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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 29 November 2022

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Energy Price Guarantee: Impact on Households

1. **Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the increase in the energy price guarantee in April 2023 on households. [902461]

4. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the increase in the energy price guarantee in April 2023 on households. [902464]

5. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the increase in the energy price guarantee in April 2023 on households. [902465]

15. **Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the increase in the energy price guarantee in April 2023 on households. [902477]

16. **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the increase in the energy price guarantee in April 2023 on households. [902478]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Grant Shapps): Future energy prices remain highly uncertain and are expected to remain elevated throughout next year. The energy price guarantee from April '23 is currently expected to equate to £500 of support for households in 2023-24.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: As I hope the Secretary of State will know, recent analysis published by *The Herald* has shown that the typical dual fuel bill for people in Scotland will be £3,300—£800 more than the current £2,500 price cap. Given the Chancellor's plans to increase the price cap further, what levels does the Secretary of State expect average energy bills to reach in Scotland next year?

Grant Shapps: As the hon. Gentleman will know, a comprehensive range of different support is in place, including the energy price guarantee, which on average

looks to guarantee £2,500. It is not specific to each household, of course, and it depends on how much energy is actually used—it is a cap—but there is additional help including the £400 non-repayable support through the energy bills support scheme.

Chris Law: The support to which the Secretary of State refers offers scant consolation to those suffering, particularly the near-130,000 households in Scotland who rely on heating oil. The £200 of support from the UK Government covers less than half the price of the typical minimum order of heating oil, so will he finally commit to increasing the support available to these households?

Grant Shapps: Of course, everybody has had a £400 discount from their bill that is not repayable, and 8 million families also have additional support—those on income support and the like. The hon. Gentleman mentions the £200; we only just doubled that from £100 in the autumn statement the week before last.

Chris Stephens: Rising bills terrify most households. The End Fuel Poverty Coalition recently warned that “predictions of ‘a humanitarian crisis’ for children stuck in cold homes are now a very real possibility”, so does the Secretary of State accept that failure to provide additional support for vulnerable families in April will have dire consequences?

Grant Shapps: I just mentioned support for 8 million families that goes beyond just the £400 and the energy price guarantee. Those 8 million families will benefit from all manner of additional support—£1 billion for local authorities, additional money for people on various forms of universal credit, and money for pensioners—all of which is designed to help people through a crisis that the whole House should recognise has been brought on by Putin the dictator invading Ukraine.

Angela Crawley: Contrary to what the Secretary of State says, the consequences will be dire. The Institute of Health Equity indicates that the development of millions of children will be damaged, so will he commit to providing adequate support for vulnerable families so that no child suffers the diverse health impacts of fuel poverty this winter?

Grant Shapps: I have mentioned the 8 million homes, but perhaps it will help the hon. Lady if I point out the specific means-tested benefits which mean that those families will receive an extra payment of £650 on top of all the other assistance and help that I have outlined. This is an unprecedented situation. We have put billions of pounds of taxpayers' money into supporting people. I hope the whole House will recognise that this Government have done everything within our power to assist.

Steven Bonnar: The reality is that it is a damning indictment of decades of failed UK Government energy policy that we are even discussing harm to children as a result of rising energy Bills, given the vast energy resources at Scotland's fingertips. Given that context, does the Secretary of State agree that it is absurd that nearly 1 million households in Scotland will be experiencing fuel poverty?

Grant Shapps: I have mentioned the household support fund, which is also available for the most vulnerable. I do just have to say, to this line of questioning, that it is extraordinary that while this Government are spending so much energy and money trying to support consumers, we still have the SNP refusing to allow new renewables such as nuclear power.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When will there be clarity for park home owners about exactly what they have to do to get what they have still to receive?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out the plight of park home owners, who are in a different position from others because of the lack of connection, sometimes, to the grid. We are working very hard to ensure that they get their payments as well, which will happen this winter. My right hon. Friend can be reassured that we are doing that, and currently working through local authorities to deliver it.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Mr Speaker, I know you are a huge fan of making sure your pottery comes from the Potteries. Ceramic manufacturers, despite the energy price cap guarantee—it has been hugely helpful, with one manufacturer saying it will save it £4 million over the winter months—are still left in a dire situation. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me, the other Members of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent and Rob Ffello, the chief executive of the British Ceramic Confederation, to discuss what further support can be given to this vital industry?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the pressure those manufacturers are under, and I absolutely recognise that. There is the energy-intensive industries discount of 85%, but I would certainly be very happy to meet him and colleagues to discuss the matter further.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): To summarise, what we know is that, in Scotland, average household energy bills will exceed the energy price guarantee, but the Secretary of State is unwilling or unable to tell us by quite how much. Of course, we know that on top of that households in Scotland, and indeed children in Scotland, are going to suffer as a result, yet we see no new announcements of additional financial support forthcoming. All the while, Scotland produces its own energy far in excess of what would be required to meet its own demands. Can I therefore ask the Secretary of State whether it is little wonder that viewers watching this at this moment in time would be thinking that Westminster is failing Scotland?

Grant Shapps: I absolutely do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have already talked about the £400 that everybody has been able to receive back, with some additional measures coming through for people with unusual connection positions. We have the £650 cost of living payments for those on benefits, £300 for pensioners and £150 for disability costs of living. From what I can work out, the SNP does not like its oil and gas industry and does not want new nuclear power, so I have no idea what its plan actually is.

Stephen Flynn: It is a remarkable state of affairs that a nation that produces more energy than it requires faces child fuel poverty as a result of the actions of this Government here. The Secretary of State does not like those facts, but here are some more for him. To alleviate this crisis in the medium to long term, what we need from this UK Government is not investment in nuclear, but investment in clean, sustainable renewable industries. In that regard, can I welcome his U-turn on onshore wind, but also seek clarity about whether he will provide the same tax incentives for the renewables sector as he will for the fossil fuel industry?

Grant Shapps: This Government have a very proud record when it comes to renewables. When we came to power, barely 10% was from renewables; now the figure is 42%. In fact, on one day the week before last over half of this country's energy was produced from offshore wind alone. The SNP does not like the answers I am giving because the amounts of money we are spending supporting people, including Scots, with energy bills this year means that, for example, the average single parent on means-tested benefit will be £1,050 better off because of the energy bills support scheme. Yes, we are doing our part, and perhaps it is time the SNP looked at its own policy to make sure it is encouraging energy production.

Sizewell C

2. **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the potential impact of Sizewell C on employment in the local area. [902462]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Grant Shapps): I visited the site yesterday and was delighted to confirm the nearly £700 million investment in Sizewell C pledged in the autumn statement.

Tom Hunt: There are clearly significant national benefits to Sizewell C in terms of national security, but as a Suffolk MP I am particularly interested in potential jobs creation. I understand that about 10,000 new jobs could be created. I previously worked closely with EDF and Suffolk New College to see how we can ensure that as many local people—and my constituents in Ipswich—benefit from Sizewell C as possible. Will the Secretary of State, in his own time—when he has a little availability—meet me, the principal of Suffolk New College, other education sector leaders and EDF to see how Ipswich people can benefit in a real, tangible way from Sizewell C?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will be interested and happy to learn that I met two apprentices at Sizewell yesterday, who have two of what we expect to be 1,500 new apprentice jobs. He is right to mention 10,000 jobs in the immediate area—perhaps there will be 20,000 across the country—and we expect more than 70% of investment in the project to come to the UK. I will gladly meet him and his colleagues to discuss that further.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Cumbria's energy coast, including nuclear, wind, wave and tidal, also has the capacity to create thousands of jobs in our county. When will the Secretary of State make an announcement in respect of his engagement with Cumbria's energy coast to make best use—

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not a fair representation of the question. It is a poor effort, so I am going to let it go.

Community Energy Sector

3. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help support the growth of the community energy sector. [902463]

The Minister for Climate (Graham Stuart): Ofgem supports community energy projects and welcomes applications from the sector to the industry voluntary redress scheme. We encourage community energy groups to work with their local authority to support the development of community energy projects through UK-wide growth funding schemes.

Selaine Saxby: Will my right hon. Friend support measures to enable community energy schemes to sell their clean power directly to local customers, as contained in last Session's Local Electricity Bill, and look at including them in the Energy Bill?

Graham Stuart: Although I am sympathetic to the outcome desired by proponents of, for instance, last Session's Local Electricity Bill, I am concerned that mandating suppliers to offer local tariffs may be disproportionate and have unintended consequences. But I am delighted to tell my hon. Friend, who I recognise is a great champion in this area, that as part of a wider review of market mechanisms we are considering retail market reforms and responses to the electricity market consultation.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): While the Government seem particularly confused about their position on onshore wind—the most tried and tested and easiest to roll out of all renewables—their focus on community energy is even worse. The creation of strong, well informed, capable communities able to take advantage of their renewable energy resources and create community benefits is embraced by the Welsh Labour Government. Why do the Conservative Government not do the same?

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Lady for her typically partisan contribution. [Interruption.] She is always consistent, and her Front-Bench colleagues rightly point out that I have some things in common with her. The rural community energy fund has provided £8.8 million in development grants for 208 projects focusing on a variety of technologies, which I am pleased to say include solar, wind, low-carbon heating and electric vehicle charging. The Government will be delighted to work with the devolved Administrations and others to drive forward our pathway to net zero.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Referring to the Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), energy market reform is critical to ensure the growth of the community energy sector and to splitting out the wholesale gas price from the electricity price and other things. Will the Minister update the House on the Government's current thinking on wholesale market reform?

Graham Stuart: We will update the House as soon as we have announcements to make.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Community energy schemes such as Hoy Energy Ltd in Orkney perform a really important role in the community by reinvesting their profits in local schemes and projects.

Will the Minister assure me that when it comes to devising regulations under section 16 of the Energy Prices Act 2022, there will be exemptions for such companies to ensure that they can continue to put the profits that they generate back into the community?

Graham Stuart: The provisions in the Energy Prices Act have been superseded by the announcements made by the Chancellor in the autumn statement, and therefore I do not think that they strictly apply any longer, as the right hon. Gentleman has suggested.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that the inability of local energy providers to trade within their local community remains one of the biggest obstacles to the development of community energy overall? If he is not willing to take on board the provisions of the community energy Bill that is presently being promoted by community energy supporters, does he have any other ideas as to how that problem could be overcome in the context of the Energy Bill, which I am delighted to see has resumed its parliamentary process today?

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and for his close interest in this field and knowledge of it. I look forward to sharing with the House further thoughts on how we can deliver precisely that more dynamic situation going forward. As he rightly says, there are provisions in the Energy Bill, which I am delighted to announce is resuming its passage through Parliament.

Off-grid Energy Support

6. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to support off-grid households with their energy bills. [902466]

14. **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to support off-grid consumers with their energy bills. [902476]

19. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What steps he is taking to support off-grid consumers with their energy bills. [902482]

The Minister for Climate (Graham Stuart): The Government have doubled support to £200 for alternatively fuelled households in recognition of the pressures caused by rising fuel costs. We are committed to delivering that payment to households as soon as possible this winter, and will announce further information on the delivery and timing of those payments in due course.

Sarah Green: People living in park homes are concerned that they have had no further information on when support will be available to them, or how they will access it. One representative of the company managing a park home site in my constituency first raised this issue with me in August, yet months on we still have no further information. Can the Minister provide some reassurance that people living in park homes will not slip through the cracks, and give some clarity as to when they will receive the £400 of support that they have been promised?

Graham Stuart: I think the hon. Lady has slightly confused the alternative fuel payment for those who are not on the gas grid with the energy bills support scheme—an easy mistake to make in this complex landscape. Those with a domestic electricity supply are already receiving the £400 discount under the EBS scheme that she has talked about. We are looking to come forward with details about timing, but it will be this winter; we are looking to work with local authorities in Great Britain to set up a scheme whereby people in park homes can apply as households, to ensure that they receive that £400 through local authorities as quickly as we can manage.

Lee Anderson: Now then. The residents of Ashfield mobile home park do not have a regular energy supplier. They get their gas and electricity sold on by the park owner—who, by the way, marks it up and puts a little bit back in his own pocket. Those residents do not have a great deal of money, so can the Minister please reassure them that help is on the way as soon as possible?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; I hope he found my letter yesterday, and the annex to it, helpful. As I said, the Government have doubled support to £200 for alternatively fuelled households in recognition of the pressures caused by rising fuel costs. We are also determined to get support in place for edge cases. It sounds simple, and if I were where my hon. Friend is, I would certainly be shouting at the Minister to get on with it, but we do not live in a central database-driven society; it is necessary to identify these people in a way that protects public money. We are working flat out to deliver this support as quickly as we can.

Andrew Bridgen: A number of my constituents live in park homes, and many more have no access to gas mains and so rely on bulk deliveries of kerosene and liquefied petroleum gas. They are all concerned about the rising cost of energy, so would the Minister outline to the House how he is going to communicate to those groups the support that is available, and ensure that it is delivered for them this winter?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As I said, we are very much looking to work with local authorities, which we think are in the best position to help to go through the verification and assessment process and look after public money, and most importantly, to get the funding to heating oil users and others who need support to meet these unprecedented bills this winter.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): The Government announced this week that £1 billion will go towards energy efficiency to reduce energy bills. Will the Minister confirm how many new homes will be covered by that £1 billion?

Graham Stuart: I cannot give the Chair of the Committee an exact figure, but I hope that very large numbers will be covered by that—*[Interruption.]* Opposition Front Benchers may find that amusing, but we should remember how few homes had an energy performance certificate C when Labour left power and how many more have had their level raised since then.

Manufacturing: Support for Innovation

7. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What steps he is taking to support innovation in the manufacturing sector. [902467]

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): Despite the Opposition's constant attempts to talk down UK manufacturing, the truth is that we are ninth in the world and fourth in Europe, and that our advanced manufacturing sector contributes £205 billion gross value added to the UK economy. That is why we continue to support it in sectors such as aerospace, automotive and life sciences through £850 million to the high-value manufacturing catapult and nearly £200 million through our Made Smarter programme.

Henry Smith: Recently, Rolls-Royce, in conjunction with Gatwick-based easyJet, carried out a successful green hydrogen jet engine trial. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the Government will continue to invest in sustainable aviation innovation?

George Freeman: I thank my hon. Friend, the chair of the all-party group for the future of aviation, and I take this opportunity to invite the whole House to celebrate the world-first achieved by Rolls-Royce and easyJet: the first run of a green hydrogen-powered auto engine. I am happy to reconfirm our commitment to aerospace technology. That is why we have put £685 million into the Aerospace Technology Institute programme and £125 million through the industrial strategy challenge fund into the UK Research and Innovation future flight challenge. The UK is leading in clean energy for the aviation sector and jet zero.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): The Government set a goal of the development of eight gigafactories before 2040. Will the Minister say how that is progressing, and will he reassure my constituents that the Government are in conversation with Britishvolt to secure its gigafactory site at Cambois in my constituency?

George Freeman: The hon. Member is absolutely right that we are committed to growing that supply chain for the gigafactory revolution in the north-east, the midlands and all around the country. That is why we set out, in our critical minerals strategy, a coherent plan for making sure that the country has the whole supply chain, as well as those factories. I know that the Minister with responsibility for energy technology will be happy to talk to the hon. Member to make sure that the supply chain is working locally as well.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): On 16 November, the Government awarded the contract for the new fleet solid support ships to a Spanish state-led consortium. Around £700 million of that contract will go to overseas industry when our steel and shipbuilding sectors are crying out for support. Also on 16 November, the Minister for Industry and Investment Security wrote to me to say that the future of UK steel companies was a commercial decision. Will this Minister explain why the UK Government did not take the commercial decision to deliver £700 million of work to UK steelmakers and shipyards?

George Freeman: The hon. Member raises an important point. We are committed to using our Brexit freedoms both on procurement and regulation to support UK industries. I will raise that issue with the Minister for Industry and Investment Security, who sadly cannot be here this morning, and make sure that she picks that up with the hon. Member directly. However, the answer is that we are totally committed to the UK steel sector and to getting the balance right between ensuring that we have open procurement and that we use Government procurement muscle to back our industries. They are not easy decisions to make, but we are very sighted on them to try to get that balance right.

Small Business Support

8. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support small business growth. [902468]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kevin Hollinrake): It is a delight to be part of a ministerial team of whom many members actually have a business background. We are for business because we are from business, and we know what it is like to lie awake at night worrying about how to pay the bills.

The reversal of the national insurance rise will save small businesses an average of approximately £4,200 a year, alongside the cut to fuel duty for 12 months and the energy bill relief scheme. The British Business Bank supports small and medium-sized enterprises to access growth finance.

Catherine West: From Muswell Hill to Myddleton Road, from Turnpike Lane to Hornsey High Street, we are celebrating Small Business Saturday in my constituency this weekend. There are two major concerns on the mind of small businesses. The first is the business rates expense. When will the Minister consider reforming it to help small business? The second is a wider question for business and trade unions about retained EU legislation, which is providing a lot of uncertainty in the business community and a drag on growth. When will the Government come out with a decision on that crucial issue?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question, especially the part about Small Business Saturday. As hon. Members can imagine, I will be spending much of the day visiting small businesses across my constituency. I will also shortly be attending a House of Lords reception to celebrate the 100 small businesses recognised in the programme.

As the hon. Lady knows, in the autumn statement my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced £13.6 billion of support for businesses over the next five years, reducing the burden of business rates for SMEs. Of course we all want to see reform, but simply announcing the scrapping of business rates without announcing any replacement cannot be the right thing, because it does not give business the certainty that it needs. That is the sensible reform that I think the hon. Lady should be grateful for.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): May I put it on the record that as well as being the week of Small Business Saturday, this is Family Business

Week? I had the opportunity to visit Tony at Croxley Hardware a few weeks ago. Does the Minister agree that small businesses are the lifeblood not only of the economy, but of our communities?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his recognition of the small businesses in his constituency. He is absolutely right: there is no greater force behind the supply side of the economy than small businesses, which are essential to prosperity and productivity. He is absolutely right to champion their cause, and we should all join him in that endeavour.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): There has been some talk about business rates. I appreciate what the Minister says about needing a proper plan. Businesses in my constituency tell me that business rates are their big *bête noire* and that reforming and replacing them would make their lives a lot easier and their survival more certain. Will he give some indication of the Government's thinking, and of the timescale in which they might be looking at the matter? Labour is proposing a radical reform.

Kevin Hollinrake: Well, Labour is proposing a radical reform, but we cannot quite work out whether it will scrap business rates or reform them. There have been mixed messages among Labour Front Benchers—indeed, among the shadow Chancellor and the Leader of the Opposition—so we are not quite sure what Labour's policy will be. We are certainly not sure how it would replace the £25 billion to £30 billion of revenue. I would really like to understand that.

This is a thorny issue, because if we scrapped business rates the taxpayer would have to find that huge amount of money by some other means. The right thing to do right now is to see businesses through this very difficult time with the kind of concession that we have made, such as the £13.6 billion, rather than making irresponsible and in my view undeliverable promises to completely scrap business rates.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Essex Linen Services, which provides laundry services to hospitals and hotels, is struggling to survive because of electricity prices. It believes that its sector has been left out of the energy support packages. Will the Minister agree to review the situation for providers of laundry services and see whether they can be supported in paying their electricity bills in future?

Kevin Hollinrake: All businesses have access to the energy bill relief scheme. There are concerns about which sectors will be covered by the revised scheme. We will have details on that by the end of the year; the Government have committed to that. Clearly we are trying to balance the interests of the taxpayer, who has to fund this, with those of business. It is right that we focus on businesses that cannot mitigate their energy use, by whatever means, or pass on the costs to consumers. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the interests of the sector.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Seema Malhotra.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I grew up in a small family business. Labour is proud to be supporting Small Business Saturday and its 10th anniversary, and to have supported last week's family business week.

Small and medium-sized enterprises are indeed the lifeblood of our economy, but they have been hit hard by 12 years of Tory failure and staggeringly low growth. Even after three Prime Ministers this year, the Government have no answers—and the House should not just take that from me; the Federation of Small Businesses judged the autumn statement as being

“low on wealth-creation, piling more pressure on the UK’s 5.5 million small businesses”.

If the Government are really serious about helping small businesses to grow, is it not time they adopted Labour’s plan to reform business rates, back our high streets, make Brexit work, and make Britain the best place in which to start and grow a business?

Kevin Hollinrake: As one who was in business in 2010, I remember very well what the economy was like in that year, when we took over from Labour; it was not having a good time. *[Interruption.]* Yes, it is a lot stronger now.

We should bear in mind that while we can choose our own opinions, we cannot choose our own facts, and the facts are that the UK has experienced the third fastest growth in the G7 since 2010—behind only the United States and Canada—and has grown faster than Germany since 2016. It is right that we seek to provide new solutions for businesses; we have to stimulate the supply side of the economy, not least because that is good not only for businesses but for consumers. However, as I said earlier, simply claiming that you are going to scrap business rates without saying how you are going to replace that £25 billion of revenue is highly irresponsible.

SMEs: Recruitment Support

9. **Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support (a) small and medium-sized enterprises and (b) other businesses to recruit adequate numbers of staff. [902471]

Mr Speaker: Come on!

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kevin Hollinrake): I am new to this, Mr Speaker.

My Department works closely with other Government Departments and with firms in all sectors of the economy on a range of issues relating to the labour market and skills. That includes increasing the number of apprentices and business investment in skills development, the adoption of T-levels and skills bootcamps, and ensuring that there is better information along with easier routes into careers in a range of sectors.

Douglas Chapman: Last month I held a business roundtable with the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants. It was clear that SMEs were struggling with recruitment, high energy costs, Brexit, and £20 billion worth of late payments.

When it comes to late payments, the prompt payment code does not cut it for SMEs. Will the Minister work with me to introduce legislation to outlaw late payments once and for all and give our SMEs a fighting chance?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s correspondence on this matter, and I look forward to meeting him on 7 December.

The prompt payment code, which we introduced and which we reviewed recently, will be out for consultation very shortly, and I am keen to learn from best practice how we can make it more effective. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there are many issues facing businesses today, and we are keen to help them get through the difficulties that will no doubt continue over the next few months, but in my experience of business our best years come after our worst years, and I think we can be confident when looking ahead while also recognising that there will be difficult times in the short term.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): There are many SMEs in the retail and hospital sector. It is a sector that does well in the run-up to Christmas, which gives those businesses the opportunity to make some money. What impact does the Minister think the rail strikes that are planned for next week will have on their ability to recruit more staff?

Kevin Hollinrake: It is, of course, right that we look after the interests of business and consumers. There is no doubt that the strikes will have an impact on both parts of that sector, and it is also right for us to prioritise the needs of all consumers, not just those who are seeking to take industrial action. We urge all parties to get round the negotiating table as quickly as possible and try to reach a sensible agreement.

Energy Support

11. **James Grundy** (Leigh) (Con): What steps he is taking to support (a) households and (b) businesses with energy bills in winter 2022-23. [902473]

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): As my colleagues have already pointed out, the Government are supporting households and businesses during the winter through a series of measures including the energy price guarantee, which will save the average household £900 this winter, the £400 energy bill support scheme payment, and, for businesses, the energy bill relief scheme, which will provide a price reduction to ensure that all eligible businesses and other non-domestic customers are protected. That is in addition to the £2 billion that the energy-intensive industries have received since 2013.

James Grundy: Over the last six months, several businesses in my constituency have approached me to raise concerns about potential tenfold increases in their energy bills. Can my hon. Friend assure me that the Government will continue to act to ensure that no business will face such shocking increases in reality, either this year or next year?

George Freeman: In a word, yes. All of us in the Business Department are focused on the point that my hon. Friend raises—namely, the pressure on businesses from the energy price spike this winter. In the autumn statement the Chancellor announced the Treasury-led review of our energy bill relief scheme beyond March, and we are actively working as a Department to make sure that that review has all the necessary data and

evidence from businesses. Our energy bill relief scheme supporting energy-intensive industries has put in £2 billion of relief since 2013, and our 2022 energy security strategy announced that the EII compensation scheme would be extended for a further three years. We are also looking at making similar changes to the related EII exemption scheme. The Business Department absolutely gets how much difficulty businesses are facing through energy.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The north-east of England process industry cluster has advised me that major companies on Teesside currently obtaining their energy via a private wire relationship do not qualify for the energy bill relief scheme, with some major employers paying millions more for their energy and facing the real prospect of ceasing operations and moving overseas. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how their concerns can be addressed?

George Freeman: Even better than that, I can make sure that the energy Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), meets the hon. Gentleman. We are aware of this problem and we are actively working on it.

BEIS Capital Spending

12. **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the efficiency and effectiveness of his Department's capital spending. [902474]

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): As the Department for science, research and innovation, with the historic uplift in public R&D announced in the comprehensive spending review 2021 and the autumn statement 2022, and the Department for net zero, BEIS secured the highest increase in capital budgets at the last spending review, growing at 8.3% per annum over the spending review period.

John Stevenson: As we know, capital expenditure spent effectively drives economic growth. To this end, would the Minister agree that capital projects such as those in my constituency that will clearly help economic growth and can start in the next 12 months will be prioritised, and that additional support will be given where they have shortfalls due to rising costs?

George Freeman: My hon. Friend has put his powerful point on record. I can assure him that the Department is actively working with the Treasury to make sure that those sorts of schemes are accelerated.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Is it still in the Department's plans to take a 20% shareholding in Sizewell C? If so, will that result in a capital spend of £6 billion or £7 billion—money that could be better spent elsewhere? Private investment could be freed up in the Scottish cluster if it was made a track 1 cluster and pumped storage hydro could be helped by agreeing a pricing mechanism for electricity.

George Freeman: Unlike the Scottish nationalists, we are committed to the private-public partnership that drives investment in our nuclear industry, and Sizewell C is a major commitment. The Government are proud to

be partnering with industry, and it is a shame that the Scottish nationalists are not similarly partnering with industry for the benefit of Scots voters and bill payers.

Energy Price Guarantee

13. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): If he will publish a White Paper on the long-term structure of the UK energy sector after the energy price guarantee ends. [902475]

The Minister for Climate (Graham Stuart): The Government have announced changes to the energy price guarantee from April 2023, as well as additional support for pensioners and those on benefits. The Government will work with consumer groups and industry to consider the best approach to consumer protection from April 2024 as part of wider retail market reforms.

John Penrose: Does the Minister agree that while subsidies are necessary short-term sticking plasters, investors will not commit the multi-billion pound investments that the energy sector needs to upgrade and modernise energy storage, generation and transmission unless the long-term rules are clear? Will he therefore update the Energy Bill to lay out a sustainable long-term future with investable deadlines and milestones to transition from today's highly distorted, politicised and bureaucratic sector to a cheaper, simpler, better-value industry with much lower political and regulatory risks?

Graham Stuart: I am proud that this Government have led the way, with contracts for difference driving renewables such as offshore wind by driving down costs. I am also delighted that we have the legislative vehicle to deliver the necessary changes, and the Energy Security Bill will be taken forward in this Parliament to transform our energy industry by turbocharging carbon capture, utilisation and storage and our hydrogen industries in pioneering projects from the Humber to the Mersey, and beyond. The Bill will encourage competition in the energy sector, creating opportunity, prosperity and security with clean jobs, new skills and, as my hon. Friend rightly highlights, cheaper bills.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Minister talks about long-term energy support. Will he bear in mind that, despite the promises made here today that everyone in the United Kingdom is already benefiting from short-term support, not one penny has been allocated to consumers in Northern Ireland, even though the electricity companies are ready and the utility regular has told him that the ground has been set. When will payments be made to people in Northern Ireland? We are looking not for promises tomorrow but for payments today.

Graham Stuart: The energy price guarantee is benefiting Northern Ireland consumers today, along with pensioners and vulnerable families—they are all being helped. Of course, energy policy is devolved to Northern Ireland, and we have had to step in because of the lack of an Executive. We are working very hard. I held a roundtable with energy suppliers only last week, and another one was held yesterday. We are doing everything within our power to find the right route, while protecting public money in the proper fashion, to get money out to

Northern Ireland consumers this winter. We are doing everything for our part, and I hope the right hon. Gentleman will support me in urging others to do the same.

Topical Questions

T2. [902487] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Grant Shapps): With Sizewell C, we are securing a cheap, clean and reliable supply of energy to supercharge growth—I will provide more details in my oral statement. We have recommitted to increasing public investment in research and development to £20 billion each year by 2024-25, which will supercharge science and innovation, and we are supporting local enterprises and increasing the national living wage by almost 10%, the largest ever cash-terms increase.

Andrew Bridgen: As well as renewables, it is clear that we need to add more baseload capacity, and nuclear is the favourite for that. Hundreds of my constituents work at Rolls-Royce, and many of them work on the development of small modular nuclear reactors. Will my right hon. Friend outline what support the Government are giving to Rolls-Royce to develop this technology, which will not only add to the UK's energy security but deliver a technology that we will be able to export successfully around the globe?

Grant Shapps: Like my hon. Friend, I am very keen on small nuclear reactors as part of the solution. We will be launching Great British Nuclear early next year to assist both Rolls-Royce and its competitors. There are other brands out there, all of which have interesting ideas about modular production of nuclear power, which will provide sustainable energy even when the wind is not blowing and the sun is not shining.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Business Secretary to his first oral questions. He is the third Business Secretary we have had this year, and I have to say that lack of stability is the No. 1 complaint from businesses, which genuinely cannot keep track of Government policy in any particular area. If they do know the policy, they feel it could change at any moment if the internal politics of the Conservative party shift one way or the other. Does he accept that political instability has very real consequences for economic stability?

Grant Shapps: I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman's welcome, I hope to be in post for a long time, not to disappoint him in any way. His talk about the instability of policy is a bit rich, as many Labour Members sat on the Front Bench under their previous leader, who believed in a whole bunch of different things. Even the shadow Secretary of State for Climate Change and Net Zero, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), once said it is impossible for this country to get to 40% renewable energy—he called it “pie in the sky.” Right now we are producing 43.1% of our energy from renewables. That is from a party that is consistent.

Jonathan Reynolds: Respectfully, I think the Business Secretary needs to focus a little bit more on his own side and the humility required to do that.

On a more positive note, this Saturday is small business Saturday. A future Labour Government will tackle the issue of late payments to small and medium-sized enterprises by making audit committees report on public companies' payment practices. With more than £20 million waiting to be paid at any one time, this is a change that will make a real difference and one that is backed by the Federation of Small Businesses. We could, however, implement it sooner by amending the draft audit reform Bill when it comes forward. Would the Secretary of State support that change?

Grant Shapps: I agree that payment for small businesses is very important, particularly when it is not done by larger companies that have the resources. That is one of the reasons why the Government have led the way to make sure that, when small businesses deal with Government, payments are made quickly and efficiently. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) is looking at a whole range of different things to ensure that we speed up the culture of late payments to small businesses, and he will be saying more about that very shortly.

T4. [902489] **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Transport for London consultation data shows that 80% of outer London businesses said no to the Mayor of London expanding the ultra low emission zone, but they have been ignored and now many Carshalton and Wallington businesses are considering closing their doors. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me and other London Conservative MPs to discuss how we might be able to support businesses in outer London?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Labour Members talk about helping businesses, but that is what you get with a Labour Mayor in London, bashing businesses. I would be proud to meet my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): We do not know where the half a billion pounds announced last week to cover Horizon uncertainty is coming from, as the Science Minister refuses to answer my questions, but we do know that British scientists are still having to choose between the country they love and the funding they need. British science, British businesses and British jobs are at risk while the Government play a blame game, instead of keeping their manifesto promise to associate with the world's biggest science fund. Will the Science Minister admit that no science fund can have the efficiency, effectiveness, influence, prestige or range of Horizon, and that he has let British science down?

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): In a word, no. I will tell the hon. Lady exactly where the £484 million that we announced last Monday—I think the Opposition supported it—is coming from. It is coming from Her Majesty's Treasury to support universities, researchers and companies in this country that have been affected

by—and this is the second point—the European Union’s block on our negotiated membership of Horizon, Copernicus and Euratom. I was in Paris last week negotiating. We are still actively pushing to be in Horizon, Copernicus and Euratom, but we have made provision, and early in the new year Members will start to see that we will be rolling out additional support for fellowships, innovation and global partnerships. If UK scientists cannot play in the European cup, we will play in the world cup of science.

T5. [902490] Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in condemning the actions of the London Mayor in extending the ULEZ scheme out to the whole of London? This will have a significant impact on businesses both inside and outside London, creating a financial wall between London and the rest of the country, and hitting areas such as Dartford particularly hard, which, of course, have no say in who the Mayor of London is.

Grant Shapps: That is absolutely right. Voters will have their say. I say no taxation without representation.

T3. [902488] Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I welcome the Business Secretary to his place. What assessment has he made of the number of European countries to exit the energy charter treaty on the basis that attempts to modernise the treaty have failed, and will the Government be considering the UK’s position?

The Minister for Climate (Graham Stuart): We consider all those that have left the energy charter treaty, but we have so far supported its modernisation. We keep that under advisement.

T6. [902491] Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my enthusiasm for synthetic fuels made from green hydrogen and atmospheric carbon capture as part of our route to decarbonisation? If so, what is his Department doing to support the UK pioneers in this sector, such as Zero Petroleum, to compete in what will surely be a multitrillion-pound global industry and huge export opportunity?

Grant Shapps: I do enthusiastically support our SAF—sustainable aviation fuel—industry. Actually, it is a little known fact that last year at COP26 we sent more than 500 aircraft home with sustainable aviation fuel in their tanks, and this country has set a more ambitious target for sustainable aviation fuel than elsewhere, with 10% by 2030.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Groceries Code Adjudicator has done a good job over the past 10 years, leading to a big fall in the number of breaches of the fair purchasing code, but bad practice is still rife in the fashion industry, with UK fashion retailers among the worst offenders. The Environmental Audit Committee called for a garment trade adjudicator. Will Ministers bring that proposal forward?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kevin Hollinrake): I thank the right hon. Member for all his work in this area; I know that he has done an awful lot. We have no plans to bring forward a garment code adjudicator, but

we do take reports of illegal and unsafe employment practices very seriously. Since October 2020, a wide group of stakeholders, comprising retailers, manufacturers and non-profit organisations have been working with the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority to address poor practice and working conditions.

T7. [902492] Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): May I say pob lwc, good luck, to the Wales football team tonight?

Can the Secretary of State confirm that, beyond Sizewell C, Great British Nuclear will be empowered to commission and build at not only gigawatt-scale, but small modular reactor-scale, so that my constituents on Ynys Môn can benefit from those new jobs from new nuclear?

Grant Shapps: I can confirm that that is the intention with Great British Nuclear. I know that areas such as Wylfa Newydd—if I am pronouncing it correctly—in my hon. Friend’s constituency could well be in line to benefit. However, as she can tell from my Welsh pronunciation, I suspect that I will be on the English side tonight.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Yesterday, I hosted a roundtable meeting for businesses in my constituency. They were worried about late payments and a Government who are not helping them. Fifty thousand businesses close every year due to late payments, and small businesses account for two thirds of UK private sector employment. Will this Government act before the worst of the Tory-led recession bites to save millions of jobs?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Member for his question. He is absolutely right to bring up this matter. It is one of the concerns that has been raised most frequently with me since taking on this role. We are tackling the culture of late payments with measures including the Payment Practices Reporting, the Small Business Commissioner and the Prompt Payment Code, but I am determined to see how much further we can go to be effective in this area.

T8. [902493] David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I recently met my constituent, Puneet Bhalla, who is the founder and chief executive of Maxim World, a very successful small exporter of hotel goods across the world. He told me of some of the challenges that small and medium-sized exporters are facing with post-Brexit trade arrangements. Can my hon. Friend tell me what plans there are to involve SMEs in the review of EU retained law?

Kevin Hollinrake: It is great to hear that my hon. Friend’s constituent is looking to export right across the world, and we are determined to make it easier to do so through trade deals outside the European Union. Ministers and officials from across BEIS regularly engage with SMEs on a wide range of issues and will continue to do so as the retained EU law programme proceeds.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), when will Ministers start to use procurement in order to generate and defend

British jobs? I have been listening for years to Ministers coming to that Dispatch Box saying that they will use procurement, so when will we actually see it?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is a very important point. The Government are determined to tackle not just their own procurement practices, but those further afield. Clearly, we want to keep our markets open to international competition, because we want to compete internationally as well, but there also needs to be fair competition. Where we can prioritise the needs of British companies and British workers, we should do so.

T9. [902494] **Gary Sambrook** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Northfield Business Improvement District and I are eagerly awaiting the announcement of the levelling-up bid, especially the one for Northfield High Street. In the meantime, many local shops, especially independents, are in need of help to stay open. Can the Minister help Marcia and Andy from the Northfield BID and set out how the Government can help those businesses?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for standing up for his constituency businesses; I hope he is supporting Small Business Saturday this weekend, as I am sure hon. Members across the House will be. It is absolutely right that we are supporting businesses through these difficult times with the energy bill relief scheme and the £13.6 billion of rates support that they will see over the next five years, but we will continue to look at the needs of business to ensure that we have the right measures in place.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Rosebank oilfield would produce more than 200 million tonnes of CO₂ when burned, which is equivalent to running 58 coal-fired power stations for a year and more than the combined annual emissions of 28 low-income countries. How does that make any sense in a world where heating needs to be constrained to below 1.5°?

Graham Stuart: Our use of oil and gas in this country is falling as part of our pathway to net zero. It is usage that drives the burning of oil and gas, and it is on the downward pathway. Producing our own oil and gas when we will be burning it on our net zero pathway domestically is sensible. It is good for Scottish jobs—although sadly opposed by the Scottish nationalists—it is good for the British economy and it is entirely net zero compliant. That is why we will continue to manage the mature and declining basin that is the North sea.

Mr Speaker: I call Henry Smith.

T10. [902495] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): Sorry—I did not know I had a topical question, Mr Speaker. Can I get assurances from the Government that airports such as Gatwick will be supported as they recover strongly from the covid-19 pandemic?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will be reassured to know that I did know that he would have a topical question, and the answer to it is yes.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): Recently, a Premier Inn hotel in my constituency threw out one of their visually impaired guests, Ms Angharad Paget-Jones, and her guide dog Tudor in the middle of the night

because they refused to believe, despite being shown identification, that Tudor was a guide dog. Can the Minister tell me what action his Department is taking not only to ensure that businesses are complying with the Equality Act 2010, but to go after those who show frank disregard for it in practice?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is a very disturbing case, and I am happy to help the hon. Lady with it. I know that the guide dog campaigning organisations have this issue in their sights as something we need to address. I would be grateful if she wrote to me with the specific instance and I will be happy to deal with it for her.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the Government's recent doubling of the alternative fuel payment and yesterday's written communication from the Minister confirming that the majority of households eligible for those payments will receive their £200 automatically as a credit on their electricity bill. Can he reassure constituents in Banff and Buchan who are dependent on heating oil in particular that those payments will indeed be made as soon as practically possible?

Graham Stuart: I can give my hon. Friend and his constituents that assurance.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): A few months ago, CF Fertilisers in Billingham ceased ammonia production there because of the high gas price. Now Mitsubishi, just a few hundred yards along the road, is consulting on the closure of one of its plants, with the loss of hundreds of direct and contractor jobs, for the same reason. Is the Minister aware of that latest blow to Teesside, and what is he doing to help firms such as Mitsubishi?

Grant Shapps: I was up in Teesside the week before last, and I have been keeping in close contact with what is happening there. The good news is that there are new jobs coming about in new industries, including new industries supplying electric battery manufacturing, which are available because this country is outside the European Union and able to produce new rules that will allow things such as green lithium to thrive here and provide up to 8% of Europe's entire needs. New jobs are coming to Teesside.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, maths and higher maths is often the foundation skill upon which other innovative technologies are built. Can he therefore tell the House what steps his Department is taking both to fund higher maths and to give people the skills they need in maths to help us to reinforce our status as a global science power?

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): My hon. Friend makes an important point: maths is one of the underpinning disciplines of all our science and technology leadership. That is why we have increased funding through UK Research and Innovation for core maths, and I am delighted to confirm that we are looking at various ways in which we might be able to turbocharge our international fellowships in maths as well.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Households in Great Britain have had access to the £400 energy support payments since 1 October, but households in Northern Ireland have not had any substantial support whatsoever. The energy price guarantee does not really work in Northern Ireland, because 70% of households there use oil. Can the Government give the people of Northern Ireland a firm date by which the £400 payments will be made available?

Graham Stuart: As I said in an earlier answer, we are doing everything we can, working through suppliers, to ensure that the money reaches Northern Ireland consumers. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that every single Northern Ireland household is receiving the alternative fuel payment, in addition to the energy bills support scheme. We are looking to make sure not only that that money gets out and is credited to households, but that they are able to access it this winter. There is no point having it as a credit on an electricity bill, as that does not help them deal with other costs this winter. That is the sticking point; that is what we are working on.

Mr Speaker: Come on, Minister—you said you had already answered it once.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The proposed takeover of Activision by Microsoft has the potential to have a profound impact on many of Britain's brilliant video games industry manufacturers and makers. Although I know that the Secretary of State will not want to comment on the specifics of that case, can he reassure me that the Competition and Markets Authority has all the resources it needs to come to the right conclusion and to do so as thoroughly and rapidly as possible on this important matter?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is right to raise that question. I know that the CMA has received a large number of submissions, and some very large submissions as well. I think it has until 1 March next year to complete its phase 2 inquiry. We absolutely believe that it has the right resources to do that, and we will make sure that it has over the coming months.

Anti-lockdown Protest in Shanghai: Arrest and Assault of Edward Lawrence

12.36 pm

Mr Speaker: We come now to the urgent question. I believe this is the first time Jim Shannon has had one.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the arrest and assault of Edward Lawrence by Chinese authorities while covering an anti-lockdown protest in Shanghai.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity. It has been 12 years of waiting—patience is a virtue.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): I find it hard to believe, given his powers of persuasion, that this is the hon. Gentleman's first urgent question. He is an ever present ray of sunshine in Parliament, and we love him for it.

As the Foreign Secretary made clear yesterday, the arrest of a BBC journalist while covering the recent protests in Shanghai is a deeply disturbing and wholly unacceptable situation. Journalists must be able to do their job without fear of arrest or intimidation. The BBC has stated that the journalist was beaten and kicked by the police during his arrest, and was held for several hours before being released. In response, we are calling in the Chinese ambassador to make clear the unacceptable and unwarranted nature of those actions and the importance of freedom of speech, and to demand a full explanation. We have also been in close touch with the journalist and the BBC throughout to gather the facts and provide consular support.

We recognise that the covid-related restrictions in China are challenging for the Chinese people. We urge the Chinese authorities to respect the rights of those who decide to express their views about the situation. Moreover, as the Prime Minister made clear yesterday in his Mansion House speech, the media—and, for that matter, our parliamentarians—must be able to highlight issues without fear of sanction or intimidation, whether in calling out human rights violations in Xinjiang and the curtailment of freedom in Hong Kong, or in reporting on the recent protests.

This, of course, follows the recent incident in Manchester. As we have previously made clear to the House, the apparent behaviour of staff at the Chinese consulate general was wholly unacceptable. In view of the gravity of that incident, we summoned the Chinese chargé d'affaires on 18 October and delivered a clear message through our ambassador in Beijing. There is now an ongoing investigation and it would be wrong to pre-empt the findings.

More broadly, we recognise that China poses a systemic challenge to our values and interests, which, again, the Prime Minister highlighted yesterday. That challenge grows more acute as China moves towards greater authoritarianism. That is why we are taking robust action to protect our interests and stand up for our values. That includes imposing sanctions, leading action at the UN and strengthening our supply chain resilience. Let me assure Members that, as

part of our frank relationship with China, we will continue to raise our human rights concerns at the highest levels.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for having a certain firmness in his response, which is what we wish to hear. I welcome the news that the Chinese ambassador has been summoned by the FCDO to account for this arrest. I encourage the Minister to share—hopefully he can—all the justifications that will be given at that meeting. The reason given to the BBC by the Chinese authorities was that they had arrested Edward Lawrence for his own good in case he caught covid from the crowd. Wow, what a pathetic answer! My goodness. Such was their concern for him, a senior journalist in the BBC and a British citizen, that the Chinese police beat him and kicked him as he tried to lawfully cover a peaceful protest in Shanghai. He had all the necessary permits and licences, and is a veteran reporter in China.

The first question we need to ask is: what assessment has the FCDO Minister made of the safety of British journalists in China following this assault? It is important to remember that the arrest and assault of Edward Lawrence is not the first attack on freedom of speech, but just another example in a long line of journalists and human rights defenders who have been silenced, arrested or simply disappeared by the Chinese Communist party. This is the sixth urgent question granted in this parliamentary term on human rights abuses by the Chinese Communist party. We have seen the CCP establishing incognito police stations in the UK, the assault of Bob Chan outside the Chinese consulate in Manchester, the Xinjiang police files highlighting horrendous crimes against the Uyghurs, and the arrest of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong. This is unprecedented and needs urgent action.

This incident is part of a clear pattern of behaviour of increased crackdowns and restrictions on Chinese people within China and on British soil in the run-up to, and following, the 20th national congress of the Chinese Communist party last month. Last night at the Lord Mayor's banquet, the Prime Minister gave a speech stating that the "golden era" of China-UK relations was over. I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment, which is worthy of saying. The director general of MI5 said that China represents

"the biggest long-term threat to Britain and the world's economic and national security".

Clearly, tougher action is needed to protect British citizens, human rights defenders, pro-democracy activists, and religious and ethnic minorities targeted by the CCP.

David Rutley: As always, my friend the hon. Gentleman raises important points, and he can be assured that when the Chinese ambassador is called in to the FCDO, they will be raised, particularly the immediate point about the arrest, its unacceptable manner and the justification, which as he highlighted is incredibly thin. In that meeting, we will also raise the wider point he has mentioned about the safety of journalists. He raises a number of other important points, including about Chinese police stations. As the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), made clear in his statement to the House on 1 November, reports of undeclared police stations in the United Kingdom are extremely concerning

and will be taken seriously. The Home Office is reviewing our approach to transnational repression, and the Minister for Security has committed to providing an update on that work to the House in due course. The hon. Gentleman rightly says that there are wider concerns about the increasing authoritarianism and muscular foreign policy of the Chinese, and the Prime Minister rightly set out a new era of robust pragmatism, which we have seen grow over recent years, but which was clearly articulated by the Prime Minister yesterday.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I congratulate our friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on successfully securing this urgent question? He raises a series of very important points. We all absolutely and rightly condemn the brutal treatment yesterday of Ed Lawrence, the BBC cameraman, that saw him dragged away and beaten. I have seen a text from him to a colleague saying that he was beaten hard during the course of his detention.

With all the other issues that have been raised—the chasing and incarceration of journalists in Hong Kong, the crackdowns and genocide on the Uyghur—there is now an endless litany of China's bad behaviour, so I simply ask my hon. Friend the Minister this. How is it that yesterday the Prime Minister, who previously said that China posed a “systemic threat”, has now moved to saying it poses “a systemic challenge”, and that our strongest policy statement now, in terms of our reputation and relationship with China, is that we are going to be “robustly pragmatic”? Can he please explain to me how “robustly pragmatic” will worry the Chinese any one bit?

David Rutley: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. He is a long-standing campaigner on these issues, and I listen keenly to what he says, as does the Foreign Secretary. What the Prime Minister set out yesterday was a co-ordinated and coherent approach in which we do more to adapt to China's growing impact. As he knows, we will revise and update the integrated review, which will help us to invest in our alliances and in the serious capabilities that we need to counter the actions that we see in China's foreign policy.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Minister.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing his first urgent question in the House—who would have known that it was the first?

I turn to the serious matter of the arrest and detention of journalists, which is deeply shocking and, in this particular case, concerns our own BBC. Sadly, this is the approach and tone that we have come to expect from an increasingly authoritarian Chinese regime. That has been further demonstrated this week by the case in Hong Kong of the independent media outlet, Apple Daily, whose founder, Jimmy Lai, faces court cases in Hong Kong on basic freedom of expression for local people. We must show solidarity in that terrible situation, not just in Hong Kong but across the People's Republic of China.

I welcome the fact that the Foreign Secretary has summoned the Chinese ambassador, as well as the consular support that has been provided for Mr Lawrence.

The robust response is a welcome change to the Government's previous handling of Chinese overreach in Manchester, which the House thought did not match the severity of the violence outside the Chinese consulate. Our support for the work of the press must be unified, and we stand squarely behind the Government in making it clear to Chinese officials that their treatment of journalists doing their job is not and never will be acceptable. The Opposition have made it clear that the BBC must be protected in its crucial work abroad, tackling disinformation and providing reliable, accurate reporting—I am sure the Minister agrees with that.

I have one question for the Minister. We are in the middle of profound cuts to the BBC World Service, including of Chinese journalists. Will the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office say on the record today that it will not defund Mandarin-speaking journalists, because, particularly in covid lockdown, it is crucial that individuals can listen to good journalism on our BBC World Service?

David Rutley: I thank the hon. Member for her considered and important words. Of course, with the calling in of the ambassador, we will raise those matters, and to hear them raised across the House helps to add strength to what we are going to say, so we are grateful for that.

The hon. Member made an important point about protecting journalists across the board, and I will raise that with my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and with the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who is responsible for the Indo-Pacific and is currently travelling.

The hon. Member made some important points about Manchester, and I assure her that we do not have any intention of giving the Chinese Government any excuse to make this a political issue. It is about law, and we will see it through.

The hon. Member made points about the BBC World Service. There is a move to a digital platform, and we have set out our funding plans with the World Service. I will meet it shortly on the wider points that she made.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Another day, another blatant abuse of human rights by the Chinese communist Government. Who but that Government would think that arresting, cuffing, kicking and beating a journalist could be construed as for his own good?

We have had an awful lot of calling in the Chinese ambassador. If robust pragmatism is to mean anything, should there not be clear consequences? We have still not expelled the Manchester consulate general, and there should be sanctions against Chinese officials who are waging seriously cruel oppression on brave protesters who are simply trying to stand up for their rights in China and against the oppressive lockdown, which resulted in the deaths of over 100 people in a fire in Wuhan last week. When are we going to get serious about China?

David Rutley: My hon. Friend makes a good point: the case against the BBC journalist was thin to say the least, and we will raise that with the ambassador today. He raises an important point about Manchester, about

[David Rutley]

which an investigation is ongoing. Unlike the Chinese, we will see that process through before we take action—and we will. On his broader point about the action that we will take, we have put sanctions in place in relation to the atrocities in Xinjiang, so action is being taken. We are also refreshing our integrated review, which will help us to create the framework in which further action can be taken as appropriate.

Mr Speaker: We now come to SNP spokesperson, Alyn Smith.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this urgent question and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it. It is important for the House to take account of the issue. Journalists deserve a special status anywhere: they tell the truth, they shed a light and they do a public service. They need support, so we express our support for Edward Lawrence. I am glad to hear that the ambassador will be summoned to the FCDO, but, frankly, I would like to hear about more consequences. Bluntly, the Manchester investigation also seems to be taking longer than it needs to; I think the House would support consequences on that.

There is a wider issue at play. I am deeply concerned about the pressure that is building within China. The Communist party has boxed itself into a zero covid strategy that has been coupled with a terrifyingly low vaccine uptake, particularly among the elderly. That huge pressure could tend towards greater authoritarianism and a more violent crackdown. What assessment has the FCDO made of the risk to UK nationals in China? Does the advice need to change? On a humanitarian level, is there scope for assisting the Chinese state, for all its faults, with a catch-up vaccine roll-out? That might go some way to alleviating the humanitarian pressure that could tend towards worse consequences for the people of China.

David Rutley: As I have highlighted, consequences have been put in train in relation to other situations, particularly in Xinjiang, and we will be having a robust conversation with the ambassador today. The hon. Member talks about Manchester; I have already highlighted that we are awaiting the details of the police investigation. It is absolutely right that we get that done properly so that we can then take informed action, which was clearly not the case with what happened to our BBC journalist.

On what is happening more broadly with the Chinese Government and their approach to covid, that is for them to decide. We have scientific co-operation and, if and when appropriate, that dialogue can take place. Ultimately, they need to make a decision about how they tackle covid within their borders.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this crucial urgent question?

The Government must always do all they can to protect the safety of His Majesty's subjects abroad; that is a fundamental duty. I wonder what effect calling in the ambassador will have and whether more does not

need to be done urgently that actually has an effect on the Chinese operation in the UK. Should we not be looking to expel diplomats; to take tougher actions in international forums where Chinese interests are at stake; or to do things that the Chinese would not want us to do, such as improving our relationship with Taiwan or inviting the Dalai Lama on a formal visit by the British Government to show that we are not a pushover and will not support the communist running dogs?

David Rutley: At the calling in today, those issues will be raised in a robust manner. Of course, the safety of our citizens is absolutely key across the world and in China, so we will raise those issues. In terms of providing a robust, muscular approach, as we have seen, given the concerns that have been raised in the House about Uyghur minorities, sanctions and trade guidelines have been put in place. We will continue to take the appropriate action to counter what we believe are incorrect practices.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Last night, the Prime Minister said that our relationship with China would be characterised by “robust pragmatism”. I have no idea what that means, and nor, I expect, do tech start-ups trying to decide about Chinese investment; universities looking at Chinese funding; journalists trying to decide how to cover Chinese stories; businesses looking at their supply chains and market strategies; and Chinese activists risking their lives. Is it not time that we had the long-promised China strategy, not just another hollow slogan?

David Rutley: As I said in answer to a previous question, we will be updating the integrated review to ensure that we continue to invest in our alliances and the capabilities that we need. We have not committed to publish a separate China strategy, but we will continue to maintain as much transparency as possible and keep Parliament updated on our approach to China. The integrated review will be the main focus for that.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): This disgraceful episode reminds us of the importance of the BBC's work in China. About a decade ago, ringfenced funding was stopped for the BBC World Service and BBC Monitoring. Some ringfenced funding has now been restored for the World Service but not, as far as I know, for Monitoring. Will the Government undertake to look at that matter? The degree of investment in such services should not be competing with commercial BBC considerations.

David Rutley: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I have already highlighted that a broader strategy is taking place with the World Service, but I will follow up about Monitoring and get back to him in more detail.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The Chinese people are living with this authoritarian rule and they are taking immensely brave actions in protesting against it. We all remember—they will remember better than we do—Tiananmen Square and the way that the Government cracked down on that protest. There is a serious threat and a serious challenge, and now we have “robust pragmatism”—I am trembling at those words. Words mean nothing; action is desperately needed. Manchester is less than 20 miles from where I

live, so this is on our doorsteps. We must take action now and start sanctioning to let the Chinese Government know that we are taking them seriously. They are laughing up their sleeves at us in this state.

David Rutley: The hon. Member makes an important point about the protests that are taking place and we urge the Chinese authorities to respect those who decide to express their views about the current situation. The freedom to protest must be respected. She also makes an important point about Manchester, which is not far from my constituency either. We have these concerns, but we need to go through due process. We have taken steps on sanctions in response to the situation of the Uyghurs and the integrated review will set out a wider strategy.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The violent, aggressive crackdown against journalists and protesters is yet another completely unacceptable act by the Chinese Communist party. I have seen at first hand how UK Ministers and our brave diplomats are prepared to stand up against autocratic bullies across the world; often, we are one of the few countries that will do that. When it comes to robustness, I urge my hon. Friend to continue to ensure that the UK is a leader in standing on the side of freedom, especially freedom of speech.

David Rutley: That is something that we take great pride in and is fundamental to our values and those of many other countries. We need to speak up for those values. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for her incredible work at the FCDO in making the case and highlighting the robust action that we take and will continue to take.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What happened to Edward Lawrence was not a one-off or isolated incident. It is part of a deliberate strategy to ensure that reporters in China do not tell the rest of the world what is going on there. This week, the other place will debate the Report stage of the Procurement Bill and will consider an amendment in the name of Lords Alton, Blencathra, Coaker and Fox. It would require the Government to set out a timetable

“for the removal of physical technology or surveillance equipment from the Government’s procurement supply chain”

where there is evidence that the supplier has been engaged or involved in modern slavery, genocide or crimes against humanity. Is the Government’s policy now sufficiently robust to accept the noble Lords’ amendment, or does the Minister think that pragmatism will lead them to vote against it?

David Rutley: I am not aware of that amendment, but I am sure the relevant Ministers will listen to what the right hon. Member has said. I would highlight that action is being taken, however. On 24 November the Government announced that companies subject to the national intelligence law of the People’s Republic of China should not be able to supply surveillance systems to sensitive Government sites. Actions are being taken, and I will get back to the right hon. Member on the particular amendment he talks about.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): The Chinese Communist party’s attacks on freedom of speech and democratic institutions abroad show that its domestic

authoritarianism is now spreading overseas. Following recent revelations about overseas police stations, attacks on the free press, and now crackdowns on peaceful protestors, what steps are the Government taking to stand against totalitarianism and for British values of democracy and freedom of speech at home as well as abroad?

David Rutley: I have just returned from my first ministerial visit to Latin America—Colombia and Panama—and it is very clear that our amazing civil servants and diplomats speak up, actively call out any authoritarian activity and speak true to our values. We will continue to do that, including this afternoon when the Chinese ambassador is called in.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on obtaining this urgent question, but I must warn you, Mr Speaker, that I think you have set him on a new trend. He was always concerned as to why he was the last person to be called in questions, but now he has found a method to be called first, so just beware, Mr Speaker, because I think you are going to get a tsunami of requests from him.

Is the Minister not concerned that increasingly autocratic regimes seem to think they can kill our citizens, attack people on our own territory, tear up agreements made with us, and affect our vital interests by their behaviour? Does he not have some concern that the message being sent out by the Prime Minister that we will be pragmatically robust—whatever that means—will not scare the Chinese and will not stop them doing what they are doing at present? Given the vital interests we have in the China sea, where China is expanding, and in Taiwan, where China is increasingly aggressive, and given the stranglehold China is seeking on resources across the world through colonialism, the pragmatic—

Mr Speaker: Mr Wilson, I granted the UQ to Mr Shannon, not you. I call the Minister.

David Rutley *rose*—

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: It is a team effort.

David Rutley: It is indeed a team effort; we have seen our colleagues work together on these issues before, but it is good to be able to respond to both of them. The points the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) makes are important and we are updating the integrated review and our broader strategy. We are very committed to investing in the alliances and capabilities we need to counter the growing threats and challenges the right hon. Gentleman highlighted in his important contribution—even if it was a bit long.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I spent much of my early career working as a presenter on BBC World Service TV news. Its correspondents and crews then as now put themselves at risk in order to tell the truth to the world, and we owe them all a debt of gratitude. Can my hon. Friend assure the House that he will be extremely firm and robust in future conversations with China, and indeed with other countries, in insisting that protecting journalists’ rights to report freely is absolutely non-negotiable?

David Rutley: My hon. Friend makes his point with real conviction and experience. We are grateful for his work and owe a debt of gratitude to the reporters who do invaluable work. He can be assured that we will make that point today to the Chinese ambassador.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Whether it is Chinese Communist officials beating up pro-democracy protestors on the streets of Manchester or Chinese authorities arresting British journalists on the streets of Shanghai, it is deeply worrying and sinister that the so-called Chinese Communist police stations overseas, including in this country, are even a factor that is occurring. May I through my hon. Friend encourage the Minister for Security to come back to this House as soon as practically possible for an update on what actions the British Government will be taking to close down such agents of the Chinese Communist party acting here in British cities?

David Rutley: That is an important point and was well made. As I highlighted earlier, the Minister for Security has committed to coming back to update the House, and the Home Office is reviewing our approach to transnational oppression and will provide an update in due course.

Energy Security

1.5 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Grant Shapps): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on energy security.

Over half the gas we use in this country is imported. A third of all our energy comes from other countries. Each click of the thermostat and every flick of the kettle sends our money abroad. We are lucky that we have access to secure supplies and strong alliances, but while the price of energy is dictated by the whims of international energy markets, it will be hard to release ourselves from the grip of high bills ushered in by Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine.

The solution is energy sovereignty. We have the ability to generate our own energy here in the UK. We need only look at our renewables to know we are already doing this rather well, but it is time for us to do more: to bring energy home; to clean it up; to reduce our reliance on dirty, expensive fossil fuels; and to create a thriving, secure and affordable energy network. We will use the might of our many brilliant engineers, experts and innovators to build a system fit for the future.

As I mentioned in questions earlier, yesterday I was in Suffolk where, thanks to Government investment, the development of the Sizewell C nuclear plant has been given the green light. It will generate not only cleaner, cheaper, low-carbon electricity for the equivalent of 6 million homes, but 10,000 jobs during construction and thousands more in the supply chain. This is the first direct stake a Government have taken in a nuclear project since 1987, and it is the first step on the ladder to long-term energy independence. This has been long awaited, and to boost the nuclear industry further we will work fast to scope and set up Great British Nuclear. With GBN we are aiming to build a pipeline of new nuclear projects beyond Sizewell C where they offer clear value for money, and we will make announcements on this early in the new year.

It is not just nuclear of course: in order to strengthen our energy sovereignty we must look to our natural resources. This island is, as students of Shakespeare will know, a "fortress built by Nature", and we are utilising that which nature has bestowed upon us—the howling winds of our coastlines, the crashing waves of our sea, and the radiant sun across our land—to create green, clean, cheap energy at home for us.

Those industries are booming, providing jobs and growth up and down the country. In fact, earlier this month, the country hit a truly historic moment, when our onshore and offshore wind farms provided more than half the UK's electricity. Furthermore, the National Grid reported that on that day all our renewable energy combined provided 70% of the country's overall electricity needs. However, we need low-carbon back-up for those days when the wind is not blowing and the sun is dimmed, which is why I have put the Energy Bill back on track. It will fire up our nascent hydrogen and carbon capture industries by providing new business models and liberating private investment. The Bill will hammer into place the high-tech solutions we need to produce our own energy.

Even after record Government support for household and business bills, the British people need us to take bold action, and the war in Ukraine, combined with

sky-high energy prices, has put a spotlight on the importance of energy efficiency. Our ambition is to reduce energy demand by 15% by 2030. That will be backed by £6 billion in cash between '25 and '28, coming on top of the £6.6 billion we have already spent during this Parliament.

The majority of British houses are, thanks to their Victorian builds, rather draughty. Our energy performance certificates did not really bother the estate builders of the 19th century, which is why our ECO+ scheme will help households install insulation, saving them hundreds of pounds off their bills each year—money they can spend elsewhere to grow the economy.

Energy sovereignty is now within our grasp. Clean, affordable energy for households and businesses is not a pipe dream; it is a project we have now embarked upon. Building new energy networks will create jobs; producing our own renewable energy will keep bills low; and as businesses and households are relieved of the pressure of crippling bills, the economy can flourish and grow. Energy is coming home.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

1.10 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and can I take the opportunity to welcome him to his new role? We support new nuclear, and I welcome the announcement on Sizewell. The Climate Change Committee tells us that nuclear should play a role as part of the balanced pathway to net zero. In his reply, could he tell us the timetable for Sizewell's final investment decision and when we expect it to be up and running? I also welcome the return of the delayed Energy Bill, which should never have been paused by the Government.

As for the rest of the statement, I am bound to ask: is that it? Alongside nuclear, we need a sprint for cheap, clean, home-grown renewables, and I have to say to the Secretary of State that, given the chaos, confusion and embarrassment of the Government on onshore wind, I find it extraordinary that he did not clear that up in the House today. Let me remind the House of some facts. The ban on onshore wind in England that they put in place in 2015 has raised bills for every family in this country by £150 each, and keeping the ban in place up to 2030 would mean customers paying £16 billion more on bills compared with a target of doubling onshore wind. Let us be clear: opposing onshore wind waves the white flag on our energy security and raises bills for families.

The only reason we are debating this issue is not that the public do not support onshore wind—they do, by 78%, according to the Department's own polling—but that dinosaurs on the Government Benches oppose clean energy, and David Cameron and every leader since has indulged them. The problem is that the Secretary of State, who prides himself on being a truly modern man, is part of the fossilised tendency. He was part of the lobbying effort against lifting the ban in April. He said onshore wind was an “eyesore” and created “problems of noise”, and he urged the then Prime Minister to “largely” reject it. I may have had some issues with his predecessor, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), but the Secretary of State's position is making the Victorian of the Tory party look positively on trend, because the right hon. Member for

North East Somerset after all called for the consenting regime for onshore wind to be brought into line with other infrastructure. Can the Secretary of State clear up once and for all what his position is on onshore wind? Will he now act in the national interest, properly end the ban and finally bring the consenting regime in line with other infrastructure?

On solar, it is the same problem. The Prime Minister spent the summer saying he wanted to block solar, echoed by the Environment Secretary in the last couple of weeks. Blocking solar risks preventing the equivalent of 10 nuclear power stations-worth of power being built, so will the Secretary of State rule out the plans of the previous Environment Secretary to further block solar power on land?

On energy efficiency, frankly this Government should be ashamed of their record, with the green deal fiasco, the green homes grant fiasco and energy efficiency installations running 20 times lower than under the previous Labour Government. Can the Secretary of State tell us from his announcement, which I am afraid contains no new resources, in what year the 19 million cold, draughty homes below energy performance certificate band C would be brought up to that level of decency under his plan? We would do it in a decade. Can he confirm that, at the current rates of installation, under this Government it would not happen till the next century?

We have seen five Energy Secretaries since 2019. To overcome the bills crisis we face and to tackle the climate crisis, we need ambition, consistency and going all in on the green energy sprint. I am afraid we have not had these things from this Government. All we have had is inconsistency, dithering and a Government looking over their shoulder at their own Back Benchers. The Secretary of State has a lot of work to do to convince the country that that is going to change, and if he does not, it means that this Government will land us with higher bills and more energy insecurity, and will fail to take the leadership we need in tackling the climate crisis.

Grant Shapps: I do not think the right hon. Gentleman was in the Chamber earlier for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions, but I did point to a quote from him back in 2010, when he said it was “pie in the sky” that the then new Conservative Government would get to 40% renewables by 2020. What happened? By 2020 we had got to 43.1% renewables. That is our record of delivery when it comes to renewables, so I do not think we need to take too many lectures from the Labour party, or from the party that five minutes ago did not support new nuclear power. It failed to commission any of it during its time in office—13 years, was it?—but now that we are getting on with it, all of a sudden it seems to have swapped sides.

On wind power, both offshore and onshore, I do not think the right hon. Gentleman recognises the fact that the strike prices in the contracts for difference are now lower for any version of power production at all when it comes to offshore wind. These turbines are now so large that they cannot even be constructed onshore. They are so big that the turbines cannot be carried by road; they have to put offshore.

Edward Miliband: How big are they?

Grant Shapps: How big are they? It is convenient that the World cup is on because the right hon. Gentleman will be able to envisage this. Single turbines are seven football pitches in scope, as they turn. They are not buildable onshore, which is one of the reasons why the cheapest way to build them offshore to produce energy offshore is to build these mammoth turbines, which go together in groups of 200 or even up to 300. However, I am sure he knows all of this and that, rather than discussing the actual solutions, he likes to throw up the chaff.

Since the right hon. Gentleman has mentioned onshore, I just want to note that the energy White Paper and the net zero strategy have both said exactly the same as we have been saying this week, which is that onshore can happen where it has local consent. I do not know why this local consent principle is so difficult for him to understand. There it is: we are delivering on the renewables, on the nuclear, on the energy independence and sovereignty that this country needs, and there is nothing from the Labour party.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Over the last 48 hours, wind has generated as little as 1% of our electricity, and it was at 2% when I checked this morning, while of course most of the homes we represent use gas for heating. Will the Secretary of State confirm that we need to get on with issuing more production licences for domestic oil and gas, which cuts the carbon dioxide involved and will enable us to keep the lights on, which we cannot do when the wind does not blow?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is characteristically correct that we cannot always rely on a single form of electricity generation. As the French have found out, we cannot always rely on nuclear. I think France has 71 nuclear power stations in its fleet, but about half of them are down at the moment, so it cannot rely only on nuclear. I was discussing this very fact with my opposite number yesterday. I know that my right hon. Friend welcomes the £700 million development approval cash that we have put into the first new nuclear since the 1980s, and he is absolutely right that we need a broad spread of different energy forms to ensure that we can provide the cheap power we require at all times.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The reality is that this statement is just a padding out of the press release that BEIS put out earlier. I do welcome the energy company obligation funding for energy efficiency, but I think we need to be clear that this is not Government money; it is money funded from our energy bills and paid for by all bill payers. One issue with ECO4 is that it cannot be combined with other grants, whereas ECO3 did allow that money to be combined with other grants to bring down the costs of external insulation, for example. That is something the Secretary of State could consider to make schemes more affordable for people. The reality with EPC bandings is that there are more homes currently rated D to G than A to C, so much more direct investment is needed in energy efficiency to rectify that.

The Secretary of State talked about energy security, so does that mean that the Government have finally bought out China General Nuclear from the Sizewell C consortium? Talking about sovereignty, will he confirm

that uranium imports are going to be needed to keep Sizewell C going? Is it still the intention to take a 20% stake, and does that mean funding capital of £6 billion or £7 billion towards Sizewell C, because there is still no clarity in today's statement? On the myth about nuclear baseload, by the time Hinkley Point C comes on stream, seven of the eight existing nuclear power stations will have stopped operating, which proves there is no need for nuclear baseload whatsoever.

On wider energy policy, the Scottish carbon capture and storage cluster was the most advanced project, but it was still only classed as a reserve. Will the Government urgently review this classification, and make the Scottish CCS cluster a track 1 cluster to allow that investment to be released and for that project to go ahead? Pump storage hydro, as I have raised several times, could deliver about 3 GW of power by 2030. All that is needed is an electricity pricing mechanism—a cap and floor mechanism—so will the Government urgently review that and start these discussions?

Finally, we know about the oil and gas investment allowance. If we are going to have continued record investment in renewables, there should be a renewables investment allowance to encourage that, particularly for green hydrogen.

Grant Shapps: Yes, I can confirm that China has now been bought out of the deal on Sizewell. The money yesterday ensured that it is no longer involved in the development.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the future funding for Sizewell. He may be familiar with the new “regulatory asset base” approach to funding, which is built along similar lines to the contracts for difference that have been used so successfully for offshore wind power. That is how we will look to bring income to the project. I should also say that CfDs will now take place on an annualised basis, which will give those including Scottish clusters the opportunity to bid in as well.

I am always curious about the SNP's approach to energy. As far as I can work out, it does not like the oil and gas industry—even though the industry employs thousands of its constituents—and it absolutely hates nuclear. I am not quite sure what it wants to do on non-windy days.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): Cumberland has sites ready to go for new nuclear. It has expertise, interest and development companies for both small modular reactors and large-scale nuclear. Will the Secretary of State work with me and my hon. Friends the Members for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) and for Carlisle (John Stevenson) to bring Rolls-Royce SMR and UK European pressurised reactors 5 and 6 to Moorside?

Grant Shapps: I know that Cumberland has a tremendous amount of expertise and a lot more to offer. When Great British Nuclear launches in the new year, it will help to bring not just traditional Sizewell-style nuclear assets to this country, but the small modular reactors from Rolls-Royce and potentially other competitors.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his role. May I push him slightly further on the financing of Sizewell C? My understanding is that the Government are committed to spending 20% of the cost, and EDF 20% of the cost. That leaves 60% to be financed from the private sector, which I think means that up to £20 billion of financing still needs to be sourced. What will the Government do if they cannot find that from the private sector?

Grant Shapps: I thank the hon. Member for welcoming me to the Dispatch Box. As he will know as Chair of the Select Committee, we have been working on the Sizewell deal for quite some time and we got to the Government investment decision stage yesterday. Of course, we have been talking to potential financiers along with EDF and the French Government. We are confident about the level of interest, but I have no doubt that I will come to his Select Committee, along with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Climate, to discuss that in more detail soon.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I welcome the announcements on nuclear and specifically on Sizewell C. The Rolls-Royce scheme for modular nuclear seems very exciting, but we do need to get on with it. Does the Secretary of State have a view as to what year we will be starting the first project?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that when I was at Sizewell yesterday, I was with leaders from EDF and the French Government—indeed, the French ambassador was there. Later in the day I spoke to my opposite number about ensuring that we can speed up co-operation on nuclear, as well as on things such as wind, and even on our interconnectors. I was going to say that the point of Great British Nuclear is to really put the acid under this, but I am sure that there is a much better nuclear comparison. It is really about ensuring that we get on with producing our new nuclear fleet a lot faster than has happened in the last few decades.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that, even with the additional money made available for home insulation, his officials have told him that the money falls short by tens of billions?

Grant Shapps: It is worth the House knowing that we have already put in £6.6 billion. We have announced another £6 billion, which will be spent in the period from 2025 to 2028. The £1 billion that I announced yesterday will cover hundreds of thousands of homes. Of course, it is typical of the Labour party to think that the only way in which this can ever be funded is by the taxpayer and that there are no other routes to market. Lots of homes will be improved by, for example, regulations on build, ensuring that the overall increase in improvements in EPCs comes not just through spending taxpayers' cash.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): It is a pleasure to welcome my constituency neighbour to his place as Secretary of State. He and the House will understand the importance of critical minerals to energy security. Could he outline his approach for the UK securing critical mineral supply to ensure that, over the longer term, we have energy security, particularly on things like lithium-ion batteries?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend and neighbour is absolutely right. Critical minerals are so important in securing the entire supply chain. Earlier I mentioned green lithium up in Teesside, which is part of that supply chain. The UK can have the first green lithium production in Europe because of Brexit and our ability, for example, to use more flexible rules that the Europeans cannot access at the moment to produce it, so that is a very good win. He is right about the strategy, and we have a strategy for the most important critical minerals.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): On energy efficiency, will the Government introduce an inspection scheme for all rented accommodation to stop landlords from letting out properties that do not meet energy efficiency minimums?

Grant Shapps: Private landlords are already under an obligation to ensure that their properties reach certain standards. However, as the hon. Member may well know, the Government are consulting on raising that standard in line with the improvements that we would expect over a period of time, and we have already signalled that that would be likely to be to an EPC rating of C.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What is my right hon. Friend's assessment of the risk to our country's energy security this winter from possible disruption to the vital Norwegian gas pipeline, which will supply our country with approximately half of its gas needs this winter? Will he confirm that contingency plans are in place?

Grant Shapps: I am pleased to report that, notwithstanding things like terrorism or developments in the war in Ukraine, we have confidence about both our supply and European supply this winter. The weather has been better than might have been expected and gas supplies are full. I should also point out that the rough storage supply has been brought back online, which has increased our own storage by about 50%. I think that in all expected, imagined circumstances, we will be okay this winter.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This morning the Secretary of State and my Opposition Front-Bench colleagues have spent a long time tilting at windmills. Does he agree that when it comes to getting the right energy and keeping people warm this winter, all of us need to have more courage? Energy from waste could fulfil 20% of our energy needs. Good energy from waste schemes can heat the whole of a town or city, such as Sheffield. Is it not about time that we took energy from waste really seriously?

Grant Shapps: The reality of energy supply is that anyone who thinks there is a single silver bullet—I am not accusing the hon. Member of that at all—is typically wrong. Almost any energy source or supply has its vulnerabilities and its shortcomings. Certainly, energy from waste has its place—we are active in that space—as does ensuring that, for example, we are using energy as efficiently as possible. That is why we announced yesterday that there will be an £18 million campaign about doing straightforward things such as ensuring that the boiler flow is set correctly on people's boilers.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as we pursue energy sovereignty, floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea can play a vital part? Will he confirm when we can expect an announcement on the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme funding? To maximise the benefits to the communities around the Celtic sea, we need good port infrastructure to drive the project forward.

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Floating offshore wind is an interesting development, and we are actively looking at it and working on it with a whole load of industry partners. She can expect some exciting information in this area in the future.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): As a student of 16th-century literature, I enjoyed the Secretary of State's Shakespearian rhetoric, but I am frankly staggered that he can possibly think that Sizewell C is cheaper—cheaper than what? It is massively costly. The RAB funding model basically means that consumers end up paying twice: once towards the cost of construction to lower the cost of borrowing, and again for more costly energy. The Secretary of State will know that no nuclear power station in the world has been built to time and to budget. He has asked what we do on windy days: may I suggest more interconnectors, far more solar—including ground-based solar—flexible energy demand systems, onshore wind, energy storage, tides, and the mass energy efficiency and insulation programme that this Government are still failing to deliver?

Grant Shapps: One would think the Green party would welcome 43% of our power being renewable, done under a Conservative Government. On Sizewell C, she asks what it is cheaper than; I will tell her—it is cheaper than being subject to Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It took an international conflict to lessen and hopefully eliminate Europe's dependency on a potential enemy, Russia. Can the Minister confirm that we will have no future dependency on China for our nuclear power stations?

Grant Shapps: I can certainly confirm that in the case of Sizewell C; as I mentioned, we are making sure that the Chinese element of that is no longer involved. We do not have a principled objection, apart from where issues of national security are concerned: clearly, energy provision is very much in our sights.

Richard Burdon (Leeds East) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place. Renewable energy is nine times cheaper than gas, and onshore wind is incredibly cheap and incredibly green, so we need to be clear: the Tory ban on onshore wind has kept bills unnecessarily high, and has also undermined energy security. Is it not time that the ban was fully scrapped and the interests of people struggling with their bills were put ahead of the political interests of nimby Tory Back Benchers?

Grant Shapps: It is good that the electorate know what they will be getting if they vote for the Labour party. With us, they will be getting local consent: if people locally are happy to see such power production, they will get it. With them, they will get it willy-nilly.

I want to correct the hon. Gentleman on one fact: the cost projections on new forms of energy supply show that offshore wind is the cheapest available in the next likely bidding round.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's focus on securing energy security domestically, but does he agree that that must happen alongside food security, not over the top of it? We have vast swathes of land being taken for solar farms, while warehouse and factory owners cannot install solar because the grid cannot take the power. What is being done to ensure that rooftop solar can happen?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about rooftop solar; I have had it on my own house for the past 11 years, and once it is there, it just carries on producing power. We need to expand that, both domestically and on factory roofs. I will be looking at things like permitted development rights, which enable those panels to go up on top of roofs. There are currently limits to the size of the panels that can be put in place, and I think they are a fruitful source of additional power.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place. According to what he has said, Sheffield must be getting some things right: we have been doing energy from waste for over 30 years, since I was council leader, and ITM Power, the leading green hydrogen company, is in my constituency.

Regarding nuclear, is it not important that we ensure a UK supply chain, which has not always happened? Rolls-Royce and SMRs are therefore really important, working with Sheffield Forgemasters, but Madhvani International is also prepared to put billions of pounds of development capital into developing Hitachi-based SMRs—which are already regulated in North America—working with Forgemasters and other Sheffield companies. I am pleased that the Secretary of State will meet me tomorrow to discuss the proposal in more detail, but in principle, I hope that he welcomes it.

Grant Shapps: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's foresightedness in all the schemes that he mentioned. It is a shame that the last Government to invest in nuclear power was Margaret Thatcher's Government, all the way back in the 1980s; yesterday brought that long drought to an end. As the energy Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness, has reminded me, we have already provided £210 million to Rolls-Royce for the small modular reactor programme. I wish both Sheffield and the rest of the country well in attracting some of this new technology, and the supply chain that goes with it, to their constituencies.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Land-based wind is a good, quick and relatively cheap way for the Government to achieve more on alternative energy and security of supply. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that the current partial ban on onshore wind is stifling growth, our march towards net zero, and our quest for security of supply?

Grant Shapps: I think a mixed provision of energy is extremely important—I have talked about solar, offshore and onshore wind, nuclear, and other sources. The answer is very simple: as has been set out in our energy review, the 10-point plan and elsewhere, where there is

local consent, we will ensure that onshore wind can be part of that critical mix. It is a fairly simple principle, which the whole House should be able to unite behind, that local consent is important in these matters. That is the situation that exists, and will continue to exist.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The role that community renewable energy production could play is currently hampered by an unwieldy regulatory process. Will the Secretary of State bring forward amendments to the Energy Bill to empower community energy schemes to sell their power directly to local companies and customers, thereby also neatly slashing bills?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. We are already doing everything we can to cut that regulatory burden, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness would be happy to take that conversation forward.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has mentioned, the last time that a Government invested in new nuclear in this way was when my late father was at the Dispatch Box as Energy Minister in 1987. I remember very well the campaign to “Get more for your monergy”—as a nine-year-old boy, I even got to wear the T-shirt. To ensure that our constituents get more for their monergy, does it not make sense to break the link between gas prices and electricity prices? When will my right hon. Friend do that?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend’s late father clearly showed great foresight—it is a shame that it has taken all these years, via a 13-year Labour Administration, to do nothing at all on nuclear. I like the T-shirt that my hon. Friend’s father made him wear, and I agree with him on separating out those prices. At the moment the highest cost in electricity applies to everything, and we are actively looking at breaking that complex relationship.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s quote from Shakespeare, but if the bard were alive today, he would be writing either a comedy about the Government or a tragedy about their energy strategy. We have houses in my constituency being built with insufficient insulation and no solar panels, or solar panels on north-facing roofs. If onshore wind is indeed the cheapest source of energy generation currently, how is it that Warwickshire has no onshore wind turbines?

Grant Shapps: As I mentioned, the reference price shows that other forms of energy could be even cheaper. Until now, solar panels were not as effective on north-facing roofs, for example, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the technology is improving rapidly, with the result that we can install solar panels in more conditions than would otherwise have been available.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): We need to recognise that developing our renewable mix of energy to 43% is a significant success—far more successful than other comparable nations—yet in these current weather circumstances, as people switch on their electric kettles during tonight’s football match, wind will only generate 2% of that energy mix. That underlines the importance of my right hon. Friend’s statement, so will

he provide further detail and timescales regarding when small and advanced modular reactors will be possible? Wales has two of the preferred development sites, but does my right hon. Friend further agree that the Welsh Government need to be supportive of those projects to make them a reality?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is right. In Wales and Scotland, the devolved Administrations need to support new nuclear provision to provide energy security for their constituents. He talked about 43.1% of our energy coming from renewable power. Opposition Members said that it could not be done, but it has been done ahead of time and we will only go further.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his answers. In BEIS questions today, he referred to 10,000 highly skilled jobs and securing UK energy security, with British energy used for British homes. Some 6 million of those homes can be powered by the Sizewell C nuclear plant. Has the Secretary of State come to an assessment of how these decisions will have an impact on energy security for the devolved institutions? What steps will be taken to ensure that Northern Ireland, which I come from and represent, plays a part in securing energy independence?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is right that a single nuclear power station can power 6 million homes, whereas a modular reactor can power perhaps 1.5 million homes. As a result of interconnectors, that power—when it is generated in Great Britain—helps Northern Ireland and all the devolved Administrations around the country. He is on the right track; that is the kind of energy independence that I mentioned in my statement.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware of analysis from the Climate Change Committee that states that we will not get to net zero in this country without carbon capture and storage. I therefore welcome his commitment to helping to liberate private investment in carbon capture and storage and other technologies. The Scottish cluster alone is poised to have billions of dollars-worth of investment. While he is pondering the acceleration of that project, will he consider joining me on a visit to the St Fergus gas terminal in my constituency? It has not only carbon capture and storage, but blue hydrogen, sustainable aviation fuel and net zero thermal power generation, and grid capacity and resilience improvements are being made in and around it.

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right about the importance of private investment in carbon capture, utilisation and storage. The Energy Bill will look to unlock that private investment.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place. Global gas prices have been at record highs. That has been caused by Putin’s illegal war in Ukraine and it has been a problem for the whole of Europe, so I welcome what the Government have done to protect my constituents from this impact through our energy price guarantee. Does he agree that the long-term solution to ensure stable and lower prices is to have diverse sources of British energy providing the power to our homes and businesses?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right. We need energy independence, security and sovereignty. That is what we are building in co-operation with our partners, with interconnectors, so that we are never again subject to the whims of a dictator from the east, as has happened this year.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I welcome many of my right hon. Friend's steps to ensure energy security, particularly in the nuclear sector. He talks a great deal about Sizewell C; Warrington is the home of the National Nuclear Laboratory, so the decision will secure many of the 2,500 jobs that nuclear generates in Warrington. The north-west leads the way in carbon capture and storage and hydrogen technology with HyNet, so will he outline how hydrogen can play an important part in large industry energy generation for the future?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right about the role of hydrogen. I know from my time as Secretary of State for Transport how important that will be, particularly for transport in the much larger category of goods vehicles, buses, coaches, marine vessels and aviation. This is not just about the jobs in nuclear, which the Sizewell decision and Great British Nuclear will help, but about the development in hydrogen power. In particular, those hubs with great expertise will be tremendously important, and this Government fully back them.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Investment in energy-intensive industries such as ceramics must also be a key part in reducing our overall energy consumption. Will my right hon. Friend look at what more can be done to invest in those key manufacturing sectors not only to reduce that energy dependence, but to reduce costs and support jobs in places such as Stoke-on-Trent?

Grant Shapps: The brilliant industries—particularly ceramics—in my hon. Friend's constituency have been badly impacted by Putin's war. The energy bill relief scheme has helped, and such things as the scheme for energy-intensive industries will assist, too. Ultimately, this comes to the point of today's statement: energy independence, with low-cost and affordable energy, is the way forward not just for domestic users, but businesses such as those in my hon. Friend's constituency.

BILL PRESENTED

ELECTIONS (PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION) BILL
Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Cat Smith presented a Bill to introduce a system of proportional representation for Parliamentary elections, for elections for directly-elected mayors in England, for local authority elections in England and for police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 January 2023, and to be printed (Bill 201).

National Eye Health Strategy

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

1.45 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish a national eye health strategy for England; and to require that strategy to include measures for improving eye health outcomes, for reducing waiting times for eye health care, for improving patient experiences of eye health care, for ensuring that providers of eye health care work together in an efficient way, for increasing the capacity and skills of the eye health care workforce, and for making more effective use of research and innovation in eye health care.

The Bill would ensure that regardless of where one lives, everyone can access the right care where and when they need it, eliminating the postcode lottery and addressing the inequalities in access to eye care services. An estimated 2 million people are living with sight loss in the UK. We rely on our eyes every day, yet we do not give much thought to our eye health until our vision changes.

A report earlier this summer showed that 17.5 million adults in the UK had not had an eye test in the past two years, as recommended. Anyone can be impacted by sight loss, and Members from across the House will have hundreds of constituents affected. Fifty per cent. of all sight loss is avoidable and 250 people begin to lose their sight every day, with a shocking 21 people a week losing their sight due to a preventable cause.

Eye care services in England are under intense pressure due to huge backlogs as a result of the pandemic, demand from an ageing population and low recruitment and retention of all groups of the ophthalmology clinical workforce. More than 650,000 people are on the waiting list in England, of whom 37% have been waiting for over 18 weeks and over 4% have been waiting for more than a year—that is, 26,000 people who have been waiting for more than 12 months to see a specialist.

Ophthalmology has been the busiest NHS out-patient clinic for the past three years. Delays to diagnosis and treatment can lead to a complete loss of sight. For example, patients with age-related macular degeneration can experience rapid and sometimes complete central vision loss within weeks if not treated. As well as the social and emotional impact of sight loss, there is a huge economic cost to the UK economy, which is estimated to be £36 billion annually.

To respond to the crisis in eye health, the Government can commit to implementing a national eye health strategy for England that would include measures to improve eye health outcomes, reduce waiting times, improve patient experiences, increase the capacity and skills of the workforce and make more effective use of data, research and innovation.

In the first instance, the Government could seek to appoint a single Minister with responsibility for eye health rather than having the current situation where multiple Ministers are responsible.

The strategy should include the following areas. First, there should be an eye health and sight loss pathway to require care and support for those with sight loss, focusing on the provision of non-clinical community support to complement the work of community optometrists, ophthalmologists in hospitals and rehab

officers. The pathway must focus on the physical and emotional impacts of being diagnosed with sight loss, as research has shown that people affected are likely to experience poor mental health lifetime outcomes such as depression and anxiety. It should not only address geographical eye health inequalities, but ensure more equity of access to eye care among communities and populations more at risk of being unable to access NHS sight tests, including people who are homeless and people with a learning disability.

The second area is to improve connections between primary and secondary care, with an emphasis on integrated care systems and on improving the relationships and collaboration across the two services so that they can work more effectively together while ensuring timely and accurate referrals. That would significantly improve patient experiences and health outcomes.

The third area is workforce expansion. Limited capacity is a particular concern in eye care because there is a significant shortage of eye doctors. Back in 2018, the Royal College of Ophthalmologists revealed that 434 additional specialist posts were required to meet demand, and we know that the situation is now even worse. The World Health Organisation's Workforce 2030 plan recognises the fundamental role of the workforce in improving health outcomes. A national strategy for eye health must address that issue, placing emphasis on the recruitment, training and upskilling of medical and non-medical eye health professionals.

The fourth area is health intelligence and data. Meaningful action starts with good-quality data, but for too long population data has not been used effectively to pinpoint the location of need and places where opportunities for change can be found. A strategy should involve focusing on robust data collection to inform decisions and improve the delivery of the service. Advances in research and technology, from how people are diagnosed to how they receive treatment, must be incorporated. Effective and efficient methods are available, but they are not being used. A strategy would change that.

Finally, the fifth area is raising awareness of eye health by creating better public health messaging. Nearly 2 million people each year turn up at an accident and emergency department or try to get a GP appointment for a problem that could be dealt with by visiting a community optometrist. We need campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of maintaining good eye health and to educate the public on the differences between eye screening and eye tests, along with improved signposting on where to go for help, should one need it.

Health strategies have delivered positive outcomes in Scotland, as they have in England for other diseases, but at present England is the only country in the UK without an eye health strategy. It is important to note that for such a strategy to be successful and of value, it must be designed in collaboration with stakeholders, including blind and partially sighted people, civil society groups, care providers and the industry. It must also have sufficient resource and investment.

Given the scale of the problems, it is in the Government's interest to commit to a strategy. The benefits would transform lives, alleviate pressures on the health service and reduce economic costs. We should make it our goal to ensure that no one loses their sight unnecessarily. I thank everyone who has contributed to the Bill, including the partnership The Eyes Have It, the Thomas Pocklington Trust, industry leaders such as Specsavers and Roche and, most importantly, people living with sight loss. The sector has been united in the call for a national eye health strategy. It is time for the Government to act.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Marsha De Cordova, Kate Osamor, Bell Ribeiro-Addy, Sir Stephen Timms, Rosie Duffield, Janet Daby, Kim Johnson, Ian Byrne, John McDonnell, Clive Lewis, Dr Rupa Huq and Jim Shannon present the Bill.

Marsha De Cordova accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 March 2023, and to be printed (Bill 202).

Privilege

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind hon. Members of the decision in question and of the procedure on this motion. The decision before the House is whether to refer the matter to the Committee of Privileges. It will be for the Committee to report back on whether it considers that there has been a contempt.

Although it is in order for hon. Members to refer to the issues cited in the motion, it is not in order to make general criticisms of the conduct of the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) or of any other hon. Member. Good temper and moderation must be maintained in parliamentary language. Previous debates on such motions have usually been relatively short; I hope that this debate will be focused and brief. Any hon. Member who wishes to speak needs to stand at the beginning of the debate to ensure that they catch my eye.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) has tabled a motion for debate on the matter of privilege, which Mr Speaker has agreed should take precedence today. I call David Davis to move the motion.

1.57 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I beg to move,

That the matter of the actions and subsequent conduct of the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire in relation to correspondence from the Speaker on a matter of privilege be referred to the Committee of Privileges.

I have been advised by the Clerks that this is a very narrow motion, so I will stick strictly and exclusively to the matter at hand. Before I come to the substantive motion, however, I want to say something to those members of the public who may think that this is an arcane or even abstruse issue.

Ever since Speaker Lenthall told King Charles I that “I have neither eyes to see, nor tongue to speak in this place, but as the House is pleased to direct me,”

the Speaker has been the spokesman, champion and protector of the Members and institutions of this place, as well as being the impartial arbiter of our proceedings. If hon. Members think that that is just a piece of ancient history, they ought to consider more recent times. Mr Speaker’s more recent predecessors have been criticised on issues of impartiality or for failing to protect Members: for example, Mr Speaker Martin’s failure to protect my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) was highly controversial at the time and very important.

As for upholding the rights of Back Benchers and Opposition Members, we need only look at Mr Speaker’s fierce criticism of the Government during the statement yesterday, when he upheld our rights. It is therefore vital for Members to protect the integrity, impartiality and apolitical nature of the Speaker’s office. That point is clearly recognised in “Erskine May”—hardly a polemical document—at paragraph 15.14, which states that

“reflections on the character of the Speaker or accusations of partiality in the discharge of their duties”

are a punishable offence. “Erskine May” also recognises that a Member’s behaviour and conduct outside this House count towards that.

I turn to the substantive motion. Following an appearance by my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) before the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport while she was Secretary of State, the Committee opened an investigation into several claims that she made, but ultimately it decided against any action. The Committee as a whole published a special report—[*Interruption.*] [HON. MEMBERS: “He’s turned up.”] Oh, right.

The Committee as a whole published a special report, which said:

“we may have sought a referral to the Privileges Committee but, as her claims have not inhibited the work of the Committee and she no longer has a position of power over the future of Channel 4, we are, instead, publishing this Report to enable the House, and its Members, to draw their own conclusions.”

It is crucial in this matter to remember that the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) sits on that Committee. He did not ask for a Division before the report was published; he did not vote against it; he did not publish a dissenting opinion on that report. Instead, he wrote to Mr Speaker asking him to give precedence to matters reported on by the Committee, even though the Committee itself was not seeking such precedence. As would be expected, Mr Speaker did the usual thing, and—in his own words—decided to

“respect the Committee’s assessment of the situation.”—[*Official Report*, 23 November 2022; Vol. 723, c. 291.]

After Mr Speaker had replied to the hon. Member privately, as is the convention with privilege issues, the hon. Member took to Twitter. He brandished a copy of Mr Speaker’s letter in his video. He broke all the conventions on the privacy of Speakers’ correspondence on privilege, and disclosed a partial and partisan account of Mr Speaker’s letter. He said on Twitter:

“He’s considered my letter, but he’s decided to take no further action.”

In doing so, he implied that it was Mr Speaker’s unfettered decision not to refer the matter to the Privileges Committee. Nowhere in his filmed statement did he tell his followers that Mr Speaker was following normal procedure by accepting the will of the DCMS Committee—I imagine that is why Mr Speaker described his action last week as giving a “partial and biased account” of the correspondence—and nowhere in his statement did he tell his followers that it was he himself who sat on that Committee and signed off the conclusions.

All of us in this House have a duty to uphold its rules and institutions, but by knowingly breaching the confidentiality of the Speaker’s correspondence, the hon. Member has done the opposite. This is a clear breach of our rules. The proper response after Mr Speaker’s censure of him for his behaviour last week was for the hon. Member to accept the seriousness of his actions, apologise properly to the House, and delete the offending tweets. If he had done so, I imagine that would have been the end of the matter; indeed, I would not have made my point of order on the day. However, he failed to apologise, and instead compounded his misdemeanour. Taking to Twitter once again, he claimed that he “offered no apology as there was no misrepresentation.”

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

Mr Davis: He claimed that he

“didn’t ‘release’ the Speaker’s letter. I summarised it entirely fairly.”

That is untrue. He misled the country by deliberately withholding the way in which this decision had been arrived at and his part in it. He also retweeted an account that was directly critical of Mr Speaker, saying that Mr Speaker's statement had been merely "Ermine pursuing theatrics" and that Mr Speaker was placing his "integrity above that of parliament".

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

Mr Davis: The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire had again compounded his misdemeanour by deliberately attempting to undermine the impartiality and integrity of the Speaker's office. It is the role of the Speaker of this House to protect Members and stand up for its Back Benchers, and it is the Members' duty, on our part, to uphold the dignity of the Speaker's office.

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

Mr Davis: I do not believe any of this conduct to be appropriate for a Member of this House. However, that is not for me to judge, as a single, ordinary Member, which is why this is not a motion to condemn, but a motion to pass the matter to the Privileges Committee of the House of Commons.

2.3 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): At the heart of this issue, I believe, is accountability. What should happen to Members who break the rules, and how open should our procedures be? What should the public be allowed to know?

Let me say at the outset that I am very sorry that the Speaker feels that my revealing his decision not to have a debate in the House about our Committee's report has put him in a bad light with the public. That was never my intention. My intention—[*Interruption.*] If Members allow me to develop my speech, they will hear my points. My intention was merely to let the public know what had been decided.

I am accused of breaking a rule myself, and I would like to explain the circumstances to the House. I am a member of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. We held a hearing with the then Culture Secretary, the right hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), at which she claimed that a Channel 4 reality series in which she had appeared some years ago had used actors pretending to be members of the public. She claimed that they had confessed this to her. A member of the production team who lived on the estate concerned—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman missed my opening remarks, but it is quite clear that this is not about the actions of any other Member. It is not about what happened in the Committee with any other right hon. Member. It is about the motion before us.

John Nicolson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me say that there was considerable press interest in our Committee's work, and I decided that we should send a copy of the report to the Speaker. I thought that time might be set aside for a debate about referring it to

the Committee of Privileges. However, the Speaker wrote back to me saying that he did not believe the case met the threshold for a debate. I recorded a video summarising the Speaker's decision, and I tweeted it. I offered no comment about the Speaker, nor did I criticise him. There was considerable public interest, and I soon discovered that the Speaker was angry. He believed that I should not have reported his decision. Last Wednesday, he told me in the House that he thought I had not summarised him accurately, and that I should not have reported him at all. It was not my intention in any way to summarise him inaccurately.

Before I was elected to the House, I was a journalist—a reporter for "Newsnight", among other current affairs shows. I believe in open democracy, but I also believe in maintaining agreed confidentiality. It did not cross my mind that revealing the Speaker's decision on this was a breach of privilege. After all, what was I to say if journalists asked me whether I had written to the Speaker? Was I to say, "Yes"? If they asked me, "Has the Speaker responded? Has the Speaker given a ruling?", was I then to say, "I'm afraid I can't tell you"? I did not consider that I had broken any confidence or betrayed any trust. I did not imagine that the Speaker's decision on a matter of importance to my constituents could not be revealed. Moreover, I believe that I summarised the Speaker fairly, but I am in the unfortunate position of finding myself unable to prove that, because in order to do so I would have to release the Speaker's letter to me in its entirety—something which, as we have established, the Speaker does not believe I should do.

There has been a suggestion that I printed only half the letter. That is not the case. The Speaker's letter to me came as a letter through the post. There was no need for me to print it, nor did I publish it, nor did I show its contents to the camera, nor did I leak it to others. I was very open in the way I talked about it, which I hope shows that I did not think I was behaving improperly. There has also been some suggestion that the Select Committee did not wish to see this matter proceed to a privileges debate. That, too, is not the case. The Committee decided not to refer the Member concerned because she was no longer a Cabinet Minister, but the Committee left open the option for others to do so. Indeed, some Committee members expected that to happen. I agreed with the findings of the Committee, which were unanimous and cross-party.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), who wrote to the Speaker asking for this debate, has just spoken again. I have never met the right hon. Member or spoken to him here, although I may have interviewed him in the past. He is not a member of the Select Committee, and he has previously championed free speech.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We really are not here to discuss the matters surrounding the Committee itself. The hon. Gentleman needs to stick to what is in the motion.

John Nicolson: May I just say this, Madam Deputy Speaker? I spoke to the Chair and the Clerk of the Committee today. I gave them exactly the words that I intended to use, and obtained their permission to use the words that I have just repeated.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It is up to me to make the final decision. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Those people do not give the hon. Gentleman permission; I do.

John Nicolson: The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden spoke last Wednesday following the Speaker’s remarks from the Chair, and he laid into me with some vigour, using what appeared to be a pre-prepared speech. He was especially exercised by what he saw as my breach of parliamentary etiquette. It is worth me pointing out in that context that he did not contact me to inform me that he planned to speak about me, which as we all know is the convention. I was not afforded the opportunity to reply last Wednesday, but before moving on to other business the Speaker concluded:

“I am going to leave it there for today”.—[*Official Report*, 23 November 2022; Vol. 723, c. 292.]

I therefore assumed that the matter had been laid to rest. However, the right hon. Member then took to Twitter to pursue his criticism of me, complete with a video of his speech.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It is not for the hon. Gentleman to be criticising the right hon. Gentleman who moved the motion. He can speak to the motion, not outside it, so can we just stick to the matter in hand?

John Nicolson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) *rose*—

John Nicolson: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Simon Hoare: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who on a personal level I like. Can I just give him some friendly advice? Put the spade down.

John Nicolson: People are watching this, and I am pleased that they are. I think they will draw conclusions, having heard both sides of the argument.

Pete Wishart: I have been in this House for 21 years, and as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have been a member of the House of Commons Commission for something like four years. I had absolutely no idea that we could not reveal that we had had correspondence with the Speaker or summarise what it was. How on earth was my hon. Friend supposed to know that, when I, with my 21 years in this House and my service on the Commission, did not know it? All of this seems to be, at best, some sort of means for retribution and, at worst, institutional bullying, because that is what it is starting to feel like right now.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions can be made, but they should be brief. I would also remind hon. and right hon. Members that if the House decides to refer this matter to the Committee of Privileges, these sorts of arguments can be made there. This debate is on the simple matter of the motion. Other arguments can be made to the Committee if the House decides it wants the matter to go to the Committee.

John Nicolson: I know that the Speaker has been on the receiving end of often unpleasant comments from the public since I revealed his decision. That was never

my intention. I did not use his name, I did not link to him and I did not post contacts for him. I am very sorry that a pile-on has ensued. I have friends across the House, and I believe in vigorous but fair debate. I have no time for abusive behaviour; I do not engage in it and I deplore it.

I am advised that I breached a parliamentary rule by referring to the Speaker’s letter, but as I have explained, I did not knowingly do so. I would never reveal a confidence. I did not believe that the Speaker’s decision on a parliamentary matter was a secret. Indeed—this is perhaps not a matter for today—should there not be a distinction between correspondence containing confidences and correspondence on policy decisions? Has every Member who has revealed a Speaker’s decision by letter found themselves the subject of a parliamentary privilege debate, as I am today? Although this convention appears to exist, is it not the very antithesis of open democracy? Many Members on both sides of the House have told me privately that they did not know this rule existed.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I should declare an interest as another Member who appeared in the very same reality show that the hon. Gentleman’s Committee discussed. He has not apologised to the Speaker. Does he not think that, having betrayed what was marked as private correspondence, which clearly and rightly aggrieved the Speaker, if he had given an apology at the time when it was raised by the Chair last week, he would not be in this position now? Why did he not do that? Would he not like to bring back at least some decorum by apologising profusely to the Speaker and the House now for the offence he has caused?

John Nicolson: The hon. Gentleman says the letter was marked “private”. I do not know how he knows what was on the letter. I have shown the letter to absolutely nobody. But since he challenges me, the letter was not marked “private”. If it had been, I would not have talked about it. It is a core belief of people in my former profession that we hold confidences and that we will go to prison rather than reveal our sources. The letter was not marked “private”. It was about a matter of policy on whether or not a debate could be held, and I did not think that it was confidential.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The hon. Member has said that he was aware that the Speaker had become very angry. As the Speaker serves all of us, and as this is all about decorum, is it not time that he apologised to the Speaker? Maybe that would resolve a lot of things.

John Nicolson: I want to answer that question honestly. I am slightly torn because, on the one hand, I am deeply sorry that the Speaker is upset. Those who know me will know that I do not ever conduct politics in a way that aims to be offensive, and I am truly sorry that the Speaker is upset. I am truly sorry that I have upset the Speaker, but it would be disingenuous of me to say that I knowingly revealed this. I could not have been more open by going on camera and discussing this. I clearly was not trying to hide it. If people in my profession—my former profession and this profession—want to pass things into the public domain in a sleekit or surreptitious way, they give them to journalists. I did not do that. I stood up and talked about the letter, not revealing its contents in detail but summarising it.

This place often seems hard to understand for the general public, and its procedures can appear opaque. I suspect that most people will find it curious that the Member who misled the Select Committee was subject to no consequences but the Member who revealed that—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman absolutely needs to withdraw that remark.

John Nicolson: I withdraw that remark. I, however, am subject to the current debate. I note that, over the years, these debates have been confined to people who have committed or been accused of committing some of the most egregious offences, but I have yet to meet a Member who thinks this falls into that category.

I want to conclude by saying again that it was never my intention to insult the Speaker. I do not know him well but we have only ever had friendly exchanges when meeting. I bear him absolutely no ill will. I deplore any and all online abuse that he has suffered. Nobody, I imagine, is enjoying this debate—least of all me. I find interpersonal conflict stressful and unpleasant. I hope the House concludes that there was no malicious intent in anything that I did, and I apologise to the Speaker for breaching a House rule, but given the all-party nature of the Committee report I sought no party political advantage and I hope that Members here today will seek no party political advantage. My only motivation was to do what I always try to do, and that is to engage with the debate and to communicate my work here with constituents and with journalists as openly and fairly as I can.

2.19 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I received a letter today from someone who met me at a conference, saying that I was right in saying to her then that although I was not directly involved in her cause, it was a cause worth fighting for. I took that as a tribute. It was the LGB Alliance conference across the road from here. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) talked about pile-ons, and he constantly used the term on Twitter. That may or may not be relevant to the Committee of Privileges, if the matter is referred to that Committee—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have to say to the Father of the House that this is not about criticising other people's behaviour. It is strictly about the motion before us.

Sir Peter Bottomley: In the *Hansard* of 23 November, at 12.33 pm, Mr Speaker said he was awaiting an apology. The response from the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire expressed regret at the pile-on against the Speaker, and we have heard today that the hon. Gentleman did not intend to be offensive to anybody.

I think the proper description of last week's exchange with the Speaker, as shown on the record in *Hansard*, is that the Speaker is awaiting an apology, which we have not yet heard. We have heard an explanation this afternoon that the hon. Gentleman was asking for a debate on a

Select Committee report. The way to ask for a debate on a Select Committee report is to ask the Leader of the House. That is the normal parliamentary procedure.

The hon. Gentleman was actually asking for a privileges reference, which was not accepted. If a Member has been here for 21 years, they know the rules changed some years ago. Requests for a privileges reference are taken up in private with the Speaker, who then gives a view. If an hon. Member receives a reply from the Speaker saying no, and if they decide to make it public that they asked, they have a responsibility to be fully open about Mr Speaker's whole response, not a part of it, as the Speaker said in the Chamber last week at 12.33 pm.

I believe the House has a responsibility to back the Speaker, right or wrong, but especially when he is right. On this issue, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) is right, and I ask the House to support the reference to the Committee of Privileges. After that, when the Committee has reported, we can decide whether to have a fuller debate and whether the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire has, by then, done as the House would expect, and as the Speaker asked, and given a full apology.

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

2.21 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is extremely unfortunate that matters have come to this, but I understand the conventions of the House that brought us here. The Scottish National party respects the need for a transparent and open process.

The Leader of the House has previously spoken of the importance of parliamentary modernisation, and of how the House operates unlike any normal administrative centre in the public or private sector, and I agree with her. The procedures of the Houses of Parliament need updating, and this situation perhaps provides us with an example of where some reform could take place.

I am confident, having spoken to my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson), that he was completely unaware of the conventions of the House at the heart of this issue. He sought clarity on proper procedure and was caught out. He has already spoken at length, with his customary eloquence, outlining his position and how there was no malicious intent.

In closing, I repeat that the SNP respects the need for transparency and openness.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Leader of the House.

2.23 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The upholding of conventions is essential to the smooth running of this House and to the foundation of political order in this country. "Erskine May" is clear—there is a search function, and I checked this morning—about the procedure for raising a complaint about a breach of privilege. The rules are there to find for a Member who seeks to raise such a complaint. "Erskine May" says that Members need the permission of the Speaker and must request it in writing. There is a long-standing convention that,

[Thangam Debbonaire]

when Members write to the Speaker, they do so on the basis that the correspondence in both directions will remain confidential. This is especially the case on matters of privilege. Paragraph 15.32, footnote 6, is explicit:

“It is not the practice for such letters to be made public... Members should not challenge the Speaker’s decision in the House.”

As Members of this House we all hold parliamentary privilege, but that comes with responsibility. We have a duty not to misuse it, and we have a duty to respect the Chair’s rulings. Our conduct must live up to the high expectations that the public should have a right to expect of us.

I therefore believe the conduct of the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) warrants an investigation by the Committee of Privileges, as requested by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), so I will support the motion today, and I urge others to do so.

2.24 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) for moving the motion. I deeply regret it, but I understand why he has had to do so.

I heard what the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) said today, and I am glad to see him in the Chamber. I do not think his argument that he was not aware of the right course of action or of the appropriate response to journalistic inquiries, which is to state that any such correspondence is confidential, is a reason for not passing the motion. I sincerely hoped he would make an apology. I think there is consensus across the House about the right course of action. Had he taken that opportunity, the matter could potentially have been brought to an end today.

The procedure for raising breaches of privilege is a long-standing and important convention that ensures the privileges and rights of this House are protected.

John Nicolson: I think there is a misunderstanding. I quite clearly said that I was apologising to Mr Speaker. I was unaware of this convention, and I wished to cause him no hurt. I apologised, and I am repeating that now.

Penny Mordaunt: I am afraid that the way in which the hon. Gentleman phrased it, and the way in which he has not appreciated—

Pete Wishart: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Penny Mordaunt: I will continue.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire has not appreciated the damage that has been done in these circumstances. The Speaker’s role in this is integral, including in avoiding—

Pete Wishart: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Penny Mordaunt: No, I will not give way. I am going to have my say.

The Speaker’s role in this is integral, including in avoiding frivolous complaints. It is important that his role is respected.

Pete Wishart: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Penny Mordaunt: No.

Correspondence on such matters must remain confidential and, in this place, we all suffer if that does not happen. As Mr Speaker noted, it is not for him to determine whether a contempt has been committed. I therefore support the motion and the need for the Committee of Privileges to thoroughly and correctly investigate any potential breach. I think we all regret where we are today. I am sorry the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire did not make a full and frank apology, and I support the motion.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 371, Noes 16.

Division No. 101]

[2.27 pm]

AYES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Fleur
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Argar, rh Edward
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barker, Paula
Baron, Mr John
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Betts, Mr Clive
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Blomfield, Paul
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob

Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Chamberlain, Wendy
Charalambous, Bambos
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Feryal
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Colburn, Elliot
Cooper, Daisy
Creasy, Stella
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Daly, James
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies-Jones, Alex
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Double, Steve
Doughty, Stephen
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James
Duffield, Rosie

Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Mark
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Elmore, Chris
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Chris
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foord, Richard
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Gardiner, Barry
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, Helen
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Healey, rh John
 Heappey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollern, Kate
 Hollinrake, Kevin

Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jarvis, Dan
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Keeley, Barbara
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kyle, Peter
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast
 by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Longhi, Marco
 Loughton, Tim
 Lynch, Holly
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mak, Alan
 Malhotra, Seema
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McDonald, Andy
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorris, Anna
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin

Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Morrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nici, Lia
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opperman, Guy
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paisley, Ian
 Pawsey, Mark
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Phillips, Jess
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pollard, Luke
 Pow, Rebecca
 Pursglove, Tom
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Alok

Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spellar, rh John
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stevens, Jo
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Streeting, Wes
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Throup, Maggie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trickett, Jon
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Twist, Liz
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Webb, Suzanne
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittaker, Craig
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Robert Largan and
Andrew Stephenson

NOES

Blackman, Kirsty
 Bonnar, Steven

Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan

Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
cast by Owen Thompson*)
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Flynn, Stephen
Grant, Peter
Hendry, Drew
Hosie, rh Stewart
Mc Nally, John

McLaughlin, Anne
Newlands, Gavin
O'Hara, Brendan
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Smith, Alyn

Tellers for the Noes:
Pete Wishart and
Hannah Bardell

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the matter of the actions and subsequent conduct of the hon Member for Ochil and South Perthshire in relation to correspondence from the Speaker on a matter of privilege be referred to the Committee of Privileges.

NORTHERN IRELAND (EXECUTIVE FORMATION ETC) BILL (ALLOCATION OF TIME)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Bill:

Timetable

(1)(a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

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

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

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (15)(a) of this Order.

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

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(8)(a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(10)(a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(13) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

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

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

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

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

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

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

(16)(a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

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

(17)(a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings in respect of such a debate.

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

(19)(a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on this Order or on the Bill on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—(*Chris Heaton-Harris.*)

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Bill

Second Reading

2.41 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Three weeks ago, I stood at this Dispatch Box setting out my profound regret that the Northern Ireland Executive had not been restored by the legal deadline of 28 October. As I said then, I believe strongly that the people of Northern Ireland deserve a functioning Assembly and Executive, where locally elected representatives can address issues that matter most to those who elect them. That has been denied to the people of Northern Ireland since February, and Northern Ireland has been without fully functioning devolved institutions for the bulk of this year. That is both unacceptable and a cause for alarm.

What the people of Northern Ireland would welcome is getting their devolved institutions up and running. They are worried that almost 187,000 people in Northern Ireland have been waiting for more than a year for their first out-patient appointment; they are concerned that there is a higher share of working-age adults in Northern Ireland with no formal qualifications than anywhere else in the UK; and they are worried that a quarter of children in Northern Ireland are growing up in poverty.

There is also a legitimate and strong concern about the functioning of the Northern Ireland protocol. This concern is felt very strongly indeed in the Unionist community. It is clear, though, that the Executive will not return overnight, and that a further election in the immediate term would be unlikely to produce a significantly different result.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way so quickly into his speech. He used the term “considerable alarm”. I wonder whether he is pondering what is taking place in the Hutch criminal trial in the courts in Dublin and the implications that the outcome of that trial could have for the operation of any political activity not only in Northern Ireland, but in the Republic of Ireland. Is that being factored in to the Secretary of State’s alarm?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The trial is certainly being watched assiduously by my officials and me. However, this Bill is about the restoration of the Executive in Northern Ireland—something that is very important indeed. Unfortunately, the time has come for the Government, and indeed for hon. and right hon. Members in this House, to take action in response to the governance gap that has emerged in Northern Ireland, and that is what this Bill seeks to do.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State outlines his disappointment that we do not have functioning devolution in Northern Ireland and I share that disappointment, but he knows acutely why the Government are not functioning in Northern Ireland. Instead of sharing his disappointment, can he tell us why, in the three weeks since the duty to call an election—or

[Gavin Robinson]

the past 10 months—there has been no fundamental, sincere or considered progress on resolving the Northern Ireland protocol?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am afraid that it is unfair of the hon. Gentleman to say that. He and this Government are absolutely not commenting day-to-day about the talks between this Government and the European Commission. As both the Foreign Secretary and I have set out at the Dispatch Box, we will continue not to do that.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) *rose*—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will give way one more time.

Simon Hoare: While there is probably never a good time to collapse Stormont, does my right hon. Friend agree that, at a time of pressing problems occasioned by a cost of living crisis and with all the concerns that affect all communities and both traditions across Northern Ireland, now is most certainly not the time to be depriving Northern Ireland of its elected representatives who serve the good people who put them there?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, for his point. Although I agree with him, I cannot put myself in the shoes of those who represent the different communities in Northern Ireland. I understand the views and the strongly held sentiment about the functioning of the Northern Ireland protocol and the concern that there is within the Unionist community. That has been borne out by polls across the piece.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I feel that I have provoked all sorts of things. I hope that colleagues will forgive me if I take three interventions and then move on, because there is also a football game to get to at the end of the day.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, 17% of people are in poverty, and 12% in absolute poverty; I understand what the Chair of the Select Committee is referring to when it comes to addressing that. The Government went through the legislation in this House to ensure that the money offered on the UK mainland is equal to that offered in Northern Ireland. If the Government move with some urgency to ensure that that happens—on energy prices and everything else—the fact that the Northern Ireland Assembly cannot operate today because of the Northern Ireland protocol should not in any way hold up help going to people who are very much in need.

Chris Heaton-Harris: But, unfortunately, it did. When Ministers were in place they were unable to help us with the money going through the system. Now, as per the responses to the urgent question and to the questions to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy earlier, there are unbelievable difficulties in the UK Government doing what the hon. Member and I both want to happen.

Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his generosity in taking interventions. He is quite right about the budgetary challenges facing the people in Northern Ireland at this time, with the economic structures and problems we are seeing, which is why it is so important that we see Stormont back up and running. We all know—this has been touched on already—why Stormont is not functioning, so does he agree that it is imperative that the European Union understands the strength of feelings in Northern Ireland, across communities but particularly in the Unionist community? Without my right hon. Friend commenting on the detailed negotiations, does he not agree that the European Union must show flexibility in allowing an agreement to be formed between it and the UK Government that will facilitate Stormont's getting back up and running, especially with the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement close upon us?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my right hon. Friend for his wise words. I know, because I was present in some of the meetings, that he articulated those words directly to representatives of the European Commission when he was Secretary of State, and he is completely right in what he says.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I go back to the intervention by the Chair of the Northern Ireland Committee and state that, while the cost of living is affecting everyone in Northern Ireland, it is exacerbated by the protocol and the costs that are being added on to every single basket of shopping bought in Northern Ireland.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point that is well evidenced; that is why the protocol needs fixing.

I have separately set out in a written statement to this House how the Government intend to respond to the budgetary issues that have arisen in Northern Ireland. I do not intend to go into the detail of the budget now, but right hon. and hon. Members will see from the written statement just how difficult the fiscal situation in Northern Ireland is at present. The Government will be bringing forward a separate budget Bill in which more detail will be provided, and no doubt this House will want to consider that Bill particularly carefully.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): Does the Secretary of State agree that New Decade, New Approach contains many commitments, such as funding the Northlands Addiction Treatment Centre, the Magee university expansion and the Brandywell stadium—all in my constituency—and that in this new context they should not be seen as controversial but should be able to get funded even though we do not have Ministers in the Executive?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I believe I have just laid a written ministerial statement to give an update on how the Government are delivering on the commitments in the New Decade, New Approach paper. The hon. Gentleman is quite right that all these things can happen simultaneously or separately and at different speeds, and have done, but there is also a fundamental issue, which was noted at that time, with the protocol. This Bill, though, is about creating the conditions in which

key decisions in Northern Ireland can be taken, including on the implementation of the budget, rather than the content of the budget that I was describing before the intervention.

I will briefly summarise the overall intention of the Bill before running through its provisions. At the outset, though, I must say that I am grateful to those on the Opposition Benches—all of them—for their co-operation in moving this Bill forward. Specifically, though I know I should perhaps save this for Third Reading, I thank the shadow Northern Ireland Secretary, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), for the constructive and cross-party fashion in which he and others on the Opposition Front Bench have approached this Bill, both in this place and the other place. I am also grateful to him for speaking to me on this important Bill over the weekend and for speaking to my hon. Friend the Minister of State yesterday evening.

The Bill broadly seeks to do three main things. It retrospectively extends the period of Executive formation for two six-week periods. That means, subject to the agreement of this House and the other place, that if an Executive is not formed within those timeframes, the election duty placed on me will kick in after the second extension of six weeks, on 20 January 2023.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I ask the Secretary of State to reflect on the disjoint between the timetable he is setting out today for restoration of the Executive and the current pace of negotiations with the European Union. Does he not recognise the need for him to build in some further flexibility, to avoid a situation where he has to call an election at a time when the negotiations are coming to a conclusion and potentially inside that tunnel, given that an election may be very prejudicial to securing a stable outcome and to getting the necessary compromise so that Northern Ireland can move forward?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for his message to me on the subject earlier. I completely understand the point he makes, but I am hopeful that we can do the work that needs to be done within the timeframe that we are setting down now.

Returning to the Bill, the second main thing it does is to clarify the decisions that civil servants in Northern Ireland Departments can take in the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers, so that decisions in crucial areas such as public sector spending and the maintenance of public services can continue to be taken in the absence of an Executive.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My right hon. Friend talked about the importance of public services; many of us in this House have been talking in particular about the provision of abortion services in Northern Ireland, which the Government made a very helpful statement on last month. Can he update the House on how those services are being put in place? Many want to ensure that the legislation we passed here about two years ago will lead to an improvement in provision for women in Northern Ireland.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I can give a brief update. Indeed the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) tabled

amendments on that matter earlier, so I believe she might want to come in at this point, and then I should be able to answer.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is now 1,134 days since this House passed the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 and 973 days since the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 were laid to give effect to it. Women in Northern Ireland have been waiting patiently for safe, legal and local abortion services. Can the Secretary of State tell us how many more days he thinks it is acceptable to ask them to wait, now that he has the powers and the money to deliver those services? Would 90 days be enough, for example?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank both the hon. Lady and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) for their questions. I can give some clarity on this now, and later the Minister of State will be able to give a bit more detail. My officials have been working closely with the Northern Ireland Department of Health and I have instructed the permanent secretary to commission abortion services in Northern Ireland. I am also ensuring that the required funding is allocated for those services, and funding will be ring-fenced in the Northern Ireland budget, as set out by my written ministerial statement of last week.

That will mean that, in line with my statutory duty, health and social care trusts will have both the assurance of commissioned service and the guarantee of funding for that service, allowing them to recruit and plan for the full roll-out of services that this House decided women should have access to. The hon. Member for Walthamstow asked about dates. This is a service that is sometimes controversial, but also unbelievably important, and appropriate recruitment and training of staff needs to take place. Her amendment, which I know is a probing amendment, mentions 28 days, but I hope I can demonstrate to her that recruitment is already starting and training is going to start.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the period of 90 days. I would like to think that most services will be at least en route to being delivered by that point in time, but, if I may, I intend to write to those hon. Members who might be interested, maybe on a monthly basis, to give continual updates so that the hon. Lady and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke can see what is happening and when.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Secretary of State will be aware that since the introduction of the new legislation to Northern Ireland, more than 4,000 babies have been aborted in the womb. That is 4,000 lives lost—a stark difference from the 100,000 who are alive today because of the life-affirming laws that we have. He will be aware that 79% of people opposed that legislation. This is being forced on the people of Northern Ireland against their will, and yet he can find funding for it and not for other important things in Northern Ireland.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Lady and I have had this conversation before. I have a statutory duty to deliver that service and I will do so.

Lastly, the Bill provides for powers around the remuneration of Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, meaning that I will be able to take action to amend their pay when they are unable to conduct the

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

full range of the functions expected of them. The Bill also provides for a number of other measures, including on the regional rate and public appointments, that I will speak to shortly.

Taken together, the measures in the Bill will help to plug the governance gap that has emerged in Northern Ireland. We recognise that the Bill is a stopgap and is not intended to be a long-term solution to the issues that Northern Ireland faces; that is a matter for locally elected politicians.

I will now go through the clauses in turn to explain the Government's rationale behind some of the policy choices we have made in this process. Clause 1 makes provision for an extension of the period for filling ministerial offices, as set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and amended by the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act 2022—cannily nicknamed “MEPOC”. The clause retrospectively introduces a further six-week period during which an Executive can be formed. That means that the election duty previously placed on me from 28 October no longer applies and, through the Bill, would not apply again until 9 December 2022 at the earliest.

Clause 2 provides for a power to extend the Executive formation period by a further six weeks to 19 January 2023. That power is exercisable through a statutory instrument. I will just say a brief word about that, as I know that it is not necessarily conventional. The regulations made under clause 2 will not be subject to any parliamentary procedure—other than having to be laid after they are made—on the basis that the power is limited and exercisable only once. It is not a recurring power that allows me to extend the period for Executive formation indefinitely, but rather a very tightly drawn single further extension to a defined date.

All taken, the Government judge that this extension will afford political parties in Northern Ireland the time they need to get around the negotiating table, back to the Assembly and into the Executive. I have listened clearly and carefully to party leaders, who have all said publicly that now is not the time for a further Assembly election, and I have acted on those concerns. Right hon. and hon. Members with eagle eyes will note that the clause does not fully replicate previous legislation in that it does not provide for the extension or restoration of caretaker Ministers. The Government considered that, but we have come to the firm view that it would not have been appropriate to restore Ministers who left office on 28 October, even in a caretaker capacity. Instead, civil servants have been holding the tiller in Northern Ireland Departments since that date. They have done so admirably given the circumstances under which they have been working.

That brings me neatly to clauses 3 to 5, which clarify the decisions that Northern Ireland civil servants can take in the continued absence of an Executive. The Government have broadly mirrored the approach to these powers taken by the previous Administration but one in 2018, largely replicating the relevant provisions in the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018. We recognise that precedent is helpful both to Parliament and to decision-makers themselves. Northern Ireland civil servants will therefore be provided with the certainty to take a limited

set of decisions when it is in the public interest to do so. That will enable them to address key issues facing Northern Ireland right now: a sustainable budget, the cost of living and—importantly—the delivery of public services.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Conservatives believe that work should pay and that those who choose not to work should not be as well off. We are now hearing that civil servants will have to discharge some ministerial functions. The Secretary of State mentioned that he will have the power to vary the pay of MLAs. It will stick in lots of people's throats that, during a cost of living crisis, MLAs are receiving full wages for doing half a job. Will he look at that urgently?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I absolutely will. Indeed, depending on the passage of the Bill through this House and the other place, when the power falls to me, I intend to act on it rapidly. I am fully aware that it is a heartfelt plea from the people of Northern Ireland that their politicians should be active in the Assembly and working on these issues—people are quite cross that they are not.

Ian Paisley: Is the Secretary of State equally deeply angry about those abstentionist MPs from Northern Ireland who get allowances and run offices but do not take their seats in this House, and is he prepared to take immediate action and amend his own activities today by removing those allowances? Will he be consistent on that matter?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman will be talking about Sinn Féin Members of Parliament. I guess I would compare their take-home pay, allowances and everything with his—it would not be the same. I am just essentially taking the same principle and using it in a slightly different way.

We do not, I am afraid, have the luxury of waiting for a restored Executive to take these key decisions. That is why it is right that we give civil servants the legal cover to keep things moving. To aid them in doing that, I will shortly publish draft guidance on taking decisions in the public interest and on the principles that should be taken into account in deciding whether or not to do so. Again, that mirrors the approach that was taken previously in 2018. Final guidance will be published after Royal Assent. We recognise, though, that this is not a long-term solution, and civil servants cannot be left to take decisions indefinitely. That is why these provisions will last for six months or until an Executive reforms—whichever is sooner.

Clauses 6 to 9 make provision for certain public appointments that would usually have to be made by, or require their approval of, Ministers. That largely mirrors provision made in the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018. This is another sensible step and will ensure that key appointments, which are necessary to maintain governance and public confidence in the institutions in Northern Ireland, can still be made.

Clause 10 will allow me to do something that has just been mentioned: take action when it comes to the pay of Members of the Assembly—or MLAs, as they are usually known. At a time when taxpayers' money, and indeed taxpayers themselves, are under enormous strain,

it is simply not acceptable that MLAs continue to draw a full salary while unable to conduct the full range of functions for which they were elected. The clause will therefore allow me to amend the pay of MLAs in this and any future periods of inactivity, drawing on sections 47 and 48 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Simon Hoare: Clearly, the vast majority of MLAs want Stormont up and running. They want to do 100% of their jobs seven days a week, rather than the 50% that they are able to do at the moment. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that he has robustly explored employment law—and if he has not, that he will do so—and that it would allow only for those who refuse to attend to have a pay cut? Those who wished to attend but could not because somebody was exercising their veto should not see their income reduced through no fault of their own.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Like Sinn Féin did four years ago.

Simon Hoare: Precisely—I agree.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Amid the interesting debate that is going on across my shoulder, I can honestly say to the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), that I have sought and received lots of advice on that very issue. It is judged that, legally, I would be in a very safe place to do exactly as I am doing, but to differentiate would put us into a different place whereby I could be legally challenged or, potentially, legally challenged.

Simon Hoare: As many Members have said, the Secretary of State is being very generous with his time. He said that he would run the risk of being judicially reviewed. All Ministers of the Crown in this place run that risk. May I urge him to think again, because the risk would be worth it given the situation we are in?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think I might arrange for my hon. Friend a meeting with my Department's lawyers, who will happily take him through the issues, the various risks that they are running at this point in time, and the number of cases that we have.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I assure the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) that if he has his way, and believes that that will make any difference whatever to the principled stand that my party is taking based on the mandate we were given in the Assembly election, he is gravely mistaken.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I seem to be in the middle of an argument between two great gentlemen of this House, so I will just tactfully duck and continue with my contribution, because I know that people would like me to move on.

Any determination made by me once the provisions come into force will, I anticipate, take into account the independent analysis produced in the previous political impasse. Again, there is precedent for these powers—the Government took similar action in 2018 to deliver recommendations produced by that analysis.

However, there is an important difference that the House should note: I will retain the power to set MLA pay in future instances where the Assembly is unable to elect a Speaker and deputies following an election. The power would then snap back to the current arrangement when those roles are filled, the Assembly can conduct business and MLAs are fulfilling the full range of functions expected of them. That will mean the Government do not need to return to the House on this matter if the institutions cease to function in the future, which, of course, I hope will not be the case.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): It is worth confirming to the House that all MLAs, from whatever party—even if some of those parties do not want to be part of the Executive—are working on their constituency work, which is difficult and particularly busy at the moment. We have the biggest and most diverse set of MLAs in the Assembly's history, and it is worth speaking up for that group.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my right hon. Friend, the former Secretary of State for doing exactly that. I am fully aware that MLAs, whatever their political stance or party, do good work in their constituencies, which is why the approach I have set out today is the one I hope to take. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset, the Chair of the Select Committee, who has tabled a number of amendments on MLA pay that seek to strengthen provisions in the Bill. I know that he has spoken to the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), and I am sure there will be a bit more of this debate in Committee.

Finally, I draw the House's attention to a few other provisions in the Bill. Clause 11 confers on me a power to set through regulations the regional domestic and non-domestic rate in Northern Ireland for the financial year ending 31 March 2024. Those rates must be set for every financial year. The regional rate is normally set by the Northern Ireland Department of Finance by way of affirmative order in the Northern Ireland Assembly and comprises rates charged to domestic and non-domestic properties in Northern Ireland. In the continued absence of an Assembly and Executive, this power is an insurance policy where there is continued stasis after a further election, and it will allow the UK Government to set these rates as required. Clauses 12 to 15 are minor and consequential.

No Northern Ireland Secretary would want to introduce a Bill of this nature. As we approach the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, we should be celebrating the progress that Northern Ireland has made since that historic agreement, which is undeniably substantial. As I said in my statement to Parliament, this Government will always seek to implement, maintain and protect the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. This Bill will help to do that, providing short-term cover to plug the governance gap in Northern Ireland, but it is not a long-term solution to the issues with which Northern Ireland is grappling. Those are for a newly reconstituted Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly to solve.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to introduce this Bill, which I am happy to support, but with the time that he is buying with the Bill, will he make sure that the Northern

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Ireland Protocol Bill is taken through the Lords rather more quickly than it is presently? That will give him strength in the negotiations with the European Union and then we can get the whole matter sorted properly.

Chris Heaton-Harris: In my former role as Government Chief Whip, this place having any sway over what happened at the other end of the building would have been a pleasurable occurrence. I cannot give my hon. Friend that assurance, but I can assure him that a huge amount of work is going on in that area.

The people of Northern Ireland want their elected representatives to get round the table again and get back to power-sharing. I hope the measures in this Bill go some way to providing the space and time for that to happen, but if the Executive and Assembly are to return, it will require the determination, creativity and compromise of those who hold the keys. I know they are up to the task, but for now I commend this Bill to the House.

3.14 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for setting out the measures in the Bill. I was clear when he introduced it that we would not oppose this legislation.

There is sufficient consensus in Northern Ireland and outside it that elections this winter will not help to break the political deadlock. In many ways, this emergency legislation is the least worst of the options open to the Secretary of State. I emphasise again that Northern Ireland is a valued part of the United Kingdom, and restoring power-sharing should be one of the top priorities of No. 10. The longer the Executive are collapsed, the hollower the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement next year will be. Power sharing is the essential and hard-won outcome of that agreement. It is incumbent on the UK Government and the European Union to engage with the concerns of the Unionist community that led to its withdrawal from the institutions. Equally, any solution that emerges must be acceptable to the nationalist community to allow power sharing to resume.

There is also a growing part of Northern Ireland's population that identifies as neither nationalist nor Unionist. In May, the cross-community Alliance party achieved its best ever results in the Assembly election. Balancing these relationships is the nature of the UK Government's role as the honest broker for Northern Ireland that Northern Ireland deserves. I was encouraged to hear that the Secretary of State made the decision to delay elections after, in his own words,

"engaging widely in Northern Ireland with the parties, with businesses, with community representatives and with members of the public. I have also spoken with other international interlocutors."—[*Official Report*, 9 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 278.]

The need to mark a new chapter in how the Government deal with Northern Ireland is profound, and I hope this marks that point.

To date, there is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the Government's approach to Northern Ireland, which is perfectly illustrated by two Bills affecting Northern Ireland that are going through Parliament at this moment. The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill has as its central

justification the lost consent of one community for the protocol. The second, the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, not only has no consent of any community, but is actively opposed by all communities, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and every single victims group, yet the Government obstinately plough on. This Government care about the concerns of Northern Ireland when it suits their needs, but sadly overlook them when it does not. That is a recipe for dysfunction, and dysfunction is what has been delivered.

Labour will always take a constructive approach to Northern Ireland, and one way of trying to make progress would be for the Prime Minister to step in and use his great office. Tony Blair's first visit outside of London as Prime Minister was to Belfast. He visited five times in his first year as Premier. He did it to show commitment to Northern Ireland. It is revealing that the current Prime Minister has not yet made the short trip himself since he came to power, but in that time has managed to go to Egypt and Indonesia.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): He went to the conference in Blackpool.

Peter Kyle: The shadow—sorry, the soon to be shadow Minister intervenes to point out that the Prime Minister went to the conference in Blackpool, which he did, and we are very grateful for it. I hope that he will soon make time to go to Northern Ireland himself and perhaps use the power of his office to convene multi-party talks and get some progress over there. This matters, because it was a Conservative Prime Minister who personally championed, negotiated and signed the protocol into international treaty. It is not unreasonable to expect it to take a similar level of involvement to change it.

The Bill before us allows the Secretary of State to delay elections, but it does not explain how the Government will use the extra time they are buying themselves. The first deadline in the Bill for restoring the Executive is 8 December. That is next week. It is unclear how the Government have used the period from 28 October to 8 December to find solutions to restore the Executive. Sadly, I can go back even further and say that it is not clear how the Government have used the entire six months since the Assembly elections. For months the Executive have been collapsed, and there was no visit from the Tory Prime Minister and no multi-party talks in Downing Street. There was not even a statement to Parliament. I would like to think that, had the current Secretary of State been in place back then, he would have done so, because he has respected the House by giving multiple statements since, for which I am grateful. It is a shame that there was no such similar action in that period.

The most recent update on the Northern Ireland protocol negotiations came from the Foreign Secretary during his appearance at the European Scrutiny Committee on 15 November. He said:

"I do not want people to be defeatist, but I also do not want people to run away with the idea that we are just on the cusp of some amazing breakthrough".

He went on to say that he wanted to "manage expectations." The Bill gives the Northern Ireland Secretary the power to extend the deadline by a further six weeks to 19 January, but no further. It is not clear whether the Foreign Secretary is bluffing or the deadlines in the Bill are too short.

That matters, because over the next few months, the Government have built up hopes that a deal is imminent. The delegated powers memorandum says of the decision by the Secretary of State:

“Parliament will have an opportunity during the passage of the Bill to scrutinise fully his likely decision and the basis on which he will make it. Any decision he takes will necessarily have to be made very shortly afterwards.”

I hope that when he responds to the debate the Minister is crystal clear on this. He must explain what progress has been made to reach a negotiated solution on the protocol and on restoring the Executive.

Other powers that the Secretary of State gains through the Bill include the ability to make public appointments, cut Assembly Members’ pay and set regional rates. We have been assured that the clauses relating to those measures are all based on previous legislation. Public appointments and rate setting are necessary powers for practical reasons. I hope that Members all agree with the need for the appointment of a Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and of commissioners for the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission. Setting regional rates will provide businesses with certainty. It is also fine to cut Assembly Members’ pay, as that has been done before. Northern Ireland is suffering more from the cost of living crisis than any other part of the country, so I understand why residents would want that part of the Bill to be introduced.

Ian Paisley: I want to give the hon. Gentleman time to outline issues that have alarmed him. Does what has happened in the criminal courts in Dublin, including the Hutch criminal gang trial, create or provoke alarm in the Labour party? He will recall that, historically, whenever the IRA was involved in a major bank robbery, such as the Northern Bank robbery, and whenever its activists colluded with FARC guerrillas, that brought political institutions to a shuddering halt. Does he believe that the implications of what has been revealed in the Hutch criminal gang trial will have another shuddering impact on political activity?

Peter Kyle: The hon. Gentleman raises extremely serious issues, which relate to the Republic of Ireland and an ongoing trial. I watch that trial closely and await its outcome. I do not think that it would be appropriate at this point to comment on a trial that is under way, but I am grateful for his intervention.

Significantly, the Bill gives civil servants greater decision-making powers to allow public services to function. These decisions will be based on guidance issued by the Secretary of State. However, we should be aware that we are asking a lot of civil servants. Yesterday, Jayne Brady, head of the Northern Ireland civil service, gave an interview in which she said:

“We are in a period of keeping the system running, compounded by a requirement to make savings. But equally we won’t be moving and addressing those big systemic issues. That is why it is so important that we get the Executive up and running.”

I want to pay tribute to civil servants, who will undoubtedly do their best in the challenging weeks that lie ahead, but the big systemic issues require political leadership and political decision making.

Last week, I had the pleasure of visiting beautiful Enniskillen, where I witnessed first hand some of those acute challenges. In the local hospital, I saw outstanding

facilities that are going unused because of the struggle to recruit the clinicians needed to keep services going. I spoke to nurses whose pay deals have been agreed by Ministers but are blocked by the absence of an Executive. Once again, nurses’ pay in Northern Ireland has diverged from pay in other parts of the United Kingdom. Those nurses are essential in tackling the longest waiting lists in the UK. Those issues need to be resolved, and they need to be resolved quickly.

I also want to put on record my thanks to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, whose officers have had to deal with recent attempts on their lives by terrorists. It is worrying that in these times there has been a partial freeze on the recruitment of new officers due to the lack of a budget. Northern Ireland needs a restored Executive so that decisions in such crucial areas can be made locally, instead of here in Westminster. The Government must use the extra time that the Bill gives them to make concrete progress. After months of uncertainty and neglect, it is the very least that people of Northern Ireland deserve.

3.24 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle). May I begin by thanking Government Ministers, particularly my hon. Friend the Minister of State and his officials for many briefings and conversations that he has facilitated for the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs and for me personally? That really is appreciated. There are rumours of a bromance breaking out between my hon. Friend and me, but it is nice that we are working together so closely.

Many, if not all, Members of Parliament—I would probably say all Members and everyone in the country at large—would wish the doing of politics to be normalised in Northern Ireland, which is an integral part of the United Kingdom, yet here we are again, having to deal with pressing matters through the use of emergency legislation. That is a real sadness, and I contend that such a situation would not be tolerated in any other part of the UK. At some point, we have to try to find a focused way of trying to deliver normalised politics.

I fear—and I understand precisely why the Secretary of State and the Government have introduced the Bill, which has my full support—that we are falling into a trap. The functioning and delivery of devolution, and the changes that many people would like to see delivered to the protocol, are two distinct, divorced and separate workstreams. We should not stand idly by and allow their conflation in the minds of people across the country. In 2022, no party worthy of that name, against the pressing economic backdrop that we face, should ever have a right to veto or walk away at any time, as I said earlier, still less now. I listened to the intervention from the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), the leader of the Democratic Unionist party, about whether or not the reduction of pay was intended to drive, cajole or whip his party back to Stormont. I do not see it that way, but it is the clearest signal possible to members of the public that Parliament gets it and understands what full public service is. If people decide to exercise the veto which currently exists, clearly there should be an opportunity to deliver better value to the taxpayer by reducing the remuneration package. I have always been keen and hot on that, and I

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hope that the Secretary of State exercises that power under clause 10, which uses the word “may”. However, I very much hope that he does.

I welcome what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said in recent weeks about the process or impetus that could spur a review of the rubric on which we base the formulation and establishment of the Executive. I paraphrase, but he has said in terms that he would respond if there were overtures from the parties in Northern Ireland, from the grassroots up. That is probably the right approach, and I urge my right hon. Friend—he probably needs no urging—should those overtures be made, to respond positively to try to address them as quickly as possible.

Clause 10 says that the Secretary of State “may” make a determination; I think that he has to and that it should be done speedily. I know that many people wish that the law allowed him to differentiate between the MLAs who want to be in Stormont doing their job and those who have decided not to for reasons that are perfectly respectable. As we all know, however, any decisions that we take do and must have consequences.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee alludes to differentiating between MLAs who want to do their job and those who do not. Does he make the same differentiation between MPs who want to do their job and those who do not, but still get remunerated?

Simon Hoare: Yes, I do. At the end of the day, irrespective of which forum people are working in, that is taxpayers’ money. If one is prepared to do only a portion of the job, there should be implications for that. A teacher could not say, “I’m only going to teach boys called George or girls called Helen, and everybody else can go hang,” and expect the full package of remuneration and all the benefits. Likewise—again, I am grateful for the Minister of State’s briefing—I wish that clause 10(5) were not in the Bill, although I understand the complexities, because there should be knock-on implications for pensions as well. That needs to be looked at in due course.

This is a regrettable but understandable Bill. As the Secretary of State said, no Secretary of State would want to introduce this kind of legislation. Next year is the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement—we say that so flippantly; it has been hard-baked into our DNA as if it has always been there. As well as providing a moment for celebration and looking to the future, that provides us with an opportunity to look to the past and what led to its creation. We must never take its benefits for granted. Is it perfect? No. Does it deliver the process that we had hoped for at the speed that we had intended? Of course not, but let us not take it for granted. Let us all put our shoulders to the wheel to make sure that, across the communities, we can celebrate the huge strides for peace that it presented.

3.31 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): As I said in response to the Secretary of State’s statement on 9 November, my party has made clear its view that the best place for Members of the Legislative Assembly to be, and where we believe that the overwhelming majority of people in

Northern Ireland would expect them to be, is at work in Stormont holding a functioning Executive to account as they get on with overseeing the delivery of vital public services. As I also said, and still firmly believe, although it certainly does not serve the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland for an Executive not to be in place, it would also not serve their interests to hold another election at this point that would further embed already entrenched positions. We therefore welcome the Bill as a means of postponing an election that nobody wants and that would serve no purpose, and as a means of allowing the essential functions of Government to proceed in the interim, pending, we hope, the formation of an Executive.

Northern Ireland has, of course, been in the unfortunate position of both its Governments being paralysed by inaction in the last few months, albeit for different reasons. We hope that the Bill will allow for some long-overdue negotiations to take place about amending the terms on which the UK Government chose to leave the EU. We are all clear about why we are here, and that sits at the back of it, because that is what led the DUP to refuse to form an Administration based on the Northern Ireland protocol, which it considers to represent the undermining of Northern Ireland’s place in the Union.

We are clear, as other hon. Members have been in previous debates on the subject, that the protocol was not anybody’s favoured option. It was certainly not the Scottish National party’s preferred way; we saw considerable advantages in remaining aligned with the single market and the customs union, which would have meant that these problems simply did not arise. The protocol was, however, an unloved solution to protect the people of Northern Ireland from the consequences of the form of Brexit that was chosen by the UK Government in line with their negotiating objectives at the time.

Things froze at that point, but I was pleased to note at the British-Irish Association conference in Oxford that some fruitful discussions appeared to happen behind the scenes that started to melt some of that ice. Some of the Minister of State’s public reflections and observations on how we have got to where we are have been particularly helpful in re-establishing a basis for discussions. We welcome that and wish the UK Government well in their attempts to renegotiate the protocol; we have never at any point criticised them for having that objective, but it is now time to get on and do it.

I certainly understand the desire to dock MLA salaries, but it seems to be little more than a gesture. It is not going to provide the motive force that puts anyone back to work, because we can all see the political issues at the back of this. It might be more productive if Ministers proposed an amendment to their own salaries if they are unable to negotiate a suitable agreement within the time they have now allowed themselves. *[Interruption.]* That seems to have started a discussion; I will let it rattle around and see where it ends up.

Our views on Brexit and the diminished position it has left not just Scotland but all parts of the UK in are unchanged, but any new settlement on the protocol cannot only be about Northern Ireland: a revised settlement will only be a better one if it resolves issues in trade both between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and between the UK and the European Union. In that regard, while supporting this Bill, we urge the UK Government to move at pace.

3.36 pm

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I support this proposed legislation. We had the bandages in New Decade, New Approach of keeping Ministers in place after the Executive fell, and we are now on to the elastoplast. It is worth stressing the limited nature of this Bill. There are very difficult choices that civil servants in Northern Ireland are not able to take. There are big challenges in all sorts of areas, including health, with long waiting lists; education, with hundreds of millions of pounds going in the wrong direction on the budget; foreign direct investment, where Northern Ireland has a great reputation but not having Ministers has an impact; and community groups and other organisations, which are desperate for political direction.

It is worth stressing to the House that there is the current period of not having an Executive, but there have also been other periods. One party is getting a lot of heat this time, but there were other parties involved in the past, and the implication in Northern Ireland when this happens is severe: if we did not have Westminster and instead just had civil servants in Whitehall taking the decisions, people in England, Wales and Scotland would be up in arms. So I want to emphasise that the implications of not having political decision making in Northern Ireland are very significant.

We have heard a lot about restoring the Executive. I was lucky enough to work with Northern Ireland parties in 2019-20 to restore the Executive then, and I took huge inspiration from the quality of politicians in Northern Ireland and the constructiveness and good will there at that time despite strong crosswinds. There are attempts to think about ways to run a negotiation to restore the Executive separately from the issue of the protocol, but that ship has sailed, because for one group and community in Northern Ireland fixing the protocol is key to the Executive getting back up and running. I have had strong views on how we have got here, on how previous Prime Ministers have handled this and on other routes that could have been taken, but the polling shows there is strong support for the Democratic Unionist party position among a big chunk of citizens in Northern Ireland.

We have heard that the new Prime Minister went to Blackpool, and I think he has developed new trust and new connections, and restored connections with Ireland, France and other European countries. In my view, however, we are now at a point where we really need to appeal to the EU to think again about how it is viewing this negotiation. There is some frustration—well, huge frustration—particularly about how the Conservative party has conducted these negotiations over the past couple of years, and I suspect that many of those complaints are correct, but we now need this.

We now need the EU to look back at what it did in Northern Ireland. It set up a taskforce, with multiple reports and multiple streams of investment. It invested in the Peace bridge in Derry, and it invested in the Peace Plus initiative. It had the widest set of co-ordinated activity in the European Commission on this particular vulnerable part of the EU. It thought very carefully and worked very hard to bring stability to Northern Ireland, and we now have one community that needs change to happen to get back to the restored settlement that is such a key part of the GFA.

My appeal to the EU is to think again about how it is going about this. Northern Ireland deals, in my experience, are not great on lots of legal detail, lots of bold paragraphs and lots of black and white. Instead, they are really based on compromise, fudge and flexibility. Whether it is two lanes, two approaches or different approaches to EU goods and NI goods, whether it is providing options to businesses in Northern Ireland about regulatory rules, or whether it is taking the European Court of Justice away from the very front of this deal to some distance in the background, all these things are achievable.

Those are all things on which the EU has recognised the uniqueness of Northern Ireland, with the very limited impact its trade and the risk at the border have on the single market. In this 25th year of the GFA, one community needs these changes to take place. We have a Prime Minister who is really trying to reset this relationship, and we now need to go for it. We now need to really encourage the EU to think about this differently and to work intensively at a political level to resolve this, because it is only through the resetting of the protocol situation that my colleagues in the DUP will come forward and restore the Executive. We can debate all we want whether that is good, and whether they are right or wrong, but that is the situation.

In any negotiation, one has to identify the realities, and the reality is that we need significant reform of the protocol at every level, with the EU leaning in on why that is so important. At a time of all this conflict across the broader European continent, it would be a tragedy should the EU not be flexible on the best possible success story in Northern Ireland. I realise this is a debate about Executive formation, but Executive formation in Northern Ireland comes from protocol renegotiation, and protocol renegotiation comes from the EU having some amnesia about its views on the Conservative party position on Brexit and moving forward in the best interests of the citizens of Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the leader of the DUP.

3.43 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith). We fondly recall his facilitation of the talks immediately after the general election in 2019 and the New Decade, New Approach agreement that opened the door for the restoration of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, and we thank him for his continuing interest.

I recognise that the Secretary of State is mandated by legislation to bring forward the Bill, and I think that neither he nor I want to be in this position. Let me be clear that the Democratic Unionist party wants to be back in a functioning Executive. It wants to be dealing with the issues that matter to our constituents. Our MLAs stood for election in May, and they sought a mandate from the people of Northern Ireland. That mandate was clear. I sat in TV studios in Belfast, I sat in radio studios in Belfast and I was interviewed by the print media in Belfast and made it absolutely clear that we would not nominate Ministers to an Executive until decisive action had been taken to address the difficulties created by the Northern Ireland protocol. There was no ambiguity on the part of my party about where it stood and the mandate that it sought.

[Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson]

I say gently to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that he may wish to punish us because we sought a mandate from the people for the stance that we are now taking, but I would like to see him, as Chair of the Committee, adopting a more conciliatory approach, as the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) did, which recognises the very serious concerns that Unionists have about the protocol. I am not prepared to nominate Ministers to an Executive where a Unionist Minister is required to implement a protocol that every day harms our place in the United Kingdom. It vexes me that the hon. Member for North Dorset does not get that. He does not understand it and has not sought to understand it. In my time as party leader, he and I have not had an honest conversation with each other about this issue. I would welcome the opportunity to explain to him why it is important to my party that it is resolved.

When I was elected leader of the DUP, I set out very clearly on 1 July 2021 the course of action that we would take. The Government published their Command Paper in July 2021. We welcomed the commitments that the Government gave in that Command Paper to address the real problems that the protocol has created. On the foot of that Command Paper, I outlined seven tests based on the commitments made by the Government of the United Kingdom—they were not tests that I had created—to address the problems with the protocol. That, again, was in July/August 2021.

In September last year, I again warned that if the Government and the EU were not able to agree on measures to resolve the problems created by the protocol, there would come a moment when it would no longer be tenable for my party to remain in an Executive. Why is that the case? In the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which was the basis on which devolution was restored, a number of commitments were made by all parties to that agreement. It is a fact that the one single remaining issue that has not been resolved, and which is a commitment by the UK Government in New Decade, New Approach, is restoring Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market. That commitment has not been delivered. That was made at the beginning of 2020 and we are now almost at the end of 2022, almost three years after we received that commitment from the Government, and it has not been delivered.

I welcome the publication of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. I believe that that Bill takes us in strides towards achieving the objective of restoring Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market, but it has not been delivered. The Bill is now sitting in the House of Lords, and we do not have a date for when Report will occur in the other place. We do not know what the timetable is for the Bill eventually gaining Royal Assent. It is and remains an outstanding commitment by the UK Government that has not been delivered, and that was the basis on which my party signed up to New Decade, New Approach.

Notwithstanding that, all the other main commitments are being delivered, including recently the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Bill, which was a key commitment made by the UK Government—and, I accept, others—in that agreement. That has been delivered,

notably before the proposed date of the Assembly election. The Secretary of State has now quite rightly extended that date, because an election at this stage will not solve the problem.

That is what we are looking for: a solution. That is what we need. I say—again, respectfully—to the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that it would be good to hear him talk about solutions, rather than focusing on punishing people who have a real problem with the protocol and who have a mandate from the people who voted for them to take the stand that they are now taking.

Jim Shannon: On that point, that mandate was created in May of this year—a very clear mandate for the DUP to be the largest Unionist party. Since then, the opinion polls in Northern Ireland have shown a greater mandate for our party, because more and more people of the Unionist tradition and across Northern Ireland see the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill as the solution that will sort this matter out. If that does not happen, everyone in this House has to be aware that opinions are hardening, especially on the Unionist side, and they cannot be ignored.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.

I agree entirely with the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon: although the Government have not yet been able to deliver on their commitment to restore Northern Ireland's place within the UK internal market, the biggest culprit in all of this is the European Union. The European Union was formed and founded on the basis that developing consensus in Europe was preferable in order to avoid conflict—that was its original concept. Two terrible world wars had absolutely destroyed Europe, with millions of lives lost, and there was a genuine desire on the part of many European leaders to develop a basis for working and co-existing together through consensus to avoid conflict.

The principle of consensus is central to this discussion. Since 1972 and the collapse of the then Northern Ireland Government, every single Government in this House have made clear that power can only be devolved to institutions in Northern Ireland on the basis of power sharing—a cross-community consensus. I was a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly during the mandate from 1982 to 1986, and the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) will recall that the SDLP refused to take their seats in that Assembly. They did so on the basis that they would not enter any devolved legislature in Northern Ireland unless an agreement had been established on the basis of power sharing. That has been the case ever since: it is accepted that in a divided society such as Northern Ireland, only a cross-community consensus offers the basis for stable government. After the Good Friday or Belfast agreement, we worked hard from 1998 until 2007 to create the conditions in which that stable, cross-community, consensus-style government could be delivered, and it was created. For 10 years, from 2007 to 2017, we had a stable devolved Government in Northern Ireland, which then collapsed in 2017 when Sinn Féin withdrew.

It concerns me when people talk about the need to normalise politics in Northern Ireland—what does that mean? Does it mean majority rule? Does it mean excluding one section of the community? That fundamentally will

not work, and I say that as a Unionist, part of a tradition that held the majority in Northern Ireland for very many years. Now, as the hon. Member for North Dorset has reminded us, we have three groupings. There is no majority in Northern Ireland, in the sense that although support for the Union remains the position of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, the parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly that they vote for belong to three different political groupings: Unionist, nationalist, and other. However, the idea that an Executive can be created that excludes the largest grouping—the Unionists—simply does not wash.

If we are going to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Belfast agreement, we have to accept and recognise that the principle of consensus is the way forward. As the Secretary of State acknowledged, that consensus on the protocol does not exist. On Thursday, I think, the Supreme Court will rule on the case that has been brought in relation to the Northern Ireland protocol. However, the High Court and the Court of Appeal in Northern Ireland have already ruled that the protocol supersedes article 6 of the Act of Union.

Article 6 gives the people of Northern Ireland the right to trade freely with the rest of this United Kingdom. It is the embodiment of the economic Union—this is not just a political Union, but an economic Union—and article 6 says to the citizens of Northern Ireland that they have the right to trade without barriers with the rest of the United Kingdom. As the High Court and the Court of Appeal have confirmed, the protocol creates barriers to trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. It subjugates the Act of Union. For us as Unionists, that represents a fundamental change in our constitutional status as part of the United Kingdom, yet we are expected to suck it up and operate political institutions that implement that change—that impose barriers to trade in our country. We are simply meant to accept that that is the way it is, but I am sorry, that is not the way it is. My party will not be in a position where it implements measures that harm our place in the United Kingdom and create barriers to trade with the rest of our country. We will not do that, which is why the protocol needs to be resolved. It affects trade.

I understand that His Majesty's Revenue and Customs is proposing a pilot scheme, to be introduced in conjunction with Fujitsu, that would seek to digitise arrangements for checking the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In other words, it would digitise the Irish sea border. Let me absolutely clear: the digitisation of the Irish sea border does not remove it. Tinkering around the edges of the protocol will not resolve the problems that it creates. The EU needs to understand that.

Last week, the Prime Minister spoke with great clarity when he was challenged on a story that appeared in *The Sunday Times* stating that the UK Government were prepared to consider the Swiss model as a way forward for our trading relationship with the EU. The Prime Minister said that the UK will not be aligning with EU laws. When we met him that evening, I reminded him that not only is Northern Ireland aligned with EU laws, but we are subject to them. Our ability to trade with the rest of our country is subject to legislation over which we have no control and on which we have no say. More than 300 areas of law govern the way we trade with the rest of the United Kingdom and we have no say on them.

Simon Hoare: The right hon. Member referred to digitalisation and Fujitsu. I can recall, as I am sure he can, that many on the DUP Bench kept referring during the passage of various bits of legislation to the evolving nature of IT and digital as a way of providing that light, invisible touch to deliver something. The IT companies have caught up and are providing those solutions, or are certainly evolving them with HMRC, so I do not understand why a digital solution suddenly has to be taken off the table as unacceptable.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I am happy to offer clarity to the Chairman of the Select Committee. If the digitisation is used to check the movement of goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and into the European Union, then yes, anything that makes that a smooth operation and provides the EU with the data it needs to satisfy itself that the integrity of the single market is being protected is fine. But why do my constituents need digitisation for the movement of goods that they purchase at a Sainsbury's supermarket at Sprucefield in my constituency? Sainsbury's does not have any supermarkets in the Republic of Ireland; there is therefore no risk of those goods travelling into the Republic of Ireland. Why do we need digital technology to monitor the movement of goods from the Sainsbury's depot in London to the Sainsbury's store at Sprucefield?

Simon Hoare: I think we all take the point about Sainsbury's, but may I respectfully say to the right hon. Gentleman that what he says sounds very much like a moving of the goalposts? When he and his party colleagues were advocating invisible, light digital solutions, I paid very keen attention. In all those debates and Select Committee sessions, his party colleagues' voices were heard, so we all knew the DUP's position, but I did not hear that distinction being made; it was about a digital solution for everything. It suggests to me that with a digital solution having been on the cusp of delivery, it is now not quite good enough and the goalposts are being moved still further.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I assure the hon. Member that our position has been absolutely consistent. We have said from day one—and this is why we voted against the protocol at the outset—that we do not believe that there should be regulatory barriers on the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland when they are remaining within the UK internal market.

I say to the Chairman of the Select Committee that the New Decade, New Approach agreement is very specific. It talks about restoring Northern Ireland's place within the UK internal market. What does that mean? It means that there should not be regulatory barriers to trade on the movement of goods that travel between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and remain within the United Kingdom. The Democratic Unionist party has never, at any stage, advocated that there should be an Irish sea border on the movement of goods that remain within the UK internal market. That has never been our position.

I simply say to the hon. Member that, yes, I am all for using technology. I have consistently argued that technology can help us where goods are moving through Northern Ireland and into the Republic of Ireland, because that, in essence, is the problem—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Interesting and important as this is, let us have a look at the scope of the Bill. Perhaps we can now return to the Bill before the House.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Mr Deputy Speaker, the scope of the Bill is about the government of Northern Ireland. If the government of Northern Ireland cannot function because of the protocol, we need to identify the problems that the protocol is creating.

I say to the Secretary of State and the Government that I think the United Kingdom has been accommodating in its negotiating objectives, as have we. The UK Government and Unionists both accepted from the outset of the debate that there could not be a hard border on the island of Ireland. Let us really think about that for a moment. The United Kingdom accepted, and we accepted, that using the place where customs checks normally take place, which is on the international frontier, would be disruptive to the political process and to the co-operation required to operate the political institutions in Northern Ireland—and what did the European Union do? It pocketed that accommodation and drove for an Irish sea border that it knew full well would have the effect on the Unionist community that a hard border would have on the nationalist community. I say it again: I agree with the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon that the European Union has a responsibility to put right what was done wrong in relation to the protocol.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman and I are both members of the EU-UK Parliamentary Assembly, which met recently to highlight our current problems. He and I may disagree on this, but it was the then British Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who actually proposed the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill as a solution to the problem that the Government had got themselves into, and I think we should be laying the blame squarely there.

The issue, as was said in the Parliamentary Assembly and as we all know, is problematic now, but the real problem for future trust is the future relationship. We have still not heard from the UK Government—from one voice in the Conservative party—what sort of realignments, changes and newfound freedoms they want, and that is going to create more problems on the island of Ireland, for all communities. It would be helpful if we could hear from the Government how they see the future relationship operating once we get through the current one. We are not that far apart at the moment, but the fear is that we will be very far apart in the not so distant future.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: The hon. Lady has made an important point. Let me say at this stage that I applaud the Government for introducing the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, because somebody had to do something. Somebody had to make the first move, and the Bill has at least brought the European Union to the point at which they are back at the negotiating table, and perhaps adopting a more realistic approach. However, we have yet to see that manifest itself in the form of agreement, and we need to see progress being made.

Why is progress important? Progress is important because coming down the track is a major piece of legislation which will, in my opinion, greatly exacerbate the current difficulty: the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. Why will that exacerbate the problem? Because Northern Ireland will be excluded from large swathes of the Bill, as it is not possible to remove EU regulations in Northern Ireland that are linked to the protocol, the changes that will made to law in Great Britain will leave Northern Ireland further behind in terms of regulatory alignment within the UK internal market. This will greatly enhance the divide between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. It will lead to regulatory divergence. Therefore time is of the essence, but time is also of the essence because the EU is coming forward with new regulations every week, and those regulations apply to Northern Ireland.

Let me give an important example. The EU is proposing a new regulation on human organs and tissues, which will apply to Northern Ireland but not to Great Britain. What does that mean? It means that unless Great Britain adopts the changes that will be brought about by this new regulation, when Northern Ireland patients are hoping for organ transplants or blood transfusions, special blood products or organs will have to be brought from Great Britain. That presents us with a major problem. Because there will no longer be regulatory alignment between the rules on organ transplants in Great Britain and those in Northern Ireland, there will no longer be regulatory alignment in respect of the use of blood products coming from Great Britain for use in the health service in Northern Ireland. This regulation is coming forward: it has already been the subject of scrutiny by the European Scrutiny Committee in this House.

That is just one small example of how further EU regulation will cause Northern Ireland to diverge further from Great Britain, and will present real and practical issues that are about not just trade, but the health and wellbeing of every single citizen in Northern Ireland.

Julian Smith: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I will allow this intervention, but I think we have gone way beyond the Bill that is before us. There will be plenty of other opportunities to discuss the issues that you are raising today, Sir Jeffrey. I know that this is vitally important, but there will be many more such opportunities.

Julian Smith: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the EU, on the issue of medicines, did show flexibility this year, and did start to move into the area that we were discussing earlier—the area of compromise and less hard facts? We need more of that in other areas. We should encourage the EU to use the principle that it applied to medicines in these other sectors, and to start to move in that direction.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the former Secretary of State for making that point, and I agree with him. I think that the point he made in his speech—which I echo—is that what we need now, more than anything, is for the European Union to recognise that consensus in Northern Ireland is essential to restoring the political institutions.

In conclusion, the European Union has stated that the primary reason for the protocol is to protect the integrity of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and the political institutions created by that agreement. That is what the European Union has said countless times, yet the reality is that the protocol is harming the agreement. It is harming the consensus that is necessary—nay, essential—to operate the political institutions created under the agreement. We are approaching the 25th anniversary, and a lot has been said about that in the House this afternoon. For the record, we want to see the political institutions restored well before the 25th anniversary. We want to be able to join with all our citizens in Northern Ireland to celebrate 25 years of a relative degree of peace.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way one last time. I just want to remind him of when he and I sat on the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly just a few weeks ago in Committee Room 14 and talked to the EU about moving forward. He made an impassioned plea, as did I, for the EU to take account of the needs of all the communities in Northern Ireland, and I certainly felt that that was listened to and respected. I feel optimistic about this, and I wonder if he shares that view.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I would like to be optimistic about the European Union changing its negotiating stance, but we have not seen it yet. We are looking for the evidence of it; we want to see it. That is now essential to break the logjam and open up the opportunity for the UK Government and the European Union to reach an agreement on this most pressing of issues. Therefore, we want to see this legislation have an endpoint. We want to see the political institutions restored in Northern Ireland, but let me be absolutely clear: that requires a solution on the protocol and it requires the European Union to accept that the protocol is not working. It is harming the consensus in Northern Ireland and it needs to be replaced by arrangements that respect the integrity of the UK and Northern Ireland's place within it.

4.11 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Although I am an English MP, I have a huge affection for the people of Northern Ireland. What happens there matters a lot to me because of the three years I spent soldiering in the place. Indeed, I am revisiting the Province this weekend, as Northern Ireland Members know, for the rather sad commemoration of the Ballykelly bombing, which occurred 40 years ago and for which I was the incident commander. Thankfully the bad old days of the past have gone now, and they must never return.

May I at this point commend to the House the continuing dedication, hard work and often gallantry of the Police Service of Northern Ireland? In the past I worked closely with its predecessor, the Royal Ulster Constabulary—especially the special branch—and I have nothing but the greatest of respect and admiration for the men and women who make up its ranks.

It is unfortunate that we have to have this Bill to try to get an Executive formed in Northern Ireland, but that is where we are. It is also essential that we get through this deadlock of democracy in Ulster. Everyone

agrees on that, and the stumbling block to achieving that progress is the protocol. It is certainly stumped at the moment, and people and businesses are really hurting in Northern Ireland. The protocol directly costs people in Northern Ireland. It is totally unfair that my constituents in Beckenham do not have to pay as much money in the supermarket as people in Northern Ireland do because of the protocol.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): Will the right hon. Gentleman outline where he saw these price differentials? Through my work, I spend half the week in London and half the week in Belfast, and I am not seeing it. I do not think the evidence provided by the retailers is bearing out that assertion. Can he give evidence of the price distortions he says the protocol is causing?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I make the same plea: there are plenty of opportunities to talk about these other issues. We have the Bill in front of us, and I think it would be more fruitful if we directed our comments towards that.

Bob Stewart: I will not respond to the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna). I have not been to Northern Ireland recently, but I will be there at the weekend and I will buy something in the supermarket. I have been reprimanded by Mr Deputy Speaker, and I always take a reprimand from the Chair with seriousness.

Northern Ireland must develop and regain its devolved institutions and local decision making, and I know my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—he is sitting on the Front Bench and paying great attention to everything I say, as he always does—is bending over backwards to try to sort out this problem. There is no doubt about that.

Nobody benefits from the current situation, and I welcome the Secretary of State's continuing discussion and co-operation with the Irish Government on matters of mutual concern. However, I am somewhat worried by some suggestions that, if an Executive cannot be formed, there could be some form of joint authority over the island of Ireland. That must not even be considered. It is utterly unacceptable and would be a direct attack on the sovereignty of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We cannot have that.

Obviously, we all hope that an agreement on changes to the protocol can be agreed in time for the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. To be honest, I have mixed feelings about docking the pay of MLAs because they are apparently not fulfilling all their duties of representation. I accept that, in principle, they might not be doing all their job, but every one of them—DUP included—wants to go back to work. However, I will support the Secretary of State if he decides to take that form of action.

I presume that, unless an Executive is formed by 19 January, new elections in the Province will be inevitable. To stop this, we need the problems of the protocol to be sorted by then. We really have to fix it, because my friends in Northern Ireland do not deserve to go through all this.

Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I sit down, having been reprimanded.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I know I will not need to reprimand Gregory Campbell, because he will focus on the legislation.

4.18 pm

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): It is a privilege to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am delighted to follow my esteemed colleague and friend, the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart).

In speaking to the Bill, I will limit my remarks to a small number of areas. The first is the matter of MLAs' pay, which has been alluded to not only in the Chamber but more widely as a significant contributor to the moving of the Bill. The Secretary of State helpfully introduced the Bill last week. I shall quote from what he told us:

"It is also unacceptable that Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) should continue to receive full remuneration from the public purse when they are not fulfilling their Assembly duties".

That is the justification for that portion of the Bill.

I presume that if I were to ask the Secretary of State—which I may well—whether his Government are acting with a very even hand in relation to all aspects in Northern Ireland, and whether he wants to ensure that what he applies to one community is applied equally to the other, I would not see him in any way diverting from that. Indeed, I can almost see him nodding in acclamation: that the Government want to treat everyone equally, and that that has been the sum and substance of what he and previous Secretaries of State have said on previous occasions.

If this Government are treating everyone equally in respect of the potential to reduce MLAs' salaries—on the basis of what the Secretary of State has said in introducing the Bill about it being unacceptable that they should continue to receive full remuneration from the public purse when they are not fulfilling their duties—I trust that he has had some level of conversation with the Leader of the House on the almost reprehensible nature of the fact that there are MPs who do not fulfil their duties in this House. Having done some research and received answers to parliamentary questions I have tabled about representation moneys, I know that they receive funding of not thousands, not tens of thousands, not even hundreds of thousands, but millions of pounds. In the past 10 years, those who do not fulfil their duties as Members of Parliament in this Parliament have received £10 million—ten million pounds—so I trust that, in conjunction with this Bill, the Northern Ireland Office has had conversations with the Leader of the House about wanting to treat everyone equally. I am sure that those conversations have taken place and that they have been along the lines of, "We're going to introduce this Bill to ensure that MLAs don't get the full remuneration from the public purse, but you're going to have to introduce something similar in this House, so that Sinn Féin MPs or anyone else who doesn't fulfil their duties also don't receive remuneration from the public purse."

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am curious as to whether the hon. Gentleman knows that Sinn Féin Members do not receive their parliamentary salaries.

Mr Campbell: I am well aware of that. The remuneration I am talking about does not include salaries, but it does include all other expenses, including representation moneys, and the total amount in the last 10 years was in excess of £10 million—for not performing their public duties. That is not the responsibility of the Secretary of State, but it is the responsibility of the Leader of the House.

Claire Hanna: Is the hon. Member's point that he would like the salaries of his party colleagues' staff stopped as well? That seems to be the logical extension of what he is saying. I think we are all agreed that abstentionists should not receive a salary, but if he is saying that the issue is that there are office costs and other remuneration, is he proposing that they are taken away from MLAs?

Mr Campbell: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. I think she knows full well that that is not what I am suggesting. I was quoting the exact reference from the Secretary of State in introducing the Bill: "full remuneration from the public purse". That should apply equally to Sinn Féin's allowances and representation money. Action should be taken on that. It has been requested and sought for many years. I will leave it there and hope that the Leader of the House will introduce such a change. It would be entirely unacceptable if she were not to do so.

We have discussed this Bill on many occasions and also the need to get back into Stormont, which all of us share. My party is a devolutionist party. I have served for many years in various capacities under the devolutionary settlement of Stormont, so I want to see Members back doing their jobs. However, it is a mistake to keep referring to a variety of problems and say that they could be solved if Ministers were back at their desks. Ministers were at their desks when hospital waiting times got worse. The A6 dual carriageway in my constituency is almost finished, but it has been almost finished for a year, and that has been mostly under devolution. Unfortunately, the road remains unfinished. I hope that no one will suggest that we should get back into devolved Government so that the roads can be finished. I hope that no one will suggest that we should get back into Government because the waiting times in various hospitals are getting worse. They were getting worse under devolution. Yes, I want to see devolution work, but let us not create straw men for others to knock down.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend also accept that the £670 million hole in the budget occurred when the Executive were sitting and that, this time last year, the Sinn Féin Minister could not get agreement from any party—not one party—in the Assembly to his budget?

Mr Campbell: Not only is my right hon. Friend right, but the Secretary of State alluded to that. He was extremely critical of the overspend that the devolved Government had achieved. I just think that we should be more circumspect when we talk about getting back into devolved Government. We come back to the point that my good friend the right hon. Member for Beckenham made just before I rose to speak, which was that there is one issue that prevents devolved Government from returning—with all their faults, which must be remedied—and that is the protocol.

Again, I hope that the Secretary of State, the Minister of State or anyone else will not use the other straw man, which is preventing the return of a hard border, because everyone knows that that will not happen. It was never going to happen. It was raised to pressure our Government; that is the reason that it was raised. That is why Leo Varadkar, when he was Taoiseach, threw down the front page of *The Irish Times*, which showed a border post ablaze in the 1970s, and said to Messrs Macron and Merkel that we cannot go back to that. Our Government took fright and would have agreed to anything rather than this false assertion that violence would return.

A hard border is not on the equation. It will not be implemented. Everyone accepts that that is the case. The Government have to deal with the one thing that prevents us from getting devolved Government back up and running—the one thing that has introduced the Bill that we are discussing today—and that is the protocol. Sort out the protocol and we will get back into government.

4.27 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I am pleased to be called to speak in the debate, but I am disappointed that it is on another Bill that is a manifestation of political failure. It is the latest in the diet of political failure that the people in Northern Ireland have been fed, and attention is rightly on the current abeyance of the institutions. However, the truth is that the stewardship of the Good Friday institutions has been abused for the past decade by partisan positioning. The people who pay the price, time and again, are those who are waiting for health treatment for want of reform of health and for want of workforce planning, the children who are sitting in an inadequate school estate because of delayed development decisions, and the people sitting in the cold and getting sick because of it, waiting for cost of living support payments that reached other regions many months ago.

We should be in absolutely no doubt that, despite the nihilist anti-devolution rhetoric that we have just heard, the responsibility to govern and the refusal of it does have a measurable impact on public services. Nobody is saying that the parties in charge over the past decade have done a particularly good job of running those services, but it is absolutely the case that having no Ministers degrades decision making. We should be in no doubt, either, that the normalisation of crisis politics is wearing people in Northern Ireland down, entrenching division and making our society even sicker.

Anybody listening to the speeches from DUP Members will have had a mind-bending experience. I am going to stick to the scope of the Bill, but I want to clarify that nobody is dismissing the hurt that many ordinary Unionists feel about Brexit and the protocol; that is why many of us advocated exhaustively for better solutions, which were dismissed, while DUP Members were gleefully all about their selfies with the European Research Group. However, we are being honest with people about the fact that the Northern Ireland Assembly does not have a role in that negotiation.

In the debate about restoring the institutions, people are frustrated at the idea that the DUP is the victim in all this, when the people I, my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) and many others represent

are the people who have been Brexited against our will. Are we tearing everything down? Are we punishing the health service? No—we are turning up for work every day to try to find solutions.

We have heard it demonstrated today that no solutions are going to be acceptable. Perhaps I imagined the years of debate about blockchain and all the other technical solutions to Brexit that were put forward, including by the DUP, but we know there is no bottom line that is going to be met. Instead, we have the promulgation of a “them’uns did it” narrative that the protocol is somehow a creation of Irish people, nationalists and foreigners in the EU, rather than a proposal by the UK Government to get themselves off the hook of the original Brexit trilemma and the fact that we cannot reconcile a hard Brexit with the geography we have. In all the debate I have heard over the last six years, including today, I have yet to hear a solution to that.

The Good Friday agreement is about solutions. That agreement and the institutions it created were supposed to give life to the aspirations of everybody in Northern Ireland, regardless of their community background or their view on the constitutional issue. Instead of people being able to see opportunity in politics and opportunity in public service, they just see dysfunction, an Assembly not sitting and—with respect—a UK Government who are not interested.

People in Northern Ireland know that our future is not fixed. They know the experience we are having right now does not have to be the experience that we have forever, and people are beginning to look clearly at their options. They see the Stormont dysfunction and the merry-go-round here, and they can see a very clear contrast with the Government in the rest of the island of Ireland, who are stable and delivering a budgetary surplus that can mean investment in public services.

The Social Democratic and Labour party has always been clear about our desire to create a new Ireland on the basis of consent, and we have rejected the scorched-earth approach of others that would see a new Ireland rooted through dislocation and disarray, but the hard truth is that those creating chaos in our institutions are absolutely scorching the earth. They are driving more people every day to think about a new paradigm in which they can enjoy good governance, run their businesses and raise their families.

Our primary political objective will always be meeting the needs of people in the here and now. That is why we support the provisions in this Bill—reluctantly, because we know it is required to keep the show on the road, and it does just that and no more.

We acknowledge the need to postpone an election. Elections are supposed to put power in the hands of the people, but the reality is that an election, had it been run next month, or in March or May, if the veto was not removed and the blockage was not removed, would do no such thing. It would not put the people in the driving seat and it would further disrespect the mandate that those people expressed six months ago.

We acknowledge the need to give clarity about interim political decisions, but—I appreciate that the Secretary of State understands this—it is no substitute for democratically accountable Ministers. We are not over the last governance black hole that caused much of the degradation in public services that we are currently experiencing.

[Claire Hanna]

However, the SDLP is equally clear that DUP intransigence cannot be rewarded by either direct rule or indirect rule. In the absence of an executive, even with the mitigations in this Bill, the Conservative party would be in the driving seat on major decisions. That does not reflect the will of the people as expressed either this past May or in 1998 with the Good Friday agreement. That agreement was about creating devolved institutions that reflect the views of people who are Unionist, people who are nationalist and people who are neither.

Plan A for the SDLP is a devolved Executive as chosen by the people in May. But we have tabled new proposals that would give a formal consultative role to the Irish Government and a role to the First Ministers-designate, who should be chosen from the two largest traditions—[*Interruption.*] People can call that what they will, but we are very clear that if strands 1 and 2 are deliberately paralysed, strand 3 and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference should be consciously operated. Parties should know that that will be the recourse and the consequence of their choice to hold strands 1 and 2 of the Good Friday agreement to ransom. The institutions of government rely on Unionists, nationalists and others working together in our substantial common interest, and that principle should be hardwired into any governance decisions—even those that are operating only temporarily.

We acknowledge the injustice of MLAs who are not fully at work continuing to receive a full and decent salary at a time when so many are struggling, and when those with trade unions are losing pay because they are striking to improve terms and conditions and the public services that they deliver. We regret the collective punishment and untargeted scope of this approach.

As the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) outlined, there are many decent and talented people in all the parties, including the many who have stepped forward for election for the first time this year. I spend a lot of time trying to persuade people of all political backgrounds to go into politics. It is difficult enough to attract talent—many of us now on these Benches had our pay cut last time the Assembly was in abeyance—but it is harder when you say, “These are the terms and conditions. This is the abuse you’ll get on social media. These are the hours you’ll keep. And by the way, for a few months every year, you’ll struggle to pay your mortgage and childcare bills because of the intransigence of others.” We have tabled an amendment that would direct that tactic at those who are creating the problem and who refuse to allow even the nomination of a Speaker.

We have also proposed by amendment a means of electing First Ministers and a Speaker. That would move us away from the culture of veto and the focus on binary designation, neither of which have, in recent years, proven healthy for discourse or decision making, unfortunately. That reflects our desire to evolve and reform the institutions without jeopardising the fundamental principles of power sharing and mutual respect. There is absolutely no attempt by the SDLP to move away from those principles, which have been at the core of our party and everything we do for the last five decades and more. But if that is only ever expressed

by veto and by blocking the people of Northern Ireland from having a decent life—if that is the only tactic that people appear to be prepared to use—we will absolutely look for solutions.

If the DUP continues to be abstentionist in the new year, post any EU-UK deal, and given that an Assembly election while those are still the conditions will not put power in the hands of people, we will explore reform with more urgency—

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: If you have any seats.

Mr Gregory Campbell: Yes—if you have any left.

Claire Hanna: You are doing a great job yourself.

We began that work by tabling amendments to the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act 2022 to introduce an alternative election of First Ministers—[*Interruption.*] We do that work despite the chuntering from a sedentary position of people who just say no, who just nag from the sidelines, who are blocking good governance, and who, day by day, move more people towards considering and exploring a new Ireland—[*Interruption.*] Those on the DUP Bench below me have no interest in making Northern Ireland work, have derided and mocked people like me for wanting to do so, and have shown that they are unwilling or unable to do that. Those who vote for that party to protect the Union should really take a strong look at the strategic direction that is being provided and the value that they are being given for their vote.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am going to be less generous than I was earlier. As far as the protocol is concerned, the points have been well heard. Members’ remarks are going much wider than what is in the legislation before us. Can we have a bit of focus, please? There is plenty of meat here.

Claire Hanna: I appreciate that, Mr Deputy Speaker, and my focus is exclusively on the restoration of the Executive and restoring government to the people of Northern Ireland. I am outlining the efforts that we made last year with the MEPOC Act to introduce or reintroduce mechanisms that would move us away from veto and confrontation, which have become the political culture.

We sought to equalise the titles of First Minister to clarify the joint nature of that office and to end campaigning that is only ever built on dominating other communities. We also attempted to introduce a change that would allow for the election of First Ministers based on the votes of two thirds of Assembly Members, including broad-based, not majority rule. It is worth saying that had that been voted for last July and extended to the election of the Speaker, we would be back in the Assembly now.

Solutions do exist, and we will engage with any solutions that are serious about ending the deadlock while retaining the core principles that we adhere to of common endeavour and mutual respect. The way that things are being operated at the moment and the tactics of the DUP are destroying trust in devolution, and the DUP is profiting from prioritising victory and veto in a system designed for partnership. As John Hume said many times, “If you ask for all or nothing, you will get

nothing.” [Interruption.] DUP Members may think they are being smart by chatting over me, as they do. They reject anybody whose views are not identical to their own, and they will see in the long term where they get. As long as this fiasco continues, the Social Democratic and Labour party will continue to speak up for people who are just trying to get through their days, live their lives, raise their families and run their businesses. We will support the necessary provisions in the Bill that help them do that.

4.41 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I take no pleasure in seeing this legislation before the House today, as it sadly represents failure between the Government and the EU to protect the cornerstone of the political institutions in Northern Ireland and the fundamental principle of cross-community consent. It represents a failure to the Unionist people of Northern Ireland and businesses in Northern Ireland, and it continues to put at risk the great Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Today, I want to make it as clear as I can that Unionism does not consent to the protocol or the institutions operating in a business-as-usual manner. Today, Unionism feels aggrieved by the sheer disregard for its concerns. Never before have I experienced such a groundswell of support for our position to hold the line, not give in and take a stand—all phrases we have heard so often from the people we represent. Let us not forget the words of the very author of the Belfast agreement, the late David Trimble, who said:

“Make no mistake about it, the protocol does not safeguard the Good Friday Agreement. It demolishes its central premise by removing the assurance that democratic consent is needed to make any change to the status of Northern Ireland.”

The protocol poses an existential threat to the Belfast agreement and the St Andrews agreement. Despite the time and space afforded by my party leader for the Government and EU to face up to the stark reality and find a new way forward, nothing was done. We had months of minimal action and tinkering around in the hope that the DUP would quietly let it slide. Well, the DUP can be accused of many things, but not of backing down and letting things slide. When we see the economic and constitutional damage the protocol is having on the people of Northern Ireland, we will not let it slide and we will continue to take our stand for the people who are impacted.

Our commitment to devolution throughout that window of opportunity was clear. While we urged people to face up to the political reality, others looked away.

Ian Paisley: Does my hon. Friend think it important that those who want full implementation of the protocol take cognisance of a recent report from this House and the House of Lords, which claims that that would halt east-west trade within 48 hours? Is it not the case that the reason why Unionists are staying out is that this protocol damages everybody’s livelihoods in Northern Ireland?

Carla Lockhart: Absolutely. My hon. Friend’s point is so well made. The takeaway from that is that it is the industry leads who are saying that the protocol will grind east-west trade to a halt within 48 hours, and that is a stark reality.

Last week I hosted the Minister of State on a visit to my constituency, and I thank him for that visit. He met Wilson’s Country potatoes. Wilson’s is a leading potato brand, but it faces ongoing difficulty arising from the protocol, because Scottish seed potatoes, needed to grow crops of certain varieties that the market demands, are banned from entering Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I gently ask the hon. Lady to return to the legislation that we are considering. We understand why we are here discussing it, and that has been dealt with very well by Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, but I do not think that we need every Member to stand up and cover exactly the same area. The protocol will be debated again in the Chamber, I am absolutely certain, but let us not have lengthy speeches on it today.

Carla Lockhart: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for bringing us back to the Bill. The fact remains that we would not need it if the protocol was resolved.

Moving on to MLAs’ pay, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who chairs the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, seems determined to punish MLAs for his party’s failures. His party gave us the protocol, and in doing so undermined the fundamental building blocks of the institutions and the Union which they claimed to cherish. His party failed to act when the DUP offered time and space to find a replacement and avoid the position in which we find ourselves. Does he accept any responsibility?

Let me be absolutely clear: DUP MLAs will embrace any pay cut that the hon. Member for North Dorset, or anyone else for that matter, imposes on them, whenever it comes. That will not change their stance or the stance of the DUP. As someone who was in the Assembly when pay was cut last time, I can assure the House that we are in politics because of our conviction, not for the pay that we receive.

Our refusal to enter the institutions has the support of our community, which will allow us to return to them only on the basis of respect for our constitutional position and the restoration of the integrity of the UK. The Minister of State knows that, because he heard the message loud and clear in Hillhall when he visited my constituency and the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) last week.

Today, Members are exercised about the pace and severity of a pay cut. They ought to be exercised about the reality that should a new way forward not emerge soon, there will be no MLAs, no Ministers, no Stormont and no devolution. Furthermore, should those who now seek to exclude Unionism from the institutions under the guise of reform continue to undermine the agreements they claim to cherish, restoring those institutions will be increasingly difficult. It is telling that the same voices fell silent for years when Sinn Féin refused to enter the institutions. Indeed, rather than demand their exclusion, Alliance and Social Democratic and Labour party representatives stood at protests shoulder to shoulder with those blocking government. The double standards, and the desire to exclude Unionism from the institutions, are not lost on my community.

Claire Hanna: Does the Member acknowledge that only three or four days ago I stood shoulder to shoulder, so to speak, with a member of her party when addressing

[Claire Hanna]

provision by the education authority? Does she acknowledge that working with members of other parties on different issues is not the same as endorsing their entire policy platform? She made an accusation again about my party withholding government. Is she going to keep repeating that falsehood, or does she acknowledge that cross-party working does not mean that we buy into the entire manifestoes and approaches of other parties?

Carla Lockhart: We will have an opportunity to read *Hansard* and the Member's contribution today, so we will be able to see that there is a clear ignoring of Unionist views and a clear sidelining of Unionism and the many people on whom the protocol continues to impact.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Get back to the Bill please.

Carla Lockhart: The onus is on the Government and the EU to bring about the conditions whereby power sharing can be restored. Should a new agreement be found that meets the seven tests that my party has outlined, we will not be found wanting in returning to office. The ball is in the court of the Secretary of State.

4.49 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I cannot say that I welcome the legislation, but I recognise that it is sadly necessary. It is shameful and disgraceful that the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive are currently not in place. We continue to maintain that they should be established forthwith.

We are facing twin governance and financial crises in Northern Ireland, and huge damage has been done to our economy and public services through delayed or missed decision making. That comes at a time when there is immense pressure on Northern Ireland's public finances. I have made the point that mistakes were made in the past and the roof was not mended when the sun was shining and we had better opportunities, so difficult decisions are now required. Indeed, our health service in particular is going through tremendous difficulties. Necessary reforms to our public sector are being delayed, which means that the budget crisis gets ever tighter as we try to balance the books on an ever-declining, burning platform.

I will touch on the key areas of the Bill, mindful of your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker. First, I will touch on the revised deadline for the formation of an Executive and, by implication, the resumption of the duty on the Secretary of State to call an election within 12 weeks if those deadlines are not met. The Secretary of State took the right decision to defer an election after 28 October and to seek further flexibility. In the current climate, an election would have been counterproductive and would have made the task of restoration and the wider negotiations with the European Union more difficult.

My difficulty lies with the revised dates. I appreciate that the Government have to try to move the process along and put in place some kind of deadline to get people over the line, but there is a disconnect between the timescale that the Northern Ireland Office is setting out and the reality of the pace of negotiations with the European Union. Evidently, we have seen a change in

the mood music over the past few weeks, which is extremely welcome, but we have not yet seen real progress in the substance of those negotiations. I earnestly wish that we reach a conclusion as quickly as possible, which will require flexibility from the UK and, may I say, the European Union. The UK Government need to take a view on exactly where they will land on these issues; I will refrain from going into the detail of those discussions, given the nature of the Bill.

The shadow Secretary of State has already alluded to the fact that the first deadline in the legislation of 8 December is next Thursday, which may in practice be only a couple of days after the Bill gets Royal Assent. What seemed to be a reasonable deadline a few weeks ago is now, I suspect, fairly meaningless, so we are focused on the second deadline of 19 January, which I note is essentially only seven weeks away. In theory, that is ample time for the negotiations with the European Union to reach a conclusion, but based on the rate of progress that we have seen in recent weeks and months, we need to be realistic that that may not be the case.

We could therefore be in a situation where the Secretary of State has a restored duty to call an election after 19 January. At that stage, perhaps progress will have finally been made in the negotiations or we might be in or about to enter the metaphorical tunnel of those negotiations. In that context, I venture that the prospect or actuality of an Assembly election would be at best counterproductive and at worst extremely damaging. The talks could grind to a halt because of that potential election, or a certain political party or others could harden their red lines about those negotiations, which would make compromise, or the acceptance of a compromise deal, more difficult.

Obviously we need strong leadership from all quarters to ensure that we can get something workable over the line. I suggest to the Secretary of State that this Bill is too inflexibly framed. I appreciate the need to focus minds, but if after 19 January it is manifestly not in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland, the negotiations or the wider public interest to have an election, the only recourse available will be the Secretary of State's coming back to Parliament seeking a further Bill. I imagine it would go down like a lead balloon if we were in that situation. I urge the Secretary of State to take the time between now and consideration of this Bill in the other place to reflect on the way forward—to keep us focused on the job in hand but to give that bit of flexibility if it proves necessary.

Secondly, I want to talk about the guidance. I welcome the publication of the draft guidance today, but the Bill is at best a stopgap in terms of governance. We have a major hole in that regard. What we have before us is neither tenable nor sustainable beyond the shortest possible periods. There are many difficult, pressing, urgent decisions that need to be taken, and it is right that civil servants are reluctant to take significant decisions that are normally left to be taken at the political level. There are particular difficulties in taking budget decisions: it is one thing keeping a budget ticking over on a care and maintenance basis, but if the books need to be balanced in a tighter budget situation, any decision to cut something is inherently political and will be subject to some degree of challenge. The civil servants are placed in an unenviable situation, but a balance must be struck between recognising that reluctance while at least enabling critical things to be taken forward.

We must have some further discussion on the guidance. I understand it could be clarified in due course, but what type of consultations will happen over a short period of time to get the draft guidance turned into final guidance whenever this Bill receives Royal Assent? I also seek an assurance that the guidance will be flexible enough to enable—rather than direct—civil servants to implement any pay body recommendations, because that is clearly a pressing issue for many public sector workers in Northern Ireland, who perhaps at this stage have not received what has been made available in Great Britain, never mind the legitimate concerns around additional pay that many are making.

On MLA pay, I declare a previous interest in that I was an MLA whose pay was deducted under a previous Assembly. It was difficult, but it was the right thing to do, and I recognise that cutting MLA pay is the right thing to do today. I say slightly flippantly that it should be directed primarily at those who are blocking restoration of the Executive, but I appreciate that is difficult to do. I recognise the remarks from Members of other parties that this might not in itself force a change of minds, but as the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), recognised, there is major disquiet at MLAs receiving their full salary in the current environment, and that must be recognised inside this Parliament. Most MLAs recognise that; certainly my party colleagues do so. Notwithstanding the fact that they cannot perform their full job description as set out, they are working extensively every week to act on behalf of their constituents, to make representations and work with other groups in Northern Ireland. But they are also massively frustrated.

Finally, I want to talk about what will happen if this Bill fails, and indeed if there is no outcome from negotiations with the EU or we have an outcome that most common-sense people would accept but is none the less rejected by some Northern Ireland parties, and we therefore have continued blockage. As I have said, I do not believe the current stopgap approach to governance is sustainable. Decisions should be taken by locally elected people in Northern Ireland on behalf of their constituents. If we are in the situation of defaulting to direct rule, that is problematic in many respects. As there has been some talk of joint authority being an alternative, I want to take this opportunity just to make it very clear that for my party, joint authority is outside the context of the Good Friday agreement and outside the principle of consent. None the less, if we are to talk about direct rule, that would have to have an Irish dimension of some description, and that has been understood going back to the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985.

That is basically what we are looking into, but short of that, we should be looking at reform of the institutions. I am not going to go into the detail of that, except to reiterate my party's very strong commitment to allow those parties in Northern Ireland that wish to govern to do so. That is by far the next best alternative to the current arrangements. I would prefer that to be done on an inclusive basis, but the point is that some parties have the opportunity to take up places in government, and it is they who are self-excluding.

Sammy Wilson: When did the Alliance party have this Damascus road experience? For three years when Sinn Féin was holding up progress and holding up the

Assembly in Northern Ireland, I never heard once that the Alliance party believed that the Assembly and its structures should be changed to facilitate that.

Stephen Farry: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his intervention because it gives me the opportunity to reiterate that my party has consistently advocated reform of the Assembly structures. It has been in our party manifestos going back to 1999. In particular, in the period between 2017 and 2020, my party made numerous comments publicly on the need for reform. I will gladly forward copies of speeches made by my party leader to party conferences to the right hon. Member so that he can read them with a great deal of interest.

Colum Eastwood: Far be it from me to get involved in this conversation between the Alliance party and the DUP, but would the hon. Member like to tell us his understanding of what the DUP's position actually is on mandatory coalition, because as far as I am concerned, it seems to be a new convert to the principle?

Stephen Farry: We can look at this in two different ways—what happened before 1972, and what happened in the 1970s and 1980s through to what happened during the talks. I would stress that, if we read the DUP manifestos up to the point of its current walk-out, we can see that it was actually a fan of reform of the institutions and moving away from mandatory coalition. It was a principle for the DUP then, but that is no longer the case. Indeed, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) famously went on “Question Time” during the last impasse and lambasted the situation in which a party with about 25% of the vote was able to frustrate the institutions. I think I will leave it there.

5.2 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to make what I hope is, in comparison, a relatively brief speech, but I have some questions about how this Bill will work. I hope that will meet your requirements, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I think it is important that we ask these questions and that we centre in this debate the people of Northern Ireland. We have already talked a lot about the institutions, the challenges with the protocol and, indeed, Brexit, as well as about who needs to be flexible—this Government, the European Union—but I think it is absolutely key to talk about the public in Northern Ireland and how they are affected by this legislation. I say that as somebody who has now lobbied five separate Secretaries of State about Executive formation legislation.

Members who were here before 2019 will remember the last incarnation of this legislation, which led to the situation in which we finally had legal abortion in Northern Ireland. It is with the provisions of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 and how this Bill will affect that in mind that I want to ask these questions. As I said earlier, it has now been 1,134 days since we passed that legislation, and this House took a decision that we wanted to support access at local level that is safe and legal for women in Northern Ireland. We agreed subsequently, in the abortion regulations in 2020—it is 973 days since they were passed—that there should be a service on request up to 12 weeks and that

[Stella Creasy]

beyond that, up to 24 weeks, two medical professionals could certify that a woman should have an abortion if there was a greater risk of mental harm or physical harm if she did not, which is very similar to England and Wales.

I raised that because one thing to remember in all of these debates is that decriminalisation and legalisation do not mean deregulation. Indeed, the legislation that we have seen flowing from the 2019 Act absolutely sets out how access to abortion should be provided. The challenge for many of us, though, is that during all that time, that has not happened. Time and again, we have seen the 2 million women in Northern Ireland denied that right. Abortion might be legal, but it is not accessible. Indeed, in July this year we heard that a woman in Belfast who had suffered from pre-term premature rupture of membranes was told that she had to travel to Liverpool. We have seen many more not able to access pills.

The reason we have been given for that through the last three years is basically a stand-off between the Northern Ireland Health Department and the UK Government, with the Government upholding the human rights of women in Northern Ireland set out in the 2019 Act. In the last three years, women in Northern Ireland have directly suffered because the previous incarnation of the Bill had not been delivered. All of us in the House recognise that it is one thing to win an argument—it might be another thing to win an amendment—but delivery and implementation are where change happens.

Mr Steve Baker: The hon. Member has won the argument, and I can tell her that we are making enormous progress towards delivering abortion. The Government can confirm that services will be commissioned in Northern Ireland before the Bill passes through the other place.

Stella Creasy: I thank the Minister for that confirmation. I hope he will join me in paying tribute to all those women in Northern Ireland who have continued to work on the issue, championing their sisters and neighbours—those who need these services—through the political dysfunction and patriarchal discrimination that has led to a situation where we might have decided that something was legal through a previous incarnation of the Bill, but it was not accessible.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con) *rose*—

Stella Creasy: I happily give way to one of the many former Ministers, in addition to Secretaries of State, who has worked with us on this issue.

Mr Walker: I join the hon. Member in paying tribute to those people who have campaigned on this issue. They have been right to raise the disparity of rights. If we believe in the United Kingdom, there ought to be that equality of rights. I am pleased to hear what my hon. Friend the Minister said, because it is frustrating that the House can pass laws that do not get enacted in such a way. It will be an important step for Parliament to take to ensure that that law is respected across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Stella Creasy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I know that he was frustrated by it. That is why I am speaking today. We have seen the frustration, and for three years women in Northern Ireland have

seen multiple letters traded between Departments but little change. It is worth reflecting that even during the pandemic, women from Northern Ireland were still travelling to England and Wales, with 161 doing so in 2021 compared with 371 in 2020.

It is welcome to hear what Ministers have to say. We helped to give those women a voice in 2019, and through the Bill we want to see those women given delivery in 2022. I have some specific questions that I hope the Minister will be able to address. The Government have powers in the Bill to direct commissioning. We recognise that public services need to continue. Those services include healthcare and—let us be clear—abortion is healthcare. Those who have sought to threaten that have not protected devolution; they have simply harmed women, and in particular women from refugee and minority community backgrounds who have been the least able to take advantage of an ability to travel in the United Kingdom.

Previous Ministers have told me that, even under those powers, one of the operational actions is for women to continue to travel. I hope the Minister will recognise that that is not a satisfactory response, particularly when dealing with incredibly tragic cases in which, frankly, travelling creates a health risk. Will he set out how that will be dealt with? I recognise that there is a challenge with staffing and that we are asking Ministers to move quickly, although some of us might reflect that, in three years, it is not unrealistic to have asked for priority to be given to training and recruitment, because the direction of travel that I was told was coming by previous Secretaries of State should have been translated across. Will he set out how the Government will ensure that the service will be properly staffed not just in one or two locations but across Northern Ireland? We know that there are travel difficulties within Northern Ireland, so it is not enough to say to women, “The service that you might need does exist, but it is in a particular location.” We absolutely want to see those services start, but ultimately, when we talk about a safe, legal and local service, it really does need to be local, just as we seek similar provision for our constituents here in England, Wales and Scotland.

Another issue we have seen, which I hope this funding can help address, is that there are very clear reports that some are using the online nature of seeking guidance about where services are to cause harm. What I mean is that some people are using advertising, particularly on things like Google, to encourage women to go to services that are not about abortion, but are trying to deter women from having an abortion. One of the critical issues is how women will know how to access these services. Ministers have said that they hope that services will be available on the ground within the next 90 days, particularly services for between 10 weeks and 12 weeks. We know that access to pills is patchy, but access to medical procedures is non-existent. If women are seeking information about those services and how to access them, under this legislation, what powers will the Government have and what action will they take to make sure that those women are getting information about the right services—the actual abortion services—if they make that choice?

Finally, I want to make a plea to the Minister: there is still a stigma, as I know he understands. Contrary to what might have been said in this place, there is very

clear evidence that the mood of people in Northern Ireland has shifted on this issue, as the mood of the people in Ireland shifted following the “repeal the eighth” campaign. There is widespread support for the provision of these new services and frustration at the delay that has taken place, but if those services are to survive, we need to address the stigma about working to support women who wish to have an abortion, and also having an abortion. I hope Ministers will talk about what they will do while we wait to see whether the Executive can be reformed, but also about what they will do to tackle that stigma, so that we can get the staffing and ensure that when a woman in Northern Ireland exercises her human right to choose to have an abortion, she does not face any further barriers.

As we have said, making laws—whether in this place or in devolved Administrations—requires more than just passing a Bill. It requires implementation and delivery, and the past three years have been a story of not delivering—of not meeting the promise that we made to those women in Northern Ireland. In passing this legislation today, and delivering on the work that has been done and the promise of that previous legislation, we have to show our homework, and that homework is both logistical and cultural. I hope Ministers recognise where these questions are coming from. They will have my support in working this through, and I welcome the words of the Secretary of State when he talks about this being an important provision. However, it is necessary to seek detail now, because we have had five different Secretaries of State, so many different letters and so little progress. The women in Northern Ireland who need this service deserve to be heard.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Following the next speaker, we will move on to the wind-ups. I call Jim Shannon.

5.12 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is always a pleasure to speak in the House, but this is a subject matter that we hoped we would not have to address or bring before the House. However, because we are where we are, we feel it is important to do so. My party has tabled amendments, which I believe demonstrate our concerns; we will do what we can to address those concerns, and also to show support for our community. I respect the fact that there are Members present from different parties and with different opinions. It is no secret that we differ on many things, but there is an understanding that we do what we can to represent our constituents, so I am very pleased and proud to be able to stand here and speak for my Ulster Scots, Unionist community of Strangford.

I will speak to some of the DUP amendments, particularly amendment 13. First, I want to make it clear that we in the DUP recognise the need for what we have in front of us today. It is not what we want, but we are where we are, and we have to recognise that. We believe in the right to take a stand for the political good, and unfortunately, the fundamental issue of the Northern Ireland protocol remains. The allowance for negotiations is also welcome, which is part of why the deadline will be extended by another six weeks, but it is important to remember that time is no object in this debate. The route to a resolution will come through an understanding of our conditions in relation to the Northern Ireland protocol.

The Bill in front of us is the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation Etc) Bill. We are here today because we do not have an Executive, and we do not have an Executive because of the protocol. We can talk until we are blue in the face—or until the cows come home, as we say in my neck of the woods—about the need to restore the Executive, but if Executive formation really is our purpose, we are wasting our time unless we address the issue that stands in the way of Executive formation.

In addressing the challenge of Executive formation—to which the Bill’s title refers—it is vital that we recognise that the imperative for finding a solution arises from the fact that the current arrangements cause the UK Government to violate international law, a situation that must be terminated as quickly as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Mr Shannon, I will allow you to touch on the protocol, but not to go into detail on that.

Jim Shannon: I will move straight on, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Clauses 3 to 5 permit the exercise of Northern Ireland departmental powers by senior civil servants under guidance published by the Secretary of State. Our amendment 13 reinforces the importance of accountability to the people of Northern Ireland. Elected representatives have the power to legislate and make laws for Northern Ireland, and to be scrutinised and held very much accountable. The proposal sets out the framework relating to the choice to do something, why it was done and how it could be done. At the same time, it allows people to be liable to answer questions from MLAs and MPs. As policymakers, we are all subject to the same scrutiny and accountability measures. If legislation cannot be made in the Northern Ireland Assembly, those who are asked to do it are responsible for ensuring that there is robust and transparent reasoning.

The Northern Ireland Executive would be functioning were it not for the Northern Ireland protocol. The current arrangements are a clear violation of international law. Articles 1 and 2 of the Northern Ireland protocol are subject to the Good Friday agreement. It is important to remind ourselves of that, because we are all looking forward, for different reasons, to a future time. The GFA commits the state parties to uphold the right of the people of Northern Ireland

“to pursue democratically national and political aspirations”.

Articles 3 to 19 of the protocol are subject to the GFA and article 2 places an explicit obligation on the UK Government not to allow the impacts of the protocol to diminish the rights under the GFA. It is important to reiterate those things. I understand that everyone in the House is fully committed to maintaining the GFA.

The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill is due to be on Report in the House of Lords, and I urge that all is done to secure its smooth passage. Many comments have been made about the DUP’s decision not to nominate a Speaker during the period when we have had no Assembly, yet no consideration has been given to cross-community support for this Bill. The Unionist community, which we in this House and in this party represent, are very clear about where we stand on these issues. There is no community support for this. Residents from other constituencies have contacted me to thank our party for standing up against the Northern Ireland protocol.

[Jim Shannon]

This is not a Unionist issue, but one that impacts the Northern Ireland economy and its place in the United Kingdom. It restricts our local businesses from having free-flowing trade and, most importantly, it subjects our constituents to red tape and undermines their right to trade with their United Kingdom neighbours.

As the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) spoke at some length on this issue, for the record, the Government did a consultation in Northern Ireland, and 79% of the people who responded from Northern Ireland were against any changes in the abortion law in Northern Ireland. The people of Northern Ireland were asked for their opinion and when the Government got their opinion, they ignored it. She does not care, of course, about the opinion of 79% of the people in Northern Ireland, but we already knew that. Opposition Members will know of our opposition to amendment 11, which was not selected. We are here to represent and speak for the 79% of people who objected to that.

I note with interest amendments 1 to 4 from the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) on MLA pay. I reiterate that we cannot stress enough that the notion that we might be moved back into government for monetary reasons is grossly misjudged. My right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), the leader of our party and of our DUP group here, clearly said that we will not be bullied.

Simon Hoare: Let me rehearse the arguments. This is nothing to do with bullying, or whatever; it is about demonstrating a sense of fairness to taxpayers, so if people do only 50% of the work, they get only 50% of the pay. That is it.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman gives us his opinion. My opinion is clearly very different: we will not be persuaded, bullied or coerced—whichever way people want to put it—into something. As far as we are concerned, we have an objective that we want to achieve and a mandate from Northern Ireland, and we will deliver on our mandate.

Ian Paisley: Can my hon. Friend explain how removing the salaries of some MLAs will suddenly make the Assembly work, when under the terms of the Belfast agreement, which the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) obviously supports, we cannot have a working Assembly unless Unionists are part of it? I fail to understand the logic of that position. Does my hon. Friend understand it?

Jim Shannon: In the Unionist community that we represent, people are clearly not persuaded by the actions that have been taken. As their elected representatives in this House, we feel very strongly about the matter, and so do their representatives back home.

The existential threat to Northern Ireland is the root of the entire issue. The problem that other parties have is that the DUP is taking a principled stand against an issue that has proven detrimental to Northern Ireland. It should not be an issue that sends Northern Ireland back into the past and divide Stormont down the middle. The DUP has remained strong and certain on the protocol, and there are no plans to dodge the issue of MLA salaries.

Ian Paisley: Will my hon. Friend take the opportunity to reflect on the points that Front Benchers on both sides of the House have made about the Dublin criminal trial? Does he agree that if the current crisis were not going on, the trial would be an equally huge and significant crisis for the body politic not only of Northern Ireland, but of the Republic of Ireland? The Government really need to prepare themselves for the tsunami when the verdict eventually comes.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for reminding us of that important factor, which cannot be ignored. The leader of Sinn Féin across all Ireland, north and south, is a Member for her political party down south and has jurisdiction through her party in Northern Ireland as well, so what happens in Dublin will clearly have an impact on Northern Ireland. I therefore believe, like my hon. Friend and others, that we cannot ignore the issue in this House. That is the point that I think he was making, and I concur totally.

The DUP was proud to table new clause 7, but it was not selected for debate. It would have changed the date of the local government elections in 2023 to take into consideration the King's coronation celebrations. Because Northern Ireland elections are conducted under proportional representation, counting takes significantly longer than is normal in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Stephen Farry: May I put it on the record that my party agrees with the DUP on the issue? There may well be some degree of consensus on a pragmatic reform to take into account the need to respect the coronation and respect the elections in Northern Ireland. I hope that that gives the Northern Ireland Office a hint.

Jim Shannon: Well, we have a consensus! I am pleased to hear that the hon. Member and his party concur with our opinion, so I hope that when the Minister of State replies to the debate he will give us a positive answer. It is important because if 4 May remains election day, the results will extend into coronation day. That is the very nature of what will happen back home, so it must be changed to ensure the public participation of candidates, the electoral office staff, who are an important part of it all, and the party supporters attending count centres. I urge the Government to take our proposal into immediate consideration for the sake of the celebration of the King's coronation, and I thank the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) for his support.

The amendments that the DUP has tabled are for the greater good of Northern Ireland and our economic and constitutional position within this great United Kingdom. We hope that the Government will listen to us. They must be assured of our stealth and determination in regard to the damaging effect that the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill is having on Northern Ireland.

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

5.23 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to the debate so far. It was only a few weeks ago that I was standing in this Chamber to close the debate on the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Bill; I shared my regrets that the

Bill was being debated in this Chamber and not in Stormont. Hopefully today's Bill will be a significant factor in the return to a functioning legislature in Stormont, but it would be remiss of me not to share again my disappointment that this House has been forced to act as a result of the political deadlock in Northern Ireland.

The restoration of the Executive is not simply about a restoration of process. The lack of an Executive has a very real impact on people's lives in Northern Ireland. As my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) has outlined, the delay in the commissioning of abortion services has meant that women are still being forced to cross the border to access essential services, long after they should have been able to access them in Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her tireless work in raising the issue, and to the Minister for his words of commitment to addressing it by the time the Bill has passed through Parliament.

As Members have pointed out, Northern Ireland has longer NHS waiting times than any other UK region. Many will be aware of the particularly troubling figures relating to specialist women's healthcare, with no trusts meeting the in-patient treatment targets for gynaecology. Owing to the lack of political leadership and power to reform the system, a significant proportion of women who suffer from life-changing illnesses such as endometriosis are having to pay for private healthcare, taking out loans and borrowing from friends and family so that they can simply live their lives without pain every day.

There are dozens, if not hundreds, of real-life examples of the detrimental impact that the lack of an Executive is having on the everyday lives of the people of Northern Ireland. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) correctly described the Bill as an elastoplast—just a big plaster. While I welcome it, its words must be backed up by action from the Government, and I urge the Secretary of State to ensure that the restoration of the Executive at Stormont is at the top of the Cabinet's agenda. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) said at the beginning of the debate, now is the time for the Prime Minister to show his commitment to the restoration of power sharing by visiting Northern Ireland, bringing together parties from across the political spectrum, and to take a lead in negotiations on the protocol. Belfast is not Blackpool, and he really does need to be there.

As the cost of living crisis deepens, the need for political leadership at Stormont becomes more urgent. We must have a commitment from the Government that they will use the additional time offered by the Bill well, and they must provide a clear plan for how they will work to restore the Executive.

5.26 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): My goodness, what an excellent debate this has been.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) told us why we are here. "We are here because we do not have an Executive," he said, "and we do not have an Executive because of the protocol." With great respect to my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), the Chairman of the Select Committee, I think it must be said, on the basis of realistic observation of the factors at work, that the hon. Gentleman is right: that is indeed why we are here.

The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), said that the Bill was the "least worst" option, and I agree with him. As has been said several times, this is not a position in which we would want to find ourselves today. I think that Members in all parts of the House and all parties represented here, including the Democratic Unionist party, have made it clear that they are devolutionists and would like the Executive to be back in power; but I will return to the protocol in a moment. The Bill is a responsible—if hugely regrettable—piece of legislation, but we wish we did not have to do this.

I will try to deal with as many of the points that have been made as possible, conscious that I will be dealing with the amendments themselves in Committee. The Labour Front Benchers asked how we would use this time, but I was extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Hove for referring to the need to engage with the concerns of Unionism. Let me also record my thanks to Minister Byrne, from the Republic of Ireland, who tweeted about the need to recognise those legitimate concerns—although we need to do that in a way that is acceptable to nationalism, and I was grateful to the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), for referring to a move I had made in that direction. We need to have the humility to recognise the interests of our negotiating partners, and to say, as DUP speakers have said today, "Yes, we are willing to use our law to defend their interests."

Since I have led myself on to this territory, I will just say that my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) made an exceptionally powerful speech, which I hope will be heard in the European Union. However, I also hope it will be heard together with the exceptional speech made by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), the leader of the DUP. I think that anyone listening to his speech and appreciating that it was made in earnest—and, of course in good faith—will understand what forces at work here will allow us to restore the Executive in Northern Ireland, and restore it in a way that can endure and carry us through the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. We all want to be there celebrating that agreement—I am pleased to see Members opposite nodding—with the institutions up and running. I think that all parties to the protocol, having listened to the speeches that have been made, can see very clearly those forces that are at work.

Members on the Labour Front Bench have asked us how we will use this time well. It is very clear how we need to use this time. We need to use it to persuade the European Union, and indeed ourselves, to work with great political resolve to deliver change on the protocol. This extension provides space for that further progress, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I will continue to work with our colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to that end. It has always been our preference to resolve issues through talks. The Foreign Secretary and Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič are speaking regularly and UK Government officials are having technical talks with the EU.

Ian Paisley: Can the Minister update us on how the talks on veterinary medicines are going? Will we have a solution on that before 16 December? Can he also

[*Ian Paisley*]

outline whether any more of my constituents will be receiving VAT notices from the Republic of Ireland for goods on which VAT has already been paid in His Majesty's territories here?

Mr Baker: The right hon. Gentleman makes his point with great clarity and force, but I think he encourages me to stray a little too far from the Bill on this occasion. If I recall correctly, I have replied to him on the question of veterinary medicines—whether through a parliamentary answer or a letter, I forget. I think I have signed off a reply, but I will check.

Officials are continuing to hold technical talks, but the reality is that there is still some distance between us, even though some of our technical solutions are relatively close. I say to Members on the Labour Front Bench that we need to continue to show resolve. Anyone watching this debate will see that a great degree of consensus has broken out on all sides. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset, the Chairman of the Select Committee, referred to our bromance, and although I have to tell him that he is not actually my type, people might like to observe the good will that exists in all parts of the House. We all want to get the protocol resolved so that we no longer have to talk about it, get the Executive up and running and move on to providing the good government that the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

Before moving on to other contributions, I want to join Labour Members in thanking the PSNI, particularly in the difficult circumstances it has recently faced.

With great respect to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, I do not think that his visiting Belfast and holding multi-party talks will be a silver bullet. We can see plainly what the obstacle is to the formation of the Executive, and we need to focus our efforts on the European Union. I should just say that the Prime Minister's attendance at the British-Irish Council in Blackpool was the first such attendance by a Prime Minister since 2007, and I am grateful that he had the opportunity to meet the Taoiseach.

The Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset, made a point about the normalisation of politics, which elicited an interesting response from the leader of the DUP, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley. We have to be extremely clear that we are always going to uphold all three strands of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and the right hon. Gentleman set out clearly that that involves the consent of all communities. During my short experience of being in Northern Ireland, I have heard from the public there—and from a number of Members here, including the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna)—that people are clearly in the market for normal political government that concentrates on public services, and that there is a desperate need for that. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Chairman of the Select Committee for making that point.

The role of the Irish Government was brought up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I want to be absolutely clear that we are not considering joint authority, nor will we. We have kept the Irish Government apprised of our plans to maintain public services in Northern Ireland in the absence of

Northern Ireland Ministers. The Irish Government share our commitment to devolution and the Good Friday agreement. We are pleased that we have begun to transform our friendship and relationship with Ireland, and we will continue to do so.

A number of Members, and particularly the hon. Members for North Down (Stephen Farry) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), raised the position that officials will find themselves in. We recognise that civil servants should not ideally be put in a position where they need to take political decisions themselves, but we simply cannot bring forward this further extension without taking measures to ensure that some decisions can be taken in the meantime. We believe that the Bill provides Northern Ireland's civil servants with the clarity they require in order to take the limited but necessary decisions to maintain the delivery of public services during this period.

Gavin Robinson: I want to raise an important amendment that was tabled but not selected for consideration in Committee, on the Grenfell remediation scheme for non-aluminium composite material cladding. The money was distributed and then reallocated in Northern Ireland because the scheme was not in place. There are ongoing discussions with Whitehall. This is a public safety issue and, given that there was a fire in Belfast's Obel Tower just two days ago, it needs urgent attention. Can we remove party politics and, if we are not going to get traction with this Bill, at least have a commitment from the Minister and the Secretary of State that they will turn their urgent attention to this?

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman knows that the Government care very much about this issue, as he does. This is a good moment to say the Bill is absolutely not taking powers for this Government to direct what happens in Northern Ireland on any particular policy, which is a good reason to come on to the issue raised by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), whom I congratulate on her victory in providing abortion in Northern Ireland. Before the Bill completes its passage through the other House, we will have commissioned services in Northern Ireland, but the Bill does not give Ministers of this Government the power to direct what is delivered by the Northern Ireland Department of Health, which will find that it is compelled to commission abortion services, but many of the questions she raises will be properly decided in Northern Ireland. That still relies on the Executive reforming to get the work done. We will commission services and, of course, the Secretary of State and I will continue to take a close interest in how those commitments are carried through and delivered.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) raised the issue of Sinn Féin MPs, and he talked about a figure of £10 million, which I do not recognise, so I would be grateful if he provided a breakdown so that I can consider what he said. Sinn Féin MPs are not paid salaries, because they do not take their seats. If we were to treat MLAs similarly, we would presumably reduce their salaries to zero, which is not our intent. We will have an evidence base when the Secretary of State makes his determination, and that evidence base is not likely to recommend the complete removal of salaries. We have chosen, for good, technical reasons, not to connect our measures to pensions. Of course, other measures, such as allowances, will continue.

Mr Gregory Campbell: I accept what the Minister says about Sinn Féin MPs not getting salaries but, if there is to be a reduction, we cannot reduce something that is not given. The only thing they get is representative moneys and allowances. No attempt at all has been made to cut those moneys and allowances for not doing their job, despite repeated attempts to raise it with successive Leaders of the House.

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman makes his point with great passion, and I think we agree with one another that it is not a good thing to have abstentionist MPs, although I have to say I have met Sinn Féin MPs a number of times in London and found them to be very constructive—to a much greater extent than I expected. They do not draw any pay, and we do not anticipate reducing the pay of MLAs to zero, nor do we anticipate taking away their allowances. Members of the public watching this debate will see that we are behaving reasonably in relation to MLAs.

I thank everyone who has participated in this debate. We are absolutely determined to do what is necessary to restore the Executive in Northern Ireland, which is going to mean reaching a negotiated conclusion on the protocol, and I look forward to doing so.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Bill

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

EXTENSION OF PERIOD FOR MAKING MINISTERIAL
APPOINTMENTS BY SIX WEEKS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 10, in clause 2, page 1, line 15, leave out “19 January 2023” and insert

“a date set out in regulations by the Secretary of State”.

This amendment gives the Secretary of State discretion to set a later deadline for the filling of Ministerial Offices.

Clause 2 stand part.

Amendment 13, in clause 3, page 2, line 25, at end insert—

“(5A) Guidance under subsection (4) must require senior officers of a Northern Ireland department who exercise a function in reliance on subsection (1)—

(a) to notify in writing members of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Members of Parliament representing constituencies in Northern Ireland on each occasion that they exercise such a function, and to set out their justification and rationale for exercising the function, and

(b) to make themselves available to answer expeditiously any questions regarding their exercise of the function put by members of the Assembly or Members of Parliament representing constituencies in Northern Ireland.”

Amendment 7, page 2, line 28, after “Assembly” insert

“and have due regard to the views of the First Ministers designate (the leaders of the two largest groupings elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly).”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to have due regard to the First Ministers designate, defined as the leaders of the two largest groupings elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly, who are entitled to nominate the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

Amendment 8, page 2, line 28, at end insert —

“(7) Any representations made by Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly under subsection (6) must be published by the Secretary of State, who must also place a written report of those representations in the library of the Northern Ireland Assembly.”

Clauses 3 to 9 stand part.

Amendment 1, in clause 10, page 5, line 22, leave out “may” and insert “must”.

The intention of this amendment is to require the Secretary of State to make a determination reducing the salary of Northern Ireland Assembly Members during a period in which the Northern Ireland Assembly is not functioning.

Amendment 2, page 5, line 24, leave out

“in respect of some or all of that period”

and insert

“with effect from 1 January 2023 (unless the Northern Ireland Assembly is functioning by then)”.

Amendment 3, page 5, line 28, at end insert—

“(2A) The first determination must reduce by 50 per cent the salaries of Northern Ireland Assembly Members payable during a period in which the Northern Ireland Assembly is not functioning.”

Amendment 4, page 5, line 40, leave out

“would have had were it not for”

and insert “have had under”.

The intention of this amendment is to link the pension entitlement of Northern Ireland Assembly Members to the salary they actually receive.

Clauses 10 to 15 stand part.

New clause 1—*Report to Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must provide a written report to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons about the exercise of departmental functions under section 3 of this Act, no later than six weeks after the date on which this Act is passed, and thereafter at intervals of no more than six weeks until Ministerial appointments are made to the Executive.

(2) In this section ‘the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons’ means the Select Committee of the House of Commons known as the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee or any successor of that committee.”

New clause 3—*Consultation with First Ministers designate*—

“The Secretary of State must have due regard to the views of the First Ministers Designate (the leaders of the two largest groupings entitled to nominate First Minister and deputy First Minister) in issuing guidance under section 3 of this Act.”

New clause 6—*Reports on progress towards forming an Executive*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, on or before 8 December 2022, publish a report explaining what progress has been made towards the formation of an Executive in Northern Ireland (unless an Executive has already been formed).

(2) The Secretary of State must lay a copy of each report published under subsection (1) before each House of Parliament by the end of the day on which it is published.

(3) The Secretary of State must make a further report under subsection (1) on or before 19 January 2023.

(4) For the purposes of this section an Executive is formed once the offices of the First Minister, deputy First Minister and the Northern Ireland Ministers are all filled.”

5.39 pm

Mr Steve Baker: In speaking in favour of clause 1 standing part of the Bill, I do not propose to go through the Bill clause by clause and elaborate on its purpose, because the Secretary of State has not long done that during the debate on Second Reading. I also sense that Members have already spoken to the content of many of the amendments, so I propose to conclude my initial remarks now and then come back to the amendments in detail at the end of the debate.

Gavin Robinson: I wish to speak to the amendments in my name and those of my party colleagues. I have a sense from the way in which some colleagues have gathered that they are interested in an accelerated conclusion to proceedings, but I know that nobody would want to deny us the opportunity to talk to important matters that affect the Province and governance in Northern Ireland.

I suspect that the conclusion to our consideration of amendment 13 will be positive and allow Members to retire gracefully from the Chamber. Until we get there, however, it is important to say that I hope that Members were able to discern on Second Reading that there is agreement across the parties on the content of a whole range of amendments—some in scope, some out of scope—tabled for Committee. A number of the amendments are remarkably similar in intent and import. Whether we are Members of the Social Democratic and Labour party, the Alliance party or the Democratic Unionist party, there is common ground to be had among all of us in this Committee stage and in other areas that fell outside consideration. If there is any encouragement to be taken from these proceedings, that should be it.

Amendment 13 is important, given that what we have in governance at the moment is suboptimal. There are ways in which we can enhance the governance oversight and democratic accountability of decisions taken through this Bill. We are asking that the Northern Ireland Office consider incorporating and involving Members of Parliament and Members of the Legislative Assembly in the decisions taken and in notifying us accordingly. That is the import of amendment 13.

Mr Baker rose—

Gavin Robinson: I know that the Minister has considered amendment 13 and that he has published helpful guidance, which he may wish to address now.

Mr Baker: Yes, we published the guidance as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was making his opening remarks. I draw the House’s attention to paragraph 15 of the draft guidance, which says that records should be kept of decisions that have been taken by officials. It goes on to say:

“A monthly summary report of decisions taken using the Guidance should be prepared by NI Departments and shared with the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State will promptly make these reports available to Parliament.”

We will be very happy to append “and MLAs”, and I hope that the guidance, as we aim to amend it, meets the aims and intentions of the hon. Gentleman’s amendment.

Gavin Robinson: We are almost there. I am very grateful to the Minister for that clarification. Clearly, the guidance says that the reports will be made available to Parliament. In our normal understanding, that would mean laying those reports in our Library. If we are incorporating MLAs, I think it would also be appropriate for relevant MPs who have expressed an interest in the passage of this Bill and who are from Northern Ireland to be able to get access to those reports. That means making them available in the Libraries of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and to the Northern Ireland Assembly and relevant representatives.

Mr Baker: Absolutely no problem. We will implement that as the hon. Gentleman suggests.

Gavin Robinson: Dame Rosie, you can see that there is a willingness and desire to move things along. I am very grateful to the Minister and to the Secretary of State for their engagement. That is a helpful clarification on the guidance.

As I mentioned tangentially during an intervention I made on Second Reading, a number of amendments that were tabled fell outside the scope of the Bill, but I hope that the Northern Ireland Office will engage with us and colleagues across the House pragmatically over the next few weeks, because these issues are not going to go away and need to be resolved.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Committee.

5.45 pm

Simon Hoare: I rise to speak, Dame Rosie, while trying to maintain my composure, having been rejected by the Minister of State, but I am sure that both he and I will cope.

I wish to speak in support of the clauses in my name and the name of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), although I will not be pushing them to a Division. Let me take a moment to underscore the underlying principle of these amendments and to address front and centre the erroneous assertions of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson): these are not bullying tactics. I am pretty certain that most people who have an interest in this area will have been receiving emails and other communications from people across the divide and across the communities in Northern Ireland making a very simple point—a point that is underpinned by these amendments. The point is that no other employee in the public sector would say that they were prepared to do 50% of the job, but that they want 100% of the pay. Nobody who says that they are prepared to do 50% of the job but still want 100% of the pay would also then expect to get the full whack on the pension as well. If the pay is reduced, there should be a concomitant reduction in pension. It may well be that pension law precludes that, and the Minister of State might have suggested that that is the case.

We all know that there are powers in statute law, and clause 10 (1) says:

“During a period in which the Northern Ireland Assembly is not functioning, the Secretary of State may make a determination”.

Amendment 1 says that he “must” make a determination. The Secretary of State may make a determination not to do anything at all, but I want him to confirm that he will be looking at this issue, commissioning the evidence, coming to a conclusion and sharing it with this House and others. It is an important principle. We are all recipients of taxpayers’ money, and taxpayers’ money is always a precious commodity, and never more so than at a time of economic uncertainty, heightened prices, inflation and rising interest rates.

We need to make sure that those who seek election—nobody forces us to take up the burden and the privilege of public service—are prepared to shoulder that full burden, to put their shoulders to the wheel, to work as hard as we damn well can in order to address the needs of all of our constituents wherever they may happen to reside, and to discharge our duties, whether it be in Stormont or in this place, to the benefit of the wider community outside the narrow boundaries of our constituencies.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for outlining the amendments that I support. Does he think that there seems to be some misunderstanding by DUP Members about the amendments that we have tabled? Amendment 9 could be argued to be somewhat discriminatory when it comes to various Members of the Legislative Assembly, but the amendments that we have tabled in my hon. Friend’s name do not seek to discriminate in any way at all.

Simon Hoare: I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. We have sought to be equal across the piece. On a personal note, I have some considerable sympathy with those MLAs who have made representations to me over these past eight, nine or 10 hours. They say, “We want to be there. We want to be addressing the issues of health, housing, transport, infrastructure, encouraging inward investment, growing the economy, and making sure that the prosperity dividend of the peace process is felt across the communities of Northern Ireland. Why should we be held up from doing so because of one party?” Indeed, the artist, Sara O’Neill, sent me a message this morning to say that, as the protocol—the principal, legitimate concern of the DUP—is reserved to this place, and nothing to do with Stormont, would it not make more sense for the DUP to boycott Westminster and not Stormont?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson *rose—*

Simon Hoare: I will not give way, because I want to be quick.

That is the principle underlying these amendments. I hope the Secretary of State will use his powers and use them speedily, because a message must be sent to the taxpayers of Northern Ireland that, if no one else is on their side, this place is.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I rise to speak to new clause 6 in my name and that of the shadow Secretary of State. I will not repeat too much of what was said on Second Reading; the Labour party has accepted the need for this legislation and, as its measures are so time limited, we do not think it needs significant changes. The Government have been clear that they have used previous Executive Formation Acts as the basis for this Bill. Our probing amendment has taken the same approach and is based on a section the Government put into the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019.

New clause 6 would simply require the Secretary of State to publish a report explaining what progress has been made towards the formation of an Executive in Northern Ireland if the deadlines in the Bill are passed without one being formed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) has set out, we need to hear from the Government how they will use the extra time this Bill gives them.

During the oral statement at the beginning of this month, the Secretary of State made several commitments at the Dispatch Box in response to Labour suggestions. We are really happy to work constructively with the Government on how we approach Northern Ireland. He said he would be happy to convene multi-party talks and request that the Foreign Secretary brief the Northern Ireland parties on protocol negotiations. He will know that those would be very constructive steps, but it is not clear if they have been taken yet.

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

As these debates have shown, there is a wealth of history to learn from on how the Government can move things forward. In the other place, my good friend Lord Murphy, who was very involved in the peace process, had this advice for the Government:

“The one thing I would stress in what I ask the Minister is that the negotiations themselves should be very different from what has occurred over recent months. First, there should be a proper process and plan, and there should be a timetable and a structure. There has been ad hocery, if you like, over recent months”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 825, c. 760.]

The deadlines in this Bill mean there is no more room for ad hocery. In 2019, when there was no Executive, the Government convened more than 150 meetings in a nine-week period. Similar ambition is needed now, and the House must be kept updated.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I had not intended to speak, but I really cannot allow the comments made by the Chair of the Select Committee to go without challenge. For someone who has chaired a Committee specifically on Northern Ireland for a number of years to state to this House that the protocol has nothing to do with the Northern Ireland Assembly is frankly amazing. The Northern Ireland Executive are responsible for implementing key elements of the protocol. The Assembly has a legislative role in relation to elements of the protocol and a four-year duty to decide whether the provisions of the protocol are to continue or not. For someone who ought to know better to suggest that the Assembly has nothing to do with the protocol is amazing.

Simon Hoare: I said the Assembly had nothing to do with the negotiation of the protocol. That is reserved to Ministers in this place. On the implementation, of course, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, but the negotiations are reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament. That is the point I made; it was not about the implementation.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: The implementation is the problem. The negotiation, hopefully, will deliver the solution. Therefore, we cannot divorce the Assembly from the impact the protocol is having, and it is simply unrealistic to do so.

Sammy Wilson: It is surprising that the Chair of the Select Committee has so little knowledge of something that we would expect him to be able to talk about with some degree of clarity. Does my right hon. Friend accept that it would be totally unreasonable to ask Unionists—who are opposed to the protocol and who believe it damages the constitution and their position in United Kingdom and hurts the economic standing of every citizen in Northern Ireland—to implement the thing to which they are so opposed?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Not only would that be unreasonable, but those Assembly Members were elected on a mandate not to do so.

Claire Hanna: Does that mandate extend to the former Minister at the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs who, while government was being withheld from people, was writing to UK Government Ministers asking for portions of the protocol to be retained, to benefit financially farmers such as himself?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Actually, that is not what the former DAERA Minister said. He recognised that the protocol is not working and is harming agriculture. Our farmers cannot bring seed potatoes from Great Britain into Northern Ireland, and there are many other restrictions on the movement of livestock and so on. The point he was making was that there should be no restriction on state aid support for farmers in Northern Ireland as a result of the protocol Bill—not as a result of the protocol.

We can go around in circles on all this. We can train-spot on MLA pay all day long, but the reality is that we are missing the train coming down the track. And the train coming down the track is the lack of consensus enabling the political institutions to function properly. That is what we need to resolve. The Bill allows more time for the solution to be found, and that is what we need to happen. We need the solution.

Stephen Farry: Members will be pleased to know that I will be extremely brief. I will touch on a few points.

First, I will not repeat the arguments for amendment 10 given that I mentioned them on Second Reading, but I invite the Secretary of State or the Minister to respond to the substance of it when they wind up. I hope they will reflect on what I and the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) have said about not boxing themselves in for what lies ahead.

Beyond that, I stress that there is a need for some degree of ad hoc scrutiny in what happens over the coming weeks and months. With respect to my DUP colleagues, amendment 13, taken literally, is somewhat onerous, but there is also an elephant in the room: our best means to scrutinise decision making in Northern Ireland is to have a fully functioning Assembly.

Mr Baker: First, I thank Members opposite for being constructive in dealing with Northern Ireland issues while also holding us to account. They are holding us to account on new clause 6 in particular, and have asked us to provide reports. We propose instead to make statements to Parliament, including oral statements. Those Members know that they are very welcome to be in touch with us with suggestions. Clearly, we do not want to be in here every day—nor would we need to be—but we would wish to make statements so that Parliament is properly informed. The Secretary of State and I are fully committed to working constructively with the House.

Turning to amendment 10 on indefinite extension, it is not the intention of the legislation to create indefinite or undefined extensions to the Executive formation period. We are deeply aware that the previous political impasse dragged on for three years, and we cannot allow that to happen again.

Julian Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are in the last-chance saloon. We have all seen that political decision making on public services is required now. There is a short period, I would argue, for a negotiation on the protocol, and then we need to get back to an Executive. All these amendments are fine, but the only thing we have to achieve is a deal with the EU that allows our colleagues in the DUP to get back into the Executive.

Mr Baker: I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend. Getting that deal will require us, as we have said several times, to respect the legitimate interests of our negotiating partners while also delivering on the legitimate interests of Unionists. I am extremely grateful to him for his support.

Stephen Farry: I want to press the Minister on that point. I fully accept his point that the legislation being open-ended is not desirable in any sense, but, equally, we are seven weeks away from the 18 January deadline. If he is genuinely telling us that he believes we will have a full outcome in that period, that is great, but surely he recognises that that may not be the case and that it would be best not to box himself in entirely.

Mr Baker: I certainly recognise that we may not reach a deal, and that is why the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill continues its passage in the other place, but the reality is that we cannot allow ourselves to drag on with indefinite extension. The people of Northern Ireland deserve good government, and that is why the legislation is drafted to create a short, straightforward and defined extension to the period for Executive formation. I very much hope that we will conclude an agreement, reform the institutions and then move forward.

6 pm

Turning to the decision-making amendments, I will say some general things. The Bill includes provisions for pressing public appointments and the requirement to set the regional rate. The Bill does not confer powers on the Secretary of State to direct civil servants in respect of specific policies—rather, the Bill intends to clarify the powers available to Northern Ireland Departments to enable them to deliver in the public interest in the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers. The Secretary of State is required to provide the supporting guidance, which we have now published in draft. That recognises that some decisions should not be taken in the absence of Ministers, but it helps to guide the use of powers in that context.

Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con): I had the great privilege a little while ago of being the Advocate General for Northern Ireland, and I recall in the same situation the Chief Justice of Northern Ireland saying to me that there was a serious problem in the appointment of Northern Ireland barristers to the rank of King's counsel. Can my hon. Friend give me the assurance that he and my right hon. Friend will be in close touch with the Chief Justice of Northern Ireland and that there will be no impediment to the appointment of King's counsel in the province? It is very important from the point of view of judicial appointments generally that that first rung on the ladder is not obstructed or delayed.

Mr Baker: The Secretary of State is well aware of the issue that my right hon. and learned Friend raises. I am grateful to him for putting it on the record, and we will certainly take up the point that he makes.

We do not think we can anticipate all the decisions that civil servants will need to take, so this House should not try to start prioritising some decisions over others. We are clear, however, that we want to restore the Executive with locally accountable politicians taking those political decisions. Amendment 13 concerns reporting

on decisions taken. In my intervention on my friend the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), we reached a conclusion on what we will do through the guidance in paragraph 15, and I look forward to amending the guidance when it is published in its final form.

On amendment 7 and new clause 3 and having “due regard” to the views of the First Minister designate and the Deputy First Minister designate, the essential issue is that the Belfast/Good Friday agreement does not recognise any position of First Minister designate or deputy First Minister designate, nor a joint office of First Ministers designate, so it would not be appropriate to refer to those positions, which do not exist in this expedited legislation. There is also no reference in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement to leaders of groupings.

Clause 3 as drafted already requires the Secretary of State to have regard to representations made by any MLA, and that will allow views from across the political spectrum to be put forward, including but not limited to the leaders of the largest parties in the two largest designations within the Assembly. On other occasions, Members have conceded that the Secretary of State and I have been engaging widely with Members, and we will be glad to continue doing so.

Amendment 8 and new clause 1 are about publishing representations of MLAs and providing a report to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I can assure the hon. Members for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) that the Secretary of State will treat the duty with all the seriousness it deserves as we provide guidance to senior officers on the exercise of departmental functions in relation to clause 3(1). We do not think that publishing representations from MLAs themselves is a proportionate or necessary step. I would also make the same point about the hon. Members' new clause 1, which would require a specific report to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on decisions taken. As we discussed earlier, reports will be made available through the Secretary of State to MLAs, Members of Parliament and through Libraries, as we discussed earlier.

We have already had a fairly wide-ranging discussion of MLA pay, but what I would say to my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), the Chair of the Select Committee is that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has a real zeal for this issue. He will need to make a determination, and I know that he will consider the current evidence base, but also I am confident that he will instruct officials to look for further evidence on the level of remuneration that MLAs should receive while they are not sitting and carrying out their full duties. We have heard some reasonable arguments about what that will mean for people who are less well off, and I know that my right hon. Friend will bear all of that in mind when he makes his determination. However, I should like to reassure my hon. Friend the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee about all of his amendments and say that his zeal is matched at least by that of my right hon. Friend.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset mentioned pension entitlements. Although it is perfectly reasonable to raise that, and we have considered the issue, the amendment would have a number of unintended consequences, which we do not have the powers to mitigate. We have therefore legislated to avoid those consequences.

[Mr Steve Baker]

I am extremely grateful for a wide-ranging and constructive debate. We have addressed a wide range of amendments to this short Bill, and they are all constructive. I am grateful to hon. Members above all for their forbearance on the compressed timescale that has been necessary for these measures.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 15 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

King's Consent signified.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

AGRICULTURE

That the draft Food and Feed (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 24 October, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 6 to 16 together.

Ordered,

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

That Tonia Antoniazzi be discharged from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and Ian Lavery be added.

EDUCATION

That Angela Richardson be discharged from the Education Committee and Nick Fletcher be added.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

That Saqib Bhatti be added to the Foreign Affairs Committee.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

That Dr Luke Evans be discharged from the Health and Social Care Committee and Paul Bristow be added.

JUSTICE

That Ms Diane Abbott and Laura Farris be discharged from the Justice Committee and Janet Daby and Edward Timpson be added.

HUMAN RIGHTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

That Florence Eshalomi be discharged from the Joint Committee on Human Rights and Bell Ribeiro-Addy be added.

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

That Florence Eshalomi be discharged from the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and Nadia Whittome be added.

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS

That Stephanie Peacock be discharged from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and Tony Lloyd be added.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

That James Wild be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

That Zarah Sultana be discharged from the Science and Technology Committee and Christian Wakeford be added.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

That Theo Clark and Philip Davies be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Dr Jamie Wallis and Mark Jenkinson be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

PETITION

Rural bus routes in South Northamptonshire

6.9 pm

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that there are grave concerns about reductions of Stagecoach bus services in the South Northamptonshire constituency. The 41 Stagecoach bus route provides access to a GP practice, the University of Northampton, a terminal station and other local conveniences; further that it is a lifeline for the elderly and those who do not own a car; and further that this reduction in service has severely curbed independence for those living in rural villages, cutting individuals off from family, friends, employment, education and medical care.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to allocate further support for rural bus routes like the 41 Stagecoach, and to safeguard against any future reductions in services that keep our communities connected.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002783]

Illegal Money Lending

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Amanda Solloway.*)

6.10 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will endeavour to make concision my watchword, with my eye half on the clock, but I want to give this issue an airing. Illegal money lending is a growing and pernicious problem in constituencies such as mine, but it receives little attention and is almost surrounded by stigma. I am grateful to the Centre for Social Justice for its assistance in preparing for today's debate, particularly Matthew Greenwood, who authored an exceptional report on the issue.

On the surface, illegal money lending sounds as though it might be a rather low technical offence—lending money as a business without approval from the Financial Conduct Authority. In practice, however, it is a frequently devastating crime that sees the exploitation of the financially vulnerable and carries with it deep financial, mental and physical costs. No two cases of illegal money lending are the same, but, in England today, the Centre for Social Justice estimates that up to 1 million people could be borrowing from an illegal money lender. Those people each experience illegal lending in their own way and for their own reasons. It is dangerous to over-generalise and I will try to avoid doing so.

Anyone can be the victim of an illegal money lender—indeed, anyone can be an illegal money lender—but known victims tend to share a number of common experiences. Just over 60% have an income below £20,000 a year and almost half live in social housing. That constitutes a large proportion of my constituency, as Blackpool has eight of the 10 most-deprived neighbourhoods in the country. Illegal money lending is a danger that stalks every street in the centre of Blackpool. It is a risk to almost every home, but those who are often the victims have limited awareness of it.

Sometimes illegal money lenders are called loan sharks, but I am not fond of that phrase, because the problem is much more insidious than the almost-cartoonish quality of “loan shark” suggests. The lender is not an unknown quantity circling menacingly outside the front door; too often, they are a friend or relation popping round for tea and sitting on the sofa. When people are struggling to afford the costs of everyday items and bills, and often unable to access credit, they turn to someone they know and consider a friend, or even a family member they trust, but they are deceived.

Simply, that lender is not a friend, but a fraud who deceives their victims with an offer of financial support that does not materialise in practice. Having advanced money to their customer illegally, the lender does not adhere to the stringent credit regulations put in place more widely to protect consumers but exploits their sense of obligation to repay for financial gain.

We have an excellent illegal money lending team in this country, who I know the Minister supports and works with closely. They can evidence annual percentage rate repayments into the thousands, as people are emotionally manipulated into a deep sense of obligation to repay a so-called mate who once ostensibly helped them out.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Maynard: I will, of course. I was waiting for the moment.

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this forward. In Northern Ireland, we have real problems with illegal money lending, and paramilitaries are usually involved. People on estates are desperate, with energy prices and everything else rising to a level that is absolutely beyond their means, and they think the only way out is via illegal money lenders. In these trying times, with the rise in the cost of living, many may be tempted to go down this route for a quick loan, so does he agree that more needs to be done—I am looking forward to the Minister's response—to make people aware of the damage that loan sharks can cause? A £100 loan could mean an £800 repayment, and that is outrageous.

Paul Maynard: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. As ever, he speaks a lot of sense. His evidence from Northern Ireland shows why we cannot generalise about this issue—there are specific circumstances there—but I join him in looking forward to the Minister's reply, and I am sure those points will be taken on board.

I was struck by one example in which an illegal lender took all a young girl's money in repayments because she felt obliged to him, as he had taken the effort to go round and put drops into her pet dog's eyes because she could not manage it herself. What an awful situation to be in. Coercion and intimidation are all too often encouragements to repay, and that should not be the case.

What about when a victim cannot pay? Illegal lenders have been known to add arbitrary late fees, causing the debt to spiral out of control, and to threaten their victims and even demand sexual favours. I know the Minister is more than familiar with the practices of illegal lenders and their economic abuse, but for the benefit of a wider audience, let me tell the House about Michelle. Michelle met her lender on the school playground. She needed money and her friend—her lender—offered to meet that need. She thought she was borrowing from a friend. When she struggled to repay, her lender made it her business to know when money went into her account so they could make her repay. The more she repaid, the more she needed to borrow, but that was not all. Michelle received threats, and she had her windows smashed. As she tried to sleep at night, she was shouted at, making her own home an unsafe place to stay. It got so bad that Michelle and her two children were put into temporary housing. Why? Because she borrowed £50.

I raise these issues not only because they are a blight on our communities, but because we are facing an increase in the cost of living. Those on the sharpest edges will be pushed further away from financial inclusion and the legal credit market into the hands of the most unscrupulous. I very much welcome the financial support that the Government have already given to support people's incomes, but we must do all we can to prevent illegal money lenders from taking hold by supporting the illegal money lending team to do its job and provide long-term, scalable market solutions to financial exclusion.

[Paul Maynard]

The illegal money lending team is a specialised body equipped to identify and prosecute illegal money lenders, but its current scale is insufficient to meet rising demand. Money is scarce, but support to improve the team and its data capabilities would go a long way to improve understanding of this issue and better tackle it. I know the Minister will be aware of the consumer credit levy that raises funds for the team, but perhaps funds could be found from elsewhere in the Department, even in these straitened times. Another part of this support must surely be improving the quality of debt advice and its ability to identify clients who are borrowing from illegal lenders.

It is worth touching briefly on the Help to Save scheme, which is one of my pet favourite projects of the entire Government. It is a fantastic mechanism by which people on universal credit and some legacy benefits can save for a rainy day. To date, His Majesty's Treasury reports that the scheme supports almost 360,000 people, but this is well below 10% of even those on universal credit. Improving access to and the uptake of this solution to financial resilience is a priority.

May I make a wider point? I have participated in numerous online sessions, meetings there, speeches—you name it—and often all I hear is how we remedy the consequences of poor financial resilience, not how we avoid it in the first place. Help to Save should be front and centre in all our debates about this, not waiting for things to go wrong when we could solve them further upstream. I urge the Minister, as he is new to the job, to make Help to Save a personal passion, because it can make so much of a difference to so many lives.

Finally, let me touch on credit unions and the consumer credit market more widely. Accessing credit should be something that everyone can do. It should not be stigmatised as wrong for certain types of people, as sadly I often hear in this place. We need to do much better through innovation at ensuring that those who most need credit can access credit that is affordable, and that successful repayments can open the door to future, cheaper forms of credit. That journey—the focus of the much lamented and unadvanced Woolard review—is crucial if consumers are to steer clear of illegal lenders.

Part of creating a healthy credit ecosystem is emphasising the role of credit unions, which are strong, community-focused organisations that offer low-cost, alternative credit. However, they are not currently up to the task of plugging the entire credit gap because of over-prescriptive legislation that is both old and in need of modernisation, as well as designed in such a way that it limits their growth, scalability, size and membership.

I know that this is an area of work that the Minister is taking an interest in, and I welcome the provisions in the Financial Services and Markets Bill, which he is shepherding through the House. The Bill will help to expand credit unions' coverage across the credit spectrum and improve access to services, but if we are to truly scale these lending bodies, we need to reimagine what is called the common bond. By tweaking existing legislation to allow credit unions to have a maximum membership rather than a maximum potential membership, we might allow them to cover a wider geographic area, pool their talent into bigger, more professional bodies and compete with one another to offer the best services. That would

create scale, and it seems to me to be a sensible, market-oriented Conservative policy. If only we had so many more of them at the moment. Come along—it cannot be that difficult.

More widely, it is important that the consumer credit market is fit and able to serve customers across the credit spectrum. I urge the Minister to undertake work to see whether the Bill can be adjusted to accommodate those views. Reimagining the common bond, promoting strategic mergers and supporting the illegal money lending teams to clamp down on illegal lenders are small tweaks. I know that those are issues that he takes seriously. I hope—I ask this in every Adjournment debate—he will meet with me and the Centre for Social Justice to discuss how we can take this agenda forward. I thank him for his time today and for listening to me. I thank hon. Members present and hope that, as I have been concise, the staff of the House can make it in time for kick-off.

6.21 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith):

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who has a distinguished record in advocating for this subject that is matched only by his distinguished record in speaking up for his constituents.

As my hon. Friend so persuasively explained, loan sharks—he prefers to call them illegal money lenders, so I will do so going forward—can at best use unfair, hidden fees and sky-high interest rates and, at worst, some of the much more aggressive practices that he talked about. The Government recognise many of the concerns that he outlined, and I recognise them from stories that I have heard.

Illegal money lenders prey on the most vulnerable people, which is one of the saddest things about this particular form of crime. As we heard in the case of Michelle, it causes the victims great harm and distress, as well as inflicting damage on the wider communities—sometimes, those communities already face adversity—in which they operate. It is a devastating crime.

This is not a novel issue affecting only some. Only recently, I too met the Centre for Social Justice, including Matthew Greenwood, who has produced an excellent report, to listen to the findings about the prevalence of illegal money lending in England. I want to be absolutely clear with the House that lending money without Financial Conduct Authority authorisation is a crime. We want to clamp down on this immoral and damaging practice, and that is why, as my hon. Friend mentioned, the Treasury funds the illegal money lending teams across the UK. Those teams include specialist local trading standards officers who operate nationally and work alongside the FCA in maintaining standards in the consumer credit market. They can draw on geographically dispersed community intelligence officers, who are crucial in identifying local illegal money lenders, who disproportionately operate in low-income communities, and clearly, by the nature of the crime—my hon. Friend mentioned that there is often a family and friends link—can be hard to detect.

Since the teams were established in 2004, they have prosecuted over 400 cases of illegal money lending and the associated criminality that accompanies it, and

have caused nearly £90 million of illegal debt to be written off. That is a huge number, but there is more we can do.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for the comprehensive and detailed response he is giving, which I think is what the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) is looking for. I mentioned the issue in Northern Ireland in my previous intervention. I know that the Minister may not have had an opportunity to speak to anyone in Northern Ireland, whether in policing and justice or in the Police Service of Northern Ireland, but if he has, can he give any indication of what discussions he has had with those in Northern Ireland, where paramilitaries seem to be the moneylenders, about how we can take those bloodsuckers—which is what they are—out of society and off the backs of the local people?

Andrew Griffith: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I have not had that opportunity: I am a relatively new Minister, but one who has already had impressed upon him the gravity and prevalence of this situation. I will undertake to understand the situation not just in England, but in all parts of our Union, including with the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Of course, if we are going to tackle this problem, it is right to tackle it in every corner of the Union and make sure there is no hiding place.

The Government have increased funding since the Treasury took over responsibility in 2017. That funding has gone up by 37%, and this year, the Government will provide around £7 million to the teams. I understand the desire of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys for more resources to be put into this area. I will take that away, meet with the teams and those responsible, and see what more we can do, whether that is simply a question of resources and priorities or whether some legislative changes could be examined. I cannot make any promises at the Dispatch Box today, but I will do that for my hon. Friend as we seek to bear down on this issue.

Those teams also provide support to victims and education to those who are most at risk, and they tell me that they have helped over 30,000 people through that process. They undertake community work, warning people like Michelle, my hon. Friend's constituent, of the risks of loan sharks—perhaps that term is okay in this colloquial context—or illegal moneylenders. They also support people through the provision of legal and affordable credit, which is something I am very keen to increase. As my hon. Friend impressed on me, we have to work upstream, providing safe, legal and low-cost alternatives to cut off the demand for this product at source. I want consumers to build resilience through having a savings buffer, as well as getting young children into the savings habit at a very early age, as I did. That is a great life gift to give to somebody, and we are well placed to do so through the provision of things like credit unions—safe, legal and affordable credit when people need it.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is incredibly gracious in giving way, and I am not going to hold up the debate for much longer. I just want to say that I was very fortunate to have a mother who, when I was 16, gave me my first

£10. I went down to the Northern bank, as it was then—it is now Danske bank—and that was the first stage in my savings. That instilled a habit in me, and probably in all my brothers and sisters, of saving and being able to pay our debts.

Andrew Griffith: I commend the hon. Gentleman and his mother—he probably would not be where he is today if not for that brilliant savings habit established at an early age. I had a National Savings and Investments blue book; I used to go along to the post office, put in my pound and get a little entry into that book.

I do not mean to digress—not every part of the United Kingdom has an important fixture, a date with destiny, shortly—but I share the passion of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys about getting people into the savings habit. I will be meeting soon to understand more about the opportunity presented by community development finance institutions, which provide a local, place-based alternative source of credit to people. Also, as my hon. Friend mentioned, there is the brilliant Help to Save scheme, and it would be a delight to work with him to see how we can upscale that—I am sure that he has great insights into it. The scheme is very creditable. It does a good job, and I am delighted to learn that it has helped more than 350,000 individuals. However, as we learned on the prevalence of illegal lending, there is a great deal more to do, and I am keen to understand that scheme more. I recently met the management team of National Savings and Investments at its new offices just around the corner from here. It operates that scheme on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions, and that could provide a great opportunity.

I know that people across the United Kingdom are worried at this time about the cost of living. Some of them are seeing their disposable incomes decrease or be squeezed. We are fully alive to the fact that that may induce people to turn to illegal lenders. To help the most vulnerable, we have announced £37 billion of support for the cost of living this financial year. We have taken decisive action to support millions of households and businesses with rising energy costs this winter through the energy price guarantee and the energy bill relief scheme. I know that my hon. Friend would say that there is always more to be done, and that the Prime Minister would say that, however generous the Government wish to be, there is a limit to how much we can do. We seek to get the balance right.

In addition to the energy price guarantee, millions of the most vulnerable will receive £1,200 of support through the £400 from the energy bills support scheme, the £150 from the council tax rebate and a one-off £650 cost of living payment. I hope that that gives my hon. Friend some reassurance about how seriously we take this issue and how we are putting the taxpayers' money where our mouth is, in terms of helping the most vulnerable and trying to keep them out of the clutches of illegal money lenders. I undertake to him to continue to work hard to introduce safe, legal and affordable alternatives, as well as to be relentless in our pursuit of those who would try to exploit this opportunity.

Question put and agreed to.

6.32 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 29 November 2022

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

Devolution of Justice: Wales

9.30 am

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of the devolution of justice to Wales.

Diolch yn fawr iawn, Cadeirydd—thank you very much, Mr Vickers; it is an honour to serve with you in the Chair. I am pleased to have secured this debate on the potential merits of the devolution of justice to Wales.

Wales, of course, has its own distinct legal history dating back to the laws of Hywel Dda, prior to the Acts of Union in the 16th century. In spite of the fact that many of us enjoy talking about Welsh history immensely, I am not here to make the case for devolution by looking into the past. I am here today because of the potential for a better future and because the case for devolution of justice is self-evident for those who care to look. It is a permanent question seeking an answer in the constitutional landscape of the United Kingdom, and I believe this to be irrefutable, whether the matter is approached from a Welsh viewpoint or from a Westminster viewpoint: that is an important point to make.

It has been more than eight years since the Silk commission recommended devolving police and youth justice to Wales, although those powers were not incorporated into the Wales Act 2017. It has been three years since the Thomas commission on justice in Wales published its report in October 2019, setting out a long-term vision for the future of justice in Wales. The Thomas commission produced 78 different recommendations on how Wales can have a justice system fit for the 21st century, the central one being the devolution of justice and policing and the creation of a separate Welsh legal jurisdiction. To quote the report directly,

“the people of Wales are being let down by the system in its current state. Major reform is needed to the justice system and to the current scheme of devolution.”

The weight of evidence is behind devolution. There is a growing consensus across civil society, academia, the Welsh legal profession and justice workers in the system that this needs to move ahead. That consensus is also to be found at the political level. All of Wales’s police and crime commissioners have said that the devolution of justice and policing is the next logical step. All the representatives of the justice unions who speak here and who also speak with the Senedd are engaged with how matters could be dealt with better if justice were devolved—that is the point of devolution: how the outcomes could be better. A majority of Members of the Senedd support the devolution of justice, as outlined in the Welsh Labour Government’s co-operation agreement with Plaid Cymru, which is a year old this week.

Despite having a Parliament and a Government, a legislature and an Executive, Wales is a nation without its own legal system and courts. For a nation with

22 years of policy making characterised by the values of social justice, equality and community strength, Wales can only stand by and watch the Westminster Government impose fundamentally different values through the arc of the criminal justice policy. Imagine if Wales had policy control over that arc, from crime to arrest—namely, policing—and prosecution, and then from sentencing to imprisonment and probation. Imagine that the Government of Wales had even the powers equivalent to those held—wait for it—by the Mayors of Greater London and Manchester. This is in stark contrast to Scotland and Northern Ireland, and it is unheard of internationally. When the Minister responds, could he tell us of any other examples of nations that have their own Executive and legislature but no judiciary? Does he honestly believe that this is the best way to structure an effective justice system?

The response by the UK Government to the Thomas commission was characterised by a combination of “Westminster knows best” and funding scaremongering. Here we had a former Lord Chief Justice in Lord John Thomas of Cwmgiedd, heading up an expert commission whose work across two years included a vast amount of evidence from across Wales. That extensive overview and analysis of justice in Wales was dismissed out of hand by the UK Government, who did not even bother to formally respond.

Not content with being told no by Westminster, we in Wales have instead been doing what we have had to do all along: building the institutional frameworks and capacity, piece by piece, so that we are ready for proper control and responsibility over justice. The unification of the Welsh tribunals, which put them on a proper footing, is in effect creating a nascent justice institution, which could in turn be the basis for the transfer of the courts to Wales. We are developing our capacity properly to scrutinise the operation of justice in Wales. At present, the Senedd’s Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee—the clue is in the name—undertakes the work of three committees in one. We are also addressing that capacity through the expansion of the Senedd, which again is thanks to Plaid Cymru’s co-operation agreement with Welsh Labour.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): On my right hon. Friend’s earlier point about tribunals, the seven administrative tribunals that operate in Wales are in a sense Welsh bodies, but control from Westminster—from Whitehall, actually—is very strong. That point was made when the tribunals were set up: Whitehall runs them and has the final responsibility.

Liz Saville Roberts: We will look at areas where there has been a little moving ahead on other aspects of the courts that have been proposed in Wales.

In that respect, I refer to a groundbreaking new book by Dr Robert Jones and Professor Richard Wyn Jones of Cardiff University, entitled “The Welsh Criminal Justice System: On the Jagged Edge”. It is a rigorous and thoughtful analysis of criminal justice in Wales. Indeed, it is the first of its kind, because the evidence is only now beginning to become available, and at present we have only a snapshot. I think that all will agree that, if we are looking for an evidence-based system, we do not want a snapshot: we must be able to track trends and developments over time. That is one of my key asks of the Minister, to which I hope he will be able to

[*Liz Saville Roberts*]

respond anon. The book presents a thorough overview of how justice operates in Wales, and shows why devolution is a vital step for aligning policy, values and legislative powers. As I have already said, that is the case for Northern Ireland and Scotland, and also to a degree for Greater Manchester and London. It is not possible to over-emphasise that inconsistency.

Justice in Wales is currently controlled at Westminster, but the Senedd controls key devolved services that are just as important for the delivery of justice. That has created what Lord Thomas originally called the “jagged edge”—a jagged edge of intersecting competences and responsibilities. That results in serious disadvantages, which include financial and opportunity costs; a lack of coherent, joined-up policy making; and an overly complex system that leads to a lack of understanding of how justice operates in Wales.

The Cardiff University book lays out how outcomes in Wales are particularly poor. When English and Welsh data are disaggregated, we see that Wales performs even worse than England, which is one of the worst performers in Europe. The figure that we will keep coming back to is imprisonment. England and Wales have the highest imprisonment rates in Europe. Because of the disaggregated data, we now know that Wales has the highest imprisonment rate in western Europe. That fuels a cycle of poverty, as well as health and mental health problems. Wales has higher violent crime and conviction rates than England. Black people are six times more likely to be in prison than their white counterparts. Nearly half of Welsh children who are imprisoned are detained in England, far from their homes and family support, and court closures have restricted access to justice across whole swathes of rural Wales. The lack of coherent policy making is one of the key features of the jagged edge, and it is the people in the system—and the communities from which they come and to which they return—who lose out.

First, let us take the case of women in the justice system in Wales. Welsh Women’s Aid notes that the women in the prisoner population, and those in contact with the police and other related services, are far more likely than men to have additional support needs such as mental health diagnoses, a history of drug and alcohol abuse, and homelessness, or to have experienced violence, domestic abuse and/or sexual violence. Importantly, the Welsh Government, with the backing of the Senedd, have a specific policy to reduce the number of women entering custody, given their vulnerability. That is a piece of policy extant in Wales from our Senedd and our Government. However, the aim comes crashing down against the reality of how the criminal justice system operates in Wales and the differing Westminster policy in relation to putting more people into prison.

There are no women’s prisons in Wales. Welsh women are sent most often to either His Majesty’s Prison Eastwood Park in Gloucestershire or HMP Styal in east Cheshire, which are tens or hundreds of miles away from their support networks, and getting to these prisons, particularly by public transport, is extremely difficult. Given that roughly 50% of women prisoners are also mothers, the effect of such distance on the mental health of those women and their children, and on the outcomes for the children, must not be underestimated.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing the debate. She makes important points about the detention of women, and I know that the Ministry of Justice has sought to discuss the issue, negotiate and open facilities in various local authorities. My constituency was a consideration at one time, but no suitable accommodation could be found. Is that not an example of the Ministry of Justice seeking to answer the issues that have been raised? Local authorities themselves are rejecting it.

Liz Saville Roberts: I will return to that later, but because the right hon. Gentleman has raised the point, I will engage with it now as well. There is a residential unit in planning for one area of Wales, but we really need to know exactly which services will be there. Will it effectively be a small-scale prison, or will it actually offer the services that women need? We also need to know what the interface will be between the devolved service and the reserved provision. That is a very timely point, because it has just become apparent at the private prison near Bridgend, HMP Parc, that the local authority has had to step in to take over social services there. Again, this ad hoc arrangement, the lack of clarity and the lack of scrutiny over who is providing what is resulting in bad outcomes, which is why the debate is so timely.

It is evident that there are not many of us in this room. That is actually part of the issue, because Westminster will concentrate on where the loudest majority issues are. However, there is a phenomenon in Wales: the disconnect. Frankly, if this is the best we can do in relation to the disconnect with the highest imprisonment rates in western Europe, we must consider looking at the issue in an alternative way.

Hywel Williams: My right hon. Friend is being very generous and I will pipe down after this, as I hope to speak in the debate. Another small example is when we were campaigning for a prison for north Wales some years ago. We almost got a prison, which would have been a community facility, for the 600 or so men from north Wales who are imprisoned. We also campaigned for units for women and for young people who are held, contrary to the regulations, further than 50 miles away from their homes. What we actually got from Westminster was a 2,000-man super-prison in Wrexham, which does not serve the needs of local people.

Liz Saville Roberts: Again, I will return to that. This is not just a matter of serving the needs of Wales. Sending thousands of prisoners miles away from home—men or women—does not serve the vast majority of those prisoners well either. If we want a joined-up magic connection with housing, work and maintaining kinship, family and friendship connections, which we know are the routes to successful rehabilitation, we should not send prisoners hundreds of miles away from where they will return, because those links will not be made, be they back home in Wales or in communities in England.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am encouraged by what the right hon. Lady said. When we look across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, there are two examples of where it has happened: Northern Ireland and Scotland. Surely those are examples

of what has worked, and Wales should have the same opportunity as Northern Ireland and Scotland for the benefit of those in Wales.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I am honoured that Members from across parties are pointing out the inconsistency that we are experiencing in Wales.

The UK Government's prison population projections from 2021 to 2026 anticipate that prisoner numbers in the England and Wales conglomeration will rise to 98,500 by March 2026. Those are extraordinary figures. As part of that increase, the Ministry of Justice anticipates that the number of adult female prisoners in England and Wales will increase by over a third—36%. Disaggregated data from Wales shows that the number of Welsh women in prison will likely increase from 227 to 308. Therefore, the provision that is being planned now for south-west Wales, although welcome—even to those of us who disagree that that number should be arriving in the system—is highly unlikely to deal with the numbers we are anticipating to arrive in the system.

Under the plans that took effect in May, the maximum prison sentence that can be handed out by magistrates has increased from six months to a year, which is also expected to contribute to a rise in prisoner numbers. Disaggregated sentencing data shows that the average custodial sentence length for women sentenced in Wales already increased from seven months in 2017 to 13.6 months in 2021. Although 23% of the Welsh female prison population was serving sentences of four years or more in 2019, that has increased to 29% in 2021. How does that align with the Welsh Government's stated aim to reduce the number of Welsh women in prison? The answer, of course, is that it simply does not because there is no direct link between the very worthy policy, which most of us support, and the means to bring it about.

I am pleased that the UK Government are working with the Welsh Government to establish a pilot women's residential centre in Wales as an alternative to custody, and my probation service in north Wales is doing very good work to the best of its ability on the ground, but the policy and structure that we have in place hinder it. In truth, the number of women supported will be small and focused in very specific areas of Wales. Therefore, my second question to the Minister is: given that overall incarceration of women from Wales will increase, does he honestly believe that to be coherent policy making for women in the criminal justice system in Wales? Particularly since the autumn statement, it looks likely that Departments such as the Ministry of Justice will have less capital money to spend in the long term. I wonder where that leaves the development of multiple women's residential centres across Wales.

Another issue that shines the cold light of reality on the jagged edge is housing. Housing and the responsibility for preventing homelessness lie, as we all know, with the Welsh Government, and have done so for 22 years, but the policy aim is not properly aligned with the Westminster-controlled criminal justice system at present. The removal of priority need for prison leavers in the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 was driven by several factors, including low levels of housing stock and pressures on hard-working local authority staff in finding accommodation for prison leavers. It was, however, in part due to the inability of

the Welsh Government to control or even influence the upstream factors that affect the rate and timing of demand for housing prison leavers. Even though prison leavers still get let out of prison on Fridays, they get no support at the weekend. The outcomes of that need proper scrutiny.

Those factors include the rapid rise in prison leavers from an ever-expanding prison population, the long distances from home addresses, which reduce the likelihood of prison leavers being able to receive support services, and the fact that Welsh prisoners are widely dispersed across England, making it hard to know when and where the demand will arise when they return to Wales. The same facts apply equally to English-address prisoners held in Welsh prisons. This is not looking at the justice experience just from a Welsh perspective but as a totality.

Alun Cairns: The right hon. Lady is looking at this from a purely nationalistic point of view, and I understand the motive behind that. Does she not accept that a prison in England could be closer to a prisoner in my constituency, and more appropriate than what she envisions in her purist approach, which is that the prison must be in Wales? If it were in north Wales, it would be four and half hours away.

Liz Saville Roberts: With respect, there are a number of prisons close to the right hon. Gentleman's constituency. I was emphasising that women are at present going to prisons in Gloucestershire or Cheshire. If we sent prisoners from south-east England to Parc or Berwyn, they too would be very distant from their homes. That is not an effective way to ensure rehabilitation.

Alun Cairns: That is a challenge that we need to address sensibly, but simply saying that a Welsh prisoner needs to stay in Wales is not sensible. If a Welsh prisoner needs to stay in Wales, must they travel four and half hours from north Wales to a prison in south Wales? We need to recognise the interconnectivity between Wales and England; 50% of the Welsh population live within 25 miles of the border.

Liz Saville Roberts: With respect, the right hon. Gentleman is looking at the convenient location of prisons, rather than at justice outcomes, which is what I hope we look for in our scrutiny. It is not a matter of where people go; it is a matter of their coming back to the communities where they have committed crimes. I am looking at this not just from the point of view of those individuals and their families, although I hope the children of prisoners would certainly be our consideration, but from the point of view of the communities to which they return.

I hope we all aspire to effective rehabilitation. Yes, we penalise people by taking away their liberty, but when they return to the community, we hope that they are healthier than when they went to prison, have the opportunity for more education, are housed, can find work and have a stable family environment. That is all down to services, and there is a jagged edge where there is no interconnectivity between reserved and devolved powers.

To return to housing, since the removal in 2014 of priority need in Wales, there has been an increase in the number of prison leavers presenting as homeless. As we have mentioned, housing is a factor in the success or

[Liz Saville Roberts]

otherwise of rehabilitation. In the year 2019-20, fewer than half of those released from prison custody who were managed by probation services in Wales went into settled accommodation. However, simply reintroducing priority need for prison leavers is meaningless unless we have proper joined-up working between criminal justice and social services providers, as the local authority in Bridgend does.

I have emphasised the two issues of housing and women in the criminal justice system to highlight the illogical nature of the misaligned mishmash of powers and responsibilities, which leads to problems in the operation of justice in Wales. There are countless other examples I could have chosen from across the justice system: policing, probation, courts, education, health services, access to justice and the experience of victims in Wales.

The portrait of justice in Wales is so ill drawn that it can only be presumed that the Ministry of Justice assumes that no one is looking. We are at least looking today, but there is the important question: what is to be done? The Thomas commission proposed the devolution of justice responsibilities to

“enable the proper alignment of justice policy and spending with social, health, education and economic development policies in Wales, to underpin practical, long-term solutions; place justice at the heart of Government; enable clearer and improved accountability.”

Devolution of justice is not simply a nice thing to have, a policy toy to play with. It is essential if we want to build a better and fairer society. It is the only way truly to end the jagged edge and create a system that genuinely serves the people of Wales. It would also offer some protection against the attack on human rights and civil liberties that the UK Government have been undertaking, such as their curbing of protest rights through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022.

It is hard to see how the Welsh Government can develop any plans for a Welsh Bill of Rights without having full control over justice in Wales. I have tried to think from the opposing point of view, and there are three points that critics of what we propose might throw back at us. The first is the cost of devolution. When I spoke in the debate on the Thomas commission report three years ago, the Minister at the time claimed that the additional running costs would amount to £100 million per annum, but that is not even consistent with the evidence provided by the UK Government to the Thomas commission. Rather, the UK Government's 2018 estimate was that the initial set-up costs associated with devolving justice—all right, at the time; fair enough—would amount to £101.5 million, with subsequent additional costs of some £37.5 million per annum.

Focusing on the additional financial costs involved for devolved Government, the Welsh Government estimated set-up costs of £13 million, with £10 million per annum of additional costs to follow. In other words, excluding set-up costs, the extra incremental cost of devolving justice would come to less than half the amount claimed by the justice Minister three years ago. That is in the context of an annual spend on justice functions in Wales of some £1.2 billion.

Moreover, while there would clearly be some additional costs involved in devolving justice, there are estimates that Wales would benefit financially if justice were

devolved. Per capita spend on justice is lower in Wales than in England, but if justice were devolved, the operation of the Barnett formula would, over time, ensure that the amount in the Welsh budget derived from UK spending on justice in England equalised at the English per capita level—that is, it would be more.

While it would ultimately be up to the Senedd to decide how to allocate the extra resource, those funds would be available for spending on justice-related functions, such as crime prevention, tackling substance misuse and reducing homelessness. As it is, the Welsh Government are already putting money into funding extra police community support officers. There is an argument that people in Wales pay more for policing than people in England. This change would ensure better scrutiny, and that the money spent for Wales would be accounted for in Wales.

The potential to reduce homelessness gives an example of the real savings that could be made as a result of our reducing the negative outcomes of the justice system. The charity Crisis has estimated that

“people who experience homelessness for three months or longer cost on average £4,298 per person to NHS services, £2,099 per person for mental health services and £11,991 per person in contact with the criminal justice system.”

It is a matter of whose budget we look at to see the savings. They are not all siloed in one place.

As Lord Thomas himself noted in evidence to the Senedd last year, devolution presents a great opportunity for Wales; we could

“take advantage of Wales's relatively small size and its lack of a vast metropolis to see if you can mould the workings of the bodies together to produce a coherent policy that is designed for the needs of Wales, rather than the needs of a much bigger country with very different potential problems.”

When it comes to the operation of justice in Wales, small really is beautiful, flexible and community focused.

Let me move to the second point I anticipate being used to counter what we propose. Advocates for the status quo might say, “We need better funding for the system.” That does not account for the structural issues at play here. Yes, fair and proper funding for Wales is vital for the operation of justice, but as I have highlighted, different policy decisions in Wales and Westminster are creating unavoidable tensions and failures, which money alone cannot solve.

There are two structures in play, and they are pulling in different directions. For example, even in the years of austerity in the 2010s, under a devolved system, the Welsh Government might well have chosen not to close so many courts or pursue the absurd privatisation of probation. We could have made different policy choices, even in the context of reduced funding.

The last Labour general election manifesto sadly rolled back from implementing the Thomas report, citing that it was a case for only reversing austerity rather than pursuing devolution to Wales. Therefore, cautiously, I ask the shadow Front Bench to recommit fully to implementing the Thomas commission report, just as they committed to doing so in their previous manifesto in 2017. If they will not, the question is whether the Labour party is intent on undermining its Labour colleagues in the Senedd.

Thirdly, other advocates of the status quo point out that it is not further devolution that we need, but better joined-up working between the Ministry of Justice and

Welsh Government officials. However, even experienced MOJ officials in Wales are often overridden by their superiors in London, through policy decisions that often have no thought about Wales. There are agreements in place between the MOJ and Welsh Government, such as the concordat published in 2018 to establish a framework for co-operation between the MOJ and Welsh Government. However, in practice, such agreements do not work properly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) showed when he questioned Ministers about the memorandum in the context of the development of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, it was unclear whether the UK Government followed the concordat and consulted properly with the Welsh Government on the Act, in spite of the impact that so many of the changes to policing and justice would have on devolved policies and competences.

Where UK and Welsh Government are aligned on justice matters, progress is slow. For instance, the Thomas commission recommended that problem-solving courts be established across Wales to promote alternatives to custody and tackle root causes of offending. The UK Government are piloting problem-solving courts, but not one is in Wales. It is in the Welsh Government's justice work plan to pursue the establishment of a court. Can the Minister tell us what recent engagement he has had with the Welsh Government on establishing problem-solving courts in Wales?

The Welsh element of justice will always be an afterthought. My hon. Friends the Members for Arfon, and for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), run after Ministers saying, "Have you thought of this? Have you consulted on that?" The answer almost invariably is a bland no. Then, we find that we have to catch up.

On accountability, the mechanisms and institutions of the English and Wales system do not properly engage with the Welsh part. Let us take the Lammy report—a landmark report on racial disparities in justice. There is no real engagement on how devolved services interact with the justice system in Wales, or exploration of the Welsh content. The specific needs of Wales are drowned out on the Justice Committee. The Welsh Affairs Committee has sought to scrutinise the effect of the interface between reserved and devolved matters.

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for making some points about racial injustice. Does she share my frustration that the Welsh Government chose not to be part of the race equality audit established by the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), to provide a baseline of evidence? There were active invitations and efforts made to encourage the Welsh Government to participate, so that we could establish whether the same problems existed in Wales, and they chose not to. That runs contrary to the right hon. Lady's statement that Wales is an afterthought.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that interventions limit the time available for other Members to speak.

Liz Saville Roberts: Thank you, Mr Vickers. I am drawing to a close. We have data for Wales. Black imprisonment rates are shocking. The Welsh Affairs Committee undertook a 2019 inquiry on the prison system in Wales, but it is not a specialist Committee,

and its inquiries cannot and should not take the place of a full holistic overview of justice and the intersecting devolved services under the remit of the Senedd.

That leads us to the disaggregation of data—the teasing apart of the English-centric statistics that is necessary if we are to observe what is happening in Wales. Outcomes are particularly poor in Wales, and we know that the jagged edge exists, but we cannot properly explain trends in the justice system if the right data is not in place. Cardiff University has revealed disparities in imprisonment rates between England's most and least deprived areas. Meanwhile, disaggregated data has shown that Wales recorded a higher rate of imprisonment. The link between poverty and imprisonment is clear, yet we do not know the degree to which that is true in Wales due to the lack of trends in Wales-specific data. This raises the question of how the MOJ can claim to make evidence-based policy for Wales. I raised that point in a Westminster Hall debate two years ago, yet we are in exactly the same position today, with no regular reporting of Wales-specific justice data. My major ask to the Minister, therefore, is to finally begin regularly publishing disaggregated criminal justice data for Wales, so that we have a proper overview.

To close, there are those who will argue for a piecemeal approach to devolution, but that, to me, will simply exacerbate the jagged edge by creating an even more complex, byzantine palimpsest of a system. If we—I include the Welsh Labour Government in this—want a transformational approach to justice in Wales, piecemeal reform will be tokenistic and on track to fail. Policing and justice, I propose, should be devolved in their entirety to Wales.

Several hon. Members rose—

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): Order. Members should note that I intend to call the SNP spokesman at 10.28 am, which limits contributions to three to four minutes each, if I am to get everyone in.

10.6 am

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Thank you for calling me to contribute, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on securing the debate. It is unfortunate that we have such limited time, but I will try to canter through some of the key points that I want to make.

I approach this debate as an advocate for devolution and as the former Secretary of State who took the Wales Act 2017 through Parliament. It is hard to believe that in 2010 our inheritance from the last Labour Government was the legislative competence order system, whereby the Welsh Assembly had to ask permission to pass legislation in any particular area. It is worth remembering how far we have moved from the system between 2010 and today, when we have a full law-making Parliament in Cardiff Bay. I hope that sets out the context for my remarks.

During the development of the Wales Act 2017, it was clear that some were determined to devolve justice, irrespective of the evidence from within the profession that did not support that devolution. We agreed to disagree with the Welsh Government in the end, with the First Minister specifically saying that he would revisit the matter. The only conclusion I could draw was that the political elite wish to see the devolution of justice, rather than the issue being raised on the doorstep,

[Alun Cairns]

or forming part of a campaign from those in the profession or our constituents, who really wish for genuine improvement in this area. That is not to say that improvements do not need to be made—they do—but there have not been calls for devolution of the issue, other than from the political elite.

I also note that the Commission on Justice in Wales was established by a devolved institution on a reserved policy matter. Imagine if the UK Government decided to have a commission on health or education in Wales—devolved policy areas—without there being equal and active engagement with the other party. That demonstrates that the political elite are driving this agenda, rather than this being something that is demanded.

The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd based her claim around genuine problems that need addressing. I am not denying that there are challenges in the system. We all remember the challenges in Wales—it could be said that they are even greater partly as a result of the intervention by the Welsh Government, who closed down the courts during covid when they were still functioning in England. That is an example where the Welsh Government have sought to influence justice in a negative way.

The right hon. Lady said that devolution of justice is a chance for Wales to have better outcomes. If I wanted to be flippant, I would point to the outcomes in health and education; sadly, our waiting times are longer, and our education outcomes certainly have not improved, as they have across England and Scotland in the past decade or more.

The key point I want to make in the limited time I have is about the importance of the industry that is the legal system operating between Wales and England. Extremely profitable large law firms based in Cardiff form part of an ecosystem that develops businesses, often from the City of London or other parts of the United Kingdom. Functions and professional legal expertise are provided in Cardiff, creating some of the most highly paid jobs in a desired legal profession, creating career opportunities and allowing people to move inside and outside Wales to develop their business model. Some of those firms have office spaces in the City of London and attract the business of the City, and the functions are then conducted in Cardiff. Devolving justice to the Welsh Government and to Wales would really undermine those business models. Those are the businesses that the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd should talk to.

Hywel Williams: The right hon. Gentleman made the claim earlier that this is a matter of the elite calling for change, and then he makes an argument for elite lawyers in Cardiff.

Alun Cairns: I would like to see more elite lawyers in Cardiff, because raises gross value added and creates career opportunities for Welsh people, wherever they come from.

During the negotiations on the Bill that became the Wales Act 2017, I received representations from some of the most senior lawyers in England and Wales, who were very concerned about the agenda of devolving justice and the damage that would cause to the sector.

Liz Saville Roberts: Where does the right hon. Gentleman think our priorities should lie—the business models of law firms or justice for people living in the communities of Wales?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for the question, but I do not think they are mutually exclusive. We can address the injustices that the right hon. Lady has raised—those genuine challenges need to be addressed, and I look forward to the Minister's response—but that should not undermine the large employment numbers, the well-paid positions and the career progression that is provided for people, certainly from my constituency, who work in law firms in Cardiff and south Wales. Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd called for the development of that cluster, but the right hon. Lady's proposals would do nothing but undermine it.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I call Hywel Williams. Four minutes if you could, Mr Williams.

10.12 am

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. My right hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) has made a forceful and detailed argument. I support her questions, and I hope we get some answers.

Justice sticks out like a sore thumb as one of Westminster's biggest devolution failures. Despite later devolution, and the change to a Scottish-style system, London has hung on to justice. Our Senedd now passes laws but it does not control the justice system, the courts or the prisons. Nor does it control the police, although between them local authorities and the Welsh Government provide about 60% of the funding for the police. Again, they have responsibility without power. As my right hon. Friend pointed out, our Senedd is a legislature without its own jurisdiction—the only one I know of in the world.

A lot of public services that make the justice system work are the responsibility of our Government in Cardiff—again, responsibility without power. Even if our public policy changes because of the decisions of our democratically elected Government in Cardiff, that need not follow through to justice. Health, mental health, education, housing, social services, the economy and employment might all improve in one direction, but justice need not change. Those are just some of the services we need to get the criminal justice system to work properly and to ensure that as few people as possible break the law and end up in prison. If they do offend, such services are crucial in getting them back on the straight and narrow. There is a huge hole in the middle of our justice system, which might be one reason why the system in Wales is clearly worse than anywhere else in Great Britain.

My right hon. Friend referred to “The Welsh Criminal Justice System: On the Jagged Edge” by Jones and Wyn Jones, which is an excellent publication that I would recommend to Conservative Back Benchers. Eastwood Park has prisoners from Wales and from England. According to Jones and Wyn Jones, the rate of recidivism—further offending—by the English prisoners is one in 10, but for the Welsh prisoners it is nine in 10. That hugely stark fact points to the problem. I visited Eastwood Park and talked to a prisoner from Aberystwyth who told me she was not going to have any visits,

because the hike from Aberystwyth down to Eastwood Park was too much for her young family. That is the sort of system that we have.

I want briefly to note an historical example of the discontinuity between what Wales wants and what is public policy in Wales, and what we actually get. I hope Members will forgive me for going back as far as 2007, when I tried—as I did later under a Tory Government—to introduce a small but significant reform to the jury system in Wales, to fit in with how things really are in terms of the Welsh language and to allow for bilingual juries.

The Juries Act 1974 is clear that juries should understand the evidence as directly as possible. If members of the jury do not understand English, the judge will bar them. There is no such qualification for Welsh. A matter of principle is at stake. The principle of a language qualification for juries is already conceded for English. However, in Wales, if a young person or a child is giving evidence in Welsh, there is no guarantee that the jury will understand the evidence as directly as possible, as would be the case if the child was speaking English. A wrongdoer might get off or an innocent person might be found guilty, not on the evidence but on how it was heard. My private Member's Bill would have brought some sense to that system, and I recommend it to the Minister.

10.17 am

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on securing the debate. I listened intently to what she said because the issues that drive the debate are vital.

I will be quick because of the limited time I have, and I hope colleagues will forgive me if I do not take many interventions. On behalf of residents and communities in Aberconwy, I thank our policemen and women for all they do each day to keep our communities safe. In April, I highlighted the astonishing work of the North Wales Police intercept team, which was set up to clamp down on organised crime and drug dens throughout north Wales. The team uses innovative technology to intercept and disrupt criminals, making north Wales a hostile environment for crime groups to operate in. In the last fortnight alone, the team has helped to secure the hugely significant conviction of the leader of a county lines network operating between Merseyside and north Wales and to seize considerable amounts of cash and class A drugs. I also thank the new chief constable, Amanda Blakeman, for her work with me in recent weeks on responding to community concerns about the opening of a hotel for asylum seekers in a rural village in the south of my constituency.

I will not miss an opportunity to thank and pay tribute to the police when they do that kind of good work, but that is not my sole motive for highlighting their work and successes today. County lines and the wider trade in controlled substances across north Wales are a cross-border issue that operates on an east-west axis. The point has been made well by others that one danger of the argument being made in this debate is that it focuses on a Wales only, built in Wales, made for Wales and by Wales approach. We have seen the weakness of such an approach in transport, where Wales is deeply

integrated east to west with England. There is no economic driver for a north-south rail link, for example, but there is plenty of demand for east-west rail links.

We see such parallels time and again. Wales cannot consider that it sits in isolation, so my first point is about integration. The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd says there is no legal system in Wales, but there is. *[Interruption.]* Despite Members' protestations from a sedentary position, the UK's legal system applies in Wales, as it properly should, given that Wales is part of the United Kingdom.

One highlight of my job—perhaps the greatest—is being back in my constituency each week speaking with residents, but I do not recall the issue of devolving justice once being raised with me. I do not recall a single email, phone call or letter raising the issue. In fact, I suspect that, once we excluded conversations with fellow politicians and political activists, most hon. Members present would recognise that the prominence this issue has with their constituents is very low indeed. The fact that there are only a few Members here suggests that this is more of a conversation among academics and politicians than a pressing concern to residents.

I would also mention the question of money, because, quite simply, this debate is an answer to a question that is not being asked by residents, and an expensive answer. It is important to mention money, although I do not think money is the only rationale. If this issue has value and importance, as the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd rightly suggests, it is important that we pay the money necessary. However, my point is about value. If these eye-watering sums—£100 million was the estimate of the Silk Commission—are to be paid out, we must see the impact of that and value for it. We might ask the same question about the Welsh Government's fascination with paying out £100 million to have additional Senedd Members. Again, that is an answer to a question that is not being asked.

If I had time, I would draw attention to some of the problems that Wales has in other areas of its public services. However, I will conclude by saying that, while the right hon. Member highlights that Wales has the highest imprisonment rate in western Europe, the reasons are complex. To suggest that the devolution of justice is the solution is to prioritise managing a symptom over addressing the cause. That cannot be right and, for that reason, I resist, at present, these arguments for the devolution of justice to Wales.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): If the remaining three speakers could limit themselves to three minutes, we can just about get them in.

10.22 am

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I would not normally speak on Welsh affairs, but having been asked to contribute—indeed with some consent—and taking into account the fact that I contributed to the previous commission and have met trade unions and federations about this issue, I would make the point that it does not relate to the constitution as such; it relates to the administration of justice. That is the perspective from which I am coming, and I support it. It is for Wales's to decide its constitutional future, but if it wants the best justice system it can have, it does have to take this step.

[Kenny MacAskill]

I have been listening to some of the discussion regarding prisons. One of first things the SNP did on justice when we came in in 2007 was to implement a whole-systems approach. We recognise—it will be the same thing, but with a different name and a different vocabulary, in England and Wales—that behind every troubled child there is invariably a troubled family. If we are going to sort out that child, that cannot be done simply by the justice system. It requires the involvement of education, health and employment. As it was, we made significant reductions in child offending and child imprisonment in Scotland—changes I am very proud of. That is because there was synergy and integration.

That comes to the question of prisons. We had significant problems with prisoners being released on a Friday. Very few prisoners are a bus ride from their home. By the time they got home, the GP was shut, so they were not able to get a prescription. They appeared in court the following Monday having committed another offence, and on the Monday evening they were back in the prison they had left. We have to break that. Of course, we give discretion to prison governors to release people early, but we need to bring together health, employment and education. Ultimate responsibility for keeping people secure until they are released has to be with the Prison Service, but all those agencies need to work together. That is why we need that synergy.

Equally, I understand that laws remain reserved to Westminster, but devolved jurisdictions can still make significant changes, and we did that too in Scotland, which is something I am proud of. We changed and brought in legislation against air weapons and we reduced the drink-driving limit. Air weapons were a significant problem in Scotland. People have been not only shooting animals but killing children. People wanted action. The UK did not wish to act, but the powers were given to us, and we now ensure that people have a licence for an air weapon. Not one political party would roll that back in Scotland. That would be for Wales and the rest of the UK to decide, but nobody in Scotland would support that.

Similarly, we are coming to the festive period, and we have reduced the drink-driving limit in Scotland. I was told that, on the border, it would be a disaster; people would not know which jurisdiction they were in. Well, I spoke to the chief constables, who simply said, “We’ll put up a big sign: ‘Welcome to Scotland. This is the side of the road you drive on, and this is the drink-driving limit.’” No political party in Scotland will go into any election with a manifesto arguing that we should increase the drink-driving limit. Indeed, I think the pressure has to be about giving us the powers.

Even though the laws may remain at Westminster, we can make significant changes. It might not be on those two issues, but there will be issues that matter in Wales on which a significant change can be made, albeit without changing the fundamental structure, with power retained here and the law, as such, across the UK.

10.25 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Vickers. I thank the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) for leading today’s debate.

As a politician representing Northern Ireland, I clearly appreciate the importance of devolution and its contribution to this great United Kingdom, and that is why I am present in today’s debate, despite it relating to Wales. I want to speak about Northern Ireland and to tell Members what we have done and how it has worked for us. Devolution is all about locality and co-operation between our local Parliaments and Westminster, so it is great to be here to reinforce that importance and explain why the right hon. Lady’s contribution is significant and cannot be ignored.

When the Welsh Parliament was established in 1999, it was not intended to be a Government body, hence the lack of devolution relating to justice. Since then, we have seen the devolution of some matters to the Welsh Senedd, but justice remains solely under Westminster control. In Northern Ireland and Scotland, justice is very much devolved, and I will give some examples from Northern Ireland of how devolved justice can be and has been successful. It has been successful for us and, as the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) said, for Scotland, so I think it can be equally successful for Wales.

We have our own Department of Justice in Northern Ireland, with the ability to pass and amend laws, and we have our own Minister of Justice and a policing board, which integrates members of all communities in Northern Ireland. It is possible to do that, and we have done it and done it well. The Department covers all aspects of the justice system—most notably policing and community justice.

Community safety is critical for any country, and I believe that that heightens the calls to devolve justice to Wales, which is what the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd requested, and others backed her in that. While police officers answer to the Home Office in England, the division of powers perhaps makes it difficult to align the justice system in its totality with matters that Wales does have a say over, such as health and education.

Since 2009-10, the UK Government’s day-to-day spending on public services has decreased significantly in real terms, with UK Ministry of Justice spending falling by 40%, and the Home Office’s by around 25%, which puts further pressure on the Welsh Administration. For the safety of the people of Wales, which is absolutely key, it is important that they have more of a say in the funding of their own justice system, giving them the scope to allocate their own budget to their own justice system.

On justice matters such as drug abuse or mental health, there should be collaboration with the Welsh health system, but I imagine that that can become increasingly difficult. There are potentially large benefits to devolving justice to Wales, which the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd tried to illustrate. If we look at the success of the justice Departments of Northern Ireland and Scotland, we can see that a local, joint understanding of tackling crime is indeed the way forward.

To conclude—I am working within the timescale that you suggest, Mr Vickers—I understand the right hon. Lady’s frustrations about why justice has not been devolved yet—but it should be. Perhaps the Government will consider looking at that in the future. Perhaps today’s debate will start that discussion. As mentioned

earlier, the devolution of justice certainly makes the running of the criminal and judicial systems in Northern Ireland much smoother. There is also a greater understanding of how the system works when the people running the system were brought up in that environment. We already have that in Northern Ireland and Scotland, and we also need it for Wales.

I look forward to keeping up with developments on this issue. It is great that we can all represent different regions within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and at the same time understand the importance and success of devolution. We all want devolution—the Government are committed to it—so let us see it in action in the justice system for Wales.

10.29 am

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) not just on securing this important debate, but on finding a topic that manages to unite not just Plaid Cymru and the SNP, but also the SNP, the Alba party and the Democratic Unionist party—

Hywel Williams: And Labour.

Richard Thomson: And the Labour party, indeed. That is quite a set of Venn diagrams to pull together.

Before I get to my in-depth remarks, I will address the commonality of the remarks made by the right hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) and the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar). We heard that the debate was on a rarefied topic—the preserve of politicians, academics and the political elite—and that it was all airy-fairy, fey and far removed from the doorsteps of the communities they represent. Obviously, I do not spend a huge amount of time canvassing in either of their constituencies, but I would venture to say that, just like my constituents, theirs are probably very concerned with justice matters and with outcomes.

If this debate is about anything, it is surely about how the best outcomes can be achieved and how the current set-ups, boundaries and the jagged edge, of which we have heard so much, militates against that. This morning, we have heard from a former Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Justice, the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill), about the benefits that come not just from the separate and distinct nature of the Scottish justice system, but from how the powers of devolution have been used to adapt to particular demands in order to achieve those outcomes, whether those were improved road safety through reducing the drink-drive limit or tackling the menace of air weapons before they were licensed. I could even speak about how the problem of endemic knife crime in west-central Scotland was tackled by adopting a public health approach, which is now being followed in certain measures by the authorities in London. That would not have been possible were it not for the integration not just between the healthcare system and the social services ecosystem, but between the justice system and the policing system.

Robin Millar: I commend the hon. Member on his point. I had the privilege of speaking with John Carnochan at the time about that policy switch in Glasgow to treating knife crime as a public health matter. That

speaks exactly to the point I made in my contribution. Does he not think that attention should be focused on the underlying causes, which is where people's interest lies, rather than on constitutional jiggery-pokery?

Richard Thomson: Of course the underlying problems ought to be tackled, but I suggest the point at issue is how to tackle them and how best to bring to bear the various agencies of the state and the third sector to change that behaviour, rather than sticking a flag on top and saying that this is not something that people in devolved institutions should worry their pretty little heads about.

The devolution of justice has been supported by the Welsh Labour Government through the co-operation agreement signed with colleagues in Plaid Cymru. It follows the central recommendation of the 2019 Commission on Justice in Wales.

My point here is quite a simple one: even in a devolved settlement, there are some powers that naturally sit together. We would not dream of trying to set policies for economic development without looking at education, training and investment in people. We could all hopefully see through the pandemic, even if it was not glaringly apparent before, that the NHS and social care sectors must be considered side by side to ensure we live fulfilled lives and that people are always treated in the most appropriate care settings for their needs. Therefore, I find it somewhat baffling—albeit from the context of being a Scottish politician, as there has always been a distinct and separate Scottish legal system—that we would not consider there to be a disconnect in governance when powers over social aspects are held in devolved Wales and the justice elements are controlled at the other end of the M4.

To take up that point about the disconnect in governance, a sideswipe was taken at proposals to increase the number of Members of the Senedd. I think that needs to be seen in the context of the current boundary commission proposals and the obligation placed on the Boundary Commission for Wales to reduce the number of Welsh seats at Westminster from 40 to 32. At a time when Westminster interest in Welsh affairs is going to diminish significantly, surely it is right to bolster the ability to scrutinise the justice system in the round in Wales.

That lack of control over, and scrutiny of, policing and the justice system from Wales is precisely the issue. Not only is having an executive and legislature without a judiciary anomalous when compared with other countries; as we have heard, it has led to that jagged edge of intersecting competencies and responsibilities between the reserved justice system and key devolved services and institutions. That results in serious disadvantages, including a lack of coherent and accountable policymaking across the jurisdictions, an inability to allocate spending in a co-ordinated manner, and needless complexity that leads to a waste of resources and a lack of understanding of how the system operates.

We can see those disadvantages in the outcomes that I mentioned earlier. It is fair to say that in Wales, those outcomes are particularly suboptimal. Wales has one of the highest rates of imprisonment in western Europe. That fuels a cycle of poverty, as well as mental and physical health problems. Nearly half of Welsh children who are placed in custody are detained in England, far

[Richard Thomson]

from their homes and family support. There is a chronic lack of community provision for women, which also severs family connections.

It is over three years since the Commission on Justice in Wales published its report. Surely it is past time to take forward its central conclusion that justice should be devolved to Wales. Policies and political sentiment matter. The voice of the electorate matters here. With an increasingly populist and draconian UK Government making decisions on justice matters in Wales, attempts to build a more rehabilitative system—if that is what people want, and quite clearly that is what they are voting for at the ballot box—are always likely to be thwarted.

In conclusion, there is little doubt that, as it stands, the justice system as a whole in Wales—for all the best intent of the committed professionals who are working day in, day out to get the best outcomes that they can—is simply not achieving the outcomes that it should and could. This debate should not be about sticking a great big flag on top and saying, “This is not about the priorities of my constituents,” because constituents will be concerned with the outcomes. They will be less concerned with the structures, but they will certainly be concerned that the structures work and are in their best interests, not just for them but for their communities. This should very much be about what works. We can see what works in legislative and governance terms both in Northern Ireland and in Scotland. Surely it is time for us to consider how best Wales could follow in that direction.

10.38 am

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Vickers, for the chance to respond to this debate. I pay tribute to all who have contributed. It is not lost on me that the debate is happening today of all days, as we face England in the football. Yma o hyd. Pob lwc, Cymru. I am sure we are all behind the Wales football team this evening.

A fair and effective system is fundamental to any country, and 12 long years of this Tory Government have completely broken the justice system across England and Wales. When the Commission on Justice in Wales undertook that unprecedented examination of justice, its conclusion was unequivocal:

“the people of Wales are being let down”

by the justice system. Crime is high, charges are low, criminals are getting off and victims are being let down. With record court closures, a decade or more of cuts and crippling court backlogs, the UK Government’s inability to adapt to current pressures and to lead through a victim’s focus is letting every one of us down.

A survey by the Victims’ Commissioner for England and Wales revealed that less than half of victims would report to the police again due to their traumatic experiences. The former Victims’ Commissioner, Dame Vera Baird, said in her resignation letter that the “downgrading of victims’ interests in the government’s priorities” is appalling, and she criticised the UK Government.

That is not just our view; it is the view of victims too. My constituent Sarah, who reported being sexually abused by her doctor, had her truth misbelieved and mistrusted in court. She was stripped of her dignity in

the witness box, and was subjected to vicious public humiliation and personal attacks in the so-called pursuit of justice. She told me:

“I felt like I was being publicly beaten and humiliated. I wouldn’t advise anyone to go through it”.

In Wales, many of the services are the responsibility of the Welsh Labour Government, yet the overarching justice system is at the mercy of this Tory Government. We must recognise the scale of the challenge we face. It is clear that the UK Government’s current approach is not working. They must work with the Welsh Labour Government to see how things can be managed in the future, and above all ensure that victims come first. We must focus not on where but on how justice is delivered.

The probation system in Wales was brought to its knees by a failed privatisation, based on the untested and untried payment by results system. The Tories were repeatedly warned that it would not work, but they persisted anyway. The Welsh Labour Government have done their best to mitigate the worst of the impact across the justice system, but the only solution is to have a UK Labour Government in Westminster working with a Welsh Labour Government in Wales.

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady is making important points that obviously would need to be debated if there were time, but do the Labour Opposition in Westminster support the Welsh Government’s call for the devolution of justice? At the time of the development of the Wales Act 2017, they were opposed to it.

Anna McMorris: The right hon. Gentleman is getting ahead of himself, although I absolutely hope that there will be a UK Labour Government shortly. We in UK Labour are working closely in partnership, as we would in government, to ensure that the best justice system is focused not on where justice is delivered, but on how it is delivered. That is done in partnership, and the details must be worked out.

Alun Cairns: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anna McMorris: That is absolutely not being delivered by this UK Government, who have systematically broken the criminal justice system. It is appalling. Day in, day out, I speak to victims who are suffering and traumatised, and who have been retraumatised by the justice system that this UK Tory Government are presiding over. Only one in 100 rapes recorded by the Welsh police resulted in a charge last year, let alone a conviction.

Alun Cairns: What is Labour’s position?

Anna McMorris: The right hon. Gentleman should listen, rather than chuntering away on the sidelines.

One victim, Rachel, told me:

“They didn’t treat me as a human being”,

as she relived her traumatic experiences in the justice system. She felt that the system was worse than the rape itself.

On International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the crime survey for England and Wales released its latest figures, showing that 1.7 women experienced domestic abuse in the past year alone, but everyone knows that the true number is much, much

higher. According to figures reported by the BBC, about 60% of women in custody across the UK have experienced domestic abuse.

In May, the then Justice Minister, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins)—I have lost count of how many Justice Ministers we have had since—finally announced the pilot for the women's residential centre in Swansea. That came four years after the Government originally announced it in their female offender strategy, even though they labelled it a priority, and the centre will not actually open until 2024. Across Wales, there are a total of zero female estates, and recent Cardiff University research shows that last year 218 Welsh women were sent to prisons in England.

This Conservative Government's priorities have never been on the side of victims, and they continue to treat vulnerable women as an afterthought. Labour has long argued for facilities for vulnerable women with complex needs who would otherwise be sentenced to custody. They need a safe and secure facility that is fit for purpose, and that allows them to maintain contact with their families, especially their children. Shockingly, as the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) pointed out, Wales has more people in prison than almost anywhere in western Europe. All the evidence shows that a sentencing policy that is based heavily on punishment, deterrence and imprisonment is counterproductive.

Robin Millar: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anna McMorris: I do not think there is time, sorry. Despite the Tories' mishandling of justice, the Welsh Labour Government continue to pursue existing programmes of partnership working—for example the women's justice and youth justice blueprints—to ensure that delivery is as good as it can be. Those arrangements require proper collaboration to achieve outcomes for the people of Wales.

Next spring, it will be eight years—and nine Secretaries of State—since the Conservatives promised to bring forward a victims' Bill to strengthen rights and protections and deliver urgent change. As usual, this UK Government have been on the side of dither and delay, yet the issue could not be more urgent. Every day, more and more victims are failed by this Tory Government. Words are not good enough. They fall woefully short of the step change needed to ensure that there are better outcomes for victims of crime, which is what the people of Wales deserve.

A UK Labour Government, working in Westminster with a Welsh Labour Government in Wales, will repair the damage that the Conservatives have wreaked across our criminal justice system and beyond. We owe it to the people of Wales to do so much better.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I call the Minister, Mike Freer, and remind him to give the mover of the motion two minutes to wind up.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Vickers; I think this is your first outing in the Chair. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on securing the debate, and am grateful for her significant

contribution on justice in Wales over the past several years. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions.

The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd secured a previous Westminster Hall debate, which took place on 22 January 2020, on the report by the Commission on Justice in Wales, otherwise known as the Thomas commission, which was published in October 2019. It is inevitable that we have touched on many of the same issues today. In the intervening period, work on considering and, where appropriate, implementing the Thomas commission recommendations was delayed by the coronavirus pandemic, but the right hon. Member has ensured that it remains a live issue for this House.

It will not come as a surprise that the Government's position on the devolution settlement has not changed. We disagree with Lord Thomas and with the Welsh Government, and do not think that justice should be devolved. Indeed, the many challenges brought by the coronavirus pandemic demonstrated in a number of areas that the settlement is working well.

Alun Cairns: The Minister has provided a clear response, and we understand that the Government's view is that we should not devolve justice. Does he understand Labour's point of view on the issue? It seems to me that two different messages are coming from Cardiff Bay and from the Opposition in Westminster.

Mike Freer: My right hon. Friend asked a very pertinent question and did not get a clear answer from the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorris). My understanding is that the official Opposition do not support the devolution of justice—that is what I took from her speech.

Let me go back to what happened during the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic served to demonstrate that in a number of areas the settlement is working well. In fact, the justice system performed better in Wales than it did in England in several respects, and I will say more on that later. Among the key arguments made by those who support devolving justice to Wales is what they see as the principle that a holistic approach is required to ensure that policy objectives can be delivered effectively. Of course, we agree that policies on substance misuse, education, mental health and social welfare need to be aligned with measures to reduce reoffending and protect the public, which is the responsibility of Westminster, but the notion that justice must be devolved to achieve that is misplaced. The Ministry of Justice works closely with the Welsh Government to ensure that justice policies are aligned and that we take account of distinct Welsh needs.

Ben Lake: On the specific point about the alignment between the UK Government, the Ministry of Justice and the Welsh Government, does the Minister accept that it is frustrating, as a Member representing a rural constituency, to have witnessed so many court closures in the past decade? The court closures were made without any clear consideration of the fact that there are no direct transport links, so people have quite literally lost access to justice. Does he understand my constituents' frustration that, contrary to what some Members have said today, the system is not working in lockstep, is not co-ordinated and is not in alignment to ensure the right access to justice?

Mike Freer: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. For every community that is affected by a court closure, the judiciary and the MOJ have to take into account access to justice. My understanding is that the senior judiciary take that very seriously, but I understand the frustration that he vocalises.

The joint MOJ and Welsh Government blueprints on youth justice and female offenders are successful examples of the co-development of strategies across the devolution boundary. The women's justice blueprint seeks to transform services for women in Wales, to help keep women and their communities safe and free from crime. A key aim is to reduce the number of women coming into the criminal justice system, while doing a better job of meeting the needs of those already in the system. Services are in place to support women in Wales at all stages of the criminal justice system, avoiding fragmented delivery and enabling greater consistency in the support that women receive. More than 2,075 women across Wales were referred to diversion support in the two and a half years from January 2020 to September 2022, and 2,700 women were referred to the women's pathfinder whole system approach, which services south Wales and Gwent, over the same period. The service remained operational throughout the covid pandemic, providing support to women with complex needs at a time of increased vulnerability.

Improving family ties is an important part of the blueprint. Through joint HMPPS Wales and Welsh Government funding, a Visiting Mum service is being re-established in HMP Eastwood Park and HMP Styal to help ensure that Welsh mothers are able to maintain positive relationships with their children throughout their prison sentence. Collaboration between the Ministry of Justice and the Welsh Government has led to the procurement of a site for a new residential women's centre in Swansea. That is a particularly important development for Wales, given that there is no women's prison in Wales—a position that the Welsh Government support. The new centre will offer vulnerable women an opportunity to stabilise their lives, with a range of support and interventions designed to tackle the causes of their offending.

We worked closely with partners, including the Welsh Government, police and crime commissioners and local authorities, to identify a suitable location for the RWC. We are grateful for the support that we have received from Julie James, the Member of the Senedd for Swansea West, and others at a local level, but it is disappointing that after so much collaborative work, the application for planning permission was turned down last month, and we will now have to consider the next steps with our Welsh colleagues. However, there are other examples of where the justice devolution settlement is delivering for Wales.

I mentioned earlier that Welsh justice services performed well during the pandemic, often exceeding the performance seen outside Wales. A good example of that is the performance of the Welsh courts, where the MOJ, His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service and HMPPS worked together to keep the courts operating as effectively as possible. As a result, the magistrates courts in Wales were the first to recover to pre-pandemic levels in England and Wales.

During the passage of the Wales Act 2017, it was argued that it was necessary to devolve justice for Wales to operate properly as a legislature in its own right. In fact, we noted in the debate here in January 2020 that the 2017 Act ensures that the Senedd can make law on

devolved matters, including the setting of criminal offences and other measures that enable the proper enforcement of its legislation. We have seen examples of where the Senedd has set its own legislative direction and introduced measures to enforce its policies. I again refer to the action taken by the Welsh Government during the pandemic.

Devolving justice would not simplify the system in a divergent landscape. It would simply shift the so-called jagged edge, to use Lord Thomas's term, so that the devolved justice system has to manage challenges posed by reserved matters, which I would argue would be more complex than the current position.

There are also strong economic arguments in favour of maintaining the current justice settlement for Wales. A fully devolved justice system, akin to the Scottish and Northern Ireland models, would require Wales to be self-sufficient, including with regard to offender management and a prison estate that met the needs of the full range of prisoners. There are no category A prisons or, as I have already noted, women's prisons in Wales. Wales benefits from the economies of scale that flow from being part of a larger offender management system, including the allocation of prisoners based on need and the risk they pose.

Even under other models, such as making use of the current prison estate but putting in place agreements between the Welsh and Westminster Governments on criminal justice and offender management, there would still be a need for the Welsh Government to have a justice function to manage policy across the board. They would have to develop and implement policy on criminal, civil, family and administrative law, and on matters such as legal aid. They would have to recruit staff sufficiently experienced and knowledgeable in those matters. The result of all that activity would be a significant interface between a devolved justice system and a larger body of reserved law; a much more complicated jagged edge. We are talking about a huge expense for the Welsh Government and, ultimately, the taxpayer.

I am conscious of time, but I will address one particular point raised by the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd. That is the call for greater transparency of data. That is not an unreasonable request, and I am pursuing it vigorously as a new Minister to the Department. I am happy to give the commitment to work with her and others to ensure that the data is more accessible and transparent in the interests of justice.

Robin Millar: Will the Minister undertake to ensure that that is a reciprocal agreement, and that data is made available from the Welsh Government to facilitate that free exchange of data between the two Governments?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Only half a picture is no picture at all. There must be transparency both ways.

The UK Government remain firmly opposed to devolution of justice to Wales. We believe that the current devolution settlement is working well and should be retained.

10.58 am

Liz Saville Roberts: I am grateful that the Minister has committed to work with me and others on the disaggregation of data, because I firmly believe that we should all operate on an evidence base, and we need to see trends over time.

When trying to foresee objections to the debate, I did not foresee the one that it would be solely about politicians. The idea that somehow as politicians we are not trying to improve the lives and conditions of our constituents frankly leaves me in despair. At the moment, that is evident. With the exception of the disaggregation of data, the need for that recognises that many of us are possibly working based on opinions rather than facts. We should all, therefore, be working with the facts.

It is striking that only one Welsh Labour MP of 22 is present and actually spoke. The standpoint between what is said by Welsh Labour and by UK Labour is striking in its inconsistency. It is important to note the consistency and experience in the voices from Northern Ireland and Scotland, in that knife crime is a health issue, the familiarity of community needs is important and, frankly, the argument that the border is an insurmountable problem can be blown out of the water. People do understand the difference.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of the devolution of justice to Wales.

Ministerial Code

11 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Ministerial Code.

It is a delight to see you in your place, Mr Vickers. I am speaking in my own capacity, and not as Chair of the Standards Committee. The ministerial code is bust; it does not work. Civil servants find it confusing, Ministers do not care about it and Prime Ministers find it irritating. Central to it is the adviser on the ministerial code, but it is now 167 days since Lord Geidt resigned, and I gather the new Prime Minister has offered the post to three people, all of whom have said, “Not on your nelly”. At least two investigations are already pending, but they cannot be investigated because there is no adviser. There cannot be a publication of the ministerial list of interests because there is no adviser. Frankly, the system is broken.

Most importantly, the code does not do what it says. It says that Ministers are expected to observe the seven principles of public life—the Nolan principles. Let us just go through a couple of them. First, transparency. One would think that transparency requires that the public know all interests held by Ministers: what business interests they have, if any; who had invited them to expensive social occasions, such as movie premieres; what clubs give them free membership; who had paid for trips abroad; what charities they were trustees of; and what meetings they had with lobbyists, trade associations or press barons—anything that might affect their decisions as Ministers. One might also expect the interests of Ministers’ spouses and family members to be publicly available, and that all that information would be available within a week or so of any Minister taking up office or acquiring a new financial or personal interest.

That could not be further from the truth. The most recent register of Minister’s interests was published on 31 May this year. It is not an accurate list of Ministers now. It is not even an accurate list of ex-Ministers, or of Ministers who have been Ministers in the intervening period. In case we think that this year they should be forgiven for being in a bit of a mess, because of the terpsichorean dance that has been played in Downing Street—let us face it, many of us do not know who is the Minister for what at the moment, including some Ministers, who do not quite know their areas of responsibility—the list itself is very out of date.

At the best of times, the list is published only once every six months. By contrast, the Commons Register of Members’ Financial Interests is updated every fortnight when the House is sitting. The situation is often even worse with the ministerial register. The new Government appointed in December 2019 did not produce a list of its Ministers’ interests until July 2020. There was then a 10-month gap before a new list was produced, during which lots of new Ministers had arrived in post.

As for the supposedly annual report by the adviser on ministerial interests, there was no annual report in 2020 because there was no adviser. Ministers are meant to advise their Department of any relevant interests whenever they take up a new ministerial post. However, because that is published at best only twice a year, the public is nearly always in the dark about what financial interests a Minister might or might not have.

[Chris Bryant]

Bizarrely, because the report appears so infrequently, some financial interests are reckoned to be more than six-months old by the time they are reported, and are therefore never published at all. That is not transparency. As things stand, we have no idea what ministerial interests the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Transport Secretary, the Secretary of State for the Department for Work and Pensions or the Minister for Security might have, because they simply have not been published.

The system leads to glaring anomalies—the following instances prove my point. None of the Members concerned have done anything wrong. To my knowledge, they have fully declared everything they are required to declare, but the way the Government operate ministerial registrations means that discrepancies abound. I have told all Members to whom I am about to refer exactly what I am going to say.

For instance, the latest version of the register, dated 31 May, states that the right hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden), who is Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, has as his only interest his role as patron of Watford Peace Hospice, yet according to Companies House he is the director of C&UCO Services Ltd, C&UCO Management Ltd and C&UCO Properties Ltd of 4 Matthew Parker Street, London. I do not know whether that is still true—I presume those are the Conservative and Unionist party's official management companies—but there is a discrepancy. I am told that he declared that to his Department, but it was decided that it was not a relevant interest. I do not understand why.

Likewise, the entry for the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) states:

“Trustee of discretionary family trusts”

without specifying what the trusts are, unlike the entry for Lord Benyon, which specifies all the trusteeships he holds. The entry for the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North does not include the following shareholdings, which are in the Commons register, however: Arnold Estates Ltd, Arnold Estates LLC and MSA Properties Ltd. I do not understand why those are not in both registers.

Similarly, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), who is Economic Secretary to the Treasury, has registered in the Commons that he has been a member of Wilton Park Advisory Council from 1 July 2020—that is, he assures me, an unremunerated ex officio role that he quite properly disclosed to the permanent secretary to the Treasury—yet that does not appear in his list of ministerial interests, presumably because the Department or the adviser—

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): Order. May I clarify whether the Member has advised any relevant Members that he will refer to them?

Chris Bryant: Yes, I have said so already, Mr Vickers.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I wanted to place that on record.

Chris Bryant: I have sent Members copies of precisely what I am going say.

However, that role does not appear in the list of ministerial interests for the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs, presumably because either the Department or the adviser, for some reason best known to themselves, thought it irrelevant.

The ministerial entry for the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, says that he is

“a director of Millgap Ltd, an investment holding company personally owned by him.”

The Commons register, however, lists the following:

“Shareholdings: over 15%... Pluto Capital Management LLP... Millgap Ltd... Pluto Partners LLP... Pluto Silverstone Co Invest LLP... Pluto Monza Co Invest LLP... Pluto Development Partners LLP”,

although it does not include his directorship of Millgap Ltd.

I do not think that any Member I have mentioned has sought to hide anything. Indeed, I think in each case the Member has made a full declaration to their Department, but the Department, or the adviser, has published only what it thinks fit. Different Departments clearly treat matters such as trusteeships differently, and the rules differ as between the ministerial code and the House of Commons code of conduct, which leads to ludicrous anomalies and undermines transparency.

Moreover, the Government continue to insist that Ministers acting in their ministerial capacity should be exempted from the requirement placed on all other MPs to register within 28 days hospitality they receive that is worth more than £300. The Government say that ministerial transparency returns cover that, but those returns carry far fewer details than the Commons register, and they are published at least three months late, and sometimes up to a year late. Unlike the Commons, which produces a single document, each Department does that separately, so anyone who wants to see the full picture of ministerial interests across a year has to look at more than 300 online forms every year.

This is about as transparent as a hippopotamus's bathwater. It would make far more sense for all financial and other interests of a Member, whether a Minister or not, to be available in one place, published as close as possible to real time, and certainly no less than every month.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point. Does he agree that it is simply wrong that there is a difference between what we register as MPs and what Ministers register, particularly given that the point of registration is to ensure transparency over how decisions are made? That is even more important for Ministers, arguably, than it is for MPs.

Chris Bryant: It seems to me utterly bizarre that we have a lower level of transparency for Ministers, who make decisions in their personal capacity, than we do for ordinary Back-Bench Members of Parliament. The best decisions we get to make are about our own diaries, and sometimes not even that.

It seems we have entered into a preposterous set of arrangements. The Standards Committee has made proposals for a new code of conduct that would no longer exempt Ministers from the requirement placed

on all other hon. Members. I very much hope that the Minister, when he gets up later, will say that when we have the debate on the new code of conduct on 12 December, as I understand it, the Government will support the measures advocated by the Committee.

Let us try another Nolan principle: accountability. It might be thought that a code of conduct should be enforceable and if someone breaks the rules, they should face disciplinary action. Yet the Government constantly assert that ministerial appointments and discipline are solely a matter for the Prime Minister. I understand the argument—sort of—but only to a degree. If a Minister makes a minor error of judgment, it should ultimately be up to the Prime Minister to decide whether they should stay in post. However, we do not have a separation of powers in the United Kingdom, despite what several Ministers continue to assert. I am sure the Minister who is about to speak, and who is a better historian than some others, will agree that the amendment that would have removed Ministers from Parliament and inserted a separation of powers in the UK was lost in 1713 by the Whigs.

By common law, all Ministers are Members of one or other House of Parliament. That is just a fact. It therefore undermines the whole of Parliament when a Minister is seen to get away with behaviour in their Department as a Minister that, if committed on the parliamentary estate and within the parliamentary community, would see them suspended from the House and possibly expelled. How can it be right that we have a stricter and more independent system for disciplining sexual harassment and bullying in Parliament than in Government? How can we change the culture across Parliament or in any Government organisation if Ministers are exempted?

I understand that people draw the line differently when it comes to bullying. I have a very low threshold and see behaviour as intimidatory when others might think it is acceptable. Others think they are just being forceful, exacting or demanding. I would draw a distinction between assertive, which is okay, and aggressive, which is not. I would say that an MP should always remember the imbalance of power when assessing their personal behaviour. Veering between exorbitant praise and sharp public criticism can completely undermine staff, and I would worry if a single member of my staff were ever reduced to tears by my behaviour.

More importantly, all MPs are in this together. We need to change the culture of the whole of British political and parliamentary life, and we will never succeed in doing that if we have a separate rule for Ministers. Some, including the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, have argued that the independent adviser should be put on a statutory basis, that he or she should be allowed to initiate and conclude investigations into alleged breaches of the ministerial code without the say-so of the Prime Minister, and that he or she should be allowed to recommend or impose suitable sanctions. I have argued that myself, but I no longer think that is enough—for four reasons.

First, the spider's web of our standards system is now far too complex. In addition to the law of the land, MPs are subject to 12 different sets of rules. It is difficult for us to understand all the rules that apply to us and even the system that applies to us, let alone for the public to do so. That undermines parliamentary democracy.

Secondly, since the last general election 177 Conservative MPs have been Ministers. Some have not lasted long, of course. The Minister himself has been in and out of Government. He had 292 days at the Department for Education, then 76 days out of office and 37 days at the Department for Work and Pensions before starting his present job. MPs' financial and other interests, including his, have remained the same throughout that period, but he has been governed by different systems at each of those moments. It is manifestly bonkers that MPs have to switch in and out of different regimes, and that the public do not get to know about it, in many cases until many months afterwards.

Thirdly, the Owen Paterson debacle showed that Ministers and their offices do not understand the Commons rules. Rory Stewart, formerly of this parish, argued that his meetings with Mr Paterson were fine because his private office would have advised him if they were a problem, but that office did not spot that Paterson was clearly engaged in paid lobbying and peddling influence on behalf of his paying clients, because, frankly, interpreting the Commons code of conduct is not its job.

Fourthly, it is simply no longer good enough for Prime Ministers to say, "As long as I enjoy a majority in the Commons, I and I alone get to choose who is a Minister." That is the winner-takes-all approach to politics. We have very few checks and balances in the British system as it is, but when Ministers' behaviour brings Parliament into disrepute, it is a matter for Parliament, not just the Executive.

It is time to amalgamate or at least align the ministerial code with the code of conduct of the House of Commons. The ministerial exemption for registering interests in the House within 28 days should come to an end, as should the ministerial exemption from the rules on bullying and sexual harassment in their Department. Either the House should appoint the independent adviser on the ministerial code directly, which I know some have advocated, or the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards should be given that responsibility.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers, and to respond to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) in whatever capacity and with whichever hat he is wearing today. He, like me, has a second job—mine is currently as a Minister in the Cabinet Office. It was very good of him to enunciate how many days I was in my previous post; now I have a record in *Hansard* that I can refer back to when I want to check it.

Although my response today will be relatively brief, I want the hon. Gentleman to know that, as a new Minister, I am genuinely interested in the points he has raised and I will certainly consider them with colleagues. He has previously raised these important points in the House on a number of occasions, including 7 September, I think—it is my birthday; I remember it well—and again on 18 October. He is right to say that in the coming weeks we will have an opportunity to debate these matters again.

The hon. Gentleman raises substantial issues concerning transparency, timeliness and the independent adviser. As the Leader of the House said a few weeks ago of the

[Alex Burghart]

recommendations proposed by the Committee on Standards, which the hon. Gentleman chairs, we are “very conscious that there is further progress to be made and the House should have the opportunity to consider the additional recommendations”.

We are looking to identify solutions that command cross-party support on outstanding issues, including to improve the transparency and timeliness of ministerial declarations. The Government are very clear in our views that, as the Leader of the House said,

“the rules regulating Members’ interests and ministerial interests”—[Official Report, 18 October 2022; Vol. 720, c. 636.]

are distinct. However, the hon. Gentleman has raised important points about consistency that bear further cogitation.

I can confirm that we are talking to officials about proposals we are considering to bring forward and improve the system, and that revised guidance on ministerial transparency data will be published in the coming weeks, first on gov.uk. The guidance will be updated to more closely reflect modern working practices and Ministers’ obligations under the ministerial code. As the Leader of the House has said, we are mindful of the BAFTA challenge that has been set by the hon. Gentleman. As I said, there are important points on consistency.

Chris Bryant: The Minister entices me on the BAFTA point—and it is not just the BAFTA point, but the Bond point. If I were invited to a Bond premiere, with tickets worth something like £2,000 or £2,500, I would have to declare that within 28 days, detailing the cost and who had paid for it. All that would then be published within two weeks. However, several Home Secretaries and Foreign Secretaries ago, when the then Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), and the then Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), went, they decided that they had gone in their ministerial capacities. A colleague of the Minister said that they had gone in a ministerial capacity because the Home Secretary has responsibility for MI6, which is incorrect.

Can the Minister see that the whole concept of going to a Bond premiere in a ministerial capacity brings the whole system into disrepute? Would it not be simpler for everything to be in a single place, so that members of the public could openly and transparently see the full range of a Minister’s interests?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman has made his point very clearly once again.

On timeliness, in autumn this year the Government reaffirmed their commitment to transparency, and said they would publish transparency data within 90 days of the end of each quarter. The Cabinet Office has strengthened advice to Departments on open access data, which will ensure that ministerial transparency is easily accessible to all. I appreciate what the hon. Member for Rhondda says about the importance of members of the public being able to see what is happening as promptly as possible. I can see that he is anxious to intervene again.

Chris Bryant: It is just that 90 days is not prompt; it is 28 days in this House. After 90 days, people have forgotten what they went to. I do not understand why it could not be within a fortnight, especially given the fact that Ministers might move on or make different decisions in the intervening time.

Alex Burghart: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that Ministers will not have forgotten what they went to. As he is aware, there is a very clear process, which involves permanent secretaries and good internal recording systems. He is right that the last account was published in May. It is ordinarily published every six months, so although we have been without an independent adviser, we would only be coming up for the next publication now. Because the new independent adviser is yet to be appointed, that will probably be delayed, but the Government expect it to be a very high priority for the new adviser, when he or she is appointed.

Chris Bryant: The obvious questions are, when will the adviser be appointed, and can the Minister confirm that at least three people have already been offered the post and turned it down?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman appears to have information, if it indeed is true, that is not available to me. I have not been made aware that anyone has turned the job down. I reiterate that the Prime Minister has said that the appointment of an independent adviser is a priority for him. He is pursuing it with urgency, and we very much hope and expect that an independent adviser will be in place soon. That will kick-start a number of processes that have fallen into abeyance.

Chris Bryant: I am sorry to impose on the Minister in this way, but I just offer a piece of—I hope—helpful advice. My guess is that people might be refusing the job because they are worried that their position, credibility and reputation will be at risk unless the Prime Minister agrees that a new adviser can initiate investigations, including into the Prime Minister if necessary, without the say-so of the Prime Minister, and can recommend sanctions. Unless the Government make that change, I cannot see how anybody worth having in the role will accept it.

Alex Burghart: Obviously, in May the Government said that the independent adviser would have the power to initiate investigations. The then independent adviser Lord Geidt said that that was a workable solution. As I say, there will be a new independent adviser soon. That is the desire of the Prime Minister. He is keen to ensure that our process is fit for purpose, and he is keen, as the hon. Member for Rhondda is, to ensure that we have transparency, accountability and timeliness. I am very confident that this Administration, under this Prime Minister, with a new independent adviser, can deliver that.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Economic Impact of Lockdowns

[MRS SHERYLL MURRAY *in the Chair*]

2.39 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): The debate may continue until 4.9 pm.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the economic impact of covid-19 lockdowns.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray, and to be able to debate the economic impact of covid-19 lockdowns, because so often during the pandemic we did not have the opportunity to question key decisions that were taken. In those early days of covid, much was done in a rush. Although it was understandable then, with the passing of time analysis needs to be done of the measures and decisions taken. No matter how painful and difficult the conversations will be, we need to have them. Open and frank conversations are made more difficult by the fact that the vast majority of MPs voted for continued lockdowns and most of the media was reluctant to question them.

Although everyone supported the first lockdown—March to June 2020—no one knew what we were confronting. As knowledge of covid and medical treatments grew, so should the debate have grown, particularly about subsequent lockdowns, but that was not the case. Prior to March 2020, how many of us had heard of the concept of lockdown? Blanket, stay-at-home policies were an unknown and unevicenced method of trying to control the virus.

Although lockdowns will have saved lives from the virus, many experts predicted from the start that they would also cost lives, through the unintended collateral damage they inflict. A Government report in July 2020 found that more than 200,000 lives could be lost due to lockdown. Well-rehearsed pandemic protocols, including those endorsed by the World Health Organisation and the Department of Health and Social Care had not previously recommended lockdowns because, quite simply, they are a blunt instrument.

In addition, it was felt that such drastic restrictions would not be tolerated by western democracies. As Professor Neil Ferguson infamously put it, after observing entire communities in China in lockdown,

“We couldn’t get away with it in Europe, we thought. And then Italy did it. And we realised we could.”

That poses a question. If people assumed that the UK population would not tolerate lockdowns, was messaging hardened and questions against lockdown not tolerated, in order to force compliance? We might never know the answer. Ongoing lockdowns were achieved, but at what price? Interestingly, only the other week, Andrew Gilligan, a former No. 10 adviser said on GB News that, looking back, the ongoing lockdowns were wrong, but politically we could not have got away with not doing them.

Why was that? How was an environment created in which even asking questions and providing alternative suggestions could get someone demonised? And those people were. I wrote an article for *The Daily Telegraph* in November 2020 saying, regretfully, that politicians had been guilty of a dereliction of duty. Instead of just listening to the one-dimensional approach of Public

Health England and the scientists, they should have factored in all competing consequences. They did not and ploughed on, without questioning those other factors.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that, during the pandemic and lockdowns, Parliament was not given the opportunity during certain phases to debate the impact lockdown was having on our constituents, and that we should never lockdown Parliament again?

Esther McVey: My hon. Friend and near neighbour raises an important point. This House is about debate and questioning things, and I am afraid that that did not happen. As he rightly says, we should ensure that Parliament never closes down again, as it did under the pandemic. Even back then, the figures from the Office for National Statistics pointed out that lockdowns and anti-covid measures would lead to the deaths of 200,000 in the medium to long term, due to missed treatments, under-diagnosis, loss of jobs and tax revenue, with disadvantaged people suffering the most. Bristol University in 2020 put that figure much higher, at 560,000 deaths.

Debates are now occurring on the unintended consequences of lockdown, from the mental health issues suffered by our children, to increased deaths of dementia patients, and the lack of visiting rights in care centres and hospitals still happening, even now. A big thank you has to go to the academics and scientists who initially raised concerns in those areas, including Professor Townsend, Professor Carl Heneghan and Professor Robert Dingwall, who asked those all-important questions.

Today, however, our focus is on the economic consequences of lockdown: rising financial hardship; increased poverty levels in the UK; the hundreds of thousands of people since lockdown now classed as economically inactive; the impact on them, their families and local communities; and the economic impact on the next generation’s wealth and earning capacity. It is estimated that school closures and lockdowns will lead to £40,000 being lost from lifetime earnings for each individual. A report by UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank finds that students now risk

“losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings, or the equivalent of 14 percent of today’s global GDP, as a result of COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures”

and economic shocks.

Let us look back at some of the economic shocks of lockdown. The House of Commons Library notes explain that

“The magnitude of the recession caused by the pandemic is unprecedented in modern times.”

GDP declined by 11% in 2020, the steepest drop since consistent records began in 1948 and, based on less precise estimates of GDP going back further, the contraction in 2020 was the largest since 1709. During the first lockdown, UK GDP was 26% lower in April than only two months earlier in February. More than 8 million workers were furloughed during April and May 2020, peaking at 8.9 million—roughly a third of all employees—in May 2020. Overall, 11.7 million jobs were furloughed.

In response, the Bank of England cut interest rates to 0.1% and more than doubled its quantitative easing programme by £450 billion, taking the total value of assets it owned to a peak of £895 billion by December 2021.

[*Esther McVey*]

The total amount of public money calculated to have been spent on tackling the pandemic ranges from £376 billion by the National Audit Office in June 2022 to £407 billion by the International Monetary Fund in September 2021. In 2020-21, Government had income of £794 billion in tax receipts and other revenues, which is £79 billion less than forecast, and spent more than £1,107 billion. The budget deficit was £312 billion, or 15% of GDP, which is a peacetime record. The financial cost for every man, woman and child in this country has been estimated at £5,500.

Former Supreme Court judge Lord Sumption, writing in *The Daily Telegraph* on 18 November, said:

“Compare the modest financial hit experienced by Sweden, the only European country to see through the hype by which other governments sought to justify their measures. Sweden operated a largely voluntary system and refused to lock down. Pandemic-related measures cost 60 billion kronor in 2020 and 2021, according to government figures. This works out at about £460 a head, less than a tenth of the UK figure. Yet their results in terms of both cases and deaths were a lot better than ours.

We are paying the price of panic, populism and poorly thought-out knee-jerk decision-making. At least the current Prime Minister can point to his warnings as chancellor that lockdowns were unaffordable if extended over any significant period of time. Boris Johnson’s indifference to mere money ensured that the cost was not even considered. All that can be said in his favour is that, if the Labour Party had had its way, the lockdowns would have been even longer and more costly.”

Let us look at the inflationary pressures we are now suffering from. As the country and world opened up after lockdown, there were sharp increases in the cost of essential goods and energy as the world emerged unprepared for such rapid demand, putting prices up, from the fuel pumps to the goods on supermarket shelves.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her speech. Although I do not necessarily subscribe to all her views about lockdown, she is right to say that the hospitality sector in particular is suffering dreadfully from energy price increases. I bring to her attention a particular case in my constituency, where we have many pubs and restaurants that are suffering. The energy bills of a large country house, which is open to the public, have gone from £16,000 a week to £60,000 a week. That is entirely and totally unsustainable. Does the right hon. Lady agree with me that the Government have to do something now to ease the pressure on the hospitality sector?

Esther McVey: I welcome my hon. Friend to this debate today. He might be one of those who voted for continuous lockdowns, but it is important that we are all together in a sense of open debate and conversation. The point he raised is correct. If subsequently, after the Government had intervened to close things down, there were effects on otherwise viable businesses, the Government had to step in and support them. Indeed, the Government have given unprecedented support, but I wish we could have had discussions beforehand so that when people voted for lockdown, they knew what would befall them. At the time, too many colleagues did not want to do that.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): May I ask the hon. Lady a question about a comment she made a few moments ago? She talked about populism

and said that was a factor in deciding to implement lockdowns. I am confused by that because lockdowns were, at best, tolerated; they could never be described as appealing to populism.

Esther McVey: I was quoting Lord Sumption, the former Supreme Court judge, who was talking about the way governments were led at that time—those were his words. What we need to take from them is the question of why those decisions were not questioned or challenged by Members of Parliament. Why were those decisions not challenged? If we look at the record of the House, the decision appears popular because MPs voted for it pretty much unanimously, when there should have been greater debate.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the right hon. Lady accept that Lord Sumption was right, although maybe not according to the common use of the term “populism”? First, the use of fear encouraged people to think, “There is no alternative. I have got to do this.” Secondly, the lack of any examination of the measures by the media ensured that there was not any contrary point of view, so listening politicians heard people saying out of fear, “You’ve got to do something”, and the media, when questioning that, saying, “This is the right thing to do.”

Esther McVey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. That is why I quoted Neil Ferguson at the start of the debate, who said that he never thought a western democracy would lock down, and why I posed the question about whether a campaign of fear was then brought forward, creating an atmosphere in which no one could dissent or ask questions. Going back to the question raised by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), there appeared to be a giant consensus across all political parties, leading to that word “popular” at the time.

Chris Green: Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about the point made about fear? When people look at Parliament or much of British life, it appears that we have returned to normal, but not all British life has returned to normal yet, which is having a continuing impact on our economy.

Esther McVey: My hon. Friend makes the point eloquently; I hope he will make a speech later, fleshing out his comments.

By February 2022, inflation had already surged, with the consumer price index hitting 6.2% in February, after which, without doubt, the war in Ukraine added to the problem. As it stands today, we have unprecedented inflation and costs of living.

None of that should come as a surprise. In fact, the Imperial College report of March 2020 that recommended lockdowns specifically said that the

“economic effects of the measures which are needed to achieve this policy goal will be profound.”

While many people talk about the cost of covid, it is actually the cost of lockdown and lockdown rules that need to be questioned.

The Government have spent in the region of £400 billion on the covid-19 response, which has taken the national debt to over £2.1 trillion. To make matters worse, we know

vast sums of money were wasted. For example, seven Nightingale hospitals were built in England, which was an impressive achievement completed in record time. However, most of them were hardly used in the way intended and they cost more than £530 million. The Yorkshire Nightingale closed before ever seeing a patient. Elsewhere, an eye-watering £673 million was spent on unusable personal protective equipment items.

The £70 billion spent on furlough and £84 billion on business support schemes softened the blow for a while. However, the Federation of Small Businesses still warned of a ticking time-bomb, with 500,000 owners of small businesses—the backbone of our economy—at risk of going bust within weeks.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): In my city of Coventry, many small businesses were hit considerably by covid and are still being hit because of the cost of living crisis. Does the right hon. Lady agree that in order to continue to support our small businesses given the turbulent year that they have had, we need to reform business rates and invest in our high streets, and we also need to ensure that our small businesses are given the support needed for them to be able to compete effectively with online giants that have been able to make hay during the covid-19 pandemic?

Esther McVey: I am a massive fan of small businesses, enterprise and those people creating wealth in their communities, and we will have to support them. Also, I will pause for a moment to reflect on all those small businesses that did not get support during the pandemic, which are known as Forgotten Ltd, and they also need support going forward. We again have to create a dynamic world and a dynamic UK for these private enterprises.

Vacancies are now at a record high as people elect to resign from the labour market, which is known as “the great resignation”, and because there are those other people who are now classed as being economically inactive. This is something that we could not have foreseen as we furloughed and closed the country down, but again it is a consequence of the lack of debate, probing and questioning at the time.

It is finally time to publish the much talked-about but still missing cost-benefit analysis that led to the nation being locked down, and to have full disclosure about the facts that were available. Let us review the list of experts on the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, or SAGE, and on other advisory committees. Going forward, let us ensure that there is transparency about the members of these groups, as we have for MPs, such as their political affiliation and the financial support they receive.

All eyes are on the covid-19 inquiry for impartiality and a diverse range of experts to give evidence. We need integrity and clarity, and the policy of lockdown needs to be assessed honestly and fully. However, today I call on the Minister—the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith)—to release the much-awaited cost-benefit analysis of lockdown.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, may I just apologise for the background hum? I understand that staff are trying to resolve it. In the meantime, however, if Members could speak very clearly, I think we can continue with the debate.

2.57 pm

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), both on her speech—the vast majority of which, if not all, I agree with—and on bringing this matter before the House. It was not only during the time of covid that we did not debate covid enough; since the end of lockdown, we have not debated the consequences of the policy decisions taken during covid.

I will just go back to what the Government said at the start of covid; it is always better to go back and examine whether those things actually happened or were honoured. The first thing the Government said at the start of the crisis was that they would follow the science. They did not follow the science. I can give a large number of examples where they did not follow the science, but I will just concentrate on two or three important examples.

One of them has already been mentioned: children losing their education. It was clear from the very beginning of this disease that it was primarily a disease of the elderly and of people with other co-morbidities. It was clear early on that there was essentially no danger to children or anybody else from opening schools, but they were not opened quickly enough. Anyone who goes into schools and knows young children can still see the damage that was done to them both emotionally and educationally because the science was not followed.

The hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) will remember that Greater Manchester, which had a two-tier system of lockdown, was put into lockdown before Merseyside. The Government’s statistics on infection rates and the R number were higher for Merseyside than they were for Greater Manchester, but the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), who is better occupied in the antipodes than he was in this House as the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, decided that he liked the Mayor of Merseyside rather more than Andy Burnham, so Greater Manchester went into lockdown and Merseyside did not, even though the statistics suggested otherwise.

More trivially but importantly for those who like a drink was the decision to close pubs at 10 pm. When we questioned the Government’s chief scientific adviser and chief medical officer on the Science and Technology Committee, they openly admitted that this was a ministerial decision with no science behind it whatever. So the Government did not follow the science, and I do not think they ever had any intention of doing so.

Chris Green: One concern I had from the very beginning of the pandemic was that we had the Prime Minister, professors, doctors and Ministers saying, “This is the scientific evidence. This compels you to do as we are saying. We have the weight of evidence behind us.” However, not long afterwards—in fact, within days or weeks—it was clear that there was no scientific basis for the 10 pm curfew. That undermines people’s confidence when the scientific and medical establishment tells us to take the necessary precautions.

Graham Stringer: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Most politicians are not scientists—there are very few; I do not think we even have an epidemiologist in the House—or scientifically trained.

[Graham Stringer]

Dominic Cummings came to the Science and Technology Committee and made an extremely good point: members of the Government are not experts, so when scientific evidence was being given to them, it should have been challenged, and other scientists should have been brought in to challenge it—so-called red teams. That challenge would have helped the Government to see that there was a debate. Many scientists were frustrated because they had a different view of the evidence presented—sometimes they even had different evidence—and it should have been considered. However, that internal debate did not happen in Government, and the debate in the House of Commons, as the right hon. Member for Tatton said, also did not happen as it should have done.

What did happen was that the Government decided on lockdown. My view is that once Italy, China and a number of countries in south-east Asia had locked down, the Government believed that lockdown was the politically safe thing to do. It was not scientifically the right thing to do; it was not the most effective way of dealing with the covid epidemic.

There are two reasons for locking down. The first is to eliminate the disease very early on to stop it spreading at all. That position had passed a long time before the Government locked down. After that, the reason is to stop the NHS being overwhelmed by too many infections at once. The Government's other slogan—apart from that they were following the science—was that they were going to protect the NHS. They did that in a very simple sense, because it was not overwhelmed by covid. However, since the start of 2020, there has been effectively no NHS for many people. During covid, hospitals were empty and GPs could not be seen. The fact that deaths are now about 10% higher than normal shows the impact of people not being able to access GPs or get cancer care and of elderly people suffering from dementia not getting any support or human contact.

Chris Green: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the Government's approach appeared to be to use the precautionary principle to protect the Government rather than to protect people, and to say, "If we lock down and do the restrictions, no one can blame us for what comes out from it"? In contrast, the Swedish approach was to give people good advice and take only the necessary measures.

Graham Stringer: The hon. Gentleman puts it in an interesting way, although there is another interpretation of the precautionary principle. Some people interpret it as meaning that we should be as cautious we can be, but it actually means that we should not take action until we are certain of the facts. It does not mean that we should not do anything, which is how the Government interpreted it.

The right hon. Member for Tatton made a good point about the Government's position on lockdown. Gavin Morgan, who was a member of SPI-B, the sub-committee of SAGE, said that behavioural psychology was weaponised and that there was an exaggerated threat. We got into a vicious feedback loop: the Government frightened people, so people demanded more lockdown from the Government. That was bad for health and the economy.

That is the health side of it, and we are suffering from it now, with 6 million-plus people on the waiting lists for elective surgery. However, this debate is primarily about the economy. The Government say that the war in Ukraine is the prime reason why the economy and the Government's finances are in difficulty.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the IMF's estimate that £407 billion was spent on covid. Some of that money was spent really well. Some of it was spent on developing the vaccines and on the vaccine taskforce, and that work was brilliant and very effective—I congratulate the vaccine taskforce—but much of it was wasted. The National Audit Office estimated that the bulk of the £37.5 billion spent on Test and Trace was wasted because there was no communication between the centre and the public health teams. That is a huge amount to waste, and that was just the budget.

Money on personal protective equipment was wasted not only because it went to friends of the Government in pretty dodgy contracts, but because it went on pretty dodgy personal protective equipment that did not work. All that has had a disastrous effect on the Government's finances, and therefore the economy, because it is preventing the Government from spending money where they should.

I will finish on two points. I could go on for much longer, but other Members want to speak. There was no proper debate inside or outside the Government about the science. Just before Parliament went to sleep, it passed the Coronavirus Act 2020. One would have expected that Act to be used, but it was not. The Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 was the Act under which the Government mainly enacted the decisions that they had made. That Act allows less scrutiny in Parliament, and we lost many of our civil liberties for no good reason at all. I am still shocked that, when I left the House to go back to Manchester after the House had started sitting again, and I was going into Euston station, a police officer asked me where I was going. This is not Nazi Germany in the late 1930s; this is the United Kingdom of free people. I am not going to tell police officers where I am going. We need to look at that issue.

Finally, there is a great deal of hope that Baroness Hallett's inquiry will get to the bottom of many of the issues we are discussing all too briefly today. Like other colleagues who have spoken, I have written to Baroness Hallett setting out my worry that she is disproportionately asking for evidence from people who naturally supported lockdown and not from businesses that have gone to the wall because of lockdown or from people who cannot access health services because we are still suffering the impacts of lockdown. I am worried about the way that that inquiry is structured.

I will finish on a figure from Professor Thomas of Bristol University, who has pointed out one of the issues I raised in the debates that took place when I was asking for an economic as opposed to a health analysis: poverty kills—not just covid. Professor Thomas thinks that 2.5 million life years have been lost because of the loss of GDP so far. It is a statistical factor, but it gives an indication of the economic damage and the impact that lockdown has had on people's lives.

3.12 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray, and to follow the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton

(Graham Stringer), who brings his scientific background to bear on the Science and Technology Committee. I congratulate my near neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), on securing this timely debate on the economic impact of lockdown.

We went through a very difficult period during covid. It was unnerving and nerve-racking to see the broadcasts coming from China and what happened in Italy. There are so many lessons to be learned from understanding and interpreting a little better what goes on in other countries and from reflecting on what we should do in the United Kingdom.

I have always put the concerns I had over covid and the lockdowns in four categories. Following on from the point about civil liberties, it was extraordinary to see drones following people across the Derbyshire dales and hikers being told, “If you’re carrying a coffee, that counts as a picnic, and therefore the police will intervene.” There was a whole series of different things in the civil liberties area that constrained people’s activity.

One thing we know now, and which we had a good sense of fairly early on, is that good health is immensely important when we come up against any disease. Vitamin D and exercise are important, and obesity is one of the greatest problems when facing covid. Someone who is obese is more likely to be hospitalised or suffer a serious condition. Despite that, what the Government did on civil liberties was to restrict people’s access to normal healthy activities, such as walking—even if they were socially distanced because they were on top of a mountain or they were being sensible and following the guidance—or sunbathing in a park. Civil liberties are very important, and educational exclusion is also immensely important.

There is also the wider health impact of denying the routinely expected service of being able to see a GP. Shortly before the second lockdown, I flagged to the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), my concern that there were about 20,000 fewer GP-to-hospital referrals just in Bolton borough over the lockdown period—a relatively short period of time. If that is in Bolton alone, just think of the millions of people that that means over the whole of the country. I do not know what that means in terms of life and death, but if a GP thinks something is serious enough for someone to need screening, more diagnostics and then treatment—perhaps serious and urgent treatment—then how many people right across the country with a life-threatening or life-changing condition could not see a hospital consultant or someone else to get what, in so many circumstances, was basic medical treatment?

In many ways, we can understand and appreciate the decisions we made—we did have to change our approach to healthcare and to have more controls in place—but my concern was about getting the right balance. When I wrote to the then Prime Minister about that before the second lockdown, I was expecting that he would actually explain it, perhaps with a cost-benefit analysis or an impact statement. In my letter, I asked, “Is the impact of the cure worse than the disease itself? Are the measures we are taking to protect us from covid worse than the impact it is having on our society in terms of civil liberties, education, healthcare and”—the focus of this debate—“the economy?”

When people talked about the economy early on—a good distance into covid and lockdowns—they were shouted down for that. We were shouted down for talking about money. When we have those conversations today and talk about the money, how expensive covid was and the disruption to businesses—whether large businesses or small businesses, which, as was rightly pointed out, have borne more of the brunt of this—we can see the dramatic economic impact. Who would now say, “Don’t talk about it. It’s not relevant. We have to focus only on the disease itself”? We are talking about these things all the time now.

I appreciate that the situation with Europe’s biggest energy producer invading Europe’s biggest food supplier has had a dramatic impact—we cannot get away from that—but we know, and we knew very early on, that the impact of lockdown on the economy would be enormous if we went much beyond three weeks. No one actually said, “It should be for three weeks”—there was no direct expectation—but the words of the Prime Minister at the time, suggesting a three-week period, did give people reasonable cause to think at the beginning, when Members of Parliament were voting on the first lockdown and the Coronavirus Act, “Three weeks? That would be great. If it is a little bit longer, it will be bad, but that gives us a framework for the timescales.” The longer a lockdown goes on, the worse the impact on the economy, the more demands there are for furlough and other economic support, and the greater the impact on healthcare access.

However, my particular interest is education. The schools that I visit now are actually quite grateful that we got out earlier than we might have done, because a fourth lockdown was being lined up. They are looking at the impact on children, especially from poorer backgrounds, and it is far more profound than anyone was talking about at the beginning. No one was talking about the impact on those children, but the outcomes will be devastating. Even after they have gone back to school and we have pumped a few billion pounds into the education system, they will never get back the experiences they missed or the exams they would have taken. The rest of their school career will be held back. Their results will be worse, and their opportunities for further education—for higher qualifications and the jobs that go with them—will be taken away.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton rightly mentioned the £40,000 of lost earning opportunities. However, some people will not get that job—they will not get the step up that would have led to horizon-broadening educational experiences and the work that goes with it. That has been taken away from so many children, and it has reverberated right across the system. We have been through a bit of political turmoil recently, but a recent Prime Minister and an Education Secretary have both said that we should never have locked down the schools. It would have been nice if that argument had been presented—or at least if the consensus had been challenged—right at the beginning. The people least affected by covid were the most affected by the lockdown. Many of the impacts on children can never be changed or redeemed.

I have an interest in medical research. I used to work in the mass spectrometry industry in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton for nearly 20 years before becoming a Member of Parliament, and I think about the medical research side of things.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman might want to keep within the confines of the motion that we are debating. This is about the economic impact of covid-19 lockdowns.

Chris Green: Absolutely, and the place I worked at, AstraZeneca, is a huge contributor to the British economy, not just through its manufacture of drugs, but through its research and development effort. The pharmaceutical sector is a vital part of the British economy. This goes broader than the big pharmaceutical companies, however. Smaller organisations, especially medical research charities, are an important part of the British life science sector. What did the disruption to their research effort mean? There are many rare medical conditions that need treatment. That research contributes to the economy, and the landscape in which the sector operates is a significant factor in our economy. If a lockdown disrupts medical research at an early stage, when the charity is raising money for research—perhaps recruiting a researcher and getting people on to clinical trials—it takes a long time for that medical research charity to regain those funds. Perhaps funds were raised through sporting events and other activities; that money has to be got back. They then have to recruit a researcher, or even a team of researchers, to look into getting the clinical trial started. There are many other aspects to it, too. The process takes a very long time.

The life expectancy lost due to the economic disruption has been mentioned. We should also think of the pharmaceutical and other products that would have been produced in that time. People's life chances have been hindered because the medical progress that we would have made during that period was not achieved. If we look at all the different parts of our society, including the high streets and medical research, the disruption has been profound. This is partly about jobs when people leave school, but also about jobs in businesses and industries. We should also consider the life opportunities for people receiving medical treatment, and their ability to maintain their position in the workplace, which might be taken away if they do not get medical support.

At the beginning of covid and the lockdown, people did not realise or appreciate their impact. I think of what happened as a pulling on the thread of society, and the breaking of the bonds that bind us. Knitting them back together is challenging and difficult. It is expensive and takes a long time. In the meantime, the problems are difficult. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will reflect on that. In future such situations, whether the issue is covid or something else that has come along, I hope the Government will do a cost-benefit analysis, and will ask: if we need restrictions, what will that mean for all sectors of society?

3.25 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) on securing the debate, and I thank her for her sterling work in leading the all-party parliamentary group on pandemic response and recovery. The APPG has delved into many issues that those who made or supported decisions that led to this situation would love to forget. There is a desire to put all this behind us, and to ignore the fact that there was controversy about the decisions made at the time. That controversy was submerged by a deluge of fear tactics and an unwillingness to debate

the issue. The media played a big part in that. I did a number of interviews back home in Northern Ireland, and people who questioned decisions were regarded as almost not caring whether people lived or died. That was the atmosphere in which the debate was carried on. There was, in part, a deliberate attempt to squeeze people into doing and accepting things that naturally, in an open and democratic society, they would never dream of doing or accepting.

Everybody who has spoken was probably in the group of those in the House of Commons who were prepared to challenge. However, this debate is not about saying, "We told you so." The debate is important because it ensures that the inquiry into the covid response, which is being carried out, will look at the side of the argument that was ignored, and of which full cognisance was not taken, when decisions were made. The inquiry is independent, but I hope that the Minister accepts that it is important to feed back to the inquiry the point that it must not simply reinforce all the decisions that were made. It must examine whether, when those decisions were made, decision makers sought full knowledge of the consequences that would flow from them.

We are here to look at the economic consequences. Of course, they were felt at the time, but they are still being felt today, as speakers have outlined, and will be felt for a long time. As the economy was locked down and we could not leave people without some kind of support, an immediate consequence was a huge amount of borrowing. The figures have been given today: £376 billion or £407 billion. Those are mind-boggling figures. Some of that went on support for healthy people who could have gone to work safely, and without any consequences for the health service or their families. Even people who worked outside—builders or farm workers—were unable to go to work, because they might be infected by those they worked with. There was the cost of paying healthy people not to work, when they could have worked.

Then there was the splurging on many national health issues, including the rush to buy personal protective equipment, hundreds of millions of pounds-worth of which we have never used. It is still being stored by the countries that were supplying it to us; we are paying them to do that.

There should have been a more focused debate about what was needed and the nature of what we were facing, as well as a willingness to listen to the other side of the argument. On many of the discussion programmes that I took part in, all the people brought in were on one side of the debate, even though the arguments on that side were well known. The media companies had researchers who could have dug out someone on the other side of the debate—the Government were certainly in a position to do that—yet they decided not to.

There was the immediate spending, and the impact on businesses. I can think of many people in my constituency who lost their dream of having their own business. The girl who used to cut my hair had a small hairdressers and employed three people. She obeyed all the rules. She spent what little capital she had on putting up screens and buying different instruments that could all be sterilised after use. She survived the first lockdown, but when it came to the second, she said, "I've no more money to keep the business going," and she lost it. We all know of hundreds of stories like that in our constituencies.

One Monday, I had parliamentary business, and I chose to come in rather than do it by Zoom, because I believed that Parliament should be sitting. As I came through Leicester Square on a Sunday evening at half-past 8—I remember, because I took a photograph of it—I went into Burger King to get a burger; I was not allowed to sit in the place, but I could sit outside, and throughout the time it took me to eat the burger, I was the only person sitting in Leicester Square. How could hospitality businesses ever survive that kind of situation? It was not necessary.

The Government argued, “You’ve got to do these things to save the health service, save older people from death, and stop disease spreading.” Other countries chose different routes and had better outcomes. They did not do the damage that was done here, because rather than spread fear, they gave information that people could choose to act on. Most people, being sensible, would act on sensible advice. I would never have dreamed of going to see my mum and dad when they were alive if I had a bad cold, because they were vulnerable. If that meant I did not see them for a week or two, I did not see them for a week or two, and yet we felt we had to tell people, “You cannot do this because we can’t rely on your common sense.”

There were short-term consequences: businesses went under and huge amounts of debt were built up. The Government were left with a huge amount of debt, which has curtailed their ability to help with the current economic crisis. Then there are the consequences still felt today. If supply chains close down, firms go out of business. If the people supplying the goods that we rely on are no longer there, or cannot get the parts that they need because other parts of the supply chain have been affected, then of course there will be inflationary pressures. People who lived through the pandemic and saved money came out of it immediately wanting to spend, but the goods were not there to spend money on, so we started the inflationary spiral. I will not fall into the trap of blaming the Government for inflation, all the economic difficulties and the fuel crisis, but they have to accept some responsibility for the consequences of the choices they made.

There are other consequences. We had questions to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy today. There were questions about the difficulties that companies have recruiting. Why do they have those difficulties? Because the economically active workforce has declined. In some cases, having lived through furlough, people found that they could live on less. They decided to change their lifestyle and just not work. They took early retirement or decided to work part-time, and there has been an impact on the labour market.

Hundreds of thousands of people are not able to work because the health service cannot cope—the warnings were given—with all those who were not diagnosed during the lockdown. People were afraid to go to hospital; they were told not to go, and that their doctor would not see them. Now they find themselves unable to work because of sickness. We talk about long covid; we are suffering from long covid—the long-term economic effects of the covid decisions that we made. It is important to have debates such as this, in which we highlight the impact of those decisions. We must ensure proper examination of the decision-making process at the time, and learn lessons from the actions that we took.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does my right hon. Friend accept that in Northern Ireland, the impact has been even greater? In a population of less than 1.9 million people, about 400,000 people are on waiting lists. The cancer waiting list and undiagnosed cancers are at an all-time high. The ambulance service is in disarray, and people in our wonderful nursing profession are being left high and dry, despite their expectations. They will not be rewarded, after being told that they were the most valuable people in society.

Sammy Wilson: The other aspect to this is the excess deaths that we now have. At the time, I did not support the daily death toll being announced on the news. I thought it was wrong to do that. It is strange; there are now excess deaths due to lockdown and its implications on the health service, but we do not publish those numbers. It is a daily reminder of what happened, however. Families across the country are sadly being reminded daily of the impact on the health service of the decision that lockdown was the way to go, even though in many cases the hospitals that closed down, and were not open for normal service, were not dealing with covid patients. I mention that because it reminds me of the fear that was engendered even among health professionals. Many health professionals would phone me and say, “I don’t dare speak out, because if you do, you can get struck off.” Such was the atmosphere of fear.

An issue that I have not yet mentioned is education and the long-term impact of the unnecessary lockdown of schools. Children could not easily become infected or pass on the infection. Even if they did get covid, it had very little impact on them, but they have not escaped the long-term educational impact of being taken away from school.

It has been mentioned briefly, but not enough, that the most severe impact has been felt by the least well-off in our society. I remember going into people’s homes—I probably should not have visited them during lockdown, but I did, because they were my constituents. Those living in blocks of flats did not have a garden to put their youngsters out into, and they were worried that they were not geared up to help their youngsters with their educational needs. They were worried about the long-term impact on their education, and on their social lives. I think we have forgotten that the people hardest hit were the most vulnerable and most needy. I hope that this debate helps to remind us that we should not go down that path again, and that all these issues should be considered.

3.39 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am pleased to participate in this debate, and I thank the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for bringing it forward. We have heard much today about the economic consequences of lockdown and the magnitude of the recession it caused, which was unprecedented in modern times. GDP declined by 9.7% in 2020—the steepest drop since consistent records began in 1948 and equal to the decline in 1921, according to unofficial estimates. The Scottish economy contracted by 19.4% between April and June 2020; that is the biggest fall in quarterly GDP on record.

[Patricia Gibson]

We understood—how could we not?—that lockdown would of course bring significant economic cost. How could anybody not have anticipated that consequence? I have heard some Members talk about following the science; I am about as far from being a scientist as it is possible to be, but studies have shown that about 20,000 lives could have been saved if the first lockdown had been implemented a week earlier, according to research published by Imperial College London. I do not have the scientific expertise to challenge that, but when experts speak it is incumbent on us to listen. The research, incidentally, was published in the *Science Translational Medicine* journal, and also found that national lockdown was the only effective measure that consistently brought down the R number.

We must remember that we are speaking from the comfort of having emerged from covid, for the most part, despite the damage that it has caused on a number of levels. A Government's first duty must be to ensure the safety of those they seek to serve. Surely we cannot forget the uncertainty during those dark days, and the need to do all we could to reduce our social contact, save lives and restrict the potential for infection. Of course there was a cost to that—nobody would pretend otherwise. How could we imagine that there would not be?

Chris Green: Will the hon. Member give way?

Patricia Gibson: In a moment.

These were difficult decisions that were not made lightly. I thank the lord every day that I did not have to take the responsibility to make those decisions, which were so far reaching in their consequences. They had to be made at pace and err on the side of caution, because public safety had to come first. It is easy now to sit, with some distance behind us from those days, and commentate and look at things that could have been done better. Of course mistakes would have been made, and of course things may have been done differently, but in that context and acting at speed, we—I say “we” in a societal sense—had to put public safety first.

Consider for a moment the leaders across the UK who were responsible for making those decisions, relying on public health experts as they were. As the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) said, politicians are not often particularly scientific or trained in scientific methods. The leaders were relying on public health experts and understanding the weight of their responsibility—that, when it comes to public health, the buck stops with them. We can make criticisms about the decisions that were taken, and talk about possible wrong turns and the damage done; all those things are true, but the reality is that the priority had to be to keep the infection rate down and save lives.

I agree with elements of what the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) said. Every single day that I was required to be in Parliament—Monday to Thursday, which is the norm—I came down here during lockdown. The reason I came was not because I felt invulnerable to infection. I came down here—it is quite a long journey, as Members can imagine—because postal workers, nurses and cleaners in my constituency had to go to their jobs. In that context, I felt unable and unwilling not to go and do my job. That is really important.

I also speak as someone whose mother-in-law was in a home with dementia. Again, I am not a scientist or doctor, but it is pretty clear that although dementia was cited as the cause of death on her death certificate, lockdown reduced her to a catatonic state because of the lack of stimulation. That does not mean that I think lockdown should not have happened, because the reality is that we cannot look at individual relatives or individual circumstances. We have to look at society in the round and make the best public health decisions, based on the scientific advice given across the UK and Europe, in order to protect the people we seek to represent.

Chris Green: The hon. Lady is making a powerful argument. One of the points that has been raised, which is part of the broader debate, is that we saw what was happening in China and Italy. People in Britain were already voluntarily choosing to restrict their activities and restrict going into work—

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Order. I gently remind both speakers that we are talking about the economic impact of covid lockdowns. I also remind the hon. Lady that the shadow Minister and Minister have yet to speak, and I would like to allow at least a couple of minutes for the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) to sum up. Please bear that in mind.

Patricia Gibson: Thank you, Mrs Murray; I will curtail my comments. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) has made his point, but we need to move on in the light of the comments from the Chair.

I do not think the hon. Gentleman used the name of the country, but Sweden took a different approach to lockdown. However, the House of Commons Library has done some work on the issue and has pointed out that, although there was reduced economic activity as a result of lockdown, as we would all expect, it is likely that had lockdown not been implemented—a number of Members have been critical of lockdown—people would probably have reduced their social contacts voluntarily anyway, as they did in Sweden.

We will never to what extent that may or may not have happened, and we cannot know how the virus would have evolved had we not had lockdown. We could have found ourselves in a different situation all together. People can say, “At the time, I knew this and I knew that,” but the reality is that we do not know what the outcome would have been if the Governments across the UK had taken an entirely different approach. The impact could have been even greater than that which we suffered.

Everybody understands the effect of lockdown on education, on social contact and—it has not been mentioned—on mental health, but we were faced with an unprecedented situation in which we had to act at speed and try to take the pressure off the NHS. The right hon. Member for East Antrim said that people who supported lockdown want to forget it and act like it did not happen, but we cannot forget the context in which we were living. It was a time of great uncertainty, great fear and lots of unknowables, and we had to respond. I know that a number of Members are attacking the Government, and it is not often that I defend them, but this is not about the Government. This is about public safety and public health.

Businesses have struggled through lockdown, which was considered necessary at the time, and many have managed to survive and cling on to their livelihoods. They are now going through another wave of unprecedented difficulties. If the Government do not offer additional long-term support to businesses on energy costs, the initial money they invested to keep businesses afloat will have been wasted, because the very idea of that investment was to save businesses and jobs—that is what the investment was for. If the energy support is not sufficient, those jobs will disappear anyway, so the initial funding during covid will have been to no purpose. I want the Minister to think about that and comment on it when summing up.

3.50 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Murray. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) on securing the debate, and thank hon. Members for their contributions. I am glad we have the opportunity to discuss this issue; I agree with the right hon. Lady that we need to have these frank and difficult discussions. The pandemic had a deep financial, economic impact. It is important to think about the future, and how we can grow our economy and improve living standards.

I was elected in December 2019, before the pandemic hit. I then saw at close hand the impact on people's livelihoods and wellbeing, and I know that people are still struggling. A lot has happened since covid-19 first reached the UK: not one, but two toppled Governments; two Prime Ministers; the scandal of Downing Street Christmas parties; and more than 50 people issued with fixed penalty notices, including the current Prime Minister.

I want to take us back to 2020. On 23 January, the Foreign Office advised against all but essential travel to Wuhan, China, the epicentre of the outbreak. The first case of covid-19 in the UK was confirmed on 30 January, with cases steadily rising over the following weeks. On 6 March, the then Prime Minister said, during a visit to a lab in Bedfordshire,

"It looks to me as though there will be a substantial period of disruption when we have to deal with this outbreak."

It was not until 23 March that the Prime Minister announced a lockdown—the introduction of new restrictions on everyday life and travel. We know that the delay in taking that decision risked many lives, harmed our economy and prolonged the pain. For the next 16 months, the Government yo-yoed in and out of lockdowns and new restrictions, with much dither and delay.

Some members of the Government thought it might be best to let the virus rip. The result was unclear messaging, decisions taken too late, and a death rate that was too high. The Government were too slow to lock down in March 2020, too slow to protect our care homes, too slow to save jobs and businesses, and too slow to get protective equipment to the frontline.

In the summer of 2020, the Government ignored warnings about the second wave. In September, a circuit breaker was introduced, against scientific advice, followed by a longer lockdown a month later. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) mentioned, in December, when the scientific

advice was that national lockdown was necessary, the Government dithered for nearly two weeks and ended up cancelling Christmas at the last minute.

The current Prime Minister, who was then Chancellor, was not even in the country at that point. The Government shut down the economy at the height of the festive period, and was nowhere to be seen. He had to fly back from his California home after business leaders demanded that he plan a financial support package, following the mixed messages from Government. That indecision cost lives and livelihoods.

I pay tribute to our fantastic NHS and social care workers, without whom we would have really struggled. Many put themselves in harm's way to slow the speed of the virus. I also pay tribute to the British people, who rose to the challenge and came together as communities to protect the most vulnerable. It was a time of national solidarity—a shared effort to face a challenge that most of us had never experienced before.

The right hon. Member for Tatton referred to the Labour party. Throughout that period, the Labour party called for quicker decision making and measures to protect jobs and businesses. The Government could have been provided targeted support for the hardest-hit sectors, fixed sick pay and eased the burden of business rates, whether that was on high street businesses, arts venues, café or hairdressers. So many businesses suffered from the lack of clear communication and decisive action.

We know that we were not all in it together. When much of the country was struggling, No. 10 was hosting parties. Sue Gray's independent report said that senior leadership in No. 10

"must bear responsibility for this culture."

It continued:

"At least some of the gatherings in question represent a serious failure to observe not just the high standards expected of those working at the heart"—

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Order. I gently remind the shadow Minister that we are supposed to be debating the economic impact of the covid-19 lockdowns.

Abena Oppong-Asare: Thank you, Mrs Murray, but I do think this is important because, while we were going through the economic crisis, this is what was happening. This is what we need to look into when we learn lessons for the future.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Order. We are debating the economic impact of the covid-19 lockdowns.

Abena Oppong-Asare: I will take your comments on board, Mrs Murray.

We know that the impacts of covid-19—particularly the economic impacts—run deeper. Just this month, new information has been revealed detailing how some people, including a Tory peer, sought to use covid-19 and lockdowns for their own benefit. PPE Medpro was given £230 million in Government contracts after a referral to the VIP fast lane by a Tory peer. The extent of her involvement in PPE Medpro has now come to light, and tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money ended up in offshore accounts. The protective equipment produced by PPE Medpro was substandard: 25 million surgical gowns, which cost the taxpayer £122 million, were rejected by the Department of Health and Social Care after technical inspection because they

[Abena Oppong-Asare]

were completely unusable. We also know that £6.7 billion was wasted on covid payments to businesses and individuals fraudulently or by mistake.

The economic impact of covid-19 lockdowns was immense, and was exacerbated by dither and delay in Downing Street, and hard-working businesses, families and individuals suffered as a result. It has left us with an economy that lags behind the pack. Wages are lower in 2022 in real terms than when the Tories came to power in 2010, and business investment is 8% below its pre-pandemic peak. The mini Budget from the short-lived Prime Minister and Chancellor crashed our economy.

The economic facts speak for themselves. We are now the only G7 economy that is smaller than it was before the pandemic. Other countries are still dealing with the economic impacts of covid-19, but we are doing worse. We are at the back of the pack, lagging far behind. The Chancellor said he wants to address the impacts, but again the economic facts speak for themselves.

Perhaps I am being a bit unfair to the current Chancellor and Government. They have quite a task on their hands. After all, for the 12 years in which their party has been in Government, low growth and low ambition have held our country back. What would Labour do fix the mess and grow our economy in the aftermath of covid? Back in January, we proposed a windfall tax on oil and gas giants—on the profits of rising prices and war. 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. Under the scheme, some oil and gas companies will pay zero tax this year, despite record global profits.

Ian Paisley: I have listened carefully to the hon. Lady. Some of us who turned up to Parliament during that terrible time voted against the Government's proposals. I think I voted against every single Government restriction except one. The hon. Lady and her party, I think, voted for them all. There is a bit of complicity here: if somebody's hands are on the steering wheel and they keep driving in one direction, it is hard for them to say in hindsight, "Something different should have been done." This grates on me just a little because there were opportunities all along the road to say, "There's a different course of action that can be taken here."

Abena Oppong-Asare: I want to be clear that the Labour party did raise concerns throughout the pandemic that the Government were not looking at the scientific advice, and they took late action to address and deal with it.

To conclude, as we look to recover from the pandemic, we need an ambitious plan for growth. That is what Labour has presented and that is what we will champion.

4 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray, and it is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare).

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) on securing this debate and on her ongoing work in this domain. We have had a wide-ranging debate. I will not respond to every point as many of them are for the inquiry chairman, Baroness Hallett, to answer. Members should be reassured that, within scope, she will look at the points they raised about the scientific and public health advice and the impact on health outcomes, education and civil liberties.

My right hon. Friend was quite right to lament the fact that we in Parliament did not have the opportunity to ask questions at the time. It is to her credit that she continues to bring back this issue so we can learn the lessons of lockdown, which she rightly referred to as a blunt instrument. I am sure that no Member would wish it to be repeated. She was also right to remind us that under Labour lockdowns would have been longer and more costly.

Abena Oppong-Asare: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Griffith: I will not, because I would like to respond to as many points as possible. We have had a long debate about a wide-ranging set of consequences. We heard the hon. Lady's perspective and, indeed, to the extent that it had a critique and a narrative it was that we did not lock down deeper, harder and for longer.

Abena Oppong-Asare: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Andrew Griffith: No, I have made it clear that I will not be giving way.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) mentioned the impact on the hospitality sector. I represent a constituency with a significant hospitality sector, and we know that the sector was affected disproportionately during the lockdown. He and other Members understandably raised the ongoing impact of covid. One or two Members, although perhaps not enough, also mentioned the impact of the war in Ukraine, and I thank those who did for putting it in the right context. My hon. Friend raised the issue of one hospitality business in his constituency the energy bills of which have gone from £16,000 to £60,000 per month. Clearly, he is looking at the issues that people are facing, and we hear that.

The economic priority during the pandemic was to stave off an economic depression, mass unemployment and the potential for rapidly deteriorating living standards. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton talked about GDP falling to its lowest level since 1709. We are fortunate that the economy is now growing, thanks not only to the productive and entrepreneurial nature of the British people but to the unprecedented level of support provided. Ours was one of the fastest growing economies in recent years and that continues to be the case, and we came out of lockdown earlier than many other countries.

As all Members recognise, the attempt to limit the spread of the virus did mean the implementation of restrictions. Alongside those restrictions, the Government provided support for individuals, families and businesses throughout the country that were impacted by the virus. The two things went hand in hand. The Government could not manage that unprecedented situation. It is easy with hindsight—we have talked a lot about hindsight—and many Members have empathised with that.

I am grateful for the support from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who made some fair points about the uncertainty that was faced and the difficulty of the decisions. It is my belief that they were made in good faith and tried to do the best to protect people and the economy. We cannot know, but there is at least the possibility, which the hon. Lady raised, that the impacts could have been worse if it was not for the financial support in particular that was provided, along with the other measures.

For all too short a time I served alongside the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) on the Science and Technology Committee. He was a ferocious interrogator and—if I may say so—very wise in the early, almost contemporaneous analysis of the scientific advice. His contribution was largely about the scientific advice, so I hope he will forgive me if I do not respond more fully to him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) reiterated how vital it is that we do not lock down Parliament again, and I support him in that. Lessons will be learned and must have been learned. We here all have a voice. The reason why we are here today is because we have a voice to protect our constituents and to protect the economy from the ravages of things such as the pandemic.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West also talked about the compounding effect, not just of the pandemic. I am the first to acknowledge that the pandemic has an ongoing impact on the economy. The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) talked about “economic long covid”, which is certainly part of the context in which we sit today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West reminded us that at that time nobody anticipated—as I think he put it—Europe’s biggest oil producer invading Europe’s biggest food producer. That is one reason why the Government have once again come forward with an unprecedented level of support to get people through the winter and the energy crisis that we now face, with the same objectives as the generous support that was provided during the pandemic.

Along with other major economies, the UK is in the midst of a cost of living challenge that has been caused by global inflation as a result of the disruption of supply chains, as well as the increase in energy prices. This is a global challenge and we still see higher inflation in Germany, the Netherlands and Italy. We are acutely aware of the pressures that households and businesses face. Several Members said that having been so successful in protecting the economy, jobs and businesses, it is clearly vital—this is a shared objective of Government—that we continue to do so again this winter.

Going forward, we will continue to place our people and our businesses at the heart of our policies. We are happy to make interventions, and as we debate the economic consequences of covid that is something we can all take forward.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): I call Esther McVey, with one minute to wind up.

4.8 pm

Esther McVey: I thank everybody for such a constructive debate, which was the start of our being able to look at the cost of lockdown in an open-minded way—being able to take challenge, being able to take rebuttals and answering things as honestly as possible—because when £400 billion is spent, we know that cannot be done without having long-term impacts.

We see the impact in the vulnerability of our country now—in the cost of living, the cost of jobs, the cost of inflation and the cost of poverty. We heard about the cost in terms of our health and our mental health. We should think before we ever introduce such profound policies again, particularly when the World Health Organisation and the Department of Health and Social Care have conceded that we should not use lockdowns because they are such a blunt instrument. We can never live in an atmosphere where just to ask questions is condemned. I thank everybody for participating in the debate.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Blackpool: Levelling Up

4.10 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): I call Scott Benton to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention with 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered Blackpool and levelling up.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray, and to open this debate on levelling up in Blackpool. What is levelling up? Ask the vast majority of British people and, although everybody will have heard of the term, very few will be able to articulate exactly what it is. I suspect that if we asked Conservative MPs, who were elected on a manifesto pledge to level up, we would get 350 different answers on what exactly the term means.

For me, levelling up means a child growing up in Blackpool having exactly the same life chances as a child growing up in Bracknell, Bournemouth, Brighton or anywhere else in the country. There is also a second element to levelling up. It is not just an intergenerational challenge, which takes time; there is also the fact that people love and value their communities and want to see them change, which, of course, requires an instant big bang. The Government's capital investment programme, levelling-up funds and so on have been so important to address that challenge.

Regional disparities, including those in the north-west and Blackpool particularly, have persisted for far too long. It is fair to say that towns, disproportionately in the north and midlands, have been forgotten by Governments going back a number of decades—but no more. It makes me proud to be a Government Member: this Government are probably the first in history to take levelling up seriously and invest to such an extent in communities such as mine in Blackpool. Sadly, we are top of the list of the communities most in need of levelling up, according to most metrics. That is clearly a place that Blackpool does not want to be. It is something that all stakeholders in the town are trying desperately to address.

Blackpool's tourism board, Visit Blackpool, probably will not thank me for doing this, but let me illustrate the context of the challenges we face in Blackpool and why we require Government support to try to turn our resort around. According to the multiple deprivation index, we are the most deprived local authority in England. Eight of the top 10 most deprived communities in the whole of England are in Blackpool, including six in my constituency. We have the worst life expectancy in the UK, with life expectancy three years lower on average; however, in the most deprived parts of my constituency and that of my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), it is 12 years lower on average than the national average.

We have the highest rate of drug-related deaths in the whole of England and we are among the top five most dangerous towns. We have the largest child learning gap, the third highest proportion of obesity among adults and the sixth highest teenage pregnancy rate in England. That is quite a list—I hope it illustrates the

need for Government support in Blackpool going forward. However, we have very strong communities and a brilliant, thriving voluntary sector, all of whom work with stakeholders—not least Blackpool Council—to try to turn the situation around.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): My hon. Friend is setting out a compelling picture of the challenges in Blackpool. Will he join me in praising Business in the Community for the work it has done through Pride of Place to pull together a coherent plan to address the issues he has raised? Will he also join me in urging the Government to reinstate the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Blackpool, which brought together Ministers to address each specific challenge in our town? We need that back now that we have a new Government.

Scott Benton: I agree with both points—not just the Business in the Community aspect but the wider policy ask. Following my hon. Friend's intervention, it would be remiss of me not to highlight the contributions of not just local groups but big businesses in Blackpool, which employ thousands of people and really do put their money where their mouth is when it comes to regeneration. I particularly want to mention people such as Kate Shane and Amanda Thompson, who need a special thanks in that regard.

Although the challenges are stark in Blackpool, it would be remiss of me not to point out the tremendous support received not only from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities but from the Government as a whole since I was elected in 2019. With your indulgence, Mrs Murray, I will read out a compelling but lengthy list of the investment that we have received in Blackpool since 2019.

We have one of the largest town deals in the country, worth 39.5 million, which has been spent on a plethora of different projects, from upgrading the illuminations to the new multiversity, with investment and jobs created at the enterprise zone and a new Revue sports village. Only two weeks ago the Department gave Blackpool £40 million to relocate the court complex, which will allow a £300 million private sector-led development to go ahead. That creates 1,000 new jobs and pumps £75 million into the economy every single year.

Within weeks of my being elected, we received £8.6 million for the future high streets fund, which is being spent on Abingdon Street market and upgrades at the Houndshell centre. The Government are relocating 3,000 civil service jobs to Blackpool, and that will inject an ongoing £1 million into our local town centre. We have also seen £2.9 million to upgrade the winter gardens and £1 million for the high street action zone, which my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys and I saw at first hand only on Friday, and we have received £650,000 for a homes-led regeneration study of housing projects in Blackpool—a point I will touch on later.

In education spending, £10 million has been spent on the opportunity area, and there is £8.7 million of other educational investment over and above the revenue from the direct grant to schools coming into Blackpool. The Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust has had £67 million of its debt written off, which means that money can now be spent on servicing patients rather than servicing a debt, and we have a brand-new £25 million upgrade to A&E occurring at the moment.

On transport, we have £20 million for electric buses, £9 million for bus and light rail projects, and £500,000 for the active travel grant. Project ADDER will receive a £1.9 million investment to tackle antisocial behaviour and serious drug crime in Blackpool, £1.1 million for the youth offending team to help get troubled youngsters off our streets, £550,000 for the safer streets fund, and £400,000 to help to address violence against women and girls—a horrific crime in our community. The Minister will be pleased to hear I am nearly at the end of the list, but I hope he can indulge me slightly longer.

The culture recovery fund saw £4.8 million spent on our brilliant Blackpool Grand Theatre and upgrades to the Blackpool Tower Ballroom, where we saw “Strictly” only last week. There was a bid for £12 million for flood defences on our sea walls. We had £80,000 for the changing places fund, £800,000 for the rough sleeping initiative and £1.7 million for the hardship fund.

There has been £237 million of extra investment in Blackpool since I was elected at the 2019 general election. If we include the support throughout the pandemic, that rises to £409 million of extra Government investment, over and above what we give to the local authority and spend on health and education, since 2019. Yet some people in the community question the Government’s commitment to levelling up and question the funding we have had. I hope those figures illustrate the tremendous support that the Government have given to Blackpool over the past few years.

Of course, Blackpool being Blackpool, as much as we have valued that £237 million investment there is always more that we can do, given the extent of the challenges. I know I have been speaking for a while, but I have two or three quick asks of the Government.

The biggest challenge that Blackpool faces, and the reason we are at the level we are in terms of social characteristics and demography, is the housing issue in Blackpool. The Secretary of State has been a bit of a trailblazer in recognising that. If we can tackle some of the grot-spots and the awful conditions in the private sector rental market, it will invariably improve people’s life chances. That is why the £30 million ask for housing-led regeneration in Blackpool is so important. It would be spent on upgrading Bond Street, Waterloo Road, Revoe and the Claremont area. The Government have already committed to a £600,000 feasibility study on that. Improving people’s housing conditions in those areas would be transformative, not just for the next few years but for generations ahead in Blackpool. I know that the Minister is very much aware of that—I spoke to her about it several days ago—and I look forward to meeting her and the Secretary of State once the feasibility process has been considered and concluded in January.

The Minister will not be surprised to hear that my second ask is Blackpool’s £63 million levelling-up fund. Of the £63 million, £40 million would go to the multiversity, which will invariably and conclusively improve people’s life chances, skills and opportunities to face the challenges of the future in Blackpool; £8 million would go to converting the former post office building on Abingdon Street into a brand new five-star hotel, which would completely regenerate that part of the town centre; and £15 million would go on a town centre access scheme.

Those are the two things on which I and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys are looking for support. In the last few seconds, it would be remiss of me not to mention two non-Departmental asks. One is upgrading and implementing a passing loop on the South Fylde line, which would double the number of trains that come into Blackpool every single hour. That train line services a pleasure beach—the UK’s second most visited tourist attraction—and the upgrade would improve its ability to get visitors in on busy summer days. The second is returning commercial passenger flights to Blackpool airport, which has been my main campaign since 2019. The Government have a brilliant record to sell on regional aviation. We have halved air passenger duty, we are looking to subsidise public service obligation routes, and we have the Union connectivity review. All of that has changed the landscape of regional aviation in this country, but we need support from Blackpool Council to get Blackpool flying once again. The council owns the airport and has the ability to take commercial passenger flights seriously.

The Minister and Members have indulged me long enough. I thank the Department for the superb support it has provided to our town so far. There is always more we can do—hence the distinct asks of the Minister and the Department—but I look forward to continuing to work with the Minister over the coming weeks to address some of the challenges.

4.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): May I start by saying what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Murray? I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) both on securing the debate and, more importantly, on giving such an impassioned speech. It is clear that he is a tremendous representative for Blackpool, as is our hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard)—what a team! I reflect on the numbers that were mentioned: £237 million in additional funding for Blackpool and, including the support under covid, an additional £409 million. That is a record of which both Members of Parliament should be very proud. I must say that I am rather envious.

We are here today to talk about very important matters: the significant challenges and opportunities that Blackpool faces. I am grateful to speak on the Government’s levelling-up agenda, which is our ambition to spread investment, growth and opportunity across the UK to those towns, cities and areas that have been overlooked by successive Governments. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South rightly points out, Blackpool is a town with significant strengths and potential. There are almost 19 million visitors to Blackpool a year, and the tourism economy is worth more than £1.4 billion. Despite these strengths, we know that for too long Blackpool has been held back by deeply entrenched problems, and my hon. Friend listed many statistics showing the level of deprivation and the issues in health, local housing and living standards.

That is why the Government have been working in partnership with both Members of Parliament for Blackpool on the transformational regeneration of the town, supporting their vision for Blackpool to become a leading UK tourism destination and a good place to

[Felicity Buchan]

live and work, with improved jobs, housing and skills. Today, I am delighted to be able to talk about some of the successes we have seen and what we have achieved, and I will look to address the particular points that my hon. Friends raised.

To that end, I was delighted that earlier this month the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), announced £40 million in funding for the relocation of the magistrates and county courts. Anyone familiar with Blackpool knows that the aging, outdated courts complex has persisted for decades. It was not only blighting the town but occupying land that had been earmarked for major commercial redevelopment. I am pleased that, working together with the Ministry of Justice, £40 million of funding is being used to create a new state-of-the-art court elsewhere in the town.

That means the Ministry of Justice can finally leave the outdated courts complex, freeing up the land to be redeveloped and enabling the growth-spurring regeneration scheme to go ahead as planned. That will create up to 1,000 new local jobs, while attracting an estimated 600,000 more visitors to the seaside town each year. What is more, the judicial system and its employees will be much better served by a modern, efficient new courts building.

That is not the only way that the Government are working with Blackpool to bring fresh investment and new job opportunities to the town. As part of our ambition to bring policy makers closer to the communities they serve, the Department for Work and Pensions and Blackpool Council will be constructing a new service hub in the centre of Blackpool. It will be home to up to 3,000 civil servants and only a short walk from Blackpool North station, in an area that is seeing a cluster of new developments, which promise to be transformative for the town.

It is also worth noting, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South did, that Blackpool is benefiting from just shy of £40 million of investment from our towns fund, which is being spent on a host of job-creating, tourism-boosting projects. As my hon. Friend will know, that includes rejuvenating the illuminations in order to attract more visitors to the town in the autumn and winter period, and support for a youth hub, giving more young people in the town vital access to jobs and training. To cater for businesses that are adopting hybrid models of working in the post-covid economy, the funding will also support the development of flexible managed workspace in Blackpool town centre.

My hon. Friend stressed the importance of housing. As Minister for housing and homelessness, I completely concur with him. I want the same level of ambition for Blackpool's economy to be mirrored in improving the housing provision. At the moment, too many homes in Blackpool do not provide the safe and secure accommodation that residents expect or deserve. If we are truly to tackle deprivation and unlock Blackpool's economic potential, we need to provide a wide range of quality homes across the public and private sectors—homes that cater for people at different stages of their lives. That is why, in March, we announced that Homes England, the Government's housing accelerator, would work closely with the council to develop a transformative plan for reshaping the town, backed by £650,000 of new funding. I am pleased that that work is coming on in

leaps and bounds, and my Department looks forward to examining the proposals when they are finished in the new year. Once we have seen them, we will sit down with my hon. Friends the Members for Blackpool South and for Blackpool North and Cleveleys, and I look forward to that conversation; it is clear that there is work to be done on housing in Blackpool.

To ensure that everyone has somewhere safe that they can call a home, we need to tackle rogue landlords both in Blackpool and elsewhere. We plan to do that with our reform of the private rented sector. I know that the Housing Secretary is very committed to that, and I am glad that my Department is already working with our partners to toughen enforcement on the minority of landlords who consistently break the rules.

Alongside our work with Homes England, in Blackpool we have announced £1.26 million of funding for an expanded local enforcement team, which will continue to take tough action against those who are not meeting existing standards, while proactively measuring landlords against the proposed future national standards. This enhanced inspection regime will tackle exploitation in the local private rented sector, driving up housing quality while protecting the most vulnerable. It will sit alongside a series of further pilots in other locations announced last week by the Secretary of State, to test ways of improving enforcement in the sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South talked about education and skills, which are clearly critical in Blackpool. The Government are exploring innovative ways of helping people get into work and build their skills through three pathfinder places, one of which is Blackpool. The idea behind the pathfinders is to bring together local delivery partners in skills and education to look at what skills local employers are looking for and how we most effectively build that skills base locally. This will ensure that the support available to people is more targeted and more relevant.

My hon. Friend asked about the levelling-up fund. I am sure he will appreciate that bids are currently being reviewed and I cannot comment on specific bids, but we will have clarity before the end of the year. I wish him and Blackpool every success with the bid. He talks passionately about it, and I am sure it is a good bid.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys asked about the Cabinet Sub-Committee. I want to reassure him that Blackpool will continue to benefit from cross-ministerial deep dive and working together. Blackpool is a big priority of Government.

I finish by thanking everyone for their contributions today, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South for securing the debate. It is a powerful reminder of how individual MPs can make such a difference to their constituencies, and Blackpool is fortunate to have these two MPs. I keep on coming back to the amount of Government investment that they have secured in their town. While I recognise that there are significant challenges in Blackpool, I believe that if local MPs and central Government work together with key local stakeholders, businesses and the council, we really can make a difference in Blackpool, leverage its unique strengths and restore pride to the town, so we can truly say that Blackpool is being levelled up and that people are proud and happy to work and live there. I commend both my hon. Friends.

Question put and agreed to.

Disposable Vapes: Environmental Impact

4.36 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the environmental impact of disposable vapes.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Murray, and I am pleased to bring the debate to this chamber. I am here because of a conversation with a young woman called Laura Young. She is a former constituent who recently moved away to study, but I am glad I have kept in touch with her on environmental matters, including this one. Laura is what I would describe as a climate influencer. I am not sure whether that is how she would describe herself, but to me that is a good explanation of what she does. She is a very well informed, influential young woman who is making a measurable difference to our environment. I am glad to work with her on this issue and I am interested in what she is doing more broadly.

Laura explained to me that she had increasingly been finding cast-off disposable vapes when she was out and about. That could be in town centres, when she was walking her dog in Rouken Glen park or wherever she was. As she mentioned this to other people, they reported that they could not believe how many of these cast-off disposable vapes were in their areas, whether urban, rural or coastal. The issue is everywhere and has arrived at speed.

These vaping products can last in the environment for many years, so it is important that we ensure that they are disposed of correctly, rather than thinking that it is fine to leave them on our pavements, in our parks or on our seafronts. The products are made from three key parts: the battery, the pod and the coil. In theory, consumers should dispose of them at household recycling centres or at the shop where they bought the device. That is simply not what happens, and it is not realistic. Who expects people to arrive at their local recycling centre with their finished vapes? Many people are simply unaware of what is meant to happen. It is clear that there is a significant issue that we should deal with. A recent study suggests that more than half are just thrown in the bin.

Because of the conversations that I have had with Laura, I am one of those people who spots these vapes. Wherever I go, I see them lying around on the ground. It is clear that a big chunk of those that do not end up in the bin are just thrown away on the ground. I have spoken to others who agree that once they have become aware of vapes, it is impossible not to see them. I see them in my constituency, in London and everywhere else. The proliferation of this new kind of waste is quickly becoming a reality and a concern.

This is a new thing. To illustrate the changing profile, I understand that Keep Scotland Beautiful and the Marine Conservation Society have this year added the category of disposable vapes to the list of litter that people collect from beaches when they do beach cleans. I have heard of a waste display, which is part of an installation at the V&A in Dundee. It involves waste from beaches, including Carnoustie beach. I basically grew up on that beach, so it feels quite close to home for me. The big display of waste that has been collected by

local children shows the sheer number of disposable vapes that are now being found on the seafront, as well as in the other places I have spoken about.

The situation is developing and moving apace. Figures suggest that the number of people vaping in Britain has reached 4.3 million—a record level. It seems that 8.3% of adults in England, Wales and Scotland vape, up from 1.7% a decade ago. According to research by Material Focus, at least 1.3 million disposable vapes are thrown away every week. That is two every second—a huge number. An estimated 13.6 million disposable vapes are bought in Scotland annually.

Given those really big numbers, it matters on a whole host of fronts that we stop to have a serious think about this and a serious discussion about what it means. First, on health—I want to get this issue out of the way right at the beginning—I absolutely support any and all efforts that people are making to stop smoking. It is really important that they are supported and are able to sustain a move away from smoking. I realise that vapes are not part of NHS-supported smoking cessation programmes, but many people use them as part of that journey, and I wish them all the best in their endeavours to stop smoking.

I know it is very hard to stop smoking. I am not an expert on that, but ASH—Action on Smoking and Health—is, and it has been clear about several issues in this area. It has pointed towards a range of things that we should be thinking about, including the reality that the production of disposable vapes is a commercial endeavour and that promoting novel products is one clear way that the tobacco industry is reaching out to future generations of potential consumers. It also points out that young people who try vapes are at a much higher risk of nicotine addiction and of later using tobacco. That is a prospect that we all want our children to avoid, knowing that smoking is the direct cause of 16% of all deaths in Scotland. ASH also notes that the World Health Organisation has expressed concern that children who use these products are up to three times more likely to use tobacco products in the future.

Understandably, ASH welcomes the recent publication of the Scottish Government's consultation on tightening rules on advertising and promoting vaping products as an important step towards protecting the health of children, young people and non-smoking adults in Scotland, and it notes the importance of further action on restricting advertising. That is important, because a survey by YouGov and ASH found that the percentage of children who had tried vaping had risen to 16% by 2022. In August, "STV News" revealed that hundreds of vapes have been confiscated from high school pupils in recent years.

The vaping market as a whole in the UK is worth more than £1 billion a year, and more than half of children who vape say that disposables are their preferred product. The most popular brand is the Chinese product Elf Bar. In July, an investigation by *The Observer* found Elf Bar flouting rules to promote its products to young people in Britain—for instance, via TikTok influencers. Despite the fact that legally a person has to be over 18 to purchase these products, the reality is that they are easy to get hold of, attractive and brightly coloured, and they have fruity flavours. They are designed to be attractive in a way that young people will be interested in.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. There is no doubt that this is an issue, but vaping has saved thousands of lives in this country. The more we can encourage smokers to move from tobacco on to vaping, the more lives will be saved. I would like to impress on the hon. Lady how important it is in a debate such as this that we do not tarnish the reputation of vaping to the point where we put off smokers from switching over to it, which has to be a positive thing.

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point, because it reinforces one of my earlier points. I absolutely support any and all attempts to stop smoking, and all supports that assist people. That is really important. We all know the harm that tobacco does, but I point the hon. Gentleman to the comments I have cited from bodies such as the World Health Organisation, which has concerns about the road to tobacco.

We need a nuanced approach. For instance, I would be interested in having a further conversation and seeing more research on vapes that are not disposable. I think that is a conversation worth having. I am not here to say that no one should ever use vapes; that is absolutely not my aim. My aim is to look specifically at disposable vapes and ask whether we are travelling down the right path.

We have heard about the number of young people who are vaping and the concerns about the move to tobacco, which the hon. Gentleman and I are both very concerned about because of the health implications. Are we really expecting the same young people to have a disposable vape, use it and then get themselves to a recycling centre, so that they can properly dispose of them? To me, that seems somewhat unlikely, to say the least. It is really important that we try to separate the two issues, because they are both really important, and all discussions about smoking cessation should be serious and taken seriously.

In addition to the disposal of such vapes, which I will come to a little later, we should obviously be concerned by their acquisition and use in the first place. I am really concerned and perplexed—this is perhaps a sign of my age—by reports of younger people who have never smoked but are now vaping. I just do not understand that, because I am not a young person, but I suspect that the hon. Gentleman and I would agree that this is not the direction of travel that we want to see. We want people to stop smoking, to be supported to do that, and not to move in a different direction.

As I said, I am not here today to take issue with vaping per se. I would like to see more research into the topic as a whole, but I am suggesting that having far fewer disposable vapes is going to be an immediate necessity, because of the damaging waste that is being created by the use of these devices. Reusable vapes might fill some of the gaps, should that be necessary, but I am really concerned about the environmental impact of the disposable vape industry, and there is a bit of a vacuum where there should be scrutiny on that topic. Regardless of our various views on the issue, we would probably all accept that having a bit of scrutiny would be sensible.

I recently used a written parliamentary question to ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment had been made of

the environmental impact of vaping products. The answer was none—no environmental assessment at all. Nobody who has seen the sheer quantity of cast-off disposable vapes will think that is acceptable. I do not think that is okay, and we need to up our game quickly. Disposable vapes are fundamentally electrical items, and they contain precious metals such as lithium. We should know in this day and age that lithium is a critical material for our green transition, but it is simply going to waste in devices that are not being disposed of properly.

Disposable vapes are also another unnecessary single use of plastic, which is a material that, along with the batteries and the nicotine that disposable vapes contain, is hazardous to the environment and wildlife when littered. I have heard numerous reports of pets and wildlife in marine areas being affected by this new type of plastic waste. According to the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, if a battery is disposed of incorrectly—remember that almost all of them are disposed of incorrectly—heavy metals might leak into the ground when the battery casing corrodes. That can cause soil and water pollution, and it can endanger wildlife and human health. Again, most of the vapes are disposed of incorrectly, so this is not a theoretical issue.

I am grateful to the UK Vaping Industry Association for getting in touch with me when it learned that I had secured this debate, and it made some valid points about how some people successfully stop smoking via vaping, as we have heard, and I do not take away from that in any way. However, I was a bit disappointed by the argument that under-age concerns are not exclusive to vapes. I agree with that—it is absolutely true—but I do not think that is really the point, and it cannot be the case that we cannot look for urgent action because it could put people off stopping smoking. It cannot be beyond us both to support smoking cessation in a practical and meaningful way, and to stop making such a colossal mess of the planet.

In all of this, there must be a really important role for manufacturers, and the industry as a whole, in pushing forward better ways to operate. They do not need to wait for someone to make them do the right thing; they could do the right thing and do better right now, and I am sure we would all be very grateful. I was surprised to hear comments from the vape manufacturer Riot on a recent BBC Radio 5 Live show. When pressed about the actual rate of recycling of its products, its representative said that it was in fractions of 1%. I absolutely respect the company for taking the time to engage with this discussion, which is really important, but that tiny wee recycling rate is the reality.

That is the crux of the problem, why we are having the debate and why we are seeing all these things lying around. People are simply not recycling them because it is too hard, because they do not know how, and because the things are not ideally set up to be recycled. We have to be realistic about that. We just about need a degree in vape decommissioning to work out what to do, where to go and how to go about it. Dealing properly with what are meant to be disposable items of convenience—that is their unique selling point—is actually a monumental inconvenience to their users. Manufacturers know that, but they seem much more interested in making sales than stopping the obvious waste issues that arise from them.

To get an idea of what we are talking about, at the moment the discarded disposables mean that 10 tonnes of lithium are sent to landfill every year. We must remember that this is a growing market and that those are only the bits that are being sent to landfill, not the bits that are being thrown around the place. That is already at a level equivalent to the lithium batteries inside 1,200 electric vehicles.

Concerns are also growing about what that means more broadly. Some people suggest that the material is likely to contribute to fires at landfill sites, so a range of investigations needs to take place. Indeed, it is no wonder that 18 groups that advocate on environmental and health issues recently wrote an open letter to the UK Government, published by Green Alliance, looking for a ban on disposable vapes. I am grateful to all the organisations, which include Surfers Against Sewage, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Wildlife and Countryside Link and others. It is really important that we look at the matter. We need to very seriously take on board the points those organisations make about the importance of not squandering our precious resources, such as lithium, in such a cavalier and unthinking way.

The organisations are also correct that there is “a huge waste issue” associated with disposable vapes. In Scotland, we are moving towards a circular economy and a waste-free society. We have ambitious targets for recycling, but as part of that, specific guidance on how to recycle vapes is increasingly vital. What will the UK Government do to make the whole process easier? I know that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs says that the UK Government will set out plans for reforming the existing waste electrical and electronic equipment regulations “in due course”. “In due course” needs to come now, because there is a clear and significant environmental impact, there is uncertainty and confusion, and that allows concerted inaction on the issue to take root. What are the UK Government doing to help be part of and drive forward the conversation on how vaping markets are targeting our young people? How are we going to act on plastic waste and pollution and on the failure of any proper recycling strategy for lithium batteries?

Failure to act means we are knowingly causing damage to our environment. It means that precious resources, such as lithium, which are finite and dangerous when disposed of improperly are not being properly managed. The situation has arrived at pace; it has all come upon us quite quickly. However, we need to deal with it in the same way. We need to get a move on and try and work out the best way forward for the planet and the people who use vapes. We either sort the situation out so disposable vapes are really disposable, with proper recycling not only theoretically possible but practically happening, or we get rid of them altogether. None of us can afford for things to carry on as they are.

4.53 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I did not intend to speak so I apologise, Mrs Murray, for catching you unawares and for not informing the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) that I was going to speak. I found her speech fascinating, so I did not want to continuously interrupt it with endless interventions.

I do not agree with all her points, but she highlights a general issue with littering and plastic wastage, with everything from pens to phones and so on getting irresponsibly dumped, that then ends up causing pollution. I accept that there is an additional issue with the lithium batteries in vapes and how we deal with that.

Although I do not claim to be an expert in vaping, I argue it is a positive thing to move people away from smoking tobacco and over to vaping. The organisations the hon. Lady mentioned, such as ASH, the British Heart Foundation and Asthma + Lung UK, have all said that it is 95% risk free. That has to be a good thing. Moving people away from tobacco and giving them the option of vaping is a really positive thing that the Government could embrace more than it has previously. We are not bad in this country at promoting vaping, compared with many other countries where, ridiculously, it has been banned. I was slightly concerned by the comment, which the hon. Lady made at the end of her speech, that we should perhaps get rid of some disposable vaping devices. I would wholeheartedly oppose that because, although there is an issue with the disposal of these disposable vaping devices, to put people off vaping and maybe encourage them to go back to smoking would be a retrograde step.

I remember that when I was at school there were children who opted for tobacco, and cigarettes were common when I was growing up in the 1980s. I was one of the smokers behind the bike sheds myself. Although we do not want any children under the age of 18 vaping and we do not want non-smokers vaping, there will always be a forbidden fruit, unfortunately, when it comes to children. If you could have tobacco or vaping as that forbidden fruit, which would you prefer? You would prefer to have neither and I accept that, but vaping is 95% risk free. That is far better than when I was a child in the 1980s and so many children chose to smoke.

Kirsten Oswald: Thinking back to the 1980s—the hon. Gentleman and I must be of a similar vintage—I absolutely recognise what he is saying but I would point him back to what I said earlier about the WHO’s concerns about vaping being a gateway to tobacco for young people. I am taking this from a briefing from ASH so, to reiterate, I absolutely support any and all means of supporting people to stop smoking, but it cannot be that it is only one or the other thing with all the personal and environmental issues that this causes.

Gareth Johnson: I take her point. I do not have the statistics in front of me, but what I have seen suggests that there is not a great deal of evidence that people go from vaping on to smoking, whereas there is substantial evidence that people go from smoking on to vaping. Vaping is a far more successful way of giving up smoking than the likes of patches and chewing gum. Therefore, from a health perspective, the Government should be encouraging and promoting smokers to move on to vaping because there is far less risk associated with it.

I will draw my comments to a conclusion there. I was not intending to speak at all, but what I do not want to come out of this debate is some kind of demonisation of vaping. I know that is not the hon. Lady’s intention, but I feel that we should be recognising that vaping has its place—a very valuable place—in ensuring that we reduce the number of people dying around the world from tobacco consumption, which we all know is ridiculously

[Gareth Johnson]

dangerous for your health. Vaping has a substantially reduced risk for individuals and therefore we should embrace it. Although there certainly are improvements to be made and I am grateful that the hon. Lady has highlighted those, we should see vaping as a positive thing to help people give up smoking tobacco.

4.59 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) on securing the debate and on raising the issue of the impact of disposable vapes on the environment, which I want to speak about today. As the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) mentioned, there are other issues and concerns with vapes, such as those on smoking, but I want to address their environmental impact.

Vapes are cheap and accessible to young people and they cause significant waste problems in the environment. Coloured vapes have now become a fashion accessory for many of our youth. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for ethics and sustainability in fashion—believe it or not—I have heard at first hand that people are now matching their clothes with their vapes. We may not have considered such issues, but it means vapes are just left lying about everywhere.

First, I want to repeat what my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire said. I know that the Scottish Government are aiming to reach a zero-waste society. With the circular economy, we have a target of recycling 70% of waste by 2025, exceeding EU targets, and matching EU targets for all plastic packaging to be economically recyclable or reusable by 2030. Scotland is also a signatory to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's New Plastics Economy global commitment.

Cheap and easy-to-use disposable vapes are booming in popularity and creating a mass waste issue similar to the nurdles we all encountered and now have to deal with. Those vape waste products have now added even more to the national embarrassment of litter on our streets and cycle and canal path networks. They are even being found on mountain paths and forest trails, so people who walk in those places will start to see those things lying about in areas where they would go for their natural weekend away. If they go somewhere to relax, and come across those things, they will get more and more anxious about seeing them lying about.

All of this, in my opinion is, pitiful. Dropping litter is avoidable. In particular, it costs needless amounts of money to collect and clear up the debris from these vape pens and many other single-use products that we just discard. In fact, I might add—I put my right hand up to God and say this with all truthfulness—that when crossing a car park at night I can find my way in the dark now by following the path of the blue lights coming from the vapes. That is a stark reality. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire mentioned earlier, they are becoming visible everywhere. It is worth reiterating the stark figures that my hon. Friend mentioned: 1.3 disposable vapes are thrown away every week, equating to two vapes per second, and, as she has just said, an estimated 13.6 million disposable vapes are bought in Scotland annually. Those are scary statistics to hear.

I ask the Minister to speak with, or, indeed, whether she has spoken with, some of the relevant authorities—the devolved Parliaments, local authorities, regional Mayors, courts, judges and police—to ask if they could agree on a more meaningful deterrent. We could introduce something like an automatic three points on the driving licence of anyone who discards any of those products. I tried to introduce a measure into Parliament on that some years ago, and an awful lot of people congratulated me on the idea, but it did not actually go anywhere—I think we might have had an election in between.

We all recognise that vapes, and all the other disposable products, are causing a lot of damage to our fauna and flora, and that that is seeping into the whole food supply chain. As my hon. Friend said, it is now causing toxic waste to seep into everything around us. It is impacting the already perilous environment in which we live.

Furthermore, ASH Scotland has called for a tightening of vape ads and promotion, following its consultation report. The Association of Directors of Public Health has also called for tighter regulation to ban brightly coloured packaging and for a review of flavours likely to appeal to children. The “e” part of e-cigarettes—more specifically, the battery—is using up valuable minerals, the mining of which has led to water loss, ground destabilisation, biodiversity loss, increased salinity in our rivers, contaminated soil and toxic waste.

This place has the power to change the weaknesses in the law that allow those pitiful practices to continue. Members have made excellent points in their speeches, but I humbly suggest that serious action is needed to hasten a behavioural change to benefit our health, wealth, and wellbeing. That might mean points on driving licences, or that we change the way we advertise these products and tighten up the ads, but whatever we have to do, the Government must take action before it becomes too late, once again. I am very keen to hear from the Minister on the action she is taking to address the issue.

5.4 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray, and it is good to be in Westminster Hall with colleagues for this important debate. I acknowledge the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) for securing the debate and providing Members from all parties with the opportunity to address our collective responsibility to preserve our planet, protect our environment and leave a world for the next generation.

I gently suggest to the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) that he may be on the wrong tack, as new evidence is revealing that vaping is encouraging young people to get into smoking, rather than the other way around. However, before you remind me to do so, Mrs Murray, I will return to the topic in hand of the environmental impact of vapes.

We have heard today about the scourge of waste in our communities increasingly being caused by disposable vapes. We need and expect our Ministers in DEFRA to stand up and be counted. They need to give councils the resources they need to keep our communities clean and safe and I encourage Members to continue to raise this issue in seeking help, change and assistance. I assure them that Labour will act when we form the next Government if Tory Ministers fail to deliver in the coming months.

Thanks to a lost decade of Tory austerity, waste is piling up on high streets and street corners and in our green open spaces. It is being exported to some of the world's poorest countries, where what was supposed to be recycled material ends up in landfill, polluting our oceans and being shipped back to Britain for us to deal with. That is a very real problem and it requires speedy, comprehensive and properly funded solutions.

Without question, the problems have been made worse by the increasing use of disposable vapes. Members from all parties will know, as I know the Minister does, that many of the agencies that should tackle waste and pollution are underfunded and understaffed. The Environment Agency has struggled to tackle waste crime and to monitor waste exports because of the cuts to its budget and staff numbers, and we all know the impact that austerity has had on local government.

I thank the Wildlife and Countryside Link for its very helpful briefing ahead of the debate, in which it notes that the use of vapes has surged over recent years. Those items are now ubiquitous; they are for sale on every high street and are used by millions on a daily basis. As we have already heard, they are now increasingly to be found littering the natural environment.

Research suggests that half a billion vapes are now purchased every year, with almost a fifth of UK adults having bought a vape that is either single use, rechargeable or rechargeable with a single-use chamber. Further research by Material Focus has found that 37% of people who purchased vapes in the last year bought a disposable vape, and that figure rises to 52% for 18 to 34-year-olds. Wildlife and Countryside Link says that researchers have found that since 2021 there has been more than a sevenfold increase in the proportion of 11 to 17-year-olds in the UK who use disposable vapes.

Material Focus goes on to claim that at least 1.3 million disposable vapes are thrown away every week, which equates, as we have already heard, to two vapes being thrown away every second. Around 1 million of those disposable vapes are not recycled. That is unsustainable and requires action from Ministers. I would be grateful if the Minister could outline, in precise terms, what is being done to tackle the issue.

Last week, the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), agreed with the claim that there is a risk that delay will become the default culture in DEFRA. He highlighted that the targets in the Environment Act 2021 for extended producer responsibility for textiles, fishing gear and packaging, and the deposit return scheme in England are all behind schedule. Furthermore, last week also marked a year of inaction since the Government opened consultations on bans on plastic plates and cutlery, alongside a call for evidence on a wider suite of items that could be restricted, including action on tobacco filters. There is much more to do.

The Minister will know that in England the total volume of aggregate waste increased by 12% between 2010 and 2018. Recycling must outpace the growth in consumption; it really is a simple equation. Despite the new powers on waste targets in the Environment Act 2021, I am afraid that I must remind the House that the Government have delayed the roll-out of important elements of extended producer responsibility, including the scheme administrators and fee modulation.

Actual delivery is running far behind even the relatively modest new proposed targets to reduce residual waste per capita by 50% by 2042 and to raise the current municipal recycling target of 65% by 2035 to between 70% and 75% by 2042. The inadequacies of waste collection and recycling systems mean that used compostable packaging tends to end up in landfill or incineration, or messes up recycling plants.

I do not want to irritate the Minister, but I want to talk about the Welsh Labour Government, because Wales has long been a standout performer in the United Kingdom on recycling rates and tackling waste pollution. The Welsh Labour Government's £1 billion investment in household recycling since devolution has helped recycling rates to catapult from just 4.8% in 1998 to over 65% in 2021. If the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire has come to the Chamber today hoping to find solutions to tackling vaping waste in her constituency, I urge her to look to Wales. Like her, I asked the Secretary of State whether he had made an assessment of the impact of single-use vapes on waste levels in England. I received the following response from the Minister, which said:

"The Department has not undertaken an assessment of the environmental impact of disposable vapes in the UK, including on waste levels."

I gently say to her that that is a disappointing response.

As the Minister winds up, I hope that I can get some answers to the following questions. Has she made an assessment of the environmental impact of disposable vapes in the UK, including on waste levels, since 24 October? What discussions have taken place with the Treasury and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about ensuring that councils have the resources needed to tackle waste pollution? Finally, what lessons have been picked up from the Welsh Labour and Scottish and Northern Irish Governments about their approach to tackling toxic waste, fly-tipping and waste pollution? I would be happy for the Minister to respond to me in writing, but I ask her for answers to those specific questions. This has been an interesting debate, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire for securing it.

5.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a delight to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mrs Murray. I thank the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) for bringing the important matter of disposable vapes to our attention, and thank other Members who have taken part in the debate. This area has probably not been covered in Parliament so far and is, as has been said, a new and growing concern for the environment. I was particularly saddened to hear the comments about disposable vapes turning up on beaches; that was backed up by the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally), who remembered the plastic nurdles that we talked about when we were both on the Environmental Audit Committee. It is terrible to think that this may be similar.

I took a puff of a disposable vape in preparation for the debate. I am not a smoker at all, and it caused a huge amount of coughing and spluttering—it was raspberry flavoured. I cannot say that it is something that I will take to, but it was important to have a look at some of them and try one.

[Rebecca Pow]

Before I carry on and tackle the environmental issues, I will touch on the health issue so clearly outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson). The Government are absolutely committed to making this country smoke-free by 2030, doing more to help adult smokers to quit and to stop people taking up this deadly addiction. We also note that most smokers want to quit, and there is a call to offer vaping as a substitute for smoking. We recognise that vaping is far less harmful than smoking and is an effective device for quitting. One of my officials, briefing me for the debate, shared his experience. He said that he had been a smoker for a lot of his life, starting as a young person, and how useful vapes actually were in transitioning off dangerous nicotine cigarettes. Our recently published “Nicotine vaping in England” report set out the most up-to-date evidence on vapes, providing an even more compelling case for supporting smokers to switch. Our message is clear: if the choice is between smoking and vaping, as pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, choose vaping. Obviously, if the choice is between vaping and fresh air, please choose fresh air.

The Government have two priorities for vaping, which are to maximise the opportunity to help smokers to quit while minimising the uptake by children, because the stats that we have heard on the number of children using vapes are shocking. It is the disposable ones, of course, which they are attracted by. The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire mentioned the Geek Bar and Elf Bar in particular. They get hooked on those products, which do not come under our waste electrical and electronic equipment register because the companies that produce these brands have not registered as WEEE producers for this compliance year. That is definitely something that the Environment Agency is working on. I will touch more on how we are getting those who import these vapes, many of which are made in China, to pay to join our producer compliance scheme, so that they are part of the collection and recycling scheme. That very much needs attention.

While the public health impacts of vaping as an aid to quit smoking are clear, I share the concerns we have heard today about the environmental impacts of these products, especially of disposable vapes. I welcome the recent report by Material Focus because it shone an important light on some of the environmental concerns that have arisen about the improper disposal of disposable vape products.

According to that study, around 1.3 million disposable vapes are thrown away every week in the UK. We have heard quite a lot of stats, but that is pretty shocking. More than half a billion of all the different types of vapes are bought each month, by 6.4% of the population. It is a huge and growing market. A significant amount of the disposable vapes that are thrown away each week are not being recycled properly and are instead being littered or discarded with residual waste in the bin.

That waste includes a lot of single-use plastics, although there are also refillable vapes, and they contain critical resources. Lithium is one of the most valuable. That lithium is literally going to waste; the single-use vapes being thrown away contain 10 tonnes of lithium per

year, the equivalent of 1,200 electric car batteries. That is a huge amount of a critical material that is being thrown away.

The findings of the Material Focus report highlight the importance of ensuring that the vaping sector, its products and those that sell them are fully compliant with the obligations set out under key pieces of waste management legislation, which my Department has responsibility for. I would like to remind Members exactly what those obligations are and what my Department is already doing to assist the vaping sector with understanding those obligations and, most importantly, to increase compliance with them.

All vapes, including disposable vapes, fall within scope of the UK’s waste electrical and electronic equipment regulations, referred to as the WEEE regulations. Although waste policy is devolved, I welcome the extremely close working on the suite of producer responsibility legislation, particularly that which covers waste electricals, between the devolved nations, including Wales, where the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), resides. DEFRA is working very closely on the issue.

The WEEE regulations require importers and manufacturers of vapes and other electrical equipment to finance the cost of collection and the proper treatment of all equipment that is disposed of via local authority household waste sites and returned to retailers and internet sellers. Producers do that via membership of approved producer compliance schemes. They must be registered with the Environment Agency in England or their partners in the devolved Administrations. I know that a number of producers of vapes are registered, but clearly a great many are not, including Geek Bar and Elf Bar, which I already mentioned.

Retailers and internet sellers of vapes also have important obligations under the WEEE regulations to take back used vapes on supply of new vapes to their customers. In addition, they must also make available information to their customers about how to recycle vapes. Smaller retailers—say, a corner shop that sells all sorts of things and just a few vapes—can opt out of the take-back obligations if they pay into a scheme that supports local authority electricals recycling. Of course, those obligations are not different from those that apply to other electrical products.

Kirsten Oswald: The Minister makes a number of factual points about the regulations and how they apply equally to vapes and to other types of electrical equipment, but the very nature of disposable vapes is so different from that of any other kind of electrical equipment. That is the crux: they are made to be disposable and to be thrown away. The problem is that people throw them away. I am keen to hear from the Minister what will be done, and what assessment will be made, so that we can take some action to stop the environmental harm.

Rebecca Pow: I get the hon. Member’s point, but I was trying to make the point that there are a lot of regulations and obligations in place, so we need to ensure that those work effectively before going on to see what more needs to be done. I will touch on that in a minute.

For example, there are also separate obligations under the Waste Batteries and Accumulators Regulations 2009 that are relevant to the batteries contained in vapes.

Businesses selling vapes should be registered as battery producers because, as well as vapes, they are putting the batteries in the vapes on the market. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford effectively asked that we not have a ban on disposable vapes because we need to consider the health aspects of this issue. The Government do not have any immediate plans to ban disposable vapes, but we are concerned by the increasing number of these products and their improper disposal. The primary focus of this debate is the environment, and we need to work constructively with the sector to help businesses understand their obligations and bring them into compliance.

I can report today that my officials have held discussions in recent weeks with the vaping sector to ensure that the sector understands and communicates its members' obligations in relation to the WEEE regulations, as well as their similar obligations in relation to batteries. Those discussions on regulatory matters will continue with all those working in the vaping sector, and will of course be in accordance with the UK's commitment to article 5.3 of the World Health Organisation's framework convention on tobacco control.

My Department has already engaged with the Environment Agency and the Office for Product Safety and Standards, which is the enforcer of the retail take-back obligation. They are putting together a programme to drive up compliance, and are looking at what more can be done. They regulate the producer obligations in England and the UK-wide distributor obligations laid down in the WEEE regulations, and we are working with them on this emerging sector. It is an emerging sector, which is one of the issues: it is growing so fast, like Topsy. I can also report that, as we meet, representatives of the WEEE producer compliance schemes are meeting and discussing what they can do as a sector to proactively encourage producers of all types of vapes to fully meet their obligations under the regulations. We will support their active engagement in any way that we can.

I hope that Members will acknowledge my Department's efforts so far. It may be that we must continue to strive to ensure compliance with existing environmental obligations before jumping to an outright ban, or anything as dramatic as that. I can also report that we are reviewing the current producer responsibility system for waste electricals and batteries, and plan to publish consultations on both areas next year—I think that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Newport West, touched on that. The WEEE regulations were developed when the vaping industry was in its infancy, so it is right

that, in undertaking that review, we consider what, if any, changes are needed to that legislation to ensure that the vaping sector plays its part in properly financing the cost of the collection and treatment of the products when they become waste. More generally, the reviews are exploring ways in which we can make it easier for the public to dispose of their unwanted electrical items—including vapes—and how future regulations can better support the circular economy, which all of our waste and resources measures are driving. We have heard a lot about Scotland, but England is equally doing a great deal in this sector, so that we can have a level playing field between the businesses supplying electricals to customers via online sales and those that use more traditional sales and distribution channels. We are also considering similar measures under a parallel review of the UK's battery regulations.

Littering was touched on; I mention it because disposal vapes are contributing to litter. They get thrown around in our beautiful countryside. Local councils are responsible for keeping their public land clear of litter and refuse, and the role of central Government is to enable and support that work. DEFRA published a litter strategy for England in April 2017, setting out how to deliver a substantial reduction in litter and littering within a generation by focusing on education and awareness, improving enforcement and so forth. It goes to show that all those things are relevant to vapes as well as cigarette filters, which are the most littered item. The tobacco industry is working hard on how to reduce that. Potentially, companies that make vapes should be brought into that thinking as well.

In conclusion, there is an obvious consensus that disposable vapes—and what they may break down into—represent a genuine threat and risk to our environment. I have set out the measures that my Department is already taking to increase the vaping sector's engagement with the existing environmental legislation. I also have signalled our intention to consider any necessary changes to the WEEE regulations in their forthcoming review to ensure that the vaping sector properly meets its obligations to finance the cost of collection and proper treatment of waste from vape products.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the environmental impact of disposable vapes.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 29 November 2022

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Serious Fraud Office's Handling of the Unaoil Case: Independent Review

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): Following the Court of Appeal's judgment in the Unaoil case, *R v. Akle & Anor*, in December 2021, the then Attorney General, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), commissioned Sir David Calvert-Smith to conduct an independent review into the Serious Fraud Office's handling of the case.

On 21 July 2022, in a written ministerial statement, the then Attorney General provided Parliament with the findings of Sir David's review and a response to his recommendations. This also included a commitment to update Parliament on progress in delivering these recommendations in both November 2022 and February 2023. This WMS provides the first of these updates.

Sir David's review made 11 recommendations, which were accepted. These cover a range of matters, including record keeping and case assurance, compliance with policies, and resourcing. While many of the changes recommended by Sir David can be—and have been—made quickly, it will necessarily take longer to fully embed his recommendations and assess the effectiveness of changes made.

Within this context, I am pleased to report that significant progress has been made in delivering Sir David's recommendations. For nine of the 11 recommendations, the SFO has already implemented specific measures or steps to ensure their effective delivery. For the two remaining recommendations, work has commenced to make changes in response to Sir David's proposals.

A detailed update on progress will be published on www.gov.uk today and copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

I would also like to take this opportunity to notify Parliament of a change to the timing of the second update on Sir David's recommendations. This was originally planned for February 2023 but will now be provided by no later than May 2023. This is to allow the findings of an inspection of the SFO by His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate to be considered as part of the update. The inspection, a report of which will be published in April 2023, is examining case progression in the SFO with reference to relevant findings in Sir David's review.

[HCWS395]

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Security

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Grant Shapps): It will not be news to hon. Members that in the past year, Putin's barbaric invasion of Ukraine has sent energy prices soaring.

Without this Government's support, it would have sent thermostats sinking this winter, too. We have taken decisive action to keep homes, businesses, hospitals, and schools warm this winter. But if we are to avoid foisting this crisis on to future generations, we must think about the years to come, too.

This Government are investing now in a long-term plan, deploying transformative technologies to secure a cheaper, cleaner, reliable supply of energy for Britain and laying firm foundations for growth.

We are one of the biggest economies in the world, but for far too long our energy dependency has threatened to make us vulnerable, when the price of our energy is dictated by the whims of international energy markets.

To put a stop to this situation, we are securing our energy sovereignty.

We are building an energy system fit for the future, by delivering low-carbon energy and greater energy efficiency. We will continue working with our allies, whilst reducing the impact of international energy markets on our energy system.

By developing our world-leading renewables and investing in new nuclear, we will generate home-grown British energy for British families and businesses, boosting British jobs and British growth even as we transition to net zero.

Energy sovereignty is within our grasp. Clean, affordable energy for households and businesses is not a pipe dream, but a project we have now embarked on. Today I am setting out the steps we are taking on our path to energy freedom, delivering opportunity, security, and prosperity for all.

Investing in nuclear power

Nuclear power will be at the core of our threefold mission: to secure our energy supply; to supercharge growth; and to cut our carbon emissions. Today, it was announced that we have delivered on our commitments in the autumn statement, and that the Government will progress Sizewell C.

Our investment, the first made directly by a Government in nuclear power for 30 years, will drive forward the project's development, and confirm the Government as a project shareholder. Next year, the Government, EDF, and the project company will work together to raise private capital under our new regulated asset base funding model for nuclear.

This is a truly significant moment, and our biggest step so far towards increasing our energy independence. Sizewell C will create 10,000 highly skilled jobs for the area and provide cleaner, cheaper, low-carbon electricity for the equivalent of 6 million homes for over 50 years.

Great British Nuclear

We remain committed to developing a pipeline of new nuclear projects beyond Sizewell C, where these offer clear value for money for taxpayers and consumers. We have been working at pace on the scoping and set up of Great British Nuclear, with the support of industry, and we will make an announcement on the set up of GBN early in the new year.

GBN will be tasked with helping projects through every stage of the development process and developing a resilient pipeline of new builds. We will back it with funding to support projects to get investment ready and

through the construction phase, while recognising the challenging fiscal environment outlined by the Chancellor at the autumn statement.

GBN will enable the delivery of clean, safe electricity over the decades to come, protecting future generations from the high prices of global fossil fuel markets.

Boosting energy efficiency

We must do all we can to boost energy generation, but we can also make sure that none of us uses more than we need.

The days of wasting energy are over. Boosting energy efficiency with warmer homes and buildings is key to bringing down bills and boosting jobs along the way with green growth.

We are aiming high, with a target to reduce the UK's final energy consumption from buildings and industry by 15% by 2030. We are also providing the money to get there, with a new £6 billion investment from 2025 to 2028 that comes on top of the £6.6 billion we are already spending over this Parliament.

Installing insulation in hundreds of thousands of homes across the country will save consumers around £310 a year through our ECO+ scheme, making our energy system more resilient and secure by slashing energy demand.

We recently launched a consultation so that we can make sure that the right support gets to the right people in the right way.

The Government have stepped in with an unprecedented package of support for households this winter, but there is more that households can do to help meet our energy demand reduction target and save money on their bills.

The Government are expanding their public awareness campaign to help reduce bills for all households and protect the most vulnerable over this winter and beyond.

Backed by £18 million, this campaign will complement existing Government support schemes. It will use public messaging to help consumers understand how they can reduce their own household usage and bills through making their homes more energy efficient for this winter and next. Moreover, it will provide vulnerable groups with the information they need to reduce energy usage without harming their health.

This information will also be available on the existing Help for Households website.

Legislating to drive investment and to secure our energy future

We have put the legislative vehicle to power up this long-term plan, the Energy Security Bill, back on track; it will be taken forward this Parliament.

The Bill will liberate private investment, driving jobs and growth in every corner of the country. Importantly, it will help to transform our energy industry by firing up the nascent CCUS and hydrogen industries, in which we already have a head start with pioneering projects from the Humber to the Mersey.

The Bill will encourage competition in the energy sector, enabling the economy to grow and flourish by creating opportunity, prosperity, and security with clean jobs, new skills, and cheaper bills.

[HCWS394]

DEFENCE

Defence Equipment Plan

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

I am pleased to place in the Library of the House a copy of the 2022 defence equipment plan report, which details the Department's spending plans in equipment procurement and support projects over a period of 10 years.

This year's equipment plan report comes at a pivotal point in time as the Ministry of Defence has become increasingly in the spotlight over the last year in the wake of Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

The uplift received from the 2020 spending review meant we were able to rectify an existing deficit and produce an affordable equipment plan. We have retained this affordable position for the 2022 plan and continue to hold a contingency to mitigate against emerging financial pressures.

Since the publication of the last report the Department has made significant improvements in the process and production of the equipment plan. We have revised guidance to improve realism judgments, strengthened our assessment of affordability and ensured closer engagement between top-level budget holders and head office to mitigate finance and capability risks.

The recent autumn statement has recognised the need to increase defence spending, and we look forward to the outcomes of this once the integrated review is refreshed. For now, however, we are assured that the spending decisions we have set out remain in line with departmental priorities.

The plan is not immune to risk, we have set ambitious savings targets and made hard decisions in spending priorities across the commands. The defence landscape has shifted, and we must and will remain agile to those emerging threats. We are entering a new age of warfare and will face pressure from the rising levels of inflation; the Department however remains confident in the resilience of our spending decisions despite now living in a more volatile environment.

[HCWS396]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Online Safety Bill

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michelle Donelan):

The Online Safety Bill is a vital, world-leading piece of legislation, designed to ensure that tech companies take more responsibility for the safety of their users, particularly children. It is also vital that people can continue to express themselves freely and engage in pluralistic debate online. For that reason, I am today committing to make a number of changes to the Online Safety Bill to strengthen its provisions relating to children, and to ensure the Bill's protections for adults strike the right balance with its protections for free speech.

Since taking up the role of Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport I have engaged extensively with colleagues to hear views on this legislation. We have heard concerns from many parliamentarians, stakeholders and members of the public on a number of issues, including a desire to go further on child protections, wanting better protections for legal speech and a concern that too much power over what we see and engage with online rests with tech giants themselves. Making progress on these important concerns did not, in my view, need to come at the expense of one another. I therefore set out a clear approach with three main aims:

Strengthen the protections for children in the Bill

Ensure that adults' right to legal free speech is protected

Create a genuine system of transparency, accountability and control to give the British public more choice and power over their own accounts and experience.

We can say with confidence that all three aims have been achieved with the amendments the Government are putting forward. We will go further to strengthen the elements of the Bill that specifically protect children online. At the same time, we will remove the clauses pertaining to "legal but harmful" content for adults and replace them with a "triple shield" that empowers users and ensures that control over the online experience rests with individuals rather than anonymous committees in Silicon Valley.

Protections for Children

The Bill's key objective, above everything else, is the safety of young people online. Not only will we preserve the existing protections, I will table a number of amendments that go further to strengthen the existing protections for children in the Bill to:

make clearer the existing expectations of platforms in understanding the age of their users and, where platforms specify a minimum age for users, require them to clearly explain in their terms of service the measures they use to enforce this and if they fail to adhere to these measures, Ofcom will be able to act. I will table these amendments in the Commons;

require the largest platforms to publish summaries of their risk assessments for illegal content and material that is harmful to children, to allow users and empower parents to clearly understand the risks presented by these services and the approach platforms are taking to children's safety

name the children's commissioner as a statutory consultee for Ofcom in its development of the codes of practice to ensure that the measures relating to children are robust and reflect the concerns of parents.

The Government will table the remaining amendments in the Lords.

Legal Free Speech

A large number of colleagues, stakeholders and members of the public have been particularly concerned about provisions that would result in the over-removal of legitimate legal content by creating a new category of "legal but harmful" speech. However admirable the goal, I do not believe that it is morally right to censor speech online that is legal to say in person.

I will therefore table a number of amendments in the Commons to remove "legal but harmful" from the Bill in relation to adults, and replace it with a fairer, simpler and we believe more effective mechanism called the triple shield, which will focus on user choice, consumer rights and accountability while protecting freedom of expression. We are taking the same approach when

assessing the proposed new harmful communications offence, which when applied could potentially have criminalised legitimate discussion of some topics. I have therefore tabled amendments for the second day of Report stage to remove the harmful communications offence from the Bill.

To retain protections for victims of abusive communications, including victims of domestic abuse, we will continue progressing new offences for false and threatening communications. Furthermore, the Bill will no longer repeal the Malicious Communications Act 1988 and relevant sections of the Communications Act 2003. To avoid duplication in legislation, the Government will remove elements of the offences in these Acts which criminalise false and threatening communications.

Protection for Adults: The Triple Shield

It is unquestionable that speech that is illegal in the street should also be illegal online, and that major platforms should remove illegal content from their sites. While most platforms, including social media sites, have robust terms of service detailing the types of content they do or do not allow, anyone who uses these platforms regularly will know that there is a widespread failure of companies to enforce their own terms of service and platforms can often treat some sections of society differently. Lastly, I believe that rather than censoring adults, the Government should be standing up for free speech and choice by empowering people.

Together, these three common sense principles form the basis of the triple shield, a comprehensive set of tools to protect and empower adults. Under this system, three important rules apply:

Illegal: Content that is illegal should be removed. The Bill includes a number of priority offences, and companies must proactively prevent users from encountering this content. The Bill includes the relevant offences for England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Companies will also have to remove other relevant illegal content, when they become aware of it.

Terms of service: Legal content that a platform prohibits in its own terms of service should be removed, and legal content that a platform allows in its terms of service should not be removed.

User empowerment: Rather than tech giants' algorithms alone deciding what users engage with, users themselves should have the option to decide. Adults should be empowered to choose whether or not to engage with legal forms of abuse and hatred if the platform they are using allows such content. So the "third shield" puts a duty on platforms to provide their users with the functionality to control their exposure to unsolicited content that falls into this category. These functions will, under no circumstances, limit discussion, robust debate or support groups' ability to speak about any of these issues freely.

The user empowerment tools will allow adults to reduce the likelihood that they will see certain categories of content if they so choose. The duty will specify legal content related to suicide, content promoting self-harm and eating disorders, and content that is abusive or incites hate on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sex, gender reassignment, or sexual orientation. This is a targeted approach that reflects areas where we know adult users, in particular vulnerable users, would benefit from having greater choice over how they interact with these kinds of content. For the first time, tech giants will be required to give individual adults genuine

control over their own accounts and online experience. I will table amendments relating to these provisions in the Commons.

This will be done while upholding users' rights to free expression and ensuring that legitimate debate online will not be affected by these stronger duties. There are high thresholds for inclusion in these content categories, which will exclude discussions about these broad topics—even where that could be controversial or challenging—but where it does not become abusive. Nothing in this duty will require companies to remove or take down legal content. This will also be made clear through the Bill's explanatory notes.

Category 1 services will still need to give users the option to verify themselves and choose not to interact with unverified users. This duty will remain unchanged, and again reinforces this Government's commitment to ensuring users have genuine choice over their online experience.

These changes will ensure the Bill protects free speech while holding social media companies to account for their promises to users, guaranteeing that users will be able to make informed choices about the services they use and the interactions they have on those sites.

Accountability and further measures

Publication of enforcement notices: The regulator, Ofcom, will hold companies to account if they fail to comply with the requirements in the Bill by issuing fines or notifications requiring them to take steps to remedy compliance failures. To further strengthen transparency for users, we will give Ofcom the power to require services to publish the details of any enforcement notifications, including notices requiring them to remedy breaches, that they receive. I have now tabled these amendments in the Commons.

Self-harm: I am aware of particular concerns around content online which encourages vulnerable people to self-harm. While the child safety duties in the Bill will protect children, vulnerable adults may remain at risk of exposure to this abhorrent content. I am therefore committing to making the encouragement of self-harm illegal. The Government will bring forward in this Bill proposals to create an offence of sending a communication that encourages serious self-harm via an amendment in the House of Lords. This new offence will ensure that trolls sending such messages to a person, regardless of the recipient's age, face the consequences for their vile actions.

Tackling violence against women and girls: It is unacceptable that women and girls suffer disproportionately from abuse online and it is right that we address this through the Online Safety Bill. Therefore, extensive work has been undertaken, including with Home Office colleagues, to understand how we can further protect women and girls through the Online Safety Bill, including to:

List Controlling or Coercive behaviour as a priority offence. This is an offence that disproportionately impacts women and girls—listing this as a priority offence means companies will have to take proactive measures to tackle this content, therefore strengthening the protections for women and girls under the Bill.

Name the Victims' Commissioner and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner as Statutory Consultees for the codes of practice, to ensure that they are consulted by Ofcom ahead of drafting and amending the codes of practice.

These changes will be made to the Bill in the House of Lords.

As announced last week by the Deputy Prime Minister, we are also going to take forward reforms to the criminal law on the abuse of intimate images. Building on the campaign of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), as well as recommendations from the Law Commission, we will criminalise the sharing of people's intimate images without their consent. This, in combination with the measures already in the Bill to make cyberflashing a criminal offence, will significantly strengthen protections for women in particular as they are disproportionately affected by these activities. The Government will table these amendments in the Lords. Separate to the Online Safety Bill, the Government will also bring forward a package of additional laws to tackle a range of abusive behaviour including the installation of equipment, such as hidden cameras, to take or record images of someone without their consent.

Epilepsy Trolling: I have tabled amendments for the second day of Report Stage to legislate for a new flashing images offence. I would like to pay tribute to the passionate campaigning that has been done on this issue, both by the Epilepsy Society, and parliamentarians from across both Houses to help the Government ensure that this appalling behaviour is tackled and that we fulfil the Government's previous commitment to legislate to protect victims from epilepsy trolling. We have also made a number of other technical changes to clarify existing policy positions, further details of which can be found in the amendment paper.

To ensure the proposed changes go through proper scrutiny, we intend to return a number of clauses back to a Public Bill Committee for consideration. These are issues that are of fundamental importance to the regime, and to members of this House, such as freedom of expression, user empowerment, and age assurance, and it would not be right to proceed with these changes without detailed scrutiny in the House of Commons. We intend to make further changes, as set out above, in the House of Lords, however the timing of these amendments will depend on parliamentary scheduling.

[HCWS397]

EDUCATION

Further Education

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Robert Halfon): Today the Office for National Statistics published its decision to reclassify the further education sector and its subsidiaries as part of the central Government sector.

The ONS is an agency independent of Ministers, and it periodically reviews the classification of all sectors of the economy for the purposes of national accounts. More information on classification and how the ONS has reached this decision is available on its website.

This means the statutory further education sector—FE colleges, sixth-form colleges and designated institutions—and its subsidiaries are treated from today, 29 November 2022, for financial and accounting purposes as part of the central Government sector, with my Department as the principal Department responsible for ensuring the sector complies with financial and accounting rules. In practice, this means that colleges are now subject to the

framework for financial management set out in the parliamentary document “Managing Public Money”, guidance on senior pay and other relevant central Government guidance.

The mission of colleges—to continue to fulfil their role at the heart of their communities, working in partnership with employers, local government and other providers to meet the needs of learners and the labour market—has never been more important. The decision to reclassify the FE sector will not alter these strategic aims. Colleges will continue to play a leadership role in England’s skills system. My officials will work to make sure that they provide the world-leading skills infrastructure that our country needs while adequately demonstrating that we are managing public money well.

My officials said at the start of the review that we wanted to ensure that if colleges were reclassified, it happened in as seamless a way as possible, maintaining continuity and stability for the sector where possible. We have taken the time to get these changes right; to give colleges the support that they need as the transition takes place; and to explore the ways that colleges, learners, employers and communities might all make the most of this change. Colleges will retain many of the flexibilities they currently have and day-to-day operations will continue with minimal changes, so colleges can maintain a smooth delivery.

With that in mind, my officials are publishing the Government’s response to this reclassification decision today, which sets out how my Department will continue to support colleges following the ONS’s decision.

To support and protect colleges, we will be:

- Investing £300 million of payments before the end of the current financial year to eliminate the current deficit in funding experienced by March and move to a profile of funding that better matches need, recognising the challenging environment the sector faces;

- Providing an additional £150 million of capital grant funding in 2023 to 2024 to support and protect colleges planning to invest in their infrastructure/estate where previously they would have borrowed from commercial lenders;

- Allowing colleges to retain flexibility on using surpluses and sale of assets, ensuring that colleges can continue to invest in their estates while complying with the “Managing Public Money” framework; and

- Working in partnership with the sector to develop the future approach to financial reporting, and a new college handbook

This means that how colleges report to and interact with Government will change. Colleges will be required to ensure their systems of financial control support public sector standards of accountability.

“Managing Public Money” is clear that public sector organisations may borrow from private sector sources only if the transaction delivers better value for money for the Exchequer. Because non-Government lenders face higher financing costs, in practice it is very unlikely that central Government bodies—now including colleges—will be able to satisfy this condition for future private sector borrowing. If colleges have any proposals for new private sector borrowing, they will now need Department for Education approval—we will update college learner grant agreements to include this as a condition of funding.

In recognition of the limitation on private sector borrowing that reclassification as part of central Government imposes, and in response to feedback from the FE sector and stakeholder groups, I am pleased to

confirm that my Department will be investing an additional £150 million of capital funding in further education and sixth-form colleges. This change means that although colleges will have only very limited access to private finance, they will benefit from additional grant funding to improve the condition of the college estate. From the research we have done with colleges, I understand this is one of the main reasons that colleges currently seek private finance, so I hope it will be welcomed by the FE sector.

Furthermore, to help colleges manage their cashflow, my Department will address the historical issue of uneven monthly payments from central Government, which leave colleges out of pocket by March each year. My Department will invest £300 million in bringing forward payments into this financial year to enable us to smooth out the funding, so we have a new even profile for colleges from 2023 to 2024 for both the 16 to 19 and adult education budgets.

I can also confirm that colleges will retain the flexibility to carry over surpluses from one year to the next, and to keep and spend the proceeds from the sale of assets, subject to certain conditions, and this will be kept under review.

Many colleges have subsidiaries, some of which are profit-making entities with commercial operations. Subsidiaries play an important role in the college system, both in delivering provision and generating commercial income. Colleges will also retain the ability to operate their trading subsidiaries, which the ONS has reclassified to the central Government sector.

Regarding financial reporting, colleges will continue to produce their own annual report and accounts as normal for the year ending 31 July 2023. The Department will eventually be required to consolidate the accounts for all FE colleges into one. This means we will require additional information from colleges. We will be working with the sector to ensure that the impact of this request is manageable.

My officials will begin work to write a new college financial handbook and engage with representatives from the sector from the outset, with a view to sharing it in draft with colleges and sector bodies in autumn 2023 for consultation so that they are clear what is expected of them and build their understanding and support. In parallel, my officials will set up the necessary processes and data collection systems to operationalise the new MPM requirements. The handbook will be finalised for publication in March 2024, ahead of an effective date of August 2024 to coincide with the start of the financial year.

The changes will be explained in more detail in a letter from the accounting officer of the Education and Skills Funding Agency to all college financial directors and will be followed by further guidance to help colleges comply with the “Managing Public Money” framework and other central Government guidance as quickly as possible.

I am also writing today to college principals to explain the changes that need to be made and to thank them for the important role they will play in the public sector.

We have taken the opportunity of reclassification to strengthen our arrangements for, and invest more in, this hugely important sector, which is now more obviously than ever a vital part of the Government’s skills agenda for the future.

The Government's response ensures we use this opportunity to continue to support colleges to do what they do best, while balancing this against the need to adequately demonstrate that we are managing public money well.

[HCWS392]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Funding for Woodlands and Timber Industry

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Today we announced £20 million of funding to improve tree planting stocks, woodland resilience and domestic timber production, and to accelerate tree planting across England.

The £10 million has been awarded through the Woods into Management Forestry Innovation Funds and the Tree Production Innovation Fund to support projects that explore new technologies and business models to improve tree planting stocks and woodland resilience.

In addition, 57 local authorities have been awarded nearly £10 million to accelerate tree planting.

These initiatives will see hundreds of thousands of trees planted in communities across England. They represent another step forward in the Government's drive to treble tree planting rates across England by the end of this Parliament.

The Local Authority Treescapes Fund and the Urban Tree Challenge Fund will reopen for new applications early in 2023.

<i>Applicant</i>	<i>Total Grant £</i>
Oxfordshire County Council	150,000
Lancashire County Council	300,000
Tees Valley Combined Authority	299,996
Nottinghamshire County Council	149,845
Kent County Council	299,642
West of England Combined Aut.	299,738
Rotherham Metropolitan BC	107,000
North Yorkshire County Council	150,000
City of York Council	149,800
Warwickshire County Council	150,000
City of Trees	299,880
Gateshead Council	147,886

<i>Applicant</i>	<i>Total Grant £</i>
Wakefield Metropolitan DC	147,921
Gloucestershire County Council	149,853
Lambeth Council	142,024
London Borough of Enfield	144,042
London Borough of Hillingdon	148,712
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	103,153
City of Bradford Metropolitan DC	150,000
Portsmouth City Council	147,116
Calderdale Borough Council	55,332
Devon County Council	298,476
Lincolnshire County Council	283,387
Doncaster Council	138,108
Shropshire Council	149,618
Hertfordshire County Council	148,500
Halton Borough Council	148,402
Knowsley Metropolitan BC	150,000
Newcastle City Council	290,000
Buckinghamshire Council	144,778
North Somerset Council	150,000
Kirklees Council	80,524
Worcestershire CC	149,708
North Lincolnshire Council	149,932
Surrey County Council	150,000
London Borough of Islington	146,411
Haringey Council	88,296
Somerset County Council	296,948
Sheffield City Council	147,520
Leicestershire County Council	149,577
London Borough of Barnett	100,000
Walsall Council	149,624
Cheshire West and Chester Council	144,520
Royal Borough of Greenwich	135,488
Wirral Council	85,274
Hampshire County Council	150,000
Norfolk County Council	148,225
Leeds City Council	125,176
Central Bedfordshire	140,028
Solihull MBC	149,215
Wiltshire Council	294,800
Bedford Borough Council	150,000
Cambridgeshire County Council	300,000
St Helens Council	149,000
North Northamptonshire	150,000
City of London Corporation	88,292
Peterborough City Council	149,809

[HCWS393]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 29 November 2022

EDUCATION

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Education questions on 28 November 2022.

Margaret Ferrier: 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.

[Official Report, 28 November 2022, Vol. 723, c. 656.]

Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for Education, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier).

The correct response should have been:

Nick Gibb: We **will soon start** delivering defibrillators to schools up and down the country—it is **going to be** a successful programme. I will write to the hon. Member with the precise **information** that she is seeking.

ORAL ANSWERS

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Tuesday 29 November 2022

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**not later than
Tuesday 6 December 2022**

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