According to *The Times*, one in four pregnancies in Great Britain ends in abortion. Last year, 214,000 terminations were carried out in England and Wales—the highest number since records began—and nearly half were repeat abortions.

Those who wish, in essence, to decriminalise abortion often make the claim that they have overwhelming public support in their favour, in particular among women. The evidence, however, does not bear that out; in fact, it points in totally the opposite direction. Removing all legal restrictions would risk opening the door to late-term abortions on demand right up until birth and for any reason whatever. Polling by Savanta ComRes paints a clear picture of how out of step that is with public opinion: only 1% of women wanted the 24-week gestational time limit to be extended, while 70% favoured a reduction in time limits.

Dame Maria Miller: In talking about decriminalisation, we now have a model in Northern Ireland that brings the idea into practice. Does my hon. Friend have any evidence that end-of-term abortions are happening in Northern Ireland? I am not aware of any. It appears to be a way of shaping our law in a modern way, rather than a way that replicates Victorian times.

Scott Benton: The point I was trying to make was that, in practice, decriminalisation means no specific law regulating abortion up until birth. That is the problem we are grappling with.

Stella Creasy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Scott Benton: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I shall make some progress. She spoke for just over 20 minutes. I will take an intervention at a later point.

The EU median time limit for abortion is 12 weeks. Since the point at which a baby is viable outside the womb is now closer to 22 weeks, far from discarding our time limits, it is clear that we should look to reduce them.

Briefly, I will turn to same-sex selective abortion, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) alluded. Unfortunately, there is growing evidence for, and first-hand testimony of, women in this country who have been coerced by their partner or family into obtaining a sex-selective abortion. That disproportionately targets baby girls. As regressive as that may seem, sex-selective abortion would become entirely permissible under the decriminalisation that some would like to see. We must think about the message that that sends to women and girls, the chief victims of such an abhorrent practice. Allowing sex-selective abortion does not empower or advance women's rights; we need to show girls that we will not allow sex-selective discrimination, because they contribute to and are valued by society every bit as much as boys.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Those women who have been coerced—would the hon. Gentleman criminalise them?

Scott Benton: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution. I think she is merging two very different matters. I reiterate my point: decriminalisation in effect allows abortion up until any point.

Stella Creasy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Scott Benton: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will make some progress.

Stella Creasy: On a point of order, Sir Charles. The Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 set out incredibly clearly what the requirements are—

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. That is not a point of order. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly entitled not to take interventions.

Scott Benton: Additionally, decriminalisation risks paving the way for abortion on request for a baby that has a minor disability or a particular genetic trait—as just alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). Abortion of babies with disabilities is sadly already present in our society. Babies have been aborted because they have minor conditions such as a club foot, even though that can be completely corrected through surgery. That is clear discrimination on the basis of disability, as brave campaigners such as Heidi Crowter have shown.

Babies with disabilities will grow up to contribute to and enrich our society. They must be treated and valued equally. With this and everything else I have mentioned, removing the few existing safeguards to the law, which decriminalisation would do, would send a signal to society that discrimination against babies with disabilities and sex-selective abortions are morally acceptable. This petition is simply not a serious proposal, and, as the polling shows, its goals are not supported by the general population, especially the women of this country. The evidence shows that they want more sensible and humane limits to abortion that respect the fundamental dignity and equality that each human being has, regardless of their characteristics.

6.5 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I thank you, Sir Charles, for calling me to speak, and the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for the way in

[*Ian Paisley*]

which she introduced the petition. It was obvious to most that the hon. Member may not have agreed with everything in the petition—and that places a person in a difficult circumstance when introducing a petition—but I thank her none the less for the gracious way in which she introduced it.

This debate is about the right to an abortion being uniquely enshrined in law in the United Kingdom via a Bill of Rights. It is so unique that something that destroys, not protects, should be put in a Bill of Rights. We need to see this in that light, because we normally bring in laws that have a declaratory positive framework. This has a negative framework. I say that with all true compassion because, as was said in the House, no one wants to see a situation where a woman feels she has to have an abortion or that an abortion is her only way out, but having something enshrined in a Bill of Rights and framed in that new constitutional dispensation would be totally abhorrent to how law should be made in the United Kingdom.

Many of my constituents who have spoken to me about this matter in advance of the debate see it as fundamentally wrong and many have expressed that it is fundamentally evil to create law on the issue of life because it is such a fraught matter, and it is important that that point of view is listened to. Many have talked about the international legal position. The European convention on human rights, which, at best, will be the main template on which a UK Bill of Rights—if it is ever drawn up—will be based, does not enshrine the right to an abortion or to give an abortion. It does not touch on that matter at all for the obvious reasons I have already stated: it is not its place to do so. This is a matter of domestic law, and for the rights that many people on the other side of the argument are seeking to protect, I would go as far as to say that those rights are stronger under our British constitutional system of domestic law than they would be under a rights-based type of law on the matter.

The debate has been shrouded from time to time—not in this Chamber, but outside it in arriving at this petition—in misinformation. We saw the social media issues. In fact, TikTok had to take down some comments. People were being falsely driven to sign the petition on the basis of misinformation. Of course, I still think the debate would have come about, and we should not run away from the issue. I agree with hon. Members, for all different sorts of reasons, that it is important that the debate takes place, but it should not be brought to the House because of misinformation, by a social media campaign, or as a result of a vanity project by someone who wants to clutch to a moment of fame on this matter. That is not the reason we should be doing this; we should be doing it for the right reasons.

Tonia Antoniazzi: The whole ethos of the Petitions Committee, and the intent of the petitioner—she is sitting in Public Gallery behind the hon. Member, if he would like to speak to her after the debate—is not about that. When we had the debate on assisted dying, there were accusations against groups and organisations. That is not what the Petitions Committee is about. It is not misinformation; it is about where people choose to get their information from. The fact that we are here shows that the Petitions Committee is working, and that a person's voice can be heard in Parliament.

Ian Paisley: I think the hon. Member maybe misheard me, because I was not challenging the right to have the debate. I was challenging the misinformation on social media that encouraged people to falsely sign the petition. If the debate is so positive, there should be no negativity behind encouraging people to sign it. The word “ethos” is very interesting; its Greek origins show that it should actually be about an ethic. It should be something that has character to it, not something that is denuded of character and strength. I think the hon. Member misheard what I was getting at and the point I was making.

This lays bare how wrong it is—and the falsehood and naivety involved—to bring a debate to this House and try to shape our laws based on experiences of the American legal constitutional system. If we juxtapose them, it just does not work. We have a parliamentary democracy and statute law, versus the written constitution of the United States of America and all the issues that flow from that.

There is then another layer set upon that juxtaposition in saying that this is about fear because of what happened with *Roe v. Wade*—a completely separate issue again. It is naive to say that we should try to change our whole system to embrace and address that issue because of what has happened in the United States of America. It would be far better having a much more open and honest debate, rather than one that is based on fear of something that might happen.

Dame Maria Miller: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about not having misinformation. Would he agree with me that we have to be very careful not to conflate deregulation with decriminalisation? I think that happened in a couple of the earlier contributions. The hon. Gentleman will know from Northern Ireland that although we have introduced decriminalisation, that has not deregulated the controls that are there for abortion. That is a really important point.

Ian Paisley: That is an important point that I will come to later when I touch on the matter of decriminalisation.

There were 214,869 abortions in 2021. I looked that up. That is about 40,000 people short of the population of Walthamstow. Just think of the number, if we were to line them up. Do you know what that says to me, Sir Charles? It speaks to the utter, abysmal failure of abortion regulations. Why so many? Why, after so many years—decades and decades of this regulation—is that necessary? There were 214,869 women who felt it was necessary to have an abortion.

Dr Lewis: I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman, but he is not going to carry the House with an argument that says that the number of abortions is equivalent to the human population of a city when a vast proportion of those abortions will have been at a very early stage—barely fertilised eggs. Although I see Members on the Opposition Benches nodding in agreement with me, I say to them that the demand for an absolute right to abortion similarly but in reverse fails to recognise that a very late-term abortion is killing an embryo that is viable. That is why this is a dialogue of the deaf.

Ian Paisley: I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman feels it is a dialogue of the deaf; I do not think that is the case. It is important that we are, for the first time in a

long time, actually having a sensible debate on this matter, because in numerous debates on abortion in the past, people—principally male Members of the House—have been silenced. They have been called out, heckled and told not to speak on an issue that does not concern them. Indeed, we heard the comment earlier in the debate that behind every abortion is a woman—full stop. No, no, no: behind every pregnancy is not only a woman but the life of the unborn and the male who was involved in that pregnancy. Until we have full engagement and an educational process that addresses those issues and gets this nation into a proper debate on this matter—not in a climate of fear and of, “I’d better not speak out because we’re not allowed to say these things any more; they are too difficult to say if you’re a man”—I am afraid this will be a debate of the deaf, but it does not have to be. That is the point.

Carla Lockhart: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Men do matter and he is absolutely right to say so. Some 82% of all abortions last year were for women whose marital status was given as single. I commend the men who support their partners and children, and we need more men to do the same. This House is at risk of silencing those men who do stand up and take responsibility for pregnancies.

Ian Paisley: I thank my hon. Friend for that point.

In 2022, there were double the number of abortions in Northern Ireland than there were in the previous year. The number doubles each year, and will continue to double, because of the very liberal legislation that is now in place in Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) put on the record that one in four of all pregnancies in the United Kingdom end in abortion. In England and Wales, abortions can take place up to the extreme limit of six months, whereas the European median time limit is three months. We need to have a debate about why we have an extreme time limit and why some people wish to drive it even further, to the point of birth, as a right. I just think that is wrong.

We certainly need to have a debate about why there is so much abortion in the United Kingdom. To go back to the point made by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), why are second and third-time pregnancies leading to abortion? Why are older women having abortions? Those questions need to be asked. It cannot all be ectopic, it cannot all be rape, it cannot all be incest and it cannot all be miscarriage.

Stella Creasy *rose*—

Tonia Antoniazzi *rose*—

Ian Paisley: I give way to the hon. Member for Gower.

Tonia Antoniazzi: The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. He is right to say that no one should be silenced, which is what I wanted to achieve with this debate. Everybody has a choice, but it is ultimately the woman’s body and it is ultimately her choice. We must not conflate that, because it is really important to women and girls everywhere, and not all have the privilege, as we do, to have the comfort of bringing up a child.

Ian Paisley: I understand the hon. Member’s point, but of course there are two sets of DNA, two bloodstreams, two lives and two heartbeats. It is more than just the woman’s body. While I accept that women have a very difficult choice to make and are sometimes put in a horrible position by irresponsible and selfish men, women are sometimes talked out of the choice to protect a life. I have seen and heard it, and I want to make sure that there is a choice to allow the life to flourish and to grow, and that there are other opportunities beyond the womb. That is something that we should of course be dwelling on.

Stella Creasy: The hon. Gentleman and I have debated this issue in many different ways, and I know he does not mean to sound like he is suggesting that it is okay if a man tells a woman that she has to have the baby but not okay if he supports her choice to have an abortion. That would be the corollary of what he is saying.

Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that when it comes to legalisation in Northern Ireland, we did not just have decriminalisation and we did not just take away the Offences Against the Person Act 1861? We also brought in laws to regulate how a woman can access an abortion. There is no late-term abortion or sex selection in Northern Ireland. The Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 cover precisely those issues, so it is not that enshrining a human rights perspective leads to no regulation; it removes the criminal element of our old regulation and allows us to have these debates.

Ian Paisley: Of course, the issue is that the hon. Member cannot say that there is no late termination, because she does not know; she cannot say that there is no sex selection, because she cannot know. The law now masks that and does not allow us to know that, because it is a right to have it as of a right, not because there is a reason. That is the issue. Indeed, I know it is an issue that the hon. Member would like to have here—I know she would like to have termination right up to the point of birth, for whatever reason. It is an issue—

Stella Creasy: That is a misrepresentation.

Ian Paisley: Maybe the hon. Member does not want it right up to the point of birth, but she certainly wants the most liberal interpretation of the law that is possible. We will disagree on that, but the attempt to silence people from having the conversation on this matter is of course morally wrong. I hope we never get to that position.

I said that I wanted to touch on the issue of decriminalisation, because that has been an important point in this debate and there are difficult cases. Of course, we are talking about such a small number, which was touched on earlier: 17 cases in seven or eight years, I think, in the United Kingdom. Yes, it was difficult for the 17 people who have been questioned on this matter, and more difficult for the two people who have been charged.

Let us deal with one of the cases in which a charge was brought: that of Sarah Catt in 2010. The examples of women who were prosecuted following late-term abortions include Sarah Catt in 2010, who took abortion pills at a 38 or 39-week gestation and then buried the body of the child. The judge in the case said that “all right-thinking people would consider this more serious than involuntary manslaughter or indeed any offence save murder.”

[*Ian Paisley*]

The judge also said that no remorse was detected. How would that case be dealt with under a new dispensation where there is no criminalisation? Would we create a gap in the law that would allow for people to, quite frankly, get away with murder? That is the unfortunate circumstance.

We also have circumstances in which men wrongly try to enforce or encourage an abortion on a partner who is pregnant by hiding tablets, by putting tablets into a drink to spike it, or by trying to encourage them to have a miscarriage and forcing that. With decriminalisation, how would a clever lawyer get those people off that particular charge? It would happen.

We could enter into this new dispensation of a rights base—putting this into the Bill of Rights in the United Kingdom—that would be abhorrent in terms of the law, because there are people who, unfortunately, do commit criminal offences and do commit them around pregnant women, and there are women who are pregnant and commit such offences, and the law should try to deal with it. Yes, the law should deal with it sensitively, but it should deal with it proportionately. I think 17 cases in seven years is proportionate, given that we have about 900,000 pregnancies in the United Kingdom annually.

6.23 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles, and to speak in this debate, which was so elegantly introduced by the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi).

There are two things to look at. First, there is the question of the Bill of Rights, which the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said I might mention, because this issue is about trying to impose an American construction on the British constitution and I do not think that in that sense it actually works. For example, it is much forgotten that the British Bill of Rights has a right to bear arms for the maintenance of a Protestant militia, which may be more welcome among some Opposition Members than it is for me personally. I see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is nodding in favour of having a Protestant militia. The second amendment to the similar US Bill of Rights—the US constitution—maintains the right to bear arms, again for the purpose of a militia, and that has become an absolute in the US constitution, whereas our right to bear arms has been gradually changed by Parliament over the centuries, so that it is completely controlled.

I do not, then, really see what the petitioners are trying to achieve in what they ask for. They want the right to abortion to be particularly protected, but what they are talking about is not a protection: it is protection protectionless, because any subsequent Act of Parliament could automatically change it in whatever way Parliament decided. As my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) correctly pointed out, there is no greater protection than something being in an Act of Parliament, and that is already the situation that exists. There is not a majority in Parliament to change that. Whether there is a majority in the country at large—we have heard about some opinion polling—who would like to see it changed is another matter, and a

matter for debate. However, the law is as solid as it can be from the point of view of those who are in favour of abortion legislation as it is.

The petition therefore misfires on those grounds alone. It would make no sense to introduce this matter into the Bill of Rights that the Government are bringing forward. The Bill actually deals with the relationship between the Executive, the legislature and the courts, rather than trying to move to a codified constitution which, as far as I am aware, is not the policy of His Majesty's Government. If it were, I am not sure I would support it. The Bill of Rights, as proposed, is a sensible step towards establishing how the Executive and the judiciary relate now that we no longer have the European Court of Justice sitting above us. The Bill is not right for the particular proposition brought forward by the petitioner.

There is then the issue of abortion itself, which obviously underlies this whole debate. To me, it is the greatest sadness that the number of abortions that take place each year take place. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) pointed out that there were 214,869 last year. I think all sides would agree that this is a matter of the deepest sadness. There is nobody who welcomes abortion or wants there to be this very high level of abortion. Think of it over the period since the Abortion Act came in: more than 10 million babies have been aborted. We know that there are more than 100,000 people alive today in Northern Ireland who would not otherwise be alive had Northern Ireland had the Abortion Act like the rest of the United Kingdom. We know this to be true because pro-abortionists complained about this claim to the Advertising Standards Authority. As I understand it, the Advertising Standards Authority said that the number being claimed was actually lower than the reality, instead of being overstated.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said that we cannot look at it in terms of numbers of cities and people like that, but we can. There are more than 100,000 people in Northern Ireland who are alive today who would not be alive had Northern Ireland had the abortion rules that we have in England, Wales and Scotland. That seems to be a modern tragedy: this number of people had no opportunity for a life because they were ripped untimely from their mother's womb. Think of that number: 214,869. In a four-year period, the destruction of life is as great as it was in the four-year period of the first world war. Those are the numbers we are dealing with. That is the tragedy of abortion.

Dr Lewis: May I slightly correct what my right hon. Friend has just said? It is not the destruction of life, in many cases, but the destruction of potential life—unless one agrees, as I think my right hon. Friend would, with our hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), that life begins at the moment of conception. However, most people do not agree with that: they believe that life develops during the course of gestation. That is why my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour, the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), is right when he says that the embryo acquires rights along the way, not from the outset.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend raises the question of the viability of life. The viability of life—when does that start, Sir Charles? When do you think a life

becomes a fully independent created life? Perhaps my right hon. Friend thinks we should be like the ancient Romans in their treatment of the newborn baby. St Macrina rescued newborn babies who had been exposed in ancient Rome because their life was not viable without intervention and support. They were allowed to die, until the early Christians, who were thought to be peculiar for doing so, went and saved them. It was particularly the case, as it happens, with disabled babies. We know that the abortion laws we have allow for the full-term abortion of babies with minor disabilities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) pointed out. This is the tragedy of abortion and its destruction of life. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East wants to quibble about when life begins. I accept that this is perhaps more a theological question about what is the start of life, but that new embryo has the potential for life. It has been formed as a separate being that is separate and different from the parents from which it came.

Alex Davies-Jones: Does the right hon. Member agree that in cases such as fatal foetal abnormality syndrome or ectopic pregnancies, where the life of the woman would be put at risk, abortion is acceptable, or do those lives not matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The job of doctors is to save life. It is quite clear that an ectopic pregnancy that may threaten the life of the woman carrying the baby is a case where an intervention may be made to save the life of the woman. That is a perfectly traditional and acceptable understanding of how to maximise the saving of life, while not pretending that there is not life, because there is. There are two lives.

Dr Lewis: I will not keep intervening, but I take slight objection to the use of the word “quibble”. I readily acknowledge that there is vast uncertainty and a grey area about the point, or at least the part of the spectrum, at which potential life becomes a viable human being. Just because we cannot identify an exact point in the process does not preclude that, at the beginning of the process, the fertilised egg is only a potential human being without the same rights as the viable human being at the end of the process.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The viable point is one that my right hon. Friend admits he cannot define, but there is a clear point of conception where there is a new genetic entity. It is unbelievably clear and straightforward. To say that there is some later date—it may be 21, 22 or 24 weeks—is not the heart of the argument. The heart of the argument is actually that this new life started at the point of conception. The tragedy is the 214,869 lives lost last year.

Stella Creasy: The right hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. Given the train of thought he is coming up with, would he support the right of women to choose to have an abortion were they a victim of rape or incest?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the destruction of life is wrong. I do not believe that we should say that a new life should be destroyed. I do not believe that that is the right of the state. I do not believe we can put it into a Bill of Rights, even if we were the United States and

had a Bill of Rights of the same constitutional standing as theirs. The hon. Member for North Antrim is right. He said that Bills of Rights are usually about protecting and preserving and ensuring that people are able to get on with their life. This is about destroying life. This is the cult of death. It is the great tragedy of abortion, and it is considered normal.

The extraordinarily high number of babies that are destroyed is something that should sadden us all to the depths of our souls. The idea that we would protect something that is so wrong and ignores that second life, and that we should say that it is an absolute right on par with free elections, seems to me to be an absolute tragedy. I think this petition misfires. I think it is wrong constitutionally and much more wrong morally, because it prefers death to life.

6.34 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I would like to begin by making the following observation. Over the debate, it has become very clear that Members lobbying to repeal the UK’s abortion laws say that they speak for all women, and that they are on their side. Of course, I want to make it very clear that they do not speak for all women, and they certainly do not speak for the unborn. In fact, we hear little to no mention of the unborn. If not for those of us who are champions of both lives in pregnancies, we would hear nothing of the unborn from the lips of those who pursue their pro-choice agenda.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Will the hon. Member give way?

Carla Lockhart: I have just started, so I am going to continue. I will give way later.

I want to make it clear that those Members do not speak for all women. I will focus on the women who I do not believe they speak for. One young woman, Malorie Bantala, refused to have an abortion and was violently assaulted by her ex-boyfriend, Kevin Wilson. When she returned home from her baby shower, she suffered life-threatening injuries, and her son was stillborn as a result.

Caroline Craft had been in a relationship with Matthew Cherry, a former police officer, but they broke up when she refused to have an abortion. When she was six months pregnant, Miss Craft opened her front door to find an attacker—who turned out to be Mr Cherry—who punched her repeatedly in her stomach and back, in a way that targeted her unborn baby to cause miscarriage. At sentencing, the judge remarked that it was an “evil attack” involving

“a high degree of planning”.

Fortunately, Caroline recovered from her injuries and gave birth to a healthy baby boy. A jury convicted Mr Cherry of attempting to cause grievous bodily harm, with intent, and he was sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment.

Finally, when Lauren Oliver was 34 weeks pregnant, her ex-partner, Nicholas Leaning, a professional cage fighter, stabbed her five times in the stomach in an attempt to kill her unborn child. Again, the details of the case are chilling. Ms Oliver and Mr Leaning had just broken up when Ms Oliver learned she was pregnant

[Carla Lockhart]

with his child. When she refused to get an abortion, he said he would kick it out of her if he had to—he did not want anything to do with the baby. An emergency caesarean section delivered her baby six weeks early, who, astonishingly, was unharmed in the attack. A jury found Mr Leaning guilty of wounding Ms Oliver and attempting to destroy the life of a child. He was sentenced to 19 years' imprisonment.

As those cases demonstrate, the laws in place are being used to prosecute often violent men and protect women from serious forms of violence. This new dispensation would take away those protections for Caroline, Lauren and Malorie, which ensure that the Kevin Wilsons, the Matthew Cherrys and the Nicholas Leanings of the world are punished for their despicable crimes. How can Members who seek to repeal the UK's abortion laws claim to be on the side of women, yet stand in opposition to those women who have suffered life-threatening injuries at the hands of those violent men?

According to the charity Best Beginnings, over a third of domestic violence starts or gets worse when a woman is pregnant. Some 40% to 60% of women experiencing domestic violence are abused while pregnant, while 15% of women report violence during their pregnancy. Those are worrying figures. If we contemplate removing legal protections for those women, we would be profoundly letting them down when they are at their most vulnerable. We cannot let rhetoric replace the real protections in place for women.

Throughout the debate, we have heard many people mention Northern Ireland and the laws that were forced on the people of Northern Ireland. Those laws do not represent the people and the views of Northern Ireland

Tonia Antoniazzi: The hon. Lady will understand that, in this debate, it has been important to choose one's words carefully. We do think about all women, including the women in Northern Ireland. The Women and Equalities Committee heard evidence from them in the last Parliament. We must choose our words more carefully, because we are responsible—we are legislators—and we need to realise that we all care for all women. That is why we are here.

Carla Lockhart: Certainly, I can relate to that. I do care for all women, and I want to see a society that helps women to choose life. I want to see a society that wraps its arms around women who find themselves in a situation where they feel they have no other option. I want to see services improved for women who find themselves in that situation, but the laws that have been forced on the people of Northern Ireland are not what people in Northern Ireland want. The consultation results were very clear: 79% of respondents to the consultation on the legislation opposed the introduction of these laws, which are some of the most liberal abortion laws in all of Europe, so it is just wrong to say that the people of Northern Ireland support them. It has absolutely undermined the devolution process that is in place. Health is a devolved issue and should therefore be left to the people of Northern Ireland.

I do choose my words carefully. I am from Northern Ireland, so I know exactly where people are at, and I know the views and the concerns that have been expressed

about those abortion laws. We see continual attempts to interfere in Northern Ireland's abortion laws, and we are going to see that again tomorrow through the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Bill. I say respectfully that the legislators in Northern Ireland should be allowed to do what they need to do on this issue, because it is a devolved issue.

When talking about statistics, it is important to note the ComRes data, which has been mentioned a couple of times in the debate. Only 1% of people surveyed want the abortion time limit raised to birth; 70% of women would like the current abortion time limit to be reduced; and 59% of women would like that time limit lowered to 16 weeks. It is wrong to say that the overwhelming view of women in Northern Ireland is in favour of this decriminalisation, which basically allows for abortion until birth for any reason.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): In relation to the decriminalisation of abortion, murder—I term it as murder—has been an issue. We had the Omagh bombing, where the lives of the two unborn are included in the numbers of those who were killed, and those who will be convicted will be charged with the murder of the two unborn babies as well.

Carla Lockhart: That is a very powerful point well made by my hon. Friend.

We have heard in today's debate that behind every abortion is a woman who deserves a choice. I think those were the words used; I may be paraphrasing, but it was something to that effect. Respectfully, I say that behind every abortion, there are two lives: the life of the woman, and the life of the unborn. Unfortunately, the unborn does not have a voice. They cannot speak up for themselves; they cannot articulate the fact that they would choose life—I know the unborn would choose life, because ultimately, life is precious. I respectfully ask all of those who are involved in this debate, and those who will be involved in tomorrow's debate, to respect the unborn. I will continue to be a voice for the voiceless, as many in the Chamber today have articulated. In every pregnancy, the most basic human right is the right to life.

6.44 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to again serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for presenting this petition, and particularly for the sensitivity with which she did so, outlining the complexities thrown up by the petition and the role that a Bill of Rights could—or, perhaps, could not—play in furthering women's rights over their own bodies. I also thank Caitlin, who is in the Public Gallery, for the petition itself. Whether there are bigger campaigns in play around the world or around the country, it is a great thing for democracy that an individual citizen can hold all of us in this place to account through hard work and dedication to their own particular cause.

I completely understand and recognise the very real anxieties that have prompted this debate. It is an outrage that 36 million women in 26 American states were stripped of their right to a safe and legal abortion when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned earlier this year; it was a

devastating setback for women's rights in the United States. It reminds us that we must be vigilant in the protection of our hard-won rights, especially in the face of organised far-right campaigners who seek to roll them back.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Cunningham: No, not at the moment. It was not until 1967 that women in Britain won the right to a safe and legal abortion, and it was just three years ago that 99 MPs voted to keep abortion illegal in Northern Ireland, including the current Secretary of State for Justice. I will begin by affirming the Labour party's commitment to a woman's right to choose. We believe that access to a safe, legal abortion should be available throughout the UK, and we will always protect and safeguard that right.

We have had many contributions today. The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) pressed the opinion that Parliament should remain sovereign in abortion policy, so perhaps he will also support decriminalisation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and I have had a few conversations and exchanged emails in the last 24 hours or so. She talked about the need for clarity on any rights under a Bill of Rights, and stressed how it would still be subject to challenge. She talked about variable rights in different parts of the UK and the need for a consistent approach, but ultimately about the need for a woman to have the right to determine what happens to their own body.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) was supportive of the work to give women autonomy over their own bodies. I am not surprised—I have heard her speak on many occasions. She also summarised current legislation and queried the investigation of medical abortions. Like so many people she, of course, supports decriminalisation.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) had a very different opinion, but he spoke of the need to respect each other's views and explained what he saw as the view of the Northern Irish people and why legislators should be mindful of that. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) took the usual robust approach in defining her view. She relied on international legislation and various treaties in support of opposition to abortion in all its forms, but it was good to hear her say, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower, that she did not believe that women seeking an abortion should be criminalised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) spoke about a healthcare right and a properly funded and available service, and I agree with that. She stressed that behind every abortion was a woman with a decision to make.

The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) questioned the evidence of overwhelming public approval to decriminalise abortion, but I did not hear why he actually believed that. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) stressed that men should be involved in any abortion decision, rather than it being a woman's decision alone, but he also raised the rights of a woman who a man may try to force to have an abortion against her will.

The right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) spoke on what he believed was a "cult of death". He then said that he would rule out abortion in all circumstances, including rape and incest.

The hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) spoke of the need for women to be protected from men, and stressed the horrific figures of domestic violence in her area. It has been a robust debate, with lots of contributions.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The hon. Member began his excellent summing up of the debate by quoting, I think, that 126 million women had lost their right to abortion. I do not want to get involved in the detail of US politics, but the reality is that many of those women will retain their rights under state legislation. It was simply a question of the federal right being removed.

Alex Cunningham: I do not disagree with the right hon. Member, but the fact remains that there are lessons for us to learn from what is happening in America.

The introduction of the Human Rights Act 1998 is one of the proudest achievements of our Labour party. We are deeply concerned about the Government's attacks on it. I have a number of reservations about the mechanism proposed by the petition. First, the Government's rights removal Bill—they call it a Bill of Rights—is shambolic. It would divide the nations of the UK, weaken the rule of law and create additional barriers to British people seeking justice.

The End Violence Against Women Coalition described the Bill as

"a major step backwards for victims and survivors' ability to seek justice and a direct attack on women's rights.

We have long called on the government to save our Human Rights Act, which is an essential tool for upholding women's rights to live free from violence. It provides victims and survivors with essential legal protections, as well as vital tools to challenge the state and its institutions for failing to protect us from gender-based violence."

UK in a Changing Europe, a UK-based network of academics and researchers, has also expressed concerns:

"The Bill of Rights Bill would prevent UK judges from interpreting Convention rights in ways that create positive obligations on public authorities...Many landmark cases under the HRA have relied on positive obligations: for example, the Act allowed bereaved families and survivors of the Hillsborough disaster to expose the negligence of state officials, using the positive obligation to investigate alleged breaches of the right to life....Not only does the Bill of Rights preclude new interpretations of rights that impose positive obligations on public bodies, it also discourages courts from applying positive obligations that have already been identified in previous cases. This could lead to legal uncertainty, and to divergence from the case law of"

the European Court of Human Rights,

"since positive obligations are an important principle applied by the Court to ensure practical and effective protection of rights, particularly for people whose rights are most vulnerable to abuse (such as children, victims of sexual violence and people seeking asylum)."

Everyone in the Chamber will be familiar with the case of John Worboys, the black cab rapist, who raped and sexually assaulted more than 100 women over the course of six years. Relying on the positive right under article 3 to not be subjected to inhumane or degrading treatment, two of his victims challenged the Metropolitan police's failures to stop that horrific course of offending.

[Alex Cunningham]

A UK court held that, because of our obligations under the Human Rights Act, the police were under a legal duty to take reasonable steps to investigate credible allegations of serious crime.

Labour will oppose the rights removal Bill, under which victims of serious sexual assault will lose the right to force the police to investigate crimes committed against them. The Bill is not about giving people extra rights; it is about taking our hard-won rights away. We cannot lose sight of that fact.

My second concern about the petition is that we cannot trust this Government to safeguard such an important right properly in their proposed legislation. The rights removal Bill is the pet project of the Secretary of State for Justice. It was brought back only when he was reappointed to his former position. As I mentioned, in 2019 he voted with 98 other MPs to keep abortion illegal in Northern Ireland. He has described the Government Equalities Office as “pointless” and suggested it be abolished. He even called feminists “obnoxious bigots”, and defended that remark just a couple of years ago on “The Andrew Marr Show” during his failed prime ministerial bid. This is not a Secretary of State who has women’s interests at heart.

The final reason why I do not think that the rights removal Bill is an appropriate mechanism for the reform of UK abortion law is its scope. Labour has committed to decriminalising abortion—to removing it from the scope of UK criminal law. In two cases next year, women will stand trial for accessing abortions in the UK. If found guilty, the maximum sentence is life imprisonment, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow said. A coalition of organisations, including the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, Amnesty International, Southall Black Sisters and the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, wrote to the Director of Public Prosecutions, requesting that the prosecutions be dropped, and noting that over the past eight years at least 17 women have been investigated by police for ending their own pregnancies, although it believes that the actual number is likely to be a lot higher. As we heard, last year a 15-year-old girl was investigated by the police after an unexplained stillbirth at 28 weeks. She was accused of illegal abortion and reportedly driven to self-harm by the year-long investigation. Police stopped pursuing the case after a coroner concluded that the pregnancy had ended because of natural causes.

As Clare Murphy, chief executive of BPAS, put it:

“What kind of society treats women in this way?...It is abhorrent that 160 years later vulnerable women should suffer from legislation drawn up in a world which is unrecognisable to us now, and”

be

“punished for making decisions about their own bodies.”

It is not clear to us that the scope of the Bill will allow for the reforms that we need in order to update our abortion laws, so that they represent the values of our modern Britain, but I want to underline once again that the Labour party supports women’s right to choose, and I also want answers from the Government on how they plan to make UK abortion law fit for the 21st century. The Tories are taking the UK backwards with this so-called Bill of Rights. Labour will fight tooth and nail to uphold the rights of British citizens by defending the

Human Rights Act. We saw the previous Lord Chancellor commit this Bill to a very slow back burner in the hope that everyone would forget about it. No one can defend the indefensible. The Tory Government and Lord Chancellor have got their priorities all wrong with a Bill that is about taking away our rights, rather than being the vehicle for enshrining new ones. Instead of bringing forward the much-awaited victims Bill, the Lord Chancellor seems to be determined to press on with his divisive rights removal Bill, which will make life tougher for our citizens, not better.

What is clear from this petition and the ensuing debate, however, is that the Government must do more to support women’s rights, so I will be very interested to hear the Minister’s thoughts on how the Government will engage more with women and women’s groups in order to address their concerns and ensure that their right to choose is protected.

6.57 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar):

It is a pleasure to be back in the Ministry of Justice after an absence of three and a half years, and to return to issues that I dealt with when I was last a Minister there. I pay tribute to and thank the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and the Petitions Committee, both for bringing this debate before us and, as other right hon. and hon. Members have said, for the very measured and thoughtful tone in which the hon. Lady made her opening remarks. Indeed, I am grateful to all Members for their attendance and contributions.

I am always conscious in debates of this sort that I am speaking as a Minister and necessarily reflecting the position of His Majesty’s Government rather than my personal views. I will always seek to tread that line carefully.

I congratulate the creator of this petition, Caitlin, whom I had the pleasure of being introduced to this afternoon, on what she has done, and the 150,000 people who have signed it. There are different views; we have heard them expressed in this Chamber. She and those who signed the petition have done us all a service, through the Petitions Committee, in allowing this issue to be debated today. It is an issue on which there are strong views in the country and among our constituents—and indeed among right hon. and hon. Members. The views are strongly and sincerely held, and it is right that all views be listened to with care and respect in this place.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) set out very clearly his perspective, and the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) set out hers. We also heard my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). They all gave very different perspectives on the issue, but they are all important perspectives, reflecting different strands of opinion in our country. It is right that this Chamber, this House, hears those different perspectives and debates them properly.

Let me emphasise at the outset that the Government are committed to ensuring access to safe, regulated abortion. All women in England and Wales have access to regulated abortion services on the NHS under our current laws, including taking both abortion pills at home where eligible. I gently say that it is important that right hon. and hon. Members show a degree of caution

in interpreting the motivation behind Members' votes on some of the issues that we have talked about. In some cases, they will have voted against, for example, the changes around abortion at home for reasons reflecting the process by which the changes were made, and their preference for a medical review and the Secretary of State taking the decision. Those people may then have voted in favour of buffer zones around abortion clinics. We need to be careful, and perhaps not go down the route that some websites and online platforms go down of extrapolating from a particular vote what the Member must think about the whole issue. Votes in this House, as all Members know, are often on complex, detailed questions, and complex procedural or constitutional points. We need to be cautious in those interpretations.

Access to abortion in England and Wales has been settled in law by Parliament, and we do not intend to change that. It takes nothing away from our commitment to ensuring access to safe, regulated abortion to say that the Government do not intend to include a right to abortion in the Bill of Rights. I will set out why we do not consider that the appropriate approach. We have heard different reasons; indeed, right hon. and hon. Members have spoken strongly in favour of changes while recognising that the Bill may not be the best mechanism for them.

The petition references the recent judgment of the Supreme Court of the United States in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organisation*, in which the court overruled its own 1973 judgment in *Roe v. Wade*, which found that the US constitution confers a right to have an abortion. While I hesitate to stray into US politics, I understand and appreciate the concern that the ruling has given rise to around the world. We have heard it expressed, and see an element of it in the genesis of the petition. My first point in response to the petition is that the context in the United Kingdom is very different from that in the United States. What has happened in the United States does not affect how abortions can and do occur in the UK. Indeed, we seek to avoid finding ourselves in a potentially analogous situation to that of the US.

I was going to make a point about the different historical evolution of the concept of a Bill of Rights in the American context and in the English or United Kingdom context, but my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) has done so rather more eloquently, and probably with a degree more erudition and knowledge, than I would have. However, it is worth highlighting the different democratic and legislative traditions of our two countries. In the United States, the Bill of Rights is essentially an amendment and adjunct to the constitution, which is the founding document of the United States. In this country, we had the 1689 Bill of Rights, alluded to by my right hon. Friend, but we also have the parliamentary tradition, and the very clear protocol that no Parliament may bind its successors. We are therefore looking at two very different things.

Once again, we need a degree of caution about conflating our Bill of Rights, and how our legislation works, with—for want of a better way of putting it—the inalienable constitutional rights conferred by the US constitution and Bill of Rights. *[Interruption.]* Did the hon. Member for Walthamstow want to intervene on that point?

Stella Creasy indicated dissent.

Edward Argar: I may be tempting the hon. Lady. I am grateful to her, although I suspect that I will hear from her in a moment. *[Interruption.]* I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford for his kind words about me. We will see when I finish my speech whether he wishes to reiterate them.

Access to abortion in the United Kingdom is not founded on a court ruling. Instead it has been clearly and specifically prescribed in legislation set out by Parliament, in the context that my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset set out.

Hon. Members—including the shadow Minister, to a degree—set out the context of abortion in England and Wales, but I will briefly reiterate it. Before doing so, I should highlight that responsibility for the legal status of abortion was devolved to the Scottish Parliament in the Scotland Act 2016. We have heard from various hon. Members from Northern Ireland; abortion was also devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Amendment of Schedule 3) Order 2010, and the treatment of abortion in criminal law was devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2010 following the agreement. I should therefore make it clear that when I refer to matters concerning the law on abortion, I am speaking to its application in England and Wales.

The Abortion Act 1967 amended and built on two pieces of legislation: the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, and the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929, which updated it. I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke referred to the age of that legislation. The 1967 Act allows for safe and lawful abortion in England and Wales. It defines the criteria under which abortions or terminations can legally take place. In effect, lawful abortions can be carried out in the first 24 weeks of pregnancy when two doctors agree that the abortion is necessary as it falls within one or more of four grounds. I will not set them out in detail now, but in essence they concern, as we have heard from right hon. and hon. Members, the risks to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman, or risks that the child would suffer from significant physical or mental abnormalities. There are strong views in this Chamber, as we have heard, on those tests. There are also strong views—I should have said this at the beginning when I highlighted the strength of opinion—on the rights of a woman to choose, and also very strongly held beliefs about the rights of an unborn child. Again, I emphasise that I respect the sincerity and strength with which those views are held.

Dame Maria Miller: The Minister is making a really important case. Underlying all our legislation is regulation, which ultimately is how the law works. That regulation is not, I think, under debate at this point. What I was talking about was the fundamental framework of the law. Are the Government comfortable with the fact that English women are treated as potentially criminal when they access abortions, when the Government have legislated to ensure that women in Northern Ireland are not treated as criminals? Does he think that that is fair?

Edward Argar: If my right hon. Friend will give me a little space, I was going to come to her remarks on that, and also on the position of the Department of Health and Social Care. The recent legislation in Northern Ireland was implementing the will of Parliament rather

[*Edward Argar*]

than Government, and I will come to that. She tempts me on the issue of the Government taking a particular view on the issue. I will turn to that in a moment if she will let me make a little progress, but I will of course address her points.

In practice, the framework means that access to an abortion is available to those who need and want it. Abortions at above 24 weeks are also possible in more limited circumstances, and it is of course open to Parliament to change the law if it so desires. As was mentioned, abortion law is devolved to both the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. I would usually not set out the position of a devolved Administration on any matter, but due to the relevance of those positions to this debate, I will speak briefly about the recent changes in Northern Ireland that my right hon. Friend alluded to just now.

The Abortion Act 1967 did not extend to Northern Ireland. Instead, abortion law there was provided under section 25 of the Criminal Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 1945, which was equivalent to section 1 of the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929 in the rest of the UK. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 decriminalised abortion, and repealed sections 59 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. Following that, the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 came into force, which meant that those in Northern Ireland who wish to can access an abortion on demand in the first 12 weeks of their pregnancy, and can conditionally access an abortion up to the 24th week—and beyond that in more limited circumstances.

Those changes were made because of the very specific context in Northern Ireland, and an amendment, I believe it was, was brought forward on abortion. It was felt that the will of Parliament was that women across the UK should have safe and legal access to abortion, and that the will of the House should be respected.

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Edward Argar: Before I address abortion in the context of the Bill of Rights, I will turn to the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke—and then I will give way to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I agree with my right hon. Friend that this is a very complex area—she highlighted that in her remarks. She called for the Government to set out a clear, full and complete framework for moving forward. It remains the Government's position that this is a matter for Parliament, and that it remains a matter for the consciences and decisions of individual Members of Parliament. I do not like to disappoint my right hon. Friend and I seek not to do so—but I fear I must do on this occasion.

My right hon. Friend raised another question about the Department of Health and Social Care action plan. It has been three or four months since I was last in the Department, but my memory is not entirely rusty. I know that this is something that the Department has been thinking about. In the past three years, sexual and reproductive health services have faced numerous new challenges, including those arising from the covid-19 pandemic. We saw some of that in the recent amendment on abortion and pills at home.

I am advised that Ministers in the Department are taking the time to fully engage with stakeholders from across the system, to understand the impact of that new context in any plan they bring forward. I know from previous conversations with my right hon. Friend her strength of feeling on that, and I will ensure that it is conveyed to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) with the imprimatur from her, if I may, that speed is of the essence and that she looks forward to seeing that plan.

Jim Shannon: I know that the Minister is an honourable man; I have always had that opinion of him, as has everyone in the House. But the Government consulted with the people of Northern Ireland on the abortion changes, and 79% of respondents were against any changes. If there is no intention to acknowledge or take on board the opinion of the people of Northern Ireland, when they are very much against the changes, why bother?

Edward Argar: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's strength of feeling on this issue. I know that several right hon. and hon. Members who voted against the amendment when it was brought to the House, not because they did not support access to safe abortion services but because of concerns about the devolution settlement and the nature of how it operated. The House expressed a very clear view, and it is right that that view is respected. That is why the Government have moved forward with the regulations we have seen enacted.

Fiona Bruce: The Minister indicated that he will speak with his colleague, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, about views raised on the sexual and reproductive health rights issues that are being considered by the Department. Would he also convey, when he conveys the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), that the majority of colleagues who have spoken and stayed in this three-hour debate have expressed considerable concern about any extension of abortion rights in this country?

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. I remind the Minister to sit down promptly at 7.28 pm to give the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) her two minutes at the end.

Edward Argar: I am very grateful, Sir Charles. It is my intention to sit down sooner than that to give the hon. Member for Gower plenty of time for her remarks.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton for her point. The issue I was going to raise with the Secretary of State was the very specific point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke, which was about the delay in bringing forward that action plan that had been spoken about prior to the pandemic. I will ensure that he is made aware of this debate and the transcript of it. I encourage any Member from either side of the House to take the time to read the transcript of the debate because there have been very thoughtful speeches on both sides of the debate.

The Government believe that it is right the position on abortion remains something that is settled by legislatures and by elected Members of this House, as it is now, without necessitating the creation of a specific right.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) is correct in shorthand, if I may—I am not sure if shorthand is necessarily one of his fortes or natural styles—but he is right when he highlights what the Bill of Rights is about. It is about clarifying the balance of rights and the balance between the executive, legislature and the courts, and ensuring we update that framework in a way that reflects the current circumstances and ensures that it remains effective. As this debate has demonstrated, it is the legislature, rather than the courts, that is directly accountable to our citizens and to the very strong views that our constituents have on this matter on both sides of the debate.

We continue to take action to ensure access to safe, legal abortion. For example, on 30 August, following the vote in the House, new provisions came into force that permit home use of both pills for early medical abortion on a permanent basis for women in England and Wales. On 24 October, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland announced that the UK Government will be commissioning abortion services for Northern Ireland, recognising as he did that it is “unacceptable” that women are still travelling to the rest of the UK to access healthcare to which they are legally entitled following the decision by this Parliament. Including a specific right to abortion in the Bill of Rights would, we fear, mean that challenges involving courts could potentially be brought in measuring the compatibility of that legislation with this specific new right. It risks taking us down the route of moving debate around abortion from Parliament to the courtroom. I know that hon. Members may take a different interpretation of that.

Stella Creasy: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I did promise the hon. Lady and I will honour that promise. I may regret it but I will honour it.

Stella Creasy: I note that we have not yet had a satisfactory answer to the question posed by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) about why it is acceptable that our constituents in Walthamstow and Basingstoke face a criminal foundation in securing an abortion they do not have a right to, but women in Northern Ireland have a human rights foundation to that healthcare. I just challenge his point that, if we were to include these rights in this Bill of Rights, it would somehow lead to litigation. He will of course note that there is already repeated litigation about abortion rights and the balance of rights around abortion anyway. Why is abortion any different from freedom of speech? He will recognise that people have very strong views about the application of freedom of speech, so much so that this Government have introduced its own Bill on freedom of speech in higher education, for example. Why is it that, when it comes to women's rights, these matters are considered complicated and can only be dealt with by judges, but when it comes to freedom of speech, for example, we accept that there should be a parliamentary process and a piece of legislation whereby these matters can be resolved?

Edward Argar: There are two points in there. I will address the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke more explicitly than I did previously. We have been clear throughout this that the decision

taken in Northern Ireland was a decision by this House. It is open to the House, if it wishes, to change the position in respect to England or Wales. We do not believe that is something the Government should do. We believe it is, as ever, a matter of conscience for individual Members.

What happened in the case of Northern Ireland reflected the vote of the House on a particular amendment. I will not use the word “hijacking” because I think that right hon. and hon. Members are entirely able to use the procedures of this House to advance the causes that they or their constituents wish to promote. That is how the rules and Standing Orders of this House are written. I may or may not be happy with that on occasions, but it is a legitimate use of the Standing Orders of the House of Commons if something is within scope.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: Let me briefly finish answering the hon. Lady. On her second point about rights, I come back to the point that it is entirely open for the House to legislate in primary legislation. She talked about free speech and the Bill currently going through. Just as with the 1967 legislation, which I believe was a private Member's Bill by the now Lord Steel, it is entirely open to the House, through private Member's legislation and the usual processes that are followed for such legislation, to seek to legislate.

I will make a final point before I give way to the shadow Minister, on the changes to the Bill of Rights, which links neatly to what the shadow Minister was talking about. Schedule 1 of the draft Bill of Rights includes the rights contained in the ECHR, which are set out in the HRA 1998. Although there is a focus on ensuring that the right balance is struck between the legislature, the courts and the Executive, there should be a little caution about suggesting that this is anything other than updating and clarifying some of those balances.

Alex Cunningham: I may be more blunt than my hon. Friend for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). Does the Minister foresee an early opportunity for the House to make a decision on whether abortion should be decriminalised?

Edward Argar: There are many opportunities in front of hon. Members. They may wish to submit a private Member's Bill. When the new Session starts there will be a new ballot. I may take a view on whether amendments should be included in particular pieces of legislation, but if they are ruled to be in order by the Speaker, Members will be able to explore their options. I do not believe that the Bill of Rights is the right approach to take to secure this issue, if that is the desire of right hon. and hon. Members. There are other mechanisms in Parliament for them to advance that debate and propose legislation, should they wish to do so.

Let me conclude by reiterating that this Government remain committed to ensuring access to safe, regulated abortions. It is right that women have this choice at their disposal. I am sure that I speak for the whole Chamber when I say that I do not want a return to unsafe, unregulated abortions that put women's lives at risk, or to women feeling unable to escape a situation they find themselves in or to have an alternative.

As I said, the debate has been thoughtful on both sides of the argument. I believe it has been respectful and reflects the depth of sincerely and strongly held

[Edward Argar]

views on both sides of the debate. I have sought to address the specific point in the context of the Bill of Rights. I slightly sidestepped the broader points of the Bill of Rights, and I suspect that the shadow Minister and I will have an opportunity in the coming weeks or months to debate those. I have sought to keep my remarks to the matter in hand in the petition. I am grateful for the opportunity to have spoken on this issue, and I look forward to hearing the winding up comments from the hon. Member for Gower.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Ms Antoniazzi has, at most, two minutes.

7.23 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi: Thank you, Sir Charles. I thank the petitioner and the people who signed the petition for their interest in the need to address the Bill of Rights

and abortion. In the context of the Bill of Rights, I thank the Minister for his comments. I thank all Members who participated in the debate. We have a long way to go and I believe that we can continue to have the debate and engage with more Members across the House.

When it comes to such debates as assisted dying, sex and gender, and abortion, where such differing views are held and shared, it is our responsibility as legislators to discuss them and to move forward for the benefit of everyone who lives in the United Kingdom.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Thank you for that concise bit of winding up.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 619334, relating to legal rights to access abortion.

7.25 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 28 November 2022

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative Strategy

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): Today we have presented our vision for ending the scourge of conflict-related sexual violence. With this strategy, the UK is stepping up our ambition: we will deliver a step change in the international response, working with our partners to support survivors, hold perpetrators to account and put an end to these heinous acts for good.

Progress has been made to support survivors and strengthen accountability but sexual violence continues to be widely used in conflict, as demonstrated by the appalling reports from Ukraine. We need a stronger international response for all those affected.

The Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative strategy will support the delivery of the international development strategy and the integrated review. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon is the Prime Minister's special representative on preventing sexual violence in conflict.

There are significant challenges including reliable data collection, gathering evidence on what works, securing justice and providing holistic survivor support.

This strategy will seek to change this by delivering four key objectives:

- Strengthening the global response to CRSV;
- Preventing CRSV, including by addressing root causes such as harmful gender norms;
- Improving justice for all survivors and holding perpetrators to account;
- Enhancing support for survivors and children born of sexual violence in conflict, including tackling the stigma they face within their communities.

We will strive to deliver these objectives by showing UK leadership to strengthen the global response. This will include working with partners to deliver the commitments made at the PSVI international conference and the political declaration launched there. We have launched a new initiative on accountability that will strengthen the ability of national authorities to end impunity for CRSV. This aims to bring together expertise and best practice, build capacity, improve national implementation in focus countries, and increase support to survivors.

We will drive concerted action on the Crimes Against Humanity Convention to strengthen international law in this area, including on some forms of CRSV.

Key policy initiatives:

- The Call to Action to Ensure the Rights and Wellbeing of Children Born of Sexual Violence in Conflict;
- The Murad Code, a global code of conduct to ensure that the documentation of the experiences of CRSV survivors is effective and upholds survivors' rights;

The Declaration of Humanity, a faith and belief-based call for the prevention of sexual violence in conflict that denounces the stigma faced by survivors and children born of rape; and Increasing the UK's focus on conflict and atrocity prevention to tackle the drivers of conflict before violence becomes widespread.

We will use our development budget to deliver change, including through:

The £67.5 million committed to the What Works to Prevent Violence: Impact at Scale programme, which pioneers and rigorously evaluates scalable solutions to prevent gender-based violence, including sexual violence in conflict settings;

Up to £12.5 million of new funding that the PSVI team will use over the next three years to tackle CRSV. This funding will be complemented by wider CRSV programming across FCDO.

The £12.5 million will include:

a contribution of up to £5.15 million to the Global Survivors Fund, which aims to enhance CRSV survivors' access to reparations, including through the provision financial support, livelihood assistance, education, and health care; and continued funding to the UK's PSVI team of experts, a group of independent specialists deployed to support the work of national and international bodies and NGOs to strengthen their response to CRSV.

Delivering on our commitments under the Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies, including working with our operational partners to prevent, mitigate and respond to GBV, including CRSV, from the earliest stages of a humanitarian crisis.

We will continue to work closely with international and UK partners to put an end to the scourge of sexual violence in conflict.

[HCWS390]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIM) Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

Between 1 March to 31 May 2022

TPIM notices in force—as of 31 May 2022	2
Number of new TPIM notices served—during this period	0
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens—as of 31 May 2022	2
TPIM notices extended—during the reporting period	2
TPIM notices revoked—during the reporting period	0
TPIM notices expired—during reporting period	0
TPIM notices revived—during the reporting period	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices—during the reporting period	3
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused—during the reporting period	0
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation—during this the reporting period	1

The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The second quarter TRG meetings were held on 5 and 7 July 2022.

On 16 March 2022 one individual was found guilty on four counts of breaching the monitoring measure of the TPIM notice. The individual was sentenced to 30 months imprisonment.

On 18 May 2022 one individual pleaded guilty to five breaches of the electronic communication device measure of the TPIM notice. The individual was sentenced to eight months imprisonment plus a 12-month separate period on licence upon release.

Between 1 June to 31 August 2022

TPIM notices in force—as of 31 August 2022	1
Number of new TPIM notices served—during this period	0
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens—as of 31 August 2022	1
TPIM notices extended—during the reporting period	0
TPIM notices revoked—during the reporting period	1
TPIM notices expired—during reporting period	0
TPIM notices revived—during the reporting period	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices—during the reporting period	1
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused—during the reporting period	2
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation—during this the reporting period	1

The third quarter TRG meetings were held on 19 and 26 October 2022.

In this quarter one individual was charged with a breach of the residence measure. No trial date has yet been set.

[HCWS389]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Trade Update: CPTPP and Mexico

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Kemi Badenoch): The Department for International Trade (DIT) has made good progress on two key trade negotiations. This statement provides Parliament with an update on the UK's trade negotiations with Mexico and negotiations towards accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)

The UK has taken part in further discussions to negotiate accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). The latest round of talks took place in Sydney from 10 to 13 October 2022. Negotiations covered market access on trade in goods, services and investment, financial services, Government procurement, temporary entry of businesspersons and legal and institutional issues. UK negotiators made good progress across the areas of discussion and talks are set to continue during the rest of the year.

Joining CPTPP will help UK businesses trade more easily across borders and will help keep critical supply chains open and predictable. Embracing closer trading links and breaking down barriers to trade with a diverse group of trading partners could support businesses in diversifying their supply chains promoting greater resilience.

Ahead of the UK's Accession Working Group, the CPTPP Commission convened for its 6th annual meeting on 8 October 2022. In a concluding joint ministerial statement, the commission announced that it “look(s) forward to further progress on the accession process with the commitment of both the CPTPP membership and the United Kingdom.”

Separately, Malaysia has now announced its completion of the ratification process to enter CPTPP into force. The Ministry for Trade and Industry has announced that it deposited the instrument of ratification in early October. The agreement will enter into force for the country on 29 November 2022. This could provide the UK with significantly better access to the Malaysian market, which is home to over 32 million consumers. UK's accession to CPTPP will support the UK and Malaysia's shared ambitions to remove barriers to trade and create new opportunities for businesses and investors.

UK-Mexico Trade Negotiations

Round two of the UK-Mexico trade negotiations took place from 31 October to 11 November 2022 in a virtual format across 29 policy areas over 35 separate sessions.

During the round, the UK set out its policy positions having exchanged draft chapter text with Mexico across most policy areas before the round. A key objective at this early stage was to continue to build a firm understanding of Mexico's trade policy positions and priorities. As expected at this stage, areas of convergence and divergence were identified. However, discussions remained positive. Both negotiation teams took actions to consider each other's positions and identify opportunities to move closer together ahead of round three.

The negotiations continue to reflect a shared ambition to negotiate a comprehensive agreement which is better suited for the 21st century and one which strengthens our trading relationship, already worth over £4.2 billion in 2021. Both countries agree that this is an opportunity to add value and complement the UK's accession to the CPTPP.

His Majesty's Government remain clear that any deal we sign will be in the best interests of the British people and the United Kingdom economy. We will not compromise on our high environmental and labour protections, public health, animal welfare and food standards, and we will maintain our right to regulate in the public interest. We are also clear that during these negotiations, the NHS and the services it provides is not on the table.

His Majesty's Government will continue to work closely with CPTPP parties and Mexico to ensure negotiations proceed at pace and take place on terms that are right for the UK.

[HCWS391]

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