

**Wednesday  
19 April 2023**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 19 April 2023**

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# House of Commons

*Wednesday 19 April 2023*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### WALES

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Cost of Living

1. **Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the cost of living in Wales. [904530]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies):** I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a range of topics. The Government are providing total support of more than £94 billion across the UK to help households and individuals with the cost of living, at an average of more than £3,300 a household. That includes extending energy support by keeping the energy price guarantee at £2,500 for the next three months.

**Mick Whitley:** Last month, we learned that household incomes are falling at the fastest rate since records began, forcing the people of Wales to work even harder for less in return, but Britain's leading food retailer has gouged more than £3 billion in profits from its customers over the past two years alone. With food inflation now at 19%, does the Minister agree that we are living through a cost of greed crisis? When will this Government get serious about tackling the excessive profiteering that is driving up prices and causing real pain for families across Wales and the UK?

**David T. C. Davies:** The Government are serious about dealing with the cost of living crisis, and that is why I am pleased that inflation is shown to be continuing to fall at the moment. This Government are on track to reach our target of halving inflation over the next year. This Government have always supported the most vulnerable in society, which is why I am pleased that we have made sure that pensions, benefits and the minimum wage have gone up in line with inflation.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): This Government continue to spend extraordinary sums of money supporting family incomes during this difficult time. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what is not fair to the taxpayer is giving people free cash, including young asylum seekers—no strings attached—through a poorly targeted universal basic income? Is that not what responsible welfare is all about?

**David T. C. Davies:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. It really is extraordinary that the Welsh Labour party not only wants to spend millions of pounds handing out a universal basic income to people including asylum seekers, but then wants to exempt them from having to pay the same legal bills that the rest of us would be subject to. This Government will continue to support the most vulnerable in society, and that is why I am pleased not only with the raising of pensions, benefits and the minimum wage in line with inflation, but with the extra payments made to those most in need.

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): Last week, in response to the cost of living crisis, the Labour Government in Wales increased the education maintenance allowance to £40 a week. This boost is a lifeline to thousands of students in Wales, and I am proud that we have a Labour party stepping up to help, while the UK Government have turned a blind eye. I am sure that the Secretary of State welcomes the uplift, so can he therefore share what discussions he is having with his Cabinet colleagues to ensure that the UK Government can once again follow the Welsh Labour Government's lead?

**David T. C. Davies:** I can assure the hon. Lady that there are no circumstances under which the UK Conservative Government would want to follow the lead of the Welsh Labour Government, who are coming forward with policies such as raising taxes by wanting to charge people for using the motorways, bringing in a tourism tax and even scrapping meal deals. How will that help a cost of living crisis?

**Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): Just to hammer home the point that has already been made, does the Secretary of State agree that it speaks to the kind of values that the Labour party has that it is prioritising providing huge support for those who have illegally entered our country over maximising cost of living support for Welsh citizens? The same might be the case in England, were a Labour Government ever to be elected.

**David T. C. Davies:** My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. The humanitarian response is to disincentivise people from risking their lives by crossing the channel illegally and arriving in small boats. That is why last night I jointly signed a letter that rejects what the Welsh Labour Government are asking for. We are not prepared to see the Welsh Labour Government handing out universal basic incomes to people who should not be in this country in the first place, and then on top of that providing them with legal funding and lawyers, so that they can challenge the decisions being made by the Government. Those are not the priorities of the Welsh people.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Inflation is still over 10%, and last month the Chancellor imposed a stealth tax by freezing personal allowances. Today, as we have heard, the Office for National Statistics has confirmed that food prices have risen at their fastest rate for 45 years. How does the Secretary of State expect Welsh households to afford even the most basic supermarket essentials when those have increased by almost 25% this year?

**David T. C. Davies:** Of course, the hon. Lady is correct that we have had financial problems, as a result of having to spend £400 billion during the covid pandemic and the inflation that has been caused by the illegal invasion of Ukraine, and that is why the Government have continued to support the most vulnerable in society. However, the fact of the matter is that the Welsh Labour Government's response to all of this seems to be to squander taxpayers' money, with £100 million going to create extra Members of the Senedd, £150 million wasted on plans for a relief road that was never going to be built and now more millions of pounds to be spent on universal basic income and legal fees for asylum seekers.

**Jo Stevens:** The Secretary of State mentioned inflation earlier, but of course falling inflation does not mean that prices are falling—just that the rate of the price rises is slowing. If Cabinet Ministers cannot get a grip on basics like that, it is no wonder the economy is in such a mess. Is it not the reality that his Government continue to fail households right across Wales, while protecting and rewarding the super-wealthy by refusing to abolish non-dom status and giving a huge pension bung to the top 1%?

**David T. C. Davies:** First, of course, the so-called top pension bung was for doctors, which is actually something that Labour Members had called for themselves. If the hon. Lady is seriously worried about food prices, perhaps she could explain why the Welsh Labour Government want to scrap meal deals and stop people enjoying a drink and a packet of crisps with their food. The fact of the matter is that we will prioritise our help towards the most vulnerable, while the Welsh Labour Government continue to squander it on people who do not need it.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Plaid Cymru spokesperson.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): My constituents Malcolm Atherton and Beth Cluer run a café in Trawsfynydd, and they have had to face making the heartbreaking decision to hibernate their business in the face of crippling high energy bills. Small and medium-sized businesses are the beating heart of the Welsh economy and employ 62.6% of Welsh workers, yet they received no additional support with their energy bills from the Chancellor in the spring Budget. To ensure that Malcolm and Beth can one day reopen their café, will the Secretary of State be urging his colleagues in the Treasury to increase the energy support available to small businesses?

**David T. C. Davies:** The right hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have provided an unprecedented package of subsidies for businesses through this winter worth £18 billion—those were figures set out by the Office for Budget Responsibility—and, in addition, there have been things such as the freeze on fuel duty. I am very sorry to hear about the circumstances that some individual businesses face, but I can absolutely assure the right hon. Lady that supporting businesses through this difficult time remains a priority for this Conservative Government.

**Liz Saville Roberts:** Of course, businesses that are off grid have suffered another experience and a lack of support, but with your tolerance, Mr Speaker, I would like to take the opportunity to raise another matter with the Secretary of State.

Thames Water wastes 630 million litres of water every day through leaky pipes. Rather than fix this environmentally baffling waste, they are planning on moving vast volumes of water from Wales instead. Our natural resources are being diverted elsewhere without recompense, and without consultation with local people either. He says he is Wales's man in Cabinet. Will he prove it by activating section 48 of the Wales Act 2017 so that decisions about Wales's resources are made by the people of Wales in Wales?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Can I just say to the right hon. Lady that I have a lot of people trying to get in and that this is unfair? You do get the two questions. Please do not take advantage of the rest of the Chamber.

**David T. C. Davies:** I am not responsible for Thames Water, but I have regular meetings with Welsh Water, and this is not an issue it has raised with me. One of the things I am sure the right hon. Lady would agree with is that Welsh Water needs to do more to ensure that there is less sewage and less leakage going into our rivers. Holding it to account is of course something for which the Welsh Labour Government are responsible.

### Funding Settlement

2. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the funding settlement for Wales. [904531]

13. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the funding settlement for Wales. [904543]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies):** The Welsh Government are well funded to deliver for Wales. The spending review provided the Welsh Government with a record block grant of £18 billion a year. As a result of the Budget, Welsh Government funding is increasing by a further £180 million over the next two years. This is all on top of the additional £1.2 billion announced at the autumn statement.

**John Mc Nally:** I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but the UK Government, as he has just alluded to, have recently clawed back £155 million from the Welsh Government Budget, rather than allowing it to be carried forward into the next financial year. I can only assume that, in clawing back these funds, for some bizarre reason the Secretary of State thinks the UK Government are working in the best interests of the Welsh people. Can he tell us if that is so?

**David T. C. Davies:** The funds were not “clawed back”, and there was no “bizarre” reasoning about it. The money was not spent by the Welsh Government; they managed to fail to spend £155 million in the midst of a pandemic, which is extraordinary. The Welsh Government are receiving £1.20 on the NHS for every £1 spent in the United Kingdom, and that money is not being passed on in full. That is why in Wales, under a Labour Government, we wait longer for our ambulances, longer on hospital waiting lists, and we have less access to the treatment that people are now taking for granted in England.

**Patrick Grady:** The Secretary of State is making the case for precisely the kind of financial flexibility that the devolved Administrations require. The reality of inflation and the mishandling of the economy is that the Welsh budget is worth £4 billion less than it was when it was first agreed, and the same thing is happening in Scotland. If the Government will not adequately finance the devolved institutions, why will they not devolve reasonable borrowing powers, so that we can ensure that adequate budgets are set for the benefit of our constituents?

**David T. C. Davies:** If I ever decide that I want to have lessons in sound management of public finances, I probably will not be asking the Scottish National party. The Welsh Labour Government have had a real-terms increase in spending over the spending review period, and it is for others to answer for why they are unable to deliver the same level of healthcare and education, why they are not building roads, and why they are spending the money they are getting on paying the legal bills of asylum seekers.

**Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con):** Under this UK Government, my constituency has been awarded £17 million from the levelling-up fund to regenerate Holyhead, £20 million to refurbish the Holyhead Gateway, £16 million from the shared prosperity fund, £2.7 million from the culture recovery fund, hundreds of new jobs at the inland border facility, £175 million for the RAF Valley, and now Anglesey has freeport status, with the potential to create 13,000 jobs and £1 billion to the economy. Does the Secretary of State agree that this Conservative UK Government are determined to level up places such as Anglesey in north Wales that have been forgotten by Labour in Cardiff—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Can we try to help? I want to get more people in, and the only way I can do that is with shorter questions.

**David T. C. Davies:** Others in the House may try to shout down my hon. Friend, but they will not succeed, because she has been unstinting in her support for her constituency. It is no coincidence that the Prime Minister wanted to make Ynys Môn the first place he visited as Prime Minister, to celebrate the announcement of growth deals that will deliver growth and levelling up across the whole of Wales and the United Kingdom.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Michael Fabricant.

**Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con):** Many of my constituents, including me, visit Tywyn in Gwynedd. Is my right hon. Friend aware that people need healthcare there, funded of course by the grant, yet Tywyn Hospital has closed its minor injuries unit and its in-patient ward? Will he speak to the Welsh Minister for Health and Social Services and discuss how English tourists will get proper healthcare when they are on holiday in Wales?

**David T. C. Davies:** I am, as ever, grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments, but unfortunately I am unable to give a detailed answer because the national health service is devolved in Wales. I very much hope that Welsh Labour Ministers will want to explain why, with

all the extra money they are getting, above the money that is given to the national health service in England, they are unable to deliver the same standards of healthcare, or for that matter education, as those we take for granted under a Conservative Government run in Westminster.

### Private Rental Costs

3. **Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab):** What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the impact of rising private rental costs on renters in Wales. [904532]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies):** The Secretary of State has regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a range of topics. In England we have committed to tackling issues in the private rental sector, including improving standards through the introduction of the decent homes standard, and providing tenants with greater security by banning “no fault” evictions. However, as the right hon. Member will know, rental issues in Wales are a matter for the Welsh Government.

**Mark Tami:** Low quality, expensive private rented accommodation is a problem not only in Wales but throughout the UK. Does the Minister agree that we need more council housing built to a high standard, and will he join me in praising Flintshire County Council for its excellent programme of council house building? That would be an example to the rest of the country, but we need more investment in that area overall.

**Dr James Davies:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. North Wales certainly has a deficit of housing, as do many other areas, and, as he says, that certainly needs to be addressed through building more homes. I would point out that in 2021-22 there were three new homes built in England per 1,000 and just 1.7 per 1,000 in Wales, so there is much work to do.

**Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con):** According to Rent Smart Wales, the number of registered landlords in Wales fell by 328 during the two years to January this year and there were 301 fewer rental properties available. Does my hon. Friend agree that a significant cause of the current worrying state of the private rental market in Wales is the new legislation introduced by the Welsh Government, which imposes expensive and byzantine licensing obligations on landlords? Does he also agree with the Labour cabinet member for housing on Torfaen Borough Council, Councillor David Daniels, who recently told the council’s scrutiny committee that the new law was the straw that broke the camel’s back, because for landlords it has just been one thing too many?

**Dr James Davies:** I thank my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. He is perfectly right to raise this issue. He is referring to the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016. It may be well intentioned, but the fact is that there is a shortage of housing and if we want to keep landlords in the market we need to incentivise them, so the mandatory regulations and costs imposed are really in place at the wrong time.

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



**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Private rental costs in Wales increased by 4.2% in the year to February 2023, the highest annual percentage change since the Tories came to power. The Government have accepted the need to uplift benefits in line with inflation, but they have completely failed to accept that the same principles should, at the very least, apply to the local housing allowance. Given that rent is the largest item of a family's budget, can the Minister explain exactly why this is one area of policy where the Government do not seem to believe that inflation exists?

**Dr James Davies:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the local housing allowance rates were raised to the 30th percentile in 2020 and that there is also support through the discretionary housing payment scheme. There is, in addition, the whole array of support that has been provided through the recent cost of living pressures.

### Rail Infrastructure

4. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on rail infrastructure in Wales. [904533]

12. **Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on rail infrastructure in Wales. [904542]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies):** I regularly engage with Cabinet Ministers on a range of transport measures. Over £390 million has already been provided for rail improvements in Wales since 2020, including at Bow Street Station, with the electrification of the Severn tunnel and through Cardiff Crossrail.

**Liz Twist:** Avanti chaos has hit services between Holyhead and Crewe. For communities in north Wales and the north-west of England, the line is an ongoing nightmare. What guarantees will the Secretary of State provide that those services will be restored?

**David T. C. Davies:** The hon. Lady has a point. A number of complaints have been made about Avanti by Members of Parliament of all parties and I think there is a recognition that things could be a lot better than they are. Avanti is well aware of that and has been told that it needs to improve the service quickly. I can assure her that the Department for Transport is well aware of the problems she raises.

**Ashley Dalton:** Rail connectivity is crucial to the border communities of Wales and England, such as connections between Wrexham and Merseyside. Furthermore, Merseyside is just as inaccessible for some communities in the north of England as it is in Wales. Skelmersdale in my constituency is a community of 40,000 people, but has been left without access to a train station since 1958. Will the Secretary of State tell me how the Government plan to make sure our communities on both sides of the border have access to rail services?

**David T. C. Davies:** I welcome that question from the hon. Lady. I am sure the people of north Wales would welcome many more of her constituents coming down

to visit and spending money in the local tourism industry, if they can afford the tourism tax imposed by the Welsh Labour Government. To answer her question simply, there will be a rail network enhancements pipeline review out shortly. I believe it will contain good news for rail users across Wales, which will benefit travellers from across the United Kingdom.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): With meal deal bans, tourism taxes and road charges, it is no surprise that many Welsh residents will be thinking of getting the train for a holiday in Torbay to avoid all of them. What discussions is the Secretary of State having to ensure that the rail infrastructure between south Wales and the south-west of England will be able to cope with the demand?

**David T. C. Davies:** I am sure that Torbay is a wonderful place, but I would still recommend that people come to Wales instead to enjoy its coastline. To do that, they would need to go either by train or by car, so it is unfortunate that the Welsh Labour Government have also decided to stop all road building, whereas the United Kingdom Government are getting on with building roads and railways.

**Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): One of the most important rail links into mid-Wales is through Shrewsbury. We are proud to be a border community, and of our links with Wales. We are campaigning for electrification of the line from Birmingham to Shrewsbury and beyond to Wales. Will the Minister take an interest in our project to try to electrify this vital artery for residents in mid-Wales?

**David T. C. Davies:** I will take an interest in that matter, but it is more for the Department for Transport than for my good self. I have taken an interest in the fact that a great deal of work is going on in the Forest of Dean area to ensure that commuters on both sides of the border can enjoy more reliable rail travel.

### Spring Budget 2023: Welsh Communities

5. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the Spring Budget 2023 on Welsh communities. [904534]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies):** The spring Budget delivered for Wales. As announced, the Government will provide £20 million to restore the Holyhead breakwater, deliver at least one investment zone in Wales and provide up to £20 billion for the development of carbon capture usage and storage across the UK, which Wales is well-placed to benefit from.

**Robbie Moore:** The UK Government prove time and again that they are delivering for Wales, whether through supporting hundreds of thousands of households with the energy price guarantee or through the £20-million Holyhead breakwater. However, does my hon. Friend agree that the Welsh Labour Government are advertising Wales as closed for business, with the recent ban on road building and tax on tourism?

**Dr Davies:** I could not agree more. The Welsh Government's response to the roads review was more of a roadblock. There has been widespread rejection of the tourism tax from the sector, including UK Hospitality, which has called it "anti-competitive". The contrast between the approaches of the two Governments is stark: the UK Government are striking trade deals and promoting Britain as open for business, while the Welsh Government seem focused on punishing small business owners.

**Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** A little birdy tells me that the Secretary of State has had a meeting about the Rhondda tunnel in the last few days. I hope very much—as no doubt do you, Mr Speaker—that there will be an announcement soon of some money to ensure that the Rhondda tunnel can be opened up, making it the second longest cycle tunnel in the whole of Europe and a great advert for tourism in the Welsh valleys. Will he meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) so that we can explain to him its significant benefits and he can lobby to get that money for the Rhondda tunnel?

**Dr Davies:** The hon. Member is right to raise that question. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State tells me that he would be happy to hold a meeting with him, and adds that Rhondda Cynon Taf council should be encouraged to make a levelling-up fund bid.

#### Healthcare Services

6. **Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con):** Whether he has had recent discussions with the Welsh Government on the adequacy of healthcare services in Wales. [904535]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies):** I have discussions with the Welsh Government about the adequacy of Welsh healthcare services—most recently about Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board being put back into special measures. However, the Department for Health and Social Care regularly engages and collaborates with the Welsh Government to share best practice on achieving better outcomes for patients UK-wide.

**Jerome Mayhew:** The Secretary of State has just told us that the Welsh Government receives £1.20 in health funding for every pound spent in England. Despite that, the Welsh Government are the only Government in the United Kingdom to cut funding to the NHS. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Labour party has proved itself incapable in office of running health services?

**Dr Davies:** I very much share his concern across Wales, especially north Wales. Yesterday, in the latest troubling revelations about Betsi Cadwaladr, we learned that the First Minister was wrong to state that the Auditor General had recommended taking the board out of special measures just prior to the 2020 devolved elections. On funding, the Welsh Government may repeatedly call for more money, but they are the only Government in the UK to cut health spending. In the latest budget they have set out plans to cut day-to-day spending on the delivery of NHS services in real terms this year compared with last year, while the UK Government are providing a real-terms increase.

#### Devolution Settlement

7. **Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind):** What recent discussions he has had with the First Minister of Wales on the adequacy of the operation of the devolution settlement for people in Wales. [904536]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies):** The Secretary of State for Wales has regular discussions with the First Minister on how our two Governments can work together within the current devolution settlement to deliver for Wales. Our recent agreement to establish two Welsh freeports shows what we can achieve when we work together for the benefit of people and communities in Wales.

**Rob Roberts:** Given that the Senedd sits for only two days a week and, if yesterday's reports are anything to go by, that the First Minister is less than truthful with his answers anyway, can my hon. Friend fathom any reason why they need to expand Senedd membership by 60%, at huge cost to the Welsh taxpayer? Does he agree with me that the Welsh people should be asked whether they want more MSs working only two days a week?

**Dr Davies:** The hon. Member is right to ask that question. I fully agree with him that the last thing people in Wales want is more politicians in Cardiff bay. The Welsh Government would be better spending the estimated £100 million that they suppose this would cost on public services. If the Welsh Government and their separatist allies are so confident that these proposals should progress, then I agree that they should seek the agreement of people in Wales through a referendum.

#### PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—*  
**Engagements**

Q1.[904430]**Abena Oppong-Asare**(ErithandThamesmead) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 19 April.

**The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak):** Later today, I will return to Belfast to mark the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. It is an opportunity to thank some of the leading architects of peace for their courage and the pivotal role they played to set the groundwork for a better future for the people of Northern Ireland. We will also commemorate those who are no longer with us.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

**Abena Oppong-Asare:** We are in the middle of a housing crisis, with mortgages soaring, rents rising and house building set to reach a new low. Just last week, in an interview with ConservativeHome, the Prime Minister admitted his disastrous decision to drop housing targets to appease Tory party members. Will the Prime Minister please explain to the House why the views of 1,000 party members are more important than those of families aspiring to be homeowners across the country?

**The Prime Minister:** On the Government side of the House we believe in empowering local communities to make the decisions that are right for them and to protect their green spaces. The place where there is most acute need, where house building is not keeping up with need, is in Labour-controlled London.

Q3. [904432] **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): It has been reported that the Welsh Labour Government are going to incentivise people smugglers by offering £1,600 of taxpayers' money every month to asylum seekers. May I ask my right hon. Friend for an assurance that he will never contemplate such a daft idea in our small boats Bill?

**The Prime Minister:** I know my noble Friend Lord Bellamy and the Secretary of State for Wales, my right hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), wrote to the Welsh Government yesterday confirming that we would not be undertaking their request. I note that the Labour leader has said that the Welsh Labour Government are his "blueprint". Unbelievably, as my hon. Friend said, Labour in Wales is trying to pay illegal migrants £1,600. We are stopping the boats; Labour is paying for them.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Leader of the Opposition.

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): The Tory party chair says that public services are in pretty good shape. Has the Prime Minister met a single member of the public who agrees with him?

**The Prime Minister:** Because of the record investment that we are putting into public services like the NHS, we are now getting waiting lists down. Because of the reforms that we have made to our education system, more children are studying in good and outstanding schools. Because that is what you get with a Conservative Government—more funding, more reform and better outcomes for Britain.

**Keir Starmer:** He is living in another world to the rest of us. People waiting more than two days for an ambulance because they broke the NHS. Only one in 100 rapists going to court because they broke the criminal justice system. A record number of small boats crossing the channel because they broke the asylum system. People can't afford their bills, can't get the police to investigate crimes, can't get a doctor's appointment. Does that really sound like pretty good shape to him?

**The Prime Minister:** What is the record since 2010? Since 2010, crime is down by 50% under the Conservative Government. There are 20,000 more police officers, we have given them more powers, and we have toughened up sentencing—all opposed by Sir Softie over there.

**Keir Starmer:** Either the Prime Minister—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Our constituents want to hear the questions and the answers. You will progress questions beyond—[*Interruption.*] The Prime Minister wants to leave early, along with the Leader of the Opposition. Help me to help them!

**Keir Starmer:** Either the Prime Minister does not use the same public services as the rest of us or he simply cannot see the damage that the Government have done to our country. In 2019, Arie Ali, a convicted people smuggler, threw boiling water over a prison officer, leaving him with first degree burns. The prison officer said that it felt like acid and his face was on fire. His attacker was found guilty and received a prison sentence, quite rightly in my view. Does the Prime Minister agree?

**The Prime Minister:** Our record is clear on sentencing. It was this party and this Government who passed the sentencing Act last year. It toughened up sentences, and the average custodial sentence since 2010 has now increased by almost two thirds. For child sex abusers, it is up by 15 months; for rapists, it is up by two years. When our sentencing Act ended the automatic early release of offenders who pose a danger to the public, it was the Labour party that voted against it.

**Keir Starmer:** The problem is, Prime Minister, that Arie Ali's sentence ended up being suspended. Anyone watching this would wonder why someone who violently attacks a key worker is not behind bars. Well, the Court judgment spelled it out: it is because it took 16 months for the attacker to be charged. That is ridiculous. It took another two years before he was sentenced—completely unacceptable. Cannot the Prime Minister see that because the Government have lost control of the courts service, because they have created the largest court backlog on record, he is letting violent criminals go free?

**The Prime Minister:** Here is the record: we are cracking down on grooming gangs, and the Leader of the Opposition is uncomfortable addressing them. We toughened the law on sex offenders so they spend longer in prison; he voted against it. We have increased rape convictions by over 60%; meanwhile, he attended 21 Sentencing Council meetings that watered down punishments. That is why they call him Sir Softie: soft on crime, soft on criminals.

**Keir Starmer:** I have prosecuted thousands upon thousands of sex offenders. The Prime Minister has just shown that he does not understand how the criminal justice system works. No wonder he cannot fix it. He thinks that cracking down on crime is suspending a sentence where someone should be in prison. That shows the problem.

Another reason cited by the Court for suspending the sentence in Arie Ali's case was a letter from the Justice Secretary in February about prison overcrowding. As a result of that letter, courts have been told to have awareness of the impact of current prison population levels when passing sentences. In simple terms, the wrecking ball that the Tories have taken to criminal justice means that thousands of people who should be in prison are not.

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab)** indicated dissent.

**Keir Starmer:** The Justice Secretary shakes his head. He should read the judgment.

The Court also said that it is "for government to communicate to the courts when prison conditions have returned to a more normal state."



I know that the Justice Secretary has been busy trying to save his own job rather than actually doing it, but has the Prime Minister asked him when he is going to get a grip on the prison system and withdraw that letter, which is allowing criminals to walk free?

**The Prime Minister:** We are in the process of building 20,000 more prison places. That is what this Government are delivering. We are toughening up sentencing and putting more people behind bars, and making sure that our most serious offenders spend longer there.

I love it when the right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about his record as a lefty lawyer. I have been looking at this, and I have read that people were “really disappointed” that his organisation had been “letting down...victims.” That was not even my assessment; it was that of his shadow Attorney General.

**Hon. Members:** More!

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I want to us get through these questions, and so do my constituents. To any Member present who is not interested in his or her constituents, I say, “Please leave the Chamber.”

**Keir Starmer:** When I was in office as Director of Public Prosecutions, those on the Benches opposite were my greatest supporters. In 2013, the Home Affairs Committee said:

“We would...like to commend the work of the Director for Public Prosecution, Keir Starmer... Mr Starmer has striven to improve the treatment of...sexual assault”.

The Committee goes on to say—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Prime Minister’s Questions matter to our constituents. [*Interruption.*] I wouldn’t if I were you; it is not the day for it. I want to get through these questions, because I am trying to help the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. You are not being helpful, but we will hear this question, no matter how long it takes.

**Keir Starmer:** This was in 2013—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Ms Stevenson, I have heard you for a few weeks, and this will be the last week. I suggest that you keep quiet, otherwise it is better that you leave.

**Keir Starmer:** In 2013, the Home Affairs Committee went on to say that the work I did

“should provide a model to...other agencies”,

and that

“when he leaves the Crown Prosecution Service...he will be missed.”

That report was presented to Parliament by the then Home Secretary and future Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), and the Government—those on the opposite Benches—noted and supported it. It is obviously always a good look to have your work recognised, although they did lay it on a bit thick.

Perhaps the Prime Minister should spend less time trying to rewrite history and more time sorting out the mess that he has made of criminal justice; but the crisis in criminal justice is just a snapshot of public services

collapsing on his watch. People can see it wherever they look. Our roads, our trains, the NHS, the asylum system, policing, mental health provision—the Tories have broken them all, and all that they have left are excuses and blame. I know that the Prime Minister would rather talk about a maths lesson than about the state of the country, but perhaps he could solve this equation: why, after 13 years of a Tory Government, are patients waiting longer than ever, criminals walking free and growth non-existent, and why, everywhere we look, does nothing seem to work at all?

**The Prime Minister:** I cannot quite remember, but I think the right hon. and learned Gentleman started by talking about the time when he was Director of Public Prosecutions, in 2013. I am actually glad he brought that up, because something else happened when he was DPP in 2013: he got his own special law, and I have it right here. It is called The Pensions Increase—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I expect both sides to listen to the questions and the answers.

**The Prime Minister:** It is called The Pensions Increase (Pension Scheme for Keir Starmer QC) Regulations 2013.

We are introducing a transformative policy to help doctors to cut the waiting lists faster. The right hon. and learned Gentleman wants to raise taxes on public sector workers. It is, literally, one law for him and tax rises for everyone else. [*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Double—do not make me double down on you.

Q6. [904435] **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Recently, I presented a Prime Minister’s Points of Light award to Joan Willett, who is nearly 107, for her fundraising for the British Heart Foundation, and two other Hastings and Rye residents, Anthony Kimber and Alastair Fairley, were celebrated as community champions at No. 10. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking all our fantastic volunteers and community champions, not only in Hastings and Rye but throughout the United Kingdom, and will he continue to bring them together in celebration?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend and I am absolutely delighted that Joan received her Points of Light award. Volunteers and community champions such as Joan, Anthony and Alastair all make important contributions to their local community and we are all grateful to them. Every month, millions do the same thing and they deserve our praise. Their generosity is integral to what makes our country and our communities special, and it is right that we do everything we can to celebrate them.

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

**Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. As I said, I really do want to try to help the Prime Minister. If you don’t, I do.

**Stephen Flynn:** I am delighted to hear that Members had an equally peaceful and relaxing Easter break, as I did.

Prime Minister, was it their refusal to stand alongside striking workers on the picket line, their acceptance of the economic damage being caused by Brexit, or perhaps their support for denying the people of Scotland the right to choose their own future that led to the leader of the Scottish Conservative party urging voters to back Labour?

**The Prime Minister:** What we are doing is not getting distracted by the things that are going on elsewhere; we are focused on delivering for the people of Scotland. We are making sure that we fund public services well, with £1.5 billion extra in Barnett consequentials. We are making sure that we provide support with the cost of living. I know that, at the moment, the hon. Gentleman and his party are focused on other matters. We are just going to motor on with the job.

**Stephen Flynn:** Let me be clear: we will take no lectures from a party that has not had a mandate to govern in Scotland since 1955, that went through three Prime Ministers in the course of just a matter of months, that crashed the economy, that sent mortgage rates soaring and that has taken energy support away from families most in need. The Prime Minister has been fined by the polis not once but twice, they take donations from Russian-backed donors and they have stuffed the House of Lords with people like Baroness Mone. But let us be clear: what we are talking about is the fact that the leader of the Scottish Conservatives believes that the people of Scotland should return Labour party Members of Parliament to this House rather than Scottish National party Members. So is not the message for the people of Scotland quite clear? Don't give the Tories what they want.

**The Prime Minister:** Actually, the Scottish Conservatives deserve enormous praise for forcing the SNP into abandoning its completely unworkable, fundamentally flawed deposit return scheme. So it is good that the SNP U-turned and listened to the voices of the Scottish Conservatives and to business, and we look forward to working with them on delivering something that actually works to deliver for the people of Scotland. And that is just it, because if the SNP cannot fix the mess that Nicola Sturgeon left the party in, how can it possibly fix the mess that she left Scotland in?

Q8. [904437] **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): It seems clear that the junior doctors' strike is causing a serious risk of loss of life, and certainly causing harm and pain to thousands of our constituents. The first line of the Hippocratic oath is "First, do no harm". When does the Prime Minister think the British Medical Association abandoned this central tenet of its profession?

**The Prime Minister:** We value the work of junior doctors and are keen to find a fair and reasonable settlement that recognises their role and the wider economic context facing the UK. My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the impact on patient safety, and that is why this Government have brought forward minimum safety legislation to ensure that patients can rely on a core

level of emergency service to protect vital patient care. That is something that we on this side of the House support, but I know it is not something that is supported by the party opposite.

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Tooth decay is the No. 1 reason that children over the age of four end up in hospital. Regular dental check-ups could prevent it, but too many parents cannot get one for their child. In the East Riding of Yorkshire, there are now almost 3,000 people per NHS dentist. In places such as Herefordshire and Norfolk, fewer than two in five children have been seen by a dentist in the past year. This is a scandal, so will the Prime Minister take up the Liberal Democrat plan to end this crisis and make sure people can get an NHS dentist when they need one?

**The Prime Minister:** The NHS recently reformed dentistry contracts, which will improve access for patients. Dentistry receives about £3 billion a year, and there were around 500 more dentists delivering care in the NHS last year than in the previous year. I am pleased to say that almost 45% more children saw an NHS dentist last year compared with the year before.

Q9. [904438] **Anne Marie Morris** (Newton Abbot) (Con): At Prime Minister's Question Time on 4 February 2015, David Cameron said he was determined to do whatever it took to fix the Dawlish railway line—the only route to the south-west. Phase 4 risks losing part of its agreed funding, while phase 5 has fallen foul of a 10-year moratorium on new funding. The line is only as resilient as its weakest link. Will the Prime Minister commit to getting this resilience programme back on track and fully funded?

**The Prime Minister:** We are committed to improving the resilience of this iconic stretch of railway, which provides a vital link for people in the south-west. That is why, to date, we have invested more than £165 million in delivering solutions to protect the line. Network Rail continues to develop the case for further investment, and my hon. Friend will be keen to feed into that.

Q2. [904431] **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): This week, not only has my city of Dundee announced that its flights will connect with Heathrow but the Scottish Government have committed to Dundee being at the forefront of making Scotland a major world economy, bringing investment, jobs and opportunity. However, the UK Government seem to have a problem with this. Scotland's international engagement is to be reduced. Despite being paid for through Scotland's wealth and taxes, UK ambassadors and diplomats have been instructed to obstruct the Scottish Government's international engagement, with every foreign nation told not to deal with the Scottish Government directly. This has already been described as

"smacking of a parent trying, and failing, to control a teenager."

Will the Prime Minister assure me and the businesses, the wealth creators and, most importantly, my constituents who want to see Dundee and Scotland prosper that, during this short time that Scotland remains in this unequal Union, Scotland will neither be put back in a box nor bend a knee?

**The Prime Minister:** I am pleased to say that we are supporting the communities of Dundee, which received £14 million from the levelling-up fund to support a green transport hub in the city centre. This demonstrates that the UK Government want to invest in the communities of Scotland and to deliver for Scottish people.

Q10. [904439] **Saqib Bhatti** (Meriden) (Con): On Saturday, I joined my 17-year-old constituent Alfie Ford in walking to raise funds for the National Autistic Society. Alfie's mission is to walk 15,000 steps every day in the month of April to raise awareness of autism and to show that every autistic person deserves the best chance in life. This Saturday, he is walking from Birmingham City football club to Edgbaston stadium and back again. Will the Prime Minister join me in wishing Alfie the very best for his walk, and for his noble mission to change for good how people think about autism?

**The Prime Minister:** I praise Alfie for his fantastic efforts. He is an inspiration not just for his community but for many others, and I wish him the best of luck for Saturday. Our autism strategy sets out our ambition to ensure that autistic people across all parts of the country get the support they need to live fulfilling and happy lives, and I look forward to seeing Alfie's progress on the rest of his journey.

Q4. [904433] **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): My constituent Lisa and her civil service colleagues have worked tirelessly and with distinction during some of the most challenging times, but she is fed up with Ministers patting them on the back while imposing derisory 2% and, now, 4.5% pay rises, despite years of pay restraint and, now, double-digit inflation. She asks simply:

"Why should I keep working for a UK government that treats its workers with such contempt?"

Will the Prime Minister stop with the myths and excuses, and start negotiating a fair deal with the unions?

**The Prime Minister:** I pay tribute to all our hard-working public sector workers for the job they do. We have a well-established independent pay review body process for making sure that we can have pay settlements that are fair and affordable. I am very pleased that we have reached agreement with many unions on those pay settlements and I hope that those members vote in support of them.

Q11. [904440] **Shailesh Vara** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that those who seek to criticise the Conservative record on law and order should look in the mirror and ask, "Who was Director of Public Prosecutions for some of those years?"

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our record is clear. We have halved crime since 2010; neighbourhood crime has fallen by 25% just in the last few years; criminals are spending longer in prison; and, crucially, we, unlike the Labour party, are giving the police the powers they need to tackle violent protests.

Q5. [904434] **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): My elderly constituent Anne has been in Turkey for five weeks now after her husband suffered a devastating

brain bleed—he is now in intensive care. Their holiday insurance company, Staysure, has refused to pay medical bills and has so far refused to engage with me. This has resulted in Anne being stuck with extortionate medical bills and surgery costs, which she has covered by using their life savings. With finances now running out, they are both stranded and have been advised that they will need to find at least £50,000 to pay for an air ambulance to bring them home. Will the Prime Minister meet me to consider all possible options to support constituents such as Anne and her husband in difficult situations such as that, especially where insurance companies abdicate all responsibility?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am very sorry to hear about the case that he raises. My thoughts are with Anne and her husband, as I am sure everyone's will be, at this difficult time. I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a meeting as soon as possible with the relevant Minister to discuss and progress this case further.

Q12. [904441] **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): Can I tell a tale of two councils? My constituents who live in Conservative-controlled Wychavon District Council have enjoyed six years of council tax freezes and excellent public services, while my constituents who live in the Malvern Hills District Council area, which is run by a rag-tag-bag of so-called independents and Greens, pay nearly 50% more in council tax for a band D property. Does the Prime Minister agree that the best thing my constituents can do on the cost of living is to vote Conservative on 4 May?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is of course right. Right across the country, those who live in Conservative council areas pay lower council tax than those in Labour council areas. The choice at this election is clear: it is the Conservatives who deliver for you and it is Labour that costs you.

Q7. [904436] **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Lab): This week, the Women's Rights Network published a report by criminologist Professor Jo Phoenix called "When we are at our most vulnerable". It revealed that, between January 2019 and October 2022, which includes the pandemic lockdown, of course, there were a staggering 6,539 reported rapes and sexual assaults in UK hospital settings. That is an average of 33 incidents every single week. As eight police forces did not provide any data, the real figures are bound to be significantly higher. What can the Prime Minister and his Government do to ensure that all women, staff and patients are safe in Britain's hospitals?

**The Prime Minister:** First, may I say that I was deeply shocked and appalled, like the hon. Lady, to hear about the cases of sexual assault and abuse in the NHS. I pay tribute to her for her long-standing campaign on these issues. NHS organisations are responsible for protecting their staff and patients from sexual harassment and conduct. They have recently established a domestic abuse and sexual violence programme to build more robust safeguarding processes for protecting patients, and we will work very closely with them to ensure that that is implemented. I know that she will hold us to account for doing that.



Q13. [904442] **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): On 2 June, Corwen station on the Llangollen steam railway will be officially reopened, having been closed 60 years ago under the Beeching axe. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating the volunteers, the local community and the funders who have made that possible, and take his own share of the credit for granting the levelling-up fund to Clwyd South when he was Chancellor, which has paid for the magnificent new roof on Corwen station?

**The Prime Minister:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all his campaigning on this. I am delighted that the levelling-up fund has delivered for Corwen station. It is a huge boost to local ambitions to see trains returning there. I know that a small team of the project's volunteers have built the majority of the station, and they deserve credit, and that a local company in Wrexham has supplied the new steelwork for the canopy roof, providing a welcome boost to the local economy. I look forward to seeing the station open this summer.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Over recess, I was invited to visit one of the major supermarkets in my constituency to discuss food waste. What struck me most was the experience of shop workers on the frontline. They told me that they expect to suffer a violent assault every single day that they go to work. Although more maths might always be helpful, what is this out-of-touch Prime Minister doing to make sure that people can be safe in their workplace?

**The Prime Minister:** Everyone deserves to be safe in their workplace, which is why we are making sure that, through our sentencing Act, we have appropriate sentencing in place and, more generally, that we have police officers and community support officers across the country to help combat crime. We will happily look at future sentencing when we look at reviews of that case.

Q14. [904443] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): Leadership and teamwork delivered Bolton Wanderers a superb 4-0 victory in the Papa John's trophy match at Wembley. It is delivering the Bolton College of Medical Sciences and delivered Ayyub Patel's superb Rumworth by-election victory. What message does my right hon. Friend have for Councillor Patel and all the campaigners, candidates and activists, as we run into this festival of democracy, our local elections?

**The Prime Minister:** I share in my hon. Friend's congratulations for all those in Bolton, but also offer my commiserations to those in Plymouth, especially to

our party chairman who is an avid supporter of the green army. Most importantly, I welcome the election of Councillor Patel and look forward to his joining our other councillors in delivering for their local areas, with less crime, lower council tax and, importantly, filling more potholes.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Last week, the Home Office announced that it would not be setting up a bespoke visa scheme for the fishing industry of the sort that is already available for people working in fish farms and in offshore wind farms. It also told skippers that crew previously employed by them under a temporary scheme had to stop working immediately. As a consequence of that announcement, in fishing ports around the coast today, many fishing boats are tied up unable to go to sea. It is the only time that this Home Secretary has been successful in our stated ambition of stopping the boats. The Prime Minister and his party promised our fishermen a sea of opportunity if they would support them, but what is the point of a sea of opportunity if they cannot get crew to fish in it?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not sure that I recognise the right hon. Gentleman's characterisation. We are proud champions of the UK's fishing industry, not least with our £100 million investment in fishing communities. We are always looking to engage with those communities to make sure that they get the support that they need. Crucially, all the opportunities that are there for them because of Brexit, we are keen to make sure that we deliver.

Q15. [904444] **Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking Lorna and Shirley of the Marios Tinenti Centre and the local churches in Loughborough for all their hard work in establishing a community allotment? Local people use the facility as a great place to get outdoors as well as to relax.

**The Prime Minister:** I pay tribute to Lorna and Shirley for all their fantastic work. Allotments can do wonders not just for, as my hon. Friend said, providing food, but for wellbeing and providing a place of sanctuary for people around the country, and they deserve enormous praise for creating one for the benefit of their community.

**Mr Speaker:** That completes Prime Minister's questions.



## Chinese Police Stations in UK

12.34 pm

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make a statement on secret police stations operated in the UK by the Chinese Communist party.

**The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp)**: Ordinarily, the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) would have responded to this urgent question, because it sits within his portfolio. He is in Northern Ireland today, so I have been asked to respond in his place.

The latest reporting in *The Times* on the so-called overseas police stations are of course of great concern. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security said in his previous statement on the matter in November last year, investigations by the law enforcement community are ongoing, which limits what I can say in the House about a live investigation into a sensitive matter. As Members will appreciate, I do not want to say anything that would jeopardise any operational investigations or indeed any potential future prosecutions.

I will, however, take this opportunity to reassure the House of the Government's resolve to protect every community in this country from transnational repression. Protecting the people of the United Kingdom is of the utmost importance. Any attempt to coerce, intimidate or illegally repatriate any individual will not be tolerated. That egregious activity is part of a wider train of authoritarian Governments—not just China, but others—perpetrating transnational repression in an effort to silence their critics overseas, undermine democracy and the rule of law, and further their own narrow geopolitical interests.

Through our police forces and the intelligence agencies that work with them, we take a proactive approach to protecting individuals and communities from threats. Where we identify individuals who may be at heightened risk we are front-footed in deploying security measures and guidance where necessary.

The upcoming National Security Bill will strengthen our powers to deal with transnational repression and with agents of foreign states more generally. Coercion, harassment or intimidation linked to a foreign power will be criminalised under the new foreign interference offence in that Bill. Existing criminal offences against a person, such as assault, will in future command higher sentences where they are undertaken at the behest of a foreign power through the state threats aggravating factor in that Bill.

The National Security Bill will also introduce a new foreign influence registration scheme, and we will not hesitate to use those new powers to bear down on the activities of foreign entities of concern. The Bill will return to this House in early May and I call on all hon. Members to support it when it does.

It is clear, however, that we can and must do more. That is why the Prime Minister asked my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security to lead a new defending democracy taskforce, a key priority of which is to enhance our response to transnational repression. That work is ongoing and he will provide an update to the

House in due course. It builds on the work done by his ministerial predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), who I see is in his place. I am clear, as is the rest of Government, that the repression of communities in the UK will not be tolerated and must be stopped.

**Yvette Cooper**: It is reported in *The Times* this morning that a Chinese businessman linked to an alleged Chinese secret police station in London has attended Chinese Communist party political conferences, is linked to the united front work department and has organised Tory party fundraising dinners and attended events with Conservative Prime Ministers. Those very serious allegations raise vital national security questions, and I think the Home Secretary should be here to answer them.

The director general of MI5 has warned about the Chinese authorities both trying to influence our politics and running operations to monitor and intimidate the Chinese diaspora, including forcibly repatriating Chinese nationals. In November, we questioned the Minister for Security about possible secret police stations in Croydon, Hendon and Glasgow. He provided no information, but said he would come back with an update. He has not done so. Nor has he met with my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), despite promising to do so.

Other countries have taken visible action. This week, two men were arrested by the FBI in New York for suspected operations, and in the Netherlands similar operations have been shut down. In the UK, however, we have heard nothing—no reports of arrests and no reassurance that these operations have been closed down. Instead, we are told that one key individual has been vice-chairman of the Chinese group fundraising for the Conservative Association in the City of London, and has attended party-organised events with two out of the last three Conservative Prime Ministers.

Can the Minister tell us the full extent of that individual's involvement with the Conservative party and contact with any Ministers? What actions have Ministers and the party taken? What have the Government done about the alleged secret police stations in Croydon and elsewhere? Have their operations been closed down?

The lack of answers will raise grave concerns that the Government are not addressing the scale of this threat and are not updating Parliament for fear of party political embarrassment because of the connections with the Conservative party. That is not good enough. Party political concerns must never—repeat: never—be put before our national security. The country deserves answers.

**Chris Philp**: The shadow Home Secretary asks a number of a questions relating to the specific individual named in *The Times* today in connection with his activities in Croydon, which is, as she will appreciate, the borough that I represent in Parliament—this is of great concern to me as well as to the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). I can tell the House that I have been briefed today, as one would expect—at short notice, as this is not ordinarily part of my ministerial portfolio—and there is a live investigation of this matter by the law enforcement community. As I said in my opening remarks, I cannot comment on the details of such an investigation while it is live for reasons that will

[Chris Philp]

be obvious to all Members of this House. As soon as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security is in a position to provide an update on the results of that investigation, he will do so. I will also ask him to brief privately the hon. Member for Croydon Central as soon as possible.

It is worth mentioning that the Chinese activity in this area is not confined to the United Kingdom. We are aware of approximately 100 alleged stations of the kind we are discussing around the world—they are not unique to the United Kingdom—and, as the shadow Home Secretary said, earlier this week arrests were made in New York in connection to an investigation conducted by the FBI similar to the investigations that we are conducting.

On party politics, all political parties need to be alert to the danger of representatives of hostile states seeking to infiltrate or influence their activities. It is fair to say that other Members of this House have been similarly targeted—those we know about—so I ask all Members of Parliament and all political parties to be alert to that risk. We all owe that to democracy.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I bring my right hon. Friend back to the real issue? Investigations into individual transgressions are absolutely fine, and they progress. The problem is that we in this House and the Government have known for a considerable time—it has been raised by many of my colleagues—about the activity of the three illegal Chinese police stations. We know that they are bringing Chinese dissidents in, confronting them with videos of their families, and threatening their families in front of them if they do not co-operate, leave and go back to China. We know that. The security services have warned the Government about it. The question today is this: why in heaven's name have we not acted, alongside the Americans and even the Dutch, to shut those stations down and kick those people out of the country?

**Chris Philp:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and for his long-standing campaigning on this issue and the activities of China more widely, which are rightly of great concern to this Government and to Members on both sides of the House. The activity that he describes—interference with Chinese nationals in this country—is something that we take incredibly seriously. We saw that terrible incident in Manchester not very long ago, where members of the Chinese consular staff dragged someone inside their compound. As a consequence of that, six Chinese officials have now left the United Kingdom.

The activity that my right hon. Friend describes is incredibly serious and unacceptable, and it must and will be stopped, but the three particular locations that he referred to are subject to a live investigation and work by the law enforcement community, so I am afraid that I cannot say any more from the Dispatch Box today. As soon as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security can provide an update, he will do so.

**Mr Speaker:** We come to the SNP spokesperson.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Scottish National party welcomes the inclusion of a stand-alone China section in the integrated review 2023. I agree with the Minister that we must take this threat seriously, and the Government should be giving as much, if not more, attention to the influence of Chinese state actors as they do to that of Putin's oligarchs.

This is not the first time that this issue has been raised in this House, so can the Minister provide any update at all on the secret Chinese state police stations? Can he assure us that he is not just waiting for the National Security Bill to go through before taking action? Can he reassure me that he or, perhaps more appropriately, the Security Minister has had communications with counterparts in the Scottish Government and Police Scotland? Given that one of these alleged secret police stations is in my Glasgow Central constituency, may I have an update from Ministers on the situation? The Security Minister has in the past given me a verbal promise of an update, but I have not had one. He is not here today to address that, and I do not want to put the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire on the spot, but I am very concerned about that.

What reassurance can the Minister provide to Scotland's Chinese community, some of whom may have good reason to fear Chinese state interference and the secret police, who may be operating here? Can he reassure us that action is forthcoming, because it does not feel as though terribly much has been taken thus far?

**Chris Philp:** First, I will, on the Security Minister's behalf, recommit him to meeting the hon. Lady, along with the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). Given that one of these locations is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), it is important that the Security Minister meets her to discuss it. On his behalf, I make that commitment. I will talk to him later today and reiterate the importance of that meeting taking place, for all the reasons given by the hon. Lady.

I completely agree with the hon. Lady that this kind of activity—intimidation, or potential intimidation, of foreign nationals on our soil, whether by people acting for parts of the Chinese state or, indeed, other states, because we have seen this with other countries as well, with Iran being an obvious example—is completely unacceptable. We have zero tolerance for this kind of activity. It is under active investigation. It is not true to say that no action has been taken. In relation to these particular sites, action is currently being taken, but Members will understand why I cannot go into the details of that work at the moment.

I reassure the House that action can and will be taken under the law as it stands, but the National Security Bill updates and increases the powers available to us. For example, it requires registration and gives us more power to act against people who are acting on behalf of foreign states. I encourage all Members, including those in the other place, to support that Bill so that we can get it through Parliament and on to the statute book as fast as possible, because those extra powers will help us in this area.

**Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): I agree with my right hon. Friend that the National Security Bill will make this country safer against state threats and, indeed,

make political dissidents in this country—North Korean, Russian and Chinese—safer as well. Does he agree that national security should not be a party political football and that, by definition, ongoing cases should not be discussed in this House, particularly when they have classified elements?

**Chris Philp:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Matters of national security should be tackled on a bipartisan, or tripartisan, basis across the House. All democratic political parties in the wider western world, including the United Kingdom, are at risk from inappropriate influence. All of us must work together to combat and exclude that risk, and we should approach these issues in that spirit of cross-party co-operation.

**Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): I am perplexed, and my constituents are very concerned. At the start of November, the Security Minister said in response to an urgent question that there was an investigation and that he would come back to the House as soon as possible to provide a report. He promised to meet me. I have emailed him multiple times and have even texted him, but I have had nothing in response, and now we read that the man in Croydon has links to both the Chinese Communist party and the Conservative party. Was the Security Minister's failure to respond to me multiple times a discourtesy, or is there something else going on?

**Chris Philp:** That insinuation of party political influence is frankly a disgraceful slur. The hon. Lady is not doing Croydon residents a service by attempting to ask the question in the way that she just did. I do know, because I have asked him, that the Security Minister has never met or encountered the gentleman concerned. He does, however, owe the hon. Lady an update, as I said in response to the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and I will make sure that the Security Minister meets with both the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) extremely quickly to provide an update on this issue.

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): As a former Police Minister myself, I think it is very important that Parliament stays out of an ongoing investigation—that is absolutely vital—but what I am particularly worried about is that, if we just kick these people out of the country and do not prosecute them and put them in British prisons, when they get back to China they will be given a medal, not the criminal prosecution in this country that they deserve. Can we make sure that if a criminal act has taken place, these people are prosecuted in this country, not just kicked out? The Chinese will love that, and they will give them medals and God knows what else.

**Chris Philp:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right in the point he made at the beginning of his question, as a former Police Minister, about the importance of not commenting in this House on particularly sensitive live investigations that are being undertaken. I completely agree with his second point about the importance of prosecuting people domestically in the UK and, if they have committed a criminal offence here in the UK, making sure they serve a sentence here prior to getting kicked out. There needs to be a very clear deterrent,

making it clear to the people who are thinking about doing these things that it is unacceptable on our soil—we will not tolerate it.

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I was pleased to hear the Minister say that these are matters that should be addressed on a cross-party basis. The Security Minister, whom I hold in the highest regard, said that the defending democracy taskforce would be cross-party, something that was welcomed by the director general of MI5. Can I ask the Minister to confirm that that is still the case? If it is, presumably either the Minister and his Department or the Security Minister will be reaching out to our Front Benchers in the very near future.

**Chris Philp:** I certainly share the hon. Member's sentiments about the cross-party nature of this issue. I will take that point back to my right hon. Friend the Security Minister and put it to him later today, as soon as he gets back from Northern Ireland.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I am exasperated that, six months after I secured an urgent question on this issue, it is still true that there are four illegal police stations operating in the country that we know of—the one in Belfast seems to be missing from much of the reporting. There is no question that when we are vulnerable at home to Chinese transnational repression, we are weaker on the world stage. *[Interruption.]* I hope the Minister is listening; does he wish to respond already? This is a transnational crisis, and I have just met with Vahid Beheshti, who is on day 56 of hunger strike outside the Foreign Office because of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps failing to be proscribed, despite the promise to do so. When will the Home Office close the IRGC cut-outs operating in Maida Vale, Willesden and Manchester, as well as the at least four Chinese police operating stations? Other countries have acted, so why have we not?

**Chris Philp:** I assure my hon. Friend that I was listening extremely carefully to what she was saying. She asserted in her question that these locations are still operating. If I may say so, she is making an assumption in doing so—not an assumption that I am going to comment on, because it is a matter that is under live investigation, as she will appreciate. As soon as the Security Minister is able to comment on this matter, he will come to the House and do so.

As my hon. Friend will also appreciate, I cannot comment on the IRGC either, because as she knows, Ministers do not comment on matters around proscription that are being considered. What I can and will say is that this Government take interference with foreign nationals here—transnational intimidation—extremely seriously. It is completely unacceptable, and we will do whatever is necessary to stop it from happening.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Anybody who has the right to be here has the right to feel safe and secure in being here. In the past couple of years, to their credit, the Government have allowed in excess of 100,000 Hongkongers to move to this country, but we know that the intimidation and persecution has followed them. In universities up and down the country, they are shouted down, and they continue to be intimidated. These police stations are part of the infrastructure that



[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

enables that. To borrow a phrase from the Foreign Secretary, is it not time that we should be pulling down the shutters on them?

**Chris Philp:** I completely agree with what the right hon. Gentleman has said, particularly in relation to the British national overseas Hong Kong citizens who have come here. We have extended a very warm welcome to those people, who are at risk of repression in Hong Kong now because of the Chinese Communist party's brutal repression of democratic freedoms and other freedoms there, which this Government abhor in the strongest terms. That is why we have offered refuge here to those people.

The right hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that foreign nationals residing in this country, regardless of their immigration status, should enjoy all the rights and freedoms around free speech and freedom from intimidation that we would expect any citizen of this country to enjoy. I agree with him: it is the duty of Government and the law enforcement services and agencies to ensure that those freedoms and rights are protected, including on campuses. I think the Department for Education is doing some work in that area. Where Chinese nationals are students at universities, they should be free from harassment and intimidation—the same applies, of course, to other groups of people, Jewish students being another obvious example. It is vital that university authorities take robust action to protect their students, whether Chinese, Jewish or from any other group, from any sort of intimidation on campuses, which is totally unacceptable.

**Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con):** I thank the Minister for his robust line, and I thank Ministers for all the work they are trying to do. I think it is true to say that in the past 10, 15 or 20 years, collective Governments have been slow and naive in dealing with these more nuanced, politicised threats from Iran, Russia, China and so on.

I get the fact that the Government are making transnational repression illegal and that there is an ongoing police case, but the point has already been made: repression is already illegal in this country, and has been for centuries. People have the right to the freedoms of this nation, whether they are visitors or citizens. We know who these diplomats are, and we are not going to be imprisoning Chinese diplomats, so we do not have to wait for a court case before we start expelling diplomats who are engaged in these practices. I think that is the point that I and others are trying to make today.

**Chris Philp:** There is no reluctance to ensure that diplomats engaged in inappropriate activity will leave: as I have mentioned already, six officials who were based in the Chinese consular office in Manchester have now left the United Kingdom. The gentleman in Croydon, the subject of the article in *The Times* today, is of course not a diplomat and is therefore susceptible to prosecution in the normal way, exactly as the former Police Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), described earlier. That is exactly why there is an ongoing investigation that is taking place.

**Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab):** What specific measures will higher education institutions be encouraged to take, or if necessary what legislation will be put in place, to protect BNO passport holders particularly, but also young Iranian, Russian and Ukrainian students who feel under surveillance, and others within the student body who are there under a surveillance pact? We know this has been happening for quite some time, and the Government's response has been tardy. Will the Minister undertake today to meet with the Higher Education Minister, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), and to share immediate advice following today's news, so that we can have a reassurance that all international students are safe?

**Chris Philp:** I completely agree with the hon. Lady's sentiment that international students—indeed, any students—at UK universities should be free from intimidation, a point I made in response to a previous question. Whether those are Chinese students, Iranian students, Jewish students or anyone else, they should not be getting intimidated. I will just repeat the point I made earlier: individual universities, first and foremost, should be ensuring the safety of students on their campuses in the first instance.

In relation to the hon. Lady's question about action by the DFE, as Members will appreciate, I am already straying quite a long way beyond the limits of my ministerial responsibility by answering this question; going into DFE areas would take me even further beyond them. What I will say is that I will ask the Security Minister to come back to the hon. Lady specifically on that point and update her in writing on what work he is doing with the DFE to ensure the safety of students on campuses. It is a vital question, and it is appropriate that the Government get involved as well as leaving it to universities. I will ask the Security Minister to come back to her on that very important point, but I completely agree with the sentiment of her question.

**Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con):** These illegal police stations form part of a pattern, whereby China is an adversary of freedom the world over. We saw that recently over her intimidation of Taiwan, we see it in her treatment of Hongkongers, and we see it in her actions in Africa to try to act through debt bondage to secure advantage on that continent. When will the Government designate China, as we should, as a formal threat to the interests of the United Kingdom in our security architecture?

**Chris Philp:** I agree with the thrust of my right hon. Friend's thesis. Clearly, the Chinese Communist party is seeking to project its influence around the world, in a way that often undermines the interests of the recipients of that interest and often undermines the interests of those countries that believe in freedom and democracy. I believe we have a duty in this country, acting with our allies in the free world, to make sure that that influence is circumscribed.

Clearly, we are taking more powers domestically, for example through the National Security and Investment Act 2021, which came into force just over one year ago, to seek to limit influences in the investment and economic spheres. We are doing work with partners around the world, too. We are supporting countries where freedom



is threatened, including Taiwan, which obviously we strongly support in its right to choose its own destiny. The question my right hon. Friend specifically raises is obviously a complicated one that is probably better dealt with by higher powers than me, but I have made clear in my answer my feelings on the topic of our relations with China.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): On how many occasions have the Government or governmental officials discussed the use of these police stations with the Chinese embassy?

**Chris Philp:** I am afraid that, not being a Foreign Office Minister or the Security Minister, I do not know. However, I am sure that the Security Minister will provide an update on that when he next comes to the House.

**Mrs Heather Wheeler** (South Derbyshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for his answers today. This is a difficult area, and he is constrained because of the ongoing investigation, but can he reassure me that the authorities doing all these investigations have all the resources they need, because that will be reassuring to the people of South Derbyshire?

**Chris Philp:** Yes, I can provide my hon. Friend with the assurance she requires. The Government take this issue incredibly seriously. We do not think the operation of these facilities is remotely acceptable, and neither is the intimidation of foreign nationals on our soil, so the relevant law enforcement bodies have the resources necessary to protect people on British soil, as she and this House rightly expect.

**Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): Last month, Coventry hosted a friendship festival to welcome Hong Kong nationals under the BNO scheme. I am proud of the city's diversity, but the existence of Chinese police stations poses a direct threat to my constituents. The Government's own Back Benchers have said that this Government are asleep at the wheel when it comes to the threats posed by China. Given that this is a matter of national security, what steps will the Minister take to ensure the safety of my constituents in Coventry North West?

**Chris Philp:** I do not accept the suggestion that the Government have been asleep at the wheel. A whole range of actions are being taken to counter foreign state threats. I have mentioned the National Security and Investment Act 2021; the National Security Bill; the integrated review, which puts national security at its heart; and the defending democracy taskforce, which is chaired by the Security Minister. Those are all designed to keep safe not just BNOs, but others.

On the topic of BNOs, I think that illustrates the United Kingdom at its best. We sometimes hear Opposition Members saying that we do not have safe and legal routes, and that we do not extend a warm welcome. However, we have welcomed more than 100,000 with BNO passports with open arms. We have welcomed 25,000 people from Afghanistan via safe and legal routes. There are the 25,000 who came from Syria under the UK resettlement scheme and other schemes, and the more than 200,000 people who have come from Ukraine.

They all illustrate what an open and welcoming country this is and the approach that this Government take to genuine and legitimate refugees.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): It is not just nefarious activity from the Chinese Communist party through the so-called police stations in this country and other parts of the world, but their commercial activities and activities in academia that are a threat to our national security. BGI is a company that is harvesting genomic information from people around the world, for example through prenatal tests. Can I have an assurance from the Government that the defending democracy taskforce will be looking not just at the so-called Chinese police stations operating in this country, but all those aggressive acts being carried out by the Communist Chinese state?

**Chris Philp:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to what the Chinese Government are doing in seeking to infiltrate academia and certain sensitive technologies. I saw that at first hand during my time as technology Minister, and I must say to the House that I was deeply concerned by what I saw. The machinery of government for dealing with that is the defending democracy taskforce, and there are various other arms of government dealing with that. The powers that exist under the National Security and Investment Act 2021 give the Government—in the first instance, I think it is through what used to be the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—powers to take action. I can assure my hon. Friend that the Government are alive to that, and I saw that when I was tech Minister. I can assure him that the Government are vigilant and alert and that action is being taken.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses. What steps are being taken to secure the safety of Chinese expats who are frightened of the reach of the Chinese Government's arms in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? I have some constituents who are Chinese expats who have told me that they feel they have been followed. They are pretty sure that their phones have been tapped. What assurance can I give to my Chinese constituents about their privacy, security and safety?

**Chris Philp:** I appreciate the hon. Member's question. If he is aware of cases where constituents feel that they are being in any way targeted, I strongly urge him and his constituents to contact the police, which I guess would be the Police Service of Northern Ireland in the first instance. The PSNI can then escalate the matter if required. Please report that quickly, and I would say that to any Member of this House. I can assure him that those matters will be quickly investigated and action taken.

**Saqib Bhatti** (Meriden) (Con): My constituency has become home to many people from Hong Kong. Can the Minister reassure my constituents that we take our moral duty to protect political dissidents seriously and that they should be free from harassment on any inch of UK soil? By that, I do not just mean Chinese police stations, but also IRGC cut-outs.

**Chris Philp:** My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. It is a long-standing principle in this country that we will ensure the freedoms and rights of

[Chris Philp]

all those who reside on our soil. We will protect them from threats to their freedom by whoever might perpetrate them, including, and perhaps even especially, foreign states. He makes an important point, and he is right to make it.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): I thank the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for tabling this urgent question, although I doubt whether the Chinese community will be thanking her after she made her cheap political point, which rather spoiled the questions she was asking. My right hon. Friend the Minister will be aware that, with regard to foreign actors, it is not just China that is active in this country, but Iran. What does he think he can do to protect journalists who correctly seek to criticise not only the regime in China, but what is happening in Tehran and the rest of Iran?

**Chris Philp:** First, I associate myself with the comment my hon. Friend made at the beginning of his question. In relation to press freedom, it is a long-standing, centuries-old principle in this country that the press is free and should be free from interference, including by foreign states, and that includes Iran. I suspect we are working closely with the Iranian media outlet that was shockingly, shamefully and disgracefully targeted by the Iranian regime, to ensure that it can and will continue to operate from UK soil, as it is perfectly entitled to do.

## Infected Blood Inquiry Update

1.9 pm

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement to update the House on the infected blood inquiry.

The Government welcome the publication of the infected blood inquiry's second interim report, and I would like to thank Sir Brian Langstaff and all those who have contributed. The infected blood inquiry has done a huge amount of work on an intensely complex issue, ensuring that victims' voices are heard. I have been deeply moved by the testimonies outlined in the latest report, and the victims' bravery in coming forward should not be overlooked.

The issuing of a second interim report specifically on compensation was not anticipated by the Government until we were informed of it by the inquiry in February this year. However, we very much appreciate and welcome Sir Brian taking this approach. The Government are considering intensely the recommendations outlined in this report, and work is under way at pace across all relevant Departments to respond fully.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) announced the infected blood inquiry in 2017 to examine the circumstances that led to individuals being given contaminated blood and blood products in the UK. The inquiry, chaired by Sir Brian Langstaff, commenced on 2 July 2018, and I would like to reiterate our total endorsement of my right hon. Friend's point that the

"contaminated blood scandal of the 1970s and 80s...should simply never have happened."

In tandem with the ongoing inquiry, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), then Paymaster General, commissioned Sir Robert Francis KC to produce a compensation framework study in anticipation of a recommendation from the inquiry to set up a compensation scheme. The findings of this study were published in June 2022.

Shortly after that, in July 2022, Sir Brian published his first interim report of the infected blood inquiry. In his report, Sir Brian recommended that the Government make interim payments to infected individuals and their bereaved partners. The Government accepted this recommendation in full on 17 August 2022, and interim compensation payments of £100,000 have been paid to those infected individuals and their bereaved partners registered with existing support schemes.

As I said to the House in December:

"We have much to do, but I wish to assure the House...that this is a priority for the Government and we will continue to progress it."—[*Official Report*, 15 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 1251.]

I would like to assure the House that this commitment absolutely remains.

Sir Brian's most recent report sets out what the inquiry recommends as an appropriate means of compensating both those infected and affected, and the mechanism for delivering that compensation. In doing so, it sets out the complexity of what is a multi-layered issue. The recommendations in his report outline that those infected and affected should be granted legal support, and infected and affected people and the estates of infected people

should be able to claim for categories of loss against five awards: injury impact award, social impact award, autonomy award, care award and financial loss award. This is rather than claiming on an individual assessment of each application. In addition, those dissatisfied with their compensation payments should have redress through an appeal to a structure outside the compensation scheme.

The report has also proposed mechanisms that Sir Brian thinks will ensure the fairness of the compensation scheme. He has recommended that the scheme be administered by an arm's length body, chaired by a High Court judge or equivalent, and advised by legal and medical professionals, as well as the beneficiaries of the scheme. In addition, Sir Brian has proposed that the route through the courts should still remain open to beneficiaries.

Sir Brian has agreed with much of Sir Robert's study, but there are also differences in approach. For example, Sir Robert outlined in his study that the scheme should be delivered locally in each of the four nations as this was the preference of the victims. Sir Brian has recommended that the scheme be delivered by a central body, while continuing the support provided by the existing infected blood support schemes, which should be continued and guaranteed for life

"by legislation or secure government undertaking".

There is also divergence in the consideration of scope of those eligible for compensation payments, including the extension of payments to those with hepatitis B, and not providing payments to the estates of those affected.

Sir Brian's interim report is detailed, and it is only right that the Government will need to consider the complexities it sets out thoroughly when preparing our response. The House will recognise that health is a devolved matter, and I will be discussing the report with my colleagues in the devolved Administrations.

As I said at the start of my statement, the Government welcome the publication of the infected blood inquiry's second interim report to assist its ongoing work. However, we do not underestimate the complexity of these recommendations, which do need careful consideration. For example, Sir Brian recommends an arm's length body in which His Majesty's Government would have no ongoing role beyond providing taxpayer funds as required by the body. On anything like this scale, this would be a new departure, and it does have implications for Government accountability that will need careful consideration alongside how its financial implications will be managed.

However, I would like to reassure the House that while the Government are progressing work to ensure that we are in the best possible position to respond fully at the end of the inquiry, every recommendation by Sir Brian, including in relation to timing and a further interim payment, is receiving intense focus.

My colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care are aware of issues that Sir Brian has raised in relation to psychological support. Under the current psychological support scheme for England, there is provision for a grant of up to £900 a year, for established beneficiaries and family members, for counselling and talking therapy. The Department of Health and Social Care is undertaking research to look at the psychological support needs so that decisions on commissioning a bespoke service are based on robust evidence and meet the requirement.

In closing, I would like to reiterate the need for pace. People die every week as a result of the impact of the scandal. This Government want to deliver resolution, and we are working at pace across all relevant Departments to consider the recommendations as outlined in this latest report and to ensure that we are best placed to respond to the inquiry's final report. I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.16 pm

**Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab):** I thank the Paymaster General for providing an advance copy of his statement. I would like to begin by paying tribute to the brave victims and their families, who, while working through their own personal ill health, grief and trauma, have campaigned tirelessly for justice—without their strength, we would not have reached this stage—and of course to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), who has been a stalwart of the campaign.

The continued work of the infected blood inquiry is crucial to ensuring that victims' voices are heard. I had the privilege of meeting victims of this scandal last month, and their stories will stay with me forever. No one should have to experience the pain and anguish they have faced and are still facing. Justice delayed and its continuing delay is justice denied. While we await the conclusion of the report and inquiry, those who were given contaminated blood products are dying at a rate of one every four days. Families have suffered decades of health issues, financial loss and stigma.

Victims—those affected and infected—will have watched the Minister's statement today with heavy hearts, disappointment and some degree of anger. There seems to be no commitment from the Minister to respond to the second report until the final report is published in the autumn. The interim report was published so that the Government do not have to wait until the final report to take action. We all understand the complexities of this scandal, but I hope the Minister can see that many individuals directly affected still feel angry and unrecognised. Today's statement does not provide any certainty for the families or children of victims.

To finish, I have five questions for the Minister. First, does he agree with Sir Brian's statement in the interim report that

"Time without redress is harmful. No time must be wasted in delivering that redress"?

Can he confirm that the "intense focus" he talked about is to achieve the recommendation in the report that the scheme is

"set up now and...should begin work this year"?

Secondly, how can he provide more reassurance to family members of victims, including parents who lost children and children who were orphaned when their parents died?

Thirdly, the Paymaster General talked about work under way. If the Government plan to accept these interim findings, officials must start verifying and registering directly affected people and their families urgently to understand the size of the group and to speed up the payments. Can he confirm whether that is already taking place? Fourthly, will he commit to more regular updates



[Fleur Anderson]

on progress and the direction of travel on this issue ahead of the inquiry's final report later this year? We should not have to keep squeezing this information out of the Government, because it compounds the pain of the victims.

Finally, will the Paymaster General agree to meet me and the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), so that we can work together to deliver the justice the victims deserve?

**Jeremy Quin:** I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks. She was right to pay tribute to many MPs in the House, including the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) who have campaigned tirelessly on this issue over a long time. I am grateful for the work of the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, and some members of the media have also been at the forefront of pushing this issue for a long time.

Above all, the hon. Lady is right to refer to the victims, and I am very conscious that there will be tens of thousands of people watching this statement who are desperate to see a resolution. Every time there is another iteration, or a cause for me to be in this place, it is a source of anxiety, concern and worry. I am sure that there is disappointment every time there is another statement and we do not have the final resolution, but we have travelled a long way. This inquiry was announced six years ago, and Sir Brian started work five years ago. I am very grateful to him for producing this interim report. A lot of it is similar to the report by Sir Robert Francis, but there are differences.

We do need to do the work, and on the points the hon. Lady raised, we have been focused on ensuring that at the conclusion of Sir Brian's inquiry, we are able to come forward in the best place possible, but that does not preclude doing something earlier if we are able and have the means to do so. Registration is not as yet taking place, but I am mindful that whereas for the previous interim payment there was a defined set of people and bereaved partners, if this recommendation is to be taken forward it will require registration, and that inevitably takes time, as we are all aware.

Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware that this statement is no more than an update. I was keen to come to the House to hear the views of hon. Members, and I commit to doing so again as appropriate and as we continue through this process. Work will continue, and of course it would be a pleasure to meet the hon. Lady and the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if they would like to discuss this matter.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

**Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con):** In his second interim report, Sir Brian Langstaff makes it clear that the Government have everything they need to implement the compensation framework now. I repeat the pertinent quote that the shadow Minister pulled out from the report:

"Time without redress is harmful."

I suggest that that is rather underplaying it. During "time without redress", people are passing away. Currently, the infected blood support schemes make regular ex gratia payments to those who are affected and bereaved partners. Will the Government make that provision statutory?

**Jeremy Quin:** I do not dispute for a second Sir Brian's comment that time without redress is harmful, to which my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) referred. We want progress, which is why we are working at pace to deliver it. Sir Brian makes a specific recommendation that the ongoing ex gratia payments should be put on a statutory basis, or receive a similarly strong Government commitment. I am not in a position to respond to recommendations today. It has been eight working days since the report landed, but all the recommendations will be taken seriously.

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

**Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP):** May I put on record my gratitude for advance sight of the statement, and for the work of the infected blood inquiry? I suspect there will be a considerable amount of consensus in the House on this issue. Over the years, I have been appalled at the personal testimony that I have heard from my constituents about 40 years of struggle, and the realisation that this scandal could have affected any one of us. It is a tragedy that simply should never have happened, and it has been made worse by decades of delay, first in preventing further use of contaminated factor products and identifying victims, and then in delivering compensation.

As we know, the infected blood scandal took place before devolution, while healthcare in Scotland was the responsibility of the UK Government. Financial powers to deliver compensation still lie with Westminster. It is therefore entirely appropriate to have a scheme delivered by a central body, as recommended by the inquiry. Over the years, too many delays and denials have impacted victims and their families. Sir Brian Langstaff is spot on when he says in the interim report—we have heard this a couple of times already, but I make no apology for repeating it—that:

"Time without redress is harmful. No time must be wasted in delivering that redress."

It is therefore imperative that the recommendations to widen the interim compensation payments are carried out, and that should be done before the final compensation scheme is set up. Will the UK Government accept the inquiry's recommendation that interim compensation payments are widened and delivered without delay? Finally, when will the compensation system's independent chair be appointed, and can we have a detailed timescale for that?

**Jeremy Quin:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and for his welcome for the concept of a central body. That was not an area of dispute, but there was a slightly difference emphasis in Sir Robert's report and Sir Brian's report regarding whether the payments should be delivered locally through each of the four schemes or through a UK scheme. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that this happened in the '70s and '80s, long before devolution, and there is a clear recommendation from Sir Brian, which I am glad he endorses.



The hon. Gentleman raises two points about the interim compensation payment being widened and there being no delay in its implementation, and about the appointment of individuals. This all depends on the Government's response to each of the recommendations—he will accept that—but a number of things could be done to speed up the process. If we were to agree with Sir Brian's recommendation to have an arm's length body, there are mechanisms whereby individuals could be appointed on an interim basis, prior to the ALB being formally constituted. All that is in the mix as we work through our response to the report.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the Father of the House.

**Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con):** The main views from the all-party group will come from the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), but we recognise that a great deal of work needs to go into this. As a minimum, may I put to the Minister that he should come back to the House before the summer break to say how far the Government have got in considering the recommendations, and which ones they will accept?

Will he set up a register so that those who think they have claims can put their names forward and be able to receive updates from the Government directly, rather than just through the mainstream media?

The words of former Secretaries of State for Health, that the totality has been a failure by the British state and that the pain and suffering has gone on for far too long, are endorsed across the House and by the country as a whole. We want the action that Sir Brian Langstaff has asked for, which is that the scheme should be set up this year.

**Jeremy Quin:** I thank my hon. Friend for recognising that there is a great deal of work to be done. I have already referred to the point about the register. Were we to adopt the clear recommendation from Sir Brian about an interim payment that goes more widely than the last scheme, that would require a registration scheme. I appreciate that that would take time, and it needs to be established at an early stage if that recommendation is accepted. I will return to update the House as appropriate, which I hope will certainly be before the summer break.

**Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):** I thank the Minister for his statement, but really, after thousands have died, decades of campaigning, a five-year public inquiry with more than 500 people dying during that period, a review of compensation frameworks by Sir Robert Francis which was delivered to the Government last February, a first interim report from Sir Brian Langstaff, and now a second interim report from Sir Brian Langstaff setting out the clear case for compensation, enough is enough. Sir Brian Langstaff is clear in his report that the scheme need not await the final report to begin work. He states:

"It will clearly take political will to act quickly but the circumstances here warrant it."

Will the Minister explain to me, and to the thousands of people who will be watching this statement, what exactly is the problem? Why is there not the political will from this Government to deliver justice to this group of people?

**Jeremy Quin:** The right hon. Lady has been a constant and incredibly effective champion for those affected and infected. It was about time, but it was this Government who instituted this inquiry. We have made a huge amount of progress in having an inquiry, and in having clear recommendations on compensation from Sir Brian. We want to act at pace and we want to act swiftly, but it is also vital that this is done properly. There is a huge amount of work. The nature of the report and the recommendations Sir Brian makes are unprecedented for an unprecedented circumstance, but that requires detailed work and detailed analysis. We will bring forward a response as soon as we can. As I say, we are focused on the inquiry's conclusion, but that does not preclude coming forward before then if we are able to do so and we decide that that is the right course of action.

**Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Ind):** I add my voice to those thanking Sir Brian Langstaff and the whole team for the work they have done. We all recognise the complexities of delivering a scheme that is effective. I am grateful to the Minister for repeatedly coming to this House and for committing to come to the House again, but will he repeat from the Dispatch Box the moral case for compensation, which has effectively bound the Government to act and to follow the recommendations for compensation? Of course it takes time to put that into practice, but what is vital for people to hear today is that, in principle, the Government are going to make it happen. For many years that commitment was not there and it needs to be repeated now.

**Jeremy Quin:** My right hon. Friend speaks with a great deal of knowledge on this subject. I am very grateful—I repeat this, as did he—to Sir Brian for producing a comprehensive and thorough appraisal of what the compensation scheme should look like, but we need to go through it in detail. As my right hon. Friend would accept, it needs to be effective and it needs to work, but I am pleased that he has given me the opportunity to reiterate what I said last December in this place: we fully accept that there is a moral case for compensation in this circumstance, absolutely.

**Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP):** As I said in the debate in 2017, I remember, as a young surgeon, when this scandal began to break in the early '80s. That is 40 years ago. My entire medical career has passed while people have been fighting for justice and recognition. Dragging that out has added financial hardship to the suffering people were already going through. As the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) said, enough is enough. The Minister talked about how long things will take and we recognise that, but when will they start? When will registration of bereaved parents and children start? When will the framework actually start, so that, as Sir Brian Langstaff called for, people can expect to see action this year and not wait any longer?

**Jeremy Quin:** The hon. Lady is very clear, as is Sir Brian in his report. There is no dispute over what Sir Brian is recommending. I cannot give that commitment now. There are processes across Government, as she will understand. We are working at pace and we are going through the report in great detail. As I say, it has been a short period of time since that report landed with all of

[Jeremy Quin]

us. It is detailed, it is comprehensive and it does need work, but we will be coming back to the hon. Lady and to this House.

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): My first portfolio as a shadow Minister, in 2006, was health, so I met many of the victims. The situation started in the '80s, but we did not really know until the '90s what was creating it—I am no expert, but that is what was coming forward—so I am very proud that the Government have done something that I promised we would do for the victims, but it has taken too long. The moral position is that the victims and their loved ones are still suffering. People have lost their loved ones. It is not just a financial issue; it has broken people's hearts and minds. Their scepticism might be fuelled by the fact that the Government initiated an inquiry by Baroness Cumberlege into the Primodos debacle and disaster, but they literally ignored their own inquiry, so can the Minister understand the concerns of victims and Members who are a little bit sceptical about delay, delay, delay?

**Jeremy Quin:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. This has been a long, long-term scandal. It started in the '70s and '80s, and it has taken many, many years to get to this stage. But the stage we have got to now is that a very distinguished High Court judge has spent five years working through the circumstances. He is at an advanced stage with his inquiry and has produced a thorough report on compensation. As I said to the House and say again, the moral case for compensation is fully accepted by the Government. We need to go through it to work through exactly what the implications are—they are multiple. As I said before, this is an unprecedented circumstance which requires unprecedented means of address and that is what is reflected in the report, but it does require work to go through it.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): We had the report set out by Sir Brian Langstaff, which says how the compensation should be delivered and the framework for delivering it. The Minister said that the Government are considering this recent report "at pace". He also said that he wants to come back and update the House. If we are moving at pace and we have all the detail in place that we need, when will he come back to the House?

**Jeremy Quin:** It will be a great pleasure to return to the House with more substance when I can. It is important, even though we received the comprehensive report only eight working days ago, to give Members an opportunity to share their views on that interim report at the earliest possible opportunity, but the hon. Gentleman will realise that it does require work to come back substantively to say which recommendations are being accepted and how we will be progressing them.

**James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement, but does he agree that, notwithstanding the complexity he outlined in relation to the compensation scheme, two things should happen? First, the Government should move urgently to the design of the compensation scheme. Secondly, in the design of the compensation scheme, there should be

engagement with victims or the groups representing them to ensure alignment between the compensation scheme and the expectation of victims.

**Jeremy Quin:** I totally understand where my hon. Friend is coming from. It is critical that the answers we produce in response to the report are readily understood and have the buy-in of all those who suffered so grievously as a result of these scandals. I am very keen to engage with the victims. Sir Brian has been doing an exceptional job in ensuring that he fully understands, listens to and takes on board the comments made by the victims and engages with them. It is, I think, impossible for any of us who have not suffered from this personally to understand fully the anguish the victims have been put through. Sir Brian has done his utmost to reflect that in the report he has produced.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I, too, would like to thank the Minister for coming here today, and pay tribute to Sir Brian for the work he has done. Not long after I was first elected in 2017, I received a letter from a constituent whose family had suffered as a result of the infected blood scandal. What they have been through is heartbreaking. Although progress has been made and we have the interim report, we are now six years further on and they are no further on in receiving compensation. As others have said today, can we please get on with it and ensure that the suffering of families is put to an end?

**Jeremy Quin:** I totally understand where the hon. Lady is coming from. We all have constituents in that situation. There are tens of thousands of people who are affected across the whole of the UK. We want to do so at pace. Any scheme we adopt must be effective, must work and must be appropriate. There is work ongoing. We will get there and report back to the House on our response to Sir Brian's recommendations.

**Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the Minister's intense focus on this matter, but I join Members from across the House—not on a personal basis, because I think the Minister is one of the best in the Government—on behalf of my constituents in saying that this has taken a long time. Of course, it has to be thorough—I put on record my thanks to Sir Brian and Sir Robert—but can the Minister assure the House that their difference of opinion on how the compensation may be delivered, whether nationally or through the devolved Administrations, will not cause further delay? Post the final report being published, can he reassure the House that there will not then be a further consultation on whether it is devolved or national?

On children affected who have lost their loved ones and parents, could there be quicker interim payments? Some of them are really suffering financially, let alone from the loss of their parents. On the five categories, the Minister mentioned social impact; clearly, the loss of a parent is the biggest social impact of all.

**Jeremy Quin:** Let me reassure my hon. Friend that although I referred in my statement to areas where Sir Robert and Sir Brian presented different nuances and views, I would not wish that to be overstated. Sir Brian had the benefit of Sir Robert's report; I think he would say that he found it extremely useful that that study was undertaken, to enable him to consider Sir Robert's report when coming up with his own recommendations.

We must not allow any difference between the two—mainly of nuance—to get in the way of our proper and full consideration of Sir Brian's report.

My hon. Friend referred to interim payments, as did other hon. Members. All I can say is that there is a clear recommendation from Sir Brian. We are working through all that, and we will return to the House in due course, having had an opportunity to review fully those recommendations.

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): My constituent's father died following an infected factor VIII treatment. The family did not feel that they could grieve openly because of the stigma around HIV and AIDS at the time of his death. My constituent has told me that although a compensation payment would not bring back their father, it would finally give the family a sense of closure. Does the Minister accept the symbolic importance of compensation payments? Will the Government now commit to including children who have lost a parent in the scope of the compensation scheme, as recommended by Sir Brian Langstaff?

**Jeremy Quin:** One of the worst of the many dreadful aspects of the scandal is the stigma to which the hon. Lady refers. For a child to go through the circumstances of parents being extremely ill and worried about the stigma and moving house, school or work, is deeply shocking to read now, and in many cases we are 20, 30, or 40 years on from the circumstances. These people went through absolute hell, with the stigma laid on top of dreadful circumstances. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for reminding us of that. I am afraid that I am not in a position to make piecemeal comments on Sir Brian's recommendation. As I have said, it was vital that he produced the report—a comprehensive report that we need to go through thoroughly, and it is important that we produce our response in due course when we have had a chance to do so.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The length of the scandal can be summed up by the fact that my predecessor spent 18 years pursuing cases, and I have spent the last eight years pursuing the same cases, to try to bring them to resolution. The Minister rightly says that there is work to be done following the recommendations, but what timescale has he set to prepare a response? What work has been done to prepare for the potential recruitment of people to deal with cases via the structure proposed? I know from experience with another complex compensation scheme stretching over decades that that is far easier said than done.

**Jeremy Quin:** My hon. Friend raises a good point. Work was undertaken prior to the release of the second interim report, based on Sir Robert's original study, which helps us considerably. We are now working at pace to go through the changes and what the Government's stance will be overall. I will not say the timeline for that, but we are working at pace.

My hon. Friend raises a good point about recruitment: if an arm's length body is the way forward, no time should be lost in finding a route for good people with expertise to be brought into the process prior to the formal establishment of an ALB, if that is the route we go down.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The gut-wrenching truth of the matter is that people are decaying and dying while this Government dither and delay. The people concerned in this scandal will have heard nothing new today from the Minister. For their benefit, so that they know he is fighting for them, can he confirm that the recommendations to widen the scope of the payment should be agreed? Will he fight for those compensation payments to be made this year to the people affected?

**Jeremy Quin:** It would be wrong to characterise the circumstance today as one of no progress. The fact that Sir Brian Langstaff has produced this report is a huge step forward. It is fantastic that he has come forward with a second interim report specifically on compensation. I speak on behalf of the Government and, on their behalf, I accepted the moral case for compensation back in December. We now need to go through what Sir Brian has written, which has been the culmination of many years of work, take decisions on that and come back to the House.

**Mr Jonathan Djanogly** (Huntingdon) (Con): I welcome the Government's clear determination, as shown by the Minister today, to move faster towards a just resolution to this sad and terrible scandal. As an MP representing a Huntingdon family devastated by this affair, who were long concerned by the inability to engage with Ministers, will my right hon. Friend confirm that ongoing engagement with victims' families will take place with proper understanding of their tragic plight?

**Jeremy Quin:** I can confirm that. Most of us in our constituency capacities have been aware of the victims of this dreadful scandal. Through the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and her APPG, I had the privilege of meeting representatives of those affected, and I am more than willing to do so again as we continue to progress our work.

**Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): The Minister is absolutely correct—tens of thousands of people are fixed to their televisions today, expecting a resolution to this inquiry. I will tell him why they are disappointed: because they do not have time on their side. Hundreds have already died and more are dying on a week-by-week basis. They do not have time on their side. We need to ensure that the Government respond fully to this report and set out a clear timetable on actions from the report. Remember, people are dying as the Government are dithering and delaying.

**Jeremy Quin:** The hon. Gentleman is right that, alas, the victims continue to die. Sir Brian makes a comment in his second interim report that we do not know the full scale of the medical impact of what went on in the '70s and '80s. Conditions are, in some cases, worsening. The point is well made. The hon. Gentleman says that we must respond fully—we must and we will do so when we have done the work required.

**Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): On behalf of my constituents affected, I welcome the sensitivity with which the Government have been dealing with this situation. However, the lack of urgency is undermining the good will of victims and their families, and it is letting them down every single day. How long will it be



[Damien Moore]

between accepting one of these points and implementing them? Would it not be easier to implement them now? Listening to Members today, I think that the best thing to do would be to implement them and work on getting the support to families as soon as possible.

**Jeremy Quin:** I can assure my hon. Friend that there is urgency in our response. The report was produced eight working days ago; we are working at pace to go through it and we will continue to do so. We need to determine our view on all the recommendations, but that does not necessarily preclude us taking individual steps between now and the conclusion of the inquiry, and we will continue to work.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Please do not delay any longer. The Minister will say that it is complicated, as he said at the last statement. The Government have known about this scandal for a long time and should have been preparing. Bereaved families such as the Smiths in my constituency, whose case has been waiting for 18 years, need interim payments now. Does the Minister really get that those who have waited years for justice and redress cannot afford to wait any longer?

**Jeremy Quin:** I am familiar with the hon. Lady's constituency case, which she has raised many times. I am familiar with the sad story, which is one of so many around this House. I cannot add to what I have already said. I recognise the strength of feeling in the House and in the infected and affected communities. I am grateful that in Sir Brian's report we have really thorough analysis for us to work through.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does the Minister accept that the uncertainty of when the Government will fully respond to this report risks damaging people's mental health? I am thinking about a number of constituents who have contacted me to say that there is a real impact on mental health. Can the Minister set out a timetable, or does he have a timetable in his head, for action? Does he accept the principle of making interim payments to bereaved parents and children, many of whom gave up their working careers or did not meet their educational and academic potential because of the years they spent caring for their loved ones?

**Jeremy Quin:** On the timetable, we are determined to be in the best possible place to respond to the inquiry when it concludes. As I have said to other hon. Members, that does not preclude us taking other steps earlier, if that is what we determine to do, as a Government. We are working at pace to go through all the implications of the report.

On the hon. Gentleman's second point, he will appreciate why I cannot go through individual recommendations at this stage, but I recognise the extremely strong case that Sir Brian has made for a number of those who have been affected, including carers who have given up a great deal to support others.

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): One of my constituents contracted hepatitis C from a botched blood bag in the 1980s. Her daughter wrote to me last year:

"I am furious that you have grudgingly decided to pay interim compensation after she finally could fight no longer, seven weeks after she died...In the meantime, I'm left with grief and nothing else to show for all the misery."

In addition to all the horrors that my constituent and her mother went through, the daughter is not eligible for compensation as she is not a bereaved partner. Does the Minister think that is fair?

**Jeremy Quin:** I am very sorry to hear about the loss of the hon. Lady's constituent. It was a significant and positive step forward that the Government accepted in full Sir Brian's recommendation about those infected and bereaved partners and brought forward the £100,000 of compensation, which was paid last October. It is tragic that, for the reasons stated earlier in relation to the scale of ongoing loss from this scandal, individuals will have missed out on that compensation because of their death between the announcement and the payment of the compensation. I really feel for the family of her constituent.

The hon. Lady referred to payments beyond the interim payments that were made last year. Sir Brian has made a very specific recommendation on that. We are not responding to that today, but it is one of the many recommendations that we are working through.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent's father died in England in the late 1970s and she tells me that she is his only surviving next of kin. Will the Minister confirm when my constituent, and many others like her, will obtain the compensation that they are clearly due? What proof will be required to access it, given the notorious related scandal around medical records? Bereaved people in these circumstances do not need more barriers—they need compensation after all they have suffered.

**Jeremy Quin:** The hon. Lady raises an extremely good point about the evidence to be produced to access any future compensation scheme. There is a minor point of difference between the two reports by Sir Robert and Sir Brian in terms of the evidential test. However, given the history of records not being available and the length of time that has passed, Sir Brian has been clear that an appropriate approach must be taken and a compensation scheme must be established that does not preclude people who have no means of showing their eligibility because of factors completely beyond their control.

**Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): As many colleagues across the House have already said, the children of those lost as a consequence of the scandal feel particularly unseen and unheard in the progress that has been made so far. So can the Minister assure them that they will be a focus for the Government not only in recognising their loss but in delivering compensation payments to them through the scheme as a priority?

**Jeremy Quin:** As I said before, children are a particularly harrowing aspect of the scandal. Sir Brian has made specific recommendations. We are not responding to those recommendations today, but we are working through them and I assure the hon. Lady that we will continue to do so.



**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): I express sympathy and solidarity with my constituents who have been affected. Does the Minister accept, as the questions are demonstrating, that the longer it takes to implement compensation, the more complicated that process will become, not least because the question of estates and surviving relatives will increasingly come into play? Do the Government recognise the need to confirm the individuals who are due compensation and pay them as quickly as possible?

**Jeremy Quin:** The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that that is exactly the process we are going through. We are working through Sir Brian's report and his specific recommendations, including about the eligibility of estates—he recommends that the estates of those infected should be included in any scheme. The hon. Gentleman is not wrong to say that these are all complicated risks which are becoming more complicated. We want to make certain that we make progress and come to a resolution in our consideration of the report.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): When I entered this House, my young constituent was in the nursery and we all hoped the scandal would be resolved quickly. She then graduated to primary school, and now she is about to go into secondary school. The loss of her father to this terrible infected blood scandal was absolutely devastating. I have two questions. First, will she receive compensation? There seems to be a question about whether children will get compensation. Secondly, the psychological research looking at support needs is being done only now. After all these years, how can it be that the research about commissioning a bespoke service is beginning only now? Will he apologise for that delay?

**Jeremy Quin:** I cannot confirm the details of what will be in the compensation scheme when it comes forward, simply because that is the work we are undertaking now. I recognise the urgency represented by the hon. Lady.

In terms of the psychological needs, different progress has been made around the United Kingdom. There are schemes established in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and there is £900 available every year in England. Work is being undertaken now to ensure that there will be an appropriate tailored scheme. That work is ongoing and we expect to hear over the next few months what the answer will be on the psychological support scheme. That work is being conducted by ministerial colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): I am afraid that it is simply not good enough. It is like groundhog day for our constituents who have been impacted by the contaminated blood scandal. When there has been so much time and so many reports, it is not good enough to come to the Dispatch Box with so little to say to constituents such as my constituents Vera Gaskin and Linda Cannon.

Linda emailed me last night:

“The consequences for me have been devastating. My life has been ruined beyond belief. I lost my husband of 37 years under horrendous circumstances which were hard to bear.”

Decades have gone by and nothing has been done. Of course we welcome the reports, but the Minister must not use them to hide behind and kick the can down the road for the victims. There is clearly cross-party support for taking interim measures, so why does he not get on and do that?

**Jeremy Quin:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right that this has been going on for decades. That is why it was vital that the inquiry was set up in 2017 by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead. This is a significant moment in the course of that inquiry: an interim report dealing specifically with compensation was delivered eight working days ago. It is extraordinarily important that that has been produced. It is a thorough report and we need to go through it.

I recognise the determination in all parts of the House to see a resolution to the matter. I also recognise the frustration of the hon. Lady, who I know is reflecting the frustrations of her constituents and many others, but it was only during the Easter recess that the report was delivered. We need to work through it, and we need to come back to the House when we have done that work.

**Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): Today's statement is incredibly light on substance and actual commitments. There is no reason why the Government could not begin verifying and registering those affected in preparation for the publication of the final report and for the swift delivery of compensation. The Minister's statement reiterates the need for pace, yet there is no commitment to even beginning that work, nor is there a vague timeline for when it might begin. At a time when victims are dying every week and we are in a sustained cost of living crisis, justice delayed is justice denied. Why are the Government causing further unnecessary delays with their inaction? Have the victims and their families not already suffered more than enough?

**Jeremy Quin:** I recognise the determination of the hon. Lady. In respect of the registration of those who may be eligible for a future compensation scheme, it is fair to say that they would have varied between the Sir Robert Francis study and the report produced by Sir Brian Langstaff. We need to do the work: we need to ensure that we have absolute clarity on the approach we are taking, ensure that that is announced and ensure that there is clarity for the victims. There will be no unnecessary delays, as the hon. Lady puts it; there is, however, a necessity to do the work to make certain that we have an effective, proper and appropriate response to what is a very thorough report.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I have a constituent called Brian Ross; I have his permission to use his name in this Chamber. His family have been known to mine for generations. He received contaminated blood in the 1980s and, like so many others, has been left susceptible to cancer. I have sat down with him and talked about the stress and the fear—the really black fear—that surround him and his family. For Brian Ross's sake, may I ask the Minister to make sure that nothing impedes a scheme for him? We do not know how long he has got. In working with the victims and their legal representatives and with the devolved institutions, which the Minister mentioned, let us make sure that there is no glitch. Please do this, for Brian Ross's sake.

**Jeremy Quin:** The hon. Gentleman speaks from the heart. I totally recognise the issues that he raises on behalf of his constituent, Mr Ross. I can only reiterate that we have come a long way. The inquiry was set up in 2017; we now have a thorough report that is specifically on compensation. That is a major step forward from where we were at any stage prior to eight days ago. We will do all the work and ensure that we come back with a proper, full and appropriate response.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): My constituent's son received infected blood in the '80s. The trauma and cost for the family are incalculable, as many hon. Members have described today. Time is not on the side of many of these families. I ask the Paymaster General a specific question, because he seems to have avoided giving any specific facts about what is going to happen now: is it not unreasonable to have a compensation scheme up and running by the end of this year?

**Jeremy Quin:** That is what Sir Brian recommends. Sir Brian believes that it is possible to achieve that; we need to work through and produce our response to Sir Brian. I am not in a position as yet to confirm timings or what our response will be, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right: Sir Brian Langstaff recommends that we should be in a position to get a scheme in place by the end of the year. We need to do the work and come back to this House.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): First, may I argue in favour of the importance of the independence of the compensation scheme? Many people here, although perhaps not all, would argue that the Windrush compensation scheme, for example, was hindered by not being at arm's length from the Home Office.

Secondly, in anticipation that the Government will accept the recommendations about the scope of the compensation scheme, will the Minister look to use information from the infected blood support schemes right now to start registering and verifying those who will qualify, to save time further down the line?

**Jeremy Quin:** As part of the work to which I have alluded, we are looking at a whole range of compensation schemes that come in different shapes and sizes. The

hon. Gentleman refers to Windrush; there has also been the armed forces compensation scheme from the Ministry of Defence, and there has been tribunal work. The solution of having an arm's length body, wholly separate from the Government, to pay out the schemes is an innovative approach to an unprecedented issue. It would have the independence to which he refers, but would also have consequences in terms of accountability for expenditure. We are working through all those issues, which he is wise to raise.

On the point about registering potential beneficiaries, I believe that the current infected blood schemes were the basis for the interim payments made last year to those infected and to bereaved partners. Sir Brian is very clear in saying that to widen registration we would need a new scheme that goes further and recognises others who have been infected but who are not included in the infected blood scheme. The hon. Gentleman raises a good point.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Paymaster General very much for his statement. I especially commend the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for her dogged determination at every stage: every one of us whose constituents have suffered because of contaminated blood owes her many thanks. We thank her publicly in this Chamber today.

I am very pleased that, ahead of the final report, the chairman has issued the recommendation that compensation be given. On compensation for health issues, the reality for many people is that each week that passes means worsening health and more care needed. Compensation would greatly enhance the quality of the end of life for some people who are coming to that stage. The Paymaster General is a Minister with compassion who understands the issue, so while we await the rest of the report, I respectfully ask him to consent to fast-tracking that recommendation, particularly for end-of-life claimants.

**Jeremy Quin:** I thank the hon. Gentleman and all hon. Members who have contributed today. He makes a powerful point, as he does so often, and the same point comes out from Sir Brian Langstaff's report. We will do the work and will come back to this place having done so. Sir Brian is making a powerful case, but the work needs to be undertaken. We need to do that properly, and I look forward to coming back to the House in due course when we have made more progress.

## Points of Order

2.7 pm

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I seek your help? What can be done to force Ministers to honour commitments made to this House at the Dispatch Box?

On 24 March, during my Adjournment debate about covid-19 vaccine victims, the vaccines Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), to whom I have given notice of this point of order—promised to come to an early meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on covid-19 vaccine damage. Despite exhaustive efforts, it has proved impossible to obtain any date from the Minister. We have offered any time, any place, but we cannot get any offer back from her or her Department.

Today I attended the inquest for one vaccine victim, Dr Stephen Wright, whose widow and mother heard the coroner confirm that Stephen's death at the age of 32 was caused by the AstraZeneca vaccine. We heard earlier from the Paymaster General that the Government are very keen to hear the voices of victims. As it has now been more than six months since I have been trying to get Health Ministers to meet vaccine victims, the Paymaster General's words do not ring very true.

This is just not good enough. We owe victims such as Dr Stephen Wright and his widow and children something more than the Government are currently giving. The Government owe them respect, which they are not currently receiving.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As he will know, it is not a matter for the Chair, but Mr Speaker does expect Ministers to keep commitments made in the Chamber. I know that the Ministers present—and the health Whip, who is also present—will take back the hon. Gentleman's point, and I hope that that will lead to some progress for him.

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You and Mr Speaker were kind enough to let me raise this matter.

If any of us had done 39 years in the House—and, in fact, a few of our colleagues have—a lot of people would be standing up and saying, "What a fantastic job

you have done", but for someone who has served the House for 39 years there is almost no recognition, and I want to put that right today.

Stuart Shearer Lancashire—I only know him as Stuart, because he is one of the chefs who smiles at everyone—has served us in this House, since before I came here, in every form of catering establishment. On the last day of last month, he retired after 39 years' service. I pay tribute to him—and to his colleagues, who often do not receive the recognition that they deserve—not only for being a fantastic chef and a gentleman, with a smile on his face nearly every morning when we went for breakfast, but for the charitable work that he has done over the years. Some of us grow silly moustaches every year for "Movember", but he excelled at it. He also dressed as an elf when I impersonated Father Christmas at the children's Christmas party. That was a sight to behold, because he is a formidable gentleman who makes my tummy look very small! He will not mind my saying that. The sight of him in tights was one that I will never forget, and it is sad that he has retired. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that point of order. The reception given to his tribute by Members in all parts of the House showed how much Stuart has been appreciated during his 39 years here, and I think that everyone here appreciated what the right hon. Gentleman said. I hope that Stuart heard it, and I am sure that he and his family will have been pleased to hear of the deep affection in which he has been held throughout that time and the respect that we have for the service that he has given to the House.

## BILL PRESENTED

### BURGLARY (POLICE RESPONSE) BILL

#### *Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Ed Davey presented a Bill to set minimum standards for the police in relation to the investigation of domestic burglaries, including a requirement that a police officer should attend any domestic premises where a burglary has been reported; to place a duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that police forces comply with the minimum standards; to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on compliance with the minimum standards; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 294).*



## **Dartmoor National Park (Access)**

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

2.12 pm

**Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish proposals for a scheme to incentivise owners of land within Dartmoor National Park to allow enhanced access to that land in certain circumstances; and for connected purposes.

I declare my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and also the fact that as a Member of Parliament I represent part of Dartmoor. Let me also point out that the Bill focuses specifically on Dartmoor national park, and should not be viewed as being applicable to other national parks or areas of land across the country.

The unquestionable beauty of Dartmoor has been a draw for millennia. For more than 10,000 years, mankind has shaped and cultivated this landscape into what it is today—from the hunter-gatherer approach of the mesolithic and neolithic ages, to the farmed landscapes of the bronze and iron age periods, to the Saxon defences of Lydford and the prosperity of the late middle ages and the early modern era, coupled with the development of industry. It is no wonder that the rich and varied history of Dartmoor has proved to be a draw to resident and visitor alike.

This decamillennial landscape is a working environment that has been created from the outset of our beginnings. Today, it is a space in which agricultural, environmental and recreational endeavours have flourished to create jobs, conservation programmes, charitable projects, food and even industry. As a result, livelihoods have been created, experiences gained, and traditions passed down. Those three areas are not just important to the practitioners, but essential to the fabric of Dartmoor. They must work with one another, not in competition but in co-operation. The Bill seeks to protect and even enhance the rights attached to recreational activities on Dartmoor, while also mitigating the environmental and agricultural damage that has been known to take place within the national park.

We are fortunate that Dartmoor's recreational pull attracts thousands of visitors each year. From the Duke of Edinburgh award to the Ten Tors to sleeping under the stars to simply walking along the national park trails, there is a draw that allows people to connect with nature, explore historic landscapes and witness the beauty of traditional moorland farming. It is precious, it is appreciated, and following the pandemic it is all the more needed. However, there are some issues that I hope the Bill will help to address.

First, recreational activity is critically important to human health, but it should not come at the expense of, or above, the environmental and agricultural activities that take place on the moorland. Unfortunately, in recent years the fine balance between those three areas has fallen out of kilter. Under the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985, the public have the rights and the Dartmoor national park authority has the responsibilities, although those are discretionary. However, the introduction and implementation of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 has created confusion and opaqueness in the law. It is rapidly becoming apparent that the national

park authority needs to be responsible for access management, and that for this to be successful there needs to be an appropriate level of resourcing.

Our success yesterday in calling for an independent inquiry into the management of the moor—a call to which the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) graciously responded—could well serve as a vehicle for the consideration of this matter and many others that affect those who work and live on the moorland, and thus end the confusion between successive laws and bring about clarification and simplification. However, this will also require the national park authority to engage with all stakeholders on the moorland and ensure that its own composition is inclusive. It is no good attempting to hold the balance between these three important areas if various groups are excluded from the decision-making process. For instance, the fact that landowners have no representation on the Dartmoor management committee should be a cause for concern and should be rectified immediately.

Secondly, while the allocation of £440,000 to the national park authority for 2023-2024 is particularly welcome—it will play a significant role in helping to attract people to the national park and to ensure that facilities are up to scratch, as well as developing communication and understanding about Dartmoor—if the national park authority is to be able to support the agricultural, environmental and recreational interests, an upgrading of those resources will be necessary. The national park cannot serve society's recreational, environmental and agricultural demands without the appropriate level of support. Additional support should come in the form of helping new rangers or wardens to look after the land, promoting the countryside code and preventing fly-camping—a form of camping whereby peripheral areas are camped on and then left in a state of untidiness—and working to engage the numerous land managers and various stakeholders.

I have learned during my short time in this place that it is helpful not just to point out problems but to bring solutions. I therefore suggest that, as outlined in chapter 2 of the Glover review, if we are to continue to preserve Dartmoor as a working environment that caters to multiple sectors and continues to be a welcoming environment for residents and visitors, including tourists from around the country and indeed the world, we should observe the following recommendations. We should create a stronger mission to connect all people with our national parks; we should use these landscapes to address the nation's health and wellbeing; we should expand volunteering in our national landscapes; we should educate and provide better information on the workings of national parks for the stakeholders that operate within them; and we should develop a range of services to operate alongside all groups and organisations to promote the national park and protect it from damage and degradation.

Those suggestions have already been in the public domain for some time, and I understand that the Government are assessing their viability, but it is important that while we are asking the Government to act, the Dartmoor national park authority engages with the stakeholders and takes on that responsibility. Implementing those proposals in a speedy manner to the benefit of the public—which would see them introduced before any

wider legislation or reform—would be an effective way of taking people on board, and we should also aim to speed up the environmental land management scheme proposals.

Already, in the recently agreed agricultural transition update regarding ELMS under the heading of access and engagement, the countryside stewardship scheme is encouraging the following courses of action: farmers hosting tours of their farms for school pupils and care farm visitors, supplying access maps and signage and preparing sites for access by providing the necessary facilities; accreditation for staff carrying out countryside educational access visits; and a supplement to enable permissive access across woodland where access is currently limited.

It is also welcome that the Government are looking to provide new, long-term permissive access for recreation, and that, through the farming in protected landscapes programme, additional support will be provided in national parks. The Government have set the right tone by exploring how this can expand beyond permissive access, managing existing access pressures on land and water and education access. These are all welcome steps, but at present the information and understanding around those rights is hazy at best and opaque at worst.

As my Bill suggests, a publication setting out the extensive measures that are on offer while also informing and working together with Dartmoor stakeholders would not only show the collaborative approach the Government are taking but add further emphasis to the encouragement of diversification. It would also raise awareness of the extensive and often privately funded conservation and environmental programmes across the area that are working on landscape recovery, biodiversity improvements and improving the maintenance of the moorlands, whether through rewetting programmes, peatland maintenance, leaky dams or the reintroduction of long-lost species. There is a long list of things for us to be positive about.

This Bill seeks to protect the balance of activity on Dartmoor between the recreational, environmental and agricultural sectors. It looks to inform, to educate and to promote the work being done by the Government, by the Dartmoor national park authority and by stakeholders to ensure that all those who enjoy the benefits of Dartmoor national park can continue to do so. If implemented, my proposals will see public rights, permissive rights and property rights upheld. That is an important balance and an important factor to consider. It will also encourage continued co-operation and indeed occasional compromise for all those who love this historic and sacred space. I commend this Bill to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):**  
I call Richard Foord to speak for no more than 10 minutes.

2.21 pm

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I do not intend to divide the House this afternoon, but I wish to speak against leave being given to bring forward such a Bill. I will set out my strong opposition to the terms set out by the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), relating first to so-called enhanced access, secondly to land ownership and thirdly to incentives. I also refer Members to my entry in the Register of Member's Financial Interests. They will see that I do not have any interests with a bearing on Dartmoor, but as a child

I took part in the Dartmoor Ten Tors. I also did the Duke of Edinburgh award on Dartmoor, and I would like to pay tribute to the young people from across east and mid-Devon who will take part in that gruelling exercise at the end of next week and to the others who will participate in the jubilee challenge.

John Dower wrote in 1945 in a report arguing for the creation of national parks such as Dartmoor that

“there can be few national purposes which, at so modest a cost, offer so large a prospect of health-giving happiness for the people”.

With that in mind, I wish to outline why a Bill such as the one the hon. Gentleman has outlined is not the route that we should be taking. First, on enhanced access, the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 already confers on the public a right to walk or ride a horse on the commons. There are around 450 miles of public rights of way on Dartmoor and many miles of permitted footpaths and bridleways. I am sure that most Members would agree that in addition to rights we should also think about responsibilities. Rather than talking solely about public rights of way, we might like to think about public responsibilities of way. The people I know who walk on Dartmoor and other farmlands certainly think in those terms and have nothing but disdain for the small proportion of visitors who leave litter or cause fires through the irresponsible use of disposable barbecues.

The hon. Member for Totnes's proposal refers to enhanced access, yet much of Dartmoor is already designated as access land. This means that it remains privately owned but has no restrictions on where walkers can explore. To put this into context, it is worth looking at some examples of who owns land on Dartmoor. Fifteen landowners own nearly half of the land on Dartmoor. Only 1.4% of the land is owned directly by the Dartmoor national park Authority, while around 37% of Dartmoor is designated as common land.

South West Water owns more than 5,000 acres of land on Dartmoor. This is a company that paid £45 million in dividends in 2022 and whose chief executive has a remuneration package worth £1.6 million, all while sewage continues to be discharged into our rivers, including the River Dart. South West Water has not been short of incentives from this Government, but for many of the wrong behaviours.

Another part of the moor, Brent moor, in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, is currently up for sale. It was reported in the press earlier this year that Brent moor was owned by the Saudi businessman Sheikh Khalid bin Ibrahim Al Ibrahim. The estate agent Knight Frank lists Brent Moor as

“2,763 acres of freehold land, with sporting rights in hand, sold subject to various rights, including common grazing rights and public rights of way”.

More than a third of the Dartmoor national park is private land owned by the Duchy of Cornwall. The current Prince of Wales, whom I admire sincerely, chooses to use a substantial proportion of his income from the Duchy estate to meet the cost of his public and charitable work. I do not suppose that he would want to be subject to so-called incentives to permit enhanced access on the Duchy estate.

Lastly, on this principle of proposed incentives, I am concerned that there is a suggestion here that the public should continue to enjoy the rugged beauty of Dartmoor

[Richard Foord]

in exchange for incentives, and specifically incentives for some of the landowners I have referred to. I worry about the precedent that this might set for other national parks. The Glover report recommended that the number of visitors should be only one criterion for how core funding should be delivered through a national landscapes service.

I also worry about other examples of where this Government have sought to incentivise landowners with respect to public goods. Look at the glacial roll-out of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' environmental land management scheme. I would not even trust this Government to properly incentivise young farmers with a knees-up in a brewery. Farmers were promised a more generous and far less cumbersome, less bureaucratic set of incentives than those that the Government have landed on them. It is little wonder that sign-up to some tiers of ELMS is currently running at about 10%.

The right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) said in 2020:

"It makes no sense to subsidise land ownership and tenure where the largest subsidy payments too often go to the wealthiest landowners."

But then last autumn he said in relation to the Australia and New Zealand trade deal negotiated by the Government of which he had been a part that it

"gave away far too much for far too little in return."—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]

I think we might expect the Government to do the same in any new scheme for so-called enhanced access.

For all these reasons, I urge that leave should not be given to bring in such a Bill. In 1909, Liberals sang "The Land". I will save the House from a rendition with the melody, but it included words that remain true today, more than a century later:

" 'Twas God who gave the land. God gave the land to the people."

*Question put (Standing Order No. 23) and agreed to. Ordered,*

That Anthony Mangnall, Kevin Foster, Simon Jupp, Sir Gary Streeter, Sir Geoffrey Cox, Anne Marie Morris, Luke Pollard and Selaine Saxby present the Bill.

Anthony Mangnall accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 293).*

## Finance (No. 2) Bill

[2ND ALLOCATED DAY]

**Pensions (Clauses 18 to 25; any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to the subject matter of those Clauses); Electricity generator levy (Clauses 278 to 312; any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to the subject matter of those Clauses); Power to clarify tax treatment of devolved social security benefit (Clause 27); alcohol duty: charge, rates and reliefs (Clauses 47 and 48 and Schedule 7; Clause 50 and Schedule 8; Clauses 51 to 54 and Schedule 9; Clauses 55 to 60); any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to the subject matter of those Clauses and those Schedules**

*Further considered in Committee*

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON *in the Chair*]

**The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I remind Members that, in Committee, they should not address the Chair as "Deputy Speaker". Please use our name when addressing the Chair. "Madam Chair," "Chair," "Madam Chairman" and "Mr Chairman" are also acceptable.

### Clause 18

LIFETIME ALLOWANCE CHARGE ABOLISHED

2.30 pm

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I beg to move amendment 21, page 12, line 31, at beginning insert—

"(A1) This section applies to any person who it employed for an average of more than 15 hours per week by an NHS body."

*This amendment would limit the removal of the lifetime allowance charge to NHS staff.*

**The First Deputy Chairman:** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 22, page 12, line 31, after "charge" insert "for a person to whom this section applies".

*This amendment is consequential on Amendment 21.*

Amendment 23, page 12, line 36, at end insert—

"(3) The Treasury may by regulations specify a list of NHS bodies, or types of bodies, in respect of which this section applies.

(4) Regulations under this section—

(a) may specify different bodies, or types of bodies, in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and

(b) are subject to annulment by a resolution of the House of Commons."

*This amendment is consequential on Amendment 21 and gives the Treasury the power to define "NHS body" for the purposes of that amendment.*

Clauses 18 to 24 stand part.

Amendment 27, in clause 25, page 18, line 23, at end insert—

"(4A) The arrangements must include that the Commissioners are required to provide to an individual their calculation of the appropriate amount under subsection (3)."

*This amendment would require HMRC to provide recipients of the relief with a calculation of the payment so that it can be checked.*



Amendment 28, page 18, line 26, insert—

“(5A) The arrangements must include procedures for the purposes of allowing an individual to—

- (a) challenge the amount the Commissioners have determined to be the appropriate amount under subsection (3), and
- (b) make a claim requesting that the Commissioners calculate and pay an appropriate amount in accordance with subsection (3) where the Commissioners have failed to make such a payment.

(5B) The individual must give notice to the Commissioners of any such challenge or claim no later than four years from the end of the relevant tax year as defined in subsection (1)(b).”

*This amendment would enable a recipient of the relief to challenge the amount determined by HMRC if they think it is incorrect, and would allow someone not identified as eligible for the relief by HMRC to initiate a claim for it.*

Amendment 29, page 18, line 41, at end insert—

“(8A) The arrangements must include a procedure for the Commissioners to correct, in accordance with section 9ZB TMA 1970, an individual’s personal return for the relevant tax year to include the appropriate amount paid under this section.”

*This amendment would enable HMRC to correct the tax return of a recipient of a payment under the new section 193A FA2004, to reflect that the receipt of the payment has increased the recipient’s income for the year.*

Clause 25 stand part.

New clause 4—*Review of the impact of the abolition of the lifetime allowance charge*—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within three months of the passing of this Act, make a statement to the House of Commons on the impact of the abolition of the lifetime allowance charge introduced by section 18 of this Act and other changes to tax-free pension allowances introduced by sections 19 to 23 of this Act.

(2) The statement must provide the following information—

- (a) the number of NHS doctors who will benefit from the policies referred to in subsection (1);
- (b) the proportion of those benefiting from the policies referred to in subsection (1) who are NHS doctors;
- (c) the number of people who are expected to—
  - (i) stay in work, and
  - (ii) return to work

as a result of the policies referred to in subsection (1);

- (d) a breakdown of the figures in subsection (2)(c) by sector, including the number of people under subsection (2)(c)(i) and (ii) who are NHS doctors; and

- (e) details of how a scheme that provided benefits equivalent to the policies referred to in subsection (1) only for NHS doctors could operate.”

*This new clause requires the Chancellor to make a statement setting out the impact of the tax-free pension allowance changes in relation to NHS doctors, and to set out details of how an alternative scheme targeted at NHS doctors could operate.*

New clause 5—*Review of alternatives to the abolition of the lifetime allowance charge*—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of this Act being passed—

- (a) conduct a review of the impact of the abolition of the lifetime allowance charge introduced by section 18 of this Act and other changes to tax-free pension allowances introduced by sections 19 to 23 of this Act, and
- (b) lay before the House of Commons a report setting out recommendations arising from the review.

(2) The review must make recommendations on how the policies referred to in subsection (1)(a) could be replaced with an alternative approach that provided equivalent benefits only for NHS doctors.”

*This new clause requires the Chancellor to review the impact of the tax-free pension allowance changes and to recommend an alternative approach targeted at NHS doctors.*

**Kirsty Blackman:** It is a delight to speak first in Committee of the whole House this afternoon. I had a few extra minutes to tweak my speech during the ten-minute rule Bill, as it is unusual for such a Bill to be opposed, and those extra few minutes will presumably have made my speech extra good. I am sure the whole Committee will listen very closely.

I rise to speak to amendment 21 in my name and in the name of my SNP and Plaid Cymru colleagues, but I will first talk about new clauses 4 and 5, which were tabled by the Opposition. The new clauses would require a review of the impact of the abolition of the lifetime allowance charge, with new clause 4 focusing on NHS doctors and new clause 5 looking more widely.

A significant number of questions have been raised in the House about the lifetime allowance and the problems it has caused, particularly for NHS doctors. I do not think any Opposition Member would consider that the solution to this problem is to abolish the lifetime allowance charge completely, which seems totally out of proportion. We have been raising this very serious issue for a number of years, but I never considered arguing against this solution because it never crossed my mind that the Government would do something quite so drastic or extreme.

New clauses 4 and 5 both ask for reviews, statements and information. Particularly pertinent is information on the number of NHS doctors who will benefit from the abolition of the lifetime allowance charge, as is a report containing recommendations in the light of a review of the effect of abolishing the lifetime allowance charge. The least the Government can do, if they are to make such a massive change to the lifetime allowance or the pension tax system, is provide us with as much information as possible so that we can consider all the potential and actual implications. We would then have all the information at our fingertips. The Government are able to access HMRC data in a way that the rest of us cannot, so we need details on the actual impact of these changes.

On the specific issue of NHS doctors, Torsten Bell of the Resolution Foundation has said that 20% of those who benefit from the change to the lifetime allowance work in the finance industry. He said that

“nearly as many bankers as doctors”

will benefit from this change. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has called it “bizarre”, stating:

“if this is aimed at doctors then it really is a huge sledgehammer to crack a tiny nut.”

That accords with our understanding.

Again, we agree that this significant issue for doctors needs to be fixed, but the Government are going about it in totally the wrong way. During the covid pandemic, we clapped NHS staff from our doorsteps. We recognise how difficult NHS staff had it working on the frontline during the pandemic, and how difficult they continue to have it. When other people were furloughed, they were working hard, day in and day out, to keep as many of us

[*Kirsty Blackman*]

alive and healthy as possible, yet the Government are giving exactly the same break to bankers as they are giving to those who worked day in, day out to keep us all safe. That does not make sense. If we want to support our NHS, to ensure that we have the best possible public services and to give the NHS our vote of confidence, our backing and our support, we should recognise that those working in the NHS provide a vital public service and therefore deserve different treatment from those who work in the finance industry, for example, and who do not provide that level of public service.

I thank the Clerk of Bills, who was helpful in drafting these amendments. I knew what I wanted to do, but I was not quite sure how to do it, so I very much appreciated that assistance.

Amendment 21 would mean that the abolition of the lifetime allowance charge applies only to those employed by an NHS body for more than 15 hours a week, on average.

**Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): We all respect the hard work of NHS staff, but why does that argument not equally apply to, say, senior police officers?

**Kirsty Blackman:** An awful lot of people work hard. The specific issue that many of our constituents have raised is in the NHS. I have not been approached with this concern by senior police officers, but I have been approached by NHS doctors. If the hon. Gentleman feels particularly strongly about senior police officers, he could table an amendment so that people employed in the wider public sector, or in the police service, can be included in this measure. I think both police officers and NHS staff could be included, but it would be ridiculous to include everyone, no matter how little they do for the public good.

**Anthony Browne** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Not only NHS staff and senior police officers but state school headteachers, senior civil servants in our local authorities, air traffic controllers and senior Government scientists are affected by the lifetime allowance. In fact, about half the people affected work in the public sector. If the hon. Lady follows her rationale, she would end up with a completely different tax regime for public sector pensions. Does she think that would be fair for private sector workers?

**Kirsty Blackman:** Given how much we have relied on our public sector, and given how unwilling this Government are to come to the table on pay negotiations, it would be totally reasonable for this House to say, "Our public sector is incredibly important. We want to support our public sector workers, and therefore we want to give them differential access to lifetime allowance exclusions."

Amendment 22 is consequential on amendment 21. Amendment 23 would allow the Secretary of State to specify which NHS bodies, or types of bodies, are covered, given that the NHS is structured in different ways in England, Scotland and throughout these islands. It makes sense for the Secretary of State to make that decision.

The amendments cover NHS staff who work, on average, at least 15 hours a week so that they cover all the NHS staff who have come to us with pension concerns, particularly doctors but also other senior

NHS staff. I have a large teaching hospital in my constituency, and there is another hospital just over the boundary. There is a medical school too.

**Anthony Browne:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Kirsty Blackman:** Not just now.

A significant number of doctors live and work in Aberdeen, and a number of them have come to me with concerns about the pension regime. One of them did not realise that he was about to hit the lifetime allowance until his accountant came to him and said, "This is how much you are required to pay in tax." He had tipped over into this additional tax because he had taken on hours to teach junior doctors and medical students how to be better doctors. He had taken those extra hours on at the request of the hospital. This was because the immigration laws and rules have meant that a number of our doctors are struggling to jump through the hoops that the UK Government have put in a place or they are feeling that the Home Office is particularly against doctors coming from other countries.

That constituent had been asked to take on those hours as a result of the changes in some of the departments. He had willingly taken on those hours because he knows how important continuing professional development is in the NHS and how important it is to have a new generation of doctors coming through, but he had then been hit with a massive tax bill as a result. When I met him, he said to me, "I do not want to take on any more teaching as a result of what has happened to me. The amount I have been taxed means that the teaching costs me money. I don't see why I should be asked to do this when I am training the next generation of doctors."

**Anthony Browne:** I am glad that the hon. Lady recognises the dangers of high levels of taxation in discouraging people from work, as I believe those on both sides of the House can agree on that. Her amendment mentions the NHS and people who work for "an NHS body". What does she think about this applying to GPs? The overwhelming majority of GPs do not actually work for the NHS—they are self-employed or work for their partnerships. Does she think that GPs should be excluded from this legislation as well?

**Kirsty Blackman:** That is one reason why our amendment 23 would allow the Secretary of State to make those specifications, so that all the people considered to be working for NHS bodies—GPs are commissioned by NHS bodies—are included. The measure was intended to allow that level of flexibility. If I had not intended to allow that level of flexibility, we would not have tabled amendment 23 to allow the Secretary of State that flexibility. We referred to NHS bodies and specified a number of hours so that someone who works for the significant majority of their time in private practice and private systems, and perhaps works an hour or so every few months for the NHS, would not be caught by this measure. The intention is that those people who work for a significant amount of their time in contributing to the health of the population, making people better and well, ensuring that they stay healthy and live longer lives, are recognised and given the opportunity to benefit from this measure.

My understanding, from everything that the Government have said previously about this, is that one of the biggest concerns in this area relates to NHS doctors. If the Government feel that there are other significant areas

of the public sector where people could and should benefit, I look forward very much to the Minister standing up and explaining all of those. I am sure I will be asking further questions about this in Committee.

The lifetime allowance was in place for a reason and it does not work in relation to senior NHS staff, but it does work in relation to those places where people are not contributing to the health and wellbeing of our population and where people have not been on the frontline during the past few years, working under immense pressure for the public good. SNP Members will therefore vote against clause 18 standing part of the Bill if we have a vote on that. That clause is about the abolition of that lifetime charge. We do not agree that that should apply to everyone. The Government need to bring in a bespoke scheme to solve this problem, rather than applying it to everybody, no matter how much money is involved and how little public service they provide for that income that they receive. I ask the House to support amendment 21, which stands in my name and those of my colleagues.

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith):** It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). We are covering clauses 18 to 25, which will remove the pension tax barriers to remaining in work that highly skilled and experienced individuals across the public and private sectors, including senior NHS clinicians, are facing. The clauses also ensure that the tax regime works appropriately for the winding up of collective money purchase schemes and legislates to provide taxpayer-funded top-up payments for up to 1.2 million of the lowest earners in net pay pension schemes.

2.45 pm

I will discuss the clauses in detail briefly in a moment, but just in case the Opposition are foolish enough to think of dividing the House today, let me be clear: this Government are on the side of hard-working people in every sector. Unlike the Opposition parties, we are not in the business of privileging those who work in the NHS over those who work in adult social care, those who work in our prisons and schools, or those who put themselves in harm's way in the police or our armed forces. Those public service heroes will be watching today's debate with consternation at the fact that two supposedly mainstream political parties in this country seek to pit public sector workers against public sector workers for short-term political point scoring, as will wealth creators in business and financial services, vaccine discovering scientists, charities and the creative industries. I even wish the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) well with his pension. Given his plummeting poll ratings, he may be needing it sooner than he thinks.

Unlike the Labour and nationalist parties, I want everyone to have the same opportunity. There could not be a better domain than pensions policy for showing where we seek to support those who wish to provide for themselves and their families. Of course, by doing so, they are relieving the burden on the state and allowing it to focus taxpayers' resources on the most vulnerable in society.

**Anthony Browne:** Does the Minister agree that the 80% of employees who work for the private sector make a valuable contribution to the wellbeing of the country

as well? Does he agree that they would have a right to feel annoyed at the idea that there should be an especially punitive regime just for private sector workers, which the public sector workers do not get punished by?

**Andrew Griffith:** My hon. Friend makes exactly the point that I was making, and does so extremely well. It is wrong for us in this House to seek to assign to ourselves the ability to judge the virtuous nature of people's activity. I am sure that an accountant in the private sector works as diligently as an accountant seeking to drive value for money and the best medical outcomes in the NHS. With the greatest respect, I think that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North goes a little too far in seeking to "unbake" the wonderful cake of our mixed economy health system, which involves contributions from the private sector, private forensic laboratories and private diagnostic machines, and the wonderful work of our clinicians, and administrative, ancillary and domiciliary staff, who are mostly in the public sector. As I have said, her approach is the wrong basis on which this House should proceed.

Clauses 18 to 23 will reform pension tax thresholds to remove the current disincentives for highly experienced individuals to remain in the labour market or even to return to the workforce to build up their retirement savings. Currently, there are limits placed on the amount of tax-relieved pension savings individuals can make each year and an additional second restriction that applies to the total. That is an unusual feature of the tax system, where almost every other allowance is on an annual basis. The Government listened to stakeholders from across the public and private sectors, who have said that the annual and lifetime allowances can influence the timing of retirement and act as a barrier to remaining in the workforce.

The changes made by these clauses will increase the annual allowance from £40,000 to £60,000 and remove the lifetime allowance charge from 6 April 2023. The changes will ensure that pensions tax does not act as a barrier to staying in or returning to work, and will eliminate the chilling impact that the mere fear of triggering an extra tax charge has, even for those who are not immediately subject to falling foul of the cap. Much as the opposition parties may not wish to hear this, these changes command support across the economy. The Guild of Air Traffic Control Officers told us that pension taxation risks causing its members to reject tasks essential for the safe and efficient operation of air traffic control in the United Kingdom.

Dr Vishal Sharma of the British Medical Association has said that this is

"an incredibly important step forward".

He said that the abolition of the lifetime allowance will mean that

"senior doctors will no longer be forced"—

his words—

"to retire early and can continue to work within the NHS, providing vital patient care."

The Forces Pension Society said that this is a positive development and that it had been lobbying for it for several years. It said that these changes will help keep our streets safe. Marc Jones, chairman of the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, confirmed that, as it relates to the police, they

"will be a game changer for thousands who love their jobs and do not want to retire."



[Andrew Griffith]

To support those who have left the labour market to return and build up their retirement savings, these clauses will also increase the money purchase annual allowance from £4,000 to £10,000 from April 2023. This will enable more individuals who have previously retired to return to the workforce and to continue to build their savings. In line with these headline reforms, there are also technical changes. They increase the minimum tapered annual allowance from £4,000 to £10,000 and the adjusted income level required for the annual tapered annual allowance to apply to an individual from £240,000 to £260,000.

**Kirsty Blackman:** While the Minister is talking about all the public sector individuals who will benefit as a result of these changes, he has not made the case for why this should apply to bankers. Why should bankers receive this exemption from the lifetime allowance? What benefit will the country get as a result?

**Andrew Griffith:** I am sure that the significant number of people—over half a million—who depend on jobs in the financial sector, including in places such as Edinburgh, one of our great financial centres, are listening with consternation to the politics of envy. The hon. Lady singles out individual professions and invites us to set separate tax policies on the basis of a particular profession. That would be entirely wrong. If she had been listening very carefully—I understand that she wanted to get in, because this is a debate and is the opportunity to do so—she would have heard that I was talking about the annual tapered allowance. That is a feature in pensions policy that is there entirely to ensure that it continues to have a progressive nature. A banker who is earning £260,000 a year can get only a reduced amount. They cannot avail themselves of the same annual allowance as the hon. Lady's friends, colleagues and those she seeks to represent in our public services. I can assure the House that this is not a charter for bankers. In fact, the annual tapered allowance remains unchanged in its operation. We are updating the thresholds here today.

Unless the hon. Lady wishes to withdraw her amendment at this point having heard the strength of our arguments, I will now turn briefly to the remaining clauses that we are debating today, covering collective money purchase pension arrangements and relief relating to net pay arrangements. Collective money purchase is a new type of pension arrangement. Clause 24 will prevent any unintended tax consequences should a collective money purchase scheme wind up. It will ensure that members and their dependants can receive payments and transfer funds without incurring an unauthorised payments tax charge—I do not think that that should be controversial for the House.

Finally, clause 25 relates to the introduction of top-up payments for the lowest earners—another highly progressive measure—who sit within net pay pension schemes. There are two main methods of giving pensions tax relief. Although they provide the same outcomes for most individuals, lower earners can have different levels of take-home pay depending on how their pension scheme is administered for tax purposes, and the Government believe they are right to rectify that.

Clause 25 makes changes to ensure that eligible low-earning individuals whose income sits below their personal allowance receive a taxpayer-funded top-up payment so that they will have broadly similar take-home pay regardless of how their pension scheme is administered for tax purposes. The hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) has tabled some amendments in this respect, and I wrote to him yesterday to provide some of the comfort that I think he was looking for. They were well-intentioned amendments, and I hope that the letter I have sent him gives him some of the satisfaction that he seeks. Fundamentally, we do not disagree with what he is trying to achieve, and it has the support of those who have been agitating for low-income earners. That measure could benefit an estimated 1.2 million low earners who save into an occupational pension under net pay arrangements.

In conclusion, as I have set out, we know that there is a problem that needs to be tackled. It is a fact that individuals are choosing to retire early to prevent incurring pension taxes. The changes today, which have been widely welcomed by sectoral representatives across the economy, will ensure that we can retain our most skilled and experienced workers in all sectors while also simplifying and improving the pension arrangements for millions of households. I therefore urge Members to accept that clauses 18 to 25 should stand part of the Bill.

**James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op):** Thank you, Dame Rosie, for the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Opposition. I wish to speak in support of the new clauses in my name and the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare).

In this debate, we get the chance to discuss something rare: a tax cut from this Government. It is rare to see a tax cut from this Government, because we are so used to seeing tax rises from them—24 tax rises in the past few years. We now face a tax burden in this country that has risen to its highest level in 70 years. This month, people across the country are being hit by a double whammy of Tory tax rises. Freezes to income tax thresholds mean stealth tax rises for working people, while, at the same time, families are being hit by the Tories' council tax bombshell.

Let me be clear about what these tax rises mean: the Government's six-year freeze in the personal allowance will take its real value in 2027-28 back down to its 2013-14 level, while this year, council tax for the typical band D property will breach £2,000 for the first time. In the middle of a cost of living crisis, made worse by the Conservatives' tax rises, one permanent tax cut was announced by the Chancellor in his Budget last month. That tax cut, introduced by the clauses we are debating today, sees £1 billion of public money spent to benefit only the 1% with the biggest pension pots. It is an extraordinary way to spend £1 billion in the middle of a cost of living crisis, which is still hitting people across this country hard. Ministers may claim that their decision was driven by a desire to get doctors back in work, but it is clear that they could have found a fair, targeted fix for doctors' pensions at a fraction of the cost. The British Medical Association has said that a targeted doctors' scheme could cost as little as £32 million to implement. The Conservative Chair of the Treasury Committee has said that even she was surprised that the

Government did a blanket cut, rather than a bespoke policy for doctors. That is why we oppose the Government's plans to abolish the lifetime allowance charge in clause 18 as part of their package of changes covered by clauses 18 to 23.

I wish to spend a few moments addressing clause 25, which covers a separate pensions matter, unrelated to the package of measures that we have concerns about. Clause 25 introduces, as the Minister has said, a scheme of "top-up payments" for low earners contributing to net pay pension schemes who currently miss out on a Government pension savings incentive. We know that tax relief on pension contributions can be given to individual scheme members in two ways: relief at source and net pay arrangements. In the case of the former, even non-taxpayers are given basic rate tax relief, but in the case of the latter they are not. As the Minister said, this is particularly unfair as individual people have no control over which form of scheme their employer chooses. We commend the efforts of the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group, along with pension providers, Age UK, the TUC, and others, to campaign for a change to the law, which is culminating in clause 25 before us today.

There are, however, a number of points of detail that we would like to raise with the Minister. To help draw these out, we have tabled amendments, three of which—amendments 27, 28 and 29—have been selected for debate today. I wish to put on record my thanks to the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group for its help in drafting these amendments.

We recognise that, under the measures proposed in clause 25, there is an onus on His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to make payments to eligible individuals. While we hope, of course, that HMRC would always do the right thing, we think individuals should be able to challenge the amount paid if they think it is incorrect. With that in mind, amendment 27 would require HMRC to provide recipients of the relief with a calculation of the payment so that it can be checked. I therefore welcome confirmation from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury in a letter sent to me this morning that "HMRC are already planning to provide customers with details of the payment and how it was calculated."

I would welcome any further detail on that commitment that the Economic Secretary is able to give in his closing remarks.

3 pm

We have also tabled amendment 28, which would enable a recipient of the relief to challenge HMRC's decision if they think it is incorrect. In the letter from the Economic Secretary that I received this morning, he said he felt that was unnecessary:

"Where an individual feels the top up payment is incorrect, HMRC will help them understand what may have caused the issue. HMRC will either address this or direct them to their employer".

He also wrote:

"Individuals who don't get a payment, but think they should, will be able to contact HMRC who will explain why a top-up payment has not been made and what is necessary to correct the situation."

While I do not object to what the Economic Secretary has written, I would be grateful if he could address directly why he feels it is not right to put people's ability to challenge HMRC's decision in the Bill itself. Our amendment makes it clear that HMRC must be notified of such a challenge,

"no later than four years from the end of the relevant tax year".

When he replies, can he tell us what time limit applies to the process he referred to in his letter?

Finally on this clause, the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group has highlighted concerns over how top-up payments are treated when people have filed a self-assessment tax return. If an individual received one of those payments after having filed a self-assessment return for the relevant tax year, their return for that year would then be incorrect, as it would not be a full record of their income for that year. By way of possible solution, the group has therefore suggested amendment 29, which we have tabled, a change that would enable HMRC to correct the tax return of a recipient of a payment. In his letter, the Economic Secretary suggested that HMRC already has the power proposed by the amendment. I would be grateful if he could confirm, for the avoidance of doubt, that that is the case.

I return now to the measures in clauses 18 to 23, which, as I mentioned earlier, propose changes to the lifetime allowance charge and other tax-free annual allowances, so that I can discuss our two new clauses 4 and 5. With these new clauses, we want to press Ministers on the fundamental question why they chose to implement an expensive blanket approach that fails to offer value for money, rather than choosing a targeted scheme for NHS doctors.

When the Government are considering how to spend over £1 billion of public money in the middle of a cost of living crisis, it is more important than ever to make sure that they are spending public money wisely. As I mentioned earlier, the British Medical Association has said a targeted doctors' scheme could cost as little as £32 million to implement, and even the Conservative Chair of the Treasury Committee said she was surprised by the Government's blanket approach. The central question is this: do the Conservatives think this is the right way to spend £1 billion of public money?

Before he moved into No. 11 Downing Street, the Chancellor had recently seemed to favour an approach targeted at doctors. Last July, while he was the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, it published a report stating:

"The Government must act swiftly to reform the NHS pension scheme to prevent senior staff from reducing their hours and retiring early".

We might even have thought from what the Chancellor said in his Budget speech that he was going to announce a scheme for doctors, since he began that section of his remarks by saying:

"Finally, I have listened to the concerns of many senior NHS clinicians, who say unpredictable pension tax charges are making them leave the NHS just when they are needed most."—[*Official Report*, 15 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 844.]

However, what the Chancellor announced that day, and what is legislated for in this Bill, goes much further than the fair fix that was needed for NHS doctors. Rather than introducing a targeted scheme to keep doctors working, instead the Conservatives have introduced an expensive blanket change that will benefit all those with the biggest pension pots.

**Anthony Browne:** The hon. Gentleman is making the case for a special NHS-only or doctors-only regime. Does he accept that senior workers in other parts of the public sector are affected by the lifetime pensions allowance?

[Anthony Browne]

There was already a separate scheme for judges, and we know about the former Director of Public Prosecutions having his own individual scheme, but does the hon. Gentleman accept that there are senior police officers, senior local authority civil servants, senior Government scientists, air traffic controllers—as we have heard—and other workers across the public sector who are disincentivised from continuing to work by the current regime?

**James Murray:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but the argument we were hearing from hon. Members on both sides of the House was about NHS doctors and keeping them in work. The Chancellor himself, when he was Chair of the Select Committee, said that we needed targeted intervention to help NHS doctors. No one was talking about a wider scheme to affect everyone with the largest pension pots until the Chancellor stood up and made his announcement on Budget day. I respectfully suggest the hon. Gentleman focuses on our amendments in hand and on new clause 5, which suggests that, rather than proceed with a blanket scheme affecting everyone with a pension pot, we should do what I thought there was an emerging consensus around and develop a targeted scheme for NHS doctors.

Otherwise, the Government's approach fails the critical test for any Government spending—whether they are spending public money wisely. Yet Ministers refuse to entertain the prospect of a targeted scheme for NHS doctors instead. That is why we have tabled new clause 5, which would require the Chancellor to make recommendations on what a scheme targeted at NHS doctors would look like. We believe that is a crucial question to be answered. I hope that any Conservative Members, including the hon. Gentleman, who are concerned about spending public money wisely, getting value for money and supporting our NHS, will vote for new clause 5 in the Division Lobby later.

**Anthony Browne:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**James Murray:** No; I am going to make some progress. The hon. Gentleman has intervened quite a lot and I am looking forward to his speech, as I am sure everyone in the Committee is.

When the Economic Secretary responds, I would be grateful if he could address the points set out by new clause 4, in particular by giving some much-needed clarity on the scale of the impact the Government expect their changes to pension allowances to have. Can he tell us how many people are expected to stay in work or return to work as a result of these policies? What sectors do they work in? How many of them are NHS doctors? Those are important questions, yet it has been hard to get exact answers from Ministers. The Office of Budget Responsibility has said the changes to pension contribution allowances will increase employment by around 15,000, but Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that figure is “optimistic”.

When the Financial Secretary to the Treasury was asked on Second Reading of this Bill how many doctors would stay in the NHS because of these measures, she confidently quoted Department of Health and Social Care statistics that around 22,000 senior NHS clinicians would have been expected to exceed the £40,000 annual

allowance this year. However, she may not have known that, at the very same time, the permanent secretary who oversees Government spending was appearing before the Treasury Committee, where the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) was asking her questions. When asked about the evidence on how many of those 22,000 NHS clinicians would have been discouraged from working by the cap, she said the evidence was “mixed” and that they would need to do further evaluation.

It seems clear that the Government simply do not know how many people will be brought back into work as a result of their changes to pension tax-free allowances. They certainly do not know how many NHS doctors will come back into work, and they have clearly failed to do the thinking on how a bespoke approach for NHS doctors could operate.

That is why we oppose the Conservatives' pension changes and why we will be voting for a fair fix for doctors' pensions to get them back into work. We will be voting to spend public money wisely. We will be voting against a Government who choose to cut tax for the richest 1%, while pushing up stealth taxes and council tax on working people across the country.

**Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con):** I declare an interest, as I am in the parliamentary pension scheme and I think I am one of the older people in the Chamber today. Indeed, I am old enough to remember when the shadow Health and Social Care Secretary, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), was musing about getting rid of the lifetime allowance—a matter of a few weeks ago, before the Government did it.

Doctors in Poole have said to me clearly over a number of years that at a certain stage of their career they have all the skills, but when they work they get annual bills, and when they look at their lifetime allowance it makes sense for them to retire. The tax policy of the lifetime allowance and the annual allowance have been improving the golfing skills of GPs and hospital doctors, because they get to a point where, if they do the extra work, they are penalised by the tax system and they say, “Why should I do this?” Many still do it, but it is totally wrong that we have a tax policy that discriminates against people who want to work and want to use their skills.

One key thing that the Government have done is put billions into the national health service to catch up with the backlog. If we are putting billions in and want productivity in our hospitals to improve, it is totally inconsistent to have a tax system in which the key people leading teams and doing tests find that it is a disadvantage for them to work. We will never get the lists down if people feel that they are penalised for working hard, and many want to work hard. I have talked to doctors since the changes, and the evidence in my constituency is that some have decided to delay their retirements, which they had already put in for, while others who had retired are now coming back to work part-time. The main improvements will be higher productivity and more patients being seen. I do not know whether there will be a massive advantage for doctors, but there will be for patients, because at the end of the day, there are people waiting to have tests and operations, and this will make the national health service rather more productive than it would otherwise be.



Also, because many early-retirement doctors will now stay working, they will continue to receive salaries and pay tax at the normal rate. I am somewhat sceptical about the £1 billion cost because, if significant numbers of people stay in our hospitals, they will ultimately continue to pay taxes and many of them are higher-rate taxpayers. The key point is that we have to focus on the patients, not on the providers of services. If the providers of services can work and have incentives to work, we will get through more patients, which is what people in this House want.

It is difficult to focus on the national health service alone. There are the anomalies not only of general practitioners—I come across general practitioners well into their 50s and nearing retirement who work only three days a week because of the tax system, and this measure will help them—but of dentists. We all get people writing to us about a shortage of dentists—particularly NHS dentists—and unless we fix these problems, which are pushing experienced dentists into early retirement, our constituents will not get the services that they need.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) pointed out, many other high-skilled, high-paid public sector jobs are impossible for managers to manage because the people undertaking those tasks are penalised either by a big tax bill each year, or by the difficulty of seeing their lifetime allowances used, so there is no great incentive for them to continue working. If we have a problem in this country, it is one of productivity. This tax change improves productivity. If we improve productivity in people-facing services, such as those provided by dentists and doctors, the people waiting for those services will clearly be more and better looked after by the system.

When the Conservative party came into office, the lifetime allowance was £1.8 million, which was a significant sum 14 years ago. The reason it was reduced was that there was a suspicion that City slickers were putting millions into pension funds and not paying any tax. In reality, it has come down too far and is hitting people who we need to provide the skills that they have trained for over years. Doctors spend years training and decades getting experience, but at the time when they are needed most—to deal with the waiting list—they find that the pension system is forcing them into retirement or to play golf. What the Government have done is sensible.

I do not accept the figures from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray). The main benefit of the changes will be for those in the health service, but we cannot differentiate between one person providing one skill and somebody else providing some other skill. From that point of view, the tax system has to be neutral. If we get into a position in which the more worthy people pay less tax, we may as well be saying, “Why should anybody in the NHS pay tax? Why not just give them a free ride?” That is an argument without a great deal of thought behind it. We have to have a neutral tax system without the Government trying to second guess about the public or private sector, or whether doctors are more worthy than others.

I think that the Government have done quite a brave thing, and it was the right thing to do. Government is about taking the right decisions, even if they are not always the most popular. They are the right decisions to

provide better medical care for our constituents and to get the NHS backlog down. Of course, one of the Prime Minister’s key pledges is to do just that. This is one measure that will enable that by letting people work longer, harder and more productively.

3.15 pm

**Aaron Bell:** It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms). I rise to speak to clauses 18 to 25, which I support. I was unsurprised to hear that the Opposition do not support them. The shadow Health Secretary, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), told *The Daily Telegraph* on 2 September that the cap was “crazy”. He did not say that specifically about the NHS—although, as shadow Health Secretary, he obviously spoke about the NHS—but he called the cap “crazy”. He then said:

“I’m not pretending that doing away with the cap is a particularly progressive move... I’m just being hard-headed and pragmatic about this.”

Well, obviously that could not last. On the day of the Budget, the hard-headed and pragmatic approach from the shadow Health Secretary—the so-called “heir to Blair”—was handed over to the soft-headed and opportunistic approach that we saw in the response from the Leader of the Opposition. Actually, it was not in his response, because he had to go away and first check with some other people what the Labour policy was going to be, but Labour later came out against the policy, and has tabled amendments to strike the clauses entirely and replace them with new clauses, which I am sure the Government will oppose.

To address the point about progressiveness, it is absolutely asinine to assume that the only test of any fiscal measure is whether it is progressive. We seek to do lots of things with our tax system: incentivise people, grow our economy, grow our productivity. The measures proposed by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury today, and by the Chancellor in the Budget, will do that. We want to incentivise people to stay in work and return to work.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Poole, I am not even sure that there will be a cost in the long run, because those who do not retire early will pay tax while they are earning their salaries. One big problem in our society is people retiring early with all the wisdom, experience and skills that they have at that stage of their careers. People are so productive in their 50s and 60s because they have accumulated so much knowledge, so to have people retiring early is a crying shame, not only for the country as a whole but for them, their patients and the people whom they serve in other ways. Also, those people will ultimately pay more tax when they claim their pensions; it is not a tax-free system. People might be exempt on entry into their pension scheme and exempt on returns, but they pay taxes when they draw their pensions, so taxes will be paid in the long run.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) made a point about bankers, which was ably answered by the Minister. We still have a tapering of the annual allowance for people who earn incredibly large salaries, of which there are a number in this country, although not many in my constituency. As many on the Conservative Benches have said, we do not seek to divide people based on where they work or the nature of their jobs. Our tax system works for everybody.

[Aaron Bell]

Our public sector has incredibly generous pension provision, as we have seen in recent discussions about strikes. That is why some people in the national health service, for example, have accumulated notionally very large pension pots. They are highly skilled, long-serving public servants who earn substantial salaries, particularly towards the latter end of their careers. If they have been on the scheme for a long time, they could be entitled to a pretty large pension, and we multiply it only by 20 to find out their defined benefit. So people in the public sector in defined benefit schemes are already better treated than people in the private sector, in which the same level of salary could not be purchased for £1.07 million.

I heard that argument from doctors, I put it to the Minister, and I am glad that the Chancellor listened in the Budget. I have heard the argument from others in Newcastle-under-Lyme that the system disincentivises people to continue working. We should be against that. Clause 18 abolishes the lifetime allowance, as we have heard. In clause 19, we quite rightly limit the tax-free lump sum. I do not think that it would be conscionable to have an unlimited lump sum, which could be abused. We also have a limit on the annual allowance and its tapering, so it would not be plausible for people with defined contributions on a normal career trajectory to challenge the sort of high numbers—£2 million or £3 million—that people are talking about. It is not just feasible for most people—unless they have exceptionally good returns from their pension investments—to achieve those sums in their lifetime.

Another iniquity of the current system is that people can stop paying into their defined contribution scheme and—if in a bull market, for example—have no idea how much their scheme might increase by. Obviously, that is down to investment returns, for people who do not know where they stand with their pensions right up until the moment of crystallisation.

As I said in my intervention earlier, and as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) expanded on, there are all sorts of people who welcome this. They include people in both the private and the public sector, senior armed forces personnel, senior police chiefs, headteachers, people in the NHS and GPs.

Dr Richard Fieldhouse, chair of the National Association of Sessional GPs, said of the shadow Health Secretary's comments:

“Each person's pension fund is their embodiment of a lifetime's worth of delayed gratification. So any measures to motivate people towards this is to be welcomed, particularly when applied to us as GPs”.

That is what pensions are—pay deferred. From the Government's point of view, they are tax deferred as well. They are not tax waived or tax given away; they are tax deferred until the point at which the person, whether they work in the private or the public sector, gets the rewards for their labour.

That is why I support what we have done in the Budget. The measure will simplify things for people, save lives in the NHS and, more than anything, encourage people, whatever their job is, to stay in work for longer, and that is all to the good of the British economy.

**Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell). I agree with everything he said.

I am a little surprised that we have ended up having to have this debate again today. Generally speaking, people who campaign for their own interests and ask for a special scheme for doctors do so because that was their particular area. However, if we stand back and ask how it is possible to make a special scheme for one particular sector work, we quickly realise that it is fiendishly difficult to do. There are all sorts of scenarios where we hit a problem. For example, some people have split careers, spending some time in the NHS and the rest of the time outside it. Others have split jobs where they might be a consultant for a couple of days a week and then spend another couple of days training the next set of doctors as a university lecturer. That puts them in a different pension scheme that is not subject to the same tax regime. They might say, “I have an NHS pension but I'll pay it all on my other one,” so that would not work. What about people who are not employed by the NHS or any of the myriad trusts and organisations?

I do not want to pick too much on the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), because I have tabled enough in my time to know that they are not always drafted precisely. However, if we use the word “employed” in draft legislation, that cannot be stretched to include a partner in a GP practice, because they are not employed by anybody. If we use the phrase “employed in an NHS organisation”, that cannot be stretched to include somebody working as a locum, because they are a contractor rather than somebody who is employed. There is all manner of people in the NHS family who we want to encourage to stay in work, but this is not how we will achieve it.

I also think that the hon. Lady has chosen the wrong mechanism. This would result in her having a nightmare. As soon as a person who used to be exempt ceased to work more than 15 hours or retired, the lifetime allowance would kick in and clobber them when they drew their pension. I understand her intention, but I suspect that her mechanism of choice would be disastrous.

Having thought through the scenarios, how do we pick a sector and get the right people? Are we trying to help doctors or are we trying to help anybody who happens to be employed by the NHS? As I said earlier, we are basically helping accountants, finance directors and procurement directors—all manner of people who are paid very large amounts by the NHS. I probably do not have the same amount of sympathy for their contribution to public service as I do for that of frontline doctors. It is bizarre to give a tax advantage to an NHS finance director, who gets a very generous pension, and not to an entrepreneur who is trying to grow the economy and create jobs to pay for all of this. That seems to create a huge iniquity.

If we stand back and think about how we want tax policy to work—heaven forbid that the Opposition get into government and try to do this—it would be really hard, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) has said, to go down the route of justifying different tax rates for public sector employees. If we start asking why we are charging them the same income tax and national insurance, we will end up in a horrible world and a very complicated tax regime.

Those of us who have very good public sector pensions should be very careful. Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms), my lack of career success means that I am not worried about the lifetime allowance, including under the old level, because 20 times my pension gets me nowhere near it. Strange situations are being proposed. When I was first elected 13 years ago, a big issue on the doorstep was, “Public sector pensions are too generous. It’s not fair. I work in the private sector, basically paying for that, and I’m going to get a tiny pension. People in the public sector are being paid the same or more than me, and they are getting a massively generous pension. It’s not fair.” The coalition Government’s response to tackling that perceived unfairness was to change the scheme from final salary to average salary. If we load on to that generous, inflation-protected, state-guaranteed pension a more generous tax treatment than that received by private sector pensions, that would recreate that horrible argument.

It is foolish and damaging to go down the route of cherry-picking favoured sectors and giving them different tax treatment from other sectors. It was a mistake to take that approach to judges and to Directors of Public Prosecution, and it would be a mistake to apply it to doctors. The tax system should apply to everybody across the board in the same way. If we want to provide more reward to people, we should do so by pay rather than by tax. That is a far better approach.

I want to address where the Government have ended up. We have a very complicated pensions tax regime where people do not pay tax on the way in or on an annual basis. Instead, they pay tax on what they draw out of the pension when they get to the end, unless they draw out a quarter of it as a lump sum, in which case they do not pay tax on it all. We have chosen a pension model whereby the state pension broadly provides people with subsistence to live on, and if people want more than that, we incentivise them with a generous tax regime so that they can save it themselves. The implication is that a higher earner gets a greater tax incentive because, unlike a lower earner, they save tax at 40% or 45%. They probably pick up a bit more tax at the end, but a large amount of people pay a lower marginal tax rate when they retire than when they are working. That is the system that we have chosen.

We then thought that perhaps that was a bit too generous to higher earners, so we introduced an annual cap and a lifetime cap. Quite why we needed both, I do not know. If we want to limit how much tax relief we give people, we could choose one of the two and still get to the right answer. The Government have now chosen the annual approach rather than the lifetime approach. The problem is that that does not help people whose earnings are not consistent. If someone is earning a relatively high amount at age 25 and then keeps earning it, that system will work very well for them. If someone starts a business that struggles in the early years and they cannot pay themselves a big salary or make big pension contributions, but then finally it is successful and they sell it and make a lot of money, under this new regime they would not be able to put that much in their pension because they would only be allowed to put in 60 grand a year. I think we could have chosen a higher lifetime allowance and not bothered with the annual allowance. That would have achieved a similar outcome, but we have not done that.

To complicate things further, we have decided that if people earn too much, we will start taking their annual allowance off them completely, meaning that they will be able to put next to nothing in a pension scheme. That does not strike me as being a pensions tax regime that incentivises people to save money in the way we want them to or to use it in their retirement. Effectively, as soon as people hit 57, that gives them a tax incentive to take a lump sum before they retire. We are saying, “The more you earn, the better off you are—unless you earn too much, in which case you are being made worse off and put back to where you started.” In order to put out this particular fire, I urge the Government to step back and consider what they are trying to achieve with the £50 billion or so a year of tax we defer—we actually lose the vast majority of it—and what they really want people to do with their pension savings. How can we use the tax regime to incentivise that and make it fair all the way around? We must come up with a coherent tax regime that drives our policy, rather than come back every couple of years, tweak things, find another fire to put out and think, “Well, it’s not quite working how we wanted, so let’s move it around,” and end up in a confused mess.

This should be a warning to us. If we have a confused mess, with different competing objectives, and we do not think about the whole system, we end up with an unintended consequence. The consequence we had was senior doctors retiring far earlier than we wanted them to because we got the pensions tax regime wrong. If we do not fix this, I suspect there will be another unforeseen consequence and we will have to come back and tweak it in another couple of years. Let us do the job properly, have a coherent regime and use the very large amount of money that we invest to drive the behaviours that we want.

**Anthony Browne:** I preface my comments with an absolutely fundamental underlying principle of all economic policy. Whatever we are talking about, I think this should be our first, axiomatic ground rule: whatever is right for the Leader of the Opposition should be right for everyone. There is a fundamental principle here, which is fairness, and I will come on to that.

First, though, I want to mention some of the underlying principles of the annual allowance versus the lifetime allowance, because during almost all of the previous Labour Government’s time in office, there was not a lifetime allowance. It was brought in at the tail end of the Labour Government. One of the Government’s concerns about tax relief for pensioners is the need to limit it so that we do not end up creating huge amounts of dead-weight costs for pension relief, particularly for the well paid. That is why we have an annual allowance that limits tax relief.

3.30 pm

The lifetime allowance is not an allowance of tax relief on the amount that people pay in; it is the amount that is accrued within the pension pot. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) said, a person could be very lucky: they could have worked for Google, for example, at the beginning of their career and got some Google shares in their pension, and then done virtually nothing else for the rest of their career, but their pension would suddenly be worth £1 million because those shares have done so well. They would



then suddenly be hit by this punitive regime; they would have got virtually no tax relief at any point, but they would suddenly face this massive tax penalty.

The only reason for the lifetime limit is a tax grab by the Government to try to penalise those who have ended up with big savings pots, and as we have heard, most of those affected by it work in the public sector, because public sector pensions are so generous. I am chair of the Conservative Back-Bench Treasury committee, and my hon. Friend was previously the deputy chair. We had various hearings on this issue, and we recommended to the Government that they get rid of the lifetime savings allowance altogether. I was delighted when the Government did it, because I did not think they were going to be that brave, but there is a logical series of steps that we have to follow in order to get there.

I was delighted that the spokesman for the SNP, the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), accepted that there is such a thing as a Laffer curve that a person can be beyond the peak of—that if we tax people so highly, at some point, they just stop working. We can argue about where that peak is, but that was absolutely the point that the hon. Lady was making. Labour Members have to accept that point as well, because they are making the same point regarding NHS doctors, but it applies to everyone in every other sector as well. If we end up hitting people with taxes so high that it is not worth their while working, they stop working, whether they are in the public sector or the private sector. That principle—that there is no benefit to the country in hitting people with taxes so high that whatever sector they are in, they stop working, paying taxes and contributing to the broader economy—should be a foundation of the Government’s overall thinking on pension taxation.

The point I was making about the logical chain that leads to abolishing the whole lifetime allowance is that we already have the stand-alone personal regime for the former Director of Public Prosecutions, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer)—and not just him but his predecessors as well. We already have a separate regime for judges, which has been invoked; we now have a regime for NHS doctors that is being argued for; and as was mentioned earlier, there are various other regimes for senior police chiefs, headteachers, Government scientists, local authority senior officials, air traffic controllers—the list goes on. It is a fundamental principle of taxation policy that if we have so many exemptions in all those different categories, there is clearly something wrong with the system, and we end up with an absolutely hideous mess of tax policy. My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) pointed out the complexities of having a regime just for NHS doctors, but that same complexity would apply to every other sector if we had a separate regime for police chiefs, Government scientists, and so on and so forth—what a hideous mess. We just have to accept that the whole thing is wrong.

One might say, as the hon. Member for Aberdeen North did, that we should have a separate regime just for the public sector. I think that is absolutely, fundamentally wrong, which is a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley also made. First, I just do not abide by the general principle that all those who work in the private sector are bad and all those who work in the public sector are good. By the way, 80% of employees—80%

of our voters—work in the private sector. I do not accept that those people are sufficiently bad and not moral enough that they deserve to have a specially punitive tax regime. I think it is really divisive to argue for a tax system that benefits public sector workers at the expense of private sector workers.

Private sector workers do a lot of valuable work as well. We may not like all of the different things they do, but in my constituency, they work in life sciences, developing all the drugs, the vaccines, the cures for cancer and so on. People who work in supermarkets were heroes during the pandemic, as well—they kept on working throughout the whole thing. I agree that frontline workers are unlikely to benefit from this regime, but the senior managers certainly would. It would be really divisive and corrosive in society to say, “Right, we are having one tax regime for the public sector—you are in a privileged position—and everyone else, the 80% in the private sector, has to be punished.” That is certainly not a world I would want to live in. I challenge Members to argue for that in public, because I think they would be shot down by all their voters. It would also be hideously complex, because a lot of people, including me, end up working part of their career in the public sector and part of their career in the private sector. How do we get a lifetime allowance out of that?

Fundamentally, when we follow the logic and add up all the different private sectors affected by the allowance and the private sector overall, we end up seeing that we just have to get rid of the whole thing. It would be incredibly complex and incredibly unfair if we had single sectors that benefited from the abolition of the lifetime allowance.

There is also the cost. The Treasury produces all these estimates, and we can have a big debate about its methodology and how it calculates things, but I fundamentally do not believe that a tax that is so punitive that it simply stops people from working at the peak of their skills and experience is somehow good for the overall economy. Clearly it means people work less and pay less tax. The overall cost of this measure will be far less than expected. I do not speak for the Treasury, but my understanding is that that was part of its rationale. When it looked at the costs for doing it for doctors and then at the costs for doing it for the economy overall, it realised there was not that big a difference, so it might as well go for the whole thing. The arguments against abolishing the lifetime allowance simply do not stack up. They are fundamentally unfair and economically illiterate, and the Government should push ahead with getting rid of the lifetime allowance.

**Andrew Griffith:** I thank my hon. Friends for their contributions to this debate. It has been brief, and I will try to keep my remarks brief, too. The Government do not want any doctor to retire early because of the way that pension taxes work, but as my hon. Friends have said, the issues that these changes address go much wider than doctors and affect workers across the economy. Nobody should find themselves having to reduce their work commitments due to interaction between their pay, their pension and the tax system. It is detrimental not just to those individuals who feel compelled to retire earlier than they would like, but also to the economy, and with them goes their often irreplaceable knowledge and experience.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) reminded us that today is a bad day for the purveyors of golf equipment, because this measure will allow people to come back into work. More than anything, we should be talking about the patients and others who will benefit, as well as the benefit to the economy from doctors, consultants and workers across sectors continuing to pay tax at their normal rate for those extra years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) conjured up the image of how it would oh so wonderful to be a fly on the wall for the recent conversations between the hon. Members for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and for Ealing North (James Murray) in respect of this policy. We took our cue from the hon. Member for Ilford North, who called the cap “crazy” and said that removing it would “inevitably save lives”. I find it remarkable that that is no longer the position of the official Opposition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) talked about the fiendishly difficult position of trying to create a special scheme. Though we take the amendment of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) in good faith, she nevertheless conjures up an “Animal Farm” tax policy, where we hit GP practices, people who work in hospices and adult and social care, mental health consultants, those who work in air ambulances and medical charities, and give preference to NHS finance directors over long-standing public servants elsewhere in the sector. I could not make those unequal choices, and I am surprised that she and her party feel able to do so.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne), who speaks with such great knowledge on matters financial, reminded us of the fundamental principle. We could call it the Starmer principle: what is good for the Leader of the Opposition should be good for everyone.

Since this is part of the fundamental economic debate, I will conclude by reminding my hon. Friends what happened the last time Labour had its chance to put its hand on the economy: the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury left a note saying that there was no money left. *[Interruption.]* I have answered the questions from the hon. Member for Ealing North, and I was kind enough to write to him about the matters that he raised with me.

**Kirsty Blackman:** The Government have been battling manfully to attempt to retrofit a justification to a policy that was unveiled like a rabbit out of a hat on Budget day. We have been speaking about doctors’ pensions in this Chamber for years, and suddenly it turns out it is actually about air traffic controllers, senior police officers and others who were not being mentioned, because the Chancellor has made the decision to abolish the lifetime allowance. The Minister was continuing to try to pull at the heartstrings by mentioning NHS doctors and consultants in every second sentence as if they are the only ones who will benefit from the £1 billion tax cut that is being made, and as if we should all support this change because it is for our NHS heroes, but actually it is not just for our NHS heroes.

The Government have chosen to implement this in the widest, most ham-fisted way. If the current policy of the lifetime allowance was so bad, why did it take the Conservative Government 10 years to change it? Why did it take them so long to decide this was so horrific

that they had to get rid of it? Why, if they cannot possibly have a scheme that allows for one profession or one public service to be treated differently, did they allow the scheme for judges to continue for such a long period of time? If that was so discriminatory and cannot possibly be replicated for NHS doctors, why have they only realised this in the last few months? Their arguments do not stack up. Therefore, we will do what we intended to do, which is to press amendment 21 to a vote.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 45, Noes 292.*

## Division No. 212]

[3.41 pm

### AYES

Bardell, Hannah	MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Black, Mhairi	Mc Nally, John
Blackford, rh Ian	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Blackman, Kirsty	McDonald, Stuart C.
Bonnar, Steven	McLaughlin, Anne ( <i>Proxy vote</i>
Brown, Alan	<i>cast by Brendan O'Hara)</i>
Callaghan, Amy ( <i>Proxy vote</i>	Monaghan, Carol
<i>cast by Brendan O'Hara)</i>	Newlands, Gavin
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Nicolson, John ( <i>Proxy vote</i>
Chapman, Douglas	<i>cast by Brendan O'Hara)</i>
Cherry, Joanna	O'Hara, Brendan
Cowan, Ronnie	Oswald, Kirsten
Crawley, Angela	Qaisar, Ms Anum
Day, Martyn	Saville Roberts, rh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Liz
Dorans, Allan ( <i>Proxy vote cast</i>	Sheppard, Tommy
<i>by Brendan O'Hara)</i>	Smith, Alyn
Edwards, Jonathan	Stephens, Chris
Ferrier, Margaret	Thewliss, Alison
Flynn, Stephen	Thomson, Richard
Gibson, Patricia	Whitford, Dr Philippa
Hendry, Drew	Williams, Hywel
Hosie, rh Stewart	Wishart, Pete
Lake, Ben	
Law, Chris	
Linden, David	
Lucas, Caroline	

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
Marion Fellows and  
Peter Grant

### NOES

Afolami, Bim	Bowie, Andrew
Afriyie, Adam	Brady, Sir Graham
Aiken, Nickie	Braverman, rh Suella
Aldous, Peter	Brereton, Jack
Anderson, Lee	Bridgen, Andrew
Anderson, Stuart	Brine, Steve
Ansell, Caroline	Bristow, Paul
Argar, rh Edward	Britcliffe, Sara
Atherton, Sarah	Browne, Anthony
Atkins, Victoria	Bruce, Fiona
Bacon, Gareth	Buchan, Felicity
Bacon, Mr Richard	Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Badenoch, rh Kemi	Burghart, Alex
Bailey, Shaun	Butler, Rob
Baillie, Siobhan	Cairns, rh Alun
Baker, Duncan	Carter, Andy
Baldwin, Harriett	Cartlidge, James
Barclay, rh Steve	Cash, Sir William
Baron, Mr John	Cates, Miriam
Baynes, Simon	Caulfield, Maria
Bell, Aaron	Chishti, Rehman
Beresford, Sir Paul	Chope, Sir Christopher
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Churchill, Jo
Bhatti, Saqib	Clark, rh Greg
Blunt, Crispin	Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Bottomley, Sir Peter	

Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan  
 Clarkson, Chris  
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse  
 Colburn, Elliot  
 Collins, Damian  
 Coutinho, Claire  
 Crabb, rh Stephen  
 Crosbie, Virginia  
 Crouch, Tracey  
 Daly, James  
 Davies, rh David T. C.  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Dr James  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davis, rh Mr David  
 Davison, Dehenna  
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline  
 Dines, Miss Sarah  
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
 Double, Steve  
 Doyle-Price, Jackie  
 Drax, Richard  
 Drummond, Mrs Flick  
 Duddridge, Sir James  
 Duguid, David  
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
 Dunne, rh Philip  
 Ellis, rh Michael  
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias  
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie  
 Eustice, rh George  
 Evans, Dr Luke  
 Evennett, rh Sir David  
 Everitt, Ben  
 Fabricant, Michael  
 Farris, Laura  
 Firth, Anna  
 Fletcher, Katherine  
 Fletcher, Mark  
 Fletcher, Nick  
 Ford, rh Vicky  
 Foster, Kevin  
 Fox, rh Dr Liam  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Frazer, rh Lucy  
 Freeman, George  
 Freer, Mike  
 French, Mr Louie  
 Fuller, Richard  
 Fysh, Mr Marcus  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat  
 Gibb, rh Nick  
 Gibson, Peter  
 Gideon, Jo  
 Glen, rh John  
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert  
 Gove, rh Michael  
 Graham, Richard  
 Grant, Mrs Helen  
 Gray, James  
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Green, Chris  
 Green, rh Damian  
 Griffith, Andrew  
 Grundy, James  
 Gullis, Jonathan  
 Halfon, rh Robert  
 Hall, Luke  
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette  
 Hammond, Stephen  
 Hancock, rh Matt  
 Hands, rh Greg  
 Harper, rh Mr Mark  
 Hart, Sally-Ann  
 Hart, rh Simon  
 Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver  
 Heapey, rh James  
 Henderson, Gordon  
 Henry, Darren  
 Higginbotham, Antony  
 Hinds, rh Damian  
 Holden, Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Hollobone, Mr Philip  
 Howell, John  
 Howell, Paul  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hughes, Eddie  
 Hunt, Jane  
 Hunt, Tom  
 Jack, rh Mr Alister  
 Javid, rh Sajid  
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Jenkinson, Mark  
 Jenkyns, Andrea  
 Jenrick, rh Robert  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Johnson, Gareth  
 Johnston, David  
 Jones, Andrew  
 Jones, rh Mr David  
 Jones, Fay  
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus  
 Jupp, Simon  
 Kawczynski, Daniel  
 Kearns, Alicia  
 Knight, rh Sir Greg  
 Knight, Julian (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)  
 Kniveton, Kate  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lamont, John  
 Langan, Robert  
 Latham, Mrs Pauline  
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea  
 Levy, Ian  
 Lewer, Andrew  
 Loder, Chris  
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Longhi, Marco  
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Lord, Mr Jonathan  
 Loughton, Tim  
 Mackinlay, Craig  
 Mackrory, Cherylyn  
 Maclean, Rachel  
 Mak, Alan  
 Mangnall, Anthony  
 Mann, Scott  
 Marson, Julie  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 Maynard, Paul

McCartney, Karl  
 McVey, rh Esther  
 Menzies, Mark  
 Mercer, rh Johnny  
 Merriman, Huw  
 Metcalfe, Stephen  
 Millar, Robin  
 Milling, rh Amanda  
 Mills, Nigel  
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Damien  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Mordaunt, rh Penny  
 Morris, Anne Marie  
 Morris, David  
 Morris, James  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Mortimer, Jill  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mumby-Croft, Holly  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Neill, Sir Robert  
 Nokes, rh Caroline  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Offord, Dr Matthew  
 Opperman, Guy  
 Pawsey, Mark  
 Penning, rh Sir Mike  
 Penrose, John  
 Percy, Andrew  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Poulter, Dr Dan  
 Pow, Rebecca  
 Prentis, rh Victoria  
 Pritchard, rh Mark  
 Purslove, Tom  
 Quin, rh Jeremy  
 Quince, Will  
 Randall, Tom  
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob  
 Richards, Nicola  
 Richardson, Angela  
 Roberts, Rob  
 Robertson, Mr Laurence  
 Robinson, Mary  
 Rowley, Lee  
 Sambrook, Gary  
 Saxby, Selaine  
 Seely, Bob  
 Shapps, rh Grant

Sharma, rh Sir Alok  
 Simmonds, David  
 Skidmore, rh Chris  
 Smith, rh Chloe  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, Henry  
 Smith, Royston  
 Solloway, Amanda  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, rh Mark  
 Stafford, Alexander  
 Stephenson, rh Andrew  
 Stevenson, Jane  
 Stevenson, John  
 Stewart, rh Bob  
 Stewart, Iain  
 Streeter, Sir Gary  
 Sturdy, Julian  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Syms, Sir Robert  
 Thomas, Derek  
 Throup, Maggie  
 Timpson, Edward  
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly  
 Tomlinson, Justin  
 Tomlinson, Michael  
 Tracey, Craig  
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie  
 Trott, Laura  
 Vara, rh Shailesh  
 Vickers, Matt  
 Walker, Sir Charles  
 Walker, Mr Robin  
 Wallis, Dr Jamie  
 Warburton, David (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)  
 Warman, Matt  
 Watling, Giles  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
 Whittaker, rh Craig  
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
 Wiggin, Sir Bill  
 Wild, James  
 Williams, Craig  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wragg, Mr William  
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy  
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim  
**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Ruth Edwards and**  
**Jacob Young**

*Question accordingly negated.*

*Question put, That the clause stand part of the Bill.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 293, Noes 218.*

## Division No. 213]

[3.55 pm

### AYES

Afolami, Bim  
 Afriyie, Adam  
 Aiken, Nickie  
 Aldous, Peter  
 Anderson, Lee  
 Anderson, Stuart  
 Ansell, Caroline  
 Argar, rh Edward

Atherton, Sarah  
 Atkins, Victoria  
 Bacon, Gareth  
 Bacon, Mr Richard  
 Badenoch, rh Kemi  
 Bailey, Shaun  
 Baillie, Siobhan  
 Baker, Duncan



Baldwin, Harriett  
 Barclay, rh Steve  
 Baron, Mr John  
 Baynes, Simon  
 Bell, Aaron  
 Beresford, Sir Paul  
 Berry, rh Sir Jake  
 Bhatti, Saqib  
 Blunt, Crispin  
 Bottomley, Sir Peter  
 Brady, Sir Graham  
 Braverman, rh Suella  
 Brereton, Jack  
 Bridgen, Andrew  
 Brine, Steve  
 Bristow, Paul  
 Britcliffe, Sara  
 Browne, Anthony  
 Bruce, Fiona  
 Buchan, Felicity  
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert  
 Burghart, Alex  
 Butler, Rob  
 Cairns, rh Alun  
 Carter, Andy  
 Cartlidge, James  
 Cash, Sir William  
 Cates, Miriam  
 Caulfield, Maria  
 Chalk, Alex  
 Chishti, Rehman  
 Chope, Sir Christopher  
 Churchill, Jo  
 Clark, rh Greg  
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon  
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan  
 Clarkson, Chris  
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse  
 Colburn, Elliot  
 Collins, Damian  
 Coutinho, Claire  
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey  
 Crabb, rh Stephen  
 Crosbie, Virginia  
 Crouch, Tracey  
 Daly, James  
 Davies, rh David T. C.  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Dr James  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davis, rh Mr David  
 Davison, Dehenna  
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline  
 Dines, Miss Sarah  
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
 Double, Steve  
 Doyle-Price, Jackie  
 Drax, Richard  
 Drummond, Mrs Flick  
 Duddridge, Sir James  
 Duguid, David  
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
 Dunne, rh Philip  
 Ellis, rh Michael  
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias  
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie  
 Eustice, rh George  
 Evans, Dr Luke  
 Evennett, rh Sir David

Everitt, Ben  
 Fabricant, Michael  
 Farris, Laura  
 Firth, Anna  
 Fletcher, Katherine  
 Fletcher, Mark  
 Fletcher, Nick  
 Ford, rh Vicky  
 Foster, Kevin  
 Fox, rh Dr Liam  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Frazer, rh Lucy  
 Freeman, George  
 Freer, Mike  
 French, Mr Louie  
 Fuller, Richard  
 Fysh, Mr Marcus  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat  
 Gibb, rh Nick  
 Gibson, Peter  
 Gideon, Jo  
 Glen, rh John  
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert  
 Graham, Richard  
 Grant, Mrs Helen  
 Gray, James  
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Green, Chris  
 Green, rh Damian  
 Griffith, Andrew  
 Grundy, James  
 Gullis, Jonathan  
 Halfon, rh Robert  
 Hall, Luke  
 Hammond, Stephen  
 Hancock, rh Matt  
 Hands, rh Greg  
 Harper, rh Mr Mark  
 Hart, Sally-Ann  
 Hart, rh Simon  
 Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver  
 Heappey, rh James  
 Henderson, Gordon  
 Henry, Darren  
 Higginbotham, Antony  
 Hinds, rh Damian  
 Holden, Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Hollobone, Mr Philip  
 Holloway, Adam  
 Howell, John  
 Howell, Paul  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hughes, Eddie  
 Hunt, Jane  
 Hunt, Tom  
 Jack, rh Mr Alister  
 Javid, rh Sajid  
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Jenkinson, Mark  
 Jenkins, Andrea  
 Jenrick, rh Robert  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Johnson, Gareth  
 Johnston, David  
 Jones, Andrew  
 Jones, rh Mr David  
 Jones, Fay

Jones, rh Mr Marcus  
 Jupp, Simon  
 Kawczynski, Daniel  
 Kearns, Alicia  
 Knight, rh Sir Greg  
 Knight, Julian (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)  
 Kniveton, Kate  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lamont, John  
 Lagan, Robert  
 Latham, Mrs Pauline  
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Levy, Ian  
 Lewer, Andrew  
 Loder, Chris  
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Longhi, Marco  
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Lord, Mr Jonathan  
 Loughton, Tim  
 Mackinlay, Craig  
 Mackrory, Cherilyn  
 Maclean, Rachel  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Mangnall, Anthony  
 Mann, Scott  
 Marson, Julie  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 Maynard, Paul  
 McCartney, Karl  
 McVey, rh Esther  
 Menzies, Mark  
 Mercer, rh Johnny  
 Merriman, Huw  
 Metcalfe, Stephen  
 Millar, Robin  
 Milling, rh Amanda  
 Mills, Nigel  
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Damien  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Mordaunt, rh Penny  
 Morris, Anne Marie  
 Morris, David  
 Morris, James  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Mortimer, Jill  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mumby-Croft, Holly  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Neill, Sir Robert  
 Nokes, rh Caroline  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Offord, Dr Matthew  
 Opperman, Guy  
 Pawsey, Mark  
 Penning, rh Sir Mike  
 Penrose, John  
 Percy, Andrew  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Poulter, Dr Dan  
 Pow, Rebecca  
 Prentis, rh Victoria

Pritchard, rh Mark  
 Pursglove, Tom  
 Quin, rh Jeremy  
 Quince, Will  
 Randall, Tom  
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob  
 Richards, Nicola  
 Richardson, Angela  
 Roberts, Rob  
 Robertson, Mr Laurence  
 Robinson, Mary  
 Rowley, Lee  
 Sambrook, Gary  
 Saxby, Selaine  
 Seely, Bob  
 Shapps, rh Grant  
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok  
 Simmonds, David  
 Skidmore, rh Chris  
 Smith, rh Chloe  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, Henry  
 Smith, Royston  
 Solloway, Amanda  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, rh Mark  
 Stafford, Alexander  
 Stephenson, rh Andrew  
 Stevenson, Jane  
 Stevenson, John  
 Stewart, rh Bob  
 Stewart, Iain  
 Streeter, Sir Gary  
 Sturdy, Julian  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Syms, Sir Robert  
 Thomas, Derek  
 Throup, Maggie  
 Timpson, Edward  
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly  
 Tomlinson, Justin  
 Tomlinson, Michael  
 Tracey, Craig  
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie  
 Trott, Laura  
 Vara, rh Shailesh  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Vickers, Matt  
 Walker, Sir Charles  
 Walker, Mr Robin  
 Wallis, Dr Jamie  
 Warburton, David (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)  
 Warman, Matt  
 Watling, Giles  
 Webb, Suzanne (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
 Whittaker, rh Craig  
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
 Wiggin, Sir Bill  
 Wild, James  
 Williams, Craig  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wragg, Mr William  
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy  
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Jacob Young and**  
**Ruth Edwards**

## NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami*)  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Ali, Rushanara  
 Ali, Tahir  
 Amesbury, Mike  
 Anderson, Fleur  
 Bardell, Hannah  
 Barker, Paula  
 Beckett, rh Margaret  
 Begum, Apsana  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Betts, Mr Clive  
 Black, Mhairi  
 Blackford, rh Ian  
 Blackman, Kirsty  
 Blake, Olivia  
 Blomfield, Paul  
 Bonnar, Steven  
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
 Brennan, Kevin  
 Brown, Alan  
 Brown, Ms Lyn  
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
 Bryant, Sir Chris  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Butler, Dawn  
 Byrne, Ian  
 Byrne, rh Liam  
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
 Cameron, Dr Lisa  
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
 Carden, Dan  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Chapman, Douglas  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Cherry, Joanna  
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami*)  
 Cooper, rh Yvette  
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
 Cowan, Ronnie  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Crawley, Angela  
 Creasy, Stella  
 Cryer, John  
 Cunningham, Alex  
 Daby, Janet  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 David, Wayne  
 Davies, Geraint  
 Davies-Jones, Alex  
 Day, Martyn  
 De Cordova, Marsha  
 Debbonaire, Thangam  
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin  
 Dodds, Anneliese  
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Duffield, Rosie  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Edwards, Jonathan  
 Efford, Clive  
 Elliott, Julie  
 Elmore, Chris

Eshalomi, Florence  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Fellows, Marion  
 Ferrier, Margaret  
 Fletcher, Colleen  
 Flynn, Stephen  
 Fovargue, Yvonne  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Foy, Mary Kelly  
 Gibson, Patricia  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Grady, Patrick  
 Grant, Peter  
 Greenwood, Margaret  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Haigh, Louise  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hendrick, Sir Mark  
 Hendry, Drew  
 Hillier, Dame Meg  
 Hollern, Kate  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hosie, rh Stewart  
 Howarth, rh Sir George  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Johnson, Kim  
 Jones, Darren  
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Kane, Mike  
 Keeley, Barbara  
 Kendall, Liz  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Lake, Ben  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lightwood, Simon  
 Linden, David  
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami*)  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 Lucas, Caroline  
 Lynch, Holly  
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
 Mahmood, Shabana  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mc Nally, John  
 McCabe, Steve  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McDonagh, Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
 McDonald, Stuart C.  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
 McGinn, Conor  
 McGovern, Alison

McKinnell, Catherine  
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McMorris, Anna  
 Mearns, Ian  
 Miliband, rh Edward  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Monaghan, Carol  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Murray, Ian  
 Murray, James  
 Newlands, Gavin  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
 Norris, Alex  
 O'Hara, Brendan  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Oppong-Asare, Abena  
 Osborne, Kate  
 Oswald, Kirsten  
 Owatemi, Taiwo  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Mr Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Phillipson, Bridget  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Powell, Lucy  
 Qaisar, Ms Anum  
 Rayner, rh Angela  
 Rees, Christina  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reeves, rh Rachel  
 Reynolds, Jonathan  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
 Shah, Naz  
 Sharma, Mr Virendra  
 Sheppard, Tommy  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smith, Alyn  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Spellar, rh John  
 Stephens, Chris  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tarry, Sam  
 Thewliss, Alison  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thomson, Richard  
 Thornberry, rh Emily  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Turner, Karl  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Webbe, Claudia  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Andrew  
 Western, Matt  
 Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Whitford, Dr Philippa  
 Whitley, Mick  
 Whittome, Nadia  
 Williams, Hywel  
 Wishart, Pete  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Liz Twist and**  
**Gerald Jones**

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Clause 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 19 to 25 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

## New Clause 5

REVIEW OF ALTERNATIVES TO THE ABOLITION OF THE  
 LIFETIME ALLOWANCE CHARGE

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of this Act being passed—

(a) conduct a review of the impact of the abolition of the lifetime allowance charge introduced by section 18 of this Act and other changes to tax-free pension allowances introduced by sections 19 to 23 of this Act, and

(b) lay before the House of Commons a report setting out recommendations arising from the review.

(2) The review must make recommendations on how the policies referred to in subsection (1)(a) could be replaced with an alternative approach that provided equivalent benefits only for NHS doctors.”—(*James Murray.*)

*This new clause requires the Chancellor to review the impact of the tax-free pension allowance changes and to recommend an alternative approach targeted at NHS doctors.*

*Brought up, and read the First time.*

*Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 218, Noes 294.*

# Division No. 214]

[4.9 pm

## AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami*)  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Ali, Rushanara  
 Ali, Tahir  
 Amesbury, Mike  
 Anderson, Fleur  
 Bardell, Hannah  
 Barker, Paula  
 Beckett, rh Margaret  
 Begum, Apsana  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Betts, Mr Clive  
 Black, Mhairi  
 Blackford, rh Ian  
 Blackman, Kirsty  
 Blake, Olivia  
 Blomfield, Paul  
 Bonnar, Steven  
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
 Brennan, Kevin  
 Brown, Alan  
 Brown, Ms Lyn  
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
 Bryant, Sir Chris  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Butler, Dawn  
 Byrne, Ian  
 Byrne, rh Liam  
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
 Cameron, Dr Lisa  
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
 Carden, Dan  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Chapman, Douglas  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Cherry, Joanna  
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami*)  
 Cooper, rh Yvette  
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
 Cowan, Ronnie  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Crawley, Angela  
 Creasy, Stella  
 Cryer, John  
 Cunningham, Alex  
 Daby, Janet  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 David, Wayne  
 Davies, Geraint  
 Davies-Jones, Alex  
 Day, Martyn  
 De Cordova, Marsha  
 Debbonaire, Thangam  
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin  
 Dodds, Anneliese  
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Duffield, Rosie  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Edwards, Jonathan  
 Efford, Clive  
 Elliott, Julie  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Fellows, Marion  
 Ferrier, Margaret  
 Fletcher, Colleen  
 Flynn, Stephen  
 Fovargue, Yvonne  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Foy, Mary Kelly  
 Gibson, Patricia  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Grant, Peter  
 Greenwood, Margaret  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Haigh, Louise  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hendrick, Sir Mark  
 Hendry, Drew  
 Hillier, Dame Meg  
 Hollern, Kate  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hosie, rh Stewart  
 Howarth, rh Sir George  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Johnson, Kim  
 Jones, Darren  
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Kane, Mike  
 Keeley, Barbara  
 Kendall, Liz  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Lake, Ben  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Chris  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lightwood, Simon  
 Linden, David  
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami*)  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 Lucas, Caroline  
 Lynch, Holly  
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
 Mahmood, Shabana  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mc Nally, John  
 McCabe, Steve  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McDonagh, Siobhain

McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
 McDonald, Stuart C.  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
 McGinn, Conor  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McMorris, Anna  
 Mearns, Ian  
 Miliband, rh Edward  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Monaghan, Carol  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Murray, Ian  
 Murray, James  
 Newlands, Gavin  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
 Norris, Alex  
 O'Hara, Brendan  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Oppong-Asare, Abena  
 Osborne, Kate  
 Oswald, Kirsten  
 Owatemi, Taiwo  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Mr Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Phillipson, Bridget  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Powell, Lucy  
 Qaisar, Ms Anum  
 Rayner, rh Angela  
 Rees, Christina  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reeves, rh Rachel  
 Reynolds, Jonathan  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
 Shah, Naz  
 Sharma, Mr Virendra  
 Sheppard, Tommy  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smith, Alyn  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Spellar, rh John  
 Stephens, Chris  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tarry, Sam  
 Thewliss, Alison  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Owen  
 Thomson, Richard  
 Thornberry, rh Emily  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Turner, Karl  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Webbe, Claudia  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Andrew  
 Western, Matt  
 Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Whitford, Dr Philippa  
 Whitley, Mick  
 Whittome, Nadia  
 Williams, Hywel  
 Wishart, Pete  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
 Liz Twist and  
 Gerald Jones

## NOES

Afolami, Bim  
 Afriyie, Adam  
 Aiken, Nickie  
 Aldous, Peter  
 Anderson, Lee  
 Anderson, Stuart  
 Ansell, Caroline  
 Argar, rh Edward  
 Atherton, Sarah  
 Atkins, Victoria  
 Bacon, Gareth  
 Bacon, Mr Richard  
 Badenoch, rh Kemi  
 Bailey, Shaun  
 Baillie, Siobhan  
 Baker, Duncan  
 Baldwin, Harriett  
 Barclay, rh Steve  
 Baron, Mr John  
 Baynes, Simon  
 Bell, Aaron  
 Beresford, Sir Paul  
 Bhatti, Saqib  
 Blunt, Crispin  
 Bottomley, Sir Peter  
 Bowie, Andrew  
 Brady, Sir Graham  
 Braverman, rh Suella  
 Brereton, Jack  
 Bridgen, Andrew  
 Brine, Steve  
 Bristow, Paul  
 Britcliffe, Sara  
 Browne, Anthony  
 Bruce, Fiona  
 Buchan, Felicity  
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert  
 Burghart, Alex  
 Butler, Rob  
 Cairns, rh Alun  
 Carter, Andy  
 Cartledge, James  
 Cash, Sir William  
 Cates, Miriam



Caulfield, Maria  
 Chalk, Alex  
 Chishti, Rehman  
 Chope, Sir Christopher  
 Churchill, Jo  
 Clark, rh Greg  
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon  
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan  
 Clarkson, Chris  
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse  
 Colburn, Elliot  
 Collins, Damian  
 Coutinho, Claire  
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey  
 Crabb, rh Stephen  
 Crosbie, Virginia  
 Crouch, Tracey  
 Daly, James  
 Davies, rh David T. C.  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Dr James  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davis, rh Mr David  
 Davison, Dehenna  
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline  
 Dines, Miss Sarah  
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
 Double, Steve  
 Doyle-Price, Jackie  
 Drax, Richard  
 Drummond, Mrs Flick  
 Duddridge, Sir James  
 Duguid, David  
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
 Dunne, rh Philip  
 Ellis, rh Michael  
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias  
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie  
 Eustice, rh George  
 Evans, Dr Luke  
 Evennett, rh Sir David  
 Everitt, Ben  
 Fabricant, Michael  
 Farris, Laura  
 Firth, Anna  
 Fletcher, Katherine  
 Fletcher, Mark  
 Fletcher, Nick  
 Ford, rh Vicki  
 Foster, Kevin  
 Fox, rh Dr Liam  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Frazer, rh Lucy  
 Freeman, George  
 Freer, Mike  
 French, Mr Louie  
 Fuller, Richard  
 Fysh, Mr Marcus  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat  
 Gibb, rh Nick  
 Gibson, Peter  
 Gideon, Jo  
 Glen, rh John  
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert  
 Gove, rh Michael  
 Graham, Richard  
 Grant, Mrs Helen  
 Gray, James  
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Green, Chris  
 Green, rh Damian  
 Griffith, Andrew  
 Grundy, James  
 Gullis, Jonathan  
 Halfon, rh Robert  
 Hall, Luke  
 Hammond, Stephen  
 Hancock, rh Matt  
 Hands, rh Greg  
 Harper, rh Mr Mark  
 Hart, Sally-Ann  
 Hart, rh Simon  
 Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver  
 Heappey, rh James  
 Henderson, Gordon  
 Henry, Darren  
 Higginbotham, Antony  
 Hinds, rh Damian  
 Holden, Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Hollobone, Mr Philip  
 Holloway, Adam  
 Howell, John  
 Howell, Paul  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hughes, Eddie  
 Hunt, Jane  
 Hunt, Tom  
 Jack, rh Mr Alister  
 Javid, rh Sajid  
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Jenkinson, Mark  
 Jenkyns, Andrea  
 Jenrick, rh Robert  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Johnson, Gareth  
 Johnston, David  
 Jones, Andrew  
 Jones, rh Mr David  
 Jones, Fay  
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus  
 Jupp, Simon  
 Kawczynski, Daniel  
 Kearns, Alicia  
 Knight, rh Sir Greg  
 Knight, Julian (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)  
 Kniveton, Kate  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lamont, John  
 Langan, Robert  
 Latham, Mrs Pauline  
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Levy, Ian  
 Lewer, Andrew  
 Loder, Chris  
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Longhi, Marco  
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Lord, Mr Jonathan  
 Loughton, Tim  
 Mackinlay, Craig  
 Mackrory, Cherilyn  
 Maclean, Rachel

Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Mangnall, Anthony  
 Mann, Scott  
 Marson, Julie  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 Maynard, Paul  
 McCartney, Karl  
 McVey, rh Esther  
 Menzies, Mark  
 Mercer, rh Johnny  
 Merriman, Huw  
 Metcalfe, Stephen  
 Millar, Robin  
 Milling, rh Amanda  
 Mills, Nigel  
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Damien  
 Mordaunt, rh Penny  
 Morris, Anne Marie  
 Morris, David  
 Morris, James  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Mortimer, Jill  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mumby-Croft, Holly  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Neill, Sir Robert  
 Nokes, rh Caroline  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Offord, Dr Matthew  
 Opperman, Guy  
 Pawsey, Mark  
 Penning, rh Sir Mike  
 Penrose, John  
 Percy, Andrew  
 Poulter, Dr Dan  
 Pow, Rebecca  
 Prentis, rh Victoria  
 Pritchard, rh Mark  
 Pursglove, Tom  
 Quin, rh Jeremy  
 Quince, Will  
 Randall, Tom  
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob  
 Richards, Nicola  
 Richardson, Angela  
 Roberts, Rob  
 Robertson, Mr Laurence  
 Robinson, Mary  
 Rowley, Lee  
 Sambrook, Gary  
 Saxby, Selaine  
 Seely, Bob

Shapps, rh Grant  
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok  
 Simmonds, David  
 Skidmore, rh Chris  
 Smith, rh Chloe  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, Henry  
 Smith, Royston  
 Solloway, Amanda  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, rh Mark  
 Stafford, Alexander  
 Stephenson, rh Andrew  
 Stevenson, Jane  
 Stevenson, John  
 Stewart, rh Bob  
 Stewart, Iain  
 Streeter, Sir Gary  
 Sturdy, Julian  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Syms, Sir Robert  
 Thomas, Derek  
 Throup, Maggie  
 Timpson, Edward  
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly  
 Tomlinson, Justin  
 Tomlinson, Michael  
 Tracey, Craig  
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie  
 Trott, Laura  
 Vara, rh Shailesh  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Vickers, Matt  
 Walker, Sir Charles  
 Walker, Mr Robin  
 Wallis, Dr Jamie  
 Warburton, David (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)  
 Warman, Matt  
 Watling, Giles  
 Webb, Suzanne (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
 Whittaker, rh Craig  
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
 Wiggin, Sir Bill  
 Wild, James  
 Williams, Craig  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wragg, Mr William  
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy  
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Jacob Young and**  
**Ruth Edwards**

*Question accordingly negated.*

## Clause 278

### CHARGE ON EXCEPTIONAL GENERATION RECEIPTS

#### **The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing):**

I am progressing as slowly as I can, in the hope that the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), who tabled amendment 8, or indeed one of her colleagues, might appear in the Chamber. I do not think I can go any slower, as I would have to chastise myself for wasting the Committee's time.

It must be said that I have given the Liberal Democrats as much time as possible to move amendment 8, so we will instead move directly to clause stand part.

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**The Chairman:** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 8, page 197, line 35, after “costs” insert “and relevant investment expenditure”.

*This amendment is linked to Amendment 9.*

Amendment 9, page 198, line 3, at end insert—

“Where the generating undertaking is a generator of renewable energy, determine the amount of relevant investment expenditure and also subtract that amount.”

*This amendment, together with Amendments 8, 10 and 11 would allow generators of renewable energy to offset money re-invested in renewable projects against the levy.*

Amendment 10, in clause 279, page 199, line 13, at end insert—

“a “generator of renewable energy” means—

- (a) a company, other than a member of a group, that operates, or
- (b) a group of companies that includes at least one member who operates a generating station generating electricity from a renewable source within the meaning of section 32M of the Energy Act 1989;

“relevant investment expenditure” means any profits of a generator of renewable energy that have been re-invested in renewable projects;”

*This amendment is linked to Amendment 9.*

Amendment 11, page 199, line 18, at end insert—

“a “renewable project” is any project involving the generation of electricity from a renewable source within the meaning of section 32M of the Energy Act 1989;”

*This amendment is linked to Amendment 9.*

Clauses 279 to 312 stand part.

New clause 11—*Assessment of the impact of the electricity generator levy—*

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of this Act coming into force, publish an assessment of the impact of the electricity generator levy on investment in renewable energy in the UK.

(2) The assessment must include a comparative assessment of the impact of the energy (oil and gas) profits levy and the investment allowance on overall investment in UK upstream petroleum production.

(3) The assessment must include an evaluation of the impact of the electricity generator levy on the United Kingdom’s ability to meet its climate commitments, including—

- (a) the target for 2050 set out in section 1 of the Climate Change Act 2008, and
- (b) the duty under section 4 of the Climate Change Act 2008 to ensure that the net UK carbon account for a budgetary period does not exceed the carbon budget.”

*This new clause would require the Government to conduct an assessment of the impact of the Electricity Generator Levy on investment in renewables and the delivery of the UK’s climate targets, including a comparative assessment of the impact of the Energy Profits Levy and the investment allowance, on investment in oil and gas production.*

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartledge):**

It is always a pleasure to appear so early and unexpectedly. This grouping is about the electricity generator levy. Before I address the specific clauses, here is a reminder of why we are debating this ultimately exceptional new tax.

We have to remember that Putin’s weaponisation of gas supplies to Europe has pushed energy prices to record levels. In 2022, UK wholesale energy prices rose to eight times their historical level. Despite recent falls, gas prices, which currently drive the market price for electricity, remain at twice their pre-pandemic level, which means that the price achieved by some electricity generators has risen considerably, driven by natural gas prices.

The Government have absorbed a substantial portion of the price increase through our generous support for households and businesses, which is why we have chosen to capture the windfall profits of oil and gas extraction with the energy profits levy. The Government are now introducing an electricity generator levy. The EGL is designed to capture only the exceptional receipts that electricity generators make, by taxing only the amounts above their normal return while preserving the incentive to invest in the capacity we need.

Clauses 278 to 280 detail the calculation of the levy, which will be applied at a 45% rate on revenues above a benchmark price for UK generation activities. The benchmark price of £75 per megawatt-hour is set approximately 1.5 times higher than the pre-crisis average. The benchmark price will be indexed to inflation from April 2024. To ensure that the levy applies only to large commercial operations with the capacity to administer the tax, the EGL includes an annual generation output threshold of 50 GWh, which is equivalent to approximately 15,000 domestic rooftop solar panels. A £10 million allowance provides further protection for smaller businesses from undue administrative burden and reduces the impact of the levy for those in scope. The levy applies from 1 January 2023 and will end on 31 March 2028, although colleagues will appreciate that the design of the levy is such that, should prices return to normal, no tax will be due. To ensure that the tax does not have unintended consequences, clause 279 excludes certain technologies.

Clauses 281 to 285 provide definitions for in-scope generation and the calculation of exceptional receipts. As I have outlined, the benchmark price has been set so that the EGL applies only to revenues from the sale of electricity at prices higher than the pre-crisis expectations of generators and investors. The levy applies to receipts from power sold on to the grid from wind, solar, biomass, nuclear and energy-from-waste technology. It applies to revenues that generators actually receive, taking account of contracts which might involve selling power over a longer period for a stable price. Certain types of transaction are excluded, such as “private wire” not sold via the grid, as well as power sold under contracts for difference with the Low Carbon Contracts Company, which is the Government’s flagship scheme supporting investment in renewables. Clauses 283 to 285 set out provisions for the recognition of exceptional costs related to the acquisition of fuel and from revenue-sharing arrangements. These provisions reflect the fact that for some generators fuel acquisition costs will have increased as a result of the energy crisis.

Clauses 286 to 300 deal with detailed arrangements for various structures of business operating in electricity generation. Owing to the size and complexity of projects involved, there are a number of common structures for generation undertakings. Those often involve large group companies, sometimes with significant minority shareholders. Others involve a number of businesses

[James Cartledge]

forming a joint venture. For example, a company specialising in offshore wind might go into business with a finance provider to deliver a large and complex project, sharing the revenues and risk between them. There are rules to treat these so-called “joint ventures” as stand-alone generation undertakings for the purposes of the EGL. These clauses ensure that businesses with in-scope revenues pay an appropriate share of EGL liability.

Clauses 301 to 305 provide rules for the payment of EGL. The EGL is a temporary measure that has been carefully designed to minimise the administrative burden on businesses. Firms within scope of the levy will pay it as part of their corporation tax return, albeit that EGL is a separate and new tax. The provisions for paying corporation tax are therefore applied here, including in respect of the supply of information, the collection of tax due and the right of appeal.

I turn briefly to the final clauses on the EGL, clauses 306 to 312. Those provisions ensure that the EGL applies to in-scope revenues from generation activities regardless of company type. Appropriate anti-avoidance rules are also included. Clause 309 details the interaction between EGL and corporation tax for accounting purposes, including the fact that EGL is not deductible from profits for corporation tax purposes.

In conclusion, these provisions ensure that, where electricity generators are realising exceptional receipts as a result of the current crisis, they make a fair and proportionate contribution to the support that the Government have provided to households and businesses. Importantly, the levy is designed to apply only to the excess portion of those revenues, in order to maintain the incentive to produce low-carbon electricity. This is in addition to the Government’s extensive support for investment in UK electricity generation. I will of course respond to proposed amendments, assuming that we hear about them, in the debate. In the meantime, I ask that clauses 278 to 312 stand part of the Bill.

**Abena Oppong-Asare** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak for the Opposition on the clauses relating to the electricity generator levy, a policy that was first announced in the autumn statement of 2022. Clause 278 introduces a new 45% charge on businesses that generate electricity in the UK. Specifically, it will be charged on exceptional earnings related to soaring energy prices. Extraordinary profits are defined in the Bill as receipts from wholesale electricity sold at an average price in excess of a benchmark price of £75 per megawatt-hour over an accounting period. Clause 280 specifies that this benchmark will be adjusted in line with the consumer prices index from April 2024. Companies liable for the levy are those that produce more than 50 GWh annually, generate electricity in the UK from nuclear, renewable or biomass sources, and are connected to a local distribution network or to the national grid. The levy will apply only to exceptional receipts exceeding £10 million.

4.30 pm

The clauses under discussion also set out in detail methods of calculation and procedures for joint ventures. I note that the Government have estimated that the levy will raise approximately £14 billion over the next five

years and will help to fund public services and support for households and businesses with increased energy bills.

Although Labour welcomes this move and will not oppose the inclusion of these clauses in the Finance Bill, I have to say that I have followed the Government’s developments in this area with dismay. Back in January 2022, Labour announced that it would introduce a windfall tax on oil and gas producers. We announced in August 2022 that we would cap energy bills. In the same month, we also announced that we would scrap extra charges for those on pre-payment meters. It is Labour that has been developing policies to tackle the energy crisis and support consumers and businesses that are suffering as a result of the Government’s inaction. Thirteen years of failed Conservative energy policy have resulted in higher bills, energy insecurity, and the UK losing the global race for jobs.

The British people are sick and tired of soaring energy bills and of our energy system being so exposed to the whims of dictators such as Putin. The British people want long-term solutions to cut bills for good, and it is Labour that is offering those solutions. The clauses for discussion today and the detail that the Government have given so far, still leave some questions unanswered. Will the Minister explain what measures the Government will take to ensure that this levy does not hamper investment in the renewables sector, given that low-carbon electricity generation is subject to the levy.

The Government’s botched windfall tax on oil and gas companies comes alongside an investment allowance, but this levy does not. Does that say anything about the level of importance that the Government assign to the renewables sector, the importance of investment in net zero, and the role that they see Britain playing in the green race? Given the importance of the renewables sector in reaching our net zero targets, I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is important that the measures in these clauses are monitored and evaluated. Will he elaborate a little as to how the electricity generator levy will be monitored and what cross-departmental work the Treasury will be doing alongside the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero in this area?

To conclude, the Opposition have real concerns about the Government’s energy policy. Although we support the electricity generator levy, we do have some serious questions for the Government. We need to see greater security detail on these to give the sector certainty and to ensure that these measures do not stifle investment in renewables.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am delighted to have the best part of an hour and a half to talk about the electricity generator levy—[*Interruption.*] No, not really.

I rise to speak in support of new clause 11, which would require the Government to conduct an assessment of the impact of the electricity generator levy on investment in renewable energy in the UK, exactly picking up on the point that was made by the Official Opposition just a moment ago.

In his speech in the spring Budget, just one month ago, the Chancellor proudly declared:

“We are world leaders in renewable energy”.—[*Official Report*, 15 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 840.]



Since then, the Government have published their latest energy security plan, which points to “low-cost renewables” as being “central” to their goal of Britain having among the cheapest wholesale electricity prices in Europe. The strategy is absolutely right in that regard; the International Energy Agency’s “World Energy Outlook” makes clear that, in the context of the energy price crisis, countries with a higher share of renewables also had lower electricity prices. In the words of the IEA’s executive director, Dr Fatih Birol:

“The environmental case for clean energy needed no reinforcement, but the economic arguments in favour of cost-competitive and affordable clean technologies are now stronger—and so too is the energy security case.”

In light of all that, it seems extremely perverse—to put it mildly—that, rather than the Government doing everything they can to unleash our abundant renewables, their current policy is stifling the investment we desperately need. A recent report by Energy UK warns that the investment climate for renewables has deteriorated significantly in recent months due to a combination of factors, including what it describes as “poorly designed windfall taxes. The report also states that, without urgent action to address concerns and prevent investment from moving elsewhere, the UK risks losing out on £62 billion-worth of investment this decade, which could also lead to a shortfall of 54 GW of potential solar and wind capacity, which would be enough to power every single UK home.

RenewableUK has criticised the Government for continuing to develop policies that,

“increase uncertainty and dampen investment”,

with the electricity generator levy in particular damaging investor confidence and increasing costs. While it is right that companies are taxed fairly on their excess profits, hampering our vital renewable energy industry when an expansion is essential to deliver on our climate targets is reckless.

The Government’s own plans include increasing our offshore capacity by four times over current levels by 2030 and solar by five times by 2035. My amendment would therefore also require an assessment to cover the impact of the electricity generator levy on the delivery of those UK climate targets, including net zero by 2050, and on our legally binding carbon budgets.

Most egregious of the complaints laid at the door of the EGL is that it is more punitive than the tax and relief regime for oil and gas companies. The sector has highlighted three key differences between the regimes. First, the electricity generator levy is a tax on revenue rather than overall profit, as with the energy profits levy, which results in an above-the-line cost of doing business rather than a reduction in profit.

Secondly, the electricity generator levy is not deductible from corporation tax, whereas the energy profits levy is an extension of an existing scheme. That leads to higher effective tax rates for electricity generators than is currently the case for oil and gas companies.

Thirdly and most importantly, oil and gas companies are eligible for vast and frankly obscene subsidies through the investment allowance that renewables do not have access to. If we add to all that the decarbonisation allowance, which means that the taxpayer is paying oil and gas companies to decarbonise—even though, in their

own words, the companies already have more cash than they know what to do with, thanks to their vast windfall profits—it seems to me that the Government’s approach is misguided.

The approach means that, in the case of a decarbonisation allowance, companies are eligible for more tax relief if they are putting a wind turbine on an oil platform than if they are installing a wind turbine to feed into the grid. Put simply, we should be incentivising investment in renewables to power homes, not rigs. The amount of power it takes to drill for oil and gas is comparable to the total amount of power generated by offshore wind, or enough power to generate electricity for every house in Wales.

That should be paid for by the very oil and gas companies that are reaping such huge profits, not by the taxpayer. Surely the Chancellor and Treasury team can see that, when we need to urgently get off fossil fuels to secure a liveable future, it is madness to subsidise oil and gas extraction at all, let alone at the expense of renewable energy, as the Government are doing.

My amendment would require a comparative assessment of the impact of the energy profits levy, including the investment allowance, on investment in oil and gas production versus the regime the Government are proposing for renewables. Renewable energy companies have rightly called for a level playing field with oil and gas, but, in the face of an escalating climate emergency, we should be going further than that and responding to the ambition of other countries. Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act, for example, offers \$216 billion-worth of tax credits to companies investing in clean energy and transport.

Finally, I record my support for the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), which would allow generators of renewable energy to offset money reinvested in renewable projects against the levy. Yet failing that, surely the Chancellor cannot object simply to having, at the very least, clarity on the impact of this policy. That is exactly what my new clause would do, and I very much hope that the Treasury team will consider it.

The Government are fond of pointing to the fact that almost 40% of our electricity is now generated from renewables, but if we are to fully decarbonise our electricity system, we need the right incentives, a supportive policy framework, an improved grid fit for the 21st century, and a planning system that does not hold renewables back. We simply cannot rely on what the Chancellor called a “clean energy miracle”. I very much hope that the Government will take new clause 11 seriously.

**James Cartledge:** It is a pleasure to respond to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). I hope that she will not take it as a lack of respect if I say that it is probably a good thing that she did not go for the full one-and-a-half hours, but she made important points to which I will respond. Both she and the Labour Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), asked about the impact on investment.

New clause 11, in the name of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion, specifically proposes that the Government publish within six months an assessment of the impact of the EGL on investment in renewables,

[James Cartlidge]

and a comparison with the impact of the energy profits levy. First, I am bound to say, in the immortal words of the Treasury, that we keep all policies under review. We will, in the course of normal tax policymaking, return to make an assessment of the EGL's impact at a suitable time. On investment specifically, we have to appreciate that this country has led the way in securing investment in renewables. Bloomberg New Energy Finance data shows that the UK has secured nearly £200 billion of public and private investment into low-carbon industries since 2010. Generators have received to date almost £6 billion in price support from the contracts for difference scheme for low-carbon electricity generation. CfDs have contracted a total of 26 GW of low-carbon generation, including around 20 GW of offshore wind. I hope that we are all proud of the result, which is that we as a country now have the largest array of offshore wind in Europe. Going forward, we have committed £160 million for the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme to support floating offshore wind, and up to £20 billion for early deployment of carbon capture, usage and storage.

Our record to date is also crucial. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion spoke about the Inflation Reduction Act and the steps being taken in the US. Of course, that is important, and we watch what is happening there very carefully, but it is worth reflecting on the fact that, as she quite rightly said, about 40% of our electricity came from renewables last year, while in the US that figure was about 20%.

There are two key things about the EGL and investment. First, we have to remember that the levy does not apply to the contracts for difference, which have been hugely successful in securing renewable energy investment and will cover the mainstay of future deployment in this country in relation to renewables. Secondly, the threshold price of £75 per megawatt-hour is exceptional; it is about 50% higher than the average over the past decade. The extraordinary energy prices, driven by Putin's invasion of Ukraine, would not have been foreseen by investors when they committed capital to the building of wind and solar farms—they would not have foreseen such a huge increase.

The hon. Lady, whom I respect, has made her key point about oil and gas consistently; in many ways, the Labour party's criticism of our investment allowance, which it calls a loophole, is the same point. We differ in our view. In the world today, we face a most profound energy crisis. It is a strategic energy crisis. We look at Russia, which has weaponised energy, and we ask ourselves: "Is it the right moment to be turning our back on our own domestic supply of oil and gas?" We need it. Of course, we are on the path to net zero—this country has cut its emissions more than any other nation in the G7; we are making that difference—but the journey is a long one. In that time, we will need oil and gas, which make up about three quarters of our energy demand when all transport is included. Unless the hon. Lady and the Labour party think that we should stop using oil and gas tomorrow, what they are really arguing for is simply to use more imported oil and gas.

**Caroline Lucas:** I am so fed up with this argument from the Government, because nobody is talking about turning off oil and gas tomorrow. We are talking about

whether the world can sustain more new oil and gas, particularly from a country such as the UK, which is so blessed with alternatives. We were also one of the first countries to industrialise, so we have a greater responsibility to take a real lead on this. That is why the Government should invest in alternatives, renewables and energy efficiency, and listen to the IEA, which says that there is no space for new oil and gas.

**James Cartlidge:** As I have said, I respect the hon. Lady's position, but the point is that if we were to have no further investment, the North Sea Transition Authority estimates that we would lose about 1.5 billion barrels-worth of output. There is no realistic estimate that we would not use an equivalent amount. In other words, we would simply import it, and if we import gas, that means 50% more emissions. Most importantly—and I feel very strongly about this—we would undermine our energy security. Even yesterday, representatives of the Kremlin were still talking about weaponising energy. If we have learned one thing, surely it is that we have to be realistic and pragmatic. We want to support the UK economy. Above all, we have a balanced approach. We are on the journey to net zero. We have cut our emissions more than any other country in the G7, and we continue to back renewables.

**Caroline Lucas:** Will the Minister give way?

**James Cartlidge:** I will take one final point and then wrap up.

4.45 pm

**Caroline Lucas:** The Minister is very generous in giving way again. I simply want to make the very obvious point that simply because oil and gas are extracted from the North sea, there is no guarantee that they will be used by people in the UK. They get sold on global markets at the highest price, so the argument that this is the best way to reach energy security is flawed. The best way to reach energy security is through introducing a mass energy efficiency and home insulation upgrade system, which the Government have not done; through more on electrification of transport, which they have not done; and through investing in renewables, which they are not doing enough of, as we have been saying this afternoon.

**James Cartlidge:** This is entirely true, but of course selling on the international market means that, through our balance of trade, we have an economy where we can afford to import. It is about comparative advantage.

As I have described, the Government are providing extensive support for renewables in order to decarbonise our power system and meet our ambitious net zero commitments. The EGL has been carefully designed with those objectives in mind. I therefore urge the Committee to reject the amendments and to agree that clauses 278 to 312 stand part of the Bill.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 278 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 279 to 312 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 27

#### POWER TO CLARIFY TAX TREATMENT OF DEVOLVED SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing):** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clause 47 stand part.

Amendment 25, in clause 48, page 39, line 32, at end insert—

“(aa) section (exemption: Scotch Whisky),”.

*This is a paving amendment for NC9, which would exempt Scotch Whisky from the increase in duty on spirits.*

Clause 48 stand part.

Amendment 7, in schedule 7, page 334, line 18, leave out “£31.64” and insert “£28.74”.

That schedule 7 be the Seventh schedule to the Bill.

Clause 50 stand part.

That schedule 8 be the Eighth schedule to the Bill.

Clauses 51 to 54 stand part.

That schedule 9 be the Ninth schedule to the Bill.

Clauses 55 to 60 stand part.

New clause 9—*Exemption: Scotch Whisky*—

“(1) The rate of duty on spirits shown in Schedule 7 shall not apply in respect of Scotch Whisky.

(2) The rate of duty in respect of Scotch Whisky shall continue to be the rate that applied before this Act came into force.

(3) For the purposes of this section, “Scotch Whisky” has the meaning given in regulation 3 of the Scotch Whisky Regulations 2009 (S.I. 2009, No. 2890).”

*This new clause would exempt Scotch Whisky, as defined in the Scotch Whisky Regulations 2009, from the increase in duty on spirits*

**James Cartlidge:** We have had pensions and energy, and we conclude with alcohol, and of course one other minor matter is covered. We are specifically debating clauses 27, 47, 48 and 50 to 60, and schedules 7 to 9, which cover powers to clarify the tax treatment of devolved social security benefits—that is the measure not relating to alcohol—as well as the change to alcohol duty and the introduction of two new reliefs for alcohol duty.

Clause 27 introduces a new power to enable the tax treatment of new payments or new top-up welfare payments introduced by the devolved Administrations to be confirmed as social security income by statutory instrument. The changes made by clause 27 will allow the UK Government to confirm the tax treatment of new payments or new top-up payments introduced by the devolved Administrations within the tax year, rather than their being subject to the UK parliamentary timetable.

I will now turn to the main issue of alcohol duty, and specifically clauses 47 and 48, which set out the charging of alcohol duty, and schedule 7. In line with our plan to manage the UK economy responsibly, we are reverting to the standard approach of uprating the previously published reformed rates and structures by the retail price index, while increasing the value of draught relief to ensure that the duty on an average pint of beer or lower-strength cider served on tap in a pub does not increase. Most importantly, these clauses introduce the Government’s historic alcohol duty reforms: the biggest

overhaul of the alcohol duty system in over 140 years, made possible by our departure from the European Union.

The current alcohol duty system is complex and outdated. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that our system of alcohol taxation is “a mess”; the Institute of Economic Affairs has said that it “defies common sense”; and the World Health Organisation has said that countries such as the UK that follow the EU alcohol rules are

“unable to implement tax systems that are optimal from the perspective of public health.”

As such, at Budget 2020, the Government announced that they would take forward a review of alcohol duty. This legislation is the culmination of that review, and makes changes to the overall duty structure for alcohol. It moves us from individual, product-specific duties and bands to a single duty on all alcoholic products and a standardised series of tax bands based on alcoholic strength.

The clauses we are debating today repeal and replace, with variations, the Alcoholic Liquor Duties Act 1979 and sections 4 and 5 of the Finance Act 1995. Specifically, clause 47 provides for alcohol duty to be charged on alcoholic products, clause 48 explains where the rates of alcohol duty can be found—that is, in schedule 7—and schedule 7 itself provides the standard or full rates of alcohol duty to be applied to alcoholic products. This radical simplification of the alcohol duty system reduces the number of duty bands from 15 to six, and has only been made possible since leaving the EU. Now, thanks to the Windsor framework, I can confirm that these reforms can now also be implemented in Northern Ireland. The new alcohol duty structures, rates and reliefs will take effect from 1 August this year, which brings me to the new reliefs.

**Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con):** As a member of the Campaign for Real Ale, may I ask the Minister whether that means beer that is not very strong will come down in price?

**James Cartlidge:** That is an excellent question from my right hon. Friend. As he will appreciate, there is obviously a difference between the duty and the price—we control the duty. As I am about to explain, we are doing everything possible, and I hope he will be interested, because I know that members of CAMRA have great fondness and support for our brilliant pubs up and down the country.

The first of the two new reliefs, which is our new draught relief, applies to alcoholic products under 8.5% alcohol by volume intended to be sold on draught. This draught relief is historic, because as Members will remember, in the EU, we had a thing called the EU structures directive. Under that directive, as a country, we could of course vary our alcohol duty—we could increase it, decrease it or whatever—but what we could not do was charge differential duty between the on trade, meaning pubs, and the off trade, meaning supermarkets, retail and so on. For the first time, we will have that differential draught relief, and I am pleased to confirm that in the Budget, we brought forward two very important measures in relation to that relief. It had been anticipated that we would set the draught relief at 5%, but the Chancellor confirmed in the Budget that it would be



[James Cartlidge]

increased to 9.2%. I can therefore confirm to my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) that as a result of that increase in the draught relief, when the new system comes in this August, the duty on the average pint of beer or lower-strength cider that people buy in pubs will still be frozen.

More importantly, we have issued our Brexit pubs guarantee. As I say, this change would not have been possible in the EU, and we are using this opportunity to send a very powerful message to our pubs: to guarantee that from August onwards, the duty on a pint in a pub will always be lower than the duty on the equivalent in a supermarket.

**Mark Jenkinson** (Workington) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving way. I just wondered whether an impact assessment was done on the benefits of such a change to the on trade.

**James Cartlidge:** My hon. Friend asks an excellent question, and I will be more than happy to write to him setting out more detail on the benefits, but I hope he agrees that the key point is this: we in this House all know that pubs suffered terribly in the pandemic, if we are honest. We literally legislated to close them, obviously for a very good reason—to support public health and stop the spread of that terrible disease—but the fact is that doing so was costly to pubs, so we had to support them. In addition, since then they have seen their energy bills surge on the back of the invasion of Ukraine. We want to do what we can to support them.

**Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Pubs are so important in our communities. My constituents in Bexleyheath and Crayford find their pubs pivotal to the social environment. We have a very good micropub in Crayford, the Penny Farthing, which I occasionally go to at lunchtime. My hon. Friend makes an important point. We need these pubs. They are centre stage for our local communities. They do a good social job, and also they are a safe place for people to go to. What the Government are doing is commendable.

**James Cartlidge:** We have had strong support from public health groups for the differential duty, because the evidence shows that is healthier to drink in a social environment than privately. That is another significant benefit.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) *rose—*

**James Cartlidge:** This is a popular area of the debate. I give way.

**Mr Carmichael:** I think the Minister has a sound case in relation to what the Government have done on beer duty. What is less clear, however, is why they have chosen to treat spirits so differently. Spirits are also an important part of the on trade. What will the impact be on the spirits trade from the differential that the Minister has now baked into the duty system?

**James Cartlidge:** There are spirits that will benefit from the differential—not spirits served from what I think are called optics, but spirits served on tap. There are mixers served on tap that will benefit from a more

generous differential duty. On spirits, I am more than happy to set out further detail when I respond to the relevant amendments, because I think they are specifically focused on Scotch whisky, and I understand the concerns there.

I just want to finish my point on our Brexit pubs guarantee. Just to underline what we are doing, we are giving pubs a new permanent competitive advantage. We are levelling the playing field against supermarkets. Following the difficult times that pubs have had with the pandemic and higher energy costs, that hopefully gives them a new narrative for their communities with more positive times to look forward to ahead. That is what we want for our pubs. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett) said, they are so important for our communities and our economy. We continue to do everything possible to back the great British pub.

**Bob Stewart:** It seems that we will finish early tonight, in which case I am going straight to the Jolly Woodman in my constituency. I hope I will be able to tell it that the price of its beer will come down. Is there any possibility that there can be a differentiation to encourage real ale, speaking as a member of the Campaign for Real Ale?

**James Cartlidge:** I hope my right hon. Friend is welcomed with open arms in the Jolly Woodman, having given it fulsome promotion. I might make do with Strangers Bar downstairs. Real ales will benefit from the differential duty, particularly those served on tap. There are lower rates for those with lower alcohol by volume, which will hopefully encourage innovation. I hope that will support our craft brewers, not least with the second relief, which replaces and extends small brewers relief with a small producer relief applying to alcoholic products under 8.5% ABV produced by those making less than 4,500 hectolitres of alcohol per year. That will be precisely those sorts of craft brewers.

Clauses 50 to 53 introduce the new draught relief and clauses 54 to 60 provide for the new small producer relief. Taking each clause in turn quickly—I will canter through them—clause 50 explains that alcohol duty is charged on qualifying draught products at the reduced rates shown in schedule 8. Clause 51 sets out the eligibility criteria for draught relief. Clause 52 defines repackaging for the purposes of draught relief and introduces a penalty for repackaging that is not authorised. Clause 53 provides assessment and penalty consequences for a person repackaging qualifying draught products in a way not allowed under clause 52. Clause 54 provides for discounted rates to be charged on all small producer alcoholic products and explains how the discounted rate is calculated. Clause 55 defines small producer alcoholic products.

Clause 56 introduces the criteria for determining whether premises used to produce alcoholic products are small production premises. Clause 57 explains the alcohol production amount used for the purposes of determining eligibility for the duty discount and calculating the duty discount for small producer alcoholic products. Clause 58 sets out the circumstances, other than not meeting the eligibility conditions, in which alcoholic products are not small producer alcoholic products. I hope hon. Members are all following. Clause 59 and schedule 9 set out how to calculate the duty discount

used to determine the discounted rate for small producer alcoholic products, and clause 60 allows the commissioners to assess alcohol duty that is due in circumstances where the small producer rate has not been applied correctly. The remaining clauses concerning alcohol duty will be debated in the Public Bill Committee.

5 pm

Each of the clauses I have discussed will help us to reform the tax system. On devolved social security benefits, clause 27 will provide the Government with the flexibility to confirm the tax treatment within the tax year, rather than be subject to the UK parliamentary timetable. The alcohol duty clauses replace the existing nonsensical alcohol duty system, initially created by a complex web of EU law, with a more consistent, simplified approach to taxing alcohol according to its strength. This will help to better meet our public health objectives and is in line with this Government's commitment to tax simplification. We are also introducing two new reliefs to help businesses grow and thrive, not least to support our precious pubs.

**Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD):** The Minister has talked about the Government's ambition to simplify the tax system, but he will be aware that the most adversely affected businesses are the port and sherry traders, which will feel the force of a full £20 million increase, despite fortified wine being only 3% of the total wine trade. They have asked for this process to be simplified further by taxing fortified wine at the midpoint of 17.5% ABV. Is that something the Government might still consider?

**James Cartledge:** It is a fair point from the hon. Lady. I do think this is a significant simplification. We are moving from 15 bands to six. I would love it to be 15 to one, but unfortunately "Fifteen to One" is going to remain the name of a quiz programme. If she looks carefully at the new rates—I am more than happy to share a copy of the bands with her—she will see that it is a significant simplification. It provides many benefits to the wine trade, particularly with our differential duty and the small producers relief.

To conclude, I will be happy to respond to the amendments on Scotch whisky at the end, but in the meantime I commend to the Committee clauses 27, 47, 48 and 50 to 60, and schedules 7 to 9.

**The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call Alistair Carmichael.

**Mr Carmichael:** Thank you, Dame Eleanor. It is perhaps not a novelty to see you back in the Chair, but it is still a great pleasure none the less. I am delighted to serve with you in control.

I rise to speak to amendment 7, which stands in my name and those of my hon. Friends. In doing so, I should indicate at this stage that it is my intention to divide the Committee and establish opinion on it. The effect of amendment 7 would be to freeze the level of duty on the production of spirits. The Minister kept saying these are Scotch whisky amendments. He maybe knows me too well, but I would readily concede that many other spirits will be affected by this, and they are just as important. I think the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) will speak to her amendments, which do relate specifically to Scotch whisky, but I have

had discussions with her, and she tells me that SNP Members are in fact minded to support our amendment, instead of pursuing their own. She will doubtless speak for herself, as she always does, later in the debate.

When we consider that 70% of the gin produced in this country is, in fact, produced in Scotland—my constituency has no fewer than four gin distilleries, and we find that situation replicated across Scotland—the impact of rises in duty are not just going to be felt by areas that produce Scotch whisky. We have also seen a number of distilleries appearing in recent times—a much smaller number, but it is significant none the less—producing rum. So it is important that we have a coherent strategy for the excise duty on these products. The difficulty I have with what I hear from the Treasury Minister is that it is difficult to discern exactly what the Government are trying to achieve in this Budget.

Scotch whisky in particular is very important to the UK as part of our manufacturing base. Indeed, it is an enormously important part of our export portfolio. It is also critical for many of the most economically fragile communities that can be found around the highlands and islands of Scotland. I was born and brought up on Islay, and people will know the importance of the whisky industry, and in recent years the growth of whisky tourism to that economy. In my constituency we have Highland Park and Scapa. Occasionally other interests are declared, but we still have only two producing distilleries. They are very important to our local community, not just in relation to the jobs they provide directly, but because of the spin-offs—the visitor centre, the merchandising, and the visitors that those distilleries bring to the community. Whisky tourism is enormously important, and it is it enormously important that the whisky industry has confidence that the Government are on their side. I am afraid that the signals we have seen from this Government in recent months have been, if I am to be kind to them, mixed at best.

The Chancellor was right to say in December that there would be a freeze on duty. We welcomed that, as I am sure did others. Three months later, to then turn around and whack a duty increase on spirits in the region of something just north of 10%, makes us wonder what the Government are trying to achieve. When I was Secretary of State for Scotland, along with Danny Alexander, who was Chief Secretary to the Treasury, we argued successfully for a 2% duty cut. In 2015, the Red Book of the day said that that would bring with it a reduction in the amount of duty received and revenue brought in, but in point of fact we brought in more revenue with a lower level of duty than had been the case before it was cut.

If we are trying to do something that will bring in more money to the Treasury, surely a duty freeze, at the very least, should be on offer. Indeed, Treasury data illustrates the point well, because a recent history of cuts and duty freezes has actually had a beneficial effect on revenue brought in. For some reason, we now seem determined to introduce a duty increase that will have an inflationary impact, and for some of the most economically fragile communities in the country that will have the effect of stymying growth.

The position laid out by the Minister on sales of beer was exceptionally interesting. He will be aware that spirits account for one third of the serves of alcohol consumed in this country, but less than one fifth of the

[Mr Carmichael]

units consumed. On the other hand, beer has 60% of the units consumed but accounts for less than 50% of the serves. It is clear that the effect of this measure will be inflationary and have a detrimental effect on the economic growth that we are all supposed to be pursuing.

The Chief Medical Officer tells us that we should safely consume 14 units per week—I think I have read this correctly—per week. If we are to consume 14 units of cider, we pay £1.13 in tax. If we consume 14 units of wine, we pay £3.36 in tax. But if we consume 14 units of spirits, we pay £4.06 in tax. To put it another way, Scotch whisky, and spirits as a whole, are taxed 256% higher than cider, and 16% higher than wine.

It was presumably for that reason that the Secretary of State for Scotland is reported in *The Scotsman* as having argued against it. This was not some source quoted as saying that, but the Secretary of State himself. He said that he was disappointed the Chancellor acted in the way he did. I think we can all very much share the disappointment of the Secretary of State for Scotland. For the avoidance of doubt, I did let him know that I would be referring to him in the course of my speech. Our real disappointment, however, is that, having publicly disagreed with the Government on the matter, I have a strong suspicion that if it is put to a Division he will be in the other Lobby. It is all very well to wring your hands, but if, when the moment comes and the Division bells ring, you are not prepared to do what you know is right for such an important industry in Scotland in so many of our communities, then I feel we are, as politicians, failing in our duty to our constituents and those whom we seek to serve.

We heard a lot from the Minister about the harmonisation of duties, but the House has heard the truth of the matter. The position in relation to on-sales consumption of beer will widen the gap. It simply makes no sense. If the Minister can answer no other question when he comes to respond, can he answer this: what strategy are the Government seeking to deliver by bringing forward a duty increase in excess of 10%? I do not see it. It flies in the face of the Treasury's own data and contradicts it. It is difficult to understand what the purpose of it is, other than simply an attitude that says, "Well, you've had it good for a few years now, so we're going to treat you differently and it's time for you to take some of the pain." An industry as important as the production of spirits deserves rather better consideration from the Treasury.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I rise in support of my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who speaks for my constituents as much as he does his own.

I want to make two simple points. First, the distilleries in my constituency—I could name them all, but I have done that before in this place—are part and parcel of each community in which they are based, and they are important to the people in those communities. They see them as their own. As my right hon. Friend said, the jobs they provide in some of the most sparsely populated and economically fragile parts of Scotland are absolutely crucial. Inver House, a company that owns two distilleries in my constituency, Balblair in Edderton and Old Pulteney

in Wick, sponsors the Wick Gala each year. As something that epitomises the culture of Caithness, I would honestly recommend that all right hon. and hon. Members come to Wick and see the Wick Gala—it is something they will not forget. That company is a part of it and makes it happen, which is incredibly important. In my own home town of Tain, Glenmorangie, now owned by the French company Louis Vuitton, has for a number of years pretty well paid for the Tain highland games. Again, I say to Members: come see them and enjoy. So the distilleries are a part of the community and what they do is crucial for the community. It is about rural jobs in sparse areas.

The second point I want to make to those on the Treasury Bench is about levelling up. Those are not the words I would have chosen, but it is a good concept to take parts of the UK that have lost out in the race and bring them up—giving them a leg up—to be equal to the richer parts of the UK. By definition, the areas where there are distilleries are very often some of the more hard-up parts of the Scottish highlands and of Scotland. If Government Members want to go about levelling up, they need to get into the parts of Britain that need help.

**Mr Carmichael:** As my hon. Friend says, these are often some of the more hard-up areas of the country, but the truth of the matter is that down the years they have contributed enormously to the GDP of this country and they have the potential to do more. We are not looking for any special treatment. We are not looking for any favours or handouts. All we are looking for is a fair crack of the whip.

**Jamie Stone:** That is an extremely valuable point. I would bolt on to it that we have new distilleries starting up. In John O'Groats, there is a brand new one called 8 Doors. These enterprising local Caithness people have done it off their own bat. To get tourists to go to John O'Groats, we have 8 Doors, which has done it along the coast of Caithness. We have Wolfstone—I think I have that right.

**Mr Carmichael:** Wolfburn.

5.15 pm

**Jamie Stone:** You're dead right—I stand corrected by my right hon. Friend. Tourists love it and it contributes a huge amount to the Exchequer. It matters passionately to my constituents and to me. If I do nothing else for my constituency, I will try to boost the economy in every way I can because every job counts. I rest my comments with that.

**Kirsty Blackman:** I fear that, if I was to talk about the names of all the distilleries in my constituency, the debate would be much shorter than if the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) were to do so. In fact, I have much more of a tendency to drink gin than whisky, although other spirits are available.

It was interesting to hear the words "economically fragile". That is an incredibly good point. Rural depopulation is a real issue. The Scottish Government are doing what we can to ensure that it does not continue, but if the UK Government keep working against what we are doing to encourage people to live and stay in our rural communities, we will have a real problem. That is not a small thing.



We tabled our amendments because we specifically wanted the word “whisky” on the Order Paper and we wanted to make the case in relation to whisky. However, I will not be pushing our amendments to a vote, and will support that of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) because I concede that his is better. I am always happy to do that in such situations.

The reality is that Scotch whisky is 4.9% of the Scottish economy. Some £8.1 billion can be attributed to the sale of alcohol, around 60% of which comes from whisky exports. The numbers stated by the right hon. Member about how the differential rates work and how much people are taxed on those 14 units were incredibly interesting. The Government’s purpose is to make money from some of the alcohol measures, but there is also a population behaviour change intention behind what they do with tax on spirits and alcohol, particularly the allowance on draught beer. They have different taxes to encourage a change of behaviour, or differential behaviour in people. The Government may intend to use this tax to shift some of the population, but they are actually discouraging people from buying the very spirits that a huge amount of our livelihoods relies on. It is the case that 90% of spirits in the UK are produced in Scotland. The Government’s measures therefore have a massive negative impact on Scotland.

The average price of a bottle of Scotch whisky is £15.22 at a supermarket in Scotland. Following the new alcohol duty plus the VAT, £11.40 of that £15.22 will go to the Treasury. That is such a significant amount, and does not compare with other alcohol. I appreciate what the Government are trying to do on draught, and it is important that they have laid out their rationale for doing so—that was very helpful—but this is incredibly unfair and risks damaging those economically fragile areas, particularly in rural Scotland. Those areas have already suffered as a result of Brexit, with people’s reduced ability to freely move here.

I want to raise a small flag with the Minister in relation to the Public Bill Committee. When we come to that stage, I will be raising questions around clause 87, which is on post-duty point dilution of alcoholic products. I know there have already been problems in relation to that, so when we come to that stage of the Committee, I would appreciate Ministers being absolutely clear about their reasons for the changes in clause 87. If they are able to lay out those reasons clearly, that will reduce the number of questions I am likely to ask.

In summary, we support the amendment proposed by Liberal Democrat Members. We agree with the Scotch Whisky Association and think that the increase in duty is unfair and hits spirits, particularly Scotch whisky, unfairly. We want to stand up for our constituents, our constituencies, rural Scotland and Scotland as a whole in supporting the amendment.

**Abena Oppong-Asare:** I rise to speak, on behalf of the Opposition, to the clauses that are related to the tax treatment of devolved social security benefits and the new alcohol duty regime.

I will address clause 27 briefly. Clause 27 introduces a new power to enable the tax treatment of new or new top-up welfare payments, introduced by devolved Administrations, to be confirmed as social security income through secondary legislation. That will allow

the UK Government to confirm the tax treatment of new or new top-up payments within the new tax year rather than be subject to the UK parliamentary timetable.

I note that the income tax treatment of social security benefit is currently legislated for in part 10 of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003, and that this clause will introduce a new power to add new benefits to the table of taxable benefits included in the Act. I can see that the clause is largely administrative. Therefore, the Opposition do not take issue with the clause and will support it.

I will now move on to the clauses concerning the new alcohol duty regime. The Bill contains 77 clauses establishing a new structure for alcohol duty, but we will discuss just some of those today, before moving to consider the remainder in Public Bill Committee.

Labour agreed with the principles behind the alcohol duty review. We want to see the alcohol duty system made simpler and more consistent. We recognise that there is a balance to be struck between supporting businesses and consumers, protecting public health, and maintaining a source of revenue for the Exchequer. We have consistently raised concerns about the Government’s rushed and confused messaging on this area.

Before I come to the clauses and schedules, I want to paint a brief picture of the context behind the changes. Back in October 2020, the Government announced a call for evidence, seeking views on how the alcohol duty system could be reformed. At the time, they said this would make the system

“simpler, more economically rational and less administratively burdensome on businesses and HMRC.”

However, what we have seen since then is indecision, U-turns and delays.

Businesses and consumers had to wait until September 2022 for the Government’s response to the alcohol duty consultation. What ensued was chaos. In the shambolic mini-Budget that crushed the British economy, the then Chancellor announced a freeze on alcohol duty that was due to come into force in February 2023, but then the new Chancellor scrapped the freeze in October’s autumn statement. Fast forward to December, and I was back standing at the Dispatch Box responding to another Government’s U-turn, that time deciding that the freeze was back in place until August 2023.

The Government have now confirmed that the freeze will end in August and a new system of alcohol duty will be put in place. Alcohol duty rates will be adjusted in line with inflation and moved to a system that links duty rates to alcohol by volume. Clause 47 sets out the new regime, while clause 48 and schedule 7 specify the new adjusted rates of alcohol duty for different drinks. I note that some sectors are concerned about these changes—particularly wine producers and Scottish whisky producers, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) highlighted.

The reason the Tories have hit people and businesses with stealth taxes is that they have failed to get the growth that our country needs and have failed to get a grip on inflation. That is what makes the boasts of halving inflation so hollow. Prices are already soaring, hitting industries with steep tax rises.

**Mark Jenkinson:** Can the hon. Lady set out in detail the Opposition’s plans for alcohol duty and how they might differ from the Government’s plans?

**Abena Oppong-Asare:** As I mentioned, we have consistently raised concerns about the Government's U-turns on the issue. We have scrutinised them and put forward recommendations, which the hon. Member will hear us talk about in further detail in the Public Bill Committee.

It is important that today the Minister lays out what measures the Government will take to support the sectors most affected by the duty changes, as well as what consideration the Treasury has given to the potentially inflationary impact of the increases. The explanatory notes to the Bill state:

"The commencement of changes to approvals will be announced at a later date."

Perhaps the Minister could give some certainty to businesses by fleshing out some further detail today.

Clause 50 and schedule 8 set out measures for a new draught relief that will provide a reduced rate of duty on qualifying draught products. Clause 51 sets out the requirement that qualifying draught products be under 8.5% ABV and be packaged in containers that hold at least 20 litres and are designed to connect to a dispensing system. Clause 52 sets out the rules on the repackaging of qualifying draught products. Decanting from 20-litre containers into smaller containers will be prohibited unless the products are to be consumed on the premises at which decanting takes place.

Labour supports these measures, which will support and protect the hospitality sector, but our analysis has found that more than 70,000 venues have had to reduce their opening hours because of energy bills. I have seen that in my constituency. These are businesses that enrich our communities and boost our high streets, but they are being let down by the Government and many of these changes will come far too late.

I note that the draught relief has been designed in a way that will exclude the wine sector. Can the Minister explain why? Will he let us know whether the Government will introduce any other measures to support British wine and spirit producers?

Clause 54 lays out measures to replace the small brewers relief with a small producer relief. Clause 55 specifies that eligible producers will be those whose products have an alcoholic strength of less than 8.5% ABV and who produce less than 4,500 hectolitres of alcohol per year. The remaining clauses and schedules lay out precise measures for calculating rates of relief.

Labour introduced the small brewers relief in 2002 and is proud of the effect that it has had by supporting small brewers and creating a vibrant UK beer scene. We therefore support the extension of relief to other producers, but I note that that may not occur under the new scheme, as British wine and spirit producers are largely excluded from these measures. Perhaps the Minister could lay out why the scheme has not been further extended.

In conclusion, Labour recognises the need to simplify the alcohol duty regime while striking a balance between supporting businesses and consumers, protecting public health and maintaining a source of revenue for the Exchequer.

**Mr Carmichael:** May I take up the point about small producers? Deerness distillery, in my constituency, is a family-owned business that is seeking to move into whisky production. Surely, as a small producer in a market

dominated by big corporates, it should be given the same opportunity to grow as a brewer. Why, in principle, should there be any difference in their treatment?

**Abena Oppong-Asare:** We, too, are concerned about that, and I have met various stakeholders in the sector who have highlighted their concerns. I hope that the Minister will take the issue on board in his response.

We do not oppose the clauses and schedules, but we want answers to the questions that have been raised, and, most important, we want certainty for the businesses and consumers who have suffered over the past few months and years as a result of the constant chopping and changing that the country has seen from various Conservative Governments.

5.30 pm

**James Cartlidge:** Before I turn to the very good speeches that we have heard during the current debate, let me clarify a point relating to our earlier debate on the electricity generator levy. I mistakenly said that "private wire" was included in the levy, when of course I meant to say that it was excluded.

Let me begin by saying that I welcome the support expressed by the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for the clause relating to devolved welfare payments. As for alcohol duty, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) may not recall the debate that he initiated in Westminster Hall in October 2017, when I was a mere Back Bencher, but I was the first Member to intervene on his speech. All the others were Scottish. I intervened because a leading company in my constituency produces the bottle tops for the whisky trade. That, along with the East Anglian grain that is sent up to Scotland from time to time to help support the sector, underlines the fact that this is a UK industry, and a UK export. We are all proud of Scotch whisky and the role that it plays in our economy. However, I must say this to the right hon. Gentleman, and also to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), who spoke with his usual eloquence and conjured up wonderful images. I understand the importance of the Scotch whisky sector, and we have supported it—in nine of the last 10 Budgets, we have either frozen or cut the tax—but the key point is that not introducing the RPI-linked increase would have a significant cost.

**Mr Carmichael:** The Minister is making our case himself, so presumably he will be joining us in the Lobby—as, indeed, the Secretary of State for Scotland should be doing—or else accepting my amendment.

**James Cartlidge:** I had never thought of the right hon. Gentleman as a cheeky chappie, but for that brief moment, he almost was. Let me now address his amendment 7. The Scottish National party Members have, very nobly, effectively withdrawn their amendments to ride on the back of it, which is perfectly fair: they seek, ultimately, to arrive at roughly the same point, which could be described as the protection of spirits, and Scotch whisky in particular, from the RPI-linked increase.

The proposal in amendment 7 would cost an amount between £1.7 billion and £2 billion. An overall RPI freeze would cost £5 billion across the scorecard. We have, of course, supported freezes in the past, and it was

I who announced the freeze back in December. Members may recall the reason for that freeze: in view of the August reform, we did not want the sector to go through two separate alcohol tax increases. We supported the industry, but it is expensive, and with the public finances as they are, we feel that the responsible option is to introduce the RPI-linked increase—which, after all, is not a real-terms increase—but, nevertheless, to bring in the differential duty to support our pubs.

**Mr Carmichael** *rose—*

**James Cartlidge:** I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman, for the last time.

**Mr Carmichael:** The Minister needs to look at the actual data relating to the revenue brought in over these years of cuts and freezes, because the story that it tells is very different from the forecasts on which he relies. He should remember that in 2015 the forecast was for a 2% reduction, but in fact there was a 4% increase. When will the Government become a bit more realistic about the effect of their own policies in this area?

**James Cartlidge:** I have to disagree with the right hon. Gentleman's use of the word "realistic". I have met representatives of the Scotch Whisky Association, whom I greatly respect, and they have said to me that if we freeze the tax we get the revenue. Unfortunately, however, the Government have what I believe is the very important and successful policy of using an independent body, the Office for Budget Responsibility, which makes forecasts independently for Governments on the effects of fiscal measures. *[Interruption.]* I hear voices behind me saying that they are wrong. The point is that the OBR is not a collection of soothsayers employed to predict, entirely accurately, exactly what will happen in the future. With the greatest respect to everyone, if that was the case, I suspect they would spend rather more of their time looking at accountancy of the turf-related kind rather than trying to forecast the national accounts. The point is that this enables us to ground fiscal events in a forecast of where we are at that time and the fiscal costs at the time, therefore adding credibility to the decisions we make and avoiding the easy situation where we do not have to make the difficult trade-offs that households and businesses know that, in reality, we have to face. If we want to cut one tax, we have to find the money from somewhere else. It is a good discipline.

**Jamie Stone:** Will the Minister give way?

**James Cartlidge:** I will take this very last soupçon: a final intervention from the hon. Gentleman.

**Jamie Stone:** The Minister is nothing if not courteous, but does he not accept that he would increase the revenue base by increasing industry and economic activity? What message does this send to—let me get the names right—Wolfburn in Dunnet or 8 Doors in John O'Groats? These are new distilleries, just starting out. From little acorns, mighty oaks can grow, and those mighty oaks can give the Government lots of acorns in tax revenue.

**James Cartlidge:** The hon. Gentleman is always courteous, and I send the message to him that for every single business, charity and household in the country, one thing that trumps all is wanting the Government to run the public finances in a stable way so that businesses

can have confidence that the investments they make will be in a growing and stable economy. I totally understand where he is coming from, but he has not persuaded me that he has a way to find those billions of pounds. I hope that I have nevertheless offered the assurance needed for hon. Members to retract their proposed amendments, and that clauses 27, 47 to 48 and 50 to 60 will stand part of the Bill as we end our theme of alcohol for the evening.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 27 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 47 and 48 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Amendment proposed:* 7, in schedule 7, page 334, line 18, leave out "£31.64" and insert "£28.74"—*(Mr. Carmichael.)*

*Question put,* That the amendment be made.

*The Committee divided:* Ayes 54, Noes 290.

## Division No. 215]

[5.37 pm

### AYES

Bardell, Hannah  
Black, Mhairi  
Blackford, rh Ian  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Bonnar, Steven  
Brown, Alan  
Callaghan, Amy *(Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara)*  
Cameron, Dr Lisa  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Chamberlain, Wendy  
Chapman, Douglas  
Cherry, Joanna  
Cowan, Ronnie  
Crawley, Angela  
Davey, rh Ed  
Day, Martyn  
Docherty-Hughes, Martin  
Dorans, Allan *(Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara)*  
Farron, Tim  
Fellows, Marion  
Ferrier, Margaret  
Flynn, Stephen  
Gibson, Patricia  
Grant, Peter  
Green, Sarah  
Hendry, Drew  
Hobhouse, Wera  
Hosie, rh Stewart  
Jardine, Christine

Law, Chris  
Linden, David  
MacNeil, Angus Brendan  
Mc Nally, John  
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
McDonald, Stuart C.  
McLaughlin, Anne *(Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara)*  
Monaghan, Carol  
Moran, Layla  
Morgan, Helen  
Newlands, Gavin  
Nicolson, John *(Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara)*  
O'Hara, Brendan  
Olney, Sarah  
Oswald, Kirsten  
Qaisar, Ms Anum  
Sheppard, Tommy  
Smith, Alyn  
Stephens, Chris  
Stone, Jamie  
Thompson, Owen  
Thomson, Richard  
Wilson, Munira  
Wishart, Pete

### Tellers for the Ayes:

Richard Foord and  
Daisy Cooper

### NOES

Afolami, Bim  
Afriyie, Adam  
Aiken, Nickie  
Aldous, Peter  
Anderson, Lee  
Anderson, Stuart  
Ansell, Caroline  
Argar, rh Edward  
Atherton, Sarah  
Atkins, Victoria  
Bacon, Gareth  
Bacon, Mr Richard  
Badenoch, rh Kemi  
Bailey, Shaun

Baillie, Siobhan  
Baker, Duncan  
Baldwin, Harriett  
Barclay, rh Steve  
Baron, Mr John  
Baynes, Simon  
Bell, Aaron  
Beresford, Sir Paul  
Bhatti, Saqib  
Blunt, Crispin  
Bowie, Andrew  
Brady, Sir Graham  
Braverman, rh Suella  
Brereton, Jack



Brine, Steve  
 Bristow, Paul  
 Britcliffe, Sara  
 Browne, Anthony  
 Bruce, Fiona  
 Buchan, Felicity  
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert  
 Burghart, Alex  
 Butler, Rob  
 Cairns, rh Alun  
 Carter, Andy  
 Cartledge, James  
 Cash, Sir William  
 Cates, Miriam  
 Caulfield, Maria  
 Chalk, Alex  
 Chishti, Rehman  
 Choze, Sir Christopher  
 Churchill, Jo  
 Clark, rh Greg  
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon  
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan  
 Clarkson, Chris  
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse  
 Colburn, Elliot  
 Collins, Damian  
 Coutinho, Claire  
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey  
 Crabb, rh Stephen  
 Crosbie, Virginia  
 Crouch, Tracey  
 Daly, James  
 Davies, rh David T. C.  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Dr James  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davis, rh Mr David  
 Davison, Dehenna  
 Dineneage, Dame Caroline  
 Dines, Miss Sarah  
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
 Double, Steve  
 Doyle-Price, Jackie  
 Drax, Richard  
 Drummond, Mrs Flick  
 Duddridge, Sir James  
 Duguid, David  
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
 Dunne, rh Philip  
 Ellis, rh Michael  
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias  
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie  
 Eustice, rh George  
 Evans, Dr Luke  
 Evennett, rh Sir David  
 Everitt, Ben  
 Fabricant, Michael  
 Farris, Laura  
 Firth, Anna  
 Fletcher, Katherine  
 Fletcher, Mark  
 Fletcher, Nick  
 Ford, rh Vicky  
 Foster, Kevin  
 Fox, rh Dr Liam  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Freeman, George  
 Freer, Mike  
 French, Mr Louie  
 Fuller, Richard  
 Fysh, Mr Marcus  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat  
 Gibb, rh Nick  
 Gibson, Peter  
 Gideon, Jo  
 Glen, rh John  
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert  
 Gove, rh Michael  
 Graham, Richard  
 Grant, Mrs Helen  
 Gray, James  
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Green, Chris  
 Green, rh Damian  
 Griffith, Andrew  
 Grundy, James  
 Gullis, Jonathan  
 Halfon, rh Robert  
 Hall, Luke  
 Hammond, Stephen  
 Hancock, rh Matt  
 Harper, rh Mr Mark  
 Hart, Sally-Ann  
 Hart, rh Simon  
 Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver  
 Heapey, rh James  
 Henderson, Gordon  
 Henry, Darren  
 Higginbotham, Antony  
 Hinds, rh Damian  
 Holden, Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Hollobone, Mr Philip  
 Howell, John  
 Howell, Paul  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hughes, Eddie  
 Hunt, Jane  
 Hunt, Tom  
 Jack, rh Mr Alister  
 Javid, rh Sajid  
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Jenkinson, Mark  
 Jenkyns, Andrea  
 Jenrick, rh Robert  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Johnson, Gareth  
 Johnston, David  
 Jones, Andrew  
 Jones, rh Mr David  
 Jones, Fay  
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus  
 Jupp, Simon  
 Kawczynski, Daniel  
 Kearns, Alicia  
 Keegan, rh Gillian  
 Knight, rh Sir Greg  
 Knight, Julian (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)  
 Kniveton, Kate  
 Lamont, John  
 Langan, Robert  
 Latham, Mrs Pauline  
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Levy, Ian  
 Lewer, Andrew

Loder, Chris  
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Longhi, Marco  
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Lord, Mr Jonathan  
 Loughton, Tim  
 Mackinlay, Craig  
 Mackrory, Cheryl  
 Maclean, Rachel  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Mangnall, Anthony  
 Mann, Scott  
 Marson, Julie  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 Maynard, Paul  
 McCartney, Karl  
 McPartland, rh Stephen  
 McVey, rh Esther  
 Menzies, Mark  
 Mercer, rh Johnny  
 Merriman, Huw  
 Metcalfe, Stephen  
 Millar, Robin  
 Milling, rh Amanda  
 Mills, Nigel  
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Damien  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Mordaunt, rh Penny  
 Morris, Anne Marie  
 Morris, David  
 Morris, James  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Mortimer, Jill  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mumby-Croft, Holly  
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Neill, Sir Robert  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Offord, Dr Matthew  
 Opperman, Guy  
 Pawsey, Mark  
 Penning, rh Sir Mike  
 Penrose, John  
 Percy, Andrew  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Poulter, Dr Dan  
 Pow, Rebecca  
 Prentis, rh Victoria  
 Pritchard, rh Mark  
 Purslove, Tom  
 Quin, rh Jeremy  
 Quince, Will  
 Randall, Tom  
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob  
 Richards, Nicola  
 Richardson, Angela  
 Roberts, Rob  
 Robertson, Mr Laurence  
 Robinson, Mary  
 Rowley, Lee  
 Sambrook, Gary  
 Saxby, Selaine  
 Shapps, rh Grant  
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok  
 Simmonds, David  
 Skidmore, rh Chris  
 Smith, rh Chloe  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, Henry  
 Smith, Royston  
 Solloway, Amanda  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, rh Mark  
 Stafford, Alexander  
 Stephenson, rh Andrew  
 Stevenson, Jane  
 Stevenson, John  
 Stewart, rh Bob  
 Stewart, Iain  
 Streeter, Sir Gary  
 Sturdy, Julian  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Syms, Sir Robert  
 Thomas, Derek  
 Throup, Maggie  
 Timpson, Edward  
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly  
 Tomlinson, Justin  
 Tomlinson, Michael  
 Tracey, Craig  
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie  
 Trott, Laura  
 Vara, rh Shailesh  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Vickers, Matt  
 Walker, Sir Charles  
 Walker, Mr Robin  
 Wallis, Dr Jamie  
 Warburton, David (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)  
 Warman, Matt  
 Watling, Giles  
 Webb, Suzanne (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
 Whittaker, rh Craig  
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
 Wiggin, Sir Bill  
 Wild, James  
 Williams, Craig  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wragg, Mr William  
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy  
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim  
**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Jacob Young and**  
**Ruth Edwards**

*Question accordingly negated.*

*Schedule 7 agreed to.*

*Clause 50 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Schedule 8 agreed to.*

*Clauses 51 to 54 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Schedule 9 agreed to.*

*Clauses 55 to 60 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.*

*Bill (Clauses 5 to 15, 18 to 25, 27, 47, 48, 50 to 60 and 121 to 312, and schedules 1, 7 to 9 and 14 to 18), as amended, reported, and ordered to lie on the Table.*

## Business without Debate

### THE SPEAKER'S ABSENCE

*Ordered,*

That the Speaker have leave of absence on Monday 24 April to attend the Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments (EUSC) in Prague to participate in the session dealing with Russian aggression against Ukraine.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

### PETITION

#### Teaching real life skills

5.51 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present this petition on teaching real life skills, which calls for the provision of the teaching of life skills in secondary schools in budgeting, loans management and taxation and also in job and employment skills. It is a credit to Katelyn Banks, a young petitioner, that she presented this petition to me to bring to the House today.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioner and make a life skills class mandatory in secondary schools.

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The petition of Katelyn Banks,*

*Declares that the current educational curriculum does not adequately prepare students for the future; notes that that upon leaving secondary school, most students are not taught how to prepare for job interviews, manage loans or do taxes; further declares that the secondary school curriculum should therefore introduce a 'lessons for the future' class which teaches students how to budget, manage monetary funds and prepare for post-qualification life.*

*The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioner and make a life skills class mandatory in secondary schools.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P002829]

## Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

5.52 pm

**Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): At midnight on 31 March 1948, the National Fire Service was disbanded, and, on 1 April 1948, Buckinghamshire fire brigade came into service. Seventy-five years on, it is fitting to mark in Parliament the contribution that what is now known as Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service makes to the local community.

Bucks Fire serves more than 800,000 people, with its headquarters in the proud county town of Aylesbury, the heart of my constituency. Geographically, it covers an area of some 723 square miles, spanning Aylesbury vale, the Chilterns, south Bucks, Milton Keynes and Wycombe. I am pleased to see that so many colleagues from across the service's footprint—especially those on the Conservative Benches—have been able to join me here today, despite the hour.

I would like to put on record the thanks of my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) to Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service for its hard work and dedication to protect his constituents. The Minister wished to listen to this debate in person, but is on Government business in Northern Ireland. I am sure that all colleagues here will join him in expressing their gratitude for the hard work of Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service for their constituents.

It is often said that those in our emergency services are the people who run towards danger. I would suggest that that is the case for our firefighters above all, as they literally go into burning buildings to protect other people's lives and livelihoods. The bravery of our firefighters rightly inspires the public's admiration time and again. It is truly awe-inspiring to hear tales of their heroism.

Therefore, it is no surprise that becoming a firefighter is still one of the dream jobs for children who are asked what they would like to be when they grow up. These days, they are no doubt spurred on by the brilliant "Fireman Sam" in Pontypandy. For my generation, though, the inspiration came from the indomitable crew of Trumpton fire brigade—Pugh, Pugh, Barney McGrew, Cuthbert, Dibble and Grubb, led by Captain Flack—although, if memory serves, the firefighters of "Trumpton" never actually put out a blaze. Instead, they removed fallen branches, unblocked the movement of the town clock and even retrieved the mayor's hat from a tree. Thankfully, to the best of my knowledge, no such incident has occurred in Aylesbury.

The work of the 359 firefighters and more than 125 support staff at Bucks Fire and Rescue is no less varied, but many of their jobs are far more serious. The service receives around 16,000 calls a year, with roughly 8,000 emergency incidents last year alone. In just the past few weeks, crews have been called out to everything from a cooker fire to a blaze at a derelict building, from children locked in cars to car crash victims needing immediate emergency care. Indeed, last year the service was co-respondent to more than 605 medical emergencies in support of the South Central Ambulance Service, and the rescue of bariatric patients is especially valued by the NHS.

[Rob Butler]

The range of incident responses is of endless and almost incalculable benefit to my constituents but, as we all know, by far the best way to save lives is to prevent them from occurring in the first place. Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service provides excellent help, advice and support for people wanting to reduce their fire risk, whether at home or at work, with a special interactive tool for small businesses, of which we have many thousands in Buckinghamshire.

The service also contributes to our community in other respects, including by facilitating a hoarding support group and visiting schools for children with special educational needs. Notably, it also runs a superb apprenticeship scheme, which is not just for the firefighters of the future but for mechanics and finance and human resources staff, and not just for young school leavers, but for older people changing career or building their qualifications.

Perhaps the jewel in the crown of Bucks Fire is the urban search and rescue service, or USAR. Aylesbury fire station is part of a national network of 19 USAR bases in England set up following the 9/11 attack on New York in 2001. Those bases have the people, vehicles and equipment needed in the aftermath of major incidents—not just terrorism, which thankfully is very rare, but collapsed buildings, major transport incidents and natural disasters.

The USAR crews at Aylesbury are equipped with four lorries, two personnel carriers and five modules containing specialist equipment ranging from fast-cutting saws to timber for the rapid shoring up of unsafe structures. What is more, the USAR team in Aylesbury is one of just a handful that also includes a dog, Huw, a labrador-springer cross who has been trained to recognise and concentrate on the specific odour given off by living people, something that is massively important when searching for survivors of a disaster. The team at Bucks Fire's USAR is widely recognised as one of the best performing in the country. It has come second in the national awards four times and been the overall winner twice, most recently in 2021.

Given that extremely impressive track record, I am sure you will understand, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I was utterly shocked when I learnt that the Bucks USAR team was under threat of closure. The reason was budget constraints at the Home Office, resulting in a decision to reduce the number of USAR teams across the country. While I fully recognise the challenging economic times we are in and the acute need to ensure every penny of public money is well spent, the proposed scrapping of Bucks USAR seemed to me to lack both foundation and reason, not least as there had been no consultation with the fire service, nor indeed any assessment of the potential risks arising from such a change.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for listening to my impassioned pleas to rethink that decision and maintain this vital service. Not only did he listen, but he acted. I was absolutely delighted to learn last week that he has now secured the future of Bucks USAR until April 2025. His fast response and positive approach are greatly appreciated across the county.

**Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the expertise of USAR is appreciated not just across Buckinghamshire but far and wide? It acts as a regional hub of excellence in search and rescue.

**Rob Butler:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will talk a little about the wider impact of Bucks USAR. He represents a Milton Keynes constituency, so it is opportune to say that people often ask, “Why does Buckinghamshire have an urban search and rescue team?” Well, it is because Milton Keynes is a major urban centre in the area, as are Wycombe—I have already referred to my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe—and Aylesbury, which is fast growing. So Buckinghamshire does need the Bucks urban search and rescue team, and I am absolutely delighted that its future is secure for my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt).

Needless to say, I and the residents of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes want USAR to survive well after 2025 so that Bucks Fire and Rescue Service can continue to make such an important contribution to the local community, so I will make a few points to help my right hon. Friend the Minister convince our Treasury colleagues that a long-term settlement should be given to the Home Office in the next spending review to ensure the long-term future of our USAR service.

I have seen for myself the difference that USAR makes. When I was mid-way through a recent visit to Aylesbury fire station, the USAR team was called out to reports of a serious road collision. The USAR units had been specifically requested to attend as the incident demanded specialists and equipment beyond the normal firefighters and their engines. The accident was not in Bucks, though; it was over the border in Oxfordshire, highlighting perfectly the wider impact of USAR in the south-east of England, which my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North mentioned.

As the closest urban search and rescue service, the Aylesbury team was first on the scene to assist colleagues from Thames Valley police. If Bucks USAR had been abolished, the closest unit would have been in either London or the west midlands, and the time taken to reach the incident would have been an hour longer—as we all know, every minute counts when it comes to saving lives. I respectfully suggest to Treasury colleagues that as Buckinghamshire is so centrally placed in the heart of England, our USAR service is invaluable not just to our own residents but to those in Oxfordshire, Hertfordshire and, at times, beyond.

It is also worth highlighting that the USAR team is expert and experienced in searching for and rescuing people from tunnels. The construction of High Speed 2 has dramatically increased the potential requirement for that type of activity, and it is surely right that the cost of having a team ever prepared for a national infrastructure project should come from a national budget. Bucks USAR is already making a contribution of national importance. The fire service has, at its own expense, constructed a specialist training facility in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith). Using burning cars, a plane fuselage, school equipment and more than 600 tonnes of rubble, the site recently staged a full disaster training exercise for USAR teams from Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Merseyside, Tyne and Wear, and West Yorkshire. The site could and should become a national training facility under the national resilience framework. That one exercise alone amply demonstrates that importance and significance of Bucks USAR to the entire country.



What is more, under the leadership of Chief Fire Officer Jason Thelwell and fire authority chairman Councillor Simon Rouse, Bucks Fire and Rescue Service has demonstrated that considerable financial efficiencies can be made even within the current funding model. That is because Bucks Fire operates an integrated system in which its USAR team combines its specialist capabilities with normal firefighter duties. If that were replicated by all USAR units across the country, not only would the saving desired by the Home Office be made, but there would be cash to spare.

Before I conclude my remarks, it is only right that I acknowledge that although we are here to celebrate the successes of Bucks Fire and Rescue Service and its enormous contribution to our county, it also has challenges to address. As right hon. and hon. Members are aware, a recent inspection report into the fire service nationally suggested that bullying and misogynistic behaviour, sexist language and racism are widespread—that is of great concern. Naturally, I wanted to discover what the situation is locally and, more importantly, what is being done to tackle any such behaviour in our local fire service.

The senior management of Bucks Fire do not pretend that such incidents never happen, but they have assured me that everything possible is done on a daily basis to root out poor behaviour and, indeed, that they are proactive in their approach. For example, Bucks Fire is thought to be the only service in the country to insist on enhanced DBS checks for all frontline staff. A letter sent to the fire service by the Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services has outlined the considerable progress made in this area since the last inspection, with staff describing a positive change in the way the service was raising awareness of and promoting equality, diversity and inclusion.

There has also been progress in other areas since the 2021 inspection report by His Majesty's chief inspector of fire and rescue services. Two years ago, concerns were expressed about the number of firefighters available, as well as about general funding. The chief fire officer and his team have made great strides since then, and there is now an almost full complement of firefighters, and a £5 increase in the precept has brought about significant benefits.

Let me finish by saying simply that I, along with fellow hon. Members from Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, are extremely grateful for the hard work, dedication and sense of duty demonstrated day in, day out by the staff of Bucks Fire and Rescue Service. They protect us in the face of danger. They save lives. Seventy-five years after its establishment, we thank them for their service and for their continued contribution to our local community.

6.6 pm

**The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):**

Let me start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) on securing this evening's Adjournment debate and on his eloquent and comprehensive speech. I echo the tribute he paid to firefighters not just in Buckinghamshire but up and down the country, who often put themselves in the line of danger in order to keep us and our families and constituents safe. As he said, they often run towards danger to protect their fellow citizens. I put on the record my and the Government's thanks—and, I am sure, the thanks

of the whole House—to firefighters for the work they do up and down the country on a daily basis. I pay particular tribute to the work done by the urban search and rescue services, whose specialist capabilities are unique and often necessary at very difficult times such as complicated and dangerous road traffic accidents of the kind mentioned by my hon. Friend.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend and the other Members present on their assiduous and always charming campaigning on behalf of the people of Buckinghamshire to preserve the urban search and rescue service. As my hon. Friend said, there was a plan—which, I should add, predated my time as Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire—to reduce the number of urban search and rescue centres from 19 to 14. I reviewed those plans and listened very carefully to the arguments raised by my hon. Friend, Members from the county of Buckinghamshire and others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) and Members from Norfolk. I studied their proposals and comments very carefully, as any diligent Minister would.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury said, I was pleased to be able to find ways to reorder arrangements internally in the Home Office so that we can keep all 19 urban search and rescue centres open until at least April 2025. We will also make sure that we bid for funding that goes beyond April 2025, to keep all 19 open into the future. Of course, I cannot prejudge the outcome of any future spending review, but I can give the commitment that we will include in our next spending review bid a robustly argued case for funding to keep all 19 centres open, while at the same time making sure that the necessary renewal of equipment happens. I personally accept the arguments that my hon. Friend and others have made, and I was delighted that I was able not just to listen but to respond substantively to the concerns raised. I congratulate him again on his successful campaigning on this topic.

At the end of his speech, my hon. Friend mentioned the question of resources for fire services more generally. The fire funding settlement that we announced a few months ago for the current financial year, which started a week or two ago, sees the average fire and rescue authority—assuming it uses the full precept flexibility—getting about 8% more funding this year than it did last year, so there is a strong financial settlement for the fire service there.

Finally, my hon. Friend drew attention to some issues to do with culture, standards and behaviour in the fire service. There was a recent inspector's report covering that topic across the country as a whole, as well as the recent Nazir Afzal report into the London Fire Brigade. I am deeply concerned about these issues of culture, and I do expect the fire service to address them. I expect the fire service at all levels, right through to individual frontline firefighters, watch commanders and fire station commanders, to make sure that the right culture prevails. Where there is inappropriate behaviour, whether it is sexist, misogynist, racist or homophobic, that needs to be immediately called out and eradicated. It is up to every single firefighter, as well as fire service leaders, to make sure that happens. I am very pleased to hear that Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service conducts full vetting checks on all its firefighters—that is something that other fire services can learn from, and it is something I have asked colleagues in the Home Office to have a

*[Chris Philp]*

very careful look at. There is good practice in Buckinghamshire, and where Buckinghamshire leads, perhaps the rest of the country can follow.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am glad to be here—perhaps unusually—with a good news story, confirming that we have listened to parliamentary colleagues and responded

positively, and that the urban search and rescue centre in Buckinghamshire and the other 18 across the rest of the country will continue.

*Question put and agreed to.*

6.11 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 April 2023

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

## Human Rights in Myanmar

9.30 am

**Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): I beg to move,  
That this House has considered human rights in Myanmar.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I am grateful to have the opportunity to lead this debate and raise my concerns about the ongoing situation in Myanmar, which is deeply concerning and requires urgent attention by the UK Government and the wider international community.

This February marked the two-year anniversary of the coup in Myanmar and the start of the country's military rule. This rule has been brutal and oppressive, with continued attacks on civilians and opposition forces and parties. According to the Burma Campaign UK briefing, since the attempted coup began, more than 2 million people have been forced to flee their homes, with the vast majority internally displaced within Burma. More than 21,000 people have been arrested, with around 17,000 still in detention. Under the previous military regime, there were usually just over 2,000 political prisoners. Thousands of civilians and members of resistance forces have been killed. Restrictions on freedom of speech, the media and the internet have increased significantly. The Burmese military effectively banned 40 political parties by deregistering them. Parties banned included the National League for Democracy, which won the last election, and significant ethnic political parties.

More than 60,00 civilian homes and properties have been destroyed. The Burmese military use airstrikes indiscriminately on almost a daily basis, with targets including medical centres, schools, religious buildings and camps for internally displaced people. Data from Amnesty International estimates that thousands of people have been arbitrarily detained, with more than 1,000 opposition politicians, political activists, human rights defenders and others convicted in unfair trials. There have been reports of widespread torture and abuse at the hands of military groups, and in the last year alone, at least 356 people have died in police custody. A report this week from BBC journalists—the first to report from the country since the coup—uncovered the oppressive nature of the country under military rule.

Myanmar is, at this moment, a nation torn of its freedoms. It is a nation run by military checkpoint, with corners occupied by sandbags, there to protect automatic weapon-wielding police from attacks by freedom fighters. Recently, there have been reports of the Burmese military Government launching airstrikes on their own citizens. Just over a week ago, the military launched a brutal attack on civilians taking part in a ceremony in the Sagaing region, with women and children present. It is estimated that around 100 people died in the attack, including 20 to 30 children—an example of innocent bystanders falling victim to this brutal regime.

The Rohingya Muslim population in Myanmar have faced years of persecution at the hands of Government forces. In 1982, under the so-called Citizenship Act, they were effectively made stateless, and they now represent one of the largest populations of stateless people in the world.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Last week, the military authorities announced the arrest of 15 schoolteachers for participating in an online school organised by the National Unity Government, and last summer 30 more teachers were arrested for similar reasons. Does the hon. Member agree that the restriction of access to education and the intimidation of the country's educators is a very concerning restriction of freedom?

**Naz Shah**: I absolutely agree. Without education, we do not have a defence of the defenceless, and it is only through education that we will educate the nation and move it forward.

An estimated 600,000 Rohingya Muslims remain in the Rakhine state of Myanmar, and this group are subject to persecution on a daily basis. The atrocities that the Rohingya Muslim population have been subjected to have been rightly condemned by the international community. Former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini described it as

“a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”

More than 730,000 Rohingya have fled the military's crimes against humanity and acts of genocide, escaping to neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh. Even today, over 1 million Rohingya people live in makeshift settlements in squalid conditions in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. I thank Bangladesh, which is a country with a fast-growing economy, but it still has its own huge challenges and remains one of the poorest countries, and we must ensure that the international community keeps up its support.

**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government's aid budget cuts mean that the camps have seen a dramatic fall in the humanitarian assistance that the UK provides—assistance that was very welcome when these problems began in 2017. The cuts are making it much more difficult for people to survive in the camps and leaving the Government of Bangladesh and other agencies in a difficult position. For five years, they have had to support and protect those who had to flee the military of Myanmar, having suffered ethnic cleansing and genocide according to the United Nations.

**Naz Shah**: I thank my hon. Friend, whom I admire for all her work and tireless efforts in this area. She is a passionate campaigner for the Rohingya people of Myanmar, and I agree with her powerful words: the Government need to look at this matter. The Labour party has been calling for more aid, and this situation is not acceptable.

Six years on from fleeing genocide, the Rohingya people still face restrictions on their movements and freedoms. Let me tell the House the story of Naripokkho, which is an activist group leading the fight for women's rights in Bangladesh. Naripokkho was instrumental in supporting Rohingya rape victims in 2017, when Bangladesh once again found itself on the frontline of a rape



[Naz Shah]

epidemic as more than 730,000 Rohingya Muslims crossed its borders to escape genocide in neighbouring Myanmar. Among them were thousands of women and children who had suffered horrifying sexual violence at the hands of Burmese soldiers. Harrowing details emerged of women being tied to trees and subjected to rape for days, tortured by bamboo sticks and set on fire. Once again, echoing past events, many of the women would find themselves battling the stigma of unwanted pregnancy.

There have been attempts to resettle Rohingya refugees in Myanmar, but that action has rightly been condemned by Human Rights Watch, which has stated:

“Voluntary, safe, and dignified returns of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar are not possible while the military junta is carrying out massacres around the country and apartheid in Rakhine State.”

The conditions must be created to allow the Rohingya community to return home in safety, dignity and security. The Labour party has continuously called for the UK Government to heighten their work with international partners and call out regimes such as Russia and China, which are both alleged actively to have supplied the regime with oil and arms that have been used by the military to launch brutal attacks on the civilian population.

Labour is deeply concerned about the ongoing and long-standing abuse of human rights in Myanmar. The treatment of the Rohingya minority has been, and continues to be, a stain on the world's conscience. We have consistently called for the announced arms embargo against Myanmar to be applied in full, and have echoed calls from activists for a suspension of exports of aviation fuel to the authorities in Myanmar. We have also called for the Government to engage with British shipping companies and insurance companies covering shipping to urge them to stop any involvement in the trade, as well as the redoubling of efforts to engage with regional partners to shut off the supply of aviation fuel and military equipment to the regime.

Too many times, we have said never again, then stood back only to see something happen once more. How many times must we learn the same lesson? We have an obligation—a moral duty—to work with our international partners to put an end to the seemingly endless suffering faced by the people of Myanmar. We must speak up for them and raise their plight on the international stage. Unless there are robust and tangible international consequences for the military rulers of Myanmar, the problems of the genocidal attacks on the Rohingya people, the military rulers' airstrikes against their own civilian population and the large-scale refugee crisis in Cox's Bazar will not be solved.

Our view of the world is under threat from Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, China's aggression in the Taiwan strait, and tyrannical autocrats across the world growing in confidence and strength. They do not believe in international law, nor do they respect human rights.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She is setting out the international backdrop to the issues in Myanmar. Does she agree that the sooner full democracy returns in Myanmar, the better? The junta's decision to postpone elections further will only make the situation in the country deteriorate much further, so rapid steps towards democracy must be taken as quickly as possible.

**Naz Shah:** I absolutely agree: democracy is the cornerstone of giving back to people the power they need.

Autocrats do not believe in international law or respect human rights. If we are to stand up to them and defend our rules-based order, we must show that our values are not just for show, and that they have consequence. We must show that we will stand up for human rights and for the oppressed and downtrodden, wherever they are, whatever they need. Like all people, the Rohingya people have a right to return home, but that will be possible only when there is lasting peace in the region. We have an opportunity and an obligation to act now to ensure that.

9.40 am

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. The hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) made a powerful speech, and I commend her for securing this debate.

It will probably come as no surprise to colleagues that the issue I want to speak about is the fundamental right of freedom of religion or belief, which is being stamped on in Myanmar, with targeted repression of religious actors. I will highlight one individual, but sadly he is one of many.

I ask colleagues to join me in condemning the recent sentencing on 7 April by a court in Myanmar of Rev. Dr Hkalam Samson to six years in prison on manufactured charges of terrorism, unlawful association, defaming the state and inciting opposition to the regime. I ask them to join the international calls for his immediate, unconditional release, and the release of others similarly arbitrarily detained. Yesterday, I tweeted to that effect in my capacity as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. I urge colleagues concerned about freedom of religion or belief in Myanmar, and indeed other rights and freedoms, to join that call.

The Foreign Secretary said just a short time ago in the House of Commons that freedom of religion or belief is a “canary in the mine” for human rights. Where persecution and discrimination occur on account of people's beliefs, the loss of other human rights follows, as we have seen in the case of Dr Samson.

**Margaret Ferrier:** The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners stated that more than 3,000 people have been killed in the military crackdown on the pro-democracy movement, including activists and other civilians, such as those the hon. Lady has mentioned. I know she condemns the murder of innocent civilians, but will she join me in hoping that that will not deter the brave, peaceful activists advocating for democracy?

**Fiona Bruce:** I certainly will. I am very pleased that the hon. Lady has given me the opportunity to put on the record my profound respect for the people in Myanmar speaking out against the regime at great personal risk, many of whom are religious leaders.

Dr Samson is a former president of the Kachin Baptist Convention, and is the chairman of the Kachin National Consultative Assembly. He is an internationally respected religious leader and advocate for freedom of religion or belief and human rights in Myanmar. He has dedicated his pastoral career to promoting peace efforts, to justice and equality for Kachin Christian, to reconciliation and forgiveness, and to drug eradication.

He has helped to facilitate the safe and voluntary return of more than 100,000 displaced Kachin to their homes. In essence, he has been accused of crimes simply because he has spoken out and criticised the military regime's brutal repression, because he has met people and groups the military do not like, and because he has called for prayers for freedom for the people of Myanmar.

Dr Samson's international advocacy is well renowned. In 2018, he came to the UK Parliament to meet Members. In 2019, he travelled to Washington DC to participate in the international ministerial conference to advance religious freedom, which was a forerunner of the international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief that we held here last July, at which once again concerns about freedoms in Myanmar were expressed.

I will close by quoting Benedict Rogers, who is an experienced analyst on east Asia, the author of three books on Myanmar, a friend of Rev. Hkalam Samson and, indeed, a friend to many of us here in this place, because those of us who have been concerned about freedoms in Myanmar have for many years benefited from Ben's wise counsel and his experience of travelling to east Asia many times over many years. This week, Ben Rogers said:

"This sentence is an outrageous travesty of justice. Reverend Dr Samson is a completely non-violent Christian pastor and a brave and tireless advocate of justice, human rights and peace. He has been jailed simply for courageously speaking out against the Myanmar military's barbaric atrocities perpetrated against the people of Myanmar. The international community must speak out strongly to demand his immediate release from prison and intensify efforts to apply targeted sanctions against Myanmar's illegal military regime until all political prisoners are freed, the military ceases all attacks in the ethnic states and Myanmar is placed on a path of genuine federal democracy."

9.46 am

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, in this important debate on human rights in Myanmar. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) for bringing this important debate before the House.

Tragically, as we look around the world today, despite what we are told and led to believe, we see that human rights are not the universal, inalienable and inherent rights of all humanity that they are supposed to be. The fact is that so many across the globe continue to face persecution, abuse and injustice. Rights are nothing more than a myth—afforded to some but not others, unless of course it suits the needs of richer, more powerful nations.

In Myanmar, the Government and authorities are guilty of persecuting and oppressing countless different minorities. I echo the serious and important points made already, in particular by my hon. Friend, but I will keep my remarks in particular to the Rohingya, whose human rights and protections from abuses have been—I think we can all agree—non-existent. For decades now, the Rohingya have faced systemic discrimination at the hands of Myanmar's Government. So despicable is their treatment, they are regarded as even less than second-class citizens in their own country, denied the right to citizenship, driven from public places and segregated from society.

For those with even a passing interest in the region, those human rights abuses faced by the Rohingya are not unknown—they are no secret. The Rohingya have been one of the most persecuted peoples for decades. The abuses are well documented, not just by numerous human rights organisations and the United Nations, but by the Rohingya who fled Burma for safer countries and even by the Rohingya diaspora living in the UK, including in my constituency, which I am proud to say is home to one of the largest Rohingya communities in the UK, if not the whole of Europe.

On that point, Bradford is a city of sanctuary from anywhere. We are a proud city of sanctuary, which welcomes people from across the world. Make no mistake: those fleeing persecution, oppression and injustice, wherever that may be in the world, will always be welcome in my city of Bradford. The Rohingya community has made a fabulous and fantastic difference to the diversity, culture and richness of our great city, and they will always be welcome there.

It is utterly inexcusable that the international community continues to stand by and do nothing, knowing full well that the Rohingya face such horrific human rights abuses in Myanmar. What is most unforgivable is that the world did nothing when the Rohingya faced some of the gravest human rights abuses and worst crimes against humanity imaginable in 2017, when the Burmese military, joined and emboldened by armed thugs and militia groups, who had longed for the opportunity to wipe the Rohingya from the country, marched through countless Rohingya villages, razing them to the ground and savagely slaughtering innocent, defenceless men, women and children.

To be clear, I know full well that, as that grave act of ethnic cleansing was taking place, the UK Government did absolutely nothing. I remember all too clearly standing up in the Chamber of the House of Commons in autumn 2017—as well as speaking privately to Ministers—to implore the Foreign Office to act, only to be told time and again that it was not the UK's place to get involved, and that they did not want to upset the fragile democracy in Myanmar.

After so many years of military dictatorship, of course we all wanted to see Myanmar become a full, vibrant democracy but, as I told the House, the road to democracy can never be built on persecution, paved with ethnic cleansing and genocide, or stained with the blood of innocent men, women and children. That is a price we should never be prepared to pay. Yet I am ignored by our Government, who continued with their refusal to act, fearful of undermining democracy in Myanmar.

Where did that approach end up? Barely more than three years after the Rohingya genocide, encouraged by the world's reluctance to act and its willingness to turn a blind eye to war crimes, the Burmese military overthrew the Government anyway, just as we all expected. The inaction of the international community and its unwillingness to stand up for the Rohingya, who were chased out of their homes, tortured, raped, murdered in the street and driven from their country at the barrel of a gun, is clearly evident in the fact that, even now, nearly six years later, the Rohingya still do not have justice for what they faced.

The generals and commanders who ordered that brutal wave of violence against an unarmed, defenceless civilian population, and the soldiers and thugs who carried it out, have yet to face any accountability for

[Imran Hussain]

their actions, besides a few limited and toothless sanctions for those who participated in the military coup. As each year passes, justice gets further and further away and out of reach for the Rohingya. Because the international community failed to act with sufficient speed or force when the Burmese military and its thugs were burning down homes and spilling Rohingya blood, those responsible will likely now never face the consequences of their actions. They will never be forced to answer before a court for grave and contemptible crimes against humanity.

I come here today, not just with a condemnation of the Burmese military and Government for their record on human rights abuses against the Rohingya and other minorities, and their deliberate, planned genocide, but with a condemnation of our own Government, whose callousness towards the human rights of the Rohingya meant that they were found wanting when the Rohingya needed them the most. Our Government's ineffectiveness, indecision and inaction, even as the number and speed of Rohingya refugees fleeing eclipsed the horrific genocide in Darfur in the 1990s, cost the lives of thousands of Rohingya. Because neither the UK Government nor the international community stopped the genocide of the Rohingya even as it was taking place, more than 1 million Rohingya refugees now face a bleak and uncertain future in one of the largest refugee camps in the world—a point well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West—located inside one of the most dangerous and natural disaster-prone regions on the planet.

In the squalid conditions of the camp in Cox's Bazar, where refugees face disease, dirty water, fires, monsoons and floods, the first generation of Rohingya children born outside Myanmar to parents who fled the genocide are now reaching school age. However, the chances of their getting a good education to succeed beyond the camp are slim, and the chances of ever seeing the country where their parents were born are even worse, with no real prospect of the Rohingya ever being safe if they return to Myanmar.

The international community does not care. Funding for refugees is drying up, with barely 50% of the funding target for 2022 set by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees met. It is clear that those children, their siblings and their parents have been forgotten and abandoned by much of the world, who have simply moved on to the next crisis.

The UK Government are not excluded from this charge of abandoning Rohingya refugees. Time and again I have told them about my constituents who have close relatives living in the refugee camps in Bangladesh who fled the genocide—close relatives who are eligible even under normal visas to come to the UK, but who are unable to do so because when they are confined to the camps they are unable to cut through the mountains of red tape that the Home Office puts in their way. Despite knowing those problems and the challenges they face, the Government refuse to make it any easier and deliberately prevent vulnerable Rohingya who should be able to come to the UK from doing so.

The Government tell us that they will stand up for human rights across the world, as of course they rightly should. But what they seem to forget is that they cannot pick and choose which human rights abuses they can act on, and which they can turn a blind eye to. Human

rights are universal and the abuse of human lives must be acted upon, regardless of any other thing. They cannot single out some of the abuses that are taking place around the world and treat them with greater importance than others—not if human rights truly are universal, unalienable and inherent to all of humanity, as they rightly should be.

9.57 am

**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on securing this important debate.

We are debating the human rights crisis in Burma, where ordinary citizens are being denied the most basic freedoms and rights, and the international community is not doing anywhere near enough to change the situation. It has been two years since the Burmese military launched its coup and seized control of the country from a democratically elected Government. Despite heroic resistance and international condemnation, the military has instituted a regime of repression and violence on a massive scale.

I want to extend my solidarity to the international non-governmental organisations that have done a great deal to protect people inside Myanmar and support internally displaced people, particularly in Rakhine state, but also in other states across the country, and in Bangladesh where there are now 1 million Rohingya refugees who have had to seek refuge over the years, particularly after the attacks in 2017.

Burma Campaign UK, which I thank for its tireless work, estimates that more than 2 million people have fled their homes and become internally displaced in Myanmar. I want to declare an interest: Burma Campaign UK provides secretariat support to the all-party parliamentary group on democracy in Burma, which I chair.

There are 40 political parties that have been banned, including the National League for Democracy, which was declared the winner in the last democratic elections. More than 21,000 people have been arrested and 17,000 remain in detention. More than 60,000 civilian homes and properties have been destroyed. The Burmese military have used almost daily airstrikes to target medical centres, schools, religious buildings and camps for people displaced from their homes. As has been mentioned, as recently as 12 April the world's media reported helicopter attacks on a village ceremony including women and children in the Sagaing region. The death toll is likely to have reached 100, including many children—one of the worst atrocities since the military coup. Thousands of resistance fighters and civilians have lost their lives.

Despite the unprecedented level of repression and danger, the people of Burma have resisted their oppressors. The people have boycotted military-owned companies and risked their lives to protest peacefully, and young people have taken up arms to form the People's Defence Force to fight the military. In the months since the military coup on 1 February, the military has stepped up attacks in ethnic areas, including Chin, Karenni and Karen state, that have involved torching villages, murdering children and burning people alive.

Of course, we must never forget the plight of the Rohingya people. In August 2022, we marked the fifth anniversary of the Burmese military's genocide against



the Rohingya people. For the Rohingya, it has been more than five years of pain, trauma, grief and displacement—five years in camps far from home, robbed of their livelihood, their education, their peace of mind and their future. For the perpetrators, the Myanmar military—the soldiers, auxiliaries and men who issued the orders—it has been five years of evading justice for their crimes, which the UN fact-finding mission described as genocide.

I saw the suffering at first hand during my two visits to Rakhine state, before the military coup, in the camps for internally displaced Rohingya people, and during multiple visits to the camps in Cox's Bazar, which is now home to 1 million refugees—the largest such camp in the world. The pandemic ravaged the camps and put ever more strain on stretched resources. As has been said, the military coup has made it even more unlikely that the Rohingya will return to their rightful homes in Myanmar. Half of the people in the camps are children—denied a normal childhood and a normal education.

There have been some advances in holding the Burmese military to account, but not enough. The Burmese military has lost control internally in large areas of the country, and we are told that morale among the armed forces is low. As well as the documented restrictions that people face, the people are facing a huge economic crisis and need international support. Many international investors have pulled out, understandably and correctly, but that has a knock-on effect on people's lives and leads to further poverty. The answer has to be action to remove the military dictatorship and ensure that the democratic Government are restored.

I welcome the UK Government's support for the International Court of Justice case, and I am grateful to the Minister for the support that he extended in that campaign when he was on the Back Benches. I hope that, now he is back in power, he will do everything that he can to secure justice for those who face genocide at the hands of the Myanmar military. As well as supporting the International Court of Justice case against Myanmar led by The Gambia, the Government have committed in principle to supporting a case at the International Criminal Court. I welcome that, but a former Foreign Office Minister, the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), stated in response to my written parliamentary question that

“there is insufficient support amongst Security Council members”.

We recognise the challenge, which has been mentioned, of certain countries, such as China and Russia, vetoing action to seek justice in the International Criminal Court against the Myanmar military for committing genocide, but our Government, as the penholder in the UN Security Council, have a unique responsibility to ensure that the military is held to account and to show leadership. Otherwise, we will never see justice served for the Rohingya people, who have faced genocide.

As I have said, it is deeply distressing that the British Government have drastically reduced our aid to the Rohingya refugees over the past few years. For the 2021-22 financial year, British aid to the camps was reduced to 45% of the level of the previous financial year—a reduction of 67% compared with the financial year before that. The need in the camps has not reduced; it has grown.

After years of campaigning with parliamentarians, I welcome some of the steps that our Government have taken, but the fact remains that sanctions against the

Burmese military's sources of incomes are too slow to be implemented. Even after two years, there are organisations and individuals who remain untouched by sanctions, including those working in major revenue generators such as gas, banking and mining. The military finds its way round sanctions, and continues to buy arms and equipment to oppress people. I ask the Minister to address the slow implementation of sanctions and whether he thinks that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has an adequate number of officials working to deliver the policy.

I believe that the UK Government should be doing far more to co-ordinate international efforts to speed things up, and they must go further with sanctions. They should sanction the military cash cow, Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise; ban UK companies from engagement with Burma's gas industry, which earns \$2 billion a year; sanction the mining companies and the Myanma Foreign Trade Bank; speed up the implementation of sanctions; and close the loopholes until sanctions bite hard. We have seen what Governments' co-ordinated action on sanctions can do in relation to the Ukraine crisis, so where there is political will, we see action in the face of resistance from some players in the international community. I want to see that kind of leadership by our Government, and I am hopeful that the Minister, who was a great advocate of this agenda and worked with Back-Bench parliamentarians when he was a Back Bench, is best placed to take this issue forward. I hope he will not disappoint me and other colleagues. More than 100 parliamentarians, over many years, have campaigned on this issue with him.

As I have said, there is more action that our Government need to take, including banning British firms from supplying aviation fuel to Burma, sanctioning the Russian, Chinese, Pakistani and Indian companies supplying Burma with arms, and encouraging other countries to uphold the ban on supplying arms. I want to point out that there are three particular UK companies that have insured vessels delivering aviation fuel: NorthStandard, formerly known as North P&I; UK P&I Club; and Britannia P&I. I hope the Minister will look at how the insurance regulators and others in our country can take steps to ensure that our insurance system is not inadvertently, or even consciously, providing fuel for air strikes and supporting a genocidal dictatorship. Can the Minister outline what conversations he has had with his counterparts in other Governments to encourage a ban on arms sales?

The sanctions must hit the supply of aviation fuel to the military. To save lives, we need to ground the jets and helicopters by cutting their fuel lines. British companies supplying fuel, or providing insurance or other logistics, must be dissuaded by the threat of sanctions. The diplomatic pressure must be stepped up, as well as the economic pressure. Why is the Burmese military attaché still free to wander the streets of Wimbledon and live in a mansion? It is an absolute disgrace, and I know the Minister will agree that it needs to stop. The military attaché should be expelled immediately. Can the Minister tell us why that has not happened?

In conclusion, what we have seen is years of persecution. What we have seen is one of the most ruthless military dictatorships in the world, which has jailed the former democratically elected leader. What we have seen is a military who have committed genocide and continue to act with impunity, and what we have seen is a lack of

[*Rushanara Ali*]

co-ordinated action and limited leadership by our Government. Given the relatively new Minister's track record, I very much hope that he will do what is needed to hold the Burmese military to account for the atrocities that they have committed in the past and continue to commit today.

10.10 am

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Sir Edward, for giving me the chance to make a contribution. I thank the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) for leading the debate and all hon. Members for their passionate, detailed and significant speeches. It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), who knows more than most about the subject. I thank her for sharing her knowledge with everyone in the Chamber, and those outside who are watching.

As everyone probably knows, I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. I will take a specific point of view that is similar to that taken by the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), but I will speak generally about the issue. It is a pleasure to see the shadow Ministers in their place, and especially to see the Minister, who grasps what we are saying very well. He knows what we are after. He knows the answers that we seek, and I am hopeful that he will give us the encouragement that we need, which, more importantly, will be encouragement for the people who are suffering in Myanmar. I will illustrate that suffering, which others have illustrated exceptionally well, in my short contribution.

When I think of this subject, the thing that always comes to mind first is the astounding atrocities. Everyone has outlined them, especially the hon. Member for Bradford West. Such atrocities are taking place not only in Myanmar; we had a debate yesterday in Westminster Hall on those occurring in Nigeria. In Afghanistan, too, women and young girls are denied the basic rights that we have as a norm across the world. That was illustrated in the main news on BBC 1 this morning. Today's debate is an opportunity to shed some more light and make people aware of such human rights abuses, and to support the hon. Member for Bradford West and others in their requests.

I always think that freedom of religious belief and human rights march together. They are not separate; they are one and the same. Religious minorities often find that human rights abuses fall significantly more upon them than upon others, because they seem to be the target. Whenever we speak out for those without freedom of religious belief we speak out for those facing human rights abuses as well. Myanmar ranks at No. 14 in the Open Doors world watch list. Although last year it ranked at No. 12, the fact that it has dropped two places does not for a second reflect an improvement in the rights of Christians in Myanmar. Regrettably, the change in Myanmar's ranking is a result of persecution in other countries worsening at a faster rate. It is not that Myanmar is improving; others have just got worse and overtaken it.

The press regularly marks the persecution that takes place. There are so many examples across all of south-east Asia, but today's debate is about Myanmar. Unfortunately, the plight of Christians in Myanmar has worsened in

the past year, having deteriorated ever since the military took control in February 2021. This is not the first debate we have had in Westminster Hall on these issues, nor is it the first debate in which everyone present has tried to highlight them. As we know, violence and fighting are increasing across Myanmar, but Christians are suffering disproportionately. Churches are targeted, converts are beaten, and community resources including such basics as clean water are all too often denied to Christians.

**Fiona Bruce:** The hon. Member is, as ever, making a compassionate speech. He referred to churches being targeted. Does he agree that the Myanmar regime's deliberate targeting of places of worship for attacks, burning and, in some cases, wholesale destruction should be particularly condemned, not only because international instruments such as The Hague convention call for the protection of places of worship, but critically because, so often and particularly in times of conflict, places of worship are focal points where communities gather to support one another and to seek to promote forgiveness, reconciliation and peace?

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Lady is so right. For many across Myanmar and the world, churches are the focal point for the local community. That is where people gather to worship, socialise and interact with one another. Although the church is just a building, it is a focal point where people can reassure, comfort and help each other. Whether that is physically, prayerfully or emotionally, it is really important.

**Fiona Bruce:** Of course, we are not just talking about the members of that particular faith group; we are talking about support for the wider community, which is so often offered in such cases.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Lady is right to clarify that. It is absolutely right that whenever someone is being persecuted, whenever someone is under pressure, whenever someone's human rights are being abused, they do not have to be a Christian to go to the church. Muslims and people from other religious groups can go. It is the social interaction, the encouragement, the brotherhood and the sisterhood that brings it all together. The hon. Lady is right to clarify that.

One thing that really bothers me—I know that it bothers others as well; the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar), who will speak shortly, will probably mention it too—is the terrible, criminal, wicked, vindictive abuse of women and girls. The hon. Member for Bradford West set the scene in referring to those who fled across the border, especially women and children. They have experienced some of the most terrible, mind-boggling and sickening abuse.

Others have asked the Minister this, but I am going to ask him as well. Those who have carried out abuse know that they may get away with it today. They certainly will not get away with it in the next world, because there will be a day of justice for them, but I want to see that day of justice happen a wee bit earlier for them, in this world. Will the Minister give us an indication that those who have carried out some of these despicable, awful crimes will be held accountable? There are some that are yet to be held accountable. The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow referred to some people being

able to walk the streets of London, even though their countries are guilty of some of these crimes. That must be addressed.

Furthermore, as is often the case, women from religious minorities face double persecution. Christian women are forced to adopt disguises in public and are prevented from taking the sacrament of holy communion, which is a basic part of our right to worship and to religious belief. Christians in Myanmar cannot even do that.

The impact of the fighting in Myanmar on Christian displacement is particularly worrying. According to Open Doors research, record numbers of Christians in Myanmar have become internally displaced people or refugees and are living in camps or churches without adequate food or healthcare.

Extreme Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar poses another serious threat to Myanmar's Christian population. For example, Na Ta La schools aim to convert Christian children to Buddhism, even though their parents do not want that. Buddhist nationalists seem to be pushing that with some severity, effectively stopping Christianity spreading to the next generation. Freedom of religious belief means having the freedom to worship your God as you wish and to have the education that your parents wish. Such Buddhist nationalist tendencies are not prevented by the Government, with actors getting away with impunity. Until legal protections are extended to Christians and other minorities alike, there will always be disproportionate targeting of religious minorities and impunity for the actors.

Is the Minister able to give some encouragement that aid is being provided to the minority Christian populations in Myanmar and the surrounding countries? I underline again the need to ensure that those who carry out terrible crimes are held accountable.

**Fiona Bruce:** The hon. Gentleman is making a particular plea to the Minister, who has vast experience of development work—indeed, we spent many recesses with others on the Umubano project, working on aid internationally. What often seems not to be recognised, although I am confident that the Minister will do so, is that the specific targeting of people because of their beliefs, and the specific targeting of women and girls, is often a driver of poverty. It is often a root cause of people living in dire need of aid and development support. That is exactly what we see in Myanmar today.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Lady clearly underlines my—and indeed her—request to the Minister to ensure that some aid and assistance can be given directly to those groups. They are under terrible pressure. This morning, we probably all had a fairly good breakfast. We were lucky. Some of the Christians in those countries today will not have breakfast, a bed to sleep on or a roof over their head. It is about how we can help those people.

Those are all issues to be concerned with to help us all in realising our goal of an environment in which we can live, preach and worship freely. We are here in this House to represent those who do not have a voice to speak with; we are often the voice for the voiceless. My constituents feel the same. The hon. Lady and I get vast amounts of correspondence on these matters—I suspect that we all do. I frequently receive correspondence from Open Doors sent directly to Westminster by my constituents. The debate gives us a chance to make requests to the

Minister and his Department directly and encourage them to ensure that aid and support get to the people who need it. We are pushing at an open door, as I know he wants to respond in a positive fashion; we will get that shortly. We must look for improvements and not a deterioration in the rights of people to worship their God as they wish and not to have their human rights suppressed.

10.22 am

**Ms Anum Qaisar** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank my friend, the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for securing this important debate. She has been a continuous champion for Myanmar, and I know that she is incredibly passionate and vocal about the issue.

I have listened carefully to hon. Members from across the House and would like to reiterate and stress the need for urgent action to help end the ongoing human rights abuses in Myanmar. Since the military coup in 2021, the country has descended into violence. The Government have unleashed untold abuse on their own people, committing widespread and violent human rights abuses that have resulted in unimaginable suffering and devastation. That, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, disproportionately affects women and girls.

As we debate, hundreds more civilians endure the horrors of the conflict. Just last week, an airstrike claimed the lives of more than 100 people, making it one of the deadliest incidents of the civil war, as reported by the BBC. The conflict's impact goes beyond the immediate threat to human life: more than 1 million people have been forced to flee their homes, leaving everything behind. They now face dire circumstances, with limited access to food, water, medical assistance and other basic necessities. The devastation caused by the conflict knows no bounds.

Amnesty International has reported that deliveries from aid organisations have been blocked by the military, depriving people of life-saving aid and support, further exacerbating the already dire situation. The crisis also disproportionately affects female-headed households, who, according to the World Food Programme, are becoming more reliant on negative coping mechanisms such as borrowing food, limiting portion sizes and relying on savings to meet food needs.

The erosion of political freedom in Myanmar amid the state-sponsored conflict is deeply troubling. The military has dissolved 40 political parties this year, leaving little to no room for exercising political beliefs. This attack on democracy is a grave injustice that further exacerbates the already harrowing situation faced by civilians in Myanmar. They are at the mercy of the Tatmadaw and are facing atrocities; there is complete disregard for their basic rights and freedoms. The severity of the conflict cannot be overstated. Urgent action is needed to restore democracy and to protect the political rights of the people of Myanmar.

As we heard from the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Strangford and for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), the scale of human rights abuses in Myanmar is staggering. Forces linked to the junta have carried out mass killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence and various other acts



[Ms Anum Qaisar]

of abuse that amount to nothing less than crimes against humanity. Given their gravity, these abuses demand immediate attention and action to hold those responsible accountable.

The military in Myanmar has been systematic in brutally punishing its opponents and their perceived supporters, resulting in unspeakable atrocities. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project, an estimated 32,000 political violence-related deaths have occurred since the start of the coup. Mass arbitrary arrests and detentions of supporters of the anti-coup movement have been rampant. Those detained face inhumane conditions, with widespread reports of torture occurring in interrogation centres and prisons. Amnesty International reports that 356 people have died in custody due to torture this year alone.

Based on an assessment of civil rights and political liberties, the Freedom House index ranks Myanmar as one of the least free countries in the world; it scores lower than places such as Iran, Russia and the Gaza strip. As arbitrary arrests and detentions and unfair trials continue, and as the curtailment of freedom of expression, assembly and association enforced by the military persists, the people in Myanmar are experiencing some of the poorest human rights conditions.

A central theme of the conflict has been tensions between ethnic communities. The north-west of Myanmar, which is home to many ethnic minority populations, has accounted for 60% of recorded post-coup deaths. That is compounded by the decades of military operations and aggression by the Tatmadaw in Myanmar's border states, where the majority of minority ethnic populations reside. The situation is dire, with minority communities disproportionately affected by the ongoing conflict.

Among the minority groups facing persecution in Myanmar, the Rohingya Muslims have been labelled by the UN Human Rights Council as the most persecuted minority in the world. As the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) said, the Rohingya Muslims have borne the brunt of the military's inhumane operations, and nearly 900,000 have fled to Bangladesh in search of safety. They have faced horrific atrocities, including extrajudicial execution, arson and sexual assault.

We must acknowledge that ethnic conflict in Myanmar may have been influenced by the legacy of British colonialism and the arbitrary creation of ethnic groups. The construction of umbrella groupings along ethnic lines during the colonial era may have contributed to the current atmosphere of ethnic violence in Myanmar. Alongside condemning the Tatmadaw's treatment of ethnic and religious minorities, I call on the Minister to retrospectively acknowledge the historic responsibility of British colonialism in the creation of arbitrary ethnic groups in Myanmar.

The SNP is of the firm belief that for the UK Government's strategy of tilting to the Indo-Pacific region to be successful, it must not prioritise trade and defence policy at the expense of safeguarding and promoting human rights in the region. We call on the UK Government to increase pressure on the regime. First, using its position as a dialogue partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the UK must encourage neighbouring states to increase pressure on Myanmar.

Although ASEAN has taken steps to promote negotiations and de-escalate the situation, those steps have ultimately failed.

Secondly, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, the UK Government must match the sanctions implemented by Canada on the sale of aviation fuel and military equipment. While I welcome the recent moves by the UK Government to implement such sanctions, there must be a co-ordinated effort, like in our response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Thirdly, the UK Government must conduct high-level diplomatic discussions with the Bangladeshi Government to reverse their decision to repatriate Rohingya refugees to Rakhine state. There is little doubt that any Rohingya returning would face the same genocidal persecution that they escaped. In order to support Bangladesh, the FCDO should release additional official development assistance funding to improve conditions in refugee camps and look to create a stand-alone visa scheme for Rohingya to settle in the UK.

Lastly, the UK Government must reverse their cuts to conflict prevention funding. Aid to Myanmar to support refugees has been cut by 46%, causing innocent civilians to suffer. Now that the FCDO has merged the conflict, stability and security fund into the new UK integrated security fund, we must receive detail on how much money is earmarked for conflict prevention and accountability projects.

10.31 am

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, to hear so many excellent speeches from across the House and so much consensus on the dreadful situation in Myanmar, and to debate what the UK can do to highlight and combat the terrible injustices and violence there. The last few years have seen no end of horrific human rights abuses in many parts of the globe, from Putin's brutal and barbaric invasion of Ukraine to the treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Thus, Myanmar has somewhat faded from the headlines since the height of the Rohingya crisis of 2015, but the brutal oppression and systemic human rights abuses continue apace.

The Government should be acting with much greater energy on this crisis in Asia. As the Government move toward the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership in the region, so must they act in keeping with the values of the British people. It is best practice in trade negotiations to include an element of dialogue on human rights. My first question to the Minister is: what dialogue on human rights has there been from the Department for International Trade as it has gone about inserting the UK into the Pacific region?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) said, in the last two weeks we have seen even more airstrikes against civilians. The military junta is currently cracking down on an uprising where civilians are protesting against the Tatmadaw seizure of power two years ago and the ongoing loss of freedoms and violent repression. In her opening statement, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) commented that since the coup against the Government two years ago, the level of human rights abuses and human suffering is staggering.

We heard from the chair of the all-party parliamentary group, my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), who has been a steady champion for the Rohingya people. They are already an expelled minority, based in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. My hon. Friend has stood up year after year in the House of Commons to speak on behalf of that particularly marginalised ethnic group. She has visited Cox's Bazar, where up to a million refugees live in poverty, creating another generation of marginalised young refugees.

I speak for the whole House when I put on record our thanks to my hon. Friend for championing this issue. She has challenged the Minister today on being more proactive on the International Criminal Court case to bring the Tatmadaw to book. I look forward to hearing the Minister's defence of that action and what diplomatic efforts are ongoing in international fora to see justice served. What assessment has the Minister made, in his relatively short period in post, of the 82% cut to development aid for the Rohingya who languish in refugee camps, despite the excellent work done by other Commonwealth countries, such as Canada, in highlighting their plight?

Returning to the desperate situation in Myanmar itself, Burma Campaign UK, which has a strong track record in advocating for the people of Myanmar, has chronicled a deeply concerning level of chaos and destruction. The people of Myanmar have had their democratic dream snatched away. More than 2 million people have fled their homes, with the vast majority of them being internally displaced within Burma. More than 21,000 people have been arrested, with around 17,000 of them still in detention. Thousands of civilians and members of resistance forces have been killed. Here in the House of Commons, I have heard through the all-party parliamentary human rights group about doctors who have performed surgery in trenches in parts of Myanmar. That is how desperate the situation is for civilians in the region.

Forty political parties have effectively been banned by deregistering them, including the National League for Democracy, which won the last election, and significant ethnic political parties have also been discriminated against and experienced violence and repression. We have seen the destruction of 60,000 civilian homes and properties, and the ongoing use of airstrikes to target medical centres, schools, religious buildings and camps for internally displaced people.

As the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) have mentioned in today's debate, freedom of religion or belief is severely curtailed in Myanmar. The hon. Member for Congleton mentioned the important work of Ben Rogers and his book, which was very important for MPs in the 2015 Parliament; it was called "Burma: A Nation at the Crossroads".

**Fiona Bruce:** I am so pleased that the hon. Lady has mentioned Ben Rogers, because when I spoke about him earlier I did not know that he was here in the Chamber today. I would like to express my appreciation to him for that, and for his continued support of those who express such deep concerns about the people of Myanmar and their situation.

**Catherine West:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and it is wonderful to have allies and champions. In the end, it is the voices of Burmese

people that Ben Rogers echoes in his work, and it is very important that we put on the record the work that Burmese people are doing, day in and day out, in order to survive.

Underpinning all aspects of how the UK should approach this brutal regime is the need to tackle its use of violence, and particularly to use all tools available to stop the arming of the Tatmadaw. Without the ability to bomb the civilian population into submission, the military will be severely weakened, and the chances for dialogue and a return to inclusive civilian-led rule will improve. The single best way in which the international community can bring that about is by a ban on the export of aviation fuel to the authorities in Myanmar, as has been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow. Could the Minister provide an update today on the progress the UK Government are making on this important ban? I welcomed the Government's previously announced sanctions in this area back in January and February, and I fully accept that he appreciates and understands the seriousness of this issue, but there is significant ground still to cover.

The Minister will know that I have repeatedly raised the issue of British insurance companies and shipping companies who may be either directly or indirectly supporting the export of aviation fuel to Myanmar, and I am afraid that the FCDO responses to my repeated questioning on this issue have been very poor. London is at the centre of the global insurance and shipping industry, and we should use its unique position to show leadership on this and make it clear that continued trade in fuel with the regime is not acceptable. I therefore urge the Minister to clarify what discussions, if any, have been had with the industry in London on this specific issue.

I also want to press the Minister on the status of the defence attaché at the Myanmar embassy here in London. I refer the House to the written question that I tabled on this very topic just before the Easter recess, to which I received a response this week. I am afraid that, once again, the question has been ducked. Can the Minister be clear today? Have there been any discussions about the expulsion of the defence attaché from the embassy, to remove any sign of support for or acceptance of the legitimacy of this vile regime?

Finally, we all know that both regional and international action will be critical to success in holding the regime to account. I once again urge the Minister to outline what specific discussions are being had with partners in the region to cut off the supply of weapons to the regime, boost the effectiveness of arms embargoes, and condemn the suppliers in Moscow and Beijing who are playing a key role in legitimising the regime and facilitating the ongoing chaos.

I conclude with these four questions to make it easier for the Minister, because I have asked rather a lot. The UK is the penholder for Burma/Myanmar in the United Nations, with particular reference to the welfare of children. First, what progress has been made on banning aviation fuel, which a number of hon. Members mentioned? Secondly, what progress has been made on banning insurance companies and other financial industries? The City of London has a particular role to play there. Thirdly, will the Minister undertake to raise with the Foreign Secretary the concern that a representative of the Myanmar Government, whose actions have been

[Catherine West]

described, is enjoying a diplomatic lifestyle, which is completely inappropriate given what is going on in that country? Finally, will the Minister review the 82% cut to aid to the Rohingya and work with Bangladesh to provide safe conditions in the immediate short term for the refugees? Will he work with other countries in the region for a decent future for the next generation?

The crisis in Myanmar may not be in the headlines as much as it ought to be, but the suffering of the people there remains in our hearts. The onus is on us to match our actions to our feelings and show the global leadership that the British people want us to display.

10.41 am

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell):** It is a rare but enormous pleasure to appear before you in this debate, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) for securing this excellent debate. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have made extremely important, helpful, interesting and well-informed contributions, and I am very pleased to have the opportunity to respond. It is a great pleasure to hear from everyone who has spoken—in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who makes such good contributions on these important matters. I will directly address several of the points she raised.

It is also a pleasure to debate this issue with the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali). As she pointed out, when I was on the Back Benches, she and I worked together constructively and with great enthusiasm. Indeed, we did so when she shadowed me as Secretary of State for International Development.

The contributions of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) always enliven our debates and ensure we focus on the critical issue of religious freedom. The hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) spoke with authority and conviction about the appalling treatment of the Rohingya community. I will address that point directly. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) spoke eloquently about these issues. I will address the shadow Minister's points towards the end of my remarks.

I thank all Members for their efforts to maintain a spotlight on the appalling human rights situation in Myanmar. I have been there on several occasions, in opposition and in government. I spent a day campaigning with Aung San Suu Kyi in her constituency, and I had the great honour of introducing her to the largest crowd I have ever addressed in my political career.

More than two years since the coup, when the armed forces seized power, the people of Myanmar continue to suffer terribly at their hands. The regime's atrocities are increasingly brutal. Indiscriminate airstrikes are more frequent, as are reports of mass burnings of homes and villages. Conflict-related deaths in Myanmar last year were second only to Ukraine, and gender and sexual-based violence is rife.

Only last week, the military carried out the deadliest airstrike against civilians since the coup, killing more than 160 people in Sagaing. That followed a devastating airstrike on 10 April in Chin state, which killed at least 11 citizens. The targeting of civilian infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and places of worship, is absolutely

grotesque and appalling, and must cease immediately. Civilians must be protected, and human rights must be respected.

Basic human rights have come under attack in many ways across Myanmar. More than 17,000 people are detained arbitrarily, including politicians such as Aung San Suu Kyi, journalists, students, lawyers, medics and protesters. Last July, death sentences were carried out for the first time in 30 years. Civic space is all but closed and further threatened by a new, highly restrictive organisation registration law. Only recently, the military regime dissolved 40 political parties, including Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. That further underscores the regime's assault on the rights of the people of Myanmar.

This brutal campaign of atrocities is plunging the country ever deeper into political, economic and humanitarian crises. More than 17 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, and more than 1.8 million have had to flee their homes. The consequences for regional stability and security are clear. The countries around Myanmar house a third of the world's population. Through our partners, we are assisting those in need on the borders with Bangladesh, Thailand, China and India. The Rohingya communities in Myanmar's Rakhine state are some of the most vulnerable, and their plight was eloquently described by the hon. Member for Bradford East.

We are nearly six years on from the horrific violence that the Rohingya communities suffered in 2017, and more than 10 years on from the violence of 2012. Last month, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who is the Minister of State with responsibility for the Indo-Pacific region, visited the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh and witnessed the difficult living conditions at first hand. Her observations and learning from the visit inform the policy of the Foreign Office.

Rohingya communities continue to face systemic discrimination. Access to services is often blocked by the military regime. Rohingya are denied citizenship, freedom of movement, and access to education and healthcare, which leaves them vulnerable to human trafficking. We have seen a tragic increase in Rohingya people attempting risky journeys to third countries, with too many lives lost at sea. More than 3,500 desperate Rohingya attempted deadly sea crossings in the Andaman sea in the Bay of Bengal last year—a 360% increase on the year before.

Sadly, there is no sign of a solution. The worsening situation in Myanmar means that conditions for the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of the Rohingya are not in place.

Let me turn directly to the UK's action, and indeed the international response. The UK is committed to ending the human rights crisis in Myanmar. Since the coup, we have been at the forefront of a strong, co-ordinated international response to the military regime's brutal oppression of its own people. In December, we led efforts to secure and pass the first UN Security Council resolution on the situation in Myanmar. It urges all parties to respect human rights, demands an end to violence, and urges the military regime to release all those arbitrarily detained.



Our targeted sanctions restrict the regime in accessing the money, arms and equipment it needs to carry out those atrocities, and we have already sanctioned 20 individuals and 29 entities, most recently including companies and individuals supplying fuel to the Myanmar air force and thus enabling its barbaric air campaign. We are also targeting the military junta, including the Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs, through those sanctions.

Since the coup, we have provided more than £100 million in humanitarian assistance. That includes ensuring that the most vulnerable still have access to health and education, and supporting human rights defenders. I will say more about the funding in a moment. Delivering through local organisations, we are able directly to reach communities that are often hard to reach, and we remain committed to supporting the Rohingya. Since 2017, the UK has provided more than £25 million for the Rohingya and other Muslim communities in Rakhine state, and we thank the Government of Bangladesh for their continued effort to support the Rohingya community.

Humanitarian assistance alone cannot solve the crisis. We continue to engage with partners to encourage dialogue, find a peaceful resolution and support a return to democracy. We will use all available opportunities, including the G7 and our ASEAN partners, to push for that. We will also use our role as penholder at the UN Security Council to keep the situation in Myanmar high on the agenda. Through accountability, we have the possibility of ending the military's culture of impunity and preventing future atrocities. Justice must be delivered for victims.

Last year, the UK Government announced our intention to intervene in the International Court of Justice case brought by The Gambia regarding Myanmar's obligations under the genocide convention. We have also established the Myanmar witness programme, which reports on some of the most egregious human rights violations. We have provided £500,000 to the independent investigative mechanism for Myanmar to preserve evidence of atrocities for future prosecution.

I want to say a word or two specifically on spending. Although we are enormously constrained, particularly during this financial year, I am pleased to be able to reassure hon. Members that the position is not as bad as suggested. We have increased spending since the coup and spent £100 million. That was £45.8 million inside Myanmar in 2021-22, and £57.3 million last year. As I explained, since 2017 we are spending more than £25 million in Rakhine state in Myanmar. We are the second largest funder since 2017, and have spent £350 million bilaterally supporting the Rohingya in Bangladesh. That is more than a third of a billion pounds in Bangladesh, and takes no account of the multilateral funding we provide through the World Food Programme, the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

I hope hon. Members across the House will accept that the position is immensely constrained, but that we are spending an enormous amount of British taxpayers' money on this very important and needy issue.

**Rushanara Ali:** The Minister has not really answered the question. When will he be able to restore funding to its former level? There is a real-terms cut. I recognise the aggregate he mentioned, which is very much appreciated,

but he needs to do more to restore the funds. This is a major humanitarian crisis, and Bangladesh, INGOs and international agencies should not be left to their own devices to deal with these cuts.

**Mr Mitchell:** I very much appreciate what the hon. Lady said. When we come to make decisions on funding, we do not look at the issue of restoring the money, we look at the issue of need. I can tell her that we will always take account of the need. That is why we have spent more than £350 million—a third of a billion pounds—inside Bangladesh, supporting the Rohingya, precisely for the reasons she eloquently put to us. I would also say that, although this year's budget is very stretched, we will try, and expect to be able, to maintain the same coverage in the water, sanitation and hygiene programme for the Rohingya in the camps that we have done in the past. I am sure she will welcome that.

I turn to what my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton said. I pay tribute to her as the PM's envoy for freedom of religion or belief. She occupies the office next to mine in King Charles Street, and so is sure to keep Foreign Office Ministers up to the mark. What she said about the treatment of Reverend Samson is absolutely right; it is disgraceful. His Majesty's Government call for the release of Reverend Samson, and all those who are arbitrarily detained. She also spoke about our friend Ben Rogers, with whom I visited Myanmar when we were in opposition. I pay tribute to Ben Rogers's wise and expert testimony and the extraordinary way in which he has dedicated so much of his life to helping those who live in an environment without religious freedom, and where so many are arbitrarily detained.

Finally, I return to the excellent speech made by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), who raised a number of matters. There is no support from the embassy in Yangon for this illegal and pariah regime—let us be in doubt about that. In respect of the individual in the United Kingdom to whom she and others referred, their rights are obviously governed by the conventions that apply, particularly the diplomatic conventions. As she would expect, we abide by those rules. In view of the concern that she and others expressed on the subject of aviation fuel and insurance, I will have a look again to check that we are doing everything we are able to on those matters, and I will write to her if I have anything to add to what I have said in the debate.

**Catherine West:** I thank the Minister for his excellent response to all the matters raised, particularly freedom of religion or belief and the million people in the Cox's Bazar refugee camp, which I know my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) will raise with him later. May I press him on the important symbolism of stripping away the diplomatic role of the military attaché based in Wimbledon? He enjoys freedoms that so many people in Myanmar do not because of his Government. Will the Minister review what more can be done to strip away the legitimacy we are affording that individual?

**Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair):** Will the Minister leave time for the Member in charge to wind up?

**Mr Mitchell:** I will indeed, Sir Edward, and I will bring my remarks to a close.

[Mr Mitchell]

On the hon. Lady's latter point, we will have a careful look to see if anything further can be done. I will write to her anyway on the answer to that question.

The people of Myanmar have shown great determination and resilience in the face of unspeakable atrocities. They continue to demonstrate their commitment to democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms, and we continue to stand with them. We will do all we can to ensure that in the future they can live safely and in peace—something that is comprehensively denied to them today.

10.57 am

**Naz Shah:** I thank all Members for their contributions, and I welcome the Minister's response. One thing I would mention is that he appeared to use only humanitarian figures and not the figures for overall aid to Burma. Before the coup, aid to Burma was roughly around £100 million a year.

I thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for the continued passion with which she speaks up for freedom of religion. I also thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who has the largest Rohingya community in the UK, and who passionately advocates for them and for our city of Bradford as a city of sanctuary.

The continued efforts of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) to highlight this issue are noted and very welcome. I also admire the passion with which my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), who chairs the APPG on democracy in Burma, continues to advocate for the Rohingya people and others in Myanmar who are fleeing persecution.

I thank everyone. We are unanimous across the House in this debate, and it is not often that that happens in this place. It heartens me that the Minister will maintain the funding for sanitation and water in Burma, but there is more work to be done. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) said, we have not done enough. I urge the Minister to relook at some of the figures for aid that is going to the Rohingya people.

Many of my constituents come to me on the issue of the Rohingya, and I also have members of the Rohingya community in my constituency. I hope that today's debate and the unanimous feeling in this Chamber will give them some reassurance that the world has not forgotten and that we will continue to advocate their plight.

**Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair):** I thank all Members who have taken part in the debate. Many years ago, I led a debate in Westminster Hall on the plight of the Karen people. I think that we have had a very good debate. These debates do make a difference.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered human rights in Myanmar.

## Food Security and Farming

[Relevant documents: e-petition 611113, *Ban development on agricultural land to increase food self-sufficiency*, and e-petition 606663, *Produce a Farmland Protection Policy to regulate the loss of farmland to solar*.]

11.1 am

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered food security and farming.

I thank the Minister and my hon. Friends who are present for joining me for this rather short debate. We will cover as much ground as possible. It is a little disappointing that there is no Opposition spokesperson, and a distinct lack of people on the Opposition Benches. Why does food security matter? There is a war in Ukraine, the breadbasket of Europe. There is global inflation. There are global supply chain challenges, and climate change. There is the challenge of rising prices and the cost of living. We all need food; it is a basic need. So as I said, I am very disappointed that no one from the Opposition is present.

In this place, energy security rightly is firmly on the agenda, and the Government are taking action, but I believe that we must take food security equally seriously. Food security has many dimensions, including availability, affordability, nutrition, the state of global agriculture, logistics and food safety. The journey from farm to fork has never been more complex than it can be today.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this very important debate, short though it is. With food inflation at 18%—which hits poor people particularly hard, because staple foods are going up the most, not luxury foods—does she agree that it makes no sense to take grade 1 and 2 land out of production here, only to fly in food from all around the world, increasing the carbon footprint?

**Wendy Morton:** My hon. Friend makes a really important point, which I will touch on a little later.

Much of the journey from farm to fork is unknown to our constituents until they see gaps on the shelves of their local supermarket, or read of shortages in the media. Overall, we produce 61% of all the food that we need in the UK, a figure that has been broadly stable for the past 20 years. The food strategy commits to keeping it at the same level in the future. I acknowledge that the work that the Government are doing is putting significant investment into the food system, but I will challenge my good friend the Minister, who knows more about food and farming than many in this place, by saying that investment and innovation are great, but they can take time. We need to be addressing the challenge and delivering today.

The first UK food security report was published in December 2021, but I am sure that we would all agree that much has changed significantly since then, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and global energy and inflation pressures. As my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) alluded to, today's figures report that food inflation is running at 19%. Many of us, when we go into our local supermarket or shop, often see that reflected in the basics that we buy, whether that is bread, milk, butter or whatever.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Lady for securing this debate. On food security and farming, Strangford is an important constituency for beef and dairy farming. They are prominent exports and a major part of our economy. We all want to go forward together, as the Minister understands and knows very well. But one of the changes that we are experiencing in Northern Ireland—I say this respectfully to the right hon. Lady and the Minister—is that, as DUP colleagues have stated before, exports face a delicate issue when it comes to the small print of the Windsor framework, which disadvantages my beef and dairy farmers. Does the right hon. Lady agree that we must move forward together?

**Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair):** Order. Can we have a short intervention? It is only a half-hour debate, Jim.

**Wendy Morton:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It is important that we continue to look closely at regulation and some of the bureaucracy around food production and farming, and ensure that the journey from farm to fork, and from one market to another, is as smooth as possible.

The production-to-supply ratio of food in the UK has been declining since it peaked in the mid-1990s. For me, the question is not so much why, although that is important, but what we are doing about it and what more can be done. We can start by recognising the dual role that farmers play as both food producers and custodians of the countryside. I am a farmer's daughter, so I have a bit of experience in this, although it is a few years since my dad gave up farming. We need to get that important balance right, because farming must be viable and economically sustainable, as well as environmentally sustainable.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The right hon. Lady is being very generous, and I thank her for bringing an important debate to this House. Like me, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has demonstrated that, while the official Opposition may not be here, the unofficial one is deeply concerned about the future of farming across our great family of nations. In Westmorland, and indeed across the rest of England, 100% of farmers will lose more than a third of their basic payment by the end of this year. Less than 10% are in the sustainable farming incentive so far, so there is a real gap in farm incomes. I can tell the right hon. Lady, just from my own experience of talking to farmers in Westmorland last week, that that is forcing some farmers out of business and some to intensify farming. Would it be wise to address that, so that we can continue food production?

**Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair):** Order. This is only a half-hour debate. It is not normal to have many interventions in this sort of debate. The Back Bencher produces his or her argument and the Minister replies.

**Wendy Morton:** Thank you, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; he makes a crucial point. Farmers in my constituency have highlighted to me the challenge they face in getting the balance and the mix right. For me, it comes down to how we keep farming sustainable while producing the food we need and looking after our environment.

**Mrs Helen Grant** (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): May I make a point about viability, very briefly? I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate her on this debate and on making such important points. I appreciate that she may not have time to go into the international aspects, but does she agree that we need to have a much more ambitious food and wine export strategy that promotes brand Britain, and that we must genuinely address the legitimate concerns of farmers in relation to food standards and cheaper imports?

**Wendy Morton:** I am a passionate supporter of British farming and produce. In recent years, we have seen a greater focus on exports of British food, so I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that there is an international angle to all this. Alas, I doubt that I will have time to cover it, but I will see how much progress I make. The situation in Ukraine—the breadbasket of Europe—has highlighted just how important global markets are when it comes to food and food security.

We also need to do more to tackle food waste, which is another of my pet hates at home. It is important that we do all we can to help people to reduce food waste. Food waste is bad for landfill, and it goes right down to the household level. I am interested to hear what the Minister might have to say on that.

I particularly want to mention two other key areas: first, land use, the environment, land for food production and solar farms; and secondly, support for our farmers. I will take support for our farmers first, because a number of Members have alluded to its importance. In my constituency of Aldridge-Brownhills, we have only a small number of farmers, but they are very important to the local economy and the national production of food. Local farmers tell me that the cost of fertiliser has gone up by 161%. I spoke to farmers who have had to find an eye-watering extra £200,000 just to cover the increase in costs. When they produce a crop or a product on contract, they cannot just put their price up because prices are fixed. Red diesel has doubled in price. I think we all appreciate and understand that there is volatility of energy costs. Whether they need heat for greenhouses or refrigeration for the storage of potatoes, farmers are being hit in a number of ways. The cost of growing a tomato, as we realise when we go into a supermarket or a shop, rose by 27% between 2021 and 2022.

The environmental land management scheme has seen a reduction in basic payments, and by 2028 will be no more. In 2022, it was recorded that £22 million-worth of fruit and veg had been wasted due to a workforce shortage for picking. I appreciate that the Department is working on that, but something is not quite right when we have to waste food because we cannot pick it and process it, particularly when some are struggling to afford food. It was highlighted to me this morning that the UK horticulture sector alone needs around 70,000 workers each year to harvest fruit and veg. What more is the Minister's Department doing to address that issue? Our farmers and our farms need support.

There will always be pressures on our land—farming versus housing and development. I know that particularly because my constituency is on the edge of the west midlands, close to the urban sprawl of Birmingham. Land use has to be about balance. I am sure that the Minister is aware of two recent petitions to the House of Commons: one to ban development on agricultural



[Wendy Morton]

land; and another that calls on the Government to consider the cumulative impact of solar farm developments on the availability of agricultural land.

My good friend the Minister knows that I talk a lot in this place about protecting the green belt and developing a brownfield-first policy approach to housing and development. That is the right and sensible way to protect our countryside, our food supplies and our farms while also delivering the homes that local communities need.

I might be straying off the point a little here, Sir Edward, but I will bring it back to the debate. With the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities recently undertaking a consultation on the national planning policy framework, and with the Levelling-up Bill passing through the other place, it would be remiss of me not to press the Minister and ask him if he could explain a little more about the position of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when it comes to the balance between development and protecting our green spaces.

**Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con):** I am very lucky to be able to go to the local supermarket and buy the apples that have been farmed in my constituency, but, sadly, nearly 7,000 hectares of greenfield in my constituency are up for residential development. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the competing issues of being able to buy locally sourced food, house building and the value of our farmers' fields need to be resolved so that we can protect locally grown products?

**Wendy Morton:** My right hon. Friend re-emphasises the point about balance. It has to be a good thing, where possible, to make the most of local land that can produce food and to buy food locally, but it must be affordable. It reduces the carbon footprint and supports local farms and shops. I agree wholeheartedly with her; she is fortunate to have so much local produce on her doorstep in her constituency. It comes down to getting the balance right, and I do not think we are quite there yet.

Agricultural land is a finite resource. It is important that we never take food security, farming or our farmers for granted. I want to spend a couple of minutes on the international aspect, although I will give the Minister plenty of time to respond. I have mentioned the war in Ukraine. It is a sad fact that we have the need of a UN-led Black sea initiative to get grain out of Ukraine to some of the most needy countries. That situation highlights the importance of global markets and the global food chain.

Taken together, Russia and Ukraine account for one third of the global wheat trade, 17% of the global maize trade and 75% of the global sunflower oil trade. It is critical to consider that perspective, and important to recognise that weaknesses in global security impact on not just us in the UK, but elsewhere; they often constitute a humanitarian crisis in some parts of the world. That can equally have a knock-on effect back here in the UK. Drought in Somalia displaced more than 1 million people. Almost 2 million people have been displaced amid the worst food crisis in a decade in Burkina Faso. We know that those are some of the factors that also contribute to migration.

The UK can be a leader in producing climate-friendly food, but we must not let our own production levels drop. We should be maintaining and increasing our domestic food focus and production, and helping our farmers, because then we can help at home and help some of the world's poorest populations as well.

11.16 am

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I start by drawing attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing the debate.

Farming is the lifeblood of our communities. As a farmer myself, I know at first hand the invaluable work that farmers do, putting food on our plates and caring for the environment and for nature. As we all know, farming in England is now going through the biggest change in a generation. It is an exciting time, but it is important that we get those changes right. We are phasing our subsidies so that we can invest the moneys in policies that work for farm businesses, food production and the environment. We have a unique opportunity to shape our policies to the needs of our farmers. I pledge that we will do exactly that, making sure that farmers are at the heart of everything that we do.

Here in the UK, we have a highly resilient food supply chain. We are well equipped to deal with disruption. However, farmers are facing challenges as a result of the global economic situation to which my right hon. Friend referred, including the illegal invasion of Ukraine, which is of course driving up the costs of fuel, fertiliser and agrochemicals, and that is why we have taken action to support them.

We have already split direct payments in England into two instalments each year to help with cash flow. We have committed to spend around £600 million on grants and other support for productivity, animal welfare and innovation over the next three years. We have provided 10,000 farmers with help and advice through the future farming resilience fund. We have moved the 25% tariff on maize imports from the US to help with animal feed costs and we have now passed the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 to help farmers become more productive and to feed the nation.

Our high degree of food security is built on supply from diverse sources—strong domestic production as well as imports from stable trade routes. Recently, we saw in supermarkets some disruption to a small number of fruit and vegetables due to poor weather affecting the harvest in Spain and north Africa, where a high proportion of the produce consumed in the UK at that time of the year is grown. In that instance, we met the industry to assess the severity of the disruption. Item limits have now been removed, so we are in a much better place than we were at that moment in time. DEFRA has a collaborative relationship with supermarkets, retailers and suppliers, to get involved and to help minimise any disruption.

The Government recognise the importance of food security. We certainly did in the Agriculture Act 2020, and we will carry on monitoring that and ensuring that we monitor food security every three years. The first UK food security report was published in December 2021. We have committed to at least maintain current

levels of food production under the food strategy, which set out what we will do to create a more prosperous agrifood sector.

When it comes to self-sufficiency, which my right hon. Friend referred to a number of times, we produce about 74% of the food that we can grow in the UK. Thanks to our farmers, we are almost 100% self-sufficient in fresh poultry and certain vegetables, and close to 90% self-sufficient in eggs. Further to that, we are 86% self-sufficient in beef, fully self-sufficient in liquid milk, and produce more lamb than we consume.

Sectors such as soft fruit, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) referred, have seen a trend towards greater self-sufficiency in recent years. However, we do recognise the huge pressure on the sector. She has done a lot in this place to highlight the challenges faced in the soft fruit and food production systems, particularly in the county of Kent.

Let me turn to getting the balance right between the environment and food. Ultimately, putting food on the plates of people across the nation is the primary purpose of farming in this country and always will be, but if we want farming and food production to be resilient and sustainable over the long term, farming and nature must go hand in hand. Indeed, our new farming schemes invest in the very foundations of food security, from good soil health and water quality to climate resilience and an abundance of pollinators.

**Tim Farron:** This will be a short intervention—I apologise for being overly long before. In this transition period, where we appear to be phasing out the old subsidy scheme but trickling in the new ones, is the Minister seeing in his communication with farmers, as I do in Westmorland, some who find it hard and are thinking of giving it up all together, and some who feel that they cannot access the environmental schemes and therefore must increase their intensity of farming? I am sure it is not just happening in Westmorland. What can he do about that?

**Mark Spencer:** The hon. Member will be aware that last week I was in Cumbria talking to those very farmers. I think it is fair to say that with the sustainable farming incentive in particular, we have been through a trial period where we have been talking to farmers directly

and taking their direct feedback on how those schemes work. We will roll out the latest phase of the SFI this summer and, as he has identified, as we move away from common agricultural policy payments and direct payments to this new phase, we want to make that as accessible as possible.

We continue to have conversations with farmers in order to support the very people he talks about. We can do that in a number of ways, such as, as I said, supporting farmers' soil quality, improving their grassland and trying to help them to reduce their input costs. We can also give them access to capital grants to help make them more productive and efficient in their farming. It is an ongoing process. This is not a presentation saying, "Here are the new schemes and this is how it will be for 20 years." Outside the EU, we now have the flexibility to listen to the industry, to work with the sector and to ensure that we can respond to its needs, so that we can keep ourselves well fed while continuing to look after the environment.

Let me turn to what we have done this year. We have provided farmers with extensive detail on the new schemes; increased payment rates in countryside stewardship to reflect the increases in costs; and introduced new, additional management payments for farmers taking environmental work through the sustainable farming incentive. We have accelerated the roll-out of SFI, with six new standards coming this summer—three more than originally planned—and we have announced that we are expanding our existing countryside stewardship scheme, adding about 30 actions to the 250 that are already available.

We will continue to broaden our offer and support thousands of farmers up and down the country with the schemes. We will continue to do everything we can to meet our three main goals of supporting viable farming businesses, maintaining food production at its current level, and achieving high environmental and welfare outcomes. My door is continually open to those conversations and discussions. We will continue to support our great British farmers and we will continue to ensure that our constituents are well fed with beautiful British food.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.24 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Future of Social Housing

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I beg to move,  
That this House has considered the future of social housing.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Paisley, for this important debate. I am glad that so many Members from across the House have joined me to make their case and give their perspective on the future of social housing. I want to acknowledge the contribution of the stakeholders that have campaigned for social housing over a considerable number of years, and especially those that have supported this debate, including Shelter, Crisis, the Local Government Association and its constituent councils, the National Housing Federation and the housing associations in my constituency.

I will make a passionate case for a new generation of social housing in this country, built at scale, in mixed communities, from north to south and throughout out devolved regions and nations. It should put tenants centre stage in the healthy and affordable—I mean genuinely affordable—houses of the future.

I will start with the story of a real family in my constituency to add context to the debate. Members from across the House will have encountered similar stories in their caseloads. Sarah and Eddy are a young couple who approached me some time ago. They have a baby on the way. They had been living in the private rented sector for nine years, and were served a section 21 notice. Section 21 should have been consigned to the history books some time ago. There have been many promises that that will happen, and I am sure the Minister will elaborate on that.

Sarah and Eddy were desperate. Weaver Vale Housing Trust, one of the housing associations in my constituency, was in the process of building affordable housing in a place called Helsby, and I was able to go along with the chief exec and hand keys not only to that family but to other families that the housing association and I had helped. I saw their desperation, then their hope, then their happiness. It was one of those days that makes us all tick in this job. Those issues keep us awake at night, but resolving them gives us a sense of purpose and achievement.

That example is one of only a few that I can refer to, because housing is not being built at a sufficient scale to meet the need that is out there; it barely scratches the surface. We have 1.2 million people in housing need, and the number is growing. There are 100,000 families living in temporary accommodation. I am sure some Members have seen the report published today—I think it was from City Hall, commissioned by the Mayor of London—which shows that there are 300,000 children sharing bedrooms with their siblings in very cramped conditions.

Of course, we see the visible consequences of not building enough genuinely affordable housing, whether we walk around the streets of Westminster, Manchester, Norwich or Birmingham, and undoubtedly it will be the same in Northern Ireland, Scotland and so forth. Quite simply, the status quo is broken.

The consensus on the need to build 300,000 homes of all tenures has now been ditched by the Conservative party—the Conservative Government—to placate Back Benchers and some Tory councillors. Now it is being reported that planning applications in England have fallen to their lowest level in 16 years. The Government are once again well below their target—I say “target”, but I am not sure that it is now. Is it a target or not? It changes by the day.

Limiting supply is shattering the dreams, hopes and aspirations of so many families and young people. There will be Government Members sat across from me now who are very much aware that it is actually market-led housing schemes that are providing some of the affordable housing schemes in our community. The situation provides yet more evidence that the current Government have set in train a collapse in house building across England, with all the harmful social and economic consequences that that entails.

Let us take our minds back to the covid pandemic. There was grand talk from Ministers of “building back better”, with the homes for key workers scheme draw on the post-war programmes of homes for heroes. We saw that scheme being announced, and spun, in the press. Unfortunately, it amounted to little in the way of substance. It was policy by press release, soundbite and broken promises. Lessons from history are simply being ignored.

During the current cost of living crisis, the relationship between housing and income has been magnified more than ever. Many commentators refer to a housing crisis; in reality, at its heart this is an affordability crisis. Too many people and families are excluded from what should be a basic right for all—a decent, genuinely affordable home that is safe and secure, and free from damp and mould. The case for social housing is stronger now than ever before—for now, not just for the future. That case is not just a moral one; it is about sound economics, too.

Let me start with the economic case. The cost of housing benefit in the UK is now truly astronomical. The Government’s own figures show that it is £23 billion a year. I will repeat that figure: £23 billion a year. Much of that goes into substandard properties in the private rented sector, where—as we all know from looking at our caseloads—rents are rocketing and local housing allowance rates are not meeting the basic costs of those rents. Again, I would like to hear from the Minister whether that will change.

As Sadiq Khan and City Hall have highlighted, over £1.6 billion is being spent on very bad—substandard—accommodation. The Government talk about the affordable homes programme, don’t they? In reality, in a lot of cases that programme is not building affordable homes, yet it costs £11.4 billion over four years. There is £23 billion every year going into the private rented sector, much of it for substandard accommodation, and yet £11.4 billion over four years has been spent on the so-called affordable homes programme.

**Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a measure of the waste of public funds and the state of the housing crisis that in Kersal and other areas in my constituency—and, I dare say, in his constituency and others—small terraced houses are being turned into houses in multiple occupation for four families, with each individual family in these tiny properties claiming housing benefit? It is bad housing policy and bad public finance policy.



**Mike Amesbury:** My hon. Friend is correct, and he will know that I am very familiar with the area that he refers to.

Surely it would be better to recycle that money and build the green social homes to provide for need, reduce costs and stimulate the economy. This Government talk about growth, and we do not have it. What better way could there be than to get Britain building and get Britain working? The result of that investment would be a long-term saving for the nation, while improving health and wellbeing and, importantly, the environment.

The National Housing Federation, Shelter, Crisis and the Local Government Association all point to figures of between 90,000 to 100,000 for the number of new homes needed every year over the next decade if we are to stand a chance of meeting demand—I mentioned the 1.2 million who are in housing need—yet the Conservative Government’s record on social housing is pitiful. Since coming to power, they have failed to build sufficient homes to meet demand and even to meet their own targets. Under right to buy, 2 million homes for social rent—public assets—have been sold off. Just last year, some 21,600 social homes were either sold or demolished, while only 7,500 new homes were built, leading to a net loss of 14,100 homes. That has happened every year since 2010; it is a familiar picture.

The Government aim to deliver just 32,000 social rented homes over the next five years. The Prime Minister is quite keen on maths—that is 6,400 a year. It is even less than they are building now, which is pitiful, so it gets even more pitiful. In contrast, post-war Governments built more than 100,000 homes for social rent right up until the end of the 1970s. Part of the answer to this housing affordability crisis has been staring us in the face for too long. It is time to summon that spirit of the 1945 Labour Government and the consensus years beyond it to build hope, houses and opportunity Britain.

If this Government do not change tack over the next 18 months, a future Labour Government must reprioritise social housing to tackle housing poverty and provide genuinely affordable housing for those in need. Our party has already committed to ensure that social housing is the second largest tenure, with that pledge made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), the shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing, Communities and Local Government, at the last Labour conference.

I want to put a number of points to the Minister. The affordable homes programme should be reinvigorated, with an increased focus on delivering homes for social rent over the next 18 months, not the current vandalised version of affordability that, in many cases, is anything but. Social rent of up to 80% of market rents in London, the south-east and many cities is just not realistic. The Government must change direction on their current proposals for section 106, given that 47% of affordable homes are currently funded by these means. The proposed infrastructure levy is becoming the Government’s very own magic money tree. We have all been in debates where we have been told that it is a remarkable, amazing levy that will pay for all these things. The one thing missing is affordable “affordable housing”.

The Government need to power up local councils and combined authorities, as argued by the Local Government Association, with even greater freedoms to borrow to build, while reforming planning to reduce the cost of land for public housing. I know that it is rather difficult

with Government Back Benchers and so forth, but they have to do the right thing. The Government should also direct Homes England to take a more interventionist approach in the marketplace and acquire the land needed for building. In their first 100 days, an incoming Labour Government will do much of that, and very much more, with our “take back control” Bill. I think it will be in the first 100 days after the King’s speech; I look forward to that moment.

Some councils, from Manchester to London, and out to Norwich and further afield in our nations, have started to build council housing again, but meeting the scale of need will require political leadership and missionary zeal to charge up councils as well as housing associations—certainly those that have not lost sight of their founding principles. We must ensure that there is capacity in planning departments to turbocharge that missionary zeal into building social homes. I believe that time is up for right to buy—that is a personal perspective. To protect and grow the public housing stock, redirect an element of that subsidy to first-time buyers, so that they can have first dibs on market-led housing development.

The current Government’s first homes scheme has delivered just 35 completed homes. It is a scheme that had lots of fanfare in the not-too-distant past, with a target of 10,000. I suppose I will pay some slight credit to the Government and the Minister: it is much better than what came before it, which was zero. I think that is referring to starter homes, none of which have been started in any way. The direction of travel on social housing regulation is the correct one, but putting the voice of the tenant at the heart of the community will require sufficient resources for tenants as well as social housing providers to improve housing stock.

I am interested to hear the Minister expand on that. What minimum standards can we expect to be required of social housing providers? Will we see a programme such as we saw some years ago, in the last Labour Government, which drove up standards of social housing? I hope that the Minister can update us on when we can expect to see section 21 abolished.

Let us consider the pressing question for the Minister: will she recognise that it is now time to make significant investment in building genuinely affordable social homes? If she changes tack in the next 18 months, maybe she can make a mark in history. If that is not the case, it is clearly time to step aside and let people and communities take control, with a Labour Government to provide hope, houses and opportunity.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** Can hon. Members remain standing so that I can see who wishes to speak? I do not want to put a time limit on Members, but if they can keep in mind a maximum of three and a half minutes when they make their speeches, it will give everyone an opportunity to speak. This is a very well-subscribed debate, and I know Members have important things that they wish to say.

2.48 pm

**Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on securing the debate and enabling us to have this vital discussion about social housing.

[Ben Everitt]

I am sure we will cover a broad range of issues relating to social housing; therefore, given the time limit, I will limit my comments to speaking about conversions and incentives to build social housing, where I know we need to be making much more ground than we already are. As of now, 145,000 new affordable homes need to be supplied in England each year to meet current demand, including 90,000 homes at social rent levels. However, Government figures show that just 59,000 new affordable homes were delivered in 2021-22, with only a small proportion for social rent, so we know that we need to do more.

I will cut to the chase: some 1 million households are currently on the social housing waiting list in England, and private sector rents are increasing at their fastest rate in 16 years. It is harder for younger people to afford social housing, and it is harder for anybody to find affordable housing. It is well documented that a lack of affordable housing options contributes to homelessness, which unfortunately remains a significant problem in my constituency of Milton North. It is vital that we deliver more affordable and social housing to keep people off the streets. Therefore, we must incentivise building more affordable social housing.

I have been looking at getting that done through conversions. The all-party parliamentary group for housing market and housing delivery, which I chair, is doing a joint inquiry with the all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness, which is spearheaded by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), who I am delighted to be stood opposite.

We must find a way to make it easier for council housing associations, individuals and organisations to build. Permitted development could be an opportunity for that. Between 2015-16 and 2019-20, a total of 72,980 new dwellings were added to our housing stock through permitted development rights, 89% of which were the result of office-to-residential conversions. We have all heard the horror stories about PDRs, so we must ensure quality and standards. In addition to boosting affordable supply through conversions, another crucial element to consider is the infrastructure levy itself. I welcomed the Minister's commitment at the Dispatch Box last year to look into exempting affordable accommodation from the infrastructure levy, following an amendment I tabled that would have done exactly that. Social housing should be included in that.

We must incentivise SME house builders to play a more significant role in the social housing sector. SMEs bring innovation, flexibility and local knowledge to the table and are often better equipped to take on small, bespoke projects than large firms. Therefore, we must make it much easier for them to enter the market.

The future of social housing in the UK requires a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach from both the Government and private sector. We must increase the supply of affordable housing, including social housing, by incentivising conversions and supporting SME builders. Consequently, we can realise our shared ambition, which is for everyone to have access to safe, secure, and affordable housing that meets the needs of our local communities.

2.52 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): Not only could I have made this speech in any year since I was first elected in 2005, I have made this speech in every year since then, because sadly, since long before that, there has been a sustained decline of social housing. Effectively, half the council homes have been lost since the right to buy was introduced as part of Thatcher's attack on social housing.

It has been a very political attack. There is a completely erroneous belief that social tenants vote Labour and that Conservative voters do not particularly like social housing to be built. Actually, a survey last week showed that 70% of Conservative voters do want more social housing to be built. Perhaps the Conservatives' electorate is slightly ahead of them on housing policy, because we are now in a deep housing crisis.

The cut to the social housing grant that was introduced in about 2011 and the freeze on rents, which prevented housing associations and councils expanding their stock, has really hobbled providers. This has been a 40-year process of decline. We have lost about half our council homes. It has gone from being a mainstream to a residual form of housing. Until we can reverse that, we will never resolve the housing crisis.

In fact, the struggle now is much greater. Because the last major building programmes were back in the '60s and '70s, many of those estates and homes are now either reaching the end of their useful life or need substantial repair. That money is not there. We now have, for sound environmental reasons, a huge bill for retrofitting and we also have—which we discovered in the wake of the Grenfell tragedy—a huge bill for fire safety. Against that, there has been a decline in the amount of money available. This is a created crisis. I do not believe that this Government are going to even begin to try to solve it in the next year, but a future Labour Government will have to tackle it head-on.

There are many practical ways. Yes, of course more grants and investment are needed, but there are underspends in Homes England. There are ways of incentivising developers. There are ways of changing plans to require a minimum of 50% affordable housing, particularly in areas of extreme shortage. That is not impossible; in Vienna the requirement is 66%. We need development corporations and an interventionist market in areas of high need.

One of the good things about canvassing, which I first started about 40 years ago, is that we get to see how people live. Forty years ago, we were worried about conditions in the private rented sector. Now, in many cases the social housing sector is just as bad. Housing associations are running their stocks badly, partly because they do not have the means to do it. Unless and until we have a Government that are serious about housing people on low and medium incomes particularly, but also the population generally, as was the pledge from Governments of both parties in years gone by—until we get that sea change in attitude, we are not going to resolve this problem. To think it can be tinkered with through the sorts of means this Government are introducing now is a pure fantasy.

2.56 pm

**Mrs Natalie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for

securing this important debate. Housing has long been my driving passion and interest. I have published extensively on housing. In that regard, I draw attention to the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my unpaid role in the Housing and Finance Institute.

Hon. Members know that I am a strong advocate for the importance of social and affordable housing. I grew up in council housing, and I firmly believe that it is social and affordable housing that provides a good home. That is somewhere that provides opportunity—a springboard for life chances—as well as stability, flexibility and affordability. A good home is not incidental or subsidiary to the other fundamental needs or priorities of a Government, such as health or education. Providing good homes is itself a fundamental need and priority. It is the foundation stone for families and people across all ages to live well and prosper in our society.

The evidence is clear that a good home is provided best in two forms of housing tenure: social housing and home ownership, not the private rented sector. The link between the private rented sector and deprivation has long been shown, and it is time to rebalance the long-standing issue of growth in that sector. The uncontrolled expansion is a grave error. There needs to be a fundamental change to rebalance the tenure mix and provide more social and affordable homes. The nation needs good homes to provide home ownership and stable social rented housing.

Last month, I published Operation Homemaker, which is a groundbreaking plan to house the homeless and provide permanent homes for the most vulnerable households in Britain. Nearly 100,000 households in our country are without a home of their own, including a staggering 11,000 children in bed and breakfast accommodation. The Homemaker plan is to build 100,000 homes over a year and a half. Those homes will house the homeless and provide a permanent home for every family stuck in temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfasts. Operation Homemaker will not only house the homeless, but boost the economy. Building the homes will provide a £15 billion stimulus to the economy, which will help to keep the building industry going and secure hundreds of jobs. The Homemaker plan can be funded by better using available funding. That is both public and private finance, revenue and capital spending. With private finance and institutional investment appetite, the funding and the planning permissions are available to deliver on this important ambition.

As a constituency MP, I am proud of the work that the Conservative-led Dover District Council has undertaken to provide new council and affordable homes for our local community. However, more must be done nationally to support those in need. It is time for Operation Homemaker—a new national mission to house the homeless and build the affordable homes that our country needs. We can and must deliver the social homes that are needed. The time to deliver social and affordable housing is not the future; it is right here and right now, and that is what we must do.

2.59 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on

securing this important debate and his excellent introduction on a subject that he is passionate about, as is every hon. Member here.

If our debates were guided by issues that constituents come to see us about, housing would be very near the top of the list. Whether it is tenants facing eviction, tenants coming to see me for the fourth or fifth time because the damp has still not been fixed, or people who simply want a roof over their heads, it is clear that we do not have enough housing at the right price, of the right quality, in the right places or of the right tenure.

I look at what the young people of today are facing: student loan repayments, sky-high private rents, huge deposits for a home, and maybe even saving for retirement. With inflation continuing to outstrip wage increases for many, even renting privately is a challenge, never mind saving for the future or for a home of their own. A young person who lives with their parents and cannot afford to move out, as many cannot, will probably not even qualify to get on the housing register in the first place. They are essentially trapped.

To get on the housing list now, people have to be in a pretty serious situation. Simply being unable to afford a place of one's own is no longer enough. Even with those restrictions, there are nearly 6,500 people on the housing register across my local authority area of Cheshire West, with more than 1,500 in the most urgent categories. For context, in the past year, only 922 vacant properties were advertised across the whole of Cheshire West. The average waiting time for an applicant in band A—which is for the most urgent cases, such as those involving domestic abuse or homelessness—is around 22 weeks, while the longest wait is just over three years. Those are just the most urgent cases—the so-called lucky few who can even get on the register in the first place.

The only answer is to massively increase the amount of council housing. As the LGA says, a generational step change in council house building is required to boost housing supply. What we have at the moment is a lottery. If there is a central Government grant going, or a new private development, where the developers might be required to build a few affordable homes, we might get a bit of new social housing, but it is piecemeal and nowhere near enough to meet demand.

The new builds we are seeing are not even enough to replace the homes lost to the right to buy, never mind to meet existing demand. I understand why, in the rush to reach the decent homes standard, many councils transferred their stock to housing associations at the start of this century, but that has led to council housing becoming detached from the communities it is supposed to serve. It is now all about asset management.

Although our council has built what it can, it is nowhere near what it needs to be, because of the straitjacket imposed by Government. Most of the new social housing built in my constituency in recent years has been built by housing associations, often based many miles away from the constituency, with no connection to the area, other than having a few dozen homes there. I doubt very much that the leaders of those organisations have spent much time in the constituency, if they have visited it at all.

When councils had the capacity and resources to plan over the long term for housing need, it was about so much more than just putting a roof over people's heads.



[Justin Madders]

It was about building communities, and successive generations living side by side in secure, well maintained, low-cost homes. We have lost all that. Decent and affordable housing, built in sustainable, joined-up communities, has the power to fundamentally improve people's lives, and the life chances of children in my constituency and across the country. What we have now is a market-first, people-last approach, which ultimately makes us all the poorer. Build more council houses and build them now.

3.3 pm

**Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Paisley. I thank my hon. Friend and north-western neighbour the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for securing this important debate. I know he is passionate about improving the provision of social housing in his constituency and across Britain.

Every single week my office is inundated with stories about scandalous rent hikes in the private sector, amounting to hundreds of pounds, and an ageing stock in the social sector, meaning damp and mould are rampant. Recent census data revealed that house prices in Stockport have risen by almost 50% in the last five years, compared with 20% in the rest of England and Wales. As a result, rents in the private sector are sky rocketing. Understandably, people are turning to an already oversubscribed social housing sector, where temporary and emergency accommodation is full.

Local housing allowance is dwarfed by the median rental value in the two broad market rental areas in my constituency, and with the Government's consistent delay in abolishing section 21 no-fault evictions, the security of tenure in the social sector is rightly and more understandably attractive. When the Chancellor announced his Budget last month, I was deeply disappointed that local authorities were not given the money to improve the housing stock, or the ability and finances to build more council houses.

I recently received an email from a woman living in social housing, who said that conditions were so bad that her one-year-old baby has

"had to stay with family as we have to protect her health. She was constantly coughing and had bad breathing".

Another example is a mother who wrote to me following an accident that left her paralysed from the waist down. She is in a property that has no wheelchair access and so is bedbound. There are currently no suitable properties for the family.

In the last fortnight I met with Stockport Homes, which is the primary social housing provider in my constituency. The truth is that it is so much more than a social housing provider. Whether by providing food and mental health or employment support to its tenants, or by tackling antisocial behaviour in and around its properties, it regularly goes above and beyond. Take, for example, the work it does through its money advice team, which supported more than 2,000 customers to obtain additional income worth £7.2 million. Stockport Homes is truly an example of an excellent social service.

But when I met with representatives from Stockport Homes, they shared with me the utter despair that they feel, day in, day out, about their inability to provide

suitable housing to the people who come through their doors, despite the excellent work and services they already offer. There are 7,000 households on the waiting list, 4,000 of which are in housing need of some kind. There has been an almost 30% increase in the number of homelessness inquiries from people currently in the private rented sector across the Stockport borough. A total of 569 properties have been reported as having damp, mould and condensation. If those figures are not shocking enough, in the last month a single studio flat received 325 bids. That means that 324 people missed out on securing one single-bed property, which demonstrates the exceptionally high demand in the Stockport constituency. I place on record my thanks to the chief executive, Helen McHale; the head of homelessness and rehousing, Jeff Binns; and all the staff at Stockport Homes who work so hard to provide for people in my constituency.

The Government must understand, though, that without addressing the inadequate finances and the much-needed upgrades to a significant portion of the stock, Stockport Homes will continue to struggle. The Government talk a good game on housing. The Secretary of State has previously publicly shamed failing social landlords, and the overdue renters reform Bill is coming, although it seems to be stuck in the pipeline. Beyond words and empty promises, what are the Government doing to ensure both that there is enough social housing provided and that the stock is of the highest quality, meeting the demands of tenants in Stockport and across Britain? I want to hear much more from the Minister on that.

3.7 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for introducing the debate, setting the scene so well and, by having the debate, giving us all an opportunity to participate. The Minister will obviously not be able to answer questions on Northern Ireland, because she does not have responsibility for that—it is a devolved matter—but I always like to come along and add a Northern Ireland perspective to debates. It is important that I do so, because I will replicate what everybody else is saying. The problems in the UK mainland are problems for us back home in Northern Ireland, so I want to make that contribution, if I can.

Housing issues have always been at the top of my agenda in my office, which perhaps indicates that back home we have the same problems that others have referred to. I work incredibly closely with the local housing executive and housing associations in my constituency of Strangford. I put on record, as the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) did, that the managers provide incredibly timely responses and always aim to do their utmost for their tenants and my constituents. I very much appreciate our working relationship and partnership.

There are issues, however, that need to be addressed for the future of social housing, so it is good to be here. I have no hesitation in saying that in my office—I am sure that yours is the same, Mr Paisley—we receive and deal with between five and 10 housing issues per day, for five to six days per week. It is a massive issue. When it comes to the workload in my office, the only thing that beats housing is benefits. More individuals are relying on social housing, especially because of the rise in the

cost of living—private rentals are so expensive and out of proportion. Many people are pushed financially to the very limit.

On 31 March 2022, there were 44,426 applicants on the social waiting list, and of those, 31,000—three quarters—were in housing stress. In other words, they were priorities. Others, including the hon. Member for Weaver Vale, have referred to the number of priorities. One of the issues that must be dealt with is the disparity between the amount of social housing available and the number of tenants waiting to be housed. I am very pleased that two new social housing developments are coming to my constituency—those properties will be allocated in about a month's time—but the number of priority tenants on the list has increased by 12% to 15% in the last number of years.

The locality of social housing must be addressed as well, as well as the sharing of properties. There was a news story this morning, which I am sure others will also have noticed. A gentleman died in a flat, and there were 16 people staying in that flat—multiple people in one property. We have a real issue.

The girls in my office would say that the issues we deal with are split 50:50 between maintenance issues and social housing transfers—50% for maintenance issues and 50% for housing allocation. Maintenance issues such as mould, damp and insulation are prevalent. That is one of the most important factors in providing a successful future for social housing. I asked a parliamentary question back in January about what the Department was doing to address the issues of damp and mould. The reply said:

“All social housing must be safe and decent, providing those living in homes with security and dignity.”

The problem is that that is not the reality. We will all have examples of that across our constituencies.

I am conscious of your direction on time, Mr Paisley, and I will conclude. Despite the issues, we have a social housing system to be proud of, and a system that looks out for and protects those who are at risk and vulnerable. We must do our job here, to help them do theirs. In this place, we have the capacity to improve things further down the line, and to help the social housing sector to create healthy and safe homes for those most in need. That is our job to do here. Let us do our best.

3.11 pm

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Paisley.

Recent figures suggest that at least 271,000 people are homeless in England. Of those, 2,400 are sleeping rough on any given night. We desperately need more social housing. In the 1950s, councils were building an average of 147,000 homes a year. Slums were cleared and people moved into decent modern homes. According to figures from the National Housing Federation, by the 1960s, a quarter of all the country's housing was council housing. There was a belief in state provision of housing.

Since those days, there has been a massive decline in council or social housing. The introduction of right to buy in 1980 under the Thatcher Government reduced the amount of social housing owned by councils and the amount of social housing overall. Following the Housing Act 1988, many councils transferred ownership

of their housing stock to housing associations, and housing associations continued to build more social homes through the 1990s and 2000s. However, a drastic reduction in Government funding since 2010 has seen fewer social and affordable homes built.

In 2010-11, nearly 36,000 social rented homes were started. The following year, after funding cuts, that number reduced to just over 3,000. But it is worse than that. Some 165,000 social homes for rent were either sold or demolished without direct replacement between 2012-13 and 2021-22. That is an average net loss of more than 16,000 desperately needed, genuinely affordable homes a year, meaning that those who cannot afford to buy their own home—that includes pensioners and those living in poverty—are often forced to rent privately and live in constant fear of rent hikes or eviction. It is not just people in poverty who are affected. A generation of young people are struggling to find a home in which they can have some dignity and raise a family.

The Government should be bringing forward an ambitious programme of new social homes built on brownfield sites to high energy efficiency standards. It is also important that existing social housing is maintained to a decent standard. It is a matter of real concern that after almost 13 years of Conservative Government, there are insufficient welfare rights agencies to support tenants when they need help with issues such as damp, mould and disrepair. I know from the casework I receive, as I am sure colleagues across the House do, that there is a desperate need for such support.

It is a matter of extreme concern that the Government have failed to address the crisis in supply of social housing. Successive Conservative Governments have not only singularly failed to build the social homes we need over the past 13 years, but they have actively sought to remove them on an unprecedented scale. We need a sea change in attitudes to social housing and a commitment and a belief that social housing is a social good. Without it, the misery of homelessness and insecure and overpriced accommodation will continue to prevail.

3.14 pm

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on securing this debate. If I had a fiver for every time I was asked by an older person to help them move to a bungalow, or I encountered a plea for help from a person with a disability who needs specialist accommodation, I could probably build a house. I could build half a street if I included all the individuals and families who are homeless, or who need more space for a growing family or an extra room so they can accommodate and care for a relative. After 13 years of Tory Government, we simply do not have the houses to meet those needs. All those people have been failed. We have simply failed to build sufficient social housing.

We do not just need to put a roof over people's heads; we need to provide safe homes that are fit for purpose in places where individuals and families can thrive without worrying about the end of yet another 12-month lease, which are so common in the private rented sector. More and more people are stuck in that sector when they should have a council house to rent.

[Alex Cunningham]

It is reprehensible that the Tories have abandoned their 2019 manifesto commitment to build 300,000 homes a year. The Prime Minister refused to say why when he spoke at Prime Minister's questions today. Perhaps the Minister will be able to answer that question. Thatcher produced the right-to-buy scheme and opened the door for millions to buy their council houses, but she failed to ensure that those homes were replaced when they were sold, which meant that there were insufficient homes to rent for future generations. The Labour Government from 1997 did not build enough houses to rent either, but they did concentrate on refurbishing millions of existing council homes, which had been neglected by the Thatcher and Major Governments for nearly two decades.

The Local Government Association says that we should

"give local government the powers and funding to deliver an ambitious build programme of 100,000 high-quality, climate-friendly social homes a year",

and I agree. It adds that that would

"save the public finances by £24.5 billion over 30 years, which includes a reduction in the housing benefit bill and temporary accommodation costs."

For a long time, what used to be our council housing stock has been transferred to housing associations, and they have succeeded in many ways, but I worry about the focus on building new houses rather than social houses for rent. More and more are being built for sale. I do not doubt that there is a place for that sort of activity, but we need a policy to drive a revolution in the building of affordable homes for rent. Shelter is banging the same drum. It says:

"Unless we act now, we face a future in which a generation of young families will be trapped renting privately for their whole lives, where more and more people will grow old in private rentals, where billions more in welfare costs will be paid to private landlords—and hundreds of thousands more people will be forced into homelessness."

My local authority, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, is also seeing rent increases, which are making housing more unaffordable for residents. There is therefore a greater demand for social housing. That comes at a time when there is a lower turnover in social housing, which means that the generations coming up that require housing do not get it. Of course, there are significant waiting lists for properties that can provide independent accommodation for those who have a family member with a disability.

Thirteen, the social housing provider, wants to upgrade its old houses, but it is a risky business because of the way the financial system works. We need that revolution, and I believe that only our Labour pledges will drive a generational step change in housing. Our people will be happier and healthier as a result.

3.18 pm

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Paisley. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for securing this really important debate and for his powerful contribution. He spoke passionately about this issue, which is close to many of our hearts.

Debates on social housing are personal to me, as they are to many people in Vauxhall. Like many other Members, I grew up on a council estate. I am the eldest of three girls, and I still remember being placed in temporary accommodation in a bed and breakfast in King's Cross. My mum never allowed us to miss school, so we still had to get on the tube every morning down to Brixton. I remember the joy we felt when we received our permanent accommodation in the Barrier block in Brixton, and the relief of not having to wheel around a suitcase or look at my belongings in a black bag.

Many years later, many of the constituents I represent are still in that vicious cycle of not having somewhere stable to call home. I look back on my childhood and almost feel guilty, because I had my own bedroom on our council estate. In many of my constituents' houses, three, four or five siblings share a bedroom. That is totally unacceptable.

This morning in the Jubilee Room, I hosted, along with Shelter, an event looking at young people's housing aspirations. Many of the issues that we have discussed today came up. Those young people cannot start their lives—how can we expect the next generation to build a life and study properly if they do not get an adequate night's sleep?

Housing is a basic human right. One of the things that I remember about growing up on a council estate is the fact that people stereotyped us and looked down at us. That is still how social tenants are treated but, as we all know from our casework, these tenants just want to live their lives, pay their rent and work. They have aspirations. The sneering in some of the media about people in social housing is part of why we are not building enough. We need to believe in those people—they are our future.

The home I had in Brixton gave me and my family a roof over our heads. In my borough of Lambeth, more than 36,000 people are on the housing waiting list, and a number of them will never get the social housing that I grew up in. My casework, like that of many other Members, is filled with housing issues. Housing is the top issue—repairs, damp, mould. I will read out one example of an email I received recently:

"I'm 27 years old and I currently live with my disabled 70 year old mother and poorly 92 year old grandmother. I am currently 33 weeks pregnant and at my wits end with the issues I'm facing. Over the past 7 years one of the bedrooms has suffered dark stains that come through the wall. These stains are so severe that a recent workman told me that it looks like there has been a fire. This is the room I have been breathing in the last 8 months of my pregnancy and this is the room I plan to bring my newborn baby into. As my due date is looming my anxiety is through the roof. Please please help."

After the tragic case of Awaab Ishak, nobody should be living in those circumstances—but they are, because our housing associations and councils do not have the funding. The Minister is the 15th Housing Minister since 2010. When will the Government make housing a key priority? They keep on talking about it. I know that the Minister is very able, and I hope we will see a step change when it comes to building more houses, supporting our local councils and making sure that my constituents and many more do not have to live in this way.

3.22 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure, Mr Paisley. Here is a scandal: in York over the past four years, just 94 social housing units



were developed, in addition to some resettlement homes. Currently, just 27 units are in development. Over that period, there have been 229 sales of social housing, while the waiting list has more than doubled—an average of 24 social homes built and 57 sold each year.

Meanwhile, York has seen the growth of short-term holiday lets: this morning, AirDNA showed 2,056 places to let. Why does that matter? It matters because people who want to rent social housing are forced to rent private housing, then their landlords serve section 21 notices, kicking out their tenants and flipping homes into Airbnbs, while residents have nowhere to go. We are drowning in luxury accommodation, with relocations, second homes and empty homes having driven up the “for sale” market costs by 23.1% in York just last year—the highest in the country.

There is a housing crisis. Ownership is inaccessible, current residential properties are flipped into Airbnbs, private rent is unaffordable and insecure, and council house builds number fewer than half the sales. There are no excuses, but that is what we get after 13 years of Tory Governments combined with a Lib Dem council.

The stock is old, cold and full of mould and damp. As I was switching off my laptop last night, there was yet another email, pleading:

“I live in a 2 bed second floor flat. I have 3 kids. I’m overcrowded and I’ve got bad mould on bedroom windows and on walls and living room windows are broken and unsafe for my 3 and 4 year old kids. Can you please help?”

It was not the first such email that day and, given that we receive hundreds and hundreds of cases, it will not be the last. Overcrowding, neglected conditions, people placed in completely unsuitable neighbourhoods—that is York today under this Conservative Government and the Lib Dem-Green council. My city and my residents are ignored as developers and private landlords profit. Our council and this Government are not incensed by the burning injustice of their own failure, but seek every reason to justify it.

Forgive me for being angry, but I am. I talk to these families every week. I am part of their community. I see the price of neglect; I know their stories, frustrations, sadness and lost dreams. When I see the Ministers, Government and councils with all the power to make a difference squander opportunities and fritter away the privilege that elected power gives to transform lives, it says politics is a sham, and politicians must be shamed if they cannot even build the homes that the poorest among us need. They cannot even find the parliamentary time for the promised renters reform Bill. Instead they publish Bill after Bill, consuming an inordinate amount of time fighting petty political battles, crushing workers and human rights, rather than using their power to retrofit homes and build the new ones that we need to restore communities and give people a new start. Labour will do that, because that is why we are here. It is the purpose of our politics.

I want no more embarrassing justifications. We have the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill in the House of Lords right now. As the Government heard my cries about Airbnb and introduced legislative changes and a consultation, I ask them to do the same in that Bill to bring forward the legislative changes to build a new generation of social housing. The opportunity is now. It must not be missed.

3.25 pm

**Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on securing this debate. We have heard fantastic, powerful speeches, particularly from Labour Members. I add my voice to say that the UK faces a severe housing crisis.

As the Member of Parliament for Luton South, I find that housing is the most common issue that local residents contact me about. High rents, poor quality housing and low rental stock mean that many Luton residents struggle to access affordable, safe, healthy and secure housing. Luton council has over 8,000 families on its housing waiting list, many with complex and multiple needs, and over 1,000 families in temporary accommodation. That is completely unsustainable and getting worse with the increase in section 21 no-fault evictions in Luton. Alongside low pay, rents in Luton are high mainly because of the town’s proximity to London, and the average house price is £289,000. That is 10 times the average wage in Luton, so owning their own home is a pipe dream for many.

We can see that the Government do not recognise the importance of a good affordable home. Around 2 million private renting households—about 38% of the total of those in the private rented sector—receive housing costs support through either universal credit or housing benefit. Yet the Government have chosen to freeze local housing allowance rates at the same time as rent inflation continues and new cost of living pressures have emerged. In Luton, Institute for Fiscal Studies analysis shows that there is now a £100 deficit in the local housing allowance rate in comparison with the lowest rents in the area. That does not acknowledge the types of properties that people need, as high demand for family homes means that the average rent for larger homes continues to grow.

In Luton, all homeless applications are placed in band 2 on the choice-based letting system. For a three-bedroom property, which is where the high demand is, the likely wait time is four to five years. That is four to five years of bringing up children in overcrowded and unsuitable accommodation. Without action, it will get worse over the coming years. The Government’s decision making is forcing people in Luton South and across the country into poverty.

I am proud that the Labour party has committed to be the first Government in a generation to restore social housing, including council housing, to the second largest form of tenure. The next Labour Government will rebuild our social housing stock and bring homes back into the ownership of local councils and communities. Home ownership will be opened up to millions more. For those in private renting, we will put into law a new renters charter and a new decent homes standard. Unlike the Tories, we know that housing is not a market, but a fundamental human right. The title of this debate is “Future of Social Housing”, but, as so many have said today, the future is social housing; the future is council housing.

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** Before I call the SNP spokesperson, I thank colleagues for self-disciplining themselves brilliantly and making sure that we got to this point without my having to call anyone to order. I call the SNP spokesperson, Chris Stephens.

3.29 pm

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I noted that your friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), exercised self-discipline, which is not always the case.

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** It is because I am in the Chair.

**Chris Stephens:** I noticed your strict chairing, Mr Paisley, but it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I thank my good friend, the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), for opening the debate. He said a number of things that resonated with me; in fact, I got flashbacks when he talked about the challenges in the private rented sector. To this day, I remember the exchange I had with the landlord associations in the Work and Pensions Committee. They told me there was no such thing as “No DSS” and no adverts put out that said it, and then I managed to find one that said, “No DSS. Small dogs considered.” I am still waiting on an answer to the vital question in that exchange: did the small dog have to provide proof of income to get a property? Colleagues raising these types of debates, and the work of the Select Committee system, ensured that that particular policy was put in the bin.

The hon. Gentleman talked at great length about the very real need for social housing. I will touch on that, but not only is there a need for social housing; we need to acknowledge the support provided by social housing providers to their tenants on a daily basis. They must provide those wraparound services because of the effects of Government policy and a broken social security system, such as the challenges people face getting pension credit or disability benefit, or getting deductions at the very start of a universal credit claim, and all the other problems that social housing providers have to support their tenants with.

A number of colleagues have talked at length about the level of rents. With that comes food price inflation—currently at 18.2%. I thank the Linthouse housing association for providing the Linthouse larder, along with Good Food Scotland and Feeding Britain; Southside housing association for opening the Cardonald larder; and the Wheatley Group, which has opened the Threehills larder in Glasgow South West. These Glasgow housing associations have a vision of ensuring that there is affordable food for their tenants right across the great city of Glasgow. What is the benefit of that? It has been calculated that someone who uses an affordable larder saves £20 a week on their weekly shop. That goes a long way to help tenants to not only afford their rent, but buy other things, and it helps them with this Tory-made cost of living crisis.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government are leading the way in the delivery of affordable housing across the UK. They have delivered 115,558 affordable homes since 2007, over 81,000 of which were for social rents; that includes 20,520 council homes. The Scottish Government are working intensively with social landlords to develop an agreement on a below-inflation rent increase for the next financial year.

The Scottish Government are also committed to tackling disrepair in housing, which many colleagues have talked about, by driving a culture in which good maintenance

is a high priority. Social landlords in Scotland are already required by law to meet the tolerable standard, which forms part of the Scottish housing quality standard. That requires housing to be substantially free from rising or penetrating damp. Compliance is monitored annually by the Scottish housing regulator.

One of the challenges we face in Glasgow South West is that housing provision for asylum seekers does not often meet the Scottish housing quality standard. The Home Office has argued that there is no need for asylum accommodation to meet the Scottish housing quality standard. I must say, I find that a disgrace, but I am sure Glasgow is not the only asylum dispersal area where we find that housing standards for those seeking sanctuary in the UK do not meet basic standards.

**Andy Slaughter:** The hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech. Understandably, most of this debate has been about general needs housing, but there is also social housing, asylum seeker and refugee housing and housing for Roma Gypsies and travellers. These are especially neglected groups, and the Government have an appalling record on each of them.

**Chris Stephens:** I agree that there is an appalling record here, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman agrees with me that it is the social housing providers that have allowed their homes and accommodation to be let out to the Home Office to provide accommodation, but far too much of it is being let out to the private sector. I hope to work with him in holding the Government to account on these issues.

It is important that the Scottish Government are committed to enabling disabled people to live independently in their own home where possible. The Scottish Government want disabled people in Scotland to have choice, dignity and freedom to access suitable homes and to enable them to participate as full and equal citizens. The Scottish Government have flexible grant funding arrangements, ensuring that specialist housing provision identified by local authorities is a priority, so that disabled people can be supported. The Scottish accessible homes standard will futureproof new homes, building in accessibility and adaptability from the start, to ensure that older and disabled people have an increased range of housing options and to reduce the need to make costly changes to people's homes as their needs change.

It is also important that steps are taken to strengthen rights for tenants and to prevent homelessness. Tackling homelessness and ending rough sleeping is a priority for the Scottish Government. On top of the funding provided through the local government settlement, the Scottish Government are providing a total of £100 million funding from their multi-year Ending Homelessness Together fund to transform the homelessness support system. I hope that the UK Government will look closely at the situation of people with no recourse to public funds. Too many people with no recourse to public funds are at risk of becoming homeless or sleeping rough. I hope that the Government look again at this issue, because the clear view of the Scottish National party is that nobody should be at risk of homelessness or destitution because of their immigration status.

As other colleagues have already said, the UK Government should—indeed, must—take urgent action to support struggling households by increasing the local

housing allowance rates and scrapping poverty-inducing Tory policies; no devolved Administration should have to mitigate those policies, but that is what they have to do.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's response and I thank hon. Members for participating in this debate.

3.37 pm

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley.

I start by warmly congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on securing this incredibly important debate and on the compelling remarks he made to open it. His personal commitment to tackling the housing crisis in all its manifestations is second to none. He made a passionate case today for doing what is necessary both to tackle the present chronic undersupply of genuinely affordable social homes and to drive up standards in those that already exist. I thank all the other hon. Members who have contributed this afternoon in an extremely powerful set of speeches, particularly those of Labour Members, who really brought home the human cost of the neglect in recent years.

A wide range of issues has been raised in the debate this afternoon, but the vast majority of them have related either to the pressing need to build more social homes or to the equally pressing need to ensure that our existing social housing stock is well managed and of good quality. I will seek to address each issue in turn, starting with supply.

It is beyond dispute that England's social housing deficit is now immense. Over 1.2 million households are now on local authority waiting lists, and that number is almost certainly a significant underestimate of the number of families for whom social housing would be an appropriate tenure if it were available. The point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) that because successive Governments have failed to build enough social homes, millions of families are trapped in overcrowded or unsuitable properties, an increasing number of low-income households have been forced into insecure, unaffordable and often substandard private rented housing, and the number of households in temporary accommodation has rocketed from 48,000 in 2010 to 99,000 in 2022.

The cost of this tenure shift has been borne not only by those trapped in inappropriate housing, who are often at risk of homelessness, but by the state in the form of a rapidly rising housing benefit bill, which now stands at a colossal £23.4 billion per year. That sum amounts to more than the total running costs of several Government Departments, yet when it comes to social housing supply, the record of successive Conservative-led Governments since 2010 has been nothing short of woeful. As my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale mentioned, the Department's own data makes it clear that just 7,528 social homes were built last year. At the same time, 21,638 were either sold or demolished. That is a net loss of 14,110 genuinely affordable homes when we know that we need to build around 90,000 a year if we are ever to meet housing need.

That meagre 2021-22 output figure is not an aberration. By means of slashed grant funding, the introduction of the so-called affordable rent tenure, increased right-to-buy

discounts and numerous other policy interventions, Conservative-led Governments have actively engineered the decline of social housing over the past 13 years, presiding over an average net loss of 13,000 social homes in each and every one of them. For all that the present Secretary of State waxes lyrical about the need to build more social homes, the steps that the Government are actually taking—namely, slightly tilting the balance of affordable homes programme spending towards social rent and providing local authorities with some additional flexibilities around the use of right-to-buy receipts—are not only too little, too late but undermined by other measures that Ministers are committed to enacting; not least, as my hon. Friend mentioned, the introduction of a new infrastructure levy that will almost certainly deliver less affordable housing overall than is provided through the present developer contribution system. Labour is the only party seriously committed to a marked increase in social house building. We will set out plans ahead of the general election that will make clear the level of our ambition and how we intend to meet it.

Given the chronic shortage of social homes across England and the corresponding lack of choice available to tenants, it is critical that what social housing stock remains is of decent standard, yet we know that the lives of far too many social housing tenants are blighted by poor, unsafe and unhealthy conditions. The shared recognition across these benches of that fact and the consequential need for the Government to act—*[Interruption.]*

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** Order. There is a vote in the other Chamber, and there will be at least two votes, possibly three. Hopefully, we will be back here at about a quarter past the hour to complete the debate.

3.42 pm

*Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.*

4.19 pm

*On resuming—*

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** I thank colleagues for making their way back so promptly; that is very helpful. I call the Opposition spokesperson—you have six minutes, or thereabouts.

**Matthew Pennycook:** Thank you, Mr Paisley. As I was saying, the shared recognition that exists across these Benches of the fact that the lives of far too many social housing tenants are blighted by poor, unsafe and unhealthy conditions, and of the consequential need for the Government to act, enabled the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill to complete its Commons stages in short order.

However, when it comes to ensuring that standards in social housing improve markedly and rapidly, the Bill is not a panacea. The onus to drive reform is, of course, ultimately on the sector itself, and the steps being taken following the publication of the "Better Social Housing" review are a welcome sign that it may be doing just that. However, the Government are ultimately responsible for the state of social housing in England and, subsequent to the Bill's receiving Royal Assent, the Government will still have a significant role to play in assisting social landlords to improve their stock and tackle the underlying causes of problems such as damp, mould and leaks.



[Matthew Pennycook]

The problem is that political choices made by successive Conservative-led Governments have piled significant financial pressure on to social landlords. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) argued earlier, the cumulative impact of having to build new, affordable homes despite swingeing grant funding reductions; the four-year 1% rent cut imposed between 2016 and 2020; the fact that the shortfall arising from this year's 7% rent cut is unfunded; and the long-term challenges posed by decarbonisation and building safety in the absence of adequate Government support cannot be overstated.

Social landlords who wish to improve their existing stock face a monumental challenge. We need a Government who at least recognise that situation and are willing to explore what more is required from them, not least in funding and financing mechanisms to support social landlords to upgrade their stock, yet we see no signs that the present Government are giving the issue the attention it deserves. It is therefore likely to be yet another task that will fall to the next Labour Government.

The historical and ongoing failure to build enough social rented homes has seen growing numbers of families trapped in overcrowded, unsuitable, insecure or unaffordable properties. Those families suffer in terms of diminished health, wellbeing and life chances, and the state also pays in the form of an eye-watering and ever-rising housing benefit bill. Social housing is at the heart of the solution to the housing crisis, and the Labour party is committed to its renewal and rebirth through a substantial programme of social house building and further measures to drive up standards in our existing stock.

When it comes to social homes, “more” and “better” must be our watchwords. It is high time we had a Government who do not just pay lip service to the importance of social housing, but are wholeheartedly committed to providing decent, safe, secure and genuinely affordable homes for all who need them.

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** I call the Minister—our third Rachel of the day.

4.22 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean):** It is a great pleasure to serve under you, Mr Paisley. Before I start, may I seek your guidance? How much time do we have for the debate?

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** You have 10 minutes, Minister; we probably have another 12 minutes left.

**Rachel Maclean:** Thank you—I will crack on, then. I thank the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for today's really important debate. It is a pleasure to be here and to respond for the very first time on this particular issue in this Chamber.

The hon. Member powerfully articulated the case for building more social homes not just in his constituency, but across the country—that is reflected in the Members here. It goes without saying that that is an objective we all very much share. I will be responding to the comments made by Members, both in the course of my speech and at the end, and I thank every Member for making powerful contributions.

I start by reaffirming the unshakeable commitment of the Government to driving up both the quality and quantity of this nation's social housing stock. It is a core tenet of our levelling-up agenda, and that has been reflected in recent years, starting with our affordable homes programme. The Government have been clear that they are entirely committed to increasing the supply of affordable housing in the country. That is why we launched the £11.5 billion affordable homes programme in 2020, with a commitment to deliver tens of thousands of affordable homes for both sale and rent.

At this point, I would like to say a bit about the social rent component of our affordable homes programme. We recognise how vital these homes are to building and maintaining thriving communities, and I was particularly struck by the very fluent remarks of the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) on this point; she really brought it to life and I thank her for doing so.

I know that every hon. Member will agree that homes for social rent are a fundamental part of our housing stock—a lifeline for those who would struggle to obtain a home at market rates. It was absolutely right for us to bring social rent homes into the scope of the affordable homes programme, as the Government did in 2018. Since then, we have doubled down in our levelling-up White Paper on our commitment to increase the supply of social rented homes, while also improving the quality of housing across the board in both the social and private rented sectors. The affordable homes programme has been changed to meet this commitment, with further increases to the share of social rented homes we are planning to deliver.

However, although social rent is a key element to our approach, we are also a Government who truly believe in supporting aspiring homeowners to take their first step on to the housing ladder. We understand what a difference that increased sense of security can make to all aspects of someone's life and the lives of their family. That is why home ownership continues to be a fundamental part of the affordable homes programme offer and we will continue to deliver a significant number of homes through our shared ownership tenure.

**Alex Cunningham:** At Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister dodged the question as to why the Conservative party was reneging on its manifesto commitment to build 300,000 homes a year. Can the Minister answer the question and say why that has happened?

**Rachel Maclean:** The hon. Gentleman must be telepathic, because I was just about to come to that point. We are more broadly focused on accelerating housing delivery to make home buying a reality for a new generation, so we must build homes in the places that people want to live and work. As the Prime Minister said, and I agree with him, we want decisions about homes to be driven locally, which is why we need to get more local plans in place to deliver the homes that our communities need. We are working tirelessly across the country with our local partners and we intend to deliver 300,000 homes per year, as our commitment set out, so that we create a more sustainable and affordable housing market that benefits everybody.

However, I am not here only to talk about commitments, because it will make no difference unless we deliver on those commitments. We are making progress in our

mission to increase housing supply and the numbers back that up. Many Members talked about numbers; let me give them some. Since 2010, we have delivered over 632,000 affordable homes, including 441,000 affordable homes for rent, over 162,000 of which were for social rent.

I hope that the hon. Member on the Opposition Front Bench, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), will forgive me for making the comparison, but it is worth noting that this Government have delivered more affordable homes in the last 12 years than were delivered in the preceding 13 years of a Labour Government. Actually, I note that the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) agrees with me. He said very clearly—

**Mike Amesbury:** Will the Minister give way?

**Rachel Maclean:** When I have finished this point, I will. The hon. Member for Stockton North said very clearly that the last Labour Government did not build enough social homes, either to rent or to buy, and I agree with him. *[Interruption.]* I will let the hon. Member for Weaver Vale intervene on me, but I want to answer his point. He has set out that he thinks a Labour Government are the answer to this situation; I disagree. A Labour Government are not the answer—the last Labour Government did not build enough affordable homes, social homes or council homes. If we look at Labour-run Wales, we see that they have an appalling record of building social housing.

Two London MPs spoke in the debate to highlight problems in London. I would like to remind—

**Matthew Pennycook:** Will the Minister give way?

**Rachel Maclean:** When I have finished my remarks. I would like to remind the House that the Mayor of London is responsible for housing in London. He is a Labour Mayor of London and the problems there lie firmly at his door.

Many Members have also spoken about councils. I would like to point out my own local council's record. Conservative-run Redditch Borough Council is delivering council housing. That is happening now that the Conservatives are in control of the borough. When Labour was in control of Redditch Borough Council, it delivered precisely zero.

**Mike Amesbury** *rose*—

**Matthew Pennycook** *rose*—

**Rachel Maclean:** I give way, first to the hon. Member for Weaver Vale, who first asked me to.

**Mike Amesbury:** I thank the Minister for giving way. I should have welcomed her to her place, so I will get that on the record now.

This debate is about the future of social homes. I keep referring to that vandalised version of the definition of “affordable homes”; many of them are not affordable. On the track record of the previous Labour Government, let us compare social housing build. In those last few years of a Labour Government, considerably more

social homes were built than under this Government—not enough, as hon. Members have said, but, going forward, the next Labour Government definitely will build enough.

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank the hon. Member for his remarks. I listened carefully to the response of the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich on the Front Bench. What I heard is our agreement about the need to build more social homes to rent or buy, and Government Members also set that out very clearly. What I did not hear—from any Opposition Member—was a clear answer on how they will do that, so we await that.

**Matthew Pennycook:** Will the Minister give way?

**Rachel Maclean:** No. With respect, the hon. Gentleman has had his time, and I need to get these points on the record.

I want to talk about what we are doing. To support continued delivery, in March this year we announced that local authorities will have access to a new concessionary Public Works Loan Board interest rate for council house building from June this year. Local authorities have a real part to play in that endeavour. We are giving them the flexibility to make locally led decisions that deliver the best deal for their communities.

The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will create a new infrastructure levy—many Members touched on that, so it is important that we set the record straight. The new infrastructure levy will capture more land value uplift. That will enable us to deliver even more affordable housing, which is badly needed.

Local authorities will continue to benefit from the £11.5 billion affordable homes programme, which we have discussed today, along with the scrapping of the housing revenue account borrowing cap. They will also benefit from greater flexibility, which someone mentioned from a sedentary position, in how they can use receipts from right-to-buy sales. I strongly urge councils to make use of those measures so that we can see more new homes built in the places where they are needed the most.

We briefly touched on social housing standards. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities could not have been clearer in his statements to the House when he said that every person in this country, no matter where they are from, what they do or how much they earn, deserves to live somewhere that is decent, safe and secure.

The tragedy of Awaab Ishak's death made clear to us all the devastating consequences of inaction. The time for promises of improvements is well and truly over. Awaab's law has been added to the Bill, with new requirements for landlords to address hazards such as damp and mould in social homes within a fixed period.

I want to finish by thanking all the Members who have contributed. We are committed to the abolition of section 21 eviction orders—

**Hon. Members:** When?

**Rachel Maclean:** Very soon—Members do not have long to wait. They will have all their questions answered in due course.

[Rachel Maclean]

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) for his excellent speech on social housing. I reassure him that social housing will be part of the infrastructure levy, and it was a pleasure to meet his small builders and business experts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) for her considerable expertise in the sector and for bringing to us the Operation Homemaker programme. I thank her for all the work she is doing to help us.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who highlighted similar issues in Northern Ireland; the hon. Members for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), for Stockton North and for Vauxhall; the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who will know that we are committed to introducing the measures she has called for to control Airbnbs; and the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins). I thank everybody who has contributed. We will not stand for any tenant being mistreated—[*Interruption.*] I forgot to thank the hon. Gentleman from the Scottish National party Front Bench, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), for his contribution. That is all I will say on the matter—[*Laughter.*] We are committed to working with all hon. Members across the House to ensure that we get the safe and decent homes people deserve.

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** Thank you, Minister. It is clear that Mr Stephens needs to try harder to get noticed. Mr Amesbury, you have one minute to wind up.

4.33 pm

**Mike Amesbury:** I thank everybody for the good spirit in which they staged the debate. Everybody made powerful contributions, particularly the Labour Members. They were genuinely passionate about building a new generation of decent, affordable social housing. The future is social housing, and the future is a Labour Government to build it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the future of social housing.

## Litter Action Groups

4.36 pm

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** I will call Mr Virendra Sharma to move the motion and will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention in 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up the debate, but I understand that there may be a couple of interventions, which have been signalled to the Member who will move the motion, and the Minister is also agreeable to that. I call Mr Sharma.

4.37 pm

**Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of support for litter action groups.

It is a great honour to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I called this debate for two main reasons, the first of which is to recognise and thank those in my constituency who tirelessly volunteer to make it a better and safer place. They do not do that as a job; they do it because they see the great strain the council is under and the lack of awareness among too many people of the cost of littering and fly-tipping. In particular, therefore, I want to thank LAGER Can—Litter Action Group for Ealing Residents—and its leader and inspiration, Cathy Swift. Cathy is in the great tradition of British volunteers: she rolls up her sleeves, digs in and does not take no for an answer. National Rail, take note: that trackside still is not litter-free; you may not have granted her access to the trackside yet, but no is not the right answer. I hope you will forgive me, Mr Paisley, for gesturing to the Public Gallery and thanking everyone here today from LAGER Can, and the other volunteers, for their work.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend also take this opportunity to join me in commending the huge effort by Harrow Litter Pickers, a group set up and co-ordinated by the remarkable Casey Dalton, which last year collected more than 11,500 bags of litter in the London Borough of Harrow? Does he agree that the Minister should be clear that local authorities should work with litter-picking groups to support their efforts and that some sort of nationally devised standard to help quantify those relationships might be helpful in holding local councils accountable for the support they give or, sadly, potentially do not give litter-picking groups?

**Mr Sharma:** I really appreciate and acknowledge the contribution made by my hon. Friend. The Harrow team work closely with LAGER Can in my constituency; we work together to improve conditions. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I am sure the Minister has also taken note of his suggestion.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate. He is speaking about his constituency, and the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) is backing him up. In my constituency of Strangford, it is the youth groups, the community groups, the Boys' Brigade and the Girls' Brigade and action groups that have taken it upon themselves to go out and clean the place up, and they have done extremely well. What our council does, which might be interesting to other speakers, is give them the pickers, the safety bibs and the bags, and it picks the rubbish up afterwards. That is an example of the council and local volunteers working together.



**Mr Sharma:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his suggestion, which I will come to later in my speech.

I want to raise awareness of the constructive relationship that LAGER Can has with Ealing Council. It makes them both more effective, saves hard-stretched resources and shows the value of volunteers and the esteem they are held in. Without them, much of the work would not get done and we would all be worse off. I thank Ealing Council. It has recognised the value of the partnership and has worked with LAGER Can, supporting that organisation in material ways that make a difference.

That is a success story, but it is not the same everywhere. People across the country could benefit from other councils adopting this model, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) have suggested.

We have a serious issue with fly-tipping in Ealing, Southall. Brilliant organisations such as LAGER Can are taking action to reduce the problem, and we, the politicians, must support their efforts and heed their advice.

**Kim Leadbeater** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important and timely debate on litter action groups. This issue is very close to my heart as the proud chair of the tidy Britain all-party parliamentary group. My hon. Friend might be aware of the recent Great British spring clean campaign, organised by Keep Britain Tidy, which was a huge success and saw groups across the country collect thousands of bags of litter. Will he join me in thanking Keep Britain Tidy and everyone who took part in the Great British spring clean, including the excellent groups in my constituency, such as Keep Hecky Tidy and Cleckheaton in Bloom, which volunteer year round to keep their neighbourhoods clean and free of litter?

**Mr Virendra Sharma:** I thank my hon. Friend for reminding us of the role that Keep Britain Tidy has played in the whole campaign, not just in one area of the country. I thank her for joining us in this debate as the chair of the APPG.

LAGER Can is identifying hotspots and clearing them. That intelligence and action helps Ealing Council. The group is not just tackling the problem as it presents itself, but working to reduce it in the future.

LAGER Can is partnering with schools and is having a great impact. Khalsa school in Norwood Green in my constituency won the Young Litter Heroes award this year, recognising pupils' efforts and their commitment to promoting environmental awareness and reducing litter in communities. Khalsa school's environmental message is about protecting our green spaces, and these brilliant litter heroes will be the next generation, reducing and tackling fly-tipping and littering for good.

Last year, LAGER Can volunteers donated at least 16,506 hours to Ealing Council, saving it approximately £282,000 in 2022, and similar amounts in 2020 and 2021. Of course, this is not a saving—the work just would not have been done without these volunteers, who are performing a valuable service for Ealing Council and everyone who lives in the borough. I declare my interest as one of those volunteers helping in my constituency, in Norwood Green, Southall Green, around the station and in the canal.

LAGER Can is clear and grateful in its words:

“Ealing Council provides excellent support to LAGER Can.”

As part of that support, Ealing Council provides the group with some essentials—litter grabbers, LAGER Can-branded rubbish sacks, work gloves and third-party and employer's insurance—and ensures the prompt removal and disposal of the rubbish collected, even from private land. A volunteer provided with a litter grabber and a roll of bags will have repaid the council in less than one hour of volunteering—LAGER Can is great value for money.

However, the council does not just offer essentials; it works with LAGER Can. Ealing Council makes engagement a priority, and Cathy and other volunteers are able to speak to key decision makers in the council regularly to make suggestions and understand why decisions are taken. Ealing Council is usually highly responsive to requests made on behalf of members. It is rewarding for LAGER Can members to know that their requests are being taken seriously. Those involved do not agree on everything, but everyone sees the relationship as constructive and valuable, and working together as partners is conducive to good-faith working.

That amazing local example should be available to volunteers everywhere. I know that there are people across the city and around the country willing and ready to do the same, but they run up against bureaucracy time and time again. LAGER Can is part of national groups, and by working with a wide range of people it has identified key areas where the Minister can help other groups to grow. I would therefore like to put four questions and challenges to the Minister.

First, volunteers need more support. In some places, such as Ealing, volunteers are encouraged and nurtured, while, in others, groups are threatened with fines for taking the rubbish they collect to the local tip. The Government could help to co-ordinate the response, with national good-practice support for volunteer litter-picking groups. The savings available are clear to see, and that should surely encourage any of the more sceptical councils.

Secondly, attitudes towards enforcement appear to vary in different parts of the country. In some areas, councils react to fly-tipping by installing more CCTV and imposing more and bigger fines, while other, neighbouring boroughs take a more lenient approach. That only encourages “cross-border” fly-tipping, moving the problem around and leaving offenders to dump their waste in areas where they know that enforcement is weaker. We would like to see a national standard on fly-tipping, as suggested earlier, based on the approach taken by the stricter boroughs, which do not hesitate to name, shame and fine culprits.

Thirdly, the introduction of a deposit return scheme is welcome. That will lead to less littering. However, the failure to include glass bottles is a problem that we can avoid, and it should be rethought. The Government are also taking action on the consumption of nitrous oxide, but the canisters are still a problem. It is difficult to find anywhere to recycle them, although some scrap metal dealers are willing to. The Government should act to ensure that these containers are manufactured in a recyclable way.

Fourthly, there is the issue of wet wipes. The build-up of wet-wipe islands is devastating for wildlife

[Mr Virendra Sharma]

and people. Many fish in our rivers have plastic fibres clogging up their digestive system, and the situation is only getting worse. The plastic fibres are contaminating rivers, and wipes are building up in large numbers on the foreshores of the Thames and other rivers. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) has campaigned tirelessly on that. There must be an end to plastic in wet wipes; I urge the Government to include a ban on it in upcoming legislation.

I am lucky enough to represent an area where there are good news stories that set an example to others. That does not mean that we are without our problems, but I hope that the good practice seen in my area can be emulated, so that there is improvement in other areas. Once again, my congratulations to LAGER Can and Cathy Swift, and many thanks to other hon. Members, including the Minister.

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** Thank you, Mr Sharma, for your most uplifting speech.

4.50 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow):** It is a pleasure to have you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) on securing this debate about litter, an issue that is so important to so many of us. It is great to have the opportunity to talk about it and what we are doing about it, and to highlight and commend the many volunteers and groups doing so much commendable work to tackle this criminal activity, and this blight on our communities.

It was really interesting to hear about the hon. Gentleman's local group, the Litter Action Group for Ealing Residents, otherwise known as LAGER Can—a nice, easy name to remember. It should not be confused with the all-party beer group, or anything to do with it. That sounds like a really good model, and Cathy, whom he mentioned, should be commended; I share in his comments. We also heard of excellent work done by others, including the Harrow Litter Pickers—I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) for mentioning them; these people all need a really big shout out—and all the volunteers and groups in Strangford.

I would like to give a shout out to a chap called Tim Walker in my constituency, whom I have been out with a number of times. He started a big litter collection off his own bat; it was, I think, just before covid. He got together a community group through Facebook, which joined him every week. More and more people started to turn out. He was so determined to tackle litter and other environmental concerns that he has set up a shop in Taunton called My Carbon Coach, and he is influencing people on even wider environmental issues. All these people need a big “thank you”.

It is usually just a careless minority who cause the issue. Councils have responsibility for keeping our public places clear, but we simply cannot underestimate the role and work of volunteers, who are very much driven by a sense of civic duty, and by pride in their community, which they want to be the best place possible in which to live. In 2019, the Government provided £9.75 million

for a high street community clean-up fund, to empower local authorities across England to support communities in undertaking community-led high-street clean-ups. I have checked, and as far as I know, I do not believe that Ealing Council got any of that money, but it sounds as though it was doing a good job anyway. Councils were able to use that one-off funding to support volunteers. I think that the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall, asked for more support for volunteers; certainly, a lot of our recent funds have gone towards them. For example, funds have gone towards supplying people with litter-picking kit, and on training for residents in how to remove graffiti, which is another blight.

More recently, the Environment Agency removed barriers for litter action groups by publishing a regulatory position statement that enables volunteers to litter-pick without a waste carrier licence. That allows local tips to accept litter from pickers. There was an extraordinary incident that gave rise to a bit of concern about that, but that has all been ironed out. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is pleased about that; I think that he referred to it. I call on all councils to provide as much support as they can to volunteer litter-pickers. Residents going to a waste site in all good faith to deposit the bags of litter that they have worked so hard to collect should not be turned away.

While we are talking about all those who have done such good work, I want to mention the Prime Minister's Points of Light awards. Through those, we have recognised the outstanding work of individual volunteers who have tackled litter in their community. Recipients of the award include Lizzie Carr MBE. She launched the successful “plastic patrol” campaign, which inspired thousands of people to take to their local waterways to prevent plastic pollution. Another recipient was Dom Ferris, who founded Trash Free Trails, which brings together runners, riders and rovers in Britain's national parks and wild places to tackle plastic pollution.

Let me deal with the issue of councils. We are going about tackling litter on many fronts. We have developed and shared best practice on the provision of litter bins, and have supported that with £1 million of grant funding for 40 councils to purchase new bins. The hon. Member for Ealing, Southall, suggested that good models should be copied and followed, and actually a lot has been learned from the practices of councils such as Ealing. It is interesting; even I have learned that there are good and bad places to put a bin. I suppose that makes sense; we want it to be where people have just finished their drink, or want to stub out their cigarette butt or whatever. It has to be convenient.

We have also committed £1.2 million to helping another 30 councils purchase equipment to tackle fly-tipping. That includes a range of projects that try to identify the offenders. That is harder than might be imagined, but there are some very creative ideas out there. As I said, councils need to play their role; that is why we have committed to putting enforcement guidance on a statutory footing. That guidance will give those to which it applies a clear and explicit duty, which they must have regard to when exercising their enforcement functions. Councils have a range of enforcement functions, but it is important that we ensure that they use them.

One of my bugbears is fast food outlets. I am sure that it is the same in other Members' constituencies: often, an amount of litter accumulates around those sites.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has recently updated planning guidance to clarify the powers available to councils to ensure that new hot food takeaways do not increase the impact of litter in their communities. Councils can also issue what are called community protection notices, which can be used to require the owners of premises such as fast food outlets to take certain actions to tackle the litter that is created by their activities. Those are all positive measures to tackle one of the types of location where we often find litter.

**Gareth Thomas:** I am grateful to the Minister for much of what she has said. I am sure that she will acknowledge what Harrow Litter Pickers has found, which is that on occasion, there are basically organised fly-tippers going around and causing problems for local councils, and litter pickers have to help the councils respond to those problems. To what extent is the Department willing to support intelligence-gathering efforts about those rogue fly-tippers, to help make councils' enforcement a little more effective?

**Rebecca Pow:** The hon. Gentleman's point is very much linked to the wider littering issue, and I will come on to it in a minute, because fly-tipping is an important part of this debate. Before I do so, I want to mention the Government's new antisocial behaviour plan, which takes even tougher action against those who seek to degrade our public places. For example, it raises the upper limit on fixed penalty notices for fly-tipping to £1,000. That was a manifesto commitment, so I am really pleased that we brought that forward. The penalty for littering and graffiti has also been raised to £500. Those penalties can be issued wherever there is evidence linking someone to one of those crimes.

Alongside those increases, there are also new measures to help councils issue more penalties. Under the action plan, there will be a league table for local authorities on fly-tipping rates. In other words, we will ask: how much are they actually enforcing this? How often are they using the powers? I genuinely think that would be helpful; we would see which are the active councils, such as Ealing Council and potentially Harrow Council. It is almost naming and shaming. This problem really annoys people, and if they saw that their council was using these powers, that would be popular.

The Government have pledged a further £93 million of additional investment in what is called community payback, so that criminals sentenced to probation and supervised community sentences at court across England and Wales can complete up to 8 million hours of unpaid community payback per year in hi-vis jackets, under supervision. They will have to clean up graffiti, pick litter, clear wasteland, and redecorate public places and buildings. That will include offenders' involvement in Keep Britain Tidy projects.

The Great British spring clean was mentioned. That saw 1,500 offenders spend almost 10,000 hours on 300 community clean-up projects. This year, we will

build on that success, and will run a second clean-up week in the autumn. Under the action plan, a new approach called immediate justice will be introduced to make perpetrators repair the damage that they have done. They will be forced to pick up litter, wash police cars or clean up graffiti within 48 hours of being caught. That will start in 10 places across England and Wales next year. Local people will have their say on that scheme. The Probation Service is relaunching the community payback nominations website early next year. By law, it will be required to consult key community leaders and local authorities on how and where payback schemes should be used to improve the area, in terms of litter and other things that I have mentioned.

We have taken some major legislative reforms in trying to tackle fly-tipping, one of which is that last year we consulted on preventing charges for the disposal of DIY waste at household waste recycling centres. We will publish the results of that soon. That is potentially a lot of the stuff that gets fly-tipped, because people are trying to avoid paying to take it to the right place. We are also taking forward our commitment to develop proposals for the reform of the waste carrier, broker and dealer regime. That should make it easier for regulators to enforce against non-compliant operators, while making it much harder for those who are not registered properly to find work in the sector. We have consulted on that, and we will publish the response shortly. We are introducing mandatory waste tracking. All those things will make a difference to tackling the pernicious issue of fly-tipping.

We also have a range of other measures around reducing waste overall that will help to reduce litter, such as our extended producer responsibility scheme for packaging and the deposit return scheme for drinks containers. That is particularly aimed at in-scope containers, an awful lot of which are on-the-go products that are bought in a local shop, consumed in the street and then chucked away. The deposit return scheme is really designed to help tackle that.

Similarly, we have really cracked down on the issue of chewing gum on pavements. That is another absolute bugbear of mine. We have established a chewing gum taskforce, which has provided £1.25 million of funding to help more than 40 councils clean chewing gum off the pavements. It has had superb results: it has achieved reductions in gum littering of up to 80% in the first two months.

Behaviour change is really important in all this, as is education, which was mentioned comprehensively by the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall. I fully support him and all those schools that are doing such great work to teach their kids that it is not right to throw down litter.

I will end there. I thank the hon. Gentleman so much for bringing this debate to us. Huge congratulations and thanks to all those volunteers and community groups, including in Ealing, Southall, who have done such great work on cleaning up litter.

*Question put and agreed to.*



## Asbestos in Workplaces

5.7 pm

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** I remind Members to bob if they wish to be called in this debate, as a number of names have joined the list since I first had notification of it. I call Jane Hunt to move the motion.

**Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered asbestos in workplaces.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, in this debate on proposals to manage asbestos in workplaces and introduce measures to prevent the public's exposure to it. I thank Mesothelioma UK, a national charity based in my constituency, for its work supporting those living with asbestos-related cancer. As well as providing access to mesothelioma clinical nurse specialists at the point of need in hospitals across the UK, the charity offers a range of support services and does dedicated research. I also thank the House of Commons participation digital team, which ahead of the debate helped me to create a public survey on the issues that I will raise, and the very many people who shared their experiences through that venue.

Earlier this month was Global Asbestos Awareness Week, which is crucial to Mesothelioma UK. It consistently receives feedback from patients, families and professionals that the public should be made more aware of the risks of asbestos, and that action should be taken to ensure that deaths from exposure to it are prevented for future generations. Currently, there are three hazards considered dangerous enough to have their own regulations: radiation, lead and asbestos. While lead and radiation are now strictly controlled, and as a result account for zero deaths, the continuing low profile of asbestos in public policy is putting the public in danger. That is supported by the mortality statistics, which I will go into shortly.

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that was extensively used as a building material in the UK from the 1950s to the mid-1980s, and found its way into products such as ceiling tiles, pipe insulation, boilers, sprayed coatings and garage roof tiles. Given that it was often mixed with other materials, it can be difficult to determine its presence. There has also never been a widescale investigation into exactly how many buildings contain asbestos. We can therefore go only by the estimates produced by various organisations when trying to determine the extent of its presence.

One such estimate is from the Health and Safety Executive, which believes that between 210,000 and 400,000 buildings in the UK contain asbestos. However, other sources say that there are about 6 million tonnes of asbestos, spread across approximately 1.5 million buildings—the most asbestos per capita in Europe.

**Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind):** I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. The Work and Pensions Committee criticised the Government and the HSE for showing a lack of imagination in working towards wholesale removal of asbestos in non-domestic buildings. Does she agree that the HSE should fund research to inform a wider credible strategy for wholesale removal?

**Jane Hunt:** I certainly agree that there is work to be done. That sounds like a very good idea. The Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) will speak later, I believe.

A freedom of information request to the Department for Education last year found that nearly 81% of schools reported that asbestos was present in their buildings. The responses to my survey indicate that schools are one of the hotspots for asbestos exposure, with one response stating:

“My lovely mum was a primary school teacher, who taught children with special educational needs. She was 64 when diagnosed with Mesothelioma, and 67 when she died...After investigations, she was asked if she'd ever worked with asbestos. She said no. It was an odd question as she was a teacher. Then we found out that asbestos is still present in UK schools today.”

**Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP):** I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this very important debate. Does she consider the idea of forcing educationalists—whether they are teachers or lecturers—to sign non-disclosure agreements about not discussing asbestos in their establishments on leaving their institutions to be an affront, and does she agree that it should end?

**Jane Hunt:** I was not aware of that. Perhaps I could put that to the Minister for a response. If she cannot give one, I will try to get an answer from the Department for Education.

Another response to my survey stated:

“My husband was diagnosed in October 2012 with Mesothelioma at the age of 34...It changed our lives forever! We do not know exactly how or where he was exposed to asbestos but, from research, we believe he either had secondary exposure from his father bringing it home on his clothes from his place of work, or he could have been directly exposed in the schools he attended which all still contain asbestos to this day.”

A separate information request to the NHS found that more than 90% of hospital buildings contained asbestos. Hospitals were identified as another hotspot for exposure in my survey, with one response stating:

“Before her 40th birthday my wife was diagnosed with Mesothelioma, a mother of 3, who for her whole life worked as an NHS Nurse. She was studying and working in what you would expect to be a safe environment.”

A further freedom of information request to 20 local authorities across England, Scotland and Wales from the law firm Irwin Mitchell revealed that 4,533 public buildings still contain asbestos. That averages to around 225 buildings per local authority. Irwin Mitchell estimates that if the data provided is repeated around the country, about 87,000 public buildings contain asbestos.

Asbestos exposure is the single greatest cause of work-related deaths in the UK, with the HSE estimating that more than 5,000 people die from asbestos-related cancers every year. More than half of those deaths are from mesothelioma, a type of cancer that can occur on the lining of the lung or the lining surrounding the lower digestive tract. Shockingly, according to the HSE, the UK has the highest rate of mesothelioma deaths per capita in the world.

Mesothelioma is not typically detected in the early stages of the disease, as it has a long latency period of 15 to 45 years, with some prolonged cases of 60 years before symptoms show. Therefore, once diagnosed, it is

often advanced, so up to 60% of patients die in the first year after diagnosis, with just over five in 100 surviving for five years or more.

Furthermore, while historically, men working in building-related activities as well as other heavy industries such as shipbuilding were the most likely people to develop asbestos-related diseases, we are now seeing a trend of younger people, both men and women, dying as a result of exposure. As Irwin Mitchell highlighted, over the past 20 years, an increasing number of people have developed asbestos-related illnesses from more indirect sources.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** The historical legacy of asbestos in heavy industry is well documented, but does the hon. Lady share my concerns and those of the Clydebank Asbestos Group in my constituency about the increasing number of women being diagnosed with asbestos-related conditions, critically reflecting the reality of women's exposure and a failure to recognise the many types of asbestos-related conditions, which can also include ovarian cancer?

**Jane Hunt:** I was not aware of the ovarian cancer element. However, I was going to mention family members washing work clothes covered in asbestos dust and that kind of thing, or non-industrial exposure. This is greatly concerning.

I will take this opportunity to share a few extracts from a statement provided to me by one of my constituents, whose husband died from mesothelioma after being exposed to asbestos:

"[My husband] at first did not show much reaction when he was diagnosed. All he really wanted was to find out what could be done to help him. He felt angry later that it could have been prevented. [My husband] was very matter of fact that all he could do now was fight it and try to survive as long as possible.

I felt absolute terror, I felt extremely upset and tearful but because [my husband] was handling it so well, I kept some of my worst feelings hidden and just supported him in the way he wanted me to, but I felt an overwhelming panic that I was going to lose my wonderful husband to this devastating cancer. Something that was totally preventable."

A number of regulations have rightly been introduced in the past 90 years to try to limit people's exposure, including in 1999 a full ban on its import, supply and use in manufacture. The Government's current policy reflects HSE advice, which states that, wherever possible, asbestos-containing materials should be left in situ.

The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 provide the regulatory framework on working with asbestos and apply to all non-domestic premises. Under the regulations, the HSE requires duty-holders to assess whether asbestos is present in their buildings, what condition it is in and whether it gives rise to the risk of exposure. The duty-holder must then draw up a plan to manage the risk associated with asbestos. Importantly, that must include the removal of the asbestos, if it cannot be safely managed where it remains in place. Duty-holders are also legally required to remove asbestos-containing materials before major refurbishment or demolition work.

Despite those efforts, asbestos is still present in many buildings, and people are still suffering and dying from asbestos-related illnesses. We therefore need to take a look at what more we can do. I welcome the fact that

the Work and Pensions Committee considered this subject as part of its 2022 report into the HSE's approach to asbestos management. The Chair of that Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham, is here, and I thank him for his dedication to highlighting this very serious issue, and for his support and assistance with today's debate. I am sure that he will want to speak in more detail about the findings of the Committee's report. However, I would like to mention two issues that were raised by the Committee and which Mesothelioma UK has highlighted in its new campaign, "Don't Let the Dust Settle".

The first of those is the Committee's recommendation that a central asbestos register is introduced. The lack of in-depth and up-to-date data is proving to be a barrier to dealing with the risk posed to the public. A central register would help to alleviate that problem and support a longer-term strategic approach to managing asbestos. It would also provide vital information on the level of compliance by those with a duty to manage asbestos on their premises, and ensure that enforcement action is focused in the right areas.

As one respondent to my survey put it:

"The existence of asbestos in public and private buildings is rife yet there is no proper cataloguing of this or scheme to remove this highly dangerous substance. The hospitals caring for people with asbestos related cancers are full of the very substance that is killing them. There is a need to systematically catalogue and schedule a programme of removal of asbestos from all buildings".

Without a register and steps being taken to remove asbestos, the British Occupational Hygiene Society estimates that we are likely to see a spike in occupational, and potentially non-occupational, illness arising from asbestos exposure in around 2060. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister reconsidered the Government's position on a national register.

The other recommendation from the Committee is that a deadline is set for the removal of all asbestos from non-domestic buildings. That approach would bring our strategy in line with that of France, where a general plan has been implemented to remove asbestos from every building within 40 years. Under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, the UK is obligated to seek out and adopt international best practice. Currently, the classification of acceptable exposure levels to asbestos fibres in the UK is 10 times greater than that now allowed across Europe.

The current way to deal with asbestos—to leave it in situ—is clearly not working, given that the people affected by asbestos-related cancers are becoming younger and younger. Materials are degrading over time through wear and tear, and are being damaged inadvertently. Research published last year by the Asbestos Testing and Consultancy Association and the National Organisation of Asbestos Consultants identified that more than 70% of asbestos-containing materials managed in situ had deteriorated, indicating that management of the risk was ineffective.

We therefore simply cannot afford to delay asbestos removal further. That is particularly true in education and health settings where many of our most vulnerable stay, work and study. The majority of those who have contacted me ahead of the debate are in agreement that in order to deal with the current risk, we need a national asbestos strategy. That approach has proved effective in other nations, which have accepted that leaving asbestos in situ is not safe. Since developing national asbestos

[Jane Hunt]

strategies, such nations have seen an improvement in their asbestos monitoring and detection technologies and practices. The UK needs its own asbestos strategy that incorporates this best practice, as well as a timetable for the safe removal of asbestos, prioritising the highest-risk asbestos in settings such as schools and hospitals. Taken together, those two actions will help to focus minds across Government and industry, and will help to drive progress.

I will close with extracts from a statement provided by another of my constituents, whose husband died of mesothelioma after being exposed to asbestos. Her husband said before his death:

"I was never told about any risks of working with asbestos. The environment was so dusty that sometimes you could struggle to see clearly. It was therefore obvious to me that health and safety was being ignored."

My constituent said later that her husband

"was 69 when he died from Mesothelioma... We had been married for 45 years."

She continued that he

"was a family man who always put others first. His death from this terrible disease has deprived me of a loving husband and friend, his daughters of a wonderful father and my daughters' children of an amazing grandad."

The grandfather of one of the members of my team also died from mesothelioma. We must put a stop to this. Please, don't let the dust settle.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** I will call the SNP spokesperson at 17.47. I do not want to put a clock on Members, but the SNP spokesperson will have five minutes, Labour will have five minutes and the Minister will have 10 minutes.

5.22 pm

**Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) for bringing this extremely important discussion to Westminster Hall.

I want to pay tribute to a number of people—I will be brief—who have been campaigning for generations on asbestos-related cancers. These are the people in the field, who deal with individuals who have died, and who assist and support people through the darkest period in their lives. Asbestos-related cancers and, in particular, mesothelioma are dreadful diseases. As has been mentioned, 60% of people when diagnosed with mesothelioma die within a year, but by heck has it been a struggle to get rightful compensation for many of the people involved—not just for them, but for the families, and everyone who has suffered.

I give a big thank you to the TUC, the Joint Union Asbestos Committee, the Asbestos Victims Support Group Forum and the different forums up and down the country—I can see members present. I also say a big thank you to Mesothelioma UK for all its work, but by heavens, that has been a very difficult task, because successive Governments have not done anything to protect people from mesothelioma and other asbestos-related cancers.

With mesothelioma, it is not just people in heavy industry, but, as the hon. Lady mentioned, teachers—and if it is teachers, it is kids. We should not forget that kids are more susceptible to mesothelioma in that environment.

They are five times more likely to get the disease than teachers. I think 400 teachers have died since 1980—21 a year. What have we done about it in this country? Absolutely nothing. The Government have failed at every turn to do anything at all about mesothelioma.

What has happened as a result of that? People are dying, and not just teachers, but plumbers, doctors, nurses and people in the NHS. We are talking about people in the building industry and patients in hospitals. People within the school and educational estates are dying. It just takes a drawing pin into asbestos and a little bit of dust lodges in someone's lungs. They do not feel it. They could have that little bit of dust in their lungs for 10, 20, 30 or 40 years and die as a result of it once they are diagnosed.

It is essential that we do more as a Government than we have ever done before. We are one of the only Governments in the world where cancer-related diseases and deaths are on the increase, and we are doing absolutely nothing about it. That is really not acceptable. It is as if we have kicked the can down the road to 30 or 40 years' time. Mr Paisley, you will remember Alice Mahon, the MP for Halifax, who recently died of mesothelioma—after being in this place, by the way, for more than a decade. It was because of her work in the national health service as a nurse, and she died as a result of mesothelioma. She had an awful death.

I could speak for ages about this issue, but I understand that lots of people want to get in on this debate. It is important to recognise that every now and again we speak about mesothelioma, cancer-related diseases and everything that is killing people, but we do nothing about it. We will have another debate in 10 years' time and say we have not done anything. We have to get our act together. We have to make sure that we support people who, unfortunately, have lost loved ones because of diseases like this. They need proper compensation and proper support. But listen: if we prevented this and took action in the first place, we would not need to support those people, and we would not have the deaths that we are having.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** I will not put an official clock on you, but for guidance, colleagues, you have four minutes.

5.28 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) on leading the debate, and I am pleased to follow my friend and good colleague, the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), who obviously has personal knowledge of this subject.

We have heard about the life-threatening danger of asbestos, which includes diseases as serious as lung cancer. For employers, the health and safety of our staff should be our utmost priority, but we still hear of cases today. That is where I am coming from. Clusters of individuals have become ill due to spaces being riddled with asbestos.

We have similar problems in Northern Ireland. I always bring a Northern Ireland perspective to these debates; it adds to the comments of others across this great United



Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, where we are often challenged by things not just collectively, but individually in our regions. We must work together towards making all spaces asbestos-free. We must study the figures in greater depth and take the steps necessary to protect and save lives.

When discussing issues relating to asbestos in workplaces or mesothelioma, I often recall a situation in Northern Ireland in late 2018. A Northern Ireland Cancer Registry investigation was triggered by a former member of staff who approached the registry with concerns that several cancers had been diagnosed among people who had been working in one area of the Ulster University Jordanstown campus. However, the NICR found insufficient evidence to prove that it was asbestos in the university that caused cancer in those staff members.

Specific figures for Northern Ireland show that cases where asbestos-related illness was the primary or secondary cause of death increased from 63 in 2019 to 99 in 2020. In some cases, that has been put down to historic working practices and the widespread use of asbestos in the building trade before 1980, with little awareness of the long-term implications. You will recall this story, Mr Paisley: I can remember films of east Belfast and Harland & Wolff—the hon. Member for Loughborough referred to shipbuilding in particular—where asbestos was flying through the streets. Kids were playing in it and breathing it in because they did not know any better. The hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) said a pinhead is enough to be affected. Many people died from that. When I first got elected to the council in 1985, I had a number of constituents who lived in Greyabbey and Ballywalter and worked in the shipyard. The shipyard employed 30,000 people at one time. The number of deaths from mesothelioma or asbestosis was incredible. I have seen men of the '60s and so on who just could not get a breath and seen the impact of what has happened to them because they did not know. Now that we do know, let us take steps to ensure it does not happen again.

**Margaret Ferrier:** The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 are retained EU law, so they will sunset at the end of the year. The Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill is still to complete its parliamentary passage. The Government have not yet set out their intentions with this issue specifically. Does the hon. Member agree there must be sufficient planning to prevent a gap in legislation for asbestos, considering the serious health risks?

**Jim Shannon:** I agree with the hon. Lady but I will refer that to the Minister, who I think will be better placed to reply. Again, I am throwing the burden on to the Minister to respond. I know she will be more than happy to do so.

The Government have paid out some £40 million in compensation for asbestos-related illnesses in Northern Ireland, with Belfast shipbuilding unjustly being linked to most of the claims. Asbestos was used in the building materials until it was discovered later that the inhalation of fibres could also cause cancers. Where there has been more in-depth research into links between cancer and asbestos, that has proved to be an ongoing problem. The Department of Education in Northern Ireland—the hon. Members for Loughborough and for Wansbeck referred to this, and I know others will as well—has many buildings that teachers and children use that contain asbestos.

I will highlight one other area that the hon. Lady did not refer to. I do so because I live on a farm, so I understand that asbestos risk is an ongoing problem. I removed one of the roofs just last year. I had to get a specialist company in to do so. They came—it was like “Star Wars”—booted from head to toe, and we were not allowed up near the top of the yard, because obviously stuff was everywhere when they were removing it.

I conclude with this because I am conscious of time. Many have asked what the price of a life is, when preventive steps should be taken to stop lives being unnecessarily lost. Compensation for those who unduly lost loved ones is one thing, but ensuring that proper precautions are taken to make workplaces safe is another. I hope that today, as a joint collective across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we can do both. I look forward to the Minister's response.

5.33 pm

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): We owe a great debt to the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) for securing the debate and the way in which she moved the motion. I used to be a union organiser in the public sector before I became a Member of Parliament, in the National Union of Public Employees. In the early '70s, when the debate started about the health, safety and welfare at work legislation, which was put in law in 1974, the issues and dangers of asbestos were known. Huge profits had been made by Turner & Newall and other companies from selling asbestos, and it was installed regularly in lots of places even after the dangers were well known. Asbestos lagging on pipes in heating installations and on exhaust systems of buses and other vehicles led to an awful lot of workers getting mesothelioma as a result.

Our great friend Alice Mahon was also a member of NUPE. She worked in a dilapidated old hospital building in Halifax and in this building. I was at her funeral in Halifax last month. It was a sombre occasion. It was a huge gathering at the minster in Halifax that paid tribute to a wonderful MP and a very principled campaigner. The collection was for victims of asbestos in the Calderdale area. In this debate, we should remember that asbestos can affect anybody. Who would have thought that a Member of Parliament would get this kind of condition from being in this building? This is not about MPs, but a lot of people whose voices have not been heard: those who clean buses or trains, those who work in or install heating systems and, indeed, people quite innocently doing a few home repairs, not realising they have actually pin-pricked into asbestos in a building.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** My grandmother, when she lived in Durban Avenue in Clydebank, had a white picket fence brought out of a sheet from Turner's asbestos factory in Clydebank. The right hon. Member is right to remind us of the differentiation around how people get asbestos. It also relates to where the asbestos is now dumped. Does he share my concern that, besides the traditional aspect of asbestos, it is hidden in grounds across our country? They also need to be investigated—that is to say, hidden asbestos dumps.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The hon. Member raises a very important point. There are a number of unaudited rubbish dumps around the country, including unaudited

[Jeremy Corbyn]

rubbish dumps from the Ministry of Defence, many of which will contain asbestos remains that are completely unknown. Somebody will come along, perhaps to construct something on that site, and dig it up. As a result, asbestos will be released into the atmosphere. We are facing a serious issue of epidemic proportions.

In the 45 seconds that I have left, I thank the Minister for being present. We need a full audit of all the asbestos dangers in the country, including the tips and so on that we have mentioned. We need a programme of containment and labelling of it everywhere before it is removed, and we need a programme of removal. We should not be the worst country in Europe, or indeed in most of the world, on the question of asbestos safety; we ought to be the best. None of this is new. All of this has been around a long time, and I hope that today's short debate will serve as a reminder that this House is determined that we will rid this country of the dangers of asbestos, and the danger of taking lives 50 or 60 years from now.

5.36 pm

**Sir Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) on securing the debate and on her speech. As she said, the Work and Pensions Committee published a report on asbestos management on 30 March last year. Ministers unfortunately rejected our recommendations but, for reasons that we have heard today, the case for action looks even stronger now than it did then.

Our report opened with this point:

"Asbestos-related illness is one of the great workplace tragedies of modern times."

Asbestos is still the biggest source of work-related fatalities in the UK, and the fact that we used brown asbestos for a long time, and used it very heavily—

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair)**: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the debate but there is a Division in the main Chamber. Please try to be back here within 15 minutes.

5.37 pm

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.*

5.46 pm

*On resuming—*

**Sir Stephen Timms**: The assumption in the current regulations, as the hon. Member for Loughborough said, is that if the asbestos is in reasonable condition and not disturbed, it should not harm anybody, but that assumption looks increasingly unsafe. We have heard from others about the extent of the problem of asbestos in schools and hospitals—I understand that the scale of the threat will be highlighted in a big article in *The Sunday Times* magazine this coming weekend—but I worry that there has not been enough focus on this problem over the last few years.

In 2019-20, the Health and Safety Executive conducted 907 inspections of work by licensed asbestos inspectors, which is 40% fewer than in 2012-13. The fall in number of asbestos enforcement notices from 2011-12 to 2018-19—a period when the HSE really struggled with resources

and should have had more support—was 60%, which was much greater than the fall in the number of HSE enforcement notices in that period, at only 10%.

The Minister's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), told our Committee that the Government had "a clearly stated goal" that "it is right to—over time and in the safest way—work towards there no longer being asbestos in non-domestic buildings."

We agreed with the Minister about that, and I hope the current Minister will reaffirm that view, but we think we need a plan to achieve that goal, not just a hope that it happens by happenstance. As the House has been rightly reminded, we recommended a 40-year deadline to remove all asbestos from non-domestic buildings and a plan to achieve it, and that the HSE should develop a central digital register of asbestos in non-domestic buildings.

We know that we will have to do a lot of work to our buildings to deliver net zero in the next few decades, and that means two things. First, asbestos left in place will not be left alone for long; it will be disturbed. That potentially creates a big problem, but it also creates an opportunity, because we can remove asbestos at the same time as making the net zero changes that will have to be made, and so achieve removal relatively cost-effectively. That is what we should be doing.

Since the Select Committee's report, published research has strengthened the case for action. We have heard about the report of the Asbestos Testing and Consultancy Association, which I am glad will become an annual report. One of the lessons from that survey is that producing a national central register of asbestos, as recommended by the Select Committee, will not involve massive new data collection. A lot of the data is already there. It needs organising, assessing and quality-assuring, but that is a wholly manageable task. The industry has done a large chunk of it already without any Government support; with Government support, the whole thing becomes a very manageable task.

I welcome the programme of inspections in 400 schools that the Health and Safety Executive has been undertaking. The HSE has made the point that a lot of those schools do not have a plan for managing asbestos risk. The Irwin Mitchell report, which has been mentioned, estimates that if we do not do anything, it will take 80 years to get rid of asbestos from all local authority buildings, so we really need to get a move on.

Finally, and to echo an earlier intervention, if the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill reaches the statute book in its current form, there will be no UK regulations on managing asbestos for the first time since 1930. I do not think that anybody wants that to happen, so perhaps the Minister can reassure us that there will be secondary legislation to fill that gap. Can she tell us when it will be published and whether it will be consulted on? I ask her as well to reconsider the Government's response to those two crucial recommendations for a 40-year deadline and a central register.

5.51 pm

**Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) on securing this important debate. It is particularly timely for those constituents of mine who were forced to take strike action in February when their employer, a local social

housing provider, was accused of forcing them to handle asbestos in tenants' homes, a job that they were not properly trained for. Thankfully, that strike was successful, but at a cost of significant disruption to the tenants and, of course, great anxiety for those workers, who feared being exposed to such a lethal substance. I raise it today as a reminder that asbestos is not a historical tragedy. We continue to live with asbestos today, and it is vital that employers in high-risk sectors are reminded of the duties they have to keep their staff safe.

I was an active trade unionist when we first began to reckon with the dangers of asbestos. Experts warned of the dangers for decades, but it was only in the 1970s, when confronted with rising rates of mesothelioma across the UK, that the construction industry was forced to acknowledge the devastation that asbestos can wreak. Even then, it was not until 1999 that we finally achieved a total prohibition on its use, more than 15 years after the first law banning some forms of asbestos had been introduced. I am not sure that it will ever be possible to calculate the number of people who were exposed to asbestos in buildings that were built or refurbished in that 15-year window alone, but we can say with some confidence that lives could doubtless have been saved if we had acted far sooner.

So we are gathered here today to confront a deadly legacy. Asbestos can be found everywhere in our lives—in the environment, our schools, our homes and our office buildings. Indeed, the Labour Research Department found that there were 451 premises in London alone with asbestos and that two thirds of NHS premises and buildings that were considered still contain asbestos today.

According to the Health and Safety Executive, asbestos remains the largest killer in the workplace and its enduring prevalence means that, tragically, there are healthy people alive today who will die from asbestos-related diseases, including mesothelioma, of which the UK has the highest number of cases in the world.

As a former regional secretary of Unite the union, I have represented thousands of workers in construction, which is the industry with the highest asbestos-related mortality rates. I have seen at first hand the terrible suffering that these vicious diseases inflict, and I know just how important it is that we deliver a strategy to rid our country of this ticking time bomb as soon as we possibly can.

I want to express my gratitude to charities such as Mesothelioma UK, as well as the Merseyside Asbestos Victim Support Group, for everything they have done to bring this issue to broader attention.

Any objective assessment of the progress made in the more than two decades since asbestos was banned for good, and in particular over the last 13 years of Tory Government, cannot but lead to the conclusion that that progress has been woefully inadequate. The families of those who have lost their lives to mesothelioma and other asbestos-related diseases are angry. They have just cause to be angry, and so do those whose loved ones will lose their lives in the future.

The Work and Pensions Committee's recent report revealed that there is no clear strategy on how to realise the vision of an asbestos-free Britain and that there is a lack of meaningful investment and research into the removal of asbestos. It called for a pan-Government

and system-wide strategy and for a legally binding 40-year commitment to the removal of asbestos from all non-domestic buildings. That is the kind of clarity and certainty that the victims of asbestos rightly deserve.

5.55 pm

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) on bringing forward this really important debate and on her wonderful speech, which was well-informed and passionately delivered. I will make a few brief observations and then ask a few questions of the Government.

The management of asbestos in buildings is a reserved matter—it is for the UK Government and the Health and Safety Executive, which has UK-wide responsibility for enforcement of legislation and regulations. The Scottish National party would call for health and safety legislation to be devolved to the Scottish Government so that we can create fairer working practices and conditions and rectify buildings to adequate standards. I do not know whether Members are aware of this, but Scotland is, I believe, the only place in the United Kingdom where people can receive compensation if they develop pleural plaques. I ask the Minister why that is not available across the UK.

I am grateful to the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the TUC, which have given me a really good briefing for today. I have listened to hon. Members carefully, and I note with interest the fact that many have referred to teachers who have been affected. I taught in a further education college, and when I took early retirement in 2011—that worked out well—I was asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement. In it was a paragraph that said I would waive all my rights to claim compensation from the college in the event of my getting asbestosis. I had a good lawyer look at the NDA and I refused to sign it. My remarks to the then principal of the college were, "You worked in that building too. You might want to reconsider putting this in an NDA."

Asbestosis can affect everyone and can do terrible things. We have heard numerous examples from Members across the spectrum of how people can contract it and the terrible price they pay if they suffer from it or from mesothelioma. It has been difficult to listen to some of the stories we have heard this afternoon, so why will the Government not collect comprehensive and accurate data on the extent, type and condition of all asbestos in public buildings, including schools and this place—as we heard, there have been problems here? Surely it is a false economy not to tackle this issue of asbestos as soon as possible. We cannot keep kicking down the road the dangers people are facing, waiting to see what happens 50 or 60 years on.

The Health and Safety Executive has had a 54% cut in funding. Will the Government commit to reversing those cuts and letting it do its job properly? We heard about the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill and the sunset clause. This has to be addressed. We cannot just ignore this problem.

I thank the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), who chairs the Work and Pensions Committee, for the work it has done. The Government are well



[Marion Fellows]

aware of what is happening, so I ask them to please do something about it. If not, please devolve the powers to the Scottish Government.

Here is something that no one has mentioned yet: can we have a public awareness campaign on this issue? We all know about it, but there are people outside the House who do not understand. We have all sorts of public campaigns on how to detect cancer; we have all sorts of information and awareness raising. Can the Government confirm that they will look into that for this issue as well?

I also thank, as someone has already done, the TUC, the Joint Union Asbestos Committee and the Asbestos Victims Support Groups' Forum. This huge issue affects many people, including in my constituency, where there was formerly a steelworks, among other things. But we have to be reminded that it is not just people who worked in heavy industry who contract this disease. Please will the Government take on board everything they have heard this afternoon, answer some of the questions, bring forward help for the future and not keep kicking things down the road?

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** I call the Opposition spokesperson.

6 pm

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): Mr Paisley, it is of course a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, sir. I, too, start by thanking the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) for bringing this important debate here today. I think we can all agree that, in her opening remarks, she made an absolutely firm case on the real dangers of asbestos.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my right hon. Friends the Members for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley), who all made excellent contributions and highlighted the real dangers, but also some tragic real-life stories of the real impact that asbestos is having.

As we all know and as has been said here today, asbestos is a deeply dangerous material. It was therefore right, and long overdue, that the last Labour Government banned the import, supply and use of asbestos in 1999. Yet asbestos remains all too prevalent in many buildings across the UK, as we have heard. The serious dangers that asbestos poses, despite being banned for almost a quarter of a century, are shown nowhere more clearly than in the number of people who have died as a result of asbestos-related conditions. Each year, there are about 5,000 asbestos-related deaths in the UK, with 2,300 in 2021 alone attributed to mesothelioma, and almost 500 mentions of asbestosis on death certificates.

The risk that asbestos poses for working people in particular—they are forced to spend significant periods in workplaces riddled with it—is significant and deeply alarming, because there are just so many workplaces, especially in the public sector, where asbestos remains present. The TUC found that 90% of schools still contain asbestos. We have heard similar statistics for hospitals—the NHS—and other public sector buildings.

It seems that the primary protection at the moment is through the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012, but with so many people contracting asbestosis after being exposed in their workplace, there is real concern that the existing legislation is just not enough, so the Government need to look long and hard at whether further protections, which are actually enforceable, are needed.

I am rushing slightly because time is limited. The Government first need to make clear whether the current legislation and protections for working people from the risks of asbestos exposure will actually exist beyond the end of the year, because right now that is far from clear. Under the Government's Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, which will automatically delete a huge number of pieces of employment rights legislation, the Control of Asbestos Regulations will cease to have any force unless amended or replaced by secondary legislation. The Government were warned of that when they were rushing the retained EU law Bill through Parliament. They were warned that sunseting so many rights and protections was reckless at best and dangerous at worst. They were even pushed on the Control of Asbestos Regulations specifically during the passage of the Bill. The Minister responsible answered that the Government saw opportunities to reduce business burdens and reaffirmed that the United Kingdom has high standards of health and safety. I would be grateful to hear this Minister's views on where they are going with that. We have a number of asks for the Government. Evidence on the number of asbestos deaths and the number of buildings that still contain asbestos shows us that we need to more, not less. The Government should start by following through on recommendations made to them. First, they must ensure adequate data collection and reporting of buildings that contain asbestos. Many locations are not known about until renovation starts. Secondly, the Government should conduct a serious review of the adequacy of asbestos exposure limits. The UK's limit is 10 times lower than limits across Europe and 100 times lower than the limit recommended by the International Commission on Occupational Health.

Thirdly, the Government should reverse the cuts made to the Health and Safety Executive's funding. Because of cuts of up to 50% between the levels seen under the last Labour Government and 2019-20, there has been a huge reduction in the number of inspectors, from 3,700 to 1,000. At the same time, the Government should reverse their attacks on trade unions and their ability to organise, because trade union health and safety reps play a critical role in keeping workers safe.

Time not permitting, Mr Paisley, I will conclude by saying that I will be grateful to hear the Minister's response to each of those four questions, particularly the one about retained EU law and how the Government plan to continue regulation and legislation in this area.

6.6 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) for bringing this important debate to the House. I too extend my heartfelt sympathy to all those individuals in Great Britain and beyond who have lost a loved one or

a colleague, or who are living with the impact of asbestos-related disease. I thank all hon. Members across the House for coming here to talk about their concerns, their impactful stories and their truths, as well as all the members of the public in the Gallery who have joined this afternoon.

Asbestos continues to be a problem experienced around the globe. As my hon. Friend mentioned in her opening remarks, earlier this month the United Kingdom joined other countries in recognising Global Asbestos Awareness Week, designed to remind us all of the impact of asbestos-related disease and how it continues to be felt. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) said, I shall be talking about raising awareness later in my speech, but I wanted to take this opportunity to welcome the important work done by charities to support people affected by this devastating disease, such as the charity Mesothelioma UK, which is based in my hon. Friend's constituency, and all those who do the great campaign work that has been outlined today.

I agree with the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). Asbestos was banned in Great Britain in 1999, and stringent interventions and regulatory controls are now in place to prevent people from being exposed to it, but I assure the House and all those listening to or reading the debate that I too, when preparing for the debate, put similar searching questions to the HSE and my colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions property team, one of whom is a former HSE inspector and removal specialist. I have not just come here to read the speech I have been given, and I hope that that reassures everyone.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** In this analysis, will the Minister include the problem of unmarked dumps around the country, particularly Ministry of Defence dumps, which are highly likely to include large quantities of very dangerous blue asbestos, which is probably the worst type?

**Mims Davies:** I have a feeling I will be sent a note on that, and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We have spoken about a lot of matters this afternoon, and I hope I will be forgiven if I do not respond to every question. I shall respond to some, and I assure right hon. and hon. Members and the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), that I shall put a copy of the responses in the Library of the House.

Under the law on dumping locations, asbestos must be disposed of in licensed sites, but we are aware of some issues of illegal dumping. The HSE supports local authorities in their enforcement responsibilities in this area, but I will take that point away.

Before I move on, I will try to answer some questions before progressing with my speech. On the question regarding asbestos research from the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, the Health and Safety Executive has published a comprehensive science and evidence strategy associated with a delivery plan, and it includes commitments. It will continue to research and publish those findings.

On the retained EU law questions, the focus continues to be on ensuring appropriate regulatory frameworks, and maintaining the United Kingdom's high standards for health and safety protection, but we balance that

with reductions in burdens to business. The HSE's approach is closely aligned with the Government's pledges to do more for business, to promote growth, to deal with disproportionate burdens and to simplify the regulatory landscape.

Our standards are all about health and safety protections, and they are among the highest in the world. The HSE will continue to review its retained EU law to seek to look at the opportunities, but it always looks at what is happening around the globe, as has been mentioned.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I do not think the Minister would suggest that we should scrap all asbestos regulations for the first time since 1930, so that does imply that there will be some secondary legislation. Can she give us any indication of when that will be forthcoming?

**Mims Davies:** I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we are looking at exactly that at the moment. The rules and regulations are for the HSE. It has the experts and it needs to do what it sees fit. I will be looking very closely at the HSE, which will be bringing proposals to Ministers; that is being looked at currently. As soon as I have more to share, I will do so. We are clear that the HSE is committed to its regulatory role and to supporting wider Government priorities.

The right hon. Member for East Ham, who chairs the Work and Pensions Committee, talked about resourcing, as did other Members. We know that this area is highly risky. Licence holders—those who undertake removal work—are individually reviewed and that is followed up. The inspections are really important. Our end-to-end approach provides assurance that the licensing regime is fit for purpose and working effectively. The HSE takes that very seriously. In '23-24, as part of its planned inspection activity, the HSE will continue to carry out inspections across the construction industry where asbestos exposure risks continue to be raised. Inspection work in schools and other organisations, which has been mentioned this afternoon, will continue to happen to effectively manage that asbestos legacy.

The HSE allocates budgets and resources on the basis of levels of expected interventions, including inspection, investigation and enforcement activity, and does not allocate budgets at sub-activity level, such as for construction and health inspection. We have a range of different interventions and a way of doing things on which the HSE is very strident, and I reassure the House that nothing has changed.

I will mention NDAs, because, like others, I have been appalled this afternoon to hear about the issues affecting teachers. This is a matter for the Department for Education, but I will ask my officials to raise it with the DFE so that a response can be provided.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw asked how we are supporting people suffering with asbestos-related diseases. In 2022-23—it says '23-24 in my notes; I do not think that is right, but I will get my officials to check whether that is the case—1,890 payable industrial injuries disablement benefit assessments took place, and the scheme provides a weekly payment based on the assessed level of disablement. I will write to the hon. Lady with further details and confirmation for her. There are lump sum compensation payments as well, and I am happy to send her further details on that.

**Marion Fellows:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mims Davies:** I am running out of time, but okay.

**Marion Fellows:** I just wanted to say that my point was to show the difference in the compensation for pleural plaques; I was not insinuating that there was no other compensation in the rest of the UK.

**Mims Davies:** I understand the hon. Lady's point and I am happy to expand on that further. She will be keen to know that, later this year, the HSE's "Asbestos and You" campaign will move to a new focus on the duty to manage asbestos safely in buildings by highlighting the requirements placed on those responsible for the buildings to manage any asbestos present.

The Government are not opposed to an asbestos register, or any steps regarding support to improve the safety regime to enable effective risk management. However, I understand from the HSE that the suggestion that Great Britain creates a national register for buildings would need to be considered carefully because of the potential unintended consequences.

In Great Britain, the regulations require duty holders to either survey premises constructed before asbestos was banned or to presume that it is present. Most duty holders decide to survey, and to arrange a register and plan for every room and area detailing the presence of any type of asbestos-containing materials and their condition and quantity. The new register would therefore require significant resources from duty holders and the Government. I understand the point made by the Select Committee Chair. The concern is about duplication of information, and there is no clear understanding that risks of exposure would be improved. We want people to focus on the duty to manage, and to presume that asbestos is in situ, but I will expand on that in my further response.

I will try to conclude, because I believe I am one minute over, Mr Paisley.

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** You're okay.

**Mims Davies:** Are you okay with that? Thank you very much.

The challenge, as we all know, is that there is no easy way of safely removing asbestos from buildings, and disturbing asbestos inevitably creates fibre release and increases the risk to health. Provided it is in good condition, the HSE confirms that it is likely to be safest to remove asbestos at the end of a building's life. If removal

is in a staged and phased way, there is a pathway for Great Britain no longer to have asbestos in its workplaces, as we have heard this afternoon.

I have much more to say, which I will share with the House in a further response, but I hope that my remarks now have reassured Members that the current regulatory regime and framework for Great Britain remains sufficiently robust and enables the legacy of asbestos exposure risk in workplaces to be managed. I will comment on the concern about women later in my broader remarks, because I am conscious that I have not had time to respond now. I strongly want to continue to work with Members, the sector, campaigners and the HSE to ensure that we develop an asbestos-free Great Britain, as my predecessor my right hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) said. I take on board all elements of the debate today, and will continue to work robustly with the HSE, the Select Committee and all campaigners to deliver that.

6.18 pm

**Jane Hunt:** I will take just a moment to thank everyone for being present today and the Minister for her remarks at the end of the debate. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), who chairs of the APPG that deals with asbestos, and the right hon. Member for East Ham, who is the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee and has been particularly helpful with my preparation for today.

Those of us present today are from across parties, and we have all tended to agree, so let us make some action and actually achieve something, please. We have a catalyst for change in the remedial action to be taken towards net zero on buildings. To me, that is the ideal opportunity to make the change and to get asbestos out of our buildings. I request that that happens.

I thank especially Mesothelioma UK—present here today—which is a great charity, among other great charities, that provides support and research into this terrible disease. Again, I thank the many people who responded to my survey. I had many hundreds more quotes that I could have used, but I am afraid that I just did not have time. I thank everyone again.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered asbestos in workplaces.

6.20 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Wednesday 19 April 2023

## CABINET OFFICE

### Coronation Oath

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State (Oliver Dowden):** On 6 May 2023, the coronation of Their Majesties will take place. The King will take the oath prescribed by the Coronation Oath Act 1688. The precise form of words has been varied over successive coronations to reflect changes to the constitutional position. As set out to the House in a statement by the then Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill on 25 February 1953, with one exception, the changes to the oath have been made without express legislative authority.

For the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, changes were made to the oath without express legislative authority to reflect the constitutional position. Some updating to the wording of the oath is required to reflect the current position as regards the realms and territories, whose number has evolved since the coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and which will be referred to collectively. As Churchill set out, the position was considered carefully in both 1937 and 1953; and it has been again for His Majesty the King's coronation. I propose to follow the same approach as then, that no express legislative authority is required to make the changes on the basis that they are to ensure consistency with the position regarding the realms and territories, as reflected in legislation. This follows the clear and consistent approach taken in 1953 as per the statement given by the then Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill, which I have appended to this written ministerial statement.

Attachments can be viewed online at:  
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2023-04-19/HCWS727/>.

[HCWS727]

## SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

### Online Safety Bill: Government Amendments at Lords Committee Stage

**The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Michelle Donelan):** I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my noble Friend Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay:

Following commitments made in the House of Commons, His Majesty's Government has tabled a number of amendments to the Online Safety Bill. These will improve the regulatory framework by strengthening protections for internet users, particularly children, reflecting the Bill's primary objective of keeping children safe online.

### Senior management liability

These amendments will strengthen the accountability of online services by making providers and senior managers criminally liable for failures to comply with steps set out in a confirmation decision, when those steps relate to specific child safety duties. As promised in the House of Commons, we based our approach on provisions in the Irish Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022, which introduced individual criminal liability for failure to comply with a notice to end contravention. The offence will be punishable with up to two years' imprisonment. In conjunction with the existing clause 178, liability of corporate officers for offences, this fulfils the commitment made in the House of Commons to create a new offence that captures instances where senior managers, or those purporting to act in that capacity, have consented to or connived in ignoring enforceable requirements, risking serious harm to children.

I would like to thank my hon. Friends the Members for Stone (Sir William Cash) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) for all of their hard work and dedication in this area. The tabled amendment will provide the legal certainty needed for the offence to act as an effective deterrent, and to be prosecuted effectively.

### Recognised news publisher content—"taking action"

This amendment has been tabled to clarify that category 1 services need to notify recognised news publishers and offer a right of appeal before action is taken against their content for a suspected breach of terms of service, and not in relation to routine or personalised content curation. This amendment will also ensure that platforms are not prevented from displaying warning labels on content encountered by children.

### Duty to publish a summary of illegal and child safety risk assessments

These amendments will require the providers of the largest services to publish summaries of their risk assessments for illegal content and content that is harmful to children. These platforms must also supply Ofcom with records of those risk assessments. These amendments will increase the level of transparency regarding these platforms' approaches to safety, and the risk of harm on their services. This will empower parents and other internet users to make informed decisions when choosing whether and how to use them.

### Statutory consultees: victims', domestic abuse, and children's commissioners

These amendments to the Bill name the victims', domestic abuse and children's commissioners as statutory consultees for Ofcom. Ofcom will be required to consult each Commissioner in the course of preparing a draft code. This will ensure that the voices of children and victims of abuse—including victims of violence against women and girls—are properly considered during implementation of the framework.

### Priority offences

These amendments seek to add priority offences to strengthen the Bill's illegal content duties. Providers will be required proactively to tackle content and activity amounting to these offences.

First, we are seeking to add the controlling or coercive behaviour offence. This will add to the existing protections in the Bill for women and girls, to ensure providers design and operate their services to protect women and girls from this behaviour when it occurs on their platforms.

Secondly—and with thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for raising this important issue—we are adding new offences relating to illegal immigration and modern slavery, to ensure that the Bill does more to prevent services being used to facilitate these crimes.

The Government are also tabling a technical amendment to add the foreign interference offence being introduced by the National Security Bill to the list of priority offences in schedule 7. This amendment will ensure that the Online Safety Bill requires social media firms to identify and root out state-backed disinformation. This provision was originally included in the National Security Bill, but as that is likely to receive Royal Assent before the Online Safety Bill the provision will instead be included in the Online Safety Bill to ensure clarity of legislation.

*Recognised news publisher definitions (sanctioned entities)*

This amendment will ensure that any entity that is designated for the purposes of sanctions regulations does not qualify as a “recognised news publisher” under the Bill, and therefore will not benefit from the protections reserved for such publishers.

The Government are also tabling a number of technical amendments to the Bill. These amendments will resolve technical drafting issues, provide further legal clarity for business, and ensure that the Bill is as effective as possible. These include:

*Communications offences*

This amendment extends the false and threatening communications offences, which currently apply only to England and Wales, to Northern Ireland. In the absence of an Executive in Northern Ireland, the process for securing legislative consent for this extension cannot be commenced.

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) is in regular contact with the Northern Ireland civil service, who are content that the Department proceed without the approval of the Executive. Following engagement with the UK Government, the Scottish Government have decided not to introduce these offences at this time.

*Permissive extent*

This amendment introduces a permissive extent clause that will allow the Bailiwick of Guernsey and the Isle of Man to extend the provisions of the Bill to Guernsey or the Isle of Man in the future.

*Funding changes*

This amendment comprises small, technical changes to the Bill to facilitate the structure of funding for the regime, with fees expected to be charged from the financial year 2025-26 or later. As previously announced, Ofcom will be expected to recover the initial costs of setting up the regulatory regime and meet their ongoing costs by charging fees to regulated services with revenue at or above a set threshold.

*Proactive technology*

This amendment clarifies that Ofcom can only recommend or require the use of content moderation technology for the illegal content, children’s safety, and fraudulent advertising duties. This is in line with existing policy to ensure that there are strong safeguards for freedom of expression and privacy. This does not affect the tech-neutral nature of the Bill, and Ofcom will be able to recommend a range of technologies that companies can use to fulfil their duties.

The amendments detailed in this statement will ensure that the Online Safety Bill presents the right balance in its provisions for the safety of children and adults online, while ensuring that the regime remains proportionate and future-proof.

[HCWS726]

# ORAL ANSWERS

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