

**Thursday
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 20 April 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Transport Links: South-east Wales and South-west England

1. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve cross-border transport links between south-east Wales and south-west England.

[904446]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Good morning, Mr Speaker. The Department for Transport is engaging with the Welsh Government and other stakeholders to deliver transport connectivity improvements, and we will publish our response to Lord Hendy's Union connectivity review in due course. In February, we announced a £2.7 million investment to develop options for new stations and services on the south Wales main line, and connectivity between south Wales and south-west England was boosted in 2021 by through services between Cardiff and Penzance.

Jessica Morden: The UK's connectivity review, the Burns commission and the western gateway rail review, which the Secretary of State will be acquainted with, all highlight the very real need for real investment on the south Wales main line. As part of that, will the Government commit to fund the much-needed relief lines upgrade?

Mr Harper: I am very grateful for that question. When I was on the Back Benches, the hon. Lady and I co-chaired the all-party parliamentary group on the western gateway, so I am very familiar with the requirements for connectivity between south Wales and the south-west. On the specific scheme she mentioned, the south Wales relief lines upgrade is now being progressed to a full business case and that will receive very careful consideration by my Department.

Aviation Sector: Decarbonisation

2. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help decarbonise the aviation sector.

[904447]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): Good morning to you, Sir. The jet zero strategy was published in July 2022, and sets out the Government's approach to decarbonising UK aviation.

The strategy focuses on the rapid development of technologies in a way that maintains the benefits of air travel while also maximising the opportunities that decarbonisation brings for the UK.

Rachel Hopkins: The new electrically powered Luton DART—direct air-rail transit—is critical to the future sustainable growth of London Luton airport. It will help increase the number of passengers accessing the airport by rail and support the delivery of Luton Council's 2040 vision of a carbon-neutral town. Do the Minister and the Secretary of State agree that the Luton DART will help reduce the environmental impact of journeys to and from the airport and congestion on surrounding roads, and may I take this opportunity to invite them both to come and visit?

Jesse Norman: How extremely kind of the hon. Lady to extend that very interesting invitation. I would accept in a flash except that I do not want to usurp the prerogative of my colleague in the House of Lords, so maybe I can pick up with her. I am very interested to hear what the hon. Lady said and very grateful for the update. I will ask my officials to look closely at that.

Repairing Potholes: Funding in Spring Budget 2023

3. **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the adequacy of the funding for repairing potholes announced in the spring Budget 2023.

[904448]

6. **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the adequacy of the funding for repairing potholes announced in the spring Budget 2023.

[904451]

15. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the adequacy of the funding for repairing potholes announced in the spring Budget 2023.

[904465]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): The Government are investing more than £5 billion between 2020 and 2025 in highways maintenance. On top of that, we are putting in another £200 million announced in the spring Budget, which will allow local communities to plan effectively for managing their roads, with enough money to fill millions of potholes, repair dozens of bridges and resurface roads right across the country. It is up to local authorities to determine how best to spend this funding.

Simon Baynes: Would the Minister urge the Labour Welsh Government to follow the UK Government's example by setting up a national pothole fund to deal with the severe problems we have with potholes in my constituency of Clwyd South in areas such Rhos, Hanmer and Bronington and the Ceiriog valley?

Mr Holden: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I would indeed. While this is of course a matter for the Welsh Government, I am sure residents across Wales, and actually the tourism industry from the rest of the country as well, would appreciate the sort of additional investment into addressing potholes that the Chancellor has provided in England. I am afraid it seems rather

indicative of the Welsh Government's approach to the road network that while England is investing, they are not.

Sir John Whittingdale: I can tell my hon. Friend that in Maldon also the repair of potholes is one of the top issues on the doorstep. Would he therefore congratulate the Conservative-led administration at Essex County Council, which is putting an additional £9 million into the repair of potholes on top of the Government funding, and is he surprised to learn that the Liberal Democrats voted against it?

Mr Holden: Well, Mr Speaker, sadly nothing surprises me when it comes to the Liberal Democrats. I would not be surprised to hear them claiming to do one thing but actually doing another, which is what they do regularly in my experience of local government. No doubt my right hon. Friend will ensure that his local residents are fully aware of any such political chicanery from his local council's political opponents. I praise the local council there for putting in an extra £9 million, on top of the extra £5.5 million that the Government have provided, to deal with those potholes.

Mr Speaker: Let us go to the next-door neighbour, Vicky Ford.

Vicky Ford: It is shocking that Essex Lib Dems voted against more money to fix our potholes. Local Lib Dems also voted for the ultra-low emission zone charge in London, the zoning charge in Oxford, the congestion charge in Cambridge, and the parking charges at Chelmsford's Hylands. Does my hon. Friend agree that when it comes to local roads, local Lib Dems are much more likely to be flinging out fines than filling up potholes?

Mr Holden: I recently visited my hon. Friend in Chelmsford to see the excellent Conservative councillors there working hard on behalf of local residents, and the stats speak for themselves, with Conservative councils repairing around double the number of potholes when they are in charge, compared with Liberal Democrat-controlled councils. She raises an important point: whether it is ULEZ, which the Lib Dems backed, backing the Labour Mayor in London, or other schemes right across the country, it is Conservatives in local government who are supporting our road network and ensuring that potholes are repaired, and Lib Dems who are at war with the driver.

Mr Speaker: Let us have a bit of balance, and try Tim Farron.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker, how kind. It would be terrible—wouldn't it?—if the Government were claiming to be putting more money into potholes, when in reality in the past two years alone, there has been a £534 million reduction in real-terms funding for highways. I am convinced that local election voters in two weeks' time will make their decisions based on realities, rather than on bluster.

Here is another reality: Cumbria gets 20 million visitors a year, and we are delighted to receive every single one of them. But our highways are in a state, because we do not get a penny from the Government to

compensate for any one of the cars that those 20 million people visit us in. Is it time that the Government gave a funding formula to Westmorland and Furness Council, and Cumberland Council, that takes account of the fact that our roads, and indeed our hospitals, doctors services and police services, are used by others, and not just by ourselves?

Mr Holden: As I pointed out in a previous answer, when it comes to councils repairing roads, it is about getting on with the job on the ground. Conservative councils repair on average twice as many potholes per council area as Lib Dem councils do. The recent Government announcement about ensuring that utility companies are properly held to account is also in the right direction. If Lib Dem-controlled councils are interested in potholes, have they implemented a lane rental scheme that enables them to get cash, like Surrey, Kent and West Sussex County Councils have done, all of which are Conservative controlled? There is nothing from the Lib Dems on that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Let me take the focus away from Conservatives and Liberals, and focus it on my constituency if I can. I do that for a reason. In the past, the Government from Westminster have been helpful to the Northern Ireland Executive and to our road surfaces, and they have given us money for potholes under the Barnett consequentials. Ards and North Down Borough Council in my constituency has the worst potholes in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister hold discussions with the Chancellor to ensure that under the Barnett consequentials, we can get some help for potholes in my constituency?

Mr Holden: I will always be delighted to do so. I was recently in Northern Ireland and drove along some of its brand new roads. I was delighted to see that Northern Ireland is still investing in our highway infrastructure, unlike in Labour controlled Wales.

Mr Speaker: Let us go to the shadow Secretary of State.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Sometimes you just have to admire the brass neck of the Conservative party. As Chancellor, the Prime Minister personally slashed the pothole budget by £400 million, which is enough to fill 8 million potholes. Lined up side by side, that giant Tory pothole would stretch from here to John O'Groats and back again. Will the Minister accept that after 13 years, the British public see that our roads, like the Tories' excuses, are full of holes?

Mr Holden: The hon. Lady heard me have a go at the Lib Dems, because Tory councils have filled twice as many potholes. You will be surprised to learn, Mr Speaker, that Conservative councils have filled three times as many potholes as Labour councils, and with an extra £5 billion going in over the next five years, and an extra £200 million this year, I hope the hon. Lady will welcome the Government's investment in potholes.

Mr Speaker: Right, let us try something different.

Bus Services

4. **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): What steps he is taking to help ensure the continuity of bus services. [904449]

14. **Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): What steps he is taking to support local bus services. [904464]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): The Government have provided over £2 billion since March 2020 to protect vital bus services, with that support set to continue until June 2023. As a result, bus service provision in England outside London remained at over 85% of pre-covid levels in 2021-22, despite patronage and commercial fare revenue remaining significantly lower. We are actively working on long-term plans to support the sector from the start of July and will set out further details in due course.

Nicola Richards: I am grateful for the support of my hon. Friend the Minister and Andy Street in my campaign to save the No. 45 bus route in my constituency. It is vital for residents in Yew Tree and Tame Bridge, and I thank Yew Tree Primary School for joining my campaign to save the route. The service is only safe for a further six months. Does my hon. Friend agree that communities like mine in Yew Tree and Tame Bridge cannot be left without a long-term secure bus route?

Mr Holden: I thank my hon. Friend for her work on this matter. She has mentioned it to me in meetings already and I know she is really campaigning in this area. The Government have provided significant help to support our bus sector, with over £1.8 billion in 2021-22 alone. That includes over £7.3 million since March 2020 to West Midlands Combined Authority to protect bus services. We are also considering further support for the sector from July onwards. I look forward to working with her to convince other parts of Government to ensure we can deliver that.

Jane Hunt: According to the Department for Transport, bus usage remains, as we just heard, at around 85% to 90% of pre-covid levels. That means many bus routes are no longer considered commercially viable for operators, despite being vital to communities. That is true of the No. 2 bus in my constituency, which will no longer connect Loughborough and the villages of Quorn, Barrow and Sileby with Leicester. Will the Minister please consider further subsidising bus routes to ensure reliable services, which will help attract passengers back and prevent rural communities becoming isolated?

Mr Holden: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She has already mentioned this to me and I know how important these services are. I have a semi-rural constituency myself, so I understand that such connections are vital. Prior to the pandemic roughly 40% of operator revenues came from public funds, including from concessionary bus fares, and at the moment the figure is at about 57%. It is right that councils decide which bus routes they want to support, but I hope that with the extra moneys we have provided over the past two years, and hopefully into the future, we will be able to provide a long-term solution for the communities she represents.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): If the Minister came to my constituency and talked to residents waiting for a bus, which will probably not turn up, how would he go about persuading them that their bus services now are as good as when the Conservatives came to power in 2010?

Mr Holden: What I would say is that—like the hon. Gentleman, I am sure—I recently held three bus meetings right across my constituency to enable people to speak to local operators and to bring those operators face to face with my constituents. I am sure he is doing something similar in his constituency. The bus sector has faced major challenges over the last couple of years, including around driver shortages—all things we are working very hard to address. We are looking at concessionary fare travel at around two-thirds of where it was pre-pandemic. That has really fallen off a cliff in the last couple of years. It is up to us to encourage people back on to our bus network. That is why this Government have provided six months of support, with a £2 fare cap, to encourage people back on to our bus network.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): To help the public grapple with rising costs in the cost of living crisis and promote sustainable public transport, the Scottish Government have supported more than 50 million free bus journeys made by under-22s across Scotland since the policy came into place last year. Not only has that benefited young people by saving them money during this Tory cost of living crisis; it has also, crucially, encouraged a shift away from cars to public transport in the next generation. To provide certainty for investment by world-leading bus builders such as ADL in Falkirk, will the Minister consider replicating this successful Scottish policy in England?

Mr Holden: I was delighted to visit Lothian Buses in Scotland recently to see for myself the impact of Scottish policies on the ground. The BSIP—bus service improvement plan—funding here in England has enabled fare caps right across the country. UK Government money is providing the £1 fare cap for under-22s in the north-east and the £2 fare cap in combined authorities in Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and other parts of the country. On free bus travel, it is about getting the balance right. We want a service that is respected by people when they use it and I am not sure that providing something totally for free is always the best solution.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): The cross-party Transport Committee recently published its report on the Government's national bus strategy, which found that the Government are unlikely to meet their target on zero-emission buses. The Committee is disappointed that the Government have not delivered on their promise to publish guidance on franchising and socially necessary services. The long-term future of the bus sector remains uncertain. Labour has a plan to get our buses back on track. What is the Government's plan? Will it be more dither, delay and short-term sticking plasters?

Mr Holden: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman said that, because through the city regional sustainable transport settlement this Government have provided

billions of pounds of long-term funding for greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and other combined authorities right across the country, allowing them to do that long-term investment. Labour might claim credit for it on the ground, but this Government are providing the money to allow it to happen.

Ultra-low Emission Zone: Expansion

5. **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Transport for London on plans to expand the Ultra-Low Emission Zone. [904450]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Transport in London is devolved to the Mayor of London, and he is accountable to the electorate for the decisions that he makes, including those regarding road schemes that charge users. We have been clear that Government grant funding, via the longer term funding settlement, cannot be used to cover the cost of implementing the scheme.

Gareth Bacon: Several outer London boroughs have refused to enter into section 8 agreements with Transport for London to allow ULEZ cameras to be installed on their roads. Sadiq Khan believes that he can override the boroughs and install his hated ULEZ expansion without their permission. Ministers have previously said that they would get legal advice on that. What advice has been received?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend has been campaigning strongly on behalf of his constituents against the expansion of the ULEZ scheme. Under schedule 23 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999, the Mayor of London and Transport for London have the relevant statutory powers to install the infrastructure required for the expansion without obtaining the London boroughs' consent. That reinforces my earlier answer that the Mayor of London is accountable. If electors in London do not like what is going on, they have the power to deal with it at the ballot box.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Properly funded scrappage schemes make a massive difference to ensuring that people transition to low-emission vehicles. This Government have provided funding for clean air zones and scrappage schemes in Bristol, Bath, Sheffield, Birmingham, Portsmouth and other areas around the country. The previous Conservative Mayor of London supported the London clean air zone, and it is recognised in the Government's air quality strategy, so why have the Government not provided a single penny of scrappage funding for London since the introduction of the ULEZ in 2019?

Mr Harper: Frankly, it is a bit rich for the hon. Lady to talk about this Government's support for Transport for London. The latest TfL settlement supports almost £3.6 billion-worth of projects. This Government's total funding to TfL has been more than £6 billion since the start of the pandemic. There are significant resources. The Mayor of London is expanding his ULEZ scheme—that is his decision, and it is therefore for him to fund the necessary scrappage scheme. If he does not want to fund a proper scrappage scheme, he should not be expanding the ULEZ.

Zero Emission Buses

7. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What steps he is taking to help accelerate the delivery of zero emission buses. [904452]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Government are committed to supporting the introduction of 4,000 zero-emission buses and a zero-emission bus fleet. As the roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), said, he has focused on sustainable public transport recently in a visit to Scotland, which included meetings with the traffic commissioner in Glasgow and Lothian Buses.

Chris Stephens: The Transport Committee's recent report referred to earlier on the implementation of the national bus strategy confirmed that meeting this Government's bus decarbonisation targets initially for England and Wales actually relies on the Scottish Government. That is evidenced by Scotland's ordering of 10.11 zero-emission buses per 100,000 people, compared with just 0.94 in England outside London. Will the Minister explain the vast chasm of delivery? What is the Government's revised target for zero-emission bus delivery in England and Wales?

Jesse Norman: The Government are on track to deliver the policy. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we are working with companies to build substantial supply chains that then have to scale up by several orders of magnitude in order to meet the scale of orders. If we look at the number that have been ordered alone: for zero emission bus regional areas, the ZEBRA scheme, 1,342; 275 for Coventry; 20 will be going to Cambridgeshire in the next few weeks, I am pleased to say; and 350 to other schemes in England outside London. The total so far is 3,429, which is well on track to meet our target.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will the Minister visit Morebus, serving my constituency, because there he will learn that its new buses generate fewer emissions than I do pushing my lawnmower?

Jesse Norman: One can take that as a comment either about buses or about the size of my right hon. Friend's lawnmower—let us assume that it is about buses. I thank him for his interest and I am certainly happy to discuss that further with him.

Rail Infrastructure: North of England

8. **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help deliver major rail infrastructure improvements in the north of England. [904454]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): We remain committed to delivering the integrated rail plan, which, as the Chancellor confirmed in the autumn statement, includes HS2 and delivering the Northern Powerhouse Rail core network. We are also delivering on the multibillion-pound TransPennine

route upgrade between Manchester, Huddersfield, Leeds and York, which represents a bigger central Government commitment than Crossrail in London.

Dan Jarvis: The Department set up the Northern Transport Acceleration Council to put rocket boosters on rail upgrades in the north, but three years on we are no closer to high-speed rail services between Sheffield and Leeds, there are no more trains on the Hope Valley line and NTAC has not met in full since May 2022. Does the Minister think that the appropriate governance arrangements are in place to enable effective decision making?

Huw Merriman: Yes, I do. The delivery speaks for itself in terms of what is being done. In recent months, I have been up to visit the team on the TransPennine route upgrade. With 76 miles of rail line, 23 stations, 6 miles of tunnels and 285 bridges or viaducts being upgraded, it is a vast engineering project. From next year, electric trains will be able to run between Manchester Victoria and Stalybridge. I remind the hon. Member that there was a grand total of nine miles of electrification under the last Labour Government in 13 years. We are also delivering the Northumberland line, HS2 all the way to Manchester and various other projects. It is about delivery rather than talking.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): When it comes to rail infrastructure improvements, the opening of a train station in Aldridge would be a huge boost, providing connectivity to the north of England and beyond. We are currently working on a business case. As soon as that comes forward, can we expect a speedy response from the Minister?

Huw Merriman: My right hon. Friend has met me to champion the cause of the new station at Aldridge. I can give her an assurance that as soon as that business case comes through, we will make a very fast decision. I will continue to work with her and Mayor Andy Street in delivering more improvements for her constituents.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I am proud to support an application to reconnect Oswestry with Gobowen in my constituency, using an existing railway line that has been closed for a number of years, and we submitted an excellent bid in September. Can the Minister update me about when we will hear the outcome and, ideally, whether he will be supporting the bid to restore the connection between Oswestry and Gobowen?

Huw Merriman: The restoring your railway programme is delivering on eight lines, and another 32 lines have business cases or are at other stages of progress. I am happy to write to the hon. Lady and provide detail about the specific project she mentions, but in my view the restoring your railway programme has been a great success.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): We have some vital projects going on across the north and in Hyndburn and Haslingden, such as the improvements at Accrington rail station; Lancaster County Council's levelling-up fund bid, which—apologies, Mr Speaker—is focused solely on east Lancashire; and the bus service improvement plan. But other schemes are needed, such as Access for

All at Oswaldtwistle and Church, work at Rishton station and the reopening of the Rawtenstall-to-Manchester line. Will the Minister meet me to discuss those projects? Will he visit Hyndburn and Haslingden to see why they are desperately needed?

Huw Merriman: I should be delighted to visit. Taking a leaf out of Michael Portillo's book, I am hoping to do my own great British railway journeys over the summer. I very much hope to meet my hon. Friend while doing so. Since 2006, Access for All has delivered step-free access to 220 stations. The programme has been a great success, and I am pleased to say that the stations that my hon. Friend mentions are within the portfolio of the 300 stations that we are currently assessing.

Mr Speaker: You will need better coloured trousers if you are doing that.

P&O Ferries: Discussions with DP World

9. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with DP World on the treatment of workers at P&O Ferries. [904455]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): Our Seafarers' Wages Act 2023 received Royal Assent on 23 March and will protect seafarers who are working on vessels that operate regular international services to and from the UK from being paid less than the national minimum wage. It will boost the pay of thousands of seafarers who work tirelessly to maintain supply chains and transport passengers safely across our waters.

Gerald Jones: DP World, the shamed parent company of P&O Ferries, saw its profits soar to £1.5 billion last year and paid out a massive dividend after sacking 786 seafarers and replacing them with cheaper agency crew. The P&O workforce now face 60 more redundancies. When will this compromised Government start working with trade unions such as the RMT and prioritise the jobs and rights of seafarers and port workers in the UK over the merciless profiteering of DP World? Or does it just prove that it pays to exploit workers in Conservative Britain?

Mr Holden: I disagree. When I took the Seafarers' Wages Bill through this House, I ensured that the Government made a number of concessions in this space. The Secretary of State has recently discussed with the French Government further options to work together to improve conditions for seafarers working on cross-channel routes between England and France. That work continues apace.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Dover is the headquarters and home of P&O Ferries, but the management of P&O Ferries and DP World have treated Dover and its workforce absolutely disgracefully. Will the Minister outline the steps that this Conservative Government are taking to improve conditions for seafarers and hold P&O Ferries and DP World to account?

Mr Holden: I thank my hon. Friend for all her work on the frontline in Dover. She has done a huge amount to raise the profile of the issue and to stand up for her

constituents and for workers in Dover. She will know of the work on the Seafarers' Wages Act, which was largely brought forward with her support. I have been disappointed to see some of the recent redundancies that P&O has brought forward locally. I know that she will continue to work with us to champion seafarers' welfare and will not shy away from ensuring that Britain maintains its role as an international leader in championing the rights of seafarers, including their employment rights.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): If we want to champion seafarers' welfare, where is the seafarers' charter? We have been waiting for it forever.

Earlier this month, disgraced P&O made another 60 people redundant, despite recording a £1.6 billion profit. Can the Minister explain how on earth Peter Hebblethwaite has still faced no sanction in over a year? Does that not show that under the Conservatives it quite clearly pays to trample over the rights of workers?

Mr Holden: As the hon. Member knows, we have worked together on the Seafarers' Wages Act to tackle exactly the issues that he has raised. With regard to Mr Hebblethwaite, civil action is still being considered and it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this time.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Seafarers' Wages Act remains a real missed opportunity. Let us look at points six to nine of the Government's nine-point plan:

"Developing a statutory code for 'fire and rehire' practices"?

Nope.

"Taking action against company leaders who break the law"?

Nope.

"Improving the long-term working conditions of seafarers"?

Nope. As the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) asked, where is the seafarers' charter?

"Encouraging more ships to operate under the UK flag"?

Nope. The figures went down by another 3% last year and are down by 30% since the Tories came to power. Other than the utterly anaemic Seafarers' Wages Act, what have the Tories ever done for seafarers?

Mr Holden: When SNP Members start talking about ferries, we can tell that they think they are on to a good one. It is interesting that they have not raised the subject of motor homes today instead.

Work on the seafarers' charter continues as we speak, and I will update the House as soon as more information is available.

Apprenticeships: Transport Sector

10. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What assessment he has made of the availability of apprenticeships in the transport sector. [904456]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the brilliant work he has done on apprenticeships in Harrogate and Knaresborough over the last few years. I note that some 12,430 new apprenticeships have been created there

since 2010. As he knows, the Department is committed to working with the transport industry to create high-quality apprenticeships so that the sector has the skilled workforce it needs. I work closely with the transport employment and skills taskforce to see what we can do to promote apprenticeships still further in the industry.

Andrew Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. I have been meeting representatives of bus companies that run apprenticeship schemes. They tell me that the rules governing the number of hours per month in the classroom can be problematic for smaller companies when it comes to rostering, and that if there was some flexibility—a change not in the total number of hours, but in the delivery pattern—they would be able to take on more apprenticeships, which they want to do. Will he consider that idea?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend knows, the Department for Education published fresh guidance last year on how apprenticeship training can be delivered flexibly to fit business needs. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), the Roads Minister, has been to talk to him and, I believe, has visited the classroom in Harrogate with him, so he can take it from us that we are very much seized of the issue of flexibility and the importance of improving it.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Minister will know that when it comes to the delivery of charging infrastructure, we are way behind the curve in comparison with our peers in France and Germany. We need more skilled individuals to deliver that infrastructure. Many young people in my constituency benefit from the courses run by Warwickshire College Group, although I am not sure how good the courses are in the rest of the country. What are the Government doing to ensure that the next generation are really electrified about the opportunity this presents?

Jesse Norman: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman meant to begin his question by congratulating the Government on the zero-emission vehicle mandate and our new investments in the local electric vehicle infrastructure scheme. The effect of that, of course, is precisely to create the further investment that will itself drive private sector demand for apprenticeships. We are certainly working as hard as we can on our side, along with the transport employment and skills taskforce, to ensure that we meet this increased demand.

Railways Reform

11. **Theo Clarke** (Stafford) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to reform the railways. [904459]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): In February this year I set out our commitment to reforming the railways. Last month I was pleased to be able to visit Derby and announce its success in being named as the location of the headquarters of Great British Railways. We will publish our response to the rail reform legislation consultation before the summer recess. Meanwhile, we are continuing to deliver rail reform, including the roll-out of pay-as-you-go technology across the network, simplifying industry processes and developing the long-term strategy for rail.

Theo Clarke: I welcome the Government's commitment to railway reform, but the Secretary of State will know from my recent meeting with the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), that my constituency is heavily impacted by the construction of HS2. We have always been promised that the Handsacre link will bring economic benefits to Stafford, but given the recent push to find savings in this project, concerns have been raised that the link will be scrapped. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it will indeed go ahead?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend never misses an opportunity to raise her constituents' concerns about HS2, both with me and with the Rail Minister, thus doing the job that she was elected to do extremely well. Our priority is to deliver the opening stage of HS2 on schedule and to ensure that high-speed services from Old Oak Common to Birmingham Curzon Street begin between 2029 and 2033, but I have made it clear that phase 1 construction works north of Birmingham from Delta Junction to Fradley—including works at Handsacre—will continue to progress.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): In Scotland, through our publicly owned ScotRail franchise, peak fare rail travel will be scrapped for six months from October. This progressive reform would not have been possible without those powers being with the Scottish Parliament. Does the Minister welcome a measure that will aid hard-pressed families in this cost of living crisis, or does he agree with his arch-Brexiteer colleague who said this morning that devolution should be reversed?

Mr Harper: This Government strongly support devolution, and not just to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but through what we are doing with combined authorities across England, because we think that having decisions taken more locally is a good thing for the country. The Scottish Government have an enormous number of powers and they should use them widely. I am pleased to see that in the past couple of weeks they are starting to be held to account for their decision making.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): When it comes to railway reform, the Conservative Government seem to know only two approaches—hike up fares and cut railways back to the bone. They are not content with slashing services, cancelling investment and reducing reliability: a leaked Network Rail report reveals that the Government want to cut funding to such a dangerous level that it will be unable to “operate, maintain and renew” tracks and bridges. On top of that, a £3 billion risk fund to help in emergencies such as severe weather will also be cut. Fewer repairs mean more obstructions, risking more delays and accidents and more compensation to private operators. Why are Ministers so passionately committed to making our railways less reliable and ever more expensive? Have the public not suffered enough already?

Mr Harper: That was an extraordinary question, containing not a single fact. The Government have provided a record £44.1 billion settlement for Network

Rail in control period 7—in English, that is between April 2024 to March 2029. Compared with the previous control period, that is a 4% increase in real terms when compared on a like-for-like basis, and an above-inflation settlement during a highly challenging fiscal environment. That demonstrates our continued commitment to running and maintaining vital railway infrastructure.

Driving Tests

12. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to help reduce the number of learner drivers waiting for a driving test. [904460]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency is increasing the number of driving tests by conducting out-of-hours testing, recruiting over 300 examiners, and re-employing retired examiners. Recovery measures have created 35,000 extra test slots each month, which equates to approximately 813,000 additional slots since April 2021. As of 27 March, there were over 50,000 tests still available to book. The DVSA's Ready to Pass? campaign aims to increase the pass rate and reduce waiting times by ensuring that people do not take their test until they are absolutely ready to do so.

Munira Wilson: Learner drivers are increasingly falling victim to a flourishing black market in driving tests. Third parties are using bots on the Government's website to snap up driving test slots that are then sold for double or triple the price. One of my constituents saw a test advertised for £240. Even driving schools are gaming the system. With AA research showing the most vulnerable, including young care leavers, being hit the hardest, what are the Government doing to crack down on this exploitation, and will Ministers stop the bots?

Mr Holden: I had a meeting with the DVSA on this matter earlier this week, and we will continue to take steps to block cancellation services from accessing the booking system. There has been a significant drop in traffic to those services because of the DVSA's successful work in identifying booking apps and bots, but there are some driving instructors who book slots for their own use. In the hon. Lady's constituency, in Isleworth and Tolworth, the waiting times in February were 8.5 weeks and 7.3 weeks respectively, well below the national average, so there is no need for people to use the bots as they can book a few weeks in advance.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I have received correspondence from a number of constituents struggling to get driving tests in my constituency in recent weeks. For example, a constituent reported that the nearby Bletchley testing centre has nothing available for six months. On top of the question from the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) about the growing purchasing of tests by third parties, will my hon. Friend consider changing the point at which tests are released? I am led to believe that it is 6 am on a Monday, which enables those third parties to get in and book them all up quickly rather than leaving them open for the genuine public, most of whom are probably not at their computers at that time.

Mr Holden: I will certainly look at that. Of the 300 extra driving instructors we have recruited, 87 are in London and the south-east. We have made hundreds of thousands of new slots available in the region over the last couple of years, but we continue to take great ideas from both sides of the House to see what more we can do to ensure people can take their test at the appropriate time.

HS2 Delays: Long-term Costs

13. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What estimate he has made of the long-term costs of delays to HS2. [904461]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): HS2 is a transformational project, and the Government remain fully committed to building the line from Euston to Manchester. HS2 is being delivered in stages, with cost estimates published for each phase of the programme. We remain transparent on the emerging cost position of HS2, and we publish six-monthly reports to Parliament. The recent announcement will clearly require us to work through adjustments for certain phases, and we will provide updated estimates in due course, including through those six-monthly reports.

Wera Hobhouse: Tens of thousands of jobs and billions of pounds in economic growth depend on building HS2. The National Audit Office has noted that the decision to delay HS2 by another two years will increase the costs of the project yet again. The Institution of Civil Engineers says that delaying HS2 could make the building process

“more difficult as construction firms shift their focus to other countries.”

Is it not time that the Government came clean with the public that HS2 is happening, and stopped the dither and delay that will only cost the taxpayer more money?

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): That is not what you said in Chesham.

Mr Harper: As my hon. Friend points out, the Liberal Democrats have different views on HS2 in different parts of the country, which would not be the first time.

The Government remain fully committed to HS2. Picking up the point made by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) about the supply chain, I made it clear in my statement to the House that we are going full steam ahead on phase 1 from Curzon Street to just north of Birmingham, precisely to make sure we protect jobs and the supply chain, and to demonstrate clearly that the project is going to happen. We see the transformation it is having in the west midlands, as Andy Street never tires of telling me, in generating economic growth in Birmingham. We want to see more of that across the country and across the route.

Topical Questions

T1. [904545] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Last month I announced measures to decarbonise transport, to help ensure that the UK continues to lead the

international fight against climate change. That included the second round of the advanced fuels fund and further measures to progress the 2025 sustainable aviation fuel mandate, to help us fly sustainably. Earlier this week, we published Phil New’s independent report on attracting more sustainable aviation fuel investment to the UK, which I discussed with the industry and academia while chairing the Jet Zero Council on Monday.

The House will also be aware that we announced the zero-emission vehicle mandate, demonstrating how our post-Brexit regulatory freedom allows us to do more and to be more ambitious than our European Union partners. This will enable us to provide the green growth we need to grow the economy and to create better-paid jobs and opportunity across the country.

Jamie Stone: The establishment of the Cromarty Firth freeport will hopefully mean more freight travels through Invergordon, which has a railhead. Our railway network is one of the UK’s greatest national assets. What are the Government doing to make sure more freight is taken off the roads and on to rail? The establishment of HS2 will surely mean that capacity is freed up on other lines that could be used to move freight.

Mr Harper: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question, to which I have two responses. First, HS2, as I frequently say but is not always well understood, is about freeing up capacity on the west coast main line both for passenger services and for freight. In my George Bradshaw address, I made it clear that later this year Great British Railways will set a freight target to get more freight off our roads and on to our railway network to help decarbonise our transport system.

T3. [904547] **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): For disabled people, access to public transport is often the difference between having a job and not, between socialising and not, and between living independently and not. In my constituency, in Burnley and Padiham, a brilliant young man called Joe Skinner has made it his mission to improve disabled access on buses, whose current design does not take account of modern wheelchair sizes. So may I ask my right hon. Friend when disabled access requirements were last reviewed, whether he would come to Burnley to meet Joe and talk about this, and whether he would praise Joe for the work he does, not just for disabled people in Burnley, but for people right across the country?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I thank my hon. Friend for that; he has been a great champion of this cause. I absolutely join him in praising Joe Skinner. Let me also praise Cameron Wood in my constituency, who has been equally hard-working in pressing the case for the improvement of disabled access. I know that my hon. Friend has already met the buses Minister, whom I know is keen to get up to Burnley—I would be very supportive of that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Last year, the Prime Minister said:

“Smart motorways are unpopular because they are unsafe.”

Yet last week he confirmed that he would leave 400 miles-worth in place. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how many breakdowns were missed by the stationary vehicle detection system on our smart motorway network last year?

Mr Harper: It is worth saying to the House that smart motorways remain the safest roads on the strategic road network, which is why the existing smart motorways are going to remain in place and we are finishing the construction of the two that are almost completed. However, it is also worth saying that the public do not have as much confidence in smart motorways as we would hope, which is why the Prime Minister delivered on the promise he made to cancel future smart motorways. That is a sensible, balanced position that we have taken, one that I strongly endorse in the House.

Louise Haigh: The combination of smart motorways and faulty technology is giving drivers serious cause for concern. Last year, more than 4,000 breakdowns were missed by that faulty technology. That shocking statistic shows that motorists have been left at risk by the Government's shambolic roll-out of smart motorways. Will the Secretary of State do the right thing and urgently reinstate the hard shoulder?

Mr Harper: This is a very good example of why the Labour party is not fit for government. The hon Lady does not want to face up to difficult choices. If she wants to reinstate the hard shoulder and maintain the capacity of the road network, that would mean spending billions of pounds on road improvements and she has no plan to pay for that. If she is not doing that, it means massive congestion on the motorway network, which will force people off that network and on to less safe A roads, and that will lead to more people losing their lives, not fewer. That is a choice she is not willing to face up to.

T4. [904548] **Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): In recent times, we have had a good number of fatal road accidents in West Dorset: on the A3066, at Mosterton; on the A30 between Sherborne and Yeovil; and on the A35. A year or so ago, I lost one of my best friends from primary school in a fatal car accident between Sherborne and Dorchester. Recently, I have set out and set up my road safety taskforce in West Dorset to address this issue. May I ask the Minister to confirm the standards and conditions he would expect local authorities and indeed National Highways to meet when it comes to white lines, cat's eyes, signage and the like?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Obviously, my heart goes out to all of those affected, including the family of his friend. My understanding is that there were two incidents in 2021 on the roads in his constituency where a police officer attended and said a contributory factor was a poor or defective road surface. This is up to the local authorities; they have a statutory duty to maintain their roads. There should also be a proper inspection scheme for all of the areas that he talks about. The Department encourages good practice in highway maintenance through our

"Well-managed Highway Infrastructure" code of practice. I would be delighted to meet him to discuss road safety further.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Government had a relative paucity of ambition on Active Travel before slashing the budget. They now plan to spend less than £1 per head in England outside London, compared with £17 per head in Wales and £50 in Scotland—5,000% more. In the Transport Committee yesterday, the Secretary of State spoke of other Active Travel spending not in core funding, but we have that, too, with the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation District Scotland—AMIDS—levelling-up project and the River Cart walking and wheeling bridge city deal project in my constituency. Without the waffle, what will the Government do to deliver transformational change—

Mr Speaker: Order. I must help Members from all parts of the House. Topical questions must be short and sweet—quick answers, quick questions. Minister, please show us an example.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Government are spending £3 billion on this area over the current spending period. Active Travel England is making an enormous difference to the quality of schemes throughout England. Significant amounts of money are going in through the levelling-up fund and through City Region Sustainable Transport Settlements and other schemes, so we believe that we are on track to meet our targets.

T6. [904550] **Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): Barrow and Sileby train stations in my constituency are currently in need of vital improvements to make them more accessible to passengers. Can the Minister please provide me with an update on when the Access for All scheme will reopen for applications and whether there are any other pots of funding available for accessibility improvements in the meantime?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): The Department commissioned station nominations for Access for All in May of last year and is currently assessing more than 300 stations that were put forward. They include Barrow-upon-Soar and Sileby. I hope to be in a position later this year to announce the successful projects.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): If the Minister's Portillo-style tour of the railways takes him north of the border, will he reflect on the eye-watering track access charges paid by ScotRail and the eye-watering disruption caused to ScotRail services by problems with that track? Is it not just common sense that train tracks as well as train services should be fully devolved to Scotland?

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman I hope knows that the way track access charges are paid for is in two parts. If he looks at the total charges paid for track access by ScotRail, he will see that they are done on the same basis as in the rest of the United Kingdom. It is a very fair deal for ScotRail, and I do not think that there is anything for the hon. Gentleman to complain about.

T7. [904552] **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): People in Chelmsford spend too much time in traffic jams. It is hitting our economic growth, and the Army and Navy junction is a notorious pinch point. The outline business case for the new junction has been submitted. Will our excellent team of Transport Ministers help me to get the funds that we need from the Treasury to get the new junction delivered?

Mr Holden: I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming me on my recent visit to her constituency where I saw the Army and Navy roundabout. The outline business case has been submitted by Essex County Council. It is currently proceeding through our assessment and decision-making process, which includes consideration by Ministers in my Department and also in the Treasury. I look forward to a positive announcement before too long.

T5. [904549] **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of measures to improve safety on public transport? In particular, does he commend PCC Kim McGuinness and NEXUS for creating an app to keep the public safe when travelling in the Northumbria force area?

Mr Holden: Safety on public transport is a vital matter. Like me, I am sure the hon. Lady is delighted to see the extra money that the Government are making available through our largest bus service improvement plan right across the country, and for the north-east of England, which covers her constituency and mine. Indeed, funds from that will be made available for transport safety in the future.

T8. [904553] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): I welcome the £3 million allocated to Nottinghamshire in the recent Budget to tackle potholes. That is in addition to the extra £50 million that Nottinghamshire County Council is spending on top of the regular budget. When will that extra money become available? Given the widespread severity of the issue and the depth of public concern over it, will he join me in asking the Treasury for further funds in future spending rounds?

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend will never need to encourage me to ask the Treasury for more cash for our road network. Potholes are a menace for all road users. The funding will be available in May. I will also be visiting Nottinghamshire in May, so I may be able to tack on a visit to his wonderful constituency during that time.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): In February and March, nearly a quarter of TransPennine Express services were cancelled, continuing a pattern that has been going on for more than a year. In the north, our economy and our residents are suffering as a result of TransPennine's failures. Surely there cannot be any question of rewarding those failures with a contract extension.

Huw Merriman: Every week I review the figures and performance related to TransPennine Express. It has been said before that those figures are not good enough; there has been some improvement, but they are still not good enough. As the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State have informed the House,

the contract expires on 28 May 2023. We have made clear that all options are on the table and a decision will be announced in the House shortly.

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): Recommendation 7 of Sir Peter Hendy's Union connectivity review says that the north Wales main line should get good connectivity with HS2 and electrification. Given that the massive white elephant of HS2 no longer comes anywhere near north Wales, can the Minister confirm that at least the Government will be proceeding with the electrification of the north Wales main line and give us an idea of when that might happen?

Mr Holden: I know how important not only rail connectivity, but road connectivity is to people in north Wales. I urge the hon. Gentleman to work with me and partners across Government to ensure that transport connectivity is a top priority for people across north Wales.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister is forever promising better bus services for tomorrow, but tomorrow never comes—much like the buses—leaving my constituents stranded at bus stops. When will he deliver better buses for Newcastle and when will he hold the bus companies to account for the atrocious services my constituents are experiencing?

Mr Holden: I am holding the bus companies to account. In fact, we have seen a reduction of over 80% in the issues with driver shortages locally. I have had two bus meetings in my own constituency with local residents and Go North East—I am sure the hon. Lady has had similar meetings where she has put residents in touch with the bus company—and we are providing over £100 million from central Government to the north-east for that long-term funding that she constantly asks about, but was never delivered under the last Labour Government.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): At 410 miles, the A1 is Britain's longest road, and it is largely free-flowing until it reaches my constituency, where it goes through no fewer than four roundabouts, as the Road Minister saw for himself. That is an absurd situation, but to make National Highways change its views will require intervention by the Secretary of State. Will my right hon. Friend agree to a meeting to discuss that further?

Mr Holden: I thank my hon. Friend for those important points. I drive up the A1 myself on a regular basis to my North West Durham constituency, so I am aware of the issues around Sandy and Biggleswade. I will continue to work with National Highways and the Secretary of State to see what more can be done to improve life for my hon. Friend's constituents.

Gavin Newlands: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), the Minister said, "If we look at the number that have been ordered alone: for zero emission bus regional areas, the ZEBRA scheme, 1,342", but, as was discussed in the Transport Committee yesterday, that number is not correct. In the ZEBRA scheme, there have been 503 buses ordered, only six of

which are on the road, and 792 are funded. The Minister was talking about the total funded, and one of the big issues is that funding is not being delivered. I appreciate that this is not a question for you, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State can answer.

Mr Harper: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, it may be helpful for the House to know that we had a detailed question and answer session on this yesterday

when I was giving evidence to the Transport Committee. It is a complicated matter and I committed to write to the Committee to set out the details in full. I will arrange for a copy of that to be placed in the Library of the House for the benefit of all hon. Members so that they can see the facts.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Secretary of State. We will leave it at that, since we at least have the answer.

Fishing Industry: Visas for Foreign Workers

10.33 am

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Office if she will make a statement on visas for foreign workers taking employment in the fishing industry.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for this question. I know this is a topic of significant interest to many in the House. Ordinarily, the Immigration Minister would respond, but he is on an operational visit this morning.

It has been the long-standing position of this and previous Governments that foreign nationals coming to work in the UK, be that on land or on our waters, should comply with the immigration system when doing so. I do not believe that that is controversial, and the fishing industry is no exception to that. Section 43 of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 clarifies the Government's policy position to date: that foreign nationals working in our waters need permission to do so. It does not introduce a new policy. Acknowledging that many in the industry have been incorrectly relying on transit visas rather than work visas to crew their boats, the Government delayed the implementation of section 43 for six months from October 2022 to allow time for the industry to regularise the position of its workers. However, we have decided not to delay implementation any further.

We are aware of the problems that the industry is having in relation to access to labour, and we are fully cognisant of the important contribution that it makes to the economy, particularly in smaller, rural and coastal areas. There are routes in the immigration system that are available for the fishing industry to use. In recognition of the fact that the industry has not been a wide user of the immigration system to date, we will make a generous offer, going over and above what is usually available to employers, to assist it. We are currently finalising the details of our offer of support as a matter of urgency. Once it is ready, my Home Office colleagues will ensure that it is communicated to the industry and to interested Members of the House.

Mr Carmichael: I have to say that fishermen listening to that will have seen it not so much as an answer but as an insult. As you will know, Mr Speaker, this issue has been raised on many occasions in the House. The fishing industry has for years struggled to source the labour that it needs to function properly, and has looked beyond these shores to meet its needs.

Those in the fishing industry have worked hard to construct a scheme that would meet their needs, and its details—written by the Fishermen's Welfare Alliance—have been under consideration by the Home Office. It is, to all intents and purposes, identical to schemes made available to workers in aquaculture and the offshore renewables industry. On Thursday last week, however, the Home Office announced that there would be no such scheme for the fishing industry and, furthermore, that the temporary arrangements that have been in place for the fishing industry would be ended with immediate effect.

My first ask of the Minister is this: will the Home Secretary or the Immigration Minister agree to meet me, with a delegation of fishermen's organisations and Members from all parties, to discuss the details of this? We need answers from the Home Secretary. Why is the fishing industry not allowed the same opportunities given to people working in aquaculture and offshore renewables? Why was no grace period allowed for fishermen to make alternative arrangements?

The people who will be most affected are those fishing in inshore waters using both fixed and mobile gear. If they are to go to sea at all, it will have to be further out, which could bring them into conflict with other sectors that are already fishing there, and will inevitably compromise safety in an industry that is already acknowledged as one of the most dangerous. The excluded areas are very widely drawn and, in Orkney, include uninhabited islands, some of which are 90 miles from the Orkney mainland, making a difficult situation catastrophic. One Shetland fisherman told me last week that he currently works inside the 12-mile limit because he has quota only for haddock. If he has to fish outside the 12-mile limit, he will catch not just haddock but ling and saithe, for which he has no quota and which he is not even allowed to discard. What would the Minister have him do?

Those fishermen have done everything that every Minister in every Government have asked of them. They have worked hard, saved and invested, but they are now left facing ruin. This is a betrayal on the scale that we saw when Ted Heath said that our fishermen were expendable.

Miss Dines: I do not accept that this is a betrayal of the industry. There has been much discussion in this area, and a generous package is imminent to bring the fishing industry in line with other industries. Allusions to the agriculture industry—a seasonal, low-skilled industry—are not apposite because fishermen are highly skilled and should apply through the usual routes. The wind farm system is closed, so it is not right to draw a comparison there either. The right hon. Gentleman asks to meet the Home Secretary or the Immigration Minister. I can put that request to the Minister this afternoon, and I hope that it will be agreed.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I am not crying wolf when I say that this is really putting the scampi industry at risk. Whitby Seafoods has substantial investment in Whitby, as well as in Kilkeel, near the constituency of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Those 500 jobs would be at risk without the supply of scampi. That can be done only using crew who are, in the main, from the Philippines. I hope that this Minister or the Immigration Minister will join me in Kilkeel to see how the crew of Filipinos work together as a team, conversing in their own language. On safety, we need to come up with a solution to the language situation so that we can keep that fish coming in, keep those jobs onshore, and keep Whitby scampi on our pub restaurant menus.

Miss Dines: I know that my right hon. Friend has been very keen in his work in this area, and he always supports the workers in his constituency and the wider industry. The Government have already delayed the

implementation of section 43 of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. It is only right that when this House passes legislation, we expect it to be implemented, and there has already been a delay once.

In relation to the particular point that my right hon. Friend made, I am sure the Immigration Minister will want to talk to him and perhaps visit. I cannot commit him to too many visits, but I will try when I see him this afternoon. This is an important industry, but it is only right that these systems are brought into line with those that everybody else has to abide by. The language provisions are there for important reasons—for the safety of those workers. There has to be a proper system for English language attainment, as with every other industry in this country; there should be no exceptions.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Labour recognises the vital role that the fishing industry plays in securing the food that we all rely on. That is why it is so important that our immigration system is designed alongside the agricultural sector with the specific sector bodies representing its constituent parts. The announcement this week is a prime example of the Government's points-based system not working as it should. Too many industries rely on immigration to fill skills gaps, but we cannot just turn off the tap. If we want to back British industries to buy and sell more in Britain, they need the workforce to do it.

Under the Conservatives, the immigration system exists entirely in isolation from long-term plans for the labour market. Action in both areas is far too weak. On immigration, the Home Secretary claims to want to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands, in disagreement with the Prime Minister, while net migration exceeds 500,000. On the labour market, the Chancellor speaks of tackling economic inactivity, despite soaring levels of people off work due to long-term illness. There is no proper interaction between these two areas. The consequence is no long-term plan to balance sector-specific labour shortages with immigration rules, and instead, panicked fixes developed on an ad hoc basis. A concession is in place for offshore wind and not for fishing. Thousands of visas are released for HGV drivers but not for the meat industry. If those differences were justified by evidence, one might have sympathy, but sectors such as the fishing industry would be forgiven for thinking the Government are just making it up as they go along.

The Labour party supports the principle of a points-based system, but we will improve the current system to make sure it is fair, firm and well managed. We will balance the requirements of businesses and public services with the need to provide the right levels of training and support for home-grown talent, while recognising the critical role that immigration can play and ensuring that we treat those migrant workers with the dignity and respect they deserve. This year, the Labour party is undertaking a review of the points-based system, but unlike the Government, we are engaging in a dialogue with businesses, trade unions and communities, so that the system works for all.

The fishing industry will be keenly watching this, and I want to ask the Minister three quick questions. What are the Government doing to help the fishing industry transition? What consultation have the Government

had with the fishing industry on these changes, and how have they adopted their approach as a result? What reforms are they considering to the points-based system to ensure that businesses train up home-grown talent in exchange for recruiting from overseas, so that the labour force is resilient? I hope the Minister can answer those questions.

Miss Dines: The hon. Lady mentioned a few areas. The offshore wind concession has now closed, so that is no longer of any relevance. It is not accepted that insufficient work has been done in this area. We have a very well-honed skilled workers programme, which has been developed after much work and consultation, and it is not accepted that this is a panicked fix. It is a typical Labour suggestion that something is panicky if it has been delayed for six months—that is hardly a panicky quick fix. This is calculated, bringing this industry into line with everybody else. There needs to be a level playing field.

The Government are doing much in relation to transition. The hon. Lady asked what provision there will be. If she was listening earlier, she will have heard me mention that there is going to be a detailed, generous package, which will be announced imminently, to allow the fishing industry, which has taken time to get away from this historical practice, to come into line. There will be generous support, and it will be announced imminently.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The UK Government's decision to not create a bespoke visa scheme for the fishing industry has created huge challenges for the sector, with some crew members forced to stop working and some boats unable even to go out to sea. The chaos caused by the Home Office announcement that a concession would not be provided to the fishing industry for foreign crew working within 12 nautical miles prevented workers on transit visas from going on to fish in international waters. What will the Minister do to address the fact that overnight, fishermen and businesses found themselves in legal limbo, with no time to make preparations to continue working? It makes no sense for concessions to be provided for workers in the aquaculture and offshore renewables sectors, but not the fishing sector.

Around one fifth of fishermen working in Scotland come from outside the European economic area and rely on transit visas to work. How does the Minister respond to concerns that it will be very difficult to find enough crew to meet demand, and what reassurances can she give to the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, which has raised serious concerns about the Government's willingness to sacrifice Scotland's fishing industry—concerns echoed by the Scottish Government, who have been similarly ignored? That threatens this sector, which is so important to Scotland and to our rural and island communities.

Miss Dines: The Government accept that there are special requirements in relation to fishing, which is why these fishermen are skilled workers, and they should be applying through the skilled worker scheme. It is not accepted that the industry has been left in limbo: it has been allowed a six-month delay, with plans for generous support that will be announced imminently.

[Miss Dines]

Again, comparisons with the agricultural industry are false, because we have seasonal, low-skilled workers in that industry for a good reason, and they have a different scheme. For fishermen, it is all year round, and these are highly skilled workers. It does the industry a disservice to say that they should be treated in a similar, seasonal, once-a-year or twice-a-year way. The industry needs to be able to accept these changes, which have been passed by the Government in this House. There will be a generous package of support to assist it so that it will no longer be in limbo—as the hon. Lady says—but will be able to plan to be treated in the same way as the rest of the UK.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Home Office's treatment of sectors employing large numbers of migrant workers has been hapless for years, so can I press the Minister: by when will we see the generous offer that she has talked about today?

Miss Dines: I do not accept that the system has been dealt with by the Government in a haphazard or hapless way. There has been a lot of consultation with the industry, and there has been the significant delay that I mentioned. The industry has been given time. Of course, the Government are very sympathetic to every industry across this great nation of ours. However, we do now need to move on with the will of Parliament and make sure that this industry goes along with what everybody else has to use—the skilled worker route. That is what we are going to do, but there will be generous support for employers to make sure they are able to make those changes.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Be in no doubt, Minister: this is a betrayal of our inshore fleet. It is particularly galling that it comes just 24 hours after the Tories demanded that the Scottish Government listen to, and consult further with, our fishing communities over highly protected marine areas, which I am delighted to say they have committed to do. That the Tories have become so callously deaf to the pleas of those same fishing communities, who have made the reasonable request that they be treated no differently from other sectors, is a betrayal, and will be seen as political opportunism of the worst kind. Can the Minister not see and understand that?

Miss Dines: I can understand, on behalf of the Government, the concerns about this area. However, I think the hon. Member does himself a disservice with the emotive language he uses. He says that we are callously deaf, but we have delayed on special grounds for six months and are bringing in a supportive and very generous package that will be announced imminently. The rhetoric therefore does not ring true; I know that sometimes, rhetoric is used to try to divide us in this nation, but I do not accept that that is the right way forward. A generous package of support will be announced imminently.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The plight of the fishing industry is closely allied to hospitality and tourism in coastal areas and other parts of the United Kingdom, which face a similar crisis. Some 63%

of the hospitality and tourism businesses in my community are operating below capacity, because of a lack of staff. The Minister's Department has been in discussions with me and the tourism industry about a youth mobility visa scheme with France, Spain, Poland and other countries. Can she give me an update or at least allow a meeting between me, the tourism industry and Ministers to see how they are getting on with bilateral negotiations over youth mobility visas to solve this problem?

Miss Dines: The Government are fully aware of shortages in all sorts of industries in the country, which is why we want to get more British people back working, particularly the over-50s, and there have been a lot of schemes on that. The Government are working hard, and there will be a package of support to enable employers to implement this measure, so that the fishing industry is the same as every other industry. We are cognisant of differences—geographical and otherwise—and the idea is that the will of this House to have a skilled worker scheme is brought into play.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Minister may not be aware that the Scottish Fishermen's Federation was literally the only part, across the entirety of Scottish civic society, that openly supported Brexit. It continued to support the Government's approach for a number of years. Even it now says that it has gone badly wrong. If the only cheerleaders that Brexit ever had in Scotland are telling the Minister that they have been sold a pig in a poke, is it any wonder that as well as resoundingly rejecting her party and her Brexit, the vast majority of people in Scotland now believe that her Union's days are severely numbered?

Miss Dines: It is unfortunate when the nationalists try to bring everything down to Brexit or independence. This is a whole of the United Kingdom system. We have a skilled worker programme, and fishermen will need to apply. There will be generous support. Despite the six-month delay, we need to give further assistance to the industry, and we will announce a generous package imminently.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) has put his finger on it. Today I have spoken to Mr William Calder, who runs Scrabster Seafoods, a highly successful firm in Caithness. William said to me that if the skippers cannot get the crew for the boats, the boats do not go to sea, and if the boats do not go to sea, they do not catch the fish. That means he may not have the fish he needs. He employs people in vital jobs in Caithness. The Government have to ask themselves one simple question: are they about business and nurturing business, or not?

Miss Dines: Of course the Government are about nurturing business, but this is about assisting industries that have been using the wrong visa for many years to come into line with the rest of the country. The fishermen should be employed through the skilled worker visa. This Government are about economics and industry, and this is about encouraging the sector with generous support to recruit local people where possible, rather

than people from abroad who may not have the language skills needed to promote their safety. That is why the English language is so very important in the visa system.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): My hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) points out the problems caused for his community if the fish are not landed. If that happens, there is no fish and no seafood to process. That feeds into communities such as mine, which may not have a food processing industry or fishermen, but do have a massive hospitality industry that is dependent on that food. Can the Government not see that by taking these steps, they are failing the entire economy and the business they claim to support?

Miss Dines: With respect, it is not failing the economy to demand that one industry does, with extra help, what everybody else does. There will be extra financial support for employers to apply through the skilled worker scheme. There has been a six-month delay. There will be support for employers to apply through the route that they should use. This practice needs, after a six-month delay, to be brought to an end, and fishing industry employers need to recruit locally if possible and use the visa system that exists.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Fishermen's Welfare Alliance has asked for an extension for fishermen's safety. They need to be trained to the appropriate English language standard. In the meeting that we had with the Minister for Immigration in January, the fishing organisations outlined how they were going to achieve that goal through a college in Sri Lanka that could train the fishermen and fisherwomen up to a standard of the English language that enables them to come here and fit into the scheme. We had some indication from the Immigration Minister that he was sympathetic to that.

I represent Portavogie in my constituency of Strangford and, because the other MP does not attend this place, I ultimately represent Ardglass and Kilkeel on fishing as well. It is imperative to have a managed, safe transition, and time is needed to deliver that. Analysis shows that 600 jobs could be lost. I say to the Minister again very respectfully—the Minister knows that I am always respectful to her, as I am to every person in this Chamber—that, for the communities that will be impacted, a further grace period is needed to enable the fishing sector to thrive and create jobs and opportunity. We need 12 months to make that happen, so that people can learn the English language and come here and do the jobs.

Miss Dines: I know the hon. Member has worked hard on this area. However, there has already been a six-month delay. The point about the English language is crucial. The English language requirement is fundamental to the successful integration into British society of workers coming from abroad. That is for many reasons: it is not just for integration, but to keep them safe. The level is B1 English, which is lower intermediate, and migrants do need to understand that. I am interested in the work that he has been watching in Sri Lanka, but there has already been a six-month delay. We need to bring this practice to an end, and applicants need to go through the skilled worker route.

Business of the House

10.55 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 24 April will include:

MONDAY 24 APRIL—Second Reading of the Non-Domestic Rating Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Public Order Bill.

TUESDAY 25 APRIL—Opposition day (14th allotted day). Debate in the name of the Leader of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 26 APRIL—Remaining stages of the Illegal Migration Bill.

THURSDAY 27 APRIL—General debate on progress on reforms to NHS dentistry, followed by a general debate on reducing plastic pollution in the oceans. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 28 APRIL—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 1 May includes:

MONDAY 1 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 2 MAY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, followed by a general debate on support for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 3 MAY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the National Security Bill, followed by remaining stages of the Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill.

The House will rise for the coronation recess at the conclusion of business on Wednesday 3 May and will return on Tuesday 9 May.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business.

I do hope everyone had a good recess, but for some it was probably more so than for others. On that note, can I welcome the leader of the SNP's comments that he, ahem, does "not believe" the SNP is operating criminally—reassuring—when it comes to its "Carry On Campervan" saga? The problem the SNP has is that it does not sound all that convincing, perhaps with good reason.

Seriously, it has emerged that the SNP's auditors have resigned from doing its Westminster group's accounts as well as from doing the national party's. I understand that senior SNP figures failed to inform the authorities here about that. Will the Leader of the House tell us if she knows whether that is correct, because this is serious—it is taxpayers' money? Can I ask the Leader of the House to intervene to make sure that SNP money that is provided for some of its political staffing here in Parliament has been properly accounted for and used for the purposes for which it is intended? Does she agree with me that, as the police investigation spreads, the First Minister and leader of the SNP should take the basic step of suspending Members of the Scottish Parliament who are the subject of police inquiries? Is it not time that the SNP came clean about who knew what and when? The Scottish people deserve much better than this.

[Thangam Debbonaire]

The Government snuck out 17 written ministerial statements on the day Parliament broke up for Easter—Whitehall's big spring clean! Why, then, did the Leader of the House not dust off the Government's impact assessment for the Illegal Migration Bill? It has been stuck down the back of Downing Street's infamous sofa for so long that she cannot be surprised that I am bringing this up. On the 10 separate occasions I have raised it, she has been unable to provide an answer 10 times. Could she have another go today? I was starting to wonder whether it was something personal, but she also could not give an answer to the shadow Deputy Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), at business questions just before the recess. Who knows how many times the shadow Home Office team have asked? There are now just six days until the remaining stages of the Illegal Migration Bill, as announced this morning. What good is publishing an impact assessment after a Bill has been rushed into law? How is that good law making? Surely the Leader of the House does not want to accept that. What are the Government trying to hide? Is it, by any chance, that the Bill is unworkable and they know it? If not, why does she not prove us wrong and publish the impact assessment?

The Leader of the House has just confirmed that the remaining stages of the Bill are scheduled for next Wednesday, instead of Tuesday, presumably to give the Government more time to table last-minute amendments. Is that because the Prime Minister could not even get his own MPs to line up with him? It does look that way. We are here again, with a weak Prime Minister who is forced to cave in to appease a small minority of right-wing Back Benchers. What a mess. Can the right hon. Lady clear it up? The Government must table any amendments such as we read rumours about in the press this morning as a matter of urgency, because MPs need to see them and scrutinise them as soon as possible.

Finally, will the Leader of the House please consider a debate on the time people have to wait for cancer care? Figures released by Labour this morning show that under the Tories, people are waiting up to six months to see a cancer doctor after an urgent referral from a GP. Some are waiting for more than a year to start treatment—a year! Labour has a plan to bring down NHS waiting times and get patients seen and treated faster. The Government have stolen enough of our policies, so could they please, please pinch our policy on this? We would double the number of medical training places, increase nursing and midwifery clinical placements, and recruit more health visitors, and we would pay for that by ending the non-dom tax loophole so that wealthy individuals—[Interruption.] It is not funny. I do not think any of our constituents find cancer waiting times funny. Will the right hon. Lady consider who the Government are siding with? Is it non-doms, or is it nurses and cancer patients?

Penny Mordaunt: Let me start with the hon. Lady's final point, which is a serious and timely one in a week when the nation is focused on improving bowel cancer diagnosis rates, and we had that wonderful documentary celebrating the work of Bowelbabe and other cancer campaigners. The Health and Social Care Secretary has been doing much more to ensure that we get down the

backlog in our NHS, and a large part of that, and one of the main barriers to people being able to come forward for treatment, is a backlog in diagnostics. That is why we have invested so much in setting up new diagnostic centres to crack through that backlog which, as the hon. Lady knows, is due to the pandemic. These are serious matters, and I know all Members of the House are concerned about them. I am sure hon. Members know how to apply for a debate in the usual way.

The hon. Lady raised the matter of the SNP and Short money, and although we all enjoy a joke at the SNP's expense, these are serious matters. I shall not comment on her suggestion about people being suspended under police investigation—I shall save her blushes as that might have included the Leader of the Opposition, who has been in that camp before. These are not matters for me, but I understand that unless the SNP has audited accounts by 31 May, it will lose its Short money after the April payment. I understand that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority may also have considerations to make. The SNP membership will feel rightly let down by this, which is similar to how the rest of Scotland will feel about the SNP's poor stewardship of public money. On the upside, I guess it will be easier for them to have a whip-round among the membership, as that number is dwindling to the point where most of them could fit into, well, a luxury camper van.

The hon. Lady raises the issue of an impact assessment. I did say, in my response to the shadow Deputy Leader of the House at the last business questions, that I hope material can be brought forward to assist Members on Report. I understand that that is still the case. I also understand that the majority, if not all, of the amendments will be tabled today.

The hon. Lady is critical of the new amendments. I want a Bill that will work. I ask her to look at them and judge them with an open mind, and urge her party to consider supporting us in obtaining the tools we need to make our systems fit for purpose and protect our borders. As a country, we cannot be soft on these issues. We regret Labour voting 44 times against tougher sentences. We regret Labour blocking the deportation of foreign criminals. We regret that crime levels in Labour-controlled police and crime commissioner areas are on average 34% higher than elsewhere, and that Labour is still against the Bill to stop the small boats.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister exposed the Leader of the Opposition as being Mr Softie, just as his predecessors have done with other Labour leaders. Mrs Thatcher, as you remember Mr Speaker, was an authority on this, having made a study of ice cream so liquid and air-filled it could be poured. Today, the Mr Softie opposite is topped with hundreds and thousands of unfunded spending pledges and one big flake. We know it, Opposition Members know it and the public know it, too.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am sure my right hon. Friend is aware of the importance of local banking to local communities. With news of the closure of yet another bank in Aldridge in July, we will be left with just one bank for the whole constituency. It really worries me that older residents struggle with access to banking, cash and valuable services, so will she consider providing time for a debate to discuss this really important topic, which I am sure is of interest to Members on both sides of the House?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this very important point. Although these are commercial decisions for banks, it is a matter of concern to us to ensure that people have access to banking services and are able to access cash. As she knows, we have announced more than 50 new shared banking hubs. I will certainly raise the matter with the relevant Minister, as the next departmental questions are not until 9 May, to ensure that she has all the information she needs to look at alternatives. We are progressing legislation in the Financial Services and Markets Bill to ensure that communities are protected.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson..

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I suppose I should start by thanking the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debona) for that remarkable outburst. In many ways we should be grateful, because never before has she shown such an interest in Scotland—that was, indeed, painfully obvious. There is much I would say, but it will suffice if I say that perhaps people in glass houses should not throw stones.

It is a pleasure to be here and come off the subs bench to make my debut at business questions. Members can see that, like all great athletes, I have been weeks in preparation for the big event. There is, however, a chance that more folk will have witnessed this particular substitution than any of the five changes made during Scotland's famous and magnificent victory over Spain last month. Unlike our free-to-air Parliament TV, no such thing exists as free-to-air live football in Scotland. Scotland's football fans have to subscribe to all manner of providers if they are to watch domestic or international matches. It is becoming an increasingly expensive hobby. May we therefore have a debate to find a way that will, at the very least, return Scottish international matches to free-to-view telly?

But of course, it is not just our international football that is facing an international blackout. Scotland's democratically elected politicians are facing one too, as the hyper-insecure Foreign Secretary is now frantically telling foreign Governments that they should not engage with Scottish Ministers without his or his Department's permission. Quite what has triggered this bizarre bout of ministerial paranoia in the Foreign Secretary is unclear, so perhaps it would be very helpful for all of us if the Government were to make time for a debate about what it is exactly they fear from Members of our democratically elected Parliament speaking to people furth of these islands.

Surely, talking to others, learning from one another's experiences, sharing new ideas and understanding difference is at the heart of all that we are about. Given that exactly 55 years ago today, on 20 April 1968, Enoch Powell gave his now infamous rivers of blood speech, would it not be great to have a debate in Government time to put on record our overwhelming belief that immigration has been good for this country and has greatly enriched every one of the nations on this island?

Penny Mordaunt: Let me start by sending my thoughts and good wishes to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). I wish her and her family well. I thank the hon. Gentleman for stepping up and standing in, especially as it has been a painful few

weeks for his party. For some time now, BBC "Politics Scotland" has resembled an episode of "Taggart". I thank him for showing up today.

I have great sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman says about viewing the considerable recent Scottish sporting victories, and I will ensure that colleagues have heard that.

The hon. Gentleman raises the matter of the Foreign Secretary's concern that the Scottish National party is spending so much time, effort and money on matters on which it does not have competency, in both senses of the word. He asks why the Foreign Secretary might feel that way; I suggest that it might be the hon. Gentleman's own views.

The hon. Gentleman raises the small boats Bill, on which he has done a lot of work recently, making his views very clear. Making our asylum system effective is a compassionate thing to do. It is compassionate to break the business model of people smugglers and to enable us to use the finite resources that we have to help those in genuine need. We have to deal with the reality of the situation. The hon. Gentleman's arguments against the Bill are drawn from fantasy. He says that our motivation is

"a legacy of our colonial past,"

or the fact we wish to profit from supplying "warring factions with weapons". Is he talking about Ukraine? Ukraine is not a warring faction but a sovereign nation under attack. I am proud of what this country has done to support the Ukrainian people.

Let me enlighten the hon. Gentleman about some other things that we should be proud of in our country, rather than talking down. The Halo Trust, based in Dumfries and Galloway, is one. It has done more to de-mine and strip out weapons than any other organisation in the world. We should be proud of that. He says that the small boats Bill is a legacy of "our CO₂ emissions" and the impact they have had on

"many of the world's poorest nations."

No industrial nation has done more to cut its carbon emissions, or done it faster than the UK. It has done more than any G20 nation, and Glasgow played a huge part in that. The UK is more than halfway to meeting its net zero target.

I hope that the SNP will stop talking Scotland and the rest of the UK down. We will do what is necessary in the Bill and in other areas to protect the vulnerable and the planet and to promote peace. We do not pass the buck and shirk responsibility—that we will leave to the hon. Gentleman and his party.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Tomorrow I will meet homeowners at Brookside Park in Bromham, one of a number of park home sites in my constituency. They will raise issues such as the 10% commission charged when they sell their home, the fact that their pitch fees increase annually at the rate of the retail price index and not the consumer prices index, the general laxity of regulation for park homes, and the recent difficulties—now largely overcome, happily—with the energy support programmes. Can my right hon. Friend find time for a general debate in the House on the particular needs of homeowners in park home areas?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. He will know that the issue is a focus for this Government, in part because of the energy bill support scheme alternative funding that is available and wanting to make sure that everyone can make use of that. The relevant Department has set up surgeries for Members, particularly because of the issues they have raised about park home owners, and we supported the Mobile Homes (Pitch Fees) Bill. We are focused on the issue and I thank my hon. Friend for raising it. He will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her statement and for announcing the Backbench Business debates on 27 April and 2 May. I am glad to say that the Committee had no fewer than six applications yesterday, which keeps us on track to fill up the appropriate slots. Slots for May are already filling up rapidly, so if Members are looking to access slots for debates in late May or June, I urge them to submit their applications as soon as possible.

Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Gateshead football club on getting to Wembley to play in the FA trophy final on 21 May? It will be my second visit to Wembley in recent history. I am afraid to say that Newcastle was not as successful against Manchester United as I had hoped, but I am hoping that Gateshead will have greater success against Halifax Town on 21 May.

Finally, may I ask the Leader of the House if we can have a debate about children being hungry at school? Because of the very low income required to be eligible for free school meals and the sadly increasing cost of school meals for those who have to pay, many more children are being sent to school with totally inadequate, nutritionally deficient packed lunches. That is in addition to the growing number of children who rely on breakfasts provided in school, through the support of Magic Breakfast, Greggs and Kellogg's. So can we have an urgent debate about the growing number and the dreadful problem of children being hungry in our schools? Hungry children do not learn, and that is bad for everyone.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his update and advert for future debate applications. We all appreciate the work he and his Committee do.

I join him in congratulating Gateshead. I had better wish both teams well, but particularly Gateshead, as the hon. Gentleman has raised the match this morning.

On his substantive question, I will ensure that both the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Secretary of State for Education have heard his concerns today. He will know that we have widened access to free school meals, but obviously in these very difficult times we want to make sure that all children have good nutrition and are able to have a good day at school.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): In light of yesterday's coroner's court ruling that the death of Dr Stephen Wright was due to "unintended complications of the vaccine",

we now have a legal precedent to review all cases of deaths that fell within the first 14 days of receiving these experimental treatments.

Stephen sadly died 10 days after receiving his first dose of AstraZeneca. As previously any death within a fortnight of receiving the vaccine was regarded as an unvaccinated death, his death was originally attributed to natural causes. Will the Government issue a statement and release details of other such cases where people sadly died within 14 days of vaccination?

Penny Mordaunt: I will ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to update the House in light of this recent change. These are very serious matters that I know are shared concerns for many Members on all sides of the House.

MPs from across the House have spoken on many occasions about medical licensing and medical device licences, the processes and policies of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, our covid response and compensation for the vaccine injured, which was recently raised on the Floor of the House by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), the former Attorney General. These are totally legitimate and correct debates to have. Parliamentary scrutiny and debate is one of the many checks and balances that we have in this country to ensure that we are taking the right course of action on these and all other matters. That is what many colleagues do.

What other colleagues are not doing is promoting false propaganda, which is widely known to originate from the Kremlin, abusing and undermining colleagues and the occupant of the Chair, and using the autopsy of a 14-year-old girl as clickbait on their social media feed, all of which the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) has done in the past week. He might like to reflect on that.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Many of my constituents in Battersea have been victims of car theft, a distressing and disruptive ordeal. Last year, on average, one car a day was stolen, but of all those incidents only five led to a charge. Tory cuts to policing in London have had a devastating impact and have led to severe consequences, so can we have a debate in Government time on the desperate need for more neighbourhood policing in London?

Penny Mordaunt: I hope that I am always helpful to hon. Members, but I think the hon. Lady needs to direct her questions to the Labour London Mayor. Since 2010, this Government have halved crime on pretty much the same resource. In my opening remarks, I set out the clear fact that Labour-run police and crime commissioner areas are 34% more likely to have a higher crime rate.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Barclays bank has recently closed its branch in Thornaby and now looks set to close its branch in Yarm. That will have a huge impact on many vulnerable and elderly people in my patch, who will lose their access to banking services; it will also reduce footfall for Yarm's incredible retail and hospitality businesses. Will my right hon. Friend grant a debate on access to banking in our high streets and town centres?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for asking the second question today on that issue. I urge him to get together with my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) to secure a debate in the usual way, but of course I will make sure that the Department has heard his concerns. I thank him for being a champion for services in his community.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate the Leader of the House on her excellent response to the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen). She was absolutely right.

The Prime Minister has boasted that 500 new dentists are practising in the NHS because of Government reforms. In reality, over 500 dentists are doing just one NHS check-up a year. The British Dental Association has described official data on NHS dentistry as a work of pure fiction; it also says that the Government have never attempted to collect data on the workload of NHS dentists or how much time they spend on private and NHS patients. Can we have a statement from the relevant Minister to explain why the Government are not collecting that important data in the middle of an NHS dentistry crisis?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know that that is a huge focus for the Department. The Secretary of State is collecting more data and using it in a way we had not done previously. As I announced in the business statement, on Thursday 27 April we will have a general debate, thanks to the Backbench Business Committee, on progress on reforms to NHS dentistry. The hon. Lady will know that we have brought forward new money and that contract reforms and many other things are under way, not just to deal with the immediate situation, which has arisen in part because of treatment backlogs, but to make the right provision and have the right number of dental schools around the country to ensure a pipeline and a strong workforce in future.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for visiting Hyndburn and Haslingden last Friday to see the Veterans in Communities organisation in Haslingden and speak to volunteers and veterans—I must just plug the open day from 10 to 3 o'clock tomorrow in Accrington town centre, where people can see the amazing work that they do. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such organisations make a huge difference to places like Hyndburn and Haslingden and to veterans in general? Can we have a debate in Government time on the support that these organisations give to veterans in our communities?

Penny Mordaunt: It was a pleasure to visit my hon. Friend's constituency and see Veterans in Communities, an amazing organisation—I am particularly keen to get updates on the progress of the giant model railway that it is constructing. I thank her for what she has done to champion such organisations and ensure that they have all they need to reach everyone in the community who can benefit from their services.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Yesterday *Private Eye* revealed truly shocking, industrial-scale corruption on Teesside. A huge site acquired by the public body South Tees Developments Limited for £12 million in 2019 subsequently received hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayer investment. Any future

sale had to be on market terms, but we now know that private developers exercised their option to purchase for a mere £1 an acre plus inflation, paying £96.79 in December 2022. I have the transfer. The only economic growth that is being delivered is being delivered to the accounts of Ben Houchen's pals Messrs Musgrave and Corney, who, for a bargain £100, will benefit to the tune of £100 million—and all the while the state remains on the hook for the ongoing environmental costs. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities comes to that Dispatch Box and tells the House what plans the Government have for a full investigation of this industrial-scale corruption?

Penny Mordaunt: The relevant questions session will not take place until 5 June, but I will write a letter, on the hon. Gentleman's behalf, to ensure that the Secretary of State has heard what he has said. I should add that the Mayor has been doing an incredible job in regenerating that part of the country and making it a world leader in clean technology. However, the hon. Gentleman has raised serious issues, so I will, as I say, raise them with the Secretary of State on his behalf, although I assume he has already done so.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I think it fair to say that in the past, communities in Sandwell have felt that there has been a bit of "cut and run", but in recent times the Government's £4 million investment in historic high streets such as the one in Wednesbury has come as a sign of hope. That being said, the removal of the Wednesbury market from its Union Street site to the clock tower has caused no end of controversy. The traders did not want it, and nor did the community. May we have a debate in Government time on the broader topic of how we can realise investment in our communities, and how there can be real accountability when we are trying to level up historic market towns such as Wednesbury?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he has done to secure new investment, focusing on Wednesbury and other parts of his constituency. His important question illustrates why it is vital for people to consult the local community, including businesses and market traders, when such matters are under consideration. This seems like a good topic for an Adjournment debate, and he will know how to apply for one.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): May I return the Leader of the House to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara)? I have held a roundtable with the Scottish Football Association, broadcasters representing both free-to-air and subscription channels, the Scottish Football Supporters Association and an observer from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on securing access to live coverage of both Scotland's national football teams on free-to-air television, equivalent to the coverage currently afforded to English and Welsh football fans. I have also discussed the issue with various sports Ministers over the years, but I should like to work with the DCMS, or indeed anyone, to find a solution. Will the Leader of the House give the Secretary of State a nudge about arranging a promised meeting, and might she also make time for the debate suggested by my hon. Friend?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important question, and, in particular for the words “work with the DCMS”. I shall do all that I can to assist him. I think that people do want to be able to follow their local and national teams, and I am also aware of the burden on those in charge of pubs and other venues who wish to stream these events. I shall ensure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman’s comments.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022, which is now in force, has made it a criminal offence to arrange a child marriage in England and Wales, but unfortunately marriage policy is devolved, so Scotland and Northern Ireland have not yet banned child marriage in their jurisdictions. The sustainable development goals commit the whole UK to banning child marriage entirely by 2030. May we have a statement from the responsible Minister about what steps the UK Government are taking to ensure that the actions of the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive do not cause us to fail in our international obligations?”

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for all the work she has done to make this important step a reality. I can inform her that Lord Bellamy wrote to the Scottish and Northern Ireland Governments in November last year to encourage them to follow suit and meet the sustainable development goal in particular. I understand that the devolved nations are now considering that matter. I personally found it a matter of deep regret that when we introduced the Civil Partnership (Opposite-sex Couples) Regulations 2019, people in Scotland had to wait a further six months to benefit from that legislation. I encourage both Scotland and Northern Ireland to follow suit when able to do so.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we have a debate about the treatment of refugees from Afghanistan? I recently visited a group who are housed near Cardiff, including consultants, doctors, people who had translated for us in Afghanistan and people who fought alongside our armed forces there. Even after all this time since they were evacuated, they have still not been housed and face great difficulty getting into employment. They also told me that they were beginning to suffer from abuse because of the dog-whistle politics on refugee status that is sadly going on at the moment. Without pivoting to such dog-whistle politics, will the Leader of the House take the opportunity to explain to the public that those refugees helped us in our foreign policy aims in Afghanistan, and tell us what the Government would do in such a debate to explain what will be done to help them?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important matter, which I know many Members will be concerned about. It is a key example of where we want to help not just those in greatest need, but people to whom we have a particular moral responsibility. Afghan refugees, especially those who served alongside us, supported our armed forces, helped us with translation and other services, or worked with some of our aid agencies, are exactly such people. I shall make sure that the relevant Minister has heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. If he wishes to pass me details about the particular site in Cardiff, I would be happy to pass those on too.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In Cumbria in the last year, 44% of all people diagnosed with cancer waited more than 62 days to get their first treatment. That is 464 individuals waiting more than two months after a diagnosis to get their first treatment, when we know that every four weeks’ delay in treatment reduces people’s chance of surviving by 10%. May we have a debate on the Government’s current lack of a cancer strategy to tackle that crisis, and will the Leader of the House consider making radiotherapy a key part of that discussion, bearing in mind that 53% of people with cancer should have radiotherapy by international standards but only 27% of British patients do? Will she also consider the impact on rural communities such as mine, in which travelling times to undergo radiotherapy can be three or four-hour round trips every day for weeks on end, and the bid that we are making for a satellite radiotherapy unit at the Westmoreland General Hospital?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue: he is the second Member to raise it today, and I shall certainly make sure that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has heard his concerns. As I said before, we are acutely aware of the need to ensure that while we work through the backlog, new cases are dealt with swiftly. It does make a massive difference to outcomes, which is why we have stood up the new diagnostic centres and are bolstering the NHS in the way that we are. As well as the provision of those services, how people are able to access them is critical, and I know that hospital transport and accessibility of those services is very important. I wish him well in his bid.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): My office was contacted in March 2022 by a young Albanian national who entered the UK in 2019 and is still, to this day, awaiting a decision on her immigration status. She had a Home Office interview in May 2022, and in October 2022 she received long-awaited confirmation that she is a victim of modern slavery and that sexual exploitation had occurred in the UK between January and April 2019. She has a degree in English from Tirana University and a British interpretation qualification, yet she is unable to seek employment in Britain. Will the Leader of the House advise me on how much longer my constituent will have to wait for a final outcome from the Home Office on her immigration status?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about this case. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has used the Home Office’s new surgery. We know it is very difficult to get answers via hotlines and correspondence, so the Home Office has established a new service, both on site and on Teams, so that Members can talk directly to a person dealing with an individual’s case. I am not part of that service, so I cannot give an answer on this case, but I will make sure he is able to access those surgeries. If he has any future problems, please contact my office.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Despite living in a colder climate, consumers in the highlands still face higher energy tariffs than consumers elsewhere in the UK. There is no regulation at all for off-gas-grid supply, there is price discrimination for those with prepayment meters, and

companies are raising direct debits while holding on to credit. There are faulty meters, the failure of smart meters, and incorrect and confusing billing. Is it not past time that we had a debate in Government time on the failure of energy regulation for people in the highlands and other rural areas?

Penny Mordaunt: After advertising the Home Office surgeries, I now advertise that the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero has stood up surgeries in Portcullis House where individual cases and policy issues can be raised. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero has introduced new measures on prepayment meters and other things to ensure that people are not paying a poverty premium and are not disadvantaged by where they live in the UK.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) *rose—*

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My constituents are not only fed up with potholes—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We cannot have two Members on their feet at the same time. Mr Burgon, please, you must give way to the Member I called. You cannot remain standing.

Matt Western: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

My constituents are not only fed up with Tory potholes, but frustrated and upset by Conservative-led Warwick District Council's lack of action on the Gypsy and Traveller sites that, by law, should be provided. The council has talked, but not delivered, for more than 10 years, so communities such as Woodloes, Chase Meadow, Whitnash and Lillington, as well as Central Ajax football club, have suffered illegal encampments. Labour councillors want to bring forward a site urgently to resolve the problem, so can we have a debate, 12 years on from the introduction of the Conservative national planning policy framework, to consider the number of local authorities that have not delivered on these sites? I think it is a widespread problem.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman cannot blame us for creating potholes, but he will know that the Chancellor has brought forward a considerable uplift in funding to address potholes, which are extremely concerning for a lot of people. I urge him to make sure his local authority and other agencies are making use of that fund to rectify the situation in his area. I would also be interested to know whether the hon. Gentleman's local authority is making use of the powers we introduced earlier in our administration to ensure that illegal encampments are not set up. I will ask the relevant Minister to get in touch with his office to make sure he has everything he needs to deal with both situations.

Richard Burgon: A new poll shows that 51% of people think the coronation should not be publicly funded, with just 32% thinking it should. Given today's report that the King has a personal fortune of £1.8 billion, and given that the monarch already benefits from not paying inheritance tax, it is easy to see why so many people are not happy. Can we have a debate on the level of public money being spent on the coronation, especially given the incredibly difficult economic situation for so many people?

Penny Mordaunt: I was waiting for a question of this flavour, and it is no surprise from where it came. It affords me the opportunity to say that I am very grateful that this nation has a monarchy. We benefit hugely from it. Even in the times of tremendous turmoil that we saw last year, it provided stability and a constant Polaris to see this nation through some very difficult times. I urge the hon. Gentleman to go to read the tributes that were paid to Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. I think her son will be a similarly great monarch, and that is something to celebrate.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Financial Services and Markets Bill is setting new parameters for the Financial Conduct Authority, but we are waiting for its Report stage in the other place. When steelworkers were duped by financial sharks, the FCA was far too slow to act. I understand that the FCA is also now renewing the rules on its consumer duties, which is welcome. However, after years of campaigning it is clear that we need proper oversight of the FCA. So, for clarity, may we have a statement on how Parliament will gain better scrutiny of our financial regulator and its duty to protect consumers across our country?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. I know that many Members of this House will have campaigned on behalf of businesses that have endured all kinds of malpractice, by banks and by all sorts of other organisations, including the issue that he raises. The Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), did a huge amount of work on this when he chaired the all-party parliamentary group and takes this matter incredibly seriously. I shall make sure that the relevant Minister has heard what the hon. Gentleman has said today and gets in touch with his office.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is right that businesses across our country are embracing new technology, but I have genuine concerns that a cashless society could discriminate against some of the most vulnerable in our communities. Some people face significant barriers when opening a bank account or using a card to make payments, and this is exacerbated by high street bank closures. Mencap Cymru is calling for shops and restaurants to have to accept cash payments. Will the Leader of the House support me in securing time for an important debate on this issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this incredibly important point. She is right to say that particular groups in society will be worse off and poorly served by the closure of these important local services. She is the third person to raise this issue, which shows the benefit of business questions. She will know that other Members on my side of the House are similarly concerned and I ask them to get together, join forces and secure a debate on these matters.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): On Saturday, I spent a lovely afternoon at the 103rd birthday party celebrations of Largs resident Jack Ransom. Jack's 100th birthday party was cancelled because of covid restrictions. London-born and now an adopted son of Scotland, Jack is believed to be the last living survivor out of those captured in 1942 and held as

[Patricia Gibson]

prisoners of war on the infamous Thai-Burma railway, which was also known as the Burmese railway of death. He survived the harshest of conditions there. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Jack and wishing him many happy returns? Will she also make a statement setting out the need to ensure that true heroes such as Jack are awarded the appropriate recognition and honour they deserve for the huge service they have done to protect the freedoms we all enjoy?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this matter and informing the House just a little about Jack's amazing life. I am sure that all Members would want to pay tribute to him and to send him good wishes. It is absolutely right that we recognise the service of individuals such as Jack. Sometimes that has been difficult to do for people who have been prisoners of war, as there is not an award or medal that people gain from having endured these appalling hardships and, in many cases, abuses. I thank her for getting that on the record and we all send our best wishes to Jack.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): In 2017, when Emmerson Mnangagwa took over as Zimbabwean president from Robert Mugabe, he promised a new time for the people of Zimbabwe. In fact, he has done the opposite. He kept on the henchmen and thugs who forced my constituent, Paul Westwood, and his family literally to flee for their lives at midnight, taking with them only the clothes that they could wear. We have seen human rights in Zimbabwe collapsing into the same kind of brutality that we saw under Mugabe. The Westwoods are very concerned to hear that President Mnangagwa is likely to be honoured as a guest at the coronation in a couple of weeks' time. I understand why the Government cannot comment on individual invitations, but can the House be given an opportunity to look at the criteria that are considered before any Head of State or Head of Government is treated as a guest of our Government, our monarch or our Parliament? Can we have an assurance from the Foreign Office that any attempt by Zimbabwe to come back into the Commonwealth will not be considered until it starts to treat UK citizens and its own people like human beings?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. On a slightly wider point, he will know that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in particular and also other Departments will be running briefings for Members of this House about the coronation and the events surrounding it. I suggest that he raises this specific issue at Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions on 2 May.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Last weekend, I had the great privilege of presenting my constituent, Brandon Grant, with his title of Scottish Elite Flyweight at the Boxing Scotland Elite Championships. It is a big achievement that speaks to his talent and hard work. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Brandon and his club, Priestfield boxing club, in Blantyre and schedule a debate on the achievements of Scottish boxers?

Penny Mordaunt: I can tell from the noises from all parts of the Chamber that we would all want to congratulate Brandon Grant on his amazing achievement. I am glad that the hon. Lady was able to celebrate that. I also want to put on record our thanks and gratitude to boxing clubs such as Priestfield that do so much to support and spot amazing talent.

Mr Speaker: Until Jack Catterall boxes and takes the title from Scotland to England.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am not sure if I ever was a boxer, but I am a real good fighter.

Over Easter, the Reverend Dr Hkalam Samson was sentenced to six years' imprisonment in Myanmar. The Reverend Samson is a non-violent Christian pastor and a tireless advocate for justice, human rights, and freedom of religion and belief. I had the privilege, which I remember well, of meeting him when he visited Parliament in 2018. He is a humble and courageous man. This sentence is a clear use of anti-terror legislation to silence a high-profile and vocal critic of a genocidal military regime. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning this imprisonment in the strongest terms and, as our voice in Cabinet, which I am very pleased to have, ask appropriate Ministers to co-ordinate a strong international response to it?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for again raising these very important matters and shining a spotlight on particular cases and individuals. We condemn the arbitrary detention of people, whether they be politicians, civil servants or journalists, by the military regime. On 18 April, the UK special envoy on freedom of religion or belief called for the immediate release of the pastor and all those detained arbitrarily by the military regime in Myanmar. The hon. Gentleman will also know that, on 21 September last year, the UK co-ordinated the landmark UN Security Council resolution, which urged immediate action to release all those in detention. We will continue that fight, as I know he will. He may wish to raise this matter with the Foreign Secretary on 2 May.

Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories

11.49 am

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement on the situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

I know the whole House will join me in condemning the horrific murder of Lucy, Maia and Rina Dee by a terrorist just over a week ago, and in offering our deepest condolences to Rabbi Leo Dee and the rest of the family in their pain and grief. My colleague, the noble Lord Ahmad, recently joined Lucy Dee's family in London to sit shiva, the Jewish mourning period. I pay tribute to the extraordinary and noble decision of the Dee family to donate Lucy's organs, saving five lives so far and possibly more. That act of compassion and generosity in a moment of tragedy stands in vivid contrast to the senseless and abhorrent violence that robbed a family of its mother and two sisters.

The United Kingdom unequivocally condemns that act of terrorism. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary spoke to the Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen on the Friday, shortly after Maia and Rina had been murdered, to offer our sympathy and co-ordinate our response. We also condemn the second act of terrorism against Israel on Good Friday, when a car rammed into civilians in Tel Aviv, killing an Italian citizen and injuring many others, including some British nationals.

Those callous acts are more examples of the attacks that have plagued the lives of ordinary Israelis and Palestinians for too long. As the British Government has made clear, the UK remains steadfast in its commitment to work with the Israeli authorities, the Palestinian authorities and all parties in the region and in the international community to bring an end to the terrorism that Israel faces and to the destructive violence that we continue to witness.

The people of Israel deserve to live free from the scourge of terrorism and antisemitic incitement, which gravely undermine the prospects for a two-state solution. The UK strongly condemns the numerous terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians this year, including the killing of seven Israelis on Holocaust Memorial Day. In recent months, Israel has also faced indiscriminate rocket, missile and drone attacks from groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and from hostile groups in Lebanon and Syria, unjustifiably and unlawfully threatening the lives of civilians. Israel must also contend with appalling rhetoric from Iran and others calling for an end to its very existence. That underlines the threats that Israel faces every day, and the UK will never waver from supporting Israel's legitimate right to self-defence.

However, our support for Israel is not confined to its defence and security. I can also inform the House that on 21 February the Foreign Secretary signed the 2030 roadmap for UK-Israel bilateral relations, alongside his Israeli counterpart Eli Cohen. The UK is proud of its deep and historic relationship with the state of Israel. Both countries are committed to a modern, innovative and forward-looking relationship, focusing on shared priorities for mutual benefit.

The roadmap is the product of detailed negotiations to deepen and expand our co-operation up to 2030, following the elevation of our relationship to a strategic

partnership in 2021. It provides detailed commitments for deepening UK-Israel co-operation, including in trade, cyber, science and tech, research and development, security, health, climate and gender. The roadmap also demonstrates the seriousness with which we take the global problem of antisemitism. The UK is proud of being the first Government to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition. There is no better tool to define how antisemitism manifests itself in the 21st century.

I turn now to the alarming violence we are seeing across Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The conflict is exacting an ever-greater human toll. The numbers of Palestinians killed by the Israeli security forces in the west bank, including 15-year-old Muhammad Nidal, and Israelis killed in acts of terrorism, including Lucy, Maia and Rina Dee, is significantly higher than at this point in 2022. In that regard, we call on the Palestinian Authority to denounce incitement to violence and resume their security co-operation with the Israeli authorities. We say to the Israeli Government that although Israel has a legitimate right to defend its citizens from attack, the Israeli security forces must live up to their obligations under international humanitarian law.

In this situation, it is all too easy for actions by one side to escalate tensions. The raid by Israeli police on Al-Aqsa mosque during Ramadan and on the first day of Passover was one such incident. When Israeli security forces conduct operations, they must ensure that they are proportionate and in accordance with international law. The anger that arose across the region and beyond from the police's actions in Al-Aqsa underlines the necessity of respecting and protecting the sanctity of Jerusalem's holy sites, especially when Ramadan, Passover and Easter overlap, as they have done this year. It is vital that all parties respect the historic status quo arrangements in Jerusalem, which allow coexistence between faiths. I welcome Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent announcement on de-escalating tensions. We value Jordan's important role as custodian of the holy sites in Jerusalem, and I pay tribute to the Jordanian authorities for protecting the safety and security of the holy sites and all who worship and visit them.

Let me restate clearly the position of the UK: we support a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state based on the 1967 lines with agreed land swaps, with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states, and a just, fair, agreed and realistic settlement for refugees. To be clear, the UK-Israel road map agreement that I have mentioned in no way alters our position on the middle east peace process. A two-state solution offers the best prospects of achieving sustainable peace.

We do not underestimate the challenges but firmly believe that, if both parties show bold leadership, peace is possible. The Israelis and the Palestinians showed leadership recently when their representatives met in Aqaba and Sharm el-Sheikh to discuss ways to de-escalate. Those talks—the first of their kind for many years—were a positive and welcome step. The UK is working with both sides and our international partners to support this process and uphold the commitments that were made.

The UK continues to be a strong supporter of all efforts to promote peace in the middle east and a lasting and sustainable agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, and we will work with all parties to progress that goal. I commend this statement to the House.

11.57 am

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement and join him in condemning the appalling and cowardly murder of Lucy, Maia and Rina Dee. On behalf of the Labour party, I send our deepest condolence to Rabbi Leo Dee and the rest of the family at a time of unimaginable grief for them.

We are deeply concerned by escalating violence against Palestinians and Israelis. This year has been one of the deadliest for Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories: 98 Palestinians, including at least 17 children, have been killed by Israeli forces, and 17 Israelis have been killed so far in 2023. Each life lost is a tragedy, and every Palestinian and Israeli deserves a just solution to the conflict.

As Ramadan ends, it is crucial that steps are taken to reduce tensions and avoid any further escalation in the days ahead. There must be no repeat of the unacceptable violence used against worshippers at Al-Aqsa mosque during Ramadan earlier this month. Israeli authorities must respect all places of worship and maintain the agreed status quo around holy sites. Since the formation of the new Israeli coalition Government, which is led by Prime Minister Netanyahu and includes extreme far-right elements, there has been a renewed assault on the rights of Palestinians, a ramping up of inflammatory rhetoric, and dangerous new moves to try to legitimise illegal settlements, threatening the viability of a two-state solution. Israel has suffered from appalling terrorist attacks and rocket attacks, including indiscriminate attacks from Gaza and escalation with Lebanon. Labour strongly opposes all actions that make a two-state solution harder to achieve, including rocket attacks, the expansion of illegal settlements, settler violence and evictions and demolitions, and we condemn all acts of terrorism.

The UK must be a strong and consistent advocate for justice, human rights and international law in this conflict. Escalating violence and human rights violations leave us further than ever from a two-state solution and a thriving and prosperous Palestinian state, alongside a safe and secure Israel. All sides must demonstrate through their words and actions a genuine commitment to peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians. We are therefore incredibly concerned about measures already being taken by the Israeli Government, such as giving Defence Minister Bezalel Smotrich control over much of the Civil Administration, the military body that administers the occupied west bank—a far-right Minister who called for the Palestinian village of Huwara to be “wiped out” in February amid the unprecedented settler violence against Palestinians.

Last month, the Prime Minister welcomed Prime Minister Netanyahu to the UK as the Government signed the 2030 road map for UK-Israel bilateral relations. The UK has a strong relationship with Israel, and there are many areas of important bilateral co-operation, but this comes at a time when the Israeli Government are taking steps that threaten to undermine Israel’s democracy and curb the power of the judiciary, and we continue to see mass protests in Israel, demonstrating the divisions and unease across Israeli society.

This road map appears to dilute long-standing UK positions held by successive Governments in relation to international law. It makes no mention of supporting a two-state solution, and it implies that there could be a

change in the long-standing UK position that illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories should not be treated as part of Israel. It also raises concerns about the UK’s commitment to apply proper diplomatic scrutiny to breaches of international law and its support for the role and independence of international legal institutions such as the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

How is the UK using diplomatic efforts to call for de-escalation following recent violence as we approach the end of Ramadan? Will the Minister condemn the attacks against worshippers at the al-Aqsa mosque earlier this month? There needs to be more accountability, and the UK Government should challenge human rights breaches wherever they occur. Labour is committed to international law, human rights and a negotiated peace based on a two-state solution, with a safe and secure Israel alongside a sovereign Palestinian state. What steps are being taken to bring about a two-state solution?

As the UK Government continue to consider Israeli settlements within the west bank to be in breach of international law, what further steps will the Government take to put pressure on Israel to stop evictions and demolitions in the occupied west bank? Finally, can the Minister tell the House whether the recently signed 2030 road map amounts to a change in policy, and can he assure us that it does not dilute our long-standing commitment to international law and the two-state solution?

Mr Mitchell: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about the Dee family, which I am sure will be warmly welcomed across the House. I also thank him for the measured comments he made about the current position and for his helpful and consensual approach on these issues. When the House speaks with one voice, particularly in its condemnation of human rights abuses, we have an impact, and our voices are heard. I thank him for the words that he used on the two-state solution and respect for human rights.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of issues that I suspect we will discuss further in this place this afternoon, during the second debate. I can assure him that the road map does not indicate any change in the long-established and long-stated position of the British Government on these matters. There is no change in our position. In respect of his second question, we condemn all acts of violence and terror without qualification, whenever they occur and whoever perpetrates them.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): May I express my deepest condolences to the Dee family for the wicked murder of Lucy, Maia and Rina? The family had great links with my constituency, with Rabbi Leo Dee working at Hendon United Synagogue at Raleigh Close.

Can the Minister advise the House what the UK Government are doing to protect innocent civilians in Israel, and particularly British tourists as they visit sites of interest?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend very much for expressing so eloquently his condolences to the Dee family, and I know of the links with Hendon about which he spoke. We condemn all attacks against civilians, from wherever they come. They are unjustifiable and unlawful.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I also thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. It is a horrific murder, and our deepest condolences go to the family of Lucy, Maia and Rina at this time for this brutal murder, and indeed to the family of the Italian tourist killed in Tel Aviv and those affected. Violence on either side must be thoroughly condemned. No innocent Israeli or Palestinian should face this kind of terror when going about their day. Respect for international law, human rights and due process must prevail.

There is little to disagree with, and much to support, in the Minister's statement; however, there is also little specific action outlined. The UK Government must act to call out the glaring and obvious mass and systematic discrimination in the Occupied Palestinian Territories at the hands of the Israeli Government and military, so why does the 2030 road map for UK-Israeli bilateral relations contain no reference to the Israeli authorities' treatment of Palestinians there? This situation is rapidly deteriorating, so did the Prime Minister raise these concerns with his counterpart when he visited last month? Will the Government cease licensing arms and security equipment while these settlements are being illegally progressed and exempt construction equipment from tariff-free deals? Will they halt trade negotiations while illegal settlements are being progressed, too?

More needs to be done to de-escalate the situation. If the UK Government are going to use the strong relationship that they have with Israel to move beyond platitudes and promises of raising concerns, it is critical that they take direct action to ensure that those things are real, and they need to do so now.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the SNP spokesman for his comments. The wide Dee family will draw strength, at a dreadful time, from the solidarity that the House is showing towards them.

The hon. Gentleman asks how often discrimination in the Palestinian territories is raised, and whether the Prime Minister has done so recently. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary raise these matters regularly in all the conversations that they have with both sides. On arms sales, as he will know, the Government have the strongest and toughest export regulations of any country in the world. On his comments about discrimination, we welcome the recent engagement between Israeli and Palestinian leadership at Aqaba and Sharm el-Sheikh.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I associate myself with the remarks of my right hon. Friend condemning all acts of violence. Obviously, our thoughts are with all those people who have lost loved ones in this recent period.

The UK accepts that Israeli settlements are illegal under international law, and continued trade with them facilitates and legitimises their existence. Will my right hon. Friend set out what consideration has been given to banning the importation of goods from Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and including such a ban in any forthcoming trade deal with Israel?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend takes a great interest in humanitarian issues as well as in issues affecting Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. On the specific issue that she raises, such trading is not allowed under

the existing trade and partnership agreement, and we have no plans to change that—our position is absolutely clear. I hope she will be reassured by that point.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I associate myself and my party with the expressions of condolence to all those who have suffered acts of violence in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories in the recent upturn in violence? May I press the Minister, though, because he is at risk of conflating the positions of the Palestinian Authority, who are not a sovereign Government, with the Israeli Government, who are a sovereign Government, and as such have responsibilities towards the Palestinian people as an occupying force? Will he confirm that in any dealings and agreements with the Israeli Government, it is made explicit in writing that any agreement applies only to the sovereign state of Israel, and not to the Occupied Palestinian Territories?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman is right on the second point that he makes. I should explain to him that while his description of the governance arrangements is entirely correct, we do our best to remain even-handed in assisting the cause of peace in the middle east, and that is the point we were making. We were not equating the two forms of governance in the way that he feared.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): May I associate myself with the condolences, the tribute and the condemnation that my right hon. Friend has expressed from the Dispatch Box? Has he considered the possibility that sooner rather than later we will need to decide what our priority is? Is it to preserve even the physical possibility of a two-state solution, or is it to maintain at quite the current level of intensity the strategic partnership that he has announced with the current Israeli regime?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend, with his usual incisiveness, poses an important and interesting question, but the position of the UK Government is precisely as I have set out, and I hope that he will therefore reflect that all these discussions we are holding are aimed at that singular end.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I join other members of the House in expressing condolences to all those who have lost dearly loved family members. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we are now probably further away from peace and a two-state solution than we have ever been, and that we will continue to see this kind of violence again and again and again until such time as new courageous political leadership emerges on the part of the Government of Israel and of the Palestinians that is prepared to compromise in the interests of that peace?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman, who has dealt with these matters in government and understands them well, makes the case with impeccable clarity.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): May I add my deepest condolences to Rabbi Dee and his family following the murder of his wife Lucy and his daughters Maia and Rina in the west bank? I welcome the statement by the Minister, who has laid out the

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

issues clearly, but can he tell me what discussions he has had with the Palestinian Authority and what help has been offered to bring the violence to an end?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend very much for her comments and her support for the statements of condolence across the House today. These discussions take place all the time. I can tell her that the UK is committed to working with all parties to reduce tensions and maintain calm across Israel and the OPT. These discussions do not go forward in leaps and bounds; they are continuous and take place all the time.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It was disappointing that there was no announcement in the Minister's statement on recognition, on settlement trade and on supporting international law processes in the International Criminal Court or the International Court of Justice. We all agree with the condolences that he has expressed, and we have a debate this afternoon. Will he deal with one point, which is the transfer of a major part of the occupied territories to civilian administration? As a matter of law, that is de facto annexation. What has he addressed specifically with the Israeli Government on that point?

Mr Mitchell: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman details of very recent discussions that have taken place, but he is right in his analysis of the issue, and the British Government are doing everything we can to advance that.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I join my right hon. Friend in condemning the recent increase in tension and violence in Israel and the west bank, and in particular the tragic killing of Lucy, Maia and Rina Dee. Fuelling this conflict is undoubtedly Iran. It has been promoting violent uprisings in Israel and the west bank and welcoming new terror networks, such as the Lions' Den, as well as orchestrating rocket attacks across three of Israel's borders. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is about time that the UK proscribed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in its entirety and sent a strong message out that the British Government are against state-sponsored terrorism?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend draws attention to the point I made in my statement that Iran is a malign actor in the region, in the very way that he sets out. As he knows, the IRGC is a sanctioned organisation. While we keep all these things under review, he will understand why we do not tend to comment on the precise position we have reached from the Dispatch Box in the House.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Can I first associate myself with the condolences for all the lives lost and the condemnation of all violence? Since 2005, 2022 was the deadliest year. We are not even six months into 2023, and it is even more deadly. What assessment has the Minister made of the escalating violence and the impact that will have on a two-state solution?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is right to echo the point I made in my statement about the levels of violence. We do everything we can to try to see that they are diminished,

and we are committed to working with all parties to reduce the tensions and maintain calm across Israel and the OPT.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Remarkably, the recent road map makes no mention whatever of human rights abuses in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, preferring to concentrate on trade and defence co-operation. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) from the SNP Front Bench, will the Minister take this opportunity to acknowledge that Palestinians in the OPT are subject to calculated and systematic mass discrimination? Only by addressing that issue can we move forward to a just and lasting peace.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman invites me to condemn violence on one side and not on the other. The point I want to make is that in order to advance to the objectives that are commonly held across the House, we should condemn all these things on all sides whenever they take place.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that he has raised the issue of the eviction of Palestinians from their homes in Masafer Yatta with his Israeli counterpart? In the run-up to the elections, Benjamin Netanyahu stated that he wanted to annex the west bank, which would be a loss of 30% of Palestinian territory. Can the Government outline how they intend to ensure that the new Israeli Government abide by their obligations under international law?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will understand that we press the Israeli Government to abide by international law on all relevant occasions. In respect of my own discussions, I should mention that this is not an area where I normally have ministerial responsibility, but I will write to him on the specific question he has raised to give him the latest information in respect of the Government's action on that.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I share the Minister's expressions of condolence and sorrow at the loss of all the lives in the middle east over these 70 years, and I share his commitment to international law. Yesterday, I met Defence for Children International Palestine to discuss its campaign, "No Way to Treat a Child". Eleven Palestinian children are being held by the Israeli military in administrative detention, a relic of the British mandate. Children can be held indefinitely without ever being charged, some for more than one year. The Government's current approach has failed to discourage these gross human rights abuses, so will the Minister commit to impressing upon the Israeli Government the need to end this brutal practice, and reserve the option of sanctions should they fail to do so?

Mr Mitchell: I am not going to get into the issue of sanctions at this point, but on the hon. Member's substantive point about sticking with internationally agreed regulations and conventions, particularly in respect of children, he makes the point extremely clearly, and I agree with him.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and join him, the shadow Minister and colleagues across the House in sending

our heartfelt condolences to Rabbi Leo Dee and the rest of the family on the horrific murder of Lucy, Maia and Rina. May their memory be a blessing.

The Minister is right that the UK and this House must condemn violence and terrorism in all its forms, but can I ask him what the Government's assessment is of the current security situation and of the recent loss of life in Israel and the occupied west bank?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Member will know from news reports, the position has been extremely tense. We seek at all stages to try to de-escalate that tension, advising both sides in that respect. I very much hope that our words and, indeed, the words of many others will be heard. I should like to thank her for the very kind and generous way in which she expressed her condolences in the first part of her comments.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I, too, express my condolences to all the families and those who have lost loved ones in all the violence. The Israeli High Court of Justice recently rejected appeals against eviction orders issued to Palestinian inhabitants of Masafer Yatta and allowed the Israeli Government to forcibly evict Palestinians. That is happening at the same time as legislation in Israel is transferring control of the west bank to civilian Ministries and away from the military. Obviously, this is in effect annexation, and we know that there are going to be violations of international human rights laws. Can the Minister confirm that the Government regard the forced transfer of civilian populations in occupied territories, whether in south Hebron in Palestine or in Donbas in Ukraine, as illegal under international law?

Mr Mitchell: In response to the hon. Member's general point, the British Government welcome the decision by the Israeli Prime Minister to pause the legislation to reform Israel's judiciary; that is relevant to the main point she made. In respect of her interpretation of international law, Britain will always urge all Governments to abide by their commitments under international treaties and under international humanitarian law.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): On top of the ongoing day-to-day restrictions on life for Palestinians in the occupied territories, in February there was unprecedented settler violence towards local Palestinians in Huwara, during which Israel's Finance Minister, Bezalel Smotrich, called for the town to be "wiped out". Has the Minister raised concerns with his counterparts about settler violence and the culture of impunity in relation to attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is quite right to condemn settler violence, and Britain condemns it in the strongest possible terms. Although I have not had those discussions, I can assure her that Foreign Office officials in country and in London do have those discussions, and they emphasise the point that I have made.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The Minister will know that we now have the most extreme right-wing Government there has ever been in the history of the Israeli state, including Ministers who are openly racist and who deny the very existence of the Palestinian

people. Yet, while other countries were using diplomatic pressure to try to curb the Tel Aviv Government's actions, this country and this Prime Minister invited the Prime Minister of Israel to London, rolled out the red carpet for him and signed an agreement with Israel that makes no reference to human rights abuses or to the upholding of international law. How does the Minister think that, in the space of a generation, the UK has gone from being seen as an honest broker in the middle east to being an outlier in its support for the Israeli Government?

Mr Mitchell: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's analysis, and I would say two things to him. The first is that the very close relationship Britain has with Israel enables us to have conversations at all levels of Government. If he is serious, which I am sure he is, about pursuing his wish for peace and de-escalation, the fact that the Prime Minister of Israel comes and is seen by our Prime Minister is a very good way of advancing that dialogue. Secondly, he spoke about the very significant and contentious issues that are part and parcel of Israeli politics at the moment, but he will know that in Israel too there is free and open discussion, with many different opinions put. The view he takes is also expressed by many within the state of Israel, and that happens because it is a democracy, and we of course respect that.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is true and right that we all condemn violence on all sides, and the Minister said:

"When the House speaks with one voice...we...are heard."

However, I must ask the question: who does he think is listening, because the violence escalates and more illegal settlements are built, making a two-state solution more difficult? The Government often talk about diplomatic engagement and private representations, but that is clearly not making any difference, so what new approaches or ideas are the Government considering to try to move the dial on this issue?

Mr Mitchell: I understand the hon. Gentleman's frustration. It is a frustration that we all share. We use our very considerable diplomatic presence in the region and our diplomatic work from London to try to advance a position that I think the House is agreed upon, as I have said, and I do believe that that voice is heard. Let me make absolutely clear what the position is and remains. It is that a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel living side-by-side with a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, based on 1967 borders with agreed land swaps, should take place, and that Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states and a just, fair, agreed and realistic settlement for refugees should be at the centre of what we do.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his statement and for the understanding he has of the issues. On behalf of my party, I join others in condemning the horrific murders of Lucy, Maia and Rina Dee by terrorists earlier this month, and we send our sincerest condolences to their immediate family and friends. In Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin aligns itself alongside Hamas, a terrorist organisation proscribed by our own UK Government, and has called for sanctions, including a boycott of Israeli products. Does the Minister agree with me that Hamas are terrorists and that the boycotting of Israeli goods is utterly abhorrent?

Mr Mitchell: Yes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With that wonderfully brief answer, we come to the end of proceedings on the statement.

Backbench Business

International Trade and Geopolitics

12.27 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered international trade and geopolitics.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members from across the House, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate today. I declare my interests as set out in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I applied for this debate because I am concerned about Britain's standing in a world that is changing more quickly than we appear to be responding. From trade and industrial policy to innovation and skills, we have just sticking-plaster policies and no long-term economic plan. There is no strategy for UK plc that shows the path to prosperity, and I hope this debate may trigger some answers from the Government on their plan to drive economic growth within the UK and through exports abroad.

The era of increasing globalisation that we have come to know over the past decades is coming to an end. We are now in an era of economic retrenchment, higher levels of state subsidy and new forms of partnership between the public and business, but how is the UK responding? Ministers are merely saying to competitor countries, "This is not how you're supposed to play the game," but they are not listening, and we are losing. There are several factors underpinning these changes: geopolitical competition between China and the United States; war in Europe and security tensions in Asia; the need for democratic nations to show their people that our system of government can deliver good jobs, good pay and prosperity; the net zero transition; and the technological arms race in both its military and civilian contexts.

Based on current data, our direction of travel as a country is not a good one. Only this morning, the Government announced that the UK fell from being the fifth largest exporter of goods and services in the world in 2020, to seventh in 2021. Our trade deficit has ballooned from £2.3 billion to £23.5 billion, meaning that we are exporting fewer goods and services, while being increasingly dependent on other countries for our own supplies. According to the International Monetary Fund only last week, the UK is set to have one of the worst economic growth projections of the seven most advanced economies. Even Russia, to our shame, is projected to experience better economic growth than we are.

Our drop in exports to the European Union, coupled with the Government's deeply short-sighted decision to agree a trade deal that blocks the sale of most UK-based services to the EU, while allowing the EU to sell services to us, has been a structural blow to the UK economy. In that context, our high levels of national debt, which have increased year on year since the Conservatives came to power in 2010, have put us in a fiscally precarious position. The Government should be ashamed of their record on UK national debt. We all remember David Cameron and George Osborne telling us that the Conservatives would fix the roof while the sun was shining. But what do we have now, 13 years after those promises to the country? A national debt that is projected

to be larger than the entire size of the UK economy. A national debt that has increased year on year—yes, in response to covid and the energy crisis, but it was also increasing year on year before those crises.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be part of this debate and to listen to the hon. Gentleman, and I hope he will not mind me picking him up on this point. He kindly acknowledged that the sizeable increase in UK debt is due to the response to covid, and I do not think he has concerns about the major schemes that comprised that. He also talks about the increase in debt that occurred in the intervening years. Will he accept that for each of those intervening years, the Labour party was calling for more expenditure and more debt?

Darren Jones: The hon. Gentleman and I, perhaps surprisingly, share something in common, in that we would like to get the national debt under control. He will recognise that his party was in government for each of those years from 2010 when debt increased, year after year. The Opposition can come forward with policy proposals, but he must take some responsibility for the fact that the Conservative party was in government, taking decisions that resulted in a significant amount of national debt before covid and the energy crisis, due to the mishandling of Brexit, the inadequate trade deal with the EU and to the failure of austerity economics, which cut our public services back to the bone without adequate investment to create opportunities for economic growth in the future.

One might have assumed that in that context, the latest form of Conservative Government would wish to do everything they can to underpin, support and incentivise growth in the UK economy. Their most whizzy recent announcement has been the UK's entry to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership for trade in Asia—a trade arrangement that is estimated to grow the national wealth by only 0.08%. It is a trade arrangement with 11 countries, nine of which we already have a trade deal with, and one that will pose due political challenges to the UK as China seeks to join it too.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful case. Does he agree that geography still matters when it comes to trade, and if we as a country choose to make our trading arrangements with our biggest trading partner, which is still the European Union, more difficult, more costly and more bureaucratic, that is bound to have an adverse effect on the British economy?

Darren Jones: I think everybody recognises that that is completely right, and my right hon. Friend recognises that with both the European Union and the United States, the bulk of our trade exists in this bit of the planet in which we find ourselves. Trade with Asia is welcome, but it will not be able to deliver larger economic opportunities for the UK than trading with our closest partners. Our arrangement with the CPTPP could cause conflicts in future trading negotiations with the European Union because of issues such as embedded carbon in the case of imported goods. Although we might want to do more trade with the European Union in line with our net zero targets, that might cause difficulty with imports from parts of Asia.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): China's growing assertiveness on the international stage is rightly cause for concern, and the CPTPP is an example of where the Government need to be cautious. If China is successful in joining, it could block Taiwan's application in the face of growing tensions between the two. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that the UK Government should formally acknowledge Taiwan's sovereignty?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for giving that suggestion to those on the Treasury Bench, and perhaps the Minister can answer when she responds to the debate.

Richard Fuller *rose*—

Darren Jones: I have two examples that are relevant to intervention of the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), but I will give way one more time, for old times' sake.

Richard Fuller: It's not that old-time! As the hon. Gentleman will realise, the Benches are not replete with Members for his debate, so I hope he will continue to be generous.

The hon. Gentleman has put his finger on an important issue, and this could be an informative debate on both sides. He has just mentioned one potential conflict between this country's trade engagements and those of others, regarding our engagement with the European Union and with CPTPP, and different paces of change when dealing with net zero. As Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, will he give the House a little more detail on his thoughts about what this country's pace should be, and in particular his views on the carbon border tax?

Darren Jones: I will do so briefly so that I do not test the patience of the Chair too much, given the number of pages I have left to read before the end of my speech. My initial observations are that it is in the UK's interest to be a global leader on the net zero transition, both because that is the right thing to do and because it is a significant industrial opportunity, and that we should be partnering with the European Union to do so through our trade deal. In my view—I have not taken evidence on this; it is just my view—that would generate a larger rate of return for the British economy and British people than some of the other opportunities that have been presented.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that in pursuance of net zero and the decarbonisation agenda, the automotive industry, for example, faces significant challenges in ensuring not only that we have a self-contained supply chain, but that we can engage with the European Union on our doorstep given restrictions on rules of origin? Will that present a difficulty, and is there an opportunity with the review of the trade and co-operation agreement to address that issue once and for all?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is exactly right, and electric vehicles are a prime example. He and I were in Sweden last week on a Select Committee visit to look at how its electric vehicle battery manufacturing looks in comparison with the UK. If we are to continue to

[Darren Jones]

export cars to the European Union, we will have to hit the so-called rules of origin requirements where the components come from local or regional sources. Eventually they will have carbon embedded within them, in order to meet carbon border adjustment mechanisms and net zero targets. It is therefore crucial that the UK Government work with the private sector successfully to deliver that industrial policy outcome, or I fear we will see the near total decline of car manufacturing in the UK. While it is not for me as Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee to prejudge the conclusion of its inquiry into this issue, the contrast between what we saw in Europe last week, and what is happening in the UK, was stark.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I cast the hon. Gentleman's mind back to his comments about the CPTPP? The Northern Ireland constituency that I represent has a large farming and agricultural manufacturing sector, and we export right across the world. Businesses in my constituency tell me that they are looking forward to opportunities that will potentially arrive from the far east. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that farming in Northern Ireland has the potential to grow more, and that part of that growth will be in the far east through the CPTPP? If that grows, there will be extra jobs, extra opportunity, and real growth in my constituency and across Northern Ireland.

Darren Jones: I have to take the hon. Gentleman's suggestion at his word as he knows much more about his constituency and farming than I do. If there are export opportunities that is great, but the question is whether that will deliver the wholesale economic growth that we need across the whole UK economy. It will be an important piece of the puzzle, but my proposition is that there is a much broader area where there are problems, and where Government policy is lacking.

In Sweden last week, we learnt about the sheer complexity of delivering a so-called gigafactory for electric vehicle battery manufacturing. We held in our hands, physically, fossil fuel-free iron made using hydrogen, which was being turned into low-carbon steel. I finally saw, after years, a carbon capture facility working, plugged in and capturing carbon in real life. Here in the UK, we just have ministerial statements setting out our intention to be world leading, without anything real or tangible to show for it. The British people will soon realise, if they have not already, that at the end of this yellow brick road set out by the Government there are just Conservative Ministers blowing smoke. The tragedy is that this is not just a dream: it is 13 years of Conservative economic mismanagement that will take years to clean up.

This sorry story is not just about what is happening in the European Union; it is about what is happening in the United States, too. During our Committee visits last year, it quickly became clear that the US is doing what Europe is doing, but on steroids. The Inflation Reduction Act, which is really a green new deal for the United States, sets long-term, multi-decade, easy-to-access tax incentives, grants, loans and market-setting standards to not only drive the net zero agenda but reinvest in the industrial capacity of the United States. This \$500 billion multi-decade initiative is acting like a magnet, pulling investment, jobs and businesses into the American economy.

Access to those tax incentives, grants and state-level support is predicated on agreements to train and employ Americans in areas that have been crying out for investment for years. In some circumstances, it is even predicated on business owners investing in childcare to help optimise the economic activity of the American labour market, including women.

Andy McDonald: Was my hon. Friend not struck by the stark report on Sky News, I think from Ed Conway, from AMTE Power in Thurso, one of the British manufacturers of car batteries? It was indeed attracted by the Inflation Reduction Act, so much so that we risk that factory—a gigafactory we do have—being relocated to the United States. Should that not be sending a signal warning to the Government that time is not on our side?

Darren Jones: Once again, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why the European Union has responded to what is happening in America, but what do we have here in the United Kingdom? I tried to be generous to the Government in a collegiate fashion, but the only thing I could find that allowed me to give the Government credit was the recent establishment of the Office for Investment, whose job it is to secure inward investment to the UK. But it has no budget.

As I understand it, when two American businesses looked at the UK as an investment destination, they did not know who to contact. Was it the Department for International Trade, the Department for Business, the Department for Transport, the Treasury, the regional mayor or the local council? The Germans, meanwhile, put together an inward investment package with significant incentives and the Americans presented a map with different options in different states, topped up with significant federal incentives. In the UK, we have an Office for Investment whose job it is to go around Whitehall, cap in hand, trying to put together an offer within existing budgets. The tragedy is that the reason those companies were looking at the UK in the first place was that we have great natural resources: huge potential for low-carbon fuel energy supplies, great industrial clusters, world-leading research and development, and great pools of highly skilled labour. But we just did not compete and we lost out on both investments.

Let me take another example, which we have already talked about: the semiconductor industry. The United States is securing multibillion dollar inward investments, as too are the Europeans. As my Committee concluded in its recent report, while we will never have end-to-end supply chains in the UK, we should be collaborating with our American and European allies to agree that the UK invests in the parts of the supply chain where we excel: chip design and advanced compound semiconductors. Britain can play a crucial exporting role within a multinational supply chain. So when the Government take decisions to decline or unwind Chinese-linked investments, such as Newport Wafer Fab, they must follow through with finding new investment and new owners. Instead, we have a semiconductor strategy that is now even more delayed than it was already because, as it was reported, Ministers cannot decide who is going to announce it. Meanwhile, other countries are racing ahead of us.

It seems to me that we have Ministers stuck in the headlights of a changing world, convinced that the best thing to do is for the state to get out of the way and let

the free market fix our problems, praying that someone, somewhere might find the sunlit uplands of post-Brexit Britain that Conservative Prime Ministers promised to deliver—while our competitors race ahead of us. The question, therefore, is what should we do about it? Beyond the obvious points of having a proper industrial policy, ideally a stable Government, a stable economy and a stable policy framework; beyond the obvious point that we continue to fail to highlight the importance and value of the service economy to our exports—we are the largest exporter of services in the world after the United States—and beyond the obvious point that we must improve our trade deal with the EU, what can we do that is new, global and in Britain's interests?

We should be leading the debate about a new model of multilateral co-operation between democracies. We clearly already collaborate on defence matters, but what we define as critical supply chains or as critical national infrastructure, what we think resilient supply chains should look like to create economic security for our countries, and how we collaborate as allies and partners to show that democracies will continue to prevail over authoritarian regimes—those issues warrant a new partnership, a new model of multilateral working. It is in Britain's interest to lead that debate and to play a central role in it.

Some will understandably say that there is a risk of decoupling the existing post-war institutional frameworks. My response is that this is already happening and that Britain can do little to stop it. That does not mean walking away from the UN, the World Trade Organisation or the G7—of course not. And it certainly does not mean Britain should play fast and loose in breach of agreed global rules. But it does mean that we must respond to lead and to influence what happens next.

If this Government had a real mission-led approach to the UK economy, we would see co-ordinated strategic action from No. 10, the Treasury, the Foreign Office, the Department for Business and Trade, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and others. But we do not. We do not see that because the Prime Minister does not have an answer. He cannot tell us what our path to prosperity is, what he thinks our unique selling points as a country are, or how Britain will maintain its standing as one of the largest, most advanced economies on the planet.

I have had the good fortune, over the past few years, of being able to represent our Parliament in many countries. From Brussels to Washington, Sydney to Tokyo and elsewhere, I keep being asked, "Are you guys okay? What's happening to the UK?" It is embarrassing and it must stop.

Richard Fuller: Absolute rubbish.

Darren Jones: It is a factual statement. The hon. Member is chuntering from a sedentary position, as I think we say in this House, but I can assure him and the House that on many occasions that is the exact conversation people have had with me.

I hope that the Minister, when she responds, will be able to inform the House, on behalf of the Prime Minister, how this latest round of Conservative Ministers are going to clear up the mess of all the former ones over the past 13 years. The Minister and I know that the opportunities for the UK are there to be taken; that the British people have within them the drive, energy and

potential; that our islands and our seas give us the potential not just to lead the net zero transition at home, but to export it abroad too; and that our greatest minds, entrepreneurs and universities mean we can ride the wave of the technological revolution in the interests of the British economy and the British people. We can achieve all those things, but only if Britain has a Government with the leadership, the ideas and the energy to start delivering. I look forward to the Minister's response.

12.47 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow that very detailed and impressive speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). My speech will take a slightly different tack. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Kashmir, I want to talk about the geopolitical significance of Kashmir. I think everybody here accepts that the UK's security and safety are paramount in trade agreements, but I want to talk about the importance of human rights in those agreements as well.

Many Members will know that Kashmir is located between Pakistan to the east, India to the south and west, and China to the north. There is also Afghanistan, which borders Kashmir on its north-west frontier. There is a very good reason why Kashmir is known as the longest running territorial dispute in the world. Basically, the British—us—messed it up and that has had a long-running impact. According to some historians, prevarication by the then ruling Hindu maharaja at the time of partition contributed to violence breaking out in Kashmir, as he alone was given the choice of whether the majority-Muslim Kashmiris should join India or Pakistan.

The unfairness of the decision to accede to India was rigorously challenged by Pakistan at the time and since. It was the first significant threat of conflict since world war two, and the newly formed United Nations took it very seriously. Hon. Members will be aware that several UN resolutions exist today, but the most significant is the UN Security Council resolution 47 from 1948, which called for a plebiscite—a referendum—of the Kashmiri people to determine their future.

The line of control was established between Pakistan-administered Kashmir, or Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan, and Indian-administered Kashmir, or Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. It is very well-guarded by the respective armies. There is also a United Nations military observers group permanently based there, such is the seriousness of the border issues between these two nuclear powers—and we must not forget China to the north, so three nuclear powers. When I visited Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir in February 2020—unfortunately, I could not get into India and Indian-administered Kashmir—the officers of that team, who are completely independent and have no axe to grind from any country, convinced me of the fragility and serious threat to global peace of the stalemate over Kashmir.

There are several reasons why Kashmir has been, and will continue to be, fought over. First, Kashmiris are immensely proud of their home and their heritage. Many of my constituents have relatives who live there, and I hear the pride in their voices when they speak about Kashmir. Secondly, and key to this debate, there

[Debbie Abrahams]

are vast material resources across Kashmir, including timber, minerals, land and water. For example, Kashmir provides much-needed water for agriculture in both Punjab and Sindh provinces. The third reason is the geopolitical significance of the region to an emerging and increasingly powerful China.

On the second reason, the 2019 unilateral revocation of articles 370 and 35A from India's constitution, which removed the special status and relative independence that Indian-administered Kashmir had enjoyed, has led to mining activity in areas that the World Bank and others are concerned may lead to flooding in an already flood-prone area. That could endanger lives and ecology. Kashmiri-owned companies that have traditionally mined in Kashmir were unable to compete with outside Indian corporations for mining rights, as the continued throttling of internet speeds prevented their participation in the online bidding process. The elimination of Kashmir's forestry laws in favour of Indian federal law has been harshly criticised and is resulting in devastating deforestation. But water is the region's most important and at-risk resource. It has not just regional but global significance. That is the third reason why Kashmir is strongly contested.

In the last two years, China and India have been at loggerheads at the line of actual control that separates China from IAK, as each seeks to develop infrastructure along the border. Some argue that the diversion of water is the biggest issue. However, tensions are extremely high after recent clashes, including the deaths of both Indian and Chinese troops in 2020 and reports of shots being fired at the line of actual control for the first time in 45 years—there are not meant to be any weapons at the line of actual control. More clashes were reported at the end of last year.

The poor relationships have trade implications. As we have seen, trade between India and Pakistan fell significantly in 2019 after the revocation of articles 370 and 35A, with negligible exports to India from Pakistan. It is also having a detrimental impact on trade across Kashmir. One of the key asks from the Kashmiris and non-governmental organisations I have spoken to is to rebuild the economy and provide jobs for Kashmiris. Opening the line of control is vital to achieving that—I was told that it would not only promote trade across the region but allow families to reconnect. Given that the G7 is being hosted by India this September, and will include meetings in Srinagar in Indian-administered Kashmir, I hope that India will consider reopening the line of control crossings at Lithia, Chakothi and Tetrinote, to allow trade as well as community and family reunions. I ask the Minister to respond to that point and to agree to raise this issue with the Indian high commissioner. Given India's record trade deficit to China, which last year reached more than \$100 billion for the first time, this might be a seemingly insignificant but symbolic gesture to Kashmiris and the international community, including Pakistan and China.

China has heavily invested in its so-called One Belt, One Road initiative, which it says is part of its vision to improve trade routes across Asia and parts of Africa. In Gilgit-Baltistan, in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, land has been sold off to develop infrastructure projects as part of the China-Pakistan economic corridor stretching across Pakistan and the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous

region of China. The first of those is a dam, which, in addition to water storage and flood control, will also be used to generate power. However, it has come at a heavy financial cost to Pakistan, which is funding the developments via loans from China.

My final point concerns human rights and trade. The UN produced two reports on human rights abuses in Indian-administered Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Kashmir—the first in 2018 and the second before the revocation of articles 370 and 35A. They are quite shocking to read—and I do not want to stretch your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker. They include the reported killings of civilians by off-duty police and army personnel with impunity, and the failure to independently investigate and prosecute widespread reports of sexual violence by security services personnel. This list goes on. I invite people to read them. Pakistan-administered Kashmir has also been challenged about human rights violations, including the Government having control over affairs in Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, hence the sale of land for the Pakistan-China economic corridor.

Most importantly, the human rights abuses have not abated. We are in the process of negotiating trade agreements with India. I feel very strongly, as do thousands of people, that we should begin to consider who, what and how we trade with Governments that systematically abuse their citizens. We must commit to making the delivery of human rights explicit in any UK trade deals with India and Pakistan, or any other country.

12.57 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is good to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to take part in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on introducing the debate this afternoon.

I would like to make a fairly brief contribution in the context of the UK's changing international trade landscape and accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—the CPTPP—by highlighting the potential and the importance of the UK's trading relationship with Mexico. It is the 15th or 16th largest economy in the world, and an integral member of the CPTPP. Geopolitically, Mexico is a strategic partner for the UK. For businesses, it is a gateway to Latin America, the broader Pacific region, the United States and Canada. In May last year, the Government launched negotiations for a Mexico 2.0 free trade agreement, seeking to bolster and grow our £4.5 billion-worth of bilateral trade.

I have chaired the all-party parliamentary group on Mexico for the last five years, and in November last year I led a delegation of the British group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union to Mexico City and Oaxaca.

Our delegation included the new Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), and the former trade envoy to Mexico, Baroness Bonham-Carter. We met senior Government representatives, the Mayor of Mexico City, members of the Senate and Congress, state governors and local government leaders. We also met strategic partners of the then Department of Trade and Industry, as well as UK and Mexican businesses and global companies with a shared interest in strengthening our bilateral trade and diplomatic relationships.

There is an active UK business community in Mexico. I am grateful to members of chambers of commerce in Mexico and the Mexican chamber of commerce in London for their guidance and support over the years. I pay particular tribute to our ambassador in Mexico City, Jon Benjamin, and his fantastic team. We keep in regular contact on issues from human rights to strengthening diplomatic relations, both between politicians in the legislatures and between Governments.

A stronger UK-Mexico trade relationship would have far-reaching benefits for the whole of the UK, including for the north-west and for Liverpool, my home city, which I have the privilege to represent in this House. As I have said in the House before, the largest chain of department stores in Mexico is actually called “Liverpool”. It was founded in 1847 and it was named after the city and the port for all the merchandise that was shipped through it. That is just one example of the historical links that exist between our countries.

In 2022, trade between Mexico and the north-west reached £224 million, making up 10.8% of all UK exports to Mexico, which was more than London and the second highest region in England. The most recent data from 2021 shows that in Merseyside alone, 153 businesses exported goods to Mexico and 68 businesses were reliant on imports from there.

UK-wide businesses depend on Mexico for various specialised manufactured goods, including cars, telecommunication equipment, power generators and office machinery. Trade in services is also growing rapidly. The UK financial sector is present in Mexico, with insurance and pensions representing the top service exports, and Mexico, and Latin America more generally, represent the key to boosting two of the UK’s most important future economic pillars: financial tech and the green economy.

Mexico’s appetite for cutting-edge financial tech products and services makes it a natural destination for UK-based fintech start-ups and more traditional financial investment. Mexico also offers significant opportunities for trade in clean technologies. It has had rapidly growing electric vehicle production and export in recent years, and I have no doubt that our growing trading relationship will make it an indispensable partner in our common fight against climate change.

I want to conclude my remarks by highlighting the clear opportunities in education and the wider benefits that can be unlocked, because the benefits of deeper trade ties with Mexico will be more than simply economic. Educational and cultural exchanges are a fundamental precursor to more and better trade. I had the privilege of hosting a recent educational technology—EdTech—inward mission from Mexico in Parliament last month, working with our ambassador in Mexico City and the Department to strengthen ties and develop co-operation in the education sector between UK and Mexico.

It is clear to me that countries across central and South America are crying out to widen access to English language learning for their populations. We need a concerted effort to promote language and student exchange programmes in tandem. As a graduate of the London School of Economics, I had the immense privilege of being part of a global student body, and I benefited in the classroom from the diverse perspectives of students from across the world. I want to see far greater numbers of Mexican, Colombian and Uruguayan students coming

to the UK, but just as importantly, I want to see more UK students having the opportunity to spend some of their study time in central and South American universities.

I have had meetings with universities, including the University of Liverpool, as well as with representatives from the Mexican education sector on this topic. Much more needs to be done to encourage UK students to look to countries in central and South America countries as places to study. I ask the Minister: what is being done to expand our study abroad programmes to countries in the CPTPP? One challenge the Minister may wish to take up is how we can ensure the mutual recognition of higher education qualifications between institutions in CPTPP countries.

Mexico is an ally and trading partner of growing importance. By 2030, it will be the ninth biggest economy on the planet, and I welcome the Government’s ongoing commitment to the Mexico free-trade agreement and the benefits that could bring for both countries. In this era of increasingly complex geopolitical dimensions to international trade, Mexico and countries in central and South America deserve renewed attention by Government and businesses across the United Kingdom.

1.5 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to have listened to the contributions so far, not least the contribution just made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). I echo his words about the opportunity to strengthen connections, particularly for our young people, between our country and countries in Latin and South America. The area is often overlooked by Government and it is not high on the list for teachers or in what is learned in schools. His calls on the issue are very welcome. On Monday, at the University of Cambridge, I had the opportunity to talk to a group of Argentinian politicians. From their country’s perspective, I know that is something they would welcome as well.

Madam Deputy Speaker, here is my point: it is an afternoon, we have plenty of time, it is an incredibly interesting and broad debate, and it will not have escaped your attention that the Government Benches are not crowded with participants. Therefore, I beg the indulgence of Opposition Members to make a number of points on a series of areas. *[Interruption.]* The Minister is asking that they be quality contributions, so I shall therefore make my speech even longer.

I will start by addressing some of the points made by the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), who I think is one of the most talented Members of this Parliament. He and I do have some strong disagreements, sometimes on principle and sometimes on practice. Let me start with two words that encompass the fundamental disagreement we have: industrial strategy.

To the Chair of the Select Committee, industrial strategy is the elixir that somehow unlocks the growth in our economy that proves elusive to all others. Not only that, it is industrial strategy as conceived by the Labour party that somehow has the unique ability to generate growth that perhaps could not be accomplished in other ways. I have always found that intellectual position interesting. When I went to business school and we were given a chance to give three words to describe ourselves to other students, I decided to call

[Richard Fuller]

myself “arrogant”, because actually at that age—I know it is hard to believe now—I was quite arrogant. But I would never have the arrogance to think that my unique perception of an industrial strategy was the right way to galvanise growth in this country. On that issue, the Chair of the Select Committee and I differ. I would like to hear what he has to say.

Darren Jones: The hon. Gentleman is generous in giving way, but as he has put words into my mouth on the record, I ought to correct him, if I may. From our Select Committee’s work on industrial policy and from my comments on that work, it should be clear that I am not somebody who believes that the state is where wealth is created or that the state is in the driving seat of a growing economy. However, when the private sector, which creates wealth, is driving down the road at speed and trying to win the race for workers, customers and shareholders, I recognise that somebody needs to build the public infrastructure for it to succeed if the road runs out.

That opportunity for the state to play an important role in partnership with business is what I refer to as industrial policy. Might I say that it is why so many businesses are talking to the Labour party right now? They are asking for such a partnership with the Government, as opposed to having a Government who stand out of the way and hope the free market will solve all the problems.

Richard Fuller: The hon. Gentleman reinforces my point. He is suggesting that if a company chooses to use its shareholders’ money to drive down a road that runs out, somehow taxpayers should pay for the extension of the road. The whole point of capitalist markets is that it is a business’s responsibility if it makes incorrect allocations of capital and its shareholders lose money. It is the job of business and business leadership to have the insight to understand how best to create value for shareholders in the long term.

Businesses are now coming to smart Labour Members—who are desperate to show that after years of hating business the Labour party now thinks prawn cocktails are a nice idea—and saying, “Can you spare us a few bob, mate? We’d like to support your party and we’ve got this really sexy thing we want to do, but frankly we don’t want to use our own capital because we know that the Labour party in government will be suckers enough to use taxpayers’ money to pay for it.”

Andy McDonald: I hope that the hon. Gentleman, as a former member of our Select Committee, will take this point in good heart. Just last week, we visited HYBRIT in Sweden, which has made some incredible advances in creating sponge iron and is on the road to creating green steel. One of its major partners in that enterprise, without which it would not have been possible, is the state-owned utility company Vattenfall. I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider that point.

This country’s version is to plough hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money into the South Tees Development Corporation, transferring those assets to private individuals in return for options for land—for buttons—leaving the state on the hook for the environmental remediations. There could be no bigger contrast with

more intelligent responses to industrial challenges. I trust that the hon. Gentleman will take that point in good heart and look at the differences in practice between the United Kingdom and Sweden.

Richard Fuller: Actually, the hon. Gentleman is exactly right. He and I share a concern for the defence of taxpayers’ money: if it is going to be spent, it should be spent wisely. If a strategy is not working, that is fine, but the point that I raised at the start of my speech was that we hold different points of view on whether industrial strategy per se will be an answer to the problems. My general position is that leaving the market and businesses to themselves and allowing the free allocation of capital in open and competitive markets has proven time, time and time again to be the best way to achieve progress, with better living standards for households in this country and around the free world. That is why the developed nations are the developed nations: because we have supported that approach.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) *rose—*

Richard Fuller: I know you are being very lenient today, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I give way.

Wera Hobhouse: Nobody—certainly no Liberal Democrat—would pretend that wealth is created by the state. It is created by businesses, but what business leaders have said time and again is that the Government need to set a direction. Is it not true that this Government are currently giving no purposeful direction to business, particularly when it comes to the green economy and the transition to net zero?

Richard Fuller: The hon. Lady is right that businesses like certainty—that is absolutely true. Setting a direction, inasmuch as it creates certainty, is useful; more than that, it is a strong part of the foundations. If we go on to talk about climate change in this debate, it may be that questions about national and international strategies and about what our response should be to issues among British businesses, businesses in other countries and multinationals will drive us apart again.

Darren Jones: May I invite the hon. Gentleman to reflect, for the benefit of the House, on his recent involvement in the Conservative report on the reform of economic regulators? I was afforded the courtesy of being shown the embargoed report, but I am not sure whether the embargo has now been lifted and I can talk about the report directly.

Richard Fuller *indicated assent.*

Darren Jones: Oh, I can. Very good. The report recognises—I invite the hon. Gentleman to confirm or contest this point—that industrial policy is not just about money, but about policy direction, about regulation by economic regulators and about creating the conditions for business to prosper, for entrepreneurs to create businesses and for innovators to innovate. Industrial policy, as I refer to it, is not about somebody in the Treasury writing a cheque for businesses that should get their money from elsewhere, as the hon. Gentleman suggests; it is about the broader competitive market that needs to be created. Of course the Government and Parliament have a role in creating optimal circumstances for businesses to succeed. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that?

Richard Fuller: I do. Again, the hon. Gentleman is showing that there are a number of areas in which we can find agreement on the details.

Let me focus on the point about regulatory policy, because it is an important one. A group of Conservative MPs have put together a report calling on the Government to look at how we deal with the stock of regulation, the process of making regulation and my particular area of interest, the accountability of regulators for performance. As Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Gentleman will be well aware of our interactions with our regulators. Effective regulation, by which I mean regulation that is regularly, systematically and rationally appraised, plays a role in the competitive advantage of the United Kingdom. It is an area that we have locked away, saying, “It’s not nationalisation, it’s not the free market—it’ll do okay.” Those days need to come to an end, because too much of our economic output happens in sectors that are subject to regulators whose performance directly affects the ability of our country to compete.

Darren Jones *indicated assent.*

Richard Fuller: The Chair of the Select Committee nods. It is nice to have an area of agreement.

Let me move on to the second area about which the hon. Gentleman spoke: the Inflation Reduction Act and the associated EU measures. As he well knows, that Act represents a \$370 billion commitment of US federal funds, or their equivalent in tax credits. It followed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, which meant \$1 trillion of investment, not only in infrastructure but in green energy. By purchasing power parity, the US economy is approximately six times the size of the UK’s. An equivalent response, which is what the hon. Gentleman says we need, would essentially require writing a cheque for £40 billion, £50 billion or £60 billion. If industrial strategy is not about expenditure, what are we supposed to be doing to compete, other than putting in that amount of money? There seems to be a part missing.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke about inward investment and said that we should be sharpening up our act. He is absolutely right. In countries such as Germany, which he mentioned, the package on offer to those who are interested in investing is not just a financial package, but a coherent one. When someone looks into making an inward investment, there are people to sort out all the Government intricacies for them at a single point on day one. That is how the UK did it when Margaret Thatcher was leading efforts with Lord Young, but over the intervening years we have made things a little too complicated and we have not found our way. I would be interested to hear the Minister address that point; it may not be directly in her remit, but it would be interesting for all hon. Members present to know the Government’s view. What are the Government doing to make sure people know that the UK can take a foreign company from thinking it wants to invest in this country to actually getting going and investing in this country, whether that involves, say, bricks and mortar or servers? What can we do to make that easier?

I know this sounds as though I am picking the hon. Gentleman’s speech apart. I am not picking it apart but asking questions about it, and I trust he is happy with that. He talked about economic security and collaboration. I think the short-term version of that is called friendshoring,

which essentially means saying, “Let us conduct a geopolitical review of important strategic supply chains, and then let us be smart and make sure we are doing business with countries that are our allies.” That is a massive change, because there is no clarity about what the extent of friendshoring areas should be. Does this apply only to strategic industries determined by the United Kingdom, or is it imposed on the United Kingdom because other friends think we should be doing business with someone else? Are we prepared as a country to outsource the way in which British companies do business to the Government of the United States?

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting point, but does he not agree that when it comes to critical areas of our economy such as energy security and the opportunities presented by carbon capture, utilisation and storage, it makes consummate sense to have strong relationships with those neighbouring countries with which we are aligned? As we face the spectre of Putin, who has caused so much damage to our energy security of late, would it not be infinitely more sensible to look to the new technologies and look to those neighbours to work together in that domain for our mutual economic benefit? Surely that makes sense.

Richard Fuller: There are two parts to what the hon. Gentleman has said. Is it sensible for us to ensure that our national security is itself sensible, along with some of the elements that are important for national security? I do not think there are too many concerns about that; the issue is, should we be focusing our policy on the issue of only going with our allies, or at least making that the primary consideration?

I think this will be a problem if it becomes part of the international discourse. The Chair of the Select Committee seemed to be talking about unbundling the existing international organisation, paying it respect but recognising the “reality” of what is happening, but then looking at ways in which we can make side arrangements with our friends. I fear that that will mean pooling the understanding of what is a friend and what is not among others, which is a substantial change in the way in which this country seeks to run its economy. My view is that the United Kingdom should be an open society, an open trading economy, and that we should lean primarily towards openness.

Andy McDonald: With Russia? With China?

Richard Fuller: Obviously not with Russia. We have already imposed substantial trade sanctions on Russia, and I think there is consensus in the House about what our response should be when one country invades another. However, to conflate Russia with China, which has not, as far as I know, invaded another country, is to move into a different area. My point is philosophical: the United Kingdom’s history of success has been as an open trading nation, and the current push, in this country and others, for us to engage in friendshoring strikes me as a significant change from the way in which, historically, we have created wealth.

Darren Jones: The point I made in my opening remarks was that we should recognise, with some humility, that Britain can have only so much influence on these global trends. The hon. Gentleman is inviting us to conclude that were we to do more deals with our friends and

[Darren Jones]

allies, as I have suggested, those arrangements would be dictated by other countries; I think he was alluding to the United States of America. My response to that is that Britain should therefore lead the debate, and be involved in how this is developing across the world. If we just sit back and wait to see what happens, we will end up having no influence over the way these things are being designed, which, by definition, will be dictated by others who are leading the global debate. I am suggesting that we, as a smaller country, have global clout, and should be convening and leading that debate.

Richard Fuller: That is a brilliant point well made, and characteristic of the hon. Gentleman's understanding and grasp of these issues. He has put his finger on it. I, for my part, am merely raising questions and concerns about the perils of doing something that others may see as somehow buttressing our national security and doing what is right by us. This is not a road we can go down without trade-offs, and there will be some significant trade-offs if we take that road. However, I think the suggestion that we should be an active participant while those discussions are going on is very sensible.

Let me return to the question of money, and the current issues involving the so-called Inflation Reduction Act and the EU. A significant proportion of the funds spent by other countries are being spent on what I would term competitive discovery, which means looking at possible solutions when we do not yet have the solution to a problem. I would place that at the higher end of the risk investment spectrum, and would therefore approach it with caution. It is like dotcom for the green era—not in all sectors, and not all the money is being used for that purpose, but a considerable amount of what we need to do if we are to achieve net zero will require money to be spent on the discovery of solutions.

I am leery of the idea that British taxpayers' money should be stacked up in competition with taxpayers' money from EU member states and from the United States. Let me use that dotcom analogy again. When there is a big rush of substantial amounts of funds into discovery on a global scale, yes, there are winners, but an enormous amount of capital is wasted on losers. We have heard, in other debates, Members pushing us to do what President Biden is doing, or saying that we should be doing the same as the EU. Politicians need to remember that that means taking taxpayers' money which could be spent on education or healthcare, and putting it in the casino of winners and losers in the green tech revolution. We need to be very cautious about spending money in that way.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I am listening to the hon. Gentleman's speech with deep interest. Does he therefore think it would be more reasonable for the UK Government to end its fossil fuel subsidies—we know where that is going, and we have been subsidising fossil fuels for generations—and put the money more directly into green inward investment?

Richard Fuller: The hon. Gentleman tempts me, but let me answer his question in this way. The 2017 Labour party manifesto was not a hugely sensible document, but a second document was put together by the then shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Hayes

and Harlington (John McDonnell), in which he enumerated all the tax breaks that were given to different sectors of the economy, which amounted to an enormous sum. As one who can, I think, claim to be a low-tax Conservative, I suggest that those running a more efficient economy would get rid of almost all of them. They would say to those in, for instance, the carbon fuels sector, "You are on your own now. If you do not have enough money, go to the market and raise the money you need from your own shareholders or from other investors to grow your business." We have had conversations about the level of debt—the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington is now present, so he can correct me if I am wrong. I read his document in 2017, and I thought it was an excellent analysis. One point that the Labour party made at the time of that election, about the need to look at tax breaks for large corporations and sections of the economy as a method of public spending, was spot on. We are not vigilant enough in that regard. My own free-market view is that the fairer the market, the lower the subsidy.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was not going to engage in the debate, but I was passing and heard a reference to me—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I would normally chastise the right hon. Gentleman for attempting to speak in a debate when he has not been present, but I happened to notice that he was in the Chamber although not in his normal place. Given that we are not under enormous time constraints this afternoon, I will be much more lax than I normally am.

John McDonnell: As generous and wise as ever, Madam Deputy Speaker.

To reinforce what the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) said, we did that piece of work because we wanted to review every tax relief. In opposition, that is impossible to do, but we would have done it in government. The reason was that we were discovering tax reliefs that had been introduced decades earlier that the Treasury had never reviewed to see whether the original purpose had been achieved or whether they should be amended. Example after example was found, and it was clear that the tax relief system was not working effectively or as it was originally planned.

Richard Fuller: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for taking part in the debate. I do not think I agreed with anything else in the Labour party's 2017 manifesto, but the point that he has just made is a point for the ages for whoever is in the Treasury.

In addition to my concern about taxpayers' money, behind the big funding race between the EU and the US to put amounts of money at risk in a casino of green discovery is an open question about the trajectory of unit costs for the materials that will be required by those sectors that will assist us to achieve net zero. When others are rushing to do something, it is a natural human urge to rush to do it too. We can all remember the shortages of toilet paper at the start of covid, which was a shortage for no apparent reason. Because everyone else was buying loo paper, we all thought we should buy it. As we know, that created a surge in unit cost, which abated and—although I have not checked recently—the

cost is now back down to a normal market price. As goes toilet paper—perhaps I should not use that phrase—so goes the unit cost for other items. A significant cost will be experienced by early adopters. My question is whether we would be better off participating in that surge in unit costs in an era of technological discovery, or keeping our money in our pocket until the unit costs come down once the successful discoveries have been made.

We should remember that there will always be opportunities for economic gain and financial success, even if the initial discoveries and the bulk of investment are elsewhere. There will always be international flows of trade. For example, in the 1940s and 1950s, most of the motor industry was in the United States, but in the 1970s the UK benefited because it needed to reshore to the UK. That will be the same in other sectors. Look at value-added: iPhones are made in developing countries, historically mostly in China, but most of the value added is in Apple's design, and the UK has advantages in that area. We can be thoughtful about such areas, but I wanted to put on the record some questions for the Chair of the Select Committee who introduced this welcome debate.

I know that I have tested everyone's patience with my opening remarks, so I will address another couple of points before allowing time for others. This issue tilts to the Indo-Pacific region, both through the trade arrangements and the infrastructure. The global review that the Government have done is welcome. Much like the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton, who talked about the issues in Latin America, before getting involved in politics I spent a lot of time in the Philippines, Korea and Australia. It was clear that in those areas of the world, there is not only great opportunity for the United Kingdom, but a great recognition of the talents that we have and a great need for the various skills that we can provide in economics, defence and other areas.

When I hear politicians pooh-pooh the impact of CPTPP as a small percentage of GDP, I worry that they are missing the deeper point that it is a bigger connection. It is part of a globalisation of what the United Kingdom does. It is a recognition not that the UK is a big global superpower, but that it is seen by people around the world as having its place and having things to offer. We should look at this trade agreement as just the start of us pushing further into that part of the world in all the ways that we can.

I yearn for the day when we can do a similar deal across Africa. Trading with countries in Africa and opening up our markets to goods and services from Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Kenya and other growing economies is surely not only in our economic interests but in the interests of humanity. The greatest benefit to humanity in economic terms over my lifetime was made by Nixon's visit to China and its redirection from Russia towards the west, and the consequent movement of hundreds of millions of people in China and surrounding areas into the global trading system. It has been a great sadness to me that the countries in the continent of Africa have not been part of that. For this generation of politicians over the next 10 or 20 years, I hope that we can look to play our small part in achieving that.

Wera Hobhouse: As we have a little time and we are debating seriously, does the hon. Gentleman not recognise that cutting ourselves off from the biggest trading partner

in the world directly on our shore was the complete opposite of his vision of a global Britain? Of course the European Union also seeks to be open to other trading blocs, other countries and other big nations, and Britain is losing out by having left it.

Richard Fuller: The hon. Lady has made her point clearly. She asks if I agree, and the straight answer is, "Absolutely not." Ahead of the referendum in 2016, one of the most important reasons I felt we should look for a different arrangement from our EU colleagues was that I wanted us to focus on trade and economic interests with the laser-like focus of the UK. People can differ on this, but for me being part of the EU was a compromise too far in the pooling of those interests in an ever more competitive world. That is one of the reasons I felt it was right for us to leave.

Beyond that, we just need to look at the subsequent reactions—and I am critical of the UK in some ways, but I am certainly critical of the EU—in the artificial period that we have now thankfully mostly got past, when everyone was trying to be difficult with everyone else. We are all pleased that the Prime Minister has not only achieved in the Windsor framework the resolution, in large part, of many of the concerns in that frictionful period, but indicated his desire that the EU and the UK should do precisely what the hon. Lady seeks—to work together where we can. In our current position, we do that primarily because we are looking to promote our own focused interests.

It has been a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I have been very complimentary about the Chair of the Select Committee, despite the fact that he is a Labour Member. By leading the debate as he has, he has demonstrated that we can agree in substantial areas even if fundamentally our philosophies start from a different place.

1.39 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate my friend, the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), on securing this important debate, which I co-sponsored, and on making such an excellent speech that has sparked such an interesting debate.

I know the Government do not want to hear about the loss of international reputation, but I know it to be true. I have lived in the UK since 1990, and I became a proud British citizen in 2006. I am proud to be a citizen of a country that played such an important role on the global stage, and which I have looked up to all my life. I weep that Britain's global reputation is now in such peril. If only the Government would listen to our neighbours and to people across the world about the loss of international reputation they face. That would be a good way forward.

Is it not lamentable that no Conservative Members put in to speak in this important debate, with only one putting in to speak retrospectively, albeit interestingly? No other Conservative Member felt it was important to participate in this debate.

The world is in crisis. War engulfs Europe. China is asserting itself on the world stage. Protectionism is on the rise, certainly in this country. The doomsday clock, which measures how close the world is to global catastrophe, is now at 90 seconds to midnight, which is the closest it has been to midnight since its inception in 1947.

[Wera Hobhouse]

The President of the United States has defined this century as a battle between autocracy and democracy, and I am sure everyone in this House agrees. Taiwan is one of the world's most democratic countries. It is an independent country whose people have the freedom to express themselves, and it provides a striking contrast with its autocratic Chinese neighbour. I do not always laud what is done in the European Union, and the French President has stated that Europe should distance itself from the brewing tension between the US and China over Taiwan. Will the Minister please restate the UK Government's support for Taiwan? I see the Minister nodding, for which I thank her, but I would like her to make a statement in her winding-up remarks.

People are not only threatened by other countries. Climate change is the biggest risk to people worldwide, and it will only exacerbate the world's insecurity. Climate change is a threat multiplier. A 27 cm rise in sea levels is now inevitable, and it will be devastating for the 150 million people who live less than 1 metre above sea level. Some 1.2 billion people are set to be displaced due to climate change by 2050. If people are concerned about migration and immigration now, they have not seen anything yet.

Conflict will worsen as resources disappear. Research has shown that every 1°C increase in temperature increases the chance of a riot or civil war by 11.3%. NASA has said that climate change is making droughts more frequent, more severe and more pervasive. This means less fresh water is available to each country, causing major problems in the middle east and Africa. Observers have warned that conflict over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance dam could erupt into a water war.

We need global responses to global threats, so international co-operation is vital. We cannot fight the climate crisis by isolating ourselves from the world. The UK must be a leader and use all available avenues to strengthen global commitments. Trade deals are a crucial avenue to push countries to adopt better environmental standards. Unfortunately, this Government failed to guarantee British standards on environmental protection in the recent trade deals they negotiated.

It has been reported that the Government have already bowed to Malaysian demands to lower tariffs on palm oil in the CPTPP negotiations. That is terrible for the climate because palm oil-related deforestation and conversion of carbon-rich peat soils is throwing millions of tonnes of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The trade deals we negotiate have an impact on the climate emergency.

The Government must not set a precedent that our climate commitments are disposable. If we fail to protect our own interests in trade deals, we will be forced to accept lower standards. The UK must implement a set of minimum environmental standards to benchmark future trade deals and to ensure the environment is a priority when negotiating such agreements.

Prioritising the climate emergency would also improve the UK's global standing. If the UK is to be a significant actor in the world, it must show far more ambition in its green policies. Putin's war has shown how long-term dependence on fossil fuels can empower hostile regimes. Russia has used Europe's dependence on its natural gas as a weapon. If the UK had moved harder, faster and

earlier towards renewables, Putin would not have had that leverage and our constituents would not be paying the price for his war.

We must invest in the UK's renewables sector to secure our energy supply, and we must do much more than is currently being done. The Prime Minister has labelled China as

“the biggest long-term threat to Britain.”

China is currently the biggest investor in renewable energy, accounting for just under half of global energy transition investment. We are already seeing the effects on energy supply chains. Cumulative growth in Chinese wind power between 2021 and 2022 was more than three times greater than in the US and more than seven times greater than in Europe. China's share of manufacturing for solar power already exceeds 80%. If we want to be a global competitor, we have to get our act together.

By 2029, China could have 70% of the world's lithium-ion battery gigafactories. Without competition, it is set to dominate electric vehicle supply chains. If we fail to prioritise renewable investment now, we risk moving our energy dependence from one autocratic power to another.

Unfortunately, the Government seem content to sleepwalk into energy dependence. At a time when both the EU and the US are introducing massive stimulus packages, this Government have refused to match the US Inflation Reduction Act. Although the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) spoke for more than half an hour, I still do not quite understand the connection between toilet paper and investment in the green transition.

There is no investment in renewables, and the Government have slashed their contracts for difference auction budget for renewables by 28%. These are not the actions of a Government who understand the peril we are in. I hope they finally realise that there will be no coming back and no next time if we miss the 1.5°C target to avert climate catastrophe. The Government must show climate leadership in their investment and their dealings with other countries. Our actions now will determine the future of both the UK and the planet.

1.47 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in such a wide-ranging and comprehensive debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on the knowledgeable and expert way in which he opened the debate that he secured. It is extremely important that we are discussing the various intersections of this subject, as geopolitics is about our interaction with the world not only through our conventional power but through our soft power and trade. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) rightly alluded to the soft power we exert and the benefits we offer to the rest of the world through our leading education opportunities.

The Government made a statement on CPTPP earlier this week and, as Members might expect, I questioned the value of that deal relative to how much the Government have lauded what they see as its benefits. Clearly I touched a bit of a nerve with the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, because not content with chastising me in her immediate response, she then took the opportunity in her responses to the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and the hon. Member for

Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) to have a second and a third go at me. I am tempted to say that that might betray a bit of a snowflake tendency, which seems to run slightly at odds with the carefully curated political persona. None of the overhyped assertions to the contrary that were handed out to all Members who questioned the CPTPP did anything to dispel my fear that it represents an agreement that will drive down standards, that lacks adequate safeguards for domestic regulation and that represents a poor substitute for all the other trade deals that we have been forced to leave behind through exiting the European Union.

I am sorry to say that that trade and geopolitical picture is not an especially happy one at the moment. UK goods exports are the lowest in the G7 following Brexit and they have not shown much sign of recovery, even since covid. It turns out that putting up trade barriers to our largest export market, and our closest one geographically, carries hefty economic consequences—who could have guessed that? Business investment is not forecast to return to 2019 levels until mid-2025, and the UK is forecast to have the worst economic record of any G20 country in 2023, including, astonishingly, sanctions-hit Russia, according to the International Monetary Fund's latest forecasts. Its "World Economic Outlook" estimates that UK GDP will contract this year. All of that is compounded by the 4% hit to GDP that we know has come from Brexit. I am left wondering whether there are sufficient trade deals around the world yet to be concluded to ever adequately fill that gap.

This manifestation of the UK Government's trade policy, a bit like the Australia and New Zealand trade deal, might appear to put some political chalk on the board for the Government, which they would find convenient, but these deals potentially come at the expense of domestic producers and of our sovereignty, through the investor-state dispute settlement clauses, with all the implications they carry. They also threaten to make a mockery of the Government's oft-stated sustainable trade goals.

I am forced to pose the question: how could matters that we are told are so important to this Government, such as sovereignty, economic growth, domestic production, domestic standards and global environmental and human rights concerns, end up being compromised by the deals the Government then go out to negotiate? Sadly, there is no way to avoid the conclusion that outcomes from those deals will end up being contradictory to the public statements and publicly stated policy objectives, simply because the Government do not appear to have any kind of trade strategy written down anywhere.

In her foreword to "The UK government's strategy for international development", a document published last May, the then Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), stated that

"in the world we face today our development work must form an increasingly key part of a coherent UK foreign policy."

There are quite a few reasons why I could take issue with that statement on its own terms, but it is bizarre, is it not, that the Government have a document setting out how they seek to link aid to foreign policy but not one that links their trade policy to their domestic and international objectives? The UK Government certainly do not have a published document to that effect. If they

have an internal one, it is clearly not working. This really does matter, not just because of its domestic impacts but because of the negative effect it will have on the international impact that the Government might hope to have.

Let us consider the facts. As it stands, the UK Government are negotiating trade deals on behalf of the UK, the four nations that make up the UK and the devolved Administrations without having a comprehensive trade strategy in place—or at least one that any of us can measure them against. That means that harmful concessions are much more likely in the process of engaging in the wider world, as has already happened, particularly with regard to the agrifood sector. This comes at a time when many countries, including even the United States of America, recognise that trade policies need fundamental transformation to support a step change to a sustainable green economy based on workers' rights and shared prosperity. However, the UK Government are pursuing a policy of free trade deals, seemingly at any cost, without that framework in place to guide them.

In contrast to the UK Government, the Scottish Government do have a published written trade strategy. It sets out five principles that underpin the Scottish Government's trade decisions and relationship, which are based around pillars of inclusive growth; wellbeing; sustainability; net zero; and good governance. It positions trade within a framework of a wider economic, social and environmental context and considers the strategic role of trade in contributing to those wider governmental ambitions. The Scottish Government are using all the powers and influence available to them to make tangible progress on delivering on that in support of Scotland's national strategy for economic transformation. Where powers are currently reserved to Westminster, the Scottish Government are seeking to engage as best as they can with the UK Government to act in a way that acknowledges the interests of Scotland and supports our economy and our people, and the planet.

We saw some news break this week that the Foreign Secretary has written to UK ambassadors and high commissioners around the world to try to get them to ensure that there is a "strengthened approach" to dealing with Scottish ministerial visits, to make sure that the Scottish Government are kept firmly in their box and do not get any ideas above their station in their international engagements. There is a supreme irony here: a Scottish Government who do have a trade strategy are to be chaperoned around the world so that Ministers are kept in their place by officials representing a Government who do not have a trade strategy.

Food security is a matter of key concern, and we have seen its impacts in the bare supermarket shelves, the shortages of certain vegetables and the rotten meat scandal. Clearly, climate change and conflict pay an enormous part in disrupting supply chains, but there is no doubt that leaving the EU has not helped either. It has left us at the end of those strained supply chains and hampered our domestic food production and our ability to acquire food on the open market. So, sadly, we are hit the first and the hardest when those supply chains break.

The integrated review update from a few weeks back said that the UK Government are worried enough that they will be assessing vulnerability in our food system and supply chains. Frankly, it is incredible that that has

[Richard Thomson]

not happened already. We desperately need a food security resilience plan that looks at that intersection of trade and domestic food production.

The issue of food security has not suddenly crept up on us and we could look at many other areas of the economy too. One key lesson we should have taken from the pandemic is surely that no matter how much we can be ideologically committed to free trade and open markets, there is a fallacy in assuming that this country will always be able to buy whatever is needed at any point on the open market and, consequently, that it is possible or desirable to run down domestic production. Our approach to trade in food should reflect our need to be self-sufficient where that is possible, and it should reflect our values. Food should be produced in ways that keep us and the animals in the food system healthy and safe; it should seek to reduce our global environmental footprint; and it should support high-standards producers at home and abroad who are pioneering the farming and land stewardship methods that will get us to net zero.

In this vacuum, there is a real opportunity to start matching industrial strategy to trade strategy in a way that does not happen at present. There is perhaps no better example of an opportunity in that area than when it comes to technology and the environment, and that is of particular interest to me not just as a Scottish MP, but as a Member of Parliament representing a constituency right at the heart of the energy economy in the north-east of Scotland.

Scotland has the potential to be a green energy powerhouse, creating up to 385,000 jobs, boosting our economy by up to £34 billion a year by 2050, permanently lowering energy bills and embedding energy security by being a reliable energy partner from the resources around our shores and on our landmass. The Government's own net zero tsar has written about the former Department for International Trade in his most recent report. He notes that

"there is a missed opportunity to further trade in environmental goods which could expand UK exports in these goods."

He goes on to say:

"Promoting environmental goods and services should be a top priority for the Government...In order to maximise the potential of free trade agreements to make a positive difference for the net zero transition to remove the barriers to trade in climate change products and services, the Government should be establishing a minimum threshold for the environmental provisions which all new FTAs should adhere to."

I would very much like to start seeing evidence that that is happening.

Finally, I wish to touch on the matter of aid. In November 2022, the current UK Minister for International Development said:

"We used to be a foreign aid superpower, but our reputation has declined."

Aid cuts are clearly a huge part of that reputationally. My party will once again take this opportunity to reiterate our calls for the 0.7% of GNI spent on international aid—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I was very lenient earlier in the debate about the length of speeches, because I appreciated that there was plenty of time this afternoon, and I am sorry to say to him that,

having been lenient, the plenty of time has run out. Normally, I would have asked him to speak for something like six or seven minutes. I did not do so, because I was not aware that we had run out of time, but I hope that he will help by concluding quite soon.

Richard Thomson: I am grateful for your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I will endeavour to bring my remarks to a controlled and orderly stop very soon.

Having made my point about aid, that seems like a good cue to finish by recalling the words of the NATO General Secretary, Jens Stoltenberg, from last year, when he said:

"Our economic choices have consequences for our security. Freedom is more important than free trade. The protection of our values is more important than profit."

I am certain that no one in this House disagrees with that, but, in the absence of a clear, coherent trade strategy aligned with a clear, coherent domestic policy, it is impossible for the Government to say that they are acting in the interests of upholding freedom, prosperity, quality of life, quality of environment, social justice or human rights around the world, and that urgently needs to be addressed.

2.3 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I join the House in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, on securing this debate. I am sure that the whole House would agree that he chairs the Select Committee with considerable distinction. The way that he approached this debate and his thoughtful and provocative speech—provocative in the best sense—are testament to him and to his expertise in this area.

We had a very interesting contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) spoke in particular about the significance of trade with Mexico and Latin America—a matter that no one else had focused on until that point. We were lucky to have the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) in the Chamber. The whole House will have cherished his contribution as there was no other Conservative Member available. We were 30 minutes into his speech when he made a particularly interesting point on the trade and geopolitical significance of Africa, which I want to return to, if I can, later in my speech. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) underlined the fundamental importance of considering the climate emergency for our trade and geopolitical agenda, and she was absolutely right to do so.

The prediction by the Office for Budget Responsibility that exports will plummet this year, will drop again next year, and will manage only anaemic growth in the next three years underscores the importance of this debate and the 13 years of economic failure that have seen trade targets repeatedly missed, rampant inflation, taxes through the roof and huge numbers of businesses in real difficulty.

The OECD expects the UK to suffer the worst performance on economic growth this year of any G7 country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West alluded to in his opening remarks, today's

global figures from the UN specialist trade body revealed that Britain has dropped out of the world's top five for exports of goods and services. That underlines the fact that there is still no White Paper on trade; no clear plan to boost green trade; no industrial strategy to help address supply chain issues; and certainly no consultation on what Britain's strategic trade goals should be, or what funding and other resources should be allocated to support a UK-wide trade strategy that delivers for all the nations and regions of the UK. That was a point that the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) also made.

Our trade relationship with our nearest neighbours remains in serious need of improvement. It is clear that the much-promised trade deal with the United States will not happen while the current crop of Ministers are in post. Furthermore, the Indo-Pacific tilt, at least in trade terms, does not look like being the great solution to our economic woes that various Conservative Prime Ministers once promised. Progress on a trade deal with India seems to have been considerably hampered by tensions between the Home Office and the Department for Business and Trade, and Africa has largely been ignored.

The invasion of Ukraine has had considerable trade and geopolitical consequences. It is a reminder of the importance of our allies in eastern Europe; of working through NATO; of the continuing significance of global supply chains; and of maintaining close relationships with both America and the European Union, even while we look for other trade opportunities, too.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West made the point that Europe remains our biggest, nearest market. It is home to crucial allies, and making Brexit work better ought to be a fundamental strategic priority for both trade and geopolitical reasons in the coming months. It is clear that the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which the first of last year's Prime Ministers negotiated with the European Union, is not working, as we were once promised that it would.

Three quarters of firms that trade with Europe and that are members of the British Chambers of Commerce say that the Government's trade deal is not helping them increase sales or grow their businesses. The Institute of Directors has reported similar problems, too. As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) alluded to in one of his early interventions, the rules of origin, which are expected to get tighter at the start of next year, pose real problems for the automotive industry. It would be good to hear from the Minister on how she and her colleagues intend to address those points.

Although Ministers may like to ignore these difficulties in general, Europe remains our biggest export market. Therefore, while progress on the Windsor framework is welcome, if we are to make Brexit work better, Ministers need a clear plan to make trading with the European Union less cumbersome and difficult, in particular for small and medium-sized businesses. A veterinary agreement with the European Union would be a good starting point, helping to reduce the considerable red tape and trade barriers that many of our agri-exporters now face. More direct Government assistance to support different business groups negotiate mutual recognition agreements of professional qualifications would be sensible, too. We also need to find new, flexible labour mobility

arrangements for those making short-term work trips and for musicians and artists seeking short-term visas to tour within the EU. We also need to resolve the position on Britain's data adequacy status, so that there is no threat to UK digital services companies' ability to compete in the EU.

The failure to negotiate a trade deal with the US, as Conservative Members promised in their 2019 manifesto would be struck, is being compounded by the failure to grasp the scale of the potential risk to British business from the US Inflation Reduction Act, while the EU's own response, published in February, could further divert green investment from the UK unless Ministers act. I hope we will hear from the Minister how her Department is responding to those threats.

I welcome the apparent progress made on the Indo-Pacific tilt and the Government's decision to accede to the CPTPP, albeit we will need to examine the agreement in considerable detail. The Secretary of State's comments on Monday suggest that she may well have made very significant concessions to secure that accession agreement. The Minister will know only too well that, while I am sure membership of the CPTPP will bring benefits in geopolitical terms, it is not clear that the trade benefits will be huge. The Government's own predictions suggest it will add just 0.08% to our GDP, so it will not make up for the failure to deliver a trade deal with Europe or all the extra red tape, customs deals and higher costs that the poorly negotiated deal with the EU has delivered.

It is striking, too, that we have still not seen a trade deal signed with India, despite the promises that it would be done by Diwali last year. The concern on India is that other countries are racing ahead to get their business interests in front of Indian Ministers. With India set to be the world's third largest economy by 2030, we need to step up significantly our trade efforts there.

Why, for example, is there not a greater effort to engage with Gujarat, where the fastest growth is taking place? We have a large Gujarati diaspora in the UK, with many highly successful businesses that already have links to Gujarat, yet we appear to be doing very little to capitalise on that knowledge and expertise. Other countries, notably France, have significantly stepped up their diplomatic and trade efforts with India in recent years. I have to say that there has been a notable failure of late by Ministers to back up negotiations to secure trade deals with the resources to help businesses to take advantage of all the claimed benefits of those deals.

Lastly, on Africa—a point that the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire brought to the attention of the House—the lack of trade and geopolitical attention that Ministers are giving to that remarkable continent is striking. The cuts in development assistance, in particular cutting back on key programmes of trade assistance such as the TradeMark Africa programme, have created the sense that Britain is less interested than it once was in Africa's future.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) reminds me, the International Monetary Fund says that in just eight years' time, fully half of all the young people entering the labour market globally will be in Africa. The continent still faces huge challenges, notably on the climate crisis, poverty and conflict, but the establishment of the African continental free trade area is an indicator of increasing African

[Gareth Thomas]

self-confidence, and new partnerships to support mutual growth and development are surely in Britain's long-term interest.

The Conservatives' record on trade is one of failure and broken promises, a point my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West made explicitly in his excellent opening contribution. In 2012 the Conservative party pledged to reach £1 trillion of exports by 2020. Six Chancellors and four Prime Ministers later, the OBR is predicting that the target will be hit 15 years late. I am very much an optimist about our country—Britain will do better—but I gently suggest to the House that it will take a Labour Government to get Britain back on the road to the brighter and better future that the British people most definitely deserve.

2.13 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) for securing this important debate. I too was on the Select Committee with my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) and the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington, so this feels like a Tuesday morning love-in all over again.

To continue that love-in, I must say that many points that the Select Committee chair made were valid, although unfortunately others were somewhat completely off the mark. As always, I will defer to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire; we played a good tag team on the Select Committee, so it is fantastic to have him here in the Chamber. I thank all colleagues from across the House for their valuable contributions and I will do my very best to reference all of the very important questions that they raised.

Andy McDonald: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Ms Ghani: Already? I have just said how fantastic you are, and now you are going to cut me to the quick—but go ahead.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful for the praise; I just want to point out that I am the Member of Parliament for Middlesbrough—my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) is a different guy altogether.

Ms Ghani: Goodness—I am no longer on the Christmas card list, so things are already going downhill. You have made it clear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I do not have as much time to speak as I thought I had, so I will do my best to refer to all the contributions.

First, to the Chair of the Select Committee, you were such an optimist when I was on the Select Committee, but there has been nothing but negativity today. You touched on UK investment—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I think you meant “the hon. Gentleman”.

Ms Ghani: Forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We are one of the leading countries for start-up capital outside the United States. Most recently, we attracted £20 billion into technology, twice as much as France and Germany. The hon. Member for Bristol North West talked about our economy; the recent PwC report said that the UK is the fastest-growing G7 economy up to 2050, which means that our economic growth will outpace that of Germany, France and Italy combined. He talked about the OBR, which has revised its figures and is no longer forecasting our falling into a recession in 2023. I just wanted to ensure that he did not spend his weekend being utterly depressed, but instead looked at some of the stats out there that will perk him up.

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate, because it is important to understand the link between trade and geopolitics. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, it is a fast-changing world out there and geopolitics is a challenge awaiting everyone, not just us here in the UK. It is only right that we ask ourselves what kind of country we want the UK to become. What part should we play in helping to shape the world of tomorrow? Should we be an outward-looking, truly global, free-trading nation that flies the flag for progress and stands up against the rise of authoritarianism and protectionism worldwide, or a country that battens down the hatches and shields itself from change?

I know what kind of nation the Prime Minister and I and the rest of this Government want the UK to be. We want to strengthen our country's role as a global champion of freedom, democracy and the rule of law, driven by free trade and free enterprise. Considering the contributions we have heard, I think we all agree that trade is the most powerful force for progress we have at our disposal.

Only trade can create jobs, drive growth and deliver the long-term prosperity that communities across the UK and around the world need to flourish. Only trade has the power to lift millions more people out of poverty in developing nations, helping to build a more secure and prosperous future for us all. Only trade can drive forward co-operation in the battle against climate change, by building networks of green innovation worldwide.

Only trade can strengthen our critical supply chains, as discussed earlier, as we adapt to the energy security challenges unleashed by Putin's barbaric illegal invasion of Ukraine. We have shown that by joining forces with our partners to cut the Kremlin's oil revenues, removing tariffs on Ukrainian goods, signing a digital trade agreement with Kyiv and mobilising British businesses to play a leading role in rebuilding the Ukrainian economy—a task that we will drive forward with our partners when we host the second Ukrainian recovery conference in June.

The global challenges were covered in many speeches in this debate. That is why trade is forged at the heart of our economic security and defence policy as we adapt to the challenges of a competitive and multipolar world, just as we outlined in our refreshed integrated review, and why we are using our post-Brexit freedoms to position the United Kingdom at the centre of a network of free trade agreements that span the globe.

We are making it easier and cheaper for British firms in our constituencies, including smaller businesses, to trade and invest overseas by tackling tariffs and opening markets. We are helping them to unlock the fantastic potential of those deals through the work of our network

of trained specialists, based here in the UK and worldwide, who provide the advice and guidance that firms need to do business overseas, from offering specialist market and sector intelligence to connecting British firms to export our investment opportunities on the ground, while flying the flag for the best of British business through the promotional work and other trade activities our teams are doing globally.

We have signed trade deals worth more than £850 billion with more than 70 nations so far, including some of the world's most diverse and dynamic economies such as Japan and Australia. We are working at both state and federal level to strengthen our economic ties with the United States, our biggest bilateral trade partner, bringing down barriers to business through the memorandums of understanding we have agreed with North Carolina, South Carolina, Indiana and Oklahoma—the International Trade Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), has just got off a flight from Oklahoma—with discussions ongoing with other states

We are also making progress in negotiating an FTA with India, although it is always about getting the right deal, not about rushing ahead. That FTA would boost our trade with the world's biggest democracy by as much as £36 billion.

Let me shift to the Indo-Pacific, which was touched on by many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire. A key plank of our policy is to strengthen Britain's trade ties with markets across the Indo-Pacific as the global economic centre of gravity shifts eastward. China's increasing assertiveness in the region is set to become one of the most significant geopolitical and geo-economic shifts over the next decade, so our response will define our relationship with the world that is emerging.

The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) in particular mentioned China and Taiwan. In trade talks back in 2021, we agreed to deepen and broaden our trading relationship. In the last talks—held in Taiwan in November 2022, with the previous Trade Minister—the UK progressed market access ambitions in a range of sectors, including energy and offshore wind power, financial services, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and, of course, food and drink. It gives me great pleasure to reassure the hon. Lady, the House and the good people of Taiwan that there is no change in the UK's position, as stated at the G7 Foreign Ministers meeting a few days ago. I also note that President Macron has emphasised that position since making his initial comments. The UK remains resolutely against any unilateral change to the status quo, and we agree with our partners that Taiwan's meaningful participation to international bodies should be possible. Of course, we are obviously aware of attempts to redefine the status quo, but we are fundamentally focused on ensuring that we de-escalate any tensions in the region.

There has been a lot of discussion about CPTPP, which is pivotal to the growth of our economy and will provide access to international markets for all the fantastic businesses in our constituencies. There has been so much doom and gloom in the debate, but it is worth remembering that we have access to markets in Europe and the CPTPP—the only country in the world to have that access. Our membership of the CPTPP was successfully secured by the Secretary of State just last month, and

the deal is a game-changer for our country, placing the UK at the centre of a free trade zone of 500 million people, spanning Asia and the Americas, with a combined GDP of £9 trillion. We are the first European country to join the CPTPP, showing what we can achieve as an independent global trading nation. It also shows how we are valued internationally. There is a lot of doom and gloom about how the UK is branded and whether it is respected overseas, but I think this shows our value and what we have to offer.

CPTPP enables us to be a part of a major geopolitical scene. Of course, tilting towards the Indo-Pacific supports jobs and creates new export opportunities for businesses in every part of the United Kingdom. We have signed an additional agreement with Singapore, and a digital innovation partnership with 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, strengthening our growing network of prosperity across the region. Those deals are underpinned by our expanding commitment to security in the Pacific, led by the AUKUS defence and security pact that we signed with the US and Australia last year. Without secure trade routes and supply chains, commerce cannot flourish and nations cannot prosper.

There has been a lot of conversation about supply chains. The war in Ukraine has starkly exposed the vulnerability of global supply chains over the past year—particularly energy security—so we are pulling out the stops to identify alternative sources for the critical goods that our economy needs to flourish while boosting our energy independence at home. The integrated review included the critical minerals refresh, which I was pleased to put together. Just this morning, the critical minerals taskforce—a collaboration with industry—met for the first time. I take this opportunity to recognise the work of Katherine Bennett, the taskforce chair. This shows how we are working not only with industry, but internationally, to ensure that UK manufacturers have access to the critical minerals and goods that they need in their supply chains.

As we move towards cleaner, more affordable sources for power, Britain is once again leading the charge and we have a head-start on our global competitors. More than 40% of our energy came from renewable sources last year, and we are ramping up our investment in the sector, directing record sums into new projects, research and innovation. We know that the US Inflation Reduction Act is a significant intervention in the global race for green energy, and we are not attempting to enter any kind of distortive subsidy race with our greatest ally—as my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire said, we need to make sure that we always get good value for taxpayers' money—but although that drive to net zero in the United States should be welcomed, it is, of course, incredibly disruptive. One cannot throw a stone into the water and not expect any ripples, and IRA is a massive stone that has caused ripples worldwide, particularly in Europe. It is incredibly important that we stick to our net zero ambitions and ensure that we have resilience in our supply chains.

We are trying to do everything that we can to ensure that businesses in the UK have a competitive advantage while leveraging billions more in private capital to drive growth—and not just in green energy. We want to grow our nuclear energy capacity, too, through the development of small modular reactors, while investing in our key growth industries—from advanced manufacturing to life sciences and artificial intelligence—forging a British

[Ms Ghani]

economy that is fit to face the challenges of a fast-changing world. [Interruption.] I am being rushed along, so I will briefly respond to some of the points raised by hon. Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire talked about the Office for Investment. We now have a joint Department—BEIS and DIT have become the Department for Business and Trade—with far more focus. An event in October will focus on global investment into the UK. We are focusing our resources and ensuring that we are reaching out.

The hon. Member for Bath spoke about CPTPP and Taiwan. It is not for us to talk about the accession of other countries, but is it not fantastic that we are at the table to ensure that our voices are heard?

There was also conversation about Liverpool and Mexico—[Interruption.] I am going as fast as I can, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) for his speech, which was positive about the work that we are doing in Mexico. He talked about the education strategy and the desire to promote exports, especially in education. I can confirm that we are most definitely doing that. If that work continues to be as positive as it is, I am sure that we would work with him to ensure that it is progressed.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) spoke about Kashmir. Those issues are fundamentally for the Foreign Office. These conversations often take place behind closed doors, but I do not doubt that her comments are on the record and will be reflected in other Departments, as necessary.

With a new chapter in global history being opened, we must have the courage to stand up for our convictions that only free trade and open markets hold the key to prosperity. It is clear that we are living in dangerous times. Autocracies are emboldened and behaving in a way that many of us have not seen in our lifetimes. The UK stands at the crossroads of the geopolitical stand-off between the international rules-based system as we know it and the system that autocratic leaders would

like it to become. Trade and investment are at the very heart of that crossroads. Securing UK prosperity while protecting our way of life must be at the core of our trading strategy. We must work with our partners and allies to forge a freer, fairer future for the global economy, standing up to protectionism and economic coercion wherever we find it, delivering for people across the UK by growing British exports until we achieve our ambition of trading £1 trillion-worth of goods and services by 2030—we have a few years to go before we hit that target—and making our economy the undisputed top investment destination in Europe, so that millions of people across the UK and around the world can be set free to realise their economic potential and enjoy the benefits that only free, fair and sustainable trade and investment can bring.

I do not want to cause you any more upset, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will finish by saying that I was at the Dispatch Box 30 days ago on the first day of Ramadan. Tonight we may see a full moon and tomorrow may be Eid, so I wish you and the House—especially the staff in the Tea Room—Eid Mubarak. I wish in particular for a full moon tonight so that I and my two brothers, Nasim and Rasalat, who are watching, can celebrate Eid tomorrow.

2.28 pm

Darren Jones: I thank Members for their interventions, contributions and—dare I say—compliments, for which I was very grateful. I think we all agree that the world has changed. The question is: what next for Britain? From empire, to Europe, to what? A new chapter in our long history. Clearly, there is disagreement on both sides of the House about the state of the UK economy, but the Labour party knows that the data shows 13 years of economic decline, and that that must change. That change will come, we hope, with a new Labour Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered international trade and geopolitics.

Human Rights Protections: Palestinians

[Relevant document: e-petition 585309, *Condemn Israel for their treatment of Palestine and Palestinians*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We have 14 speakers for this debate. It is a Back-Bench debate, which is why we try to limit the Front-Bench contributions. It is normally six minutes for the SNP, eight minutes for the Opposition and eight minutes for the Minister. I believe the opening speech will last about 15 minutes, so all other contributions will have to be about seven minutes. I would prefer not to put a time limit on speeches. I think that will give everybody an equal opportunity to get in, because it is a very well subscribed debate. That is why I was hurrying things along in the previous debate.

2.30 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of human rights protections for Palestinians.

Since the start of this year, the security situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories has deteriorated rapidly. Israelis have been killed outside a synagogue in East Jerusalem. During Ramadan, Palestinians have been beaten by police while worshipping in al-Aqsa mosque. Car-ramming attacks have claimed the lives of Israeli citizens and visiting tourists. Extensive military raids have caused the deaths of numerous Palestinians and injured many more. This unnecessary loss of innocent life is of deep and grave concern, and I want to begin this debate by paying my respects to all the victims who have been killed. In particular, I am sure all of us here today will want to send our sincerest condolences to the family of British-Israeli sisters Maia and Rina Dee and their mother Lucy, who were murdered in a horrific attack in Tel Aviv earlier this month.

Extremist ideology, rhetoric and violence carried out by any party to the conflict is never acceptable and cannot be ignored or swept under the carpet. Silence is complicity. It is not until we visit the region, bear witness and listen to the testimonies of people on all sides that we really learn the depth and scale of the horrors of what life is like for the people who live there. Last October, I made my first visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories with the International Development Committee and heard at first hand stories that are the stuff of nightmares. Things that we take for granted such as freedom of speech and freedom of movement—basic human rights that we would wish for all peoples—either do not exist for many or are under constant threat.

I am a strong believer in a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. It should go without saying that the state of Israel has the right to exist and prosper and should be our friend and ally. However, for the two-state solution to be realistic, the state of Palestine must also be recognised. Similarly, the actions of the Israeli Government, which undermine the feasibility of that peace process and seek to deny the rights, identity and legitimacy of the Palestinian people, must be called out.

While the shocking images of violence between Israelis and Palestinians that we see in newspapers, on television and online often prompt statements of condemnation and renewed calls for peace, these are not isolated incidents that we can simply push aside with sympathetic platitudes and move on from. In order to achieve a

sustainable peace, we cannot ignore the fact that systematic discrimination and human rights abuses are the daily reality for all Palestinians living under occupation, 365 days of the year, and the UK Government have a significant role to play in ensuring that this is brought to an end.

During Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions last month, the Foreign Secretary told the House:

“The UK enjoys a strong bilateral relationship with Israel, which allows us to raise issues where we disagree.”

He went on to say:

“We seek to protect the viability of a sustainable two-state solution. We raised with the Israeli Government our concerns about activities that might put that future at risk.”—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 672-673.]

In the face of ever increasing human rights violations at the hands of the Israeli authorities, when will simply “raising issues” with our Israeli counterparts no longer be enough?

I know that other Members will want to examine many of the points I am about to make in more detail in their speeches, but we must open this debate by acknowledging how the Israeli Government discriminate against and violate the human rights of Palestinians on a regular basis. As I have said, unlawful killing and the excessive use of force, illegal under international law, are commonplace within the Occupied Palestinian Territories, despite the Israeli military having an international legal obligation to protect the Palestinian population under its control.

The use of lethal force has escalated, with the UN reporting that last year was one of the deadliest years for Palestinians. At least 151 Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces in the west bank—the highest in 18 years. Tragically, that pattern is seemingly spreading into this year as well. Already, nearly 100 Palestinians have been killed in the west bank, including, shockingly, 17 children. That is more than three times as many as in the same period last year.

In many instances, it is not only the military and police that are responsible for these fatalities but settler violence, aided and abetted by Israeli authorities. This state-sanctioned impunity has been aptly highlighted in Huwara in recent weeks, where Israeli settlers have set Palestinian property and possessions on fire with no intervention. Sakir, a 22-year-old mechanic from Huwara, said:

“We have never seen anything like this. The settlers have nothing to be afraid of anymore; they know they can do whatever they like.”

In February, a 27-year-old Palestinian was shot in the head and killed by a settler. Despite all this, Israeli human rights group Yesh Din collated data from 2005 to 2022 that demonstrates, shockingly, that 93% of all investigations into ideologically motivated crime committed by Israeli settlers in the west bank are closed without an indictment.

To go back to the role of the UK Government, the FCDO often talks of its strong relationship with its counterparts in Israel and its ability to raise human rights concerns, so my first question is this: does the Minister accept that, with ever increasing provocations and bloodshed, more needs to be done? It is a simple question. The UK Government must move beyond hollow promises to raise concerns, as the situation on the ground is too critical and serious to be cryptic and dismissive of the facts. Once again, silence is complicity.

[Chris Law]

The process of settlement expansion, forced evictions, demolitions and disposessions is further evidence of systematic aggression designed to force Palestinians from their land and deny them their rights. Despite regularly pledging to pause settlement expansion, 7,000 settlement homes in 35 settlements are set to be approved by Israel—the largest number of settlement homes ever agreed in a single planning meeting. At the same time, in Masafer Yatta in the south Hebron hills, over 1,000 Palestinians face losing their homes—the largest eviction of Palestinians since the 1970s. What a stark and blindingly obvious contrast. Similarly, in East Jerusalem, demolition of Palestinian homes has escalated, with 30 homes being demolished since the beginning of this year.

The displacement of Palestinians and the demolition of Palestinian property is a violation of international law and can never be tolerated or ignored. The systematic forced displacement through home demolitions and building of settlements is a deliberate attempt to re-engineer the demographic make-up of the Occupied Palestinian Territories and is illegal under international law. When will the Government finally acknowledge that? What concrete steps will the UK take to hold Israel to account for its repeated and flagrant breaches of international law, including continuing settlement expansion? If illegal Israeli settlement construction does not stop, will the UK Government commit to suspending trade deal talks with Israeli counterparts until we can ensure that human rights are being safeguarded?

Many will be aware that Palestinians' rights to freedom of movement are restricted by the Israeli authorities. In the west bank and East Jerusalem, the separation barrier, checkpoints, arbitrary closures, a complex permit system and biometric surveillance are used to control, fragment and dominate Palestinians. This June will mark the 16th year of Israel's illegal blockade of the Gaza strip, which has effectively been turned into the world's largest open air prison. The 2 million Palestinians trapped there face a permanent humanitarian crisis. It is virtually impossible for Gazans to travel to the west bank, violating their rights to work, education, family life and healthcare. For example, human rights organisation B'Tselem has uncovered that in 2022, Israeli authorities rejected more than one third of all medical exit permits requested by ill or dying Palestinians to leave the Gaza strip to seek treatment in Israel, the west bank or East Jerusalem.

The unequal and discriminatory policies pursued by the Israeli Government have led to divergent health outcomes for Israelis and Palestinians, and these are growing. The evidence is stark. For example, Israel has three times more doctors per 1,000 people than the Occupied Palestinian Territories; women are nine times more likely to die due to complications from pregnancy and childbirth in the Occupied Palestinian Territories than in Israel; and, on average, Israelis live nearly nine years longer than Palestinians, with the gap between the two increasing by almost a year in the past 20 years.

How is it for children? Four out of five Gazan children reportedly live with depression, grief and fear, and it is Palestinian children who often bear the brunt of Israeli discrimination and aggression. Even the fundamental right to education has been destroyed. Some 58 schools in the west bank, serving around 6,500 students, are currently under threat of demolition. In November, Israeli

authorities carried out the demolition of a school in Masafer Yatta while children—get this, Madam Deputy Speaker—were still in the school building. Israel stands out as the only country in the world that systematically prosecutes children in military courts, with up to 700 prosecuted each year. Right now, there are 151 Palestinian children held in an Israeli prison, of whom 70% have been unlawfully transferred out of the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

While Israel ratified the UN convention on the rights of the child in 1991, Palestinian children living under Israeli military occupation are routinely denied their rights to life, education and adequate housing, and are denied access to healthcare, among other rights denials inherent in the decades-long Israeli military occupation, with no end in sight. Everyone in this House will agree that that is no way to treat any child, anywhere.

In all these instances, it is evident that the Israeli Government are acting with impunity and without accountability. As a result, they are emboldened and determined to continue with these policies. The nub of the issue is that this should come as no surprise to any of us, as Israeli politicians are open about their plans for the Occupied Palestinian Territories and their attitudes towards Palestinians. The evidence is staring every one of us in the face. The country now has the most far-right and extreme Government in its history. The de facto annexation of large parts of the west bank was an overarching principle in the December 2022 coalition agreements for the new Israeli Government, which stated that

“the Jewish people have an exclusive and incontestable right on the entire land of Israel. The government will advance and promote settlement in all parts of the land of Israel, in the Galilee, the Negev, the Golan Heights and Judea and Samaria”.

Where are the UK Government in all of this?

Last month, Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich triggered international outrage by saying that the Palestinian village of Huwara in the west bank should be “wiped out” following a rampage by Israeli settlers. He also said that the Palestinian people are “an invention” of the past century, and that there is

“no such thing as Palestinians because there's no such thing as the Palestinian people”.

Is this not the language of ethnic cleansing that we have heard from other states around the world? Throughout my time in this House, I have time and again called out Governments and politicians who have used this abhorrent rhetoric, whether it be Russians talking about Ukrainians, Chinese talking about Uyghurs or, indeed, Tibetans, or Azerbaijanis talking about Armenia and Armenians. Nobody can stand by and condone this disgusting, hateful language, but equally importantly, we cannot let it be put into practice. I say again: silence is complicity. Those words are reality for Palestinian people. They are entrenched in their day-to-day lives, in the policies of the Israeli Government, and in law.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I have been listening to his speech with interest. Is he concerned about the human rights of Palestinians only in relation to Israel, or is he also concerned about the abuses of Palestinian human rights by Hamas and the Palestinian Authority?

Chris Law: That is a very valid and good question, but right now I am particularly focused on the occupied territories, which of course are under the command of Israel. That is why I am pertinently directing my points to that today.

In February 2022, Amnesty International published a report concluding for the first time that Israel is committing the crime of apartheid against Palestinians. Under international law—just to be clear, because most of us assume apartheid was solely in South Africa—apartheid is defined as systematic discrimination and domination, and inhumane acts committed in order to maintain that system. That is set out in the international convention on the suppression and punishment of the crime of apartheid and the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court. This is not about politicising language: this is language that is respected in international law.

Amnesty International's report is the result of more than four years of research and analysis, and I recommend that everyone in this room read it, as other international, Israeli and Palestinian organisations have previously drawn similar conclusions, including the respected Human Rights Watch, B'Tselem, Yesh Din, Al Mezan and others. If the UK Government are serious about protecting the human rights of Palestinians, it is fundamental that the problem—the crime being committed against them—is first acknowledged, then investigated; that perpetrators are brought to justice; and that it is not allowed to continue.

I will now move to the last part of my speech, which is the most pertinent point about where the UK stands: the UK Government are actively blocking action, and that is the biggest crime at all. Why do I say this? Let us look at the UK Government's position, which is that

"we do not recognise the terminology about apartheid. Any judgment on serious crimes under international law is a matter for judicial decision, rather than for Governments or non-judicial bodies."—[*Official Report*, 13 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 876.]

Let us follow that logic. Why is it that the UK Government have quite rightly called out war crimes being committed by Russia in Ukraine without any judicial decision, or called out in this House crimes against humanity—language that includes ethnic cleansing and, indeed, genocide—against Xinjiang by China? How can we pick and choose when we apply this logic? The UK Government must make a choice: they either unequivocally champion human rights around the world, or they turn the other way when it is not politically expedient to call out what they see.

Here is the evidence that the UK is standing in the way of courts and other bodies making such a judicial decision. First, the UK stated its strong opposition to the International Criminal Court's Palestine investigation in 2021. How can the UK continue to oppose the investigation on the basis that it does not recognise Palestinian statehood, while at the same time allegedly respecting the independence of that court—which, incidentally, has ruled by majority that it has jurisdiction? Secondly, the UK voted against the Human Rights Council's resolution in 2021 establishing the current independent UN commission of inquiry on the situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Finally, the UK Government voted against the UN General Assembly's resolution to request that the International Court of Justice provide an advisory opinion on the question of the legality of Israel's occupation, and only

last month, the UK and Israeli Governments signed the 2030 road map for UK-Israeli bilateral relations. The only pathetic concrete reference to Palestinian people in that document is this:

"We will cooperate in improving Palestinian livelihoods and Palestinian economic development."

Not a mention of those suffering human rights abuses, and not a slight glimmer of hope for them.

The evidence is clear: the treatment of the Palestinian people is not primarily an economic or poverty concern, but one of systematic discrimination, erosion of human rights, and denial of identity and legitimacy. Therefore, under no circumstances can the UK Government continue to bury their head in the sand on this issue. As I have said throughout, silence is complicity.

2.47 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): For me—like many people in this House, I suspect—human rights are universal and indivisible. That is why I want to start by telling Members a little about the relationship of Israel and Palestine to the Council of Europe, which owns, as it were, the European Court of Human Rights.

At the institutional level, the Israeli Knesset has enjoyed observer status with the Parliamentary Assembly since 1957, and the Union of Local Authorities in Israel was granted observer status with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe in 1994. Israel has signed and ratified 11 Council of Europe conventions and signed but not ratified a further two. Israel participates in four partial agreements and 18 inter-governmental committees.

With respect to high-level meetings, the secretary-general of the Council of Europe paid a couple of official visits to Israel, and the President of the Knesset has paid similar visits to the Council of Europe. We at the Council of Europe have just completed a study on Israel and Palestine, which was led by the former Mayor of Turin, Piero Fassino, who has taken a strong stand on this issue.

The Palestinian National Council was granted partner for democracy status with the Parliamentary Assembly in October 2011. The Association of Palestinian Local Authorities was granted observer status with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in 2005. I mention those things not as an example just to show that we are linked with Palestine and Israel, but because the Council of Europe looks after the convention on human rights. Israel signed and ratified the convention in 1986. I personally put a lot of effort into using that link with Israel to establish a firm place where we can not just talk about human rights, but actually get Israel to do something about human rights, and I think that is important. It would help us enormously if the Palestinians would accept the same approach to human rights in their own territory and deal with those human rights themselves. We cannot have one side following one rule and another side following a completely different rule—they both have to fulfil the same conditions.

I want to concentrate somewhat on how Hamas and the Palestinians do not protect Palestinian rights. The first place to start with that is LGBT matters. Tel Aviv Pride, as the House will have seen, is the largest LGBT pride festival in the middle east and Asia. Israel welcomes people no matter how they choose to identify. It is not the same in Gaza, where people in LGBT communities fear for their lives, and where same-sex couples are so

[John Howell]

afraid that they will be condemned that they do not bring themselves forward. We need to protect that fundamental human right of the Palestinians, and we need to put pressure on the Palestinians to be able to do that. The more we can do that, the more it will influence our ability to put pressure on Israel in other areas.

A second issue is freedom of journalism and freedom of expression. We have some very good examples of how the Palestinians have gone out of their way to systematically torture those in detention. I am not aware of anyone in Israel systematically torturing people in detention, but if we can put pressure on the Palestinians to bring forward measures to curb the instincts to have a go at Palestinian journalists, it will help us enormously in resolving the human rights issues in the region.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks about torture. He may not be aware that Palestinian children are often deported into solitary confinement, where they spend hour after hour. If that is not torture, I do not know what is. They emerge from those situations with Stockholm syndrome. Perhaps he will reflect on that in his comments.

John Howell: I am aware of that, but that is completely different from how Fatah security forces in Hebron dispersed a peaceful protest against the rising cost of living. That protest was not against political things, but domestic things. Those security forces detained the organisers. What the hon. Gentleman talks about is also completely different from the security forces banning the Palestinian People's Congress, an umbrella organisation of activists and politicians calling for reform of the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

A third area where there is great difficulty on both sides and where we need to do more to push forward human rights is freedom of women and gender differentiation. Neither side has signed the Istanbul convention, and Israel has said that it is not going to sign the Istanbul convention at the moment. I think that is such a shame, because it is a landmark piece of international treaty work that protects women from domestic violence. In the Palestinian territories, there is plenty of domestic violence against women, and women suffer severe inequality under Hamas rule and have no protection against domestic violence. If they have been raped, they are seen as tainted and can be subjected to honour killings if that is known.

The final point I will mention is the death penalty. Israel at the moment has a ban on the death penalty, in compliance with its signing and ratification of the convention on human rights. The Palestinians do not have a ban on the death penalty. I know there has been considerable talk in Israel about restoring the death penalty, and I absolutely deplore that. I have told the Israeli authorities that I deplore it and that they should not do it. We should have parity on both sides to move away from the use of the death penalty, as a fundamental part of helping to establish human rights on both sides.

When we look at the Palestinian situation, there is quite a lot to have a go at in order to protect human rights. If we can get its human rights system working properly, it will help enormously in our negotiations with the Israeli side.

2.56 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Before I get into my substantive speech, I would like to put on record that my hon. Friends the Members for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) both wanted to be here. In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn wanted to raise the issue of her constituent Mr Ismail Adam, who on 5 April witnessed his son—they are British nationals—being beaten when visiting al-Aqsa, and she would have wanted the Minister to comment on that. Both are unable to be here because of constituency engagements.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) for securing today's debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. The motion is simple—human rights protections for the Palestinians. Therefore, the logical and very simple question that must be addressed, and it is glaringly obvious, is: why are the Palestinians' human rights not being protected? When it comes to protecting the human rights of the Palestinians, not only do our Government maintain a position that is morally indefensible, but they fail in their responsibility to protect the Palestinians from the most egregious violations of international law.

It is an indisputable fact for any rational person that Palestinian human rights are being violated. The massive amount of evidence that has been lodged at the International Criminal Court provides forensic detail of the thousands of criminal acts perpetrated by Israel. The evidence of Israel's human rights violations is not in doubt. What is in doubt is the international community's will to do something about it. To put it simply, because of the United Kingdom Government's position, they have failed in their responsibility to uphold even the most basic international principles of human rights norms and laws.

What do I mean when I say basic human rights? I mean the right to be born free and equal in dignity and rights; the right to freedoms without any distinction of any kind; the right to life, liberty and security; the right to privacy, family and a home; the right to freedom of movement; the right to freedoms without any discrimination; the right not to be persecuted; the right to nationality; the rights to freedom of opinion and expression; the right to leave any country, including your own, and return to your home; the right to recognition; the right to protection; and the right to justice. That list is not exhaustive, but these are the international human rights that we in this country epitomise as British values.

No one in this Chamber can honestly say that any of those human rights are afforded in full to the Palestinian people, so these are questions for us all: what would we do if we were forced, for hours each day, to go through a military checkpoint because of our race, just to get to work? What would we do if we woke up one day and JCB bulldozers was demolishing our homes or our school? What would we do if we were parents whose child needed urgent cancer treatment, but we, as well as our child, were denied a permit to access the only hospital where the care we needed was available? What would we do if we were worshipping in church on Christmas Day, and we were tied up, beaten and arrested on Christmas morning? What would we do if F-16 fighter jets blew up the BBC or ITV buildings in central London? What would we do if we were forced to live in the world's largest open-air prison?

What would we do if our home had been set alight by settlers, and our child had two options: either die of suffocation, or go outside and be pelted by rocks thrown by settlers? What would we do if NHS ambulances rushing to save lives were routinely stopped at checkpoints, or if NHS doctors rushing to care were shot at? What would we do if we were subjected to mass collective punishment? Those might be hypotheticals for us, but they are not hypotheticals for the people of Palestine living under occupation. That is their daily existence, that is their lived experience, and that is the reality they cannot escape from.

The people of Great Britain would never accept such treatment for any of us, so why do we find it acceptable when it comes to the people of Palestine? If we would not accept it, what do we do to stop this from happening to the Palestinians? It is 75 years since the Nakba, and no one is able to return home; 50 years of growing Israeli occupation, which seemingly no one can stop; 16 years of a blockade of Gaza that has not been lifted, despite the severe humanitarian crisis it has caused for 2 million people. Now it is Ramadan. After Ramadan, the storming of al-Aqsa, the third holiest site for Muslims, has become a routine practice for the Israeli military. For Palestinians, such anniversaries highlight decades of violations that have been continuing against them, unaddressed. For us, they have been a stain on our conscience, and that of the world, for more than 75 years.

Let me explain what we should be doing. We should show a real commitment to universal rights and British values. We should show leadership in demanding equality, justice and fairness, as currently we clearly do not. We should support Palestinians by holding their violators accountable for their crimes. Britain, which prides itself on the rule of law, should set the highest standard for Israel to follow, and insist on that in its dealings with us. To do otherwise means that we are continuing to fail not only the Palestinians, but the people of Israel too. In our country, we hold our politicians to account, and even when the Prime Minister broke lockdown rules or did not wear a seat belt, our laws are applied equally. We should afford Palestinians the right to self-determination, and recognise the state of Palestine. We should immediately support the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court over the situation in the region, instead of maintaining the current obstruction for justice to be done.

However, I am under no illusion. I could expect justice only if I had the recognition, let alone the power to advocate for my needs. Again, returning to the point that is glaringly obvious, this is not a clash of two equals. This is not a clash of religions, and neither is it a clash of peoples. This is an illegal military occupation. This is a conflict in which a protected oppressor is persecuting the unprotected Palestinian people. This is about Israel acting with impunity. Israel has been gifted impunity, which means it has zero incentive to deal with the Palestinians fairly. Indeed, we incentivise it to continue to break international law, because the world fails to hold it to account. That makes us complicit in the persecution faced by the Palestinians.

Our Government have failed to support any mechanisms of accountability, whether by opposing an investigation by the International Criminal Court, abstaining on crucial votes, or voting against resolutions condemning illegal settlements and the right to self-determination. Instead, they continue to ignore Israel's crimes. If we truly believe in a two-state solution, it is time to act

before it is too late. Only a few weeks ago, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, the Israeli Minister for responsibility for administering the occupied west bank, said that there was no Palestinian history or culture, and no such thing as the Palestinian people. That Israeli Minister also spoke at a podium covered in what appeared to be a variation of a map of Israel, which showed an Israeli state with expanded boundaries that included the west bank, east Jerusalem, Gaza and Jordan. Here we are talking about a two-state solution, the only fit and proper resolution to this crisis, yet the actions of Israel show a complete contradiction to that aim.

That leads me to my concluding remarks, and to three clear asks of the Government. First, any relationship with Israel, or any other country for that matter, should be based on a demonstration of an acceptance of our values, which we hold dear. In the recent Netanyahu visit, did the UK ensure that our trading partner would comply with international law, or did we further signal to it that it could continue to act with impunity at our behest for our financial gain over the duty to protect human rights? Secondly, the UK should immediately enable international systems of accountability for criminal law violations in the region and must immediately support the International Criminal Court's investigation. Thirdly, the UK must recognise the Palestinians' right to self-determination, which means the immediate recognition of the state of Palestine.

Britain has a moral duty to act on Palestine and not just present empty words. I assure the Minister that this is an issue at the ballot box, so soon empty words will lead to empty Tory seats in elections. I urge the Government to do the moral thing and act on human rights for the Palestinians. It is the right thing to do.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Just a little reminder of my guidance on seven minutes—because otherwise some people will have a lot of time and others will have very little.

3.5 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) on securing the debate and on his eloquence in putting forward the case for human rights in Palestine, as the title of the debate suggests. He acknowledged that he only put one side of the story. I hope, in the next few minutes, to be able to put the other side of the narrative.

We are aware that incidents in Gaza and the west bank show us that human rights abuses are occurring and it is clear to see who is perpetrating them. We have reports that LGBT people, women and girls, young people, journalists and critics of the Palestinian Authority have all been abused. These are people in Gaza and the west bank, and their abuse occurs in Gaza and the west bank. As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said, there are no LGBT rights in Gaza. In fact, if people are identified or identify themselves as being gay, they are thrown off buildings. If they are not thrown off buildings, they are often prosecuted. They are criminalised for being gay or identifying as being gay and they are imprisoned or sometimes executed. Let us contrast that with Israel, as has been mentioned, and Tel Aviv Pride, where all people are welcome.

[Dr Matthew Offord]

In the United Kingdom, as a democracy, we take for granted our basic rights of freedom of speech plus a free press. However, the same does not occur in Gaza and the Palestinian territories. There are no rights of freedom there. Indeed, journalists are often attacked just for criticising the Palestinian Authority. In 2022, Journalist Mujahed Tabjana was detained after publicly criticising the PA. After being freed, he recounted:

“I was beaten on arrival. I was hit with a hose, kicked, placed in stress positions for many hours, asked about my work, and my friends and colleagues. This went on for days and nights.”

I am sure we all agree that no journalist, or anyone critical of a Government, should be tortured in that way, so the Palestinian Authority must take steps towards a free press and against human rights abuses.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley also said, gender-based violence and honour killings are encouraged in the west bank and Gaza. Women are not treated as equals; they do not have the same rights or protections as men. Women suffer that inequality under Hamas itself. They have no protection against domestic violence. If they have been raped, as my hon. Friend said, they are seen as tainted and can be subject to honour killings. In 2022, the Gazan authorities prevented sisters Wissam and Fatimah al-Assi, aged 20 and 24, from pursuing domestic violence complaints through the courts by impeding them from accessing a prosecutor to testify on their behalf in court. I would therefore like to see the United Kingdom Government assess where we are spending aid and introduce a strategy, such as on violence against women and girls, in these areas.

In July last year, the United Nations Committee Against Torture said it was “seriously concerned” about the consistent reports of torture taking place in Palestinian detention centres and stations. Tens of millions of pounds of British taxpayers’ money has been spent on training Palestinian security forces. Despite that, Palestinian security forces have a terrible record on beating and torturing detainees in interrogation centres. These are Palestinians they are torturing. I know the hon. Member for Dundee West will condemn that, as well as others, but it would be useful if other Members acknowledged the abuse that is occurring in Gaza and the west bank.

We need to ask ourselves why this is happening. In recent weeks we have seen some terrible violence. I agree with the hon. Member for Dundee West that some of the inflammatory statements made by politicians in Israel have contributed towards that—they are unacceptable and I certainly would not condone such behaviour, but it has led to incidents such as the murders of my former constituents, and it is having a great impact on many people who visit Israel. We need to ask why there has been an upsurge in violence in recent weeks.

Last Friday marked Quds day, which Iran used to stoke violence in Israel and the west bank. Iran called for resistance to protect Jerusalem, and the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament Mohammad Qalibaf told demonstrators in Tehran that Israel is the root of problems in the region, and that Palestinians are actively confronting Israeli aggression from Gaza to the heart of Tel Aviv. That is a clear promotion of violence by Iran. Those words have effect, particularly among younger, more impressionable people. That is how the violence starts. It is worth repeating: I encourage the Government to

proscribe the IRGC because its malign activities have an effect on the human rights of Palestinians in Gaza and the west bank.

3.10 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) and the Backbench Business Committee for securing this debate.

The conditions on the ground in the occupied Palestinian territories are the worst they have been for nearly 20 years. That is directly related to the new far-right Government in Israel, and their willingness to terrorise or to allow the terrorising of the Palestinian civilian population and to ignore international law in the quest for the formal and actual annexation of large parts of the occupied Palestinian territory. We have heard that 98 Palestinians—17 of them children—have been killed so far this year, and 17 Israelis. That includes a 15-year-old Palestinian boy killed by Israeli troops in the Aqabat Jaber refugee camp in Jericho. As we heard earlier, it also includes the murder of three British-Israeli women. Every one of those deaths is a tragedy, but they are the most serious instances of brutality, and include state-backed settler violence, as in Hawara, and the massive expansion in illegal settlement building and the violence that occurs around that. It includes the 1,000 Palestinians at imminent risk of forcible transfer from Masafer Yatta.

I am grateful to Medical Aid for Palestinians, Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights and others who have briefed us for this debate. MAP says that 2,560 Palestinians have been injured so far this year, and there have been 260 settler attacks against Palestinians and their properties. It is very worrying that not only are there attacks on health workers and not only are ambulances routinely used as cover for Israeli troops engaged in military operations, but medical staff are prevented from reaching wounded people.

We have heard about the effect on children. I was briefed by Defence for Children International, which has been in the UK this week. It is one of six organisations proscribed—on no evidence—as a terrorist organisation, along with Al-Haq and other well-known Palestinian human rights organisations. It told us about the thousands of children who have been imprisoned, some in administrative detention, which is a disgrace. The majority are in Israeli prisons, which is a breach of international law. My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) mentioned solitary confinement—a quarter of Palestinian children are detained in solitary confinement, for an average of 16 days but in some cases up to 40 days. That is a form of torture being practised on a widespread basis.

Let me mention Gaza briefly, as I suspect there will not be much mention of it. It is a trap that we all fall into, because Gaza is blockaded and is kept away from the rest of the world. It is under occupation, effectively, despite the withdrawal of Israeli troops. Some 2.2 million people are in that open prison; there is about 50% unemployment and 60% of people rely on food aid. A whole generation has grown up in those abhorrent and appalling traditions. Again, those are breaches of international law. The Government should be asking for an immediate end to the occupation and the blockade, but I fear they are stuck in time and the only moves that the current Government have made are in the wrong direction.

Let me turn briefly to the issue of international law. The whole apparatus of occupation has been in effect for 56 years, and in three weeks' time it will be the 75th anniversary of the Nakba, when 750,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes. That occupation, which has gone on, has an apparatus that controls every aspect of the daily lives of Palestinians, whether through home demolition, forced displacement, illegal settlement construction—there are now 750,000 illegal settlers, if east Jerusalem is included—greatly increased settler violence, movement restrictions, arbitrary detention and systematic discrimination.

What do we expect from the UK Government? I return to the point I made earlier, when I talked about annexation. The Minister, who is always very courteous and thoughtful in these matters, said that my analysis was right, so I hope that he will have got some more briefing notes from his civil servants and will be able to say a little more about that.

Two things have happened so far this year. First, there has been a clear statement, both in the coalition agreement and from Prime Minister Netanyahu, to the effect that “the Jewish people have an exclusive and uncontested right on the entire land of Israel. The government will advance and promote settlement in all parts of the land of Israel,” including in Judea and Samaria, which is their description of the occupied west bank. It does not matter whether we are talking about de facto or de jure annexation—that is what is happening on the ground. When this was previously threatened, by a previous Netanyahu Government, the Government and the Opposition said that they would ban settlement goods if annexation took place. Annexation has taken place and it is now time for action, not simply for words. I am sorry that I do not have more time to expand on these thoughts.

There are very clear legal principles. The International Criminal Court investigation, which will investigate the crimes of all combatants not just Israel, and the UN investigation deserve the support of the British Government. They would have had that support in previous years, but now, consistently, this Government are voting against that and blocking independent, international investigations. That is a disgrace. The Palestinians deserve justice, peace and a country of their own. We should recognise Palestine immediately and I hope we will hear some movement from the Minister when he responds.

3.17 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) for bringing forward this important debate. I declare an interest as I visited Israel and Palestine in 2016 with some other MPs, and that is recorded in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I want to concentrate on one aspect that is not often raised in public: the detention and imprisonment of Palestinian adults and children from the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which is a central part of Israel's military occupation.

In 2016, we visited the Israeli military court at Ofer and saw how it works in person. Only Palestinians are tried in military courts. Settlers in the OPTs are tried in Israeli civil and criminal courts. As part of his report in October 2018, the UN special rapporteur wrote about how

“the extension of Israeli laws to the West Bank” since 1967 has created “a discriminatory legal regime”.

If an Israeli settler child and a Palestinian child throw a stone in the same area, the former will almost certainly not land up in a court and will be protected by Israel's legal system. However, the Palestinian child will face a military court. Israel's military court at Ofer has, by its own figures, a 99.74% conviction rate. Why? Because lawyers advise Palestinians to plead guilty in order to get out earlier. I will leave it up to hon. Members to weigh whether that is justice.

International law is very clear on the legal authority to impose military law and establish military courts to try civilians. The key provisions are found in the Hague regulations and the fourth Geneva convention. Articles 64 and 66 of the fourth Geneva convention state that local laws

“may be repealed or suspended...where they constitute a threat to...security”

and replaced with military law, enforced in

“properly constituted, non-political military courts”.

That is what the Israeli military authorities use as the jurisdictional basis for establishing military courts in the west bank. However, international law also stipulates that occupation should be on a temporary basis, including the prosecution of civilians under military law. As we have heard, Israel's military court policy has been in existence for 56 years—hardly a temporary solution.

The PLO Ministry of Detainees and Ex-Detainees' Affairs estimates that more than 850,000 Palestinians have been detained since 1967. Wide-ranging military regulations govern every aspect of Palestinian life. Military orders provide for a wide range of offences, divided into five categories—some credible, some not. Hostile terrorist activity and disturbance of public order are classified in that way, which I think is acceptable, but so are classic criminal offences, illegal presence in Israel and traffic offences committed in the OPT. Do the last three categories of offence really need to be tried in a military court? Are the sentences proportionate? Under military order No. 1651 of 2009, for example, throwing stones is considered a security offence with a punishment of up to 20 years' imprisonment.

There is also detention without trial. Palestinians may be held without charge for up to six months under an administrative detention order issued by an Israeli military commander. Recently, with *Breaking the Silence*, we met a military commander who I think had made such orders when he was 21—a very young age to have such an impact on somebody. The orders can be renewed without charge or trial. As of October 2022, there were 798 Palestinian prisoners being held under an administrative detention order, including eight members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. The majority of those prisoners have served more than six months behind bars.

It is important that I give the House some detail about what happens. Detainees, including children, are handcuffed and blindfolded. Some are kept in total isolation, as we have heard, and there are widespread allegations that they are threatened during interrogation. Some 70% of child detainees and 80% of adult detainees have been unlawfully transferred to prisons in Israel, in violation of the fourth Geneva convention and the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court.

I want to concentrate on what happens to children. Israel is the only country in the world that systematically prosecutes children in military courts. Some 95,000 children have been detained since 1967 in the west bank.

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

The most common charge is stone throwing, and it is often unclear who has thrown the stones. Stone throwing is not acceptable, but no child should be arrested in the middle of the night, roughed up, taken by the army without a parent or a responsible adult and interrogated without a lawyer present.

Worst of all, families are not informed where their children are taken, even though military order 1676 requires that a police officer inform the parents of the child's detention. In most cases, Palestinian children are taken to detention centres in larger Israeli settlements across the west bank, and parents take the time to find out where their child is. In 99% of cases, children are denied access to their parents or a lawyer and are unaware of their right to remain silent. During covid, families were unable to visit their children. Confessions are often signed in Hebrew, which few of the Palestinian children understand, and 90% plead guilty regardless of whether they committed the offence.

Children should be offered the same protections that would be granted in a civil court. In all of this, Israel is violating the numerous provisions of the UN convention on the rights of the child, which it ratified in 1991. The criminal age of responsibility is 12. In 2011, military orders raised the age of majority from 16 to 18. Under-18s must therefore be tried in juvenile courts, which brings Israel into line with international standards. However, that does not apply to sentencing: 16 and 17-year-olds are still sentenced as adults.

All of this is common knowledge if anyone cares to look. It was confirmed in the legal report that the Foreign Office funded in 2012, which found that Israel was in breach of eight of its international legal obligations under the UN convention on the rights of the child and the fourth Geneva convention. Eleven years on, sadly little has changed. As of 31 March 2023, 151 Palestinian children are in military detention, an 11% increase on the 2022 figure. I urge the Minister to revisit that report and push for change.

Following UNICEF's report "Children in Israeli Military Detention", which found that there was ill treatment of children in the military detention system, Israel reduced the maximum time for which a child could be detained before appearing in front of a judge, from four days to 24 hours for children aged 12 and 13 and from four to two days for children aged 14 and 15. However, there was no change in the period for 16 to 17-year-olds, which is still 96 hours. Settlers' children enjoy much shorter periods of detention before seeing a judge, and are allowed access to parents and lawyers.

The resentment towards the Israeli defence force that each of those 95,000 children must grow up with must be huge, and to say that it is counterproductive must be one of the biggest understatements I have made in the House. As the right hon. Sir Stephen Sedley writes in his foreword to the Save the Children report "Defenceless",

"Whatever one's view of the ongoing conflict and its causes, there is no excuse for the systematic infliction of psychological harm on a generation of young Palestinians."

Sadly, most Palestinian children's only experience of Israelis is framed by such experiences, and violence from Israeli soldiers and illegal Israeli settlers. I urge Israel to ensure that throughout the arrest, interrogation and court process, Palestinian children are given the same safeguards as Israeli children in civil courts. The UK

Government and their partners have a direct responsibility to ensure that that happens, as high contracting parties to the fourth Geneva convention. I urge the FCDO to deal with this as a matter of urgency.

3.26 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): One thing that I share with many others taking part in the debate is a concern for the human rights of Palestinians. The failure to reach a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict means that the human rights of both Palestinian and Israeli civilians are frequently put at risk. As the parliamentary chair of Labour Friends of Israel, I know that all too often this subject is presented as if only the Palestinians experienced threats to their human rights and only the Israelis were responsible. In response to my earlier intervention, the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) said that he was talking about the Palestinian territories, but the title of the debate is "Human rights protections for Palestinians", which, I suggest, is wider.

The Palestinian Authority has full civil control over the vast majority of Palestinians living in the west bank, and as we all know, the Palestinian Authority is plagued by authoritarianism and corruption. In neither the west bank nor Gaza do Palestinians enjoy the right to vote. The Palestinian Authority has not held presidential elections since 2005 or legislative elections since 2006. President Abbas is now in his 18th year of a four-year term. New laws are simply introduced as presidential decrees. Meanwhile, the Gaza strip is governed by a proscribed terrorist group whose ambition is to destroy the state of Israel. No elections have been held in Gaza since Hamas seized power in 2007. Freedom House, a not-for-profit democracy group, describes Gaza as a "de facto one-party state".

It also rates the west bank as being on a par with Rwanda and Ethiopia when it comes to human rights, civil liberties and political rights. Gaza is given a score of 11 out of 100 for its human rights record.

Freedom of speech and due process fare no better. The Palestinian Authority has a track record of arbitrary detention, with more than 200 Palestinians detained last year. In June its security forces attacked a peaceful demonstration on the cost of living, and detained the organisers. It has banned the Palestinian People's Congress, a pro-reform group, from convening, and forcibly dispersed a press conference held by the same group in Ramallah, while threatening journalists with sticks and batons. As we have heard, torture is commonplace, with a number of reported deaths in PA custody, including that of anti-corruption activist Nizar Banat.

The Independent Commission for Human Rights received more than 130 complaints of torture by the Palestinian Authority last year. Just last month, the PA refused registration to Lawyers for Justice, an organisation that represents victims of detention and torture. In Gaza, a general climate of repression exists following a brutal crackdown on peaceful protest in 2019. In 2022, at least 105 Palestinians were arbitrarily detained by Hamas, and more than 160 reports of torture were made to the Independent Commission for Human Rights. The deputy programme director of Human Rights Watch, Tom Porteous, concluded that where the Palestinian Authority and Hamas have autonomy, they have developed parallel police states.

As we have heard, women and girls in the Palestinian Authority territories continue to face discrimination, including early enforced marriage, partner and family violence, rape, incest, psychological abuse and sexual exploitation. We would not ignore such abuses here in this country; we should not ignore them in the Palestinian territories.

Naz Shah: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We would not ignore those abuses against women and girls in the UK, and rightly so. As an advocate for women and girls, especially on the issue of honour killing, it seems to me that there is a thread running through the speeches today when we talk about the rights of women in Palestine. Does he agree that when it comes to discussing women in Palestine, all of a sudden everyone becomes a women's advocate, because we are not talking about anything on the other side? Women are always used when it comes to Islamophobic tropes too.

Steve McCabe: I have a great deal of respect for my hon. Friend, and what I would say to her is that I am citing something that we are all very familiar with and would raise if it was happening here. I am saying that we should not ignore it when it happens there.

As the hon. Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Hendon (Dr Offord) said, among the communities who face the most threats to their human rights are Palestinians who are gay. LGBT+ Palestinians routinely face harassment, torture and physical attacks, including directly from the Hamas Government. Although homosexuality is not illegal in the Palestinian Authority, the PA does little to defend the rights of LGBT+ Palestinians. It has restricted the activity of LGBT+ organisation Al Qaws for violating

“the ideals and values of Palestinian society”.

In December 2019, a trans woman and a gay man were beaten and robbed by a group of men in Kafr Aqab, south of Ramallah, while the PA police stood idly by. The human rights situation faced by LGBT+ Gazans is even worse. Homosexual acts are illegal in Gaza, in line with Hamas's fundamentalist ideology, with the most serious punishment for offences being the death penalty. Perhaps unsurprisingly, at least 100 Palestinians have claimed asylum in Israel on grounds of their sexual orientation.

I conclude by asking colleagues to consider this damning record when discussing the topic of Palestinian human rights. There is no doubt that the absence of a Palestinian state and Israel's continued military presence in the west bank have a pernicious impact on the lives of many Palestinians, but human rights abuses against Palestinians take place on a daily basis by their own governing bodies.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said during the earlier statement, we need fresh and enlightened leadership on both sides. The Palestinian Authority's failure to act as a credible partner for peace is one of the significant barriers to the negotiated two-state solution that many of us wish to see.

Human rights are virtually non-existent for the long-suffering people of Gaza under the violent and bloodthirsty rule of the Hamas terrorist group. Palestine is under occupation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) suggested—occupation by Hamas. We will not do the Palestinian people any favours by turning a blind eye to the record of Hamas

and the Palestinian Authority. *[Interruption.]* Do you want me to finish, Madam Deputy Speaker? I thought I had an extra minute because of the intervention.

I am happy and willing to criticise the excesses of Israeli politicians and Israeli forces, but we have to be honest and criticise the excesses of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, too, if we want a balanced and reasonable debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Just to be clear, the time limit is an advisory one so that colleagues think of each other and everyone has an equal shot.

3.36 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) for securing this important and timely debate on human rights protections for the Palestinian people at a crucial moment in Palestinian history and, as I know from talking to my Israeli friends, at a time when many people in Israel are fearful of the dangerous political direction being taken by their own Government, who are becoming more extreme with each election. Palestinians across the occupied territories are currently subject to an explosion of violence from illegal settlers and the state-sanctioned Israeli Defence Forces alike, under what is widely seen as one of the most extreme and inflammatory Governments in Israel's history.

I take this moment to remember the British rabbi Leo Dee, following the awful death of his wife and daughters—British nationals who lost their lives in the west bank 13 days ago. I also remember those who were injured in Tel Aviv. Every life lost in this 75-year-old conflict is to be mourned.

This year alone, 98 Palestinians, including 17 children, have been killed by Israeli forces—not by terrorists or by a semi-legitimate Government but by a Government who want to be seen to be on a par with their European, middle eastern and Mediterranean neighbours. The number is three times as many as during the same period a year ago. The UN reports that last year was the deadliest year for Palestinians in the west bank since 2005, with at least 151 Palestinians killed by Israeli forces, 35 of them children. Settler violence is also rising. Since January, the UN has recorded 260 settler attacks against Palestinians and their property, including the devastating rampage through Huwara in February that left 418 Palestinians injured.

In the past few days, I have received nearly 1,000 emails and letters from local residents in Ilford South, not just from my Muslim community but from my Jewish community and local churches, expressing their sincere concern about the abuse of Palestinians' human rights and the horrendous violence on both sides of the conflict.

When the al-Aqsa mosque was raided and Palestinians were evicted from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah during the holy month of Ramadan in 2021, I received more than 5,000 emails from constituents expressing their concern about these illegal acts and calling for justice for the Palestinian people. Just last week, I met worshippers outside my local Islamic centre, with many telling me of their profound kinship with the Palestinian people and their deep feeling of injustice over the ongoing violence.

Churches are supporting organisations such as the Amos Trust to raise money to support people in Palestine. For people in Ilford South and in many seats like mine,

[Sam Tarry]

this is not a remote issue on the other side of the world; it is one of the foremost issues in their minds, and it should be taken seriously and with the gravity it rightly deserves.

I first visited Palestine and Israel in 1999. I went with a group of young people from Ilford—Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. At the time, people believed that the Oslo accords might still be enacted. I have visited the Holy Land about half a dozen times over the years. I recall a time when one could sit in Ramallah, where I sat, with people from the Palestinian negotiation support unit and Israeli Knesset Members, talking about what might be enacted. I recall at that time walking through the checkpoint at Qalandia, which was just a few barbed wire stacks on the floor, and people could walk through, showing their passport. When people go through Qalandia now, all these years later, they see the size of the gun turrets, the encasement and the brutality of the occupation. It is so visceral and so wrong.

I still speak to the Israelis and Palestinians we met back in 1999, many of whom have remained friends because of that experience. I also still speak to those in my community in Ilford, and there is hope that one day this conflict could be resolved. But we need to be clear in calling out honestly what is happening in Israel and Palestine, the asymmetry of that conflict and what we can do in this country, using our foreign service and our Government, to bring real pressure for genuine change.

There are so many aspects to this, including the ever-worsening health crisis, which further compounds the situation in Palestine. According to research by Medical Aid for Palestinians, attacks and obstructions on health workers on the ground have risen exponentially, with a 290% increase in the rate of violations against Palestine Red Crescent Society medical teams. During the recent attacks on al-Aqsa, Red Crescent ambulances were fired upon by the IDF with rubber-coated steel bullets, and a paramedic was severely assaulted and injured by an Israeli soldier. In total, nine ambulances were denied access to the courtyards of al-Aqsa, preventing them from reaching the wounded inside.

In another raid in Nablus, the IDF obstructed Red Crescent ambulance crews from accessing a two-year-old girl who had heart problems and was suffering from tear gas inhalation. The ambulance crews had to rush to the child's home, under gunfire, to reach her. Israel is supposed to be a democratic country. Is this really what people in Israel voted for—the brutality of an occupation such as this? First responders and hospitals cannot cope with the influx of fresh casualties, and that is compounded by a severe shortage of essential medicines and basic supplies, such as syringes, bandages and painkillers. These instances, and many more, are a clear violation of international humanitarian law. As an occupying power, Israel is required under the Geneva convention to ensure the adequate functioning of health services and to allow medical personnel to carry out their duties. Article 59 obliges Israel to permit the free passage of humanitarian relief and to protect, not fire upon, any such relief.

Turning closer to home, last month the Government published their 2030 road map for UK-Israel bilateral relations. The road map has been widely condemned by a host of international organisations as poorly timed

and the most egregious effort to date to try to insulate the relationship between the British and Israeli Governments from anything to do with Israel's behaviour towards the Palestinians. This is clearly unacceptable. In my view, it is a breach of the approaches of Governments of many different stripes to that conflict over the decades. Perhaps most concerning is the agreement's rejection of the latest ICJ referral, which requests that the Court render its opinion on the legal consequences arising from Israel's ongoing violation of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and its prolonged occupation, settlement and annexation, on the grounds that it undermines efforts to achieve a settlement through direct negotiations between the parties.

I have a few questions that I hope the Minister will be able to answer when he sums up. Is it the Government's view now that the situation in Israel/Palestine should be exempt from international scrutiny and that Israel should be held to a lower standard when it comes to human rights violations against Palestinians? Although no one would expect Israel to be held to a different or higher standard, we should certainly not be granting Israel the kind of impunity that has led to the extreme behaviour exhibited in today's Netanyahu Government.

Will the Minister also clarify whether it is still the Government's view that this is an occupation, that the settlements are illegal, and that bilateral co-operation should not include co-operation with Israel's illegal settlements or allow for violations of international law and Palestinian human rights? I and my constituents believe that our Government, and all of us in this House, have an historical obligation, arguably going back to the Balfour declaration, to support the creation and recognition of an independent and viable Palestinian state and to ensure that people in the Holy Land can co-exist one day on the same land. This Government must start right now by looking again at that bilateral agreement and, in my view and the view of my constituents, by formally recognising a Palestinian state.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Following Madam Deputy Speaker's strictures, I call on Members to try to stick to seven minutes.

3.45 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Let me add my thanks to the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) for securing this debate, and associate myself with every word of the condolences that he offered to those who have lost loved ones.

We must send a clear message from this House this afternoon that the spiral of violence has to stop. It has to stop because the dream of Palestine, the dream of justice and the dream of dignity are disappearing before our very eyes. They are being destroyed outrage by outrage, stun grenade by stun grenade, and bullet by bullet. Palestinians today are now losing all hope that there will ever be a future where two people and two nations can co-exist side by side in peace.

I am afraid that I have to tell the Minister that there are now too many people in this House who see this Government as standing by idle, in silence, when they should be taking the initiative, when they should be acting, and when they should be determined to ensure that there is justice for Palestine.

This House today has already heard a catalogue of horror. We have heard about the 98 Palestinians who have lost their lives already this year—far more than in previous years—the Israeli citizens who have been killed, and the children who have been killed with live ammunition. We have also heard about the 1,000 Palestinians in Masafer Yatta who are at imminent risk of forced transfer, which is in complete violation of Geneva conventions. We have heard about the brutality at the al-Aqsa mosque, where even UN observers said that there was blatantly excessive and unjustified force, with stun grenades and rifle butts used in a holy place.

All of us in this House would stand four-square behind Israel's right to self-defence. Many of us would associate ourselves with the words of the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) that we should be proscribing organisations such as the IRGC and taking a tougher line on Iran. Most of us here know that the Palestinian Authority needs radical reform, and most of us would condemn the brutality of Hamas, but all of us also know that this is not a time for whataboutery. This is a time to call out the root cause of the violence today, which is the radical spread of settlers illegally through the west bank. The fact that we now have 279 settlements, almost all of them illegal and now home to 700,000 people, must surely draw our attention to the root cause of the problem, and that is the fundamental sin that the Government should be calling out.

If the Government are serious—and they might be—about their idea of a rules-based order, then we in this House must insist that those rules also apply in the west bank, in Gaza and in Jerusalem. If the Government do not insist that the rules-based order extends to the places that the Palestinians call home, how can we ever be credible in our arguments for peace and justice for Palestine? How can we avoid the charge of double standards in international affairs, and how can we contribute meaningfully to keeping the dream of a two-state solution alive? It is time for the Government to turn their rhetoric about a rules-based international order into some red lines.

We have to ask this: when are the Government going to accept that those red lines have indeed been crossed? When we have a UN rapporteur saying that what is going on is now getting close to the legal definition of apartheid, how much more evidence do the Government need to call out a violation of the red lines? When we have Israeli Cabinet Ministers appearing in Paris before a map of greater Israel that includes the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and when we have members of the Israeli Cabinet leading the protests for the expansion of settler communities, how much more evidence do we need? It is time for the UK Government to act.

My constituents are very clear about the five things this Government need to do. They need to implement a ban on settler goods. They need to ensure there are no trade deals with Israel until it demonstrates a fundamental respect for human rights. They need to ban weapons sales until it is clear that there is a strong regime for supporting human rights. They need to start using UN mechanisms for delivering accountabilities and, as many people in this House have said and have voted for, it is time for immediate recognition of the state of Palestine. Those are practical, determined steps that we can take—and take now.

I conclude by reminding the House of what was in the Balfour declaration. When this country said that it would support the establishment of a state of Israel, it came with the words,

“it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”.

The rights of those communities are being violated every day, and it is time the Government not only called that out, but did something about it.

3.51 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I too congratulate the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) on securing this debate and on his eloquent and thoughtful speech.

Since the formation of the far-right Israeli Government at the end of last year, we have seen opposition spilling out across civil society in the region, and it has continued to escalate as Israeli Ministers pursue their very frightening agenda. Last month it came to a head and we saw tens of thousands of people protesting not only on the streets of Israel, but in Germany and the UK, as they voiced their opposition to Benjamin Netanyahu's plans to override the Israeli judiciary. Of course, that move on Netanyahu's part is central to his attempt to avoid being put on trial for corruption. Although he has put those plans on pause for the moment, that has come at the price of concessions to his coalition partners.

First, there is National Security Minister Ben-Gvir, who just 15 years ago was convicted of inciting racism and supporting a terrorist organization. It appears that Netanyahu is set to hand Ben-Gvir control over his personal militia as part of a deal over putting the judicial overhauls on pause—a truly terrifying prospect that will see many Palestinian lives put in danger.

Then there is Finance Minister Smotrich, who describes himself as a “fascist homophobe” and only recently said that

“there is no such thing as the Palestinian people”.

This is the same man who called for the Palestinian village of Huwara to be wiped out, following what an IDF spokesperson called a “pogrom” at the hands of illegal settlers and some Israeli soldiers. Smotrich has been given powers over the west bank, transferring authority away from the Israeli Defence Ministry to Israeli civilian control.

Human rights groups consider that the latest example of the irreversible entrenchment of the occupation of Palestine as de facto annexation by the Israelis becoming de jure. Occupied territory is supposed to be under temporary military control, but this temporary occupation has now endured for more than half a century and is the root cause of all the violence that we witness day in, day out across the territory. Not only is it morally indefensible, but the imposition of Israeli civilian control over settlers and Palestinians in the west bank is illegal under international law. We heard the Minister say earlier that he was totally at one with the need for adherence to international law.

The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* has concluded:

“In light of the fact that there is no intention of granting civil rights to the millions of Palestinians living in the West Bank, the result of the agreement is a formal, full-fledged apartheid regime.” That is the direction in which the Israeli Government are moving, and they will not stop unless they face robust consequences. Yet for all the demonstrations

[Andy McDonald]

against Netanyahu's Government, only certain parts of the opposition are joining the dots between the attacks on Israel's democratic structures and the broader ideology that denies democracy to millions of Palestinians, whose lives are under the control of the occupying Israeli regime and who are being subjected to gross human rights abuses.

For Palestinians, that far-right Government are no different from the Government who came before them. In fact, 2022 was the deadliest year for Palestinians in decades: hundreds were killed at the hands of Israeli soldiers and illegal settlers in the West Bank, including dozens of children. Yesterday, I met representatives of Defence for Children International Palestine. Ayed Abu Eqtaish, the director of its accountability programme, told me that Netanyahu's far-right Government are really nothing new for the Palestinian people who live under the brutality of Israel's illegal occupation.

Israel automatically and systematically prosecutes children in military courts that lack fundamental fair trial rights and protections. Between 500 and 700 Palestinian children are tried in military courts each year, and around 150 children are currently in detention. Of those 150 children, 11 are being held by the Israeli military in administrative detention—a relic of the British mandate that is a form of detention without charge or trial. Children can be held indefinitely, and some have even been locked up for more than a year.

The way in which Palestinian children are detained by Israeli forces is horrific. About one in four are placed in solitary confinement for interrogation purposes. On average, a Palestinian child placed in solitary confinement will be isolated for 15 days. In at least one case, a child was isolated for around 40 days. As DCIP says, that is no way to treat a child. It is no way to treat any human being. I hope to hear from the Minister an outright condemnation of such inhumane and unjust practices. For far too long, the UK Government's approach has failed to discourage the Israeli regime from inflicting such abuses.

First, it is high time that Ministers looked at the more impactful options available to them to bring an end to those practices. That could begin today if the Minister had the courage to do the right thing and recognise the state of Palestine with immediate effect. Secondly, he could abide by international law and impose economic sanctions to bring an end to Israel's illegal settlements in occupied Palestine. Thirdly, he could revoke the Government's statement on the investigation of Israeli war crimes by the International Criminal Court. Finally, he could heed the calls of the Palestinian people by pushing for an international peacekeeping mission in the region to ensure that there are human rights protections for Palestinians.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, but we need more than strong words; we need actions from our Government, and we need them now.

3.58 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I, too, put on record my sadness that this debate should come in the context of the awful recent violence in the region—the terrible scenes in Huwara a few weeks ago, the raid of the Al-Aqsa mosque by Israeli security forces earlier this month

and the awful footage of dreadful beatings, the escalation that followed, and the tragic death of British-Israeli nationals Rina and Maia Dee and their mother, Lucy. I and my party join others in paying tribute to them.

The violence over the last few weeks has been sickening to watch, and we cannot afford for it to spiral out of control any further, as we have heard many times this afternoon. The terrible violence of May 2021 also started in a similar fashion, with a raid on the al-Aqsa mosque during Ramadan. We need to do all we can now to prevent this from deteriorating any further, which includes ensuring that the status quo arrangements at holy sites are upheld.

The reality is that this comes at a very concerning time for the peace process. The aims of the new far-right Israeli Government and the conduct of their Ministers are hugely concerning. It is not just Itamar Ben-Gvir, with whom our Government will rightly not engage. What about Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who stood up in Paris just weeks ago and said “there is no such thing as a Palestinian people”?

Will the Government condemn these deeply racist remarks and rule out engaging with Smotrich too?

One of the new Government's aims is promoting the continued expansion of illegal settlements in the occupied territories, and we have heard about the large number of them. They have continued to progress with the proposed E1 settlement in the west bank, which would involve the construction of thousands of units and create a hugely challenging physical barrier to the territorial contiguity of the west bank and, accordingly, to a Palestinian state. If we in this place care about peace, we must understand that settlements such as this make a two-state solution much harder to attain.

The United Kingdom must be absolutely clear that we stand on the side of international law. It is therefore hugely disheartening that the Government are opposed to the International Criminal Court's investigation into international crimes in the west bank. It damages our credibility in the region, and it undermines our efforts to speak out when international law is violated in other parts of the world, including on our own continent. We cannot pick and choose. We must acknowledge the UK's historic obligations to the region, and we have heard this afternoon the powerful words of the Balfour declaration. It is vital that we do what we can.

The reality of the situation right now is that hope is evaporating. I have already touched on the far-right Israeli Government and the expansion of settlements, but we can add to this the increasing violence and deaths in the last two years. Last year was the deadliest in the west bank since 2005. Meanwhile in the west bank, the Palestinian Authority are devoid of any credibility and have refused to call elections. Where hope is extinguished, radicalisation sadly thrives exponentially.

The UK has an important card that it can play now: recognition of the state of Palestine. In the context of this deteriorating situation, what a powerful sign that would be, not only to demonstrate a tangible commitment to a two-state solution but to provide real hope to Palestinians—hope that peace is possible. Parliament has already called on the Government to recognise Palestine as a state. I join many colleagues in the Chamber in saying that now is the moment to do so. I hope the Minister will realise that at moments such as this, the UK cannot simply sit and watch in silence.

4.3 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): As we have heard today, Israel has elected the most extreme Government in its history. There has recently, rightly, been a huge focus on the threat that this new Government pose to judicial independence in Israel, which has prompted the largest protests in Israeli history. This new Israeli Government have also sparked widespread fears that they will deepen and entrench the illegal military occupation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, not least because the Government include extreme right-wing figures such as National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, previously convicted of inciting racism and supporting a terrorist organisation and who campaigned in the election on aggressively extending military control over Palestinians. Meanwhile, the Government's new Finance Minister, Bezalel Smotrich, recently said:

"There is no such thing as a Palestinian nation. There is no Palestinian history. There is no Palestinian language."

That is truly chilling.

This is all deeply alarming for those of us who wish to see an end to all violence, and a future based on peace and justice. Already, 2023 is set to be even more deadly than 2022—itself one of the deadliest of recent years—with around 150 Palestinians killed in the west bank and East Jerusalem, and 30 Israelis killed. The United Nations has reported that already this year, by the end of March, 16 Palestinian children have been killed in the west bank, compared with two in the same period in 2022.

Today, I want to make a few remarks about the human suffering that I witnessed when, as a new MP in 2016, I visited the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Jerusalem. I met Palestinian families struggling against Israeli state-sanctioned human rights abuses, and I met Israeli human rights groups. In those few days, I got a glimpse of the daily suffering that the Palestinian people have endured for over 50 years under the Israeli state's illegal occupation of the west bank, including East Jerusalem and Gaza. I saw Israeli settlements that were illegally seizing land, and which do more than anything else to prevent a two-state solution. I visited a Palestinian village that had been repeatedly demolished. I spoke with Palestinians cut off from family and friends as a result of Israel's illegal separation wall that divided Palestinian communities and annexed more land.

I attended military courts where Palestinian children are tried in a language they cannot read or speak, and in the old city of Jerusalem I visited the home of a Palestinian family who had lived there since 1953, who Israeli settlers were trying to force out of their home. Sadly, in recent weeks, that elderly couple whom I and other Members met—Nora Ghaith-Sub Laban, who is 67 years old, and her husband Mustafa, who is 72—faced imminent eviction. I have written to the Foreign Secretary about this. The spokesperson for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has called on Israel to halt any such actions that lead to a risk of forcible transfer, which he said

"may amount to war crimes".

On my visit, I did not have the opportunity to visit Gaza. It is almost impossible to imagine what it must be like to live on that tiny strip of land, smaller than the Isle of Wight, where 2 million inhabitants are unable to move freely, and whose access to clean water, electricity and healthcare is restricted by Israeli state actions.

A long-lasting peace for both Palestinians and Israelis can only be secured through a solution that tackles the underlying injustices faced by the Palestinian people. A two-state solution means that Palestine must have the right to exist, but Israeli state actions make that ever less likely. As the former colonial power in Palestine, Britain has a special responsibility to do all it can to end Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land, its colonial settlements, its denial of the right of Palestinian refugees to return, the siege of Gaza, and Israel's violations of human rights and international law.

But words alone are not enough. We need action too. That means—it has to mean—that the British Government should recognise the state of Palestine, as this Parliament voted to do back in 2014. It means that we should end all trade with illegal Israeli settlements, and that we should impose an embargo on arms sales to Israel. The Government cannot pose as an honest broker when Britain has licensed around half a billion pounds-worth of arms exports to Israel since 2015. Without such actions, the Israeli state is effectively given the green light to continue its illegal actions, which are likely to kill all hope of a Palestinian state.

4.9 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): What we saw at al-Aqsa in Jerusalem this month, with Israeli security forces storming the mosque, firing stun and smoke grenades within its grounds and brutally beating worshippers, was one of the most concerning incidents, because it marks a worrying escalation in the abuses being perpetrated by the Israeli security forces. While the desecration of a holy site is wrong at any time, to march heavily armed soldiers into al-Aqsa to use weapons on the site of one of the most revered places of worship during the holy month of Ramadan, at the start of Passover and just before Easter, and in one of the holiest cities in the world, is frankly outrageous. Let us be clear in this House that what we saw was not a policing operation, but a clear and deliberate provocation by the Israeli security forces.

For hundreds and hundreds of years, the sanctity of places of worship and the convention that they should as far as possible remain untouched during conflict has been respected, whether in law or in unspoken practice. It is clear, however, that this reverence, this convention and this respect for one of the most fundamental human rights—for people to worship and practise their religion—is being rapidly eroded, because that was not the first raid on al-Aqsa; nor was it even the first raid during Ramadan. It is now becoming an all-too-common occurrence, with the international community failing to take a stand to end this abuse. It leaves us with this question: how much blood must be spilled on consecrated ground, how many bullets must be fired in hallowed halls and how many holy sites must be trampled upon before the UK Government live up to their historical, moral and global responsibilities towards the region?

We must also remember that the raid on al-Aqsa came just weeks after the riot of settlers through Palestinian villages. This violence by settlers towards Palestinians should not be surprising, because rather than being deterred by action from the international community, the Israeli Government, security forces and settlers have instead been emboldened by their silence. The UK Government and the rest of the world have a lot to answer for in failing to present a united front against

[Imran Hussain]

these illegal settlement plans that are in deliberate violation of international law under the fourth Geneva convention. By de facto annexing Palestinian land, these illegal settlements, approved by the Israeli Government, are undermining the future viability of Palestine as part of a two-state solution. We have to ask: just how much more land do the Palestinians have to lose? How many more Palestinian homes have to be razed to the ground by army bulldozers? How much more does the future state of Palestine have to shrink before the UK Government will consider recognising a viable and independent state of Palestine?

The raid on al-Aqsa, the settler violence and the expansion of illegal settlements is just the tip of the iceberg, because there is a long and exhaustive catalogue of human rights abuses still being committed by the Israeli Government against the Palestinians. Living under occupation, Palestinians have their freedom of expression and assembly heavily restricted. They are subject to arbitrary detention, and they are beaten and tortured. Palestinians face the prospect of enforced disappearances, they see children subjected to military detention and, in a worrying number of cases, they face what is best described as summary execution by the Israel Defence Forces.

However, we know that the human rights abuses faced by Palestinians will not end there, and nor will they lessen in intensity, because in office right now is the most worryingly right-wing Government under Benjamin Netanyahu. That Government are composed of some of the most racist, anti-Palestinian Ministers, including those who have called for the Palestinian town of Huwara in the west bank to be erased. It is therefore clear to everyone that more innocent blood will continue to be spilled on all sides if the international community does not set clear red lines and if it does not do more to end the violence.

We are not even halfway through what is already one of the deadliest years since 2005, and we therefore cannot escape the urgency of reaching a lasting solution to the conflict. That solution lies in a real two-state solution, and the need for the UK Government and others to immediately recognise a full and independent state of Palestine to give effect to this two-state solution. From what we have seen with the escalating violence towards civilians and the increasing persecution that Palestinians face, the region simply cannot wait any longer. If the UK does not act now, when the UK Government finally recognise the state of Palestine, all this future Palestinian state will control will be nothing more than a thin strip of land, and the Palestinians will be denied forever the state they were promised more than 75 years ago.

4.15 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I associate myself in particular with the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain).

I have simply one issue to raise and one question. I am the secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group, which is a cross-party group. We have campaigned for the freedom of journalists to undertake their profession free from censorship, intimidation and, indeed, risk to their lives. We link with the International

Federation of Journalists. We have raised issues of journalistic freedom across the globe, to be frank, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iraqi Kurdistan, China and Colombia—you name it, we have raised it—but we have consistently expressed the NUJ's and the IFJ's concerns about the harassment, intimidation, physical abuse and, unfortunately, murder of Palestinian journalists by Israeli state forces.

Last year, on behalf of the NUJ, I attended the commemoration of the life of Shireen Abu Akleh. People may remember that Shireen, who was an al-Jazeera correspondent, was shot dead by the Israeli armed forces on 11 May 2022, while she was reporting in Jenin. Shireen fulfilled her duty as a journalist until her last moment. She was wearing her blue protective vest and helmet, and she was preparing to report on the Israeli raid on the west bank city of Jenin when an Israeli sniper fired a bullet into her face and killed her instantly.

Since then, Reporters Without Borders has compiled video and audio evidence about at least 11 other journalists who have been targeted or aggressed by Israeli security forces in the west bank. In fact, we now know that at least 30 journalists have been killed by Israeli security personnel over the last few decades. What has also been occurring—this has been reported time and again, and we have raised it in this House before—is that, as the Palestinian Centre for Development and Media Freedoms has reported, the number of infractions of Palestinian journalists has increased over the last decade. Some 368 Israeli offences against Palestinian journalists have been recorded.

It has also been reported that Palestinian journalistic organisations have been subject to closure or complete destruction by Israel, resulting not just in the loss of jobs, but in some instances in the loss of life. Some 31 news organisations were either closed or destroyed by Israel in 2021 alone, 30 of them during the attack on Gaza in May 2021. A report from the International Federation of Journalists, which has world standing and respect, has referred to the violations as

“a clear attempt by Israel to silence media reporting on the ground”,

and has said that

“no one has been held to account.”

In 2018, two deaths of journalists along with many injuries were reported by Reporters Without Borders to the International Criminal Court, and these were reported as what were regarded as war crimes. In 2022, a group of organisations came together and submitted further reports to the International Criminal Court. Those organisations were the International Federation of Journalists, the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate, and the International Centre of Justice for Palestinians. They were working with human rights lawyers—Bindmans, Doughty Street Chambers—all of which have a reputation for upholding human rights, and they put a formal complaint into the ICC. That complaint detailed the systematic targeting of Palestinian journalists. It was on behalf of four named victims in particular—Ahmed Abu Hussein, Yaser Murtaja, Muath Amarneh and Nedel Eshtayeh—who were killed or maimed by Israeli snipers while fulfilling their duties as journalists covering the demonstrations in Gaza. We have now also submitted the name of Shireen, so her case will be investigated as well. At the moment, the ICC's Prosecutor's Office has formally acknowledged receipt of the complaint, and that complaint alleging war crimes will have to be investigated.

I am raising the issue of the protection of journalists, and the harassment and murder that has taken place. The specific request I have of the Government is for them to assist in putting pressure on the ICC's Prosecutor's Office to bring these investigations to an early conclusion, so that we can have some justice in relation to what many of us believe to have been murders committed by the Israeli defence forces. We must also send a message to the Israeli state that it can no longer act with impunity when it harasses, intimidates, and indeed murders journalists who are trying to fulfil their profession of reporting freely and willingly on the circumstances for the Palestinian people.

4.21 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I completely agree with the remarks made by my Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). The loss of Shireen Abu Akleh is deeply felt by Palestinians all over the world. She was the iconic voice of reporting on behalf of al-Jazeera from Palestine, and she was the trusted voice that many Palestinians woke up to every day, to find out what was happening in their land. The case was exposed by some other journalists at the time, and we should also pay tribute to the school of forensic architecture at Goldsmiths University, which managed to reconstruct her death scene. That will no doubt help the prosecution, and although that will never bring justice for her because she has been killed, it will at least bring some comfort to her family and to all those who miss her so much.

This debate is about human rights for Palestinians, and fundamentally the whole overarching issue is that of the occupation. Everything we say should be measured against the situation facing Palestinians. The Nakba of 1948 occurred on 15 May, which has now been declared Nakba Day around the world. I saw 750,000 people expelled, and 500 towns and villages destroyed as a result of that, with people for ever living in exile. I have never forgotten on the first visit I made to Gaza in the 1990s, meeting an elderly woman and I asked her about her life. She described the way she lived until 1948, and then she described her life since 1948. She said, "Thanks to UNWRA I've had food and water, but that's all." She had her whole life under occupation, and she brought up her family under occupation.

It is hard for anyone outside to understand what it is to live under occupation, where a simple journey down the road requires going through several checkpoints, and the humiliation that goes with that. Many of us in the House have visited the west bank and Gaza on various occasions, and found the checkpoints irksome, annoying, irritating, they wind us up and so on, but we are there for only a few days or a week or two. For others it is every single day, and I wonder what goes through the mind of a Palestinian building worker who has to go into Israel to work during the day, and go through the humiliation of dozens of checkpoints. Then, when he is on his way home, he gets delayed for no reason whatsoever, often for hours and hours, while exhausted from a day's work, and he has to do it all again the next day. That plays on people's minds. Then, when an ambulance cannot get through and medical aid cannot be delivered because of it, that is where the anger gets worse and worse.

As others have pointed out, the settlements now contain over 700,000 people. There is an interesting synergy on the numbers. Some 750,000 Palestinians

were expelled in 1948 and now 750,000 settlers have chosen to live on the west bank. There, they are given protected status, access to water and access to roads. The wall that has been constructed goes through much Palestinian land, and destroys and divides farmland. The occupation is utterly brutal and the UN is not wrong when it describes the situation on the west bank as an apartheid state, where some people are allowed to use some roads and some are not, some are allowed to travel and some are not, and some are allowed to get through borders and some are not. That is the brutality of the situation facing them.

When the settlements are built, house demolitions take place to get ready for them. I have in mind the memory of the late, great Tom Hurndall, whose mother I know very well, because I supported the campaign to try to get justice for Tom. Tom was in Rafah. He was carrying a child across the road. He was helping to save children, because the Israeli defence force was demolishing their homes. He was shot dead on the street. Eventually—eventually—somebody was prosecuted for it. The memory of Tom, Rachel Corrie and so many other internationals who went there to try to help and bring about justice will never go away. This year alone, 98 Palestinians have been killed, including 17 children, and over 2,500 have been seriously injured. The settler violence towards local Palestinian communities largely goes unpunished and the brutality gets worse and worse.

There is an issue about access to healthcare. Even within the terms of the fourth Geneva convention, the occupying power, Israel, is required to do two things. One is not to make any long-term decisions on the future of the people's existence. That is one of the conditions. The other is to ensure that necessary medical services and aid are provided. It is failing on both counts, never mind on many other counts as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) spoke very well about human rights abuses. He was also quite right about the anger in Israel about the new laws Netanyahu is introducing. What I find mind-blowing is that there are so many on those demonstrations in Israel—I support them if they want to defend their independent judiciary; I absolutely agree with them that that is a fundamental in any democracy—but join up the dots. If you are defending democracy in your own society, why are you denying democracy and denying human rights in the occupied territories such a very short distance away? That is not to say there are not many very brave people in Israel. B'Tselem and other groups have done a great deal to speak up for the human rights of Palestinians, and recognise that the brutality of the occupation inflicts a brutality on the occupier as well. The brutality with which they have dealt with the protests in Israel is an indication of the desperation of Netanyahu and his ilk.

Surely to goodness, the Palestinian people have suffered enough. The least we can do as a country is recognise the state of Palestine—no qualifications—to show that we are serious in speaking up against the abuse of human rights and for an end to the siege of Gaza. Sieges and occupation bring about horrors. They affect people's minds. They affect the way people behave and they affect the country that is doing the occupying. In this debate today, let us just make the call. We are there supporting the human rights of everybody in the region; we are there calling for an end to the occupation and the settlements, and for the recognition of Palestine.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Tom, you can take an extra minute in your contribution, as we go into the wind-ups.

4.29 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Since we are having this debate at a time of escalating tension and violence in the middle east, I want to start by putting on record what I did not have time to do in the statement, which is to add my condemnation to any assault on, or murder of, civilians, no matter from what quarter. My sympathy is with the families of those who have lost loved ones in recent weeks and months.

However, as violence increases, I caution against slipping into what we used to call the politics of the last atrocity, whereby we try to understand and explain an event by seeing it as a reaction to the event that happened before. We need a wider, longer-term view that looks at the context and the factors behind what is happening in Israel-Palestine, if we are to have any prospect of beginning to rejuvenate moves towards peace. When we do that, the obvious and glaring thing in front of us is that within 20 years of the state of Israel coming into existence, it began a military occupation of territories outwith its borders that belong to other countries or that were designated by the United Nations as a future homeland of Palestine.

Fifty-six years later, that military occupation continues. That has the biggest bearing on human rights for the people who live in the occupied area, not just because—obviously—by occupying it militarily, basic human rights such as the right to exist and to be, the right to self-determination and the right to for someone to come back to the land from which they were displaced cannot happen, but because it is in the essence of occupation that the population in the occupied area has to be controlled, constrained and subjugated. That is what an occupation has to do to work. Therefore, across every aspect—education, health, travel and everywhere—the human rights of Palestinians have to be suppressed. Until we commit to ending that military occupation, it will be impossible to properly establish human rights for Palestinians.

I am unashamedly an advocate for the human rights of Palestinians, but I also want to see a future where Israel exists in harmony with its neighbours and at peace with itself, as a partner for progress in humanity. That can properly happen only once the occupation ends. It is distressing that we never hear talk of ending the occupation or even pathways towards it—certainly not from the Israeli Government and, most importantly, not from the UK Government. I ask the Minister to comment on how the UK, as a matter of policy, will work towards ending the military occupation.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend speaks with passion and knowledge on this issue. I hear regularly from constituents in Glasgow North who express solidarity with Palestinians and want to ensure that their human rights are fully recognised. He is right about how the UK Government respond to all that. One of the ways to get us on the road to an end to the occupation and the achievement of a two-state solution—still the global consensus of the best way to achieve a long-lasting peace—would be to recognise the

state of Palestine, as many Members have said in the debate. Should the Government not follow this Parliament's lead by making that recognition?

Tommy Sheppard: They should, and I will come to that in a moment. I want to say first that there are two major factors in the recent past that ought to dictate a change and a review of UK Government policy. The first is the stated policy of the Israeli Government. People have commented throughout the debate that they are the most extreme right-wing Government in the history of the state of Israel, and that is true. People have commented on Ben-Gvir and Smotrich and some of the vile statements they have made, but it is not just them. As was quoted by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), Prime Minister Netanyahu himself made clear in the mission statement of the new coalition Government that the Jewish people have the right to claim all of Israel. By all of Israel, he means all the land that Israel occupies, from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean sea. There is no room in that perspective for a two-state solution and an independent state of Palestine.

Why do we not stop pretending that the current Israeli Government are a good actor and believe in a long-term two-state solution, when they have clearly stated that they do not? Everything they are doing on the ground is designed to remove the building blocks that would be needed to ever move talk forwards to a two-state solution.

The other factor that needs to be addressed is the escalating and widespread problem of settler violence. Among the settler communities that have been established in the occupied areas, there are now effectively armed militias operating a campaign of violence and intimidation against the local Palestinian population, often with the connivance of, or certainly with the turning of a blind eye by, the official Israeli authorities.

We saw that in Huwara, in what people described as a pogrom, with settlers on the rampage, attacking any Palestinian they could come across in that village. The IDF went in, and as a result of the IDF action, more than 400 Palestinians needed treatment because of tear gas and other injuries. That is an unprecedented situation that ought to require the British Government to change their mind.

I also want to mention the word apartheid. I expect in his notes the Minister has something that says that the British Government do not consider that to be a relevant word in the context of Israel and Palestine, because it is about South Africa, and that they do not agree with the description. Let us be clear: the word apartheid is not an adjective, but a noun. It has a precise legal definition. Respected international and Israeli organisations have spent a lot of time considering the matter and have come to the conclusion that the legal test for the crime of apartheid has been met in the occupied territories and that it is being practised by the Israeli authorities.

We cannot just ignore that. The British Government may wish to come to a different view, but they should do so not by pretending that this is about some sort of linguistic choice about what words people use, but by looking at the coherent and compelling evidence that has been provided and saying whether or not they want to refute that evidence and come to a different conclusion. To simply make no comment on it seems to me to be a gross dereliction of duty.

I finish by putting forward a couple of asks to the Minister. The first is about recognition. This has been said many times, so let me rephrase it: can the Minister explain how British policy in the region would be undermined or compromised in any way by deciding to recognise the state of Palestine now? If that is not to be undermined, then what is the reason for delay? The more delay happens, the more it looks as if this country is not really serious about a two-state solution, when it is prepared to recognise only one of the states in question.

Finally, I come back the road map. Can we have a commitment, as we would with other countries, to make sure that our trading relationships with Israel are centred on the protection of human rights and the rule of international law, and that we are prepared to use the development of those trading relationships to that end?

4.37 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) for securing this timely and important debate. We have had an excellent debate and covered a wide range of issues concerning human rights violations against Palestinians, ranging from the targeting of journalists, which was raised by my right hon. Friends the Members for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), to checkpoints and permits.

This has been one of the deadliest years for Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, with 98 Palestinians having been killed by Israeli forces, including 17 children, and 17 Israeli civilians having been killed so far, including three British-Israelis. That point has been made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) and many other hon. Members. Each life lost is a tragedy, and every Palestinian and Israeli deserves a just solution to this conflict, but we cannot deny that the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories has led to significant human rights violations against the Palestinian people. It is in that context that we consider the human rights protections for Palestinians.

I will focus on only three areas, because many points that I wished to raise have been covered by other hon. Members. The first area is the treatment of children in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Under the UN convention on the rights of the child, children have special protection and must be protected from violence at all times. Every action necessary must be taken to keep children safe. According to Save the Children, last year alone 34 children were killed by Israeli security forces and settlers in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The use of violence against children can never be justified. I ask the Minister to condemn its use and to tell the House whether he supports the calls from the British consulate general in Jerusalem for thorough and transparent investigations of the deaths of children killed by the Israeli security forces.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): In November, I visited the occupied west bank with the Council for Arab-British Understanding and with Medical Aid for Palestinians; I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. We heard eyewitness accounts in the south Hebron hills of the demolition of a school in Masafer Yatta. Israeli forces threw in stun grenades while children were inside. We saw videos of

children and teachers trying to get out. The school was rebuilt as a temporary school; a few weeks later it was demolished again. The Israeli Government are currently threatening to demolish 58 Palestinian schools in occupied territory. I hope the hon. Gentleman will join me in condemning the proposed demolitions, and I hope the Minister will comment that it is not right even to threaten to demolish schools.

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. I condemn any demolitions of schools, an issue that I will come to later in my speech. It is harrowing to hear her testimony and her account.

The treatment of children who are detained and held in the Israeli military detention system, often in solitary confinement and with limited access, if any, to lawyers when interrogated, is also deeply concerning. That point was made eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). In its 2019 report, Save the Children found that child detainees

“face inhumane treatment such as beatings, strip searches, psychological abuse”.

Last year, three parliamentary colleagues and I visited the military courts at Ofer in the Occupied Palestinian Territories; the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) spoke today of her experiences visiting those courts and gave a vivid description of what she saw. We attended a bail hearing of a teenage boy who had been shot and had been questioned without a parent or guardian present. Several colleagues have made the point that Israel is the only country in the world that routinely tries children in military courts, a clear breach of international law.

The next area on which I wish to focus is forcible evictions and demolitions. Paragraph 2 of article 17 of the United Nations universal declaration of human rights states:

“No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.”

Despite that, Israel seems to be pursuing a policy of forced evictions and demolitions. More than 1,000 Palestinians face eviction in Masafer Yatta in the south Hebron hills. Palestinians in the Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah districts of East Jerusalem and Khan al-Ahmar—which the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), visited last year—face a similar fate. So far this year, there have been 63 demolitions in East Jerusalem alone. In area C, 58 schools are under threat of demolition because it is claimed that they do not have building permits, which I understand are almost impossible to obtain for Palestinians.

After demolition, land is often used to expand or develop settlements, which is illegal because international law requires occupying powers not to move their civilian populations into occupied areas, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) mentioned. He also pointed out that settlements are a risk to a two-state solution. They make it much harder.

In 2019, the then Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), described Israel's settlement expansion as an “effective annexation”. It would be a very serious development in international law if it were found to be so. The Minister for the Middle East, Lord Ahmad, visited Masafer Yatta in January and tweeted:

“The UK continues to urge Israel to desist demolitions and evictions that cause unnecessary suffering and are illegal under IHL”—

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

international humanitarian law—

“in all but most exceptional circumstances.”

However, it seems to have had little effect on the Israeli Government’s actions, so what steps do the Government intend to take to ensure that demolitions and evictions do not carry on at pace, as they have since the start of this year?

The final area on which I wish to focus is the imposition of restrictions preventing Palestinians from moving freely in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The permit system operated by the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories limits the ability of Palestinians to travel freely and creates uncertainty and additional layers of bureaucracy and delays, whether people are trying to access medical care in the Occupied Palestinian Territories or to work, study or travel abroad. That point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), who made a very passionate speech.

Similarly, there are visa restrictions on those coming from abroad to work in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, such as academics. Israel will argue that a permit system is necessary for security purposes, but the way in which the system is applied can be seen as punitive and unjust. A report published last year by Breaking the Silence, an organisation established by former soldiers in the Israel Defence Forces, described Israel’s military permit system as “bureaucratic violence” used on occasion as “collective punishment”, when an entire family’s travel permits can be revoked, which denies them access to work and to medical care in an instant.

All those human rights violations are a result of the occupation. The solution to these problems must be a two-state solution, with a thriving, prosperous Palestinian state alongside a safe and secure Israel, but sadly we have seen little progress towards that for the past eight years. The onus should be on both sides to get around the table and start talking, a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) at the start of his speech. I fear that if this does not happen there will be an escalation in the violence, given the steps already being taken by the Israeli Government, such as giving Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich control over much of the Israeli civil administration, the military body that administers the occupied west bank. That was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who also referred to last month’s raid on the al-Aqsa mosque.

However, the UK is resisting efforts to hold Israel to account within international institutions. The 2030 road map makes no reference to a two-state solution, and contains commitments that raise concerns about the Government’s willingness to apply diplomatic scrutiny to breaches of international law and their support for the role and independence of international legal institutions such as the ICJ and the ICC. The UK’s capacity to be an honest and consistent diplomatic interlocutor with credibility on all sides relies on a consistent approach to the application of international law. There needs to be more accountability, and the UK Government should be challenging human rights abuses wherever they occur. I therefore ask the Minister these questions. What steps are the Government taking to bring about a two-state

solution? Does he support the call for thorough and transparent investigations of the deaths of children killed by Israeli security forces? What further steps will the Government take to put pressure on Israel to stop the evictions and the demolitions?

I began my speech by saying that this had been one of the deadliest years so far in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Let me end by saying that unless urgent action is taken, there is a real risk that the situation will become much worse over the months ahead. The time for action to de-escalate the violence and protect human rights is now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Minister, and ask him to leave at least two minutes for the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) to wind up the debate.

4.48 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) for securing the debate, and I am also grateful for the contributions made by all Members this afternoon. I will try to respond to the points that they have raised. It has been a passionate debate, featuring many eloquent, informed and heartfelt speeches from senior and distinguished parliamentarians.

As I said in my statement earlier today, the Government condemn the horrific murder of Lucy, Maia, and Rina Dee by a terrorist—this was also mentioned at the outset of this debate—and we offer our deepest condolences to Rabbi Leo Dee. The decision of the family to donate Lucy’s organs is an act of compassion that stands in extraordinary and vivid contrast to the senseless violence that robbed a family of its mother and two sisters. The United Kingdom unequivocally condemns this and all other acts of terrorism perpetrated against Israel and her citizens.

This is, sadly, a timely debate. Last year, as has been pointed out throughout the debate, was the deadliest in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories since the second intifada, according to UN records. So far in 2023, 89 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli security forces and 19 Israelis killed in acts of terrorism. The UK is actively encouraging de-escalation. We welcome the leadership shown by the Israelis and the Palestinians when they attended the meetings in Aqaba and Sharm El Sheikh to discuss ways to de-escalate the rising tensions. We are grateful to the Governments of Jordan, Egypt, and the United States for instigating those discussions. The UK is now working with both sides and international partners to support the process, and calls on both Israel and the Palestinians to honour the commitments made in those meetings. We call on the Palestinian Authority to denounce incitement to violence and to resume its security co-operation with the Israeli authorities, and we say to the Israeli Government that Israel has a legitimate right to self-defence, but its security forces must keep their obligations under international humanitarian law.

On al-Aqsa, also referred to in the debate, both Palestinians and Israelis must avoid actions that risk escalating tensions, including around the holy sites of Jerusalem. The UK calls for all parties to respect the

historic status quo arrangements at Jerusalem's holy sites, and we welcome Israel's decision to prevent non-Muslims from visiting the al-Aqsa compound for the final days of Ramadan—an important step in support of de-escalation.

I want to address directly the four points that have been made in the debate and that were emphasised by the Opposition spokesman and the hon. Member for Dundee West. First, on demolitions and evictions, the UK is clear that the demolition of Palestinian homes and forced evictions cause unnecessary suffering to ordinary Palestinians and call into question Israel's commitment to a viable two-state solution. In all but the most exceptional of cases, demolitions by an occupying power are contrary to international humanitarian law. Officials from the British embassy in Tel Aviv have repeatedly raised our concerns about demolitions with Israeli Ministers and senior officials, and urged them to cease the policy of demolitions and to provide a clear, transparent route to construction for Palestinians in area C. The UK Government are also focused on preventing demolitions from happening in the first place, and support Bedouin communities and Palestinians facing demolition or eviction in area C of the west bank through our legal aid programme. The programme helps residents challenge decisions inside the Israeli legal system.

Secondly, the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) asked me about child detention in Israel and Save the Children's 2020 report. We remain committed to working with Israel to secure improvements to the practices surrounding children in administrative detention in Israel. We have made clear our concern about the continued reports of ill treatment of Palestinian minors in Israeli administrative detention. Reports of the heavy use of painful restraints and the high number of Palestinian children who are not informed of their legal rights, in contravention of Israel's own regulations, are particularly troubling, as is the continued transfer of Palestinian child and adult detainees to prisons inside Israel in violation of the fourth Geneva convention. We continue to make representations to the Israeli authorities on this issue and urge them to comply with their obligations under international law and either charge or release those detainees.

Thirdly, the hon. Gentleman raised access and movement. We continue to stress to the Israeli authorities the damage that their restrictions on movement, access and trade are doing to the living standards of ordinary Palestinians, especially in Gaza. While we welcome the steps that Israel has taken to ease some restrictions, we want to see Israel go much further. We urge access into and out of Gaza in accordance with international humanitarian law for humanitarian actors, reconstruction materials and those, including Palestinians, travelling for medical purposes. We are in close contact with UN agencies and key partners on the ground to assess the situation, and we will monitor that closely.

Fourthly, on construction permits, we have repeatedly made clear to the Israeli authorities our opposition to the demolition of Palestinian properties in area C of the west bank and in East Jerusalem, and we call on them to cease the policy of demolition and to provide a clear, transparent route to construction for Palestinians.

Munira Wilson: Will the Minister go a step further and condemn the permit system, which is separating Gazan families? On my recent visit to the neonatal unit

at Makassed Hospital in East Jerusalem, I saw prematurely born babies who had been separated from their mother and their family for weeks. One baby had been waiting two weeks to be discharged because neither her mother nor another family member in Gaza could get a permit. Will he condemn that? Frankly, Gaza is an open-air prison at the moment.

Mr Mitchell: I am trying to make a constructive speech, and I hope the hon. Lady will allow me to make my points in my own way. If she reads carefully what I have said in *Hansard*, I think she will find much to please her.

Liam Byrne: The Minister has just set out four sets of sins that the UK Government have protested about to the Government of Benjamin Netanyahu. He must therefore accept that our words are failing to deter egregious behaviour. When will he shift from words to deeds, to deter things from getting any worse?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, underestimates the effect of today's debate. What is said in the House of Commons will be read. He and I have focused on four particular areas, and what I am saying, and what has been said by Members on both sides of the House, speaks for itself.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) asked me to elaborate on what I said earlier, and he raised important points similar to those raised by the right hon. Members for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). Of course, some years ago and over a prolonged period, all four of us campaigned for the human rights of Shaker Aamer.

The Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority reaffirmed their joint readiness and commitment to work immediately to end unilateral measures for a period of three to six months. That includes an Israeli commitment to stop discussion of any new settlement units for four months, and to stop the authorisation of any outposts for six months. I hope that is a proper answer to the question.

The UK will always seek to advance the cause of Palestinian human rights in a manner that is fair and balanced, and that supports proportionate and fair international scrutiny of Israel.

I am conscious of the time, so I will draw my remarks to a close. I reiterate that the UK Government want to see the human rights of all Palestinians protected, as this is a vital step towards the creation of a sovereign, independent and viable Palestinian state, living in peace, security and side by side with a safe and secure Israel.

I was asked to give, without equivocation, our position on settlements. The UK's position on settlements is absolutely clear: settlements are illegal. I was asked about recognition of the Palestinian state, and the UK will recognise a Palestinian state at a time when the Government believe this will best serve the objective of peace.

4.58 pm

Chris Law: I thank my constituents, the people of Scotland, the people of the UK and the people across the world who have written to me about this very important debate, to inform and educate me.

[Chris Law]

I thank everyone in the Chamber, as they have been not only passionate but deeply evidenced and very clear about what needs to change. We have had so many debates on Palestine over the years, and things are getting increasingly worse. Words, in themselves, are not enough, although what the Minister says about the discussions is welcome.

Members on both sides of the House have spoken about values and human rights, as enshrined in international law. This means the UK Government cannot take two sides. They have to take a clear position. If they believe in human rights and international law, they should do something about it by not repeatedly blocking proposals at the UN and the International Criminal Court to judge serious crimes. That would take it out of the UK Government's hands by allowing the courts to decide the very things for which the UK Government are calling. I did not hear the Minister say that.

Silence is complicity. By doing nothing, we are complicit in not allowing judgment to be taken on these serious crimes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of human rights protections for Palestinians.

PETITION

Special school in Biddulph

4.59 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): The people of Biddulph, in my constituency, are at a disadvantage to many others because there is no specific special educational needs and disabilities provision there. They have therefore asked me to present this petition, which calls on the Government to provide dedicated resources and dedicated educational facilities for their children.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Government should take actions to construct a new special school in the town of Biddulph in the Staffordshire Moorlands so that children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities from there and the nearby surrounding areas have access to a local specialist school, notes that; this follows discussions with parents and local councillors who have formed a support group and shows that there is a legitimate need for this kind of facility at a local level; further notes that mainstream schools do not have adequate resources to provide the specialist support that these students need and require, further declares that the number of students needing specialist education is increasing; furthermore there are also issues with lack of transport should this be needed for out of area travel which can, on occasion, be both stressful and daunting for the children who are requiring specialist education.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to construct a new special school in Biddulph.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002826]

Freehold Management: Service Charges

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

5 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I am grateful to the House for being able to call this debate to draw attention to the problems with the current framework of legislation and regulation covering estate management and service charges that are placed on freeholders. I do so on behalf of the thousands of homeowners in my constituency who are being charged for services that ordinarily might be covered by their council taxes, who frequently are not given easy access to the scale of charges they face and who have inferior rights of legal challenge or redress when something goes wrong. I do so to support the efforts of local councillors, especially Councillor Jim Weir, from Great Denham, in my constituency, who has done so much to draw attention to these issues, and to support the efforts of those in local resident associations, such as Tom Middleton, the chair of the New Cardington residents' association. He has doggedly pursued estate management companies to get clarity and promote accountability. I also do so on behalf of 30 other Conservative colleagues who cannot be here today but joined me in writing to the Prime Minister to urge action. I want to put on the record my thanks to the Minister for her thoughtfulness in listening to the concerns I have raised with her ahead of this debate. I look forward to her response to some of the points I wish to make.

Let me set out a bit of the background. Freehold service charges can cover the provision of a variety of services on housing estates, such as the upkeep of play areas, communal gardens, unadopted roads and communal parking areas, such as parking courts. The requirement to make a financial contribution is most usually defined in the deed of transfer when the property is first sold by the developer. Alternatively, a liability might arise as a result of an estate rent charge that forms part of a purchase contract. The developer then usually enters a contract with a management company to organise the necessary work on the estate and to recover costs from homeowners. Sometimes the developer will set up a residents' management company to take ownership of the communal areas. Where that happens, the residents' management company can appoint a management company to work on its behalf. That may sound a little confusing, as it did to me as I said it. I was surprised to learn that in what one might think would be a single housing development area there can be 10, 20 or 30 individual companies handling small areas, such as little parts of roads or smaller communal areas. For my constituents, that is a confusing issue if they ever want to follow up with an inquiry. I am going to talk about some of those problems in this debate.

Based on my research, what is clear to me is that after the completion of a purchase these costs to homeowners can often increase significantly; that there is no clear or effective accountability; and that these arrangements have created a mini-industry of companies providing services of varying quality and charging often high fees, many of which relate to administration rather than to the services provided themselves. For the homeowner affected by estate management charges, these raise some pertinent issues that I know the Government are considering.

First, the notification to home buyers of their future liability for charges is not made clearly. Secondly, when bills arrive, it is often unclear what the charges relate to or why they are being applied to a particular property. Thirdly, it is often difficult for residents to obtain information about the charges, to challenge their reasonableness or to effect change when the work is being completed inadequately. Fourthly, the regulation or oversight of the practices of the management companies is very weak, creating problems for homeowners and, increasingly, creating reputational damage to many of our major housing developers, which it would be wise to address now.

It is also clear to me that the voice of homeowners is absent at a crucial stage. It is right at the start, while planning approval is going on, when the developer and the local planning authority determine who is responsible for the costs to maintain shared areas in the proposed development. In the room, there is the local authority planning authority and the developer. The people not in the room are the homeowners who will subsequently have to pay those charges. That structure means that the incentives are stacked too heavily for the developer and the local authority to stick the bill to those not represented—the homeowners themselves.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on an issue that affects many of my constituents. Does he agree that another issue is that, when the local authority is in the room at the start of a development, there should be some way of agreeing a time-bound point at which that local authority takes over, making certain the services or the facilities within some of these developments, otherwise a situation can arise whereby the residents can be responsible, for years sometimes, for covering the costs through service charges that should actually be taken over by the local authority?

Richard Fuller: My hon. Friend, with her great expertise in these and other matters, is absolutely right. This question of the timeframes in which certain common services might be adopted can create a number of concerns. This issue was raised for me by Councillor Phillipa Martin-Moran-Bryant, who has a number of residents affected by this issue. There is also the period of time that it can take for an estate management company to be handed over to the residents themselves. There is a double source of risk of delay, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Government should consider whether there is a reasonableness in terms of the time limit that could be put in place.

Fiona Bruce: There is also the situation of some homeowners buying early on in a development and then finding that they are bearing charges for the subsequent development of the site or the maintenance of the site during its development, which, realistically and fairly speaking, should be borne by the developer itself.

Richard Fuller: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for saying that. I know the Minister will be listening, because she has been listening to all the points that I have previously made on these issues.

Just to cap the concerns, at the end of it, a person might want to sell their property. What we find increasingly is that, as they are going through the sales process, they

hit a snag, because the estate management company is saying, “You haven’t paid charges.” Sometimes, they are charges that the homeowner was not even aware that they were liable for. This is the reality for many homeowners living in areas with estate management charges: they have no voice, no explanations, no transparency, no redress and, potentially, no ability to move house.

Let me give a couple of specific examples to bring those points to light for the Minister—they will largely be from my constituency, but they occur in many places. I return to Councillor Jim Weir in Great Denham, who conducted a survey to which 300 residents replied, and which identified multiple instances of excessive administrative fees. A number of my local councillors have done the same.

In one scheme, the anticipated maintenance work to be carried out and the charges for electricity comprised 30% of the total charge to the residents, while 70% of the charge was fees, reserves and overheads. In a second scheme in his ward, the anticipated maintenance was 10% of the total charge, with 90% of the charge going on fees, reserves and overheads. In a third scheme, the estate manager had just one job: the management of seven lamp posts. Jim and his team compared the costs charged per lamp post with the standard cost of the local council for doing the same job and found that the management agent is charging twice the standard rate.

When residents challenged the estate management company to see the electricity bills, they were informed that the bills could not be shared electronically and someone would have to visit the offices of the agent 170 miles away if they wanted to inspect them. One good resident said, “I’m up for that,” and that he would go and have a look. He arranged an appointment, which got cancelled and cancelled and cancelled. After more pressure from residents, the company finally admitted they did not have any electricity bills to show. No individual should have to go through that level of turmoil to try to find out something so simple about why they are being charged something in their own area. It is ludicrous.

I have a couple more examples from New Cardington of other issues relating to handovers and conflict of interest. Tom Middleton, the chair of the New Cardington Residents Association, wrote to me:

“Residential management companies (RMC) are set up by developers to look after the various open spaces not placed for adoption. The directors of the RMC are usually senior directors at the developer. This means the managing agent is effectively the developer’s client until handover. This is usually prolonged. Here in New Cardington the RMC was incorporated in July 2010, 13 years later the developers are only NOW starting the handover process. This means for 13 years residents have paid a service to an agent of some description but over which they have had no control.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) has a similar problem in the Silverwoods development in Kidderminster. He cannot be here today, but he wrote to tell me:

“Multiple iterations of the estate management company has resulted in absolute opaqueness in accounting and use of funds generated, whilst failure to enforce planning conditions by Wyre Forest District Council has passed on a financial burden to rectify failures onto residents. This is not good enough.”

There is a further point about conflict of interest that, on balance, I want to make. The Association of Residential Managing Agents has 10 standards in its

[Richard Fuller]

consumer charter, the seventh of which is, “Avoid conflicts of interest”. Concerns have been raised by the New Cardington Residents Association that their estate management company, RMG, has created a conflict of interest by establishing a wholly owned subsidiary, Osterna Ltd, to conduct annual fire risk assessment processes.

I have kindly been copied in to a letter from RMG that explains its rationale, and I am in no way asserting that there is any wrongdoing here, but it clearly changes the arm’s length nature of an estate management company hiring services if some regular services, such as fire risk assessments, go untendered to related companies. Will the Minister write to companies reminding them of their obligations and calling for greater accountability and transparency?

I will canter quickly through the history of Government reviews. In July 2017, there was a consultation on tackling unfair practices in the leasehold market. In December 2017, the Government said that they would legislate to ensure that freeholders who pay charges for the maintenance of communal areas and facilities on a private or mixed-use estate can access equivalent rights as leaseholders to challenge the reasonableness of service charges. In October 2018, the Government confirmed their intention to “replicate consultation requirements and obligations on the provider of services to provide information to the freeholder.”

In June 2019, the Government committed to equal rights for freeholders and the right to manage for freeholders. In December 2021, the then Minister told the House:

“The Government also intends to give freeholders on private and mixed tenure estates equivalent rights to leaseholders to challenge the reasonableness of estate rentcharges, as well as a right to apply to the First-tier Tribunal to appoint a new manager to manage the provision of services. In addition, we will ensure that where a freeholder pays a rentcharge, the rentcharge owner is not able to take possession or grant a lease on the property where the rentcharge remains unpaid for a short period of time. We will translate these measures into law when parliamentary time allows.”

May I ask the Minister to confirm, first, that there has been no dilution of those commitments by the Government, and secondly, that it is the Department’s desire to include this long-promised legislative change in the next session of Parliament? I say “Department” because, of course, it is the Prime Minister who has to balance the multiple claims on parliamentary time. That is why I—along with thirty of my colleagues—wrote to the Prime Minister to ask him to include the legislation in the King’s Speech.

The Prime Minister kindly wrote back and included the following comments:

“The Government believes that it should be made clear to potential purchasers what the financial arrangements and their responsibilities are for the upkeep of communal areas. It is also important that we hold these estate management companies more accountable on how they perform and how homeowners’ money is spent.”

He went on:

“These changes will be introduced when Parliamentary time allows, and I will carefully consider your call for it to form part of our legislative session for the next Parliamentary session.”

I put on the record that I am very grateful that the Prime Minister wrote back. I hope that he understands the purpose of this debate and the calls by 30 of my Conservative colleagues, including the contribution from

my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). It is the time for the Prime Minister to take the action that has been promised for so long. We know that the issues preceded his time, but he has a great capacity for understanding problems and finding solutions. We are close—I think the Minister will be clear that the Department is ready to move—and I hope that the Prime Minister will take further consideration and action to help my constituents and those in many other places around the country.

5.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): It is a great pleasure and privilege to respond to my hon. Friends the Members for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on this vital matter.

I pay huge tribute to hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire for his persistence on this particular issue and for his convening power in gathering 30 of our colleagues, which is no mean feat, regardless of the issue. He has made an incredibly compelling speech, every word of which the Government—and certainly the Department for Levelling Up—agree with, as I will set out in the time that remains. I also pay tribute to the individuals and groups he has worked with and about whom he has taken time to speak to me. He has explained to me the impact on the lives of his constituents, mentioned Tom Middleton of the residents’ association, and set out the excellent work that Councillor Jim Weir and many other councillors in the area have done. When my hon. Friend told me the story of the seven lampposts, I found it absolutely appalling and shocking that that kind of abusive practice can go on in this day and age. It has to stop, and we are absolutely committed to putting into practice the actions that will bring a stop to it.

I do not need to deliver most of my speech because my hon. Friend has done an excellent job of setting out the landscape of the problem and what needs to happen, so I will skip straight to what we will do to fix this. We know that legislation needs to be introduced. He challenged me on the timetable for that, and I will respond. We are committed to introducing legislation to plug this gap. We intend to create a new statutory regime for freehold homeowners based on the rights that leaseholders have, which would ensure that estate management charges must be reasonably incurred, that services provided are of an acceptable standard and that there is a right to challenge the reasonableness of charges at the property tribunal. We need to end this fleecing situation where homeowners who thought they had bought a home to live in—their own piece of property, with their own front door—are subject to abuse and find these charges escalating out of all proportion to the services provided.

We will also give a right to change the provider of maintenance services by applying to the tribunal for the appointment of a manager. That can be useful if the homeowner is dissatisfied with the service they are receiving and there is significant failure by the estate management provider to meet its obligations. We will take action to tackle these unreasonable costs and the lack of performance and service delivery by these companies. We will go further in time and will consider

how to introduce a right to manage for freehold homeowners once we have considered the complexities of the Law Commission's report.

I turn to the questions that my hon. Friend asked. He asked whether I would meet him and other concerned colleagues to discuss the detail of these issues. I am aware that we only have a short time today, and he has raised many complex issues. I am happy to meet him to discuss this further. That is important, because this is a big change, and we are tackling many areas of law.

My hon. Friend rightly challenged me on the numerous commitments made by Ministers at the Dispatch Box to ensure that these measures are introduced. Clearly, it is beyond my pay grade to pre-empt what the King's Speech will contain, but my hon. Friend rightly pointed to not only the letter from the Prime Minister but repeated assurances from myself, which I will repeat today, and from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities that this issue is top of the list of priorities for our Department. We take it very seriously, and we fully intend to bring forward legislation to implement the changes as soon as parliamentary time allows. That is the plan, and we remain committed to it.

My hon. Friend asked me whether there will be any dilution of the current commitments. The straight answer is no. We remain committed to addressing all the imbalance facing freehold homeowners, and we will legislate so that freehold homeowners have the right to challenge the reasonableness of charges and to go to the tribunal to appoint a new management company.

My hon. Friend asked me when this legislation will be introduced. Of course, we always want to bring in changes that will make a difference to people when this is having an impact on their household budgets. We all share the desire to bring legislation in as soon as possible. As soon as the Bill has completed its passage through Parliament, we will strain every sinew to get these changes on to the statute book, so that people can use them—that is what we all want to see.

My hon. Friend referenced the CMA market study into house building. He will be reassured to know that this study does not in any way dilute the Government's commitments; in fact, it complements them, and it might suggest other actions for the Government. As he said, there are many aspects of this situation and many problems that we need to fix.

My hon. Friend asked me whether we can write to companies reminding them of their obligations and calling for accountability and transparency. They need to know that change is coming, and I want to reiterate that today from the Dispatch Box. As the Minister responsible for this, I receive many pieces of correspondence from colleagues across the House and people across the country. The changes proposed by the Government are much needed. These estate management companies should be on notice, and I repeat that today. The Government have been very clear that all charges should be reasonable and clearly communicated, and we are wholly committed to strengthening freeholders' rights on these estates.

Fiona Bruce: I am very encouraged by what the Minister is saying. Actually, some charges, rather than being reasonable, should be not there at all. Let us take

play areas as an example. Will the Minister consider whether local authorities should take over a play area if, for example, it has been created as a result of an agreement with the developer? Such play areas are used not just by the residents whose properties the green area fronts but by anyone in the local area, freely. Will the Minister discuss with local authorities and the Local Government Association how to prevent situations where residents are completely unfairly burdened, and ensure that local services are taken over by local authorities where they should be?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point, which is one that I am familiar with from my constituency. It is an issue that I am sure we have all faced in one form or another, and it causes considerable frustration, annoyance and anger among local residents who have bought those properties and expect to have those facilities there. They have paid good money for the houses that they have moved into.

I will certainly discuss that issue with my hon. Friend further; there are a number of legal frameworks that we may be able to use to assist with that. I will commit to writing to her with a bit more detail on that point, because I fear that I will not be able to do it justice in the Chamber, but we will introduce secondary legislation on the back of the Bill that we intend to introduce that will bring a considerable advance in the amount of clarity that already exists pertaining to these matters and many others.

To revert to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire and his call for us to write to all the management companies, much as that would appear to be a sensible approach, unfortunately, it would prove rather more difficult in practice. It is very difficult to track down where all these companies are, their addresses, and who actually runs them. What I can certainly commit to do, though, is put information on gov.uk making it very clear to those companies what the obligations on them should be.

With that, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will bring my remarks to a close. I finish by thanking again my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire for all the work he has done with his colleagues; my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for her really useful contributions; and my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), my neighbour in Worcestershire, who has also contributed to the research. I reiterate that it should always be clear to potential homebuyers what the arrangements are, but we know that very often, it is not; that is the root cause of some of the problems that we have faced. We think it is pure justice that homeowners must have effective ways to get things put right when they have a problem with their housing. That is why we remain wholeheartedly committed to legislating, when parliamentary time allows, to empower those freehold homeowners so that they can better hold the estate management company to account. I thank the whole House for the time it has taken to consider these important matters.

Question put and agreed to.

5.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 20 April 2023

[MR DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Landmine Awareness

1.30 pm

David Mundell (in the Chair): Before I call Wendy Morton to move the motion, I should draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered land mine awareness.

Thank you for chairing this debate, Mr Mundell. I recognise that the HALO Trust is based in your constituency. The HALO Trust is one of the leading global non-governmental organisations carrying out de-mining, and I know that you have a particular interest in this issue. In fact, we worked together on Project Umubano, an international social action project, for a number of years, so I am delighted that you are in the Chair, although had you not been you might have contributed to our debate and shared with us some of your knowledge and experience of international development.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing the debate. Organisations such as the HALO Trust, whose headquarters are in your constituency in Scotland, Mr Mundell, do incredibly important work that truly saves lives, and I place my gratitude to them on the record. Does the right hon. Lady agree that if the Government are happy to rely on charitable organisations to carry out so much of the work, they must ensure that they are adequately funded?

Wendy Morton: The hon. Lady makes a really important point. Funding is crucial for de-mining work, and it is NGOs and charities that go and do this work. It is not the sort of work that Governments do, because it needs the neutrality of an NGO. As well as the HALO Trust, many other groups around the world, including the Mines Advisory Group, do amazing work in this field.

I place on the record my thanks to the Members who are present this afternoon. It is a Thursday afternoon, so many of our colleagues are already heading back to their constituencies for surgeries and visits, but I am pleased by the number of people who have been able to attend the debate, and by the tremendous support that I had from Back-Bench colleagues of all parties when I made my bid to the Backbench Business Committee. That shows not just how much interest there is in this topic, but how seriously our colleagues across the House take it. We know that, long after the end of war, civilians remain at risk from landmines, as do livestock and other animals, and often our environment.

Landmines are a lasting legacy of conflict. They remain capable of killing or injuring civilians, and so deny access to land and livelihoods, hindering agriculture, enterprise and often education as well. In the last few years, the Government have put a big emphasis on making sure that girls have access to 12 years of education. I can see the Minister nodding, and I know that she was a champion of this issue in her days as Secretary of State for International Development, when I was a Minister in that Department. We know that giving a girl an education provides her with an excellent start to life, and it is important that we recognise that link.

Landmines also disrupt essential services and the supply of valuable humanitarian aid. It is estimated that 60 million people are still at risk from landmines and unexploded ordnance in countries where conflict has long since ceased—for example, Angola. Many of us remember the pictures of the late Diana, Princess of Wales, wearing protective clothing and a visor in a minefield. She did so much to raise awareness, but that was a number of years ago. Other affected countries are Cambodia, Laos and Zimbabwe.

Margaret Ferrier: Landmines may seem like a problem from conflicts long past, but their use in Ukraine has brought this issue, rightly, back into the spotlight. Does the right hon. Member agree that there needs to be stronger deterrence of landmine use in conflict, and consequences for the resulting loss of civilian life?

Wendy Morton: The hon. Lady must be looking ahead in my speech or else she is psychic, because I intended to touch on the subject of Ukraine. That conflict—the illegal and brutal invasion of Ukraine by the Russians—is a reminder that the use of landmines is prevalent today; it still happens. I will come on to that as I do a brief tour around some of the countries where we still have challenges to handle.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, more people face danger today than two years ago, as a result of more recent conflicts. MAG estimates that on average 15 people every day are killed or injured by landmines or unexploded ordnance, and—shockingly—half of the civilian casualties are children. I did a bit of calculating when preparing my speech, and I reckon that that is about 5,500 people being killed or injured every single year. That is a huge number.

I called this debate as close as was possible—because Parliament has just had its Easter recess—to 4 April, recognising that that is the UN's International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action. I wanted to use the opportunity of this debate to draw attention once again to this deadly legacy of conflict, to recognise the global role that the UK takes on this issue and to—gently—press my right hon. Friend the Minister and the UK Government to do more to support this incredibly important work.

Of course, the UK was one of the first signatories to the anti-personnel mine ban convention, or mine ban treaty, and the convention on cluster munitions. The UK is one of the world's leading forces in ridding the world of landmines. With 164 parties to it, the mine ban treaty is one of the most widely ratified disarmament treaties, but there are notable exceptions, including Russia, the US, China, India, Pakistan, Myanmar and Syria. When the Minister sums up, will she say what more our Government can do to press these other parties to ratify the convention?

[Wendy Morton]

The UK provides aid for landmine clearance through GMAP—the global mine action programme—and UK funding has supported organisations such as MAG and the HALO Trust to remove more than 70,000 landmines and explosive remnants of war. I appreciate that the Minister faces budgetary pressures—as we did during my days in the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—but I am a little surprised that funding for such a crucial programme has decreased by about £53 million in the last year, at a time when civilians are facing a greater risk, with the war in Ukraine being a really good example for us to consider.

GMAP3 was launched in March 2022 and runs until March 2025, with, I believe, a budget of £89 million—I see the Minister nodding. Will she update us on that budget and where it stands, how much has been spent and how much has been allocated? Does she think that that will be enough until 2025, given the number of challenges that we face around the world? I will touch on some of those, and in particular Ukraine. In too many places, the situation remains extremely challenging. I want to take this opportunity, as we recognise landmine awareness day, to share a few of the many examples, because they act as a salient reminder of why this work matters.

I will start with Afghanistan, where the HALO Trust began clearing mines back in 1988, following decades of conflict. The country was left absolutely littered with ordnance, and today Afghanistan remains one of the deadliest places for civilians. The work done there to educate children and adults about the risks they face is a vital part of HALO's work programme. I am sure that is something you know, Mr Mundell, from visiting HALO and perhaps the programmes or projects it has done. If we do not do that educative part of the work and build capacity in countries to deal with the existing landmines, we are almost failing those countries, because of the amount of time it takes to clear them.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Lady for making an excellent speech and bringing this vital issue to the Chamber.

I had the opportunity a few years ago to visit the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo. The Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Action Centre understands there are around 180,000 unexploded mines left following the war, which I remember seeing on screens when I was a child. One of the most poignant things was the aftermath of the conflict and its effect on the lives of children; that was very evident from the museum. Does the right hon. Lady agree that that is one of the things we must take into consideration? This work is for future generations as well. When landmines remain, communities continue to feel scared, young people continue to feel frightened and they still see the carnage of war in their daily experiences. That is why it is so important that we fund these services adequately.

Wendy Morton: The hon. Lady makes a really important point. We both served on the International Development Committee a number of years ago, so I know that she has a great interest in international development, and in mental health and wellbeing too. That point about

education and support for the next generation is really important. In doing my research for my speech today, I was reminded that there are instances where people have kept a landmine as a remnant of war. It could be sitting in their home, yet it contains live explosives. Education really matters, and there is a need for that ongoing work.

The other important issue worth noting is land contamination. We often think that landmine clearance is about going in, removing the mine and that is it. The importance of that has increased due to greater awareness of the environmental agenda, but there is a need to ensure that that land is decontaminated; without doing that, agricultural land cannot be used. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) makes a really important point, and I thank her for that.

HALO reports that in Kosovo in the western Balkans, 4,722 landmines and 5,727 cluster munitions were destroyed during its 1999-2022 programme alone, and 21 million square metres of land were released. That starts to give us a sense of the scale of the land that is contaminated with landmines. The Kosovo mine action strategy will be realised in 2024. Back in 1999, there were 18 mine clearance agencies working in Kosovo—18—and now there are only two. That shows that progress has been made, but the work continues, and the commitment remains to creating a safe future for the people in Kosovo.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a really interesting part of the world, and one where there has been recent conflict. The region remains one of the most contaminated with landmines and unexploded ordnance in the world. The UK was the first country to announce humanitarian support following the 2020 conflict—I remember that because I was the Minister at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office at the time—and £1 million was donated to the ICRC for their work. The Government then announced a second contribution of £500,000 to support landmine clearance. In this region, more people have suffered from landmine explosions after the conflict than during the conflict. I appreciate the challenges and difficulties around the world, and earlier in my speech I touched on landmines having an impact on getting support, in particular humanitarian support, to communities. This part of the world is incredibly tricky, sensitive and complex. Will the Minister provide an update on the Lachin corridor, which is critical to that part of the region?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) *indicated assent.*

Wendy Morton: I can see that the Minister is nodding. My point is in relation to humanitarian aid getting through to the civilians who need it.

A few years ago, we had many a debate on Syria in this House. It was good to notice on Twitter this morning that HALO has just announced that it has completed mechanical clearance training in north-west Syria—an important and exciting milestone that means that HALO is now able to start to clear minefields. That is another good example of a team going in with the skills and knowledge to clear unexploded weapons using an excavator. My understanding is that work will begin there in June.

In Syria, almost 15 million people are in need of humanitarian aid and a third of the population live in communities contaminated by unexploded ordnance.

Add to that the recent earthquakes on the Syria-Turkey border and we start to understand some of the massive humanitarian challenges around the world. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, as many as 300,000 shells and bombs have failed to detonate during the conflict in Syria. It is another example of how, years after the battle has moved on, civilians are left vulnerable to death and injury. Sadly, it is estimated that 15% of the population there are living with a disability. That reinforces the need for education work to make children in particular aware of the dangers of landmines—that they are not toys to be played with and that children should not go into areas where there is sign saying not to. Alas, around the world there are cases of people assuming that no sign means the land is safe, when there could well be the remnants of war there.

This morning, I happened to catch up with an old friend who as a child lived in Lebanon. He was telling me that he could remember seeing the minefield warning signs as a child. That is a reminder that this is a problem not just of the past but of the present, and for the next generation. Decades of civil and external conflict in Lebanon—through the '80s and '90s and then again in 2006—have left Lebanon with an extensive legacy of landmine and cluster bomb contamination. Spillover from the conflict in Syria is evident in Lebanese territory, which has led to a new level of contamination by landmines best described as of an improvised nature.

In Lebanon and in many of the other countries that I have highlighted, agriculture is the key economic driver of livelihoods and activities for communities, yet large areas of farming land—fertile arable land—remain inaccessible or contaminated. If we are serious about tackling poverty and some of the drivers of migration flows, de-mining work has to be a priority.

Let me come to—do not worry, Mr Mundell; I will not mention every country in the world, but I will make the most of this opportunity—Georgia, where there were just five days of conflict in 2008, but those five days have led to Georgia appearing in this debate, because 30 huge aircraft bombs were found in the village of Chonto. Teams had to overcome the mountainous and highly unstable terrain in that area to destroy the bombs. A place called Shida Kartli was cleared a year later, again thanks to the work of de-mining teams, which allowed people to return home. Imagine not only going through conflict and leaving home, but being reliant on a team to de-mine before being able to return. That might be an international team, but in the longer term, the more we can do to help countries' non-governmental organisations to develop capacity, the better; that is a much more sustainable way of de-mining, because then the capacity remains long after the conflict has ended. Abkhazia is another part of the world where unexploded items remained after decades of war, not just in homes but in ammunition stores. As long as those items exist, there is a threat to life.

I will turn to Ukraine, because it is rightly on our minds a lot in this place. The Government have a great track record of providing support for Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. I acknowledge the families in my constituency who have offered a home to Ukrainians. They all deserve our support, and we owe them a huge amount of gratitude. It is estimated that 300,000 sq km of Ukrainian territory is contaminated. To put that into context, that is an area larger than the UK. It is a huge

amount of land. Swathes of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were already contaminated following eight years of conflict.

Let me put the situation for Ukrainian people into context. When the Ukrainian MP Lesia Vasylenko spoke to the International Development Committee about the impact of landmines in Ukraine, she said that landmine contamination is “stopping farmers”, so stopping livelihoods, and “stopping children”—stopping them having a future and an education. She said it is

“stopping you just enjoying your leisurely walk in your local forest.”

If we ever needed proof of the impact on lives and livelihoods, we have it in the words of that Member of Parliament.

I welcome the fact that the FCDO has a £2 million agreement with the HALO Trust under GMAP, and it is providing de-mining equipment and training to the state emergency services. That is so vital. To illustrate the scale of the challenge, open-source satellite imagery indicates that there are minefields stretching for hundreds of kilometres in the east and south of the country. Shockingly, one single fortified mine line runs 90 km from the Russian border to north of the town of Lysychansk in the east. That is a long tract of land.

The World Bank has estimated the cost for clearance of explosive ordnance across the entire Ukrainian nation at \$37.6 billion. That amount will only increase with every day that the conflict continues. I hope that there are many things that we can take away from this debate, but if there is only one, consider the point that one day of fighting results in roughly a month of clearance being needed. That really is quite a salient point. Funding to clear landmines and to educate the communities at risk of harm matters. It makes a difference, but so does our ability to train and build capacity in the countries concerned. The sustainable and right way of using development is to ensure that the skills, knowledge and expertise remain when an NGO has left.

However, we see from examples that de-mining takes time, commitment and funding. I have a few more questions for the Minister, which focus on that. Will her Department remain committed to this important work? How will the Government support mine action and awareness in countries no longer supported by GMAP? How will she encourage more states to accede to the anti-personnel mine ban? It is really important to stop mines being laid in the first place. Will she reassure me that, at a time of budgetary pressure, she will continue to provide Ukraine with the humanitarian and development support that it needs following the Russians' illegal invasion?

The UK has been one of the most generous countries in the world in funding de-mining. In closing, I will share one example that shows why that really matters. Let us look at the Falkland Islands. Back in 2020, almost 40 years after the end of the conflict during which thousands of exploding devices were laid, the Falkland Islands were declared mine-free under the anti-personnel mine ban convention, also known as the Ottawa convention. Tribute was paid to the members of the British armed forces who contributed to mapping, fencing and clearing the minefields between 1982 and 2009, as well as to the civilian de-miners who, between 2009 and 2020, destroyed more than 10,000 mines and other unexploded ordnance in the UK-funded programme.

[Wendy Morton]

People in the Falkland Islands no longer have to teach their children about the dangers of minefields. Beaches and places of natural beauty that were once out of bounds can now be enjoyed. I was reminded just the other week of what a tremendous achievement that was, and how much we owe to the commitment of those brave and skilled men and women who worked tirelessly to achieve the mine-free declaration. Many of them were of Zimbabwean origin but have now made a permanent home in the Falkland Islands, as they have become part of the community. I thought it important to end on a positive note and show that the work of organisations to clear mines and educate civilians really can make a difference.

1.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What a pleasure it is to follow the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton). I thank her for setting the scene so incredibly well. Her interest in the subject is well known in the House, and we are pleased to see that when the responsibilities of being a Minister were no longer on her shoulders, she did not lose her interest in the subject, and she is here in Westminster Hall to portray what she knows in a detailed and helpful way.

I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place, and look forward to her response. I will also mention the shadow Minister for the SNP, the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), and my friend, the Labour shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton). It is good to see him in his place. He and I always have the same interest, compassion and understanding on these matters. We will probably have the same requests as well.

I start with a story about landmines, with which I am unfortunately well acquainted. Thirty-three years ago just passed on 9 April, a massive landmine detonated just outside Ballydugan, outside Downpatrick, killing four young Army soldiers. I tabled an early-day motion, published today, to remember the fact that 33 years ago, those four young men were murdered by the IRA. No one was ever held accountable. Every day of my life, that reminds me personally of what landmines mean. I knew three of those four young men well, and am of an age that means that I can remember when one of them was born. Those who have lived through a campaign of violence, terrorism and murder in Northern Ireland know that landmines were often the method of killing people, including soldiers, police and others who served Government. That 1,000 lb bomb left a crater in the ground; there was little for the families to bury. I remember that; it is very real in my mind, even today, 33 years later.

I have seen at first hand the devastation of landmines and terrorism. That sticks with a person, and it resonates with us in this sort of debate. The issue is how we address landmines, but they are something of which I am very aware; that is why, as I said to the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, I made time to speak today. She asked me to be a co-signatory to her debate application, and I was happy to be one. Sometimes there are pressures on our time—you know this, Mr Mundell, as you will be leading the debate at 3 o'clock—as we try to fit in all the things we need to do. It can put a bit of pressure on us, but we have to ask: can we do more to prevent this devastation?

I wish to put on the record my thanks to the HALO Trust, which was mentioned by the right hon. Lady and will no doubt be mentioned by others, and the other charities for all they do. This is a poignant occasion on which we recognise the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action; because of the recess, it was not possible to have the debate on that day—4 April—but the right hon. Lady felt that the debate was important, and I was happy to add my name to it.

As the right hon. Lady said, mine clearance does not happen overnight; I wrote that down in my speech when I prepared this morning. In the Falkland Islands, it took 40 years, but it was a priority, and an undertaking by our Government and Ministers ensured that it happened. It can happen, but it is not something that we can rush; it has to be deliberate, slow and cautious if all mines are to be cleared. It is not like a football match where players are running up and down the field; it is a long, laborious process, and we recognise that.

In the account that the Library always presents to us before debates to help us engineer and put our thoughts together, I read that the Solomon Islands, where the Battle for the Pacific took place, has only just cleared all its mines, 80 years later. That gives an indication of the timescale needed for mine clearance, but there must be a commitment to it, and a process for doing it.

Margaret Ferrier: What is probably most awful about landmines is that they are indiscriminate: they cannot tell the difference between an innocent civilian and the enemy, and they remain long after conflicts end. As we have heard, too many children have lost their lives because of that. Does the hon. Member share my concern about the significant reduction in UK Government aid for removal programmes, and agree that Ministers must reinstate the £53 million lost this year?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do. The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills called for that, and I endorse what the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) says. That is one ask of mine and of the right hon. Lady, and it will certainly be one of the asks of the two shadow spokespersons. The Minister has a bit of time to prepare an answer on how we can address that issue.

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines estimates that at least 60 countries remain contaminated by mines, and in 2021, at least 5,500 casualties were recorded. Most of those casualties were civilians, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West and the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said. What vexes me most—I suspect it vexes us all—is that, in many cases, the casualties are just children. I have six grandchildren. They are incredibly energetic. I am glad that it is my wife who looks after them most of the time; I was going to say that I would not have much hair left if it was I who did, but I have very little hair left anyway. When children go out, they want to play, run, jump and climb trees. We can imagine what happens in areas where wee children want to play and the dangers are not apparent to them. the destruction is very real.

As the right hon. Lady said, landmines affect future generations. It is so important to keep in place the money and investment that has been taken away, so that we can protect future generations and give them the

opportunity to enjoy life. The highest numbers of casualties were recorded in Syria, closely followed by Afghanistan. I attend Holy Communion at St Margaret's church when I am here; I did so on Wednesday. The Rev. Tricia Hillas from St Margaret's always has a different speaker, and just before Christmas we heard from a guy who was involved in a charity in Syria. He told us about the number of people in Syria—adults and children—who were disabled, having lost limbs. That stuck in my mind. It is not something I would have been particularly knowledgeable about. The charity helps those people directly; they do not have prosthetic limbs, so they use crutches and wheelchairs. It indicates the issues that need to be addressed. I know that Syria has not always been a great friend of the west, but I see past those things. I do not see where Syria is in the world; I just see the people who are injured and need help. Perhaps we need to focus on that.

Wendy Morton: The point about disability is really important in the development space. That is something I learned when I was in east Africa, in countries such as Rwanda. It is difficult enough for someone in this country who becomes or is born disabled, even though there is a lot of support. In many other countries, including those we have been discussing that have been affected by conflict, that support is not there. Disabled people are often not even able to get out of the house, because they do not have the prosthetic limbs, wheelchairs or crutches that we take for granted. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that reinforces the need for not just landmine clearance, but the building of capacity and adequate education, so that civilians are aware of the dangers on their doorstep?

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Lady speaks with great knowledge and understanding, and I do not think anybody present or watching on TV would disagree with her. With compassion in our hearts, we have to see how these people are affected and how we can help them. That is part of the reason why the £53 million reduction is so disappointing.

The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills referred to Princess Diana. If I close my eyes, I can see Princess Diana there in her top and jeans with her helmet on and the cover over her face, walking through the landmines. She highlighted the issue, as she did many others; HIV is another one that I always remember. She was not afraid to take on the difficult subjects, or to take the lead and raise awareness, as the right hon. Lady said. As we probably all do, I well remember exactly what Princess Diana did on the issue of landmines.

As the Minister is aware, the UK provides aid for landmine clearance through its global mine action programme, but I have to raise recent reductions in aid spending; that is one of my questions, just as it is a question for the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West and the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, who set the scene. The programme has been decreased by £53 million in the past year. The Minister knows that I always try to be respectful to Ministers, so when I ask the question, I do so only to try to highlight the issue. As the right hon. Lady said, there is more mine usage now, so it is not the time to decrease money; we should at least hold funding at that level. Some would say—I am probably among them—we should look for more. That is the real question we are all asking.

I understand—I put it on the record—that the Government have been incredibly generous. However, at a time of austerity, and when mine usage across the world has become much greater, it is time to reflect on that. My concern is that the reduction does not reflect the urgency of the situation. I sincerely ask the Minister to make it clear that the nation's view is that we must do all we can to fulfil our international obligations and, as was agreed, dispose of these landmines.

I could not contribute to a debate that involved landmines and not include Ukraine. I do not think there has been a debate on Ukraine that I have not attended, although it may have been a case of being here in Westminster Hall while trying to be in the main Chamber—no matter how good you are, Mr Mundell, you cannot be in two places at once—

Margaret Ferrier: You try, Jim.

Jim Shannon: Sometimes I try—the other me must be a cardboard cut-out.

Ukraine is a country that needs help. If we look at the time that it took to clear the landmines in the Falklands and in the Solomon Islands in the Pacific ocean—40 and 80 years—we know the job in Ukraine will be difficult. The other difference is that there is still conflict in Ukraine. I have watched the TV programmes and read the stories in the press; there was a story in the paper last week about Ukrainian mine clearing and the deliberate, slow and cautious way in which it must be done.

The issue is important if Ukraine is ever going to be able to get back to being one of the greatest agricultural producers of grain in the world. The farmers cannot go out into fields where there are mines. Some of those farmers, and their workers, have been injured and their tractors, combines and agricultural machinery have been damaged. Clearing landmines is important if Ukraine is to move into some sort of normality, and in a direction where peace can be restored—that is my hope and the hope of us all.

I respect, and am grateful for, the fact that we have a Government and a Minister who understand the issues. They understand the key role that we play. I say “we” because we are this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; as I always say, with great respect to the SNP spokesperson, we are always better together. I believe that we have a very significant role to play. We can lead, we can show the way and we can invest. I respectfully ask the Minister to ensure that the £23 million is restored.

2.12 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I agree with most of what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) says—he was doing so well. If anyone in this place could find a way of being in two places at once, it probably would be him. I thank, commend and congratulate the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for bringing the debate forward. It is very timely, and it is important that we pay attention to the issue and do not allow it to fall off the radar. We must continue the pressure. There has been broad agreement among everyone who has spoken and, with that in mind, I will do everything I can to try and be as constructive as possible, even where I think things could be done better or in a slightly different way.

[Owen Thompson]

It is clear that landmines sow a lasting legacy of danger, destruction, and death long after the conflicts are over. According to the United Nations, nearly 70 countries and territories remain contaminated by 110 million landmines. The cost of producing landmines ranges from \$3 to \$75, but the cost of clearing them is somewhere from \$300 to \$1,000 per mine. Landmines kill and maim between 1,000 and 2,000 people every month around the world; in 2021, 5,544 people were killed or maimed by landmines globally. Most were civilians, and half were children. We have already heard the reasons for that: children are less aware of the dangers. It would take 1,100 years to clear all the world's active landmines even if no new mines were laid.

Countless countries and territories are suffering the lasting, large-scale scars of landmines. The destruction caused is all the more acute due to their indiscriminate and disproportionate effect on civilians. Along with my SNP colleagues, I stand firmly by the United Nations' International Mine Awareness Day, and its message this year that mine action cannot wait. This year, the United Nations Mine Action Service not only highlighted decades of contamination in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, but drew attention to the recent explosive ordnance contamination in Myanmar, Ukraine and Yemen. Its goal is to bring attention to areas of the world that remain contaminated after many years, and where generations have changed their lives to avoid the threat.

There is no disputing that the UK Government have taken action, and I welcome that, but there are concrete steps that the international community could take to address the global danger of landmines, such as enforcing the inhumane weapons convention treaty and the mine ban—or Ottawa convention—treaty. The mine ban treaty is one of the most widely ratified disarmament treaties, with 164 state parties, but it is deeply unfortunate that there are still some notable exceptions, including Russia, the US, China, India, Pakistan, Myanmar and Syria. The United Nations continues to call for its universalisation, and 33 state parties are yet to complete their obligations under protocol V of the inhumane weapons convention, which requires the destruction of all anti-personnel mines in their areas. I join the calls to urge the Government to exert what diplomatic pressure they can to incentivise other states to sign up to and ratify the mine ban treaty, to ensure ratified parties fulfil their disarmament obligations, and to continue to engage bilaterally and multilaterally to ensure states fulfil their obligations under protocol V of the 1997 inhumane weapons convention.

It is deeply unfortunate—I have toned down my language to try to be as constructive as possible—that despite the renewed war in the European continent, funding for mine clearance programmes has been cut by £53 million in the past year. Despite a long-standing and urgent need for global mine clearance efforts, the UK Government are not fully playing their part. I am aware that they provide aid for landmine clearance through the global mine action programme, but, as part of the wider cuts to the overseas development aid health and wellbeing programme funding, it has been slashed. In October 2021, the Mines Advisory Group reported that FCDO aid funding for mine clearance projects had been cut by 80% from a three-year cycle of nearly £125 million to just £25 million. It has since

reported that those funding cuts particularly affected mine clearance projects in the middle east, and funding for programmes in Lebanon has been cut completely.

In April 2021, due to aid cuts, the HALO Trust had to cease de-mining projects in Syria—one of the countries most affected by land mines. The war in Ukraine clearly highlights yet again the ever-present threat of landmines, so it is inconceivable that the Government are content with cutting de-mining funding for the coming financial years. I again urge the Minister, in the most constructive, positive way I can, to please do whatever possible to reconsider that.

Across Ukraine, there is thought to be 174,000 sq km of land contaminated by landmines. That is an area larger than England, Wales and Northern Ireland combined. Despite a pressing need for a global collective response on landmines, the Government are not quite yet doing enough. Again, I encourage the Minister to reinstate the aid budget of 0.7% of GNI as an urgent priority, and ensure aid spending on de-mining programmes around the world is at the very least increased to pre-covid levels. Now that the FCDO has merged the conflict, stability and security fund into the new UK integrated security fund, it must detail how much money will be earmarked for de-mining projects.

As you well know, Mr Mundell, as the local Member for the trust, the Scottish Government are fully committed to playing their part in the global removal of landmines and the safeguarding of communities in conflict. In September 2022, the Scottish Government pledged £300,000 to the HALO Trust to clear mines and other explosives in Ukraine. As part of that, my SNP colleagues in Westminster and I will continue to push the UK Government to adopt an international development and conflict prevention framework akin to the good global citizen policy proposed by the Scottish Government's global affairs framework. As a good global citizen, Scotland will amplify marginalised voices on global issues such as migration, human rights, biodiversity and the climate crisis. We commit to listen and act in response to often unheard voices, especially those of women and young people and those in the global south, and to use the networks and platforms available to us to engage and to encourage more action and commitments from Governments at all levels.

I welcome the debate and am trying to be as constructive as I can, even though I see the shortcomings in the Government's position. It has been an excellent debate that has raised the issues and revealed the level of agreement. Having a united agreement on the need for action on landmines is something that I can very much agree with.

2.20 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton)—I hope she will permit me to call her my right hon. Friend—on securing such an important debate as near as we could get to 4 April. I was pleased to work with her when she was Minister of State at the FCDO, and I am very happy that she has continued to raise issues such as those we are debating today. Indeed, let me quote from one of the speeches that she made when she was a Minister, because it is very pertinent to what we are discussing this afternoon. She said:

“Our commitment to ridding the world of fatal landmines does not end with our territories being mine-free”,

and she committed £36 million to promote de-mining in countries such as Afghanistan, Lebanon, Vietnam and Yemen. Even though she is no longer a Foreign Office Minister, she is still pursuing the strong commitment that she has always had to ridding the world of these appalling weapons.

As we know, landmines have plagued communities across the world for decades. As we have heard, they are often left in areas that were once populated, thereby forcing those populations to move out, ruining livelihoods and destroying the infrastructure that is so vital to communities. However, as has already been pointed out by the right hon. Lady, it was not until 1997 that the landmine issue shot to international prominence, spearheaded by Diana, Princess of Wales, who walked through a minefield in Angola that had been cleared by the HALO Trust. Shortly after her visit, and following a commitment from the then Labour Government, the Ottawa mine ban treaty was signed, calling for all countries to unite and rid the world of these vile and inhumane weapons, which target innocent civilians. I was in the Chamber on the Friday in 1997—I think it was in November—when the treaty was debated and ratified, and I am very proud that I was there and voted for it.

I am pleased that the United Kingdom has played such a historic role in tackling landmines since the Ottawa treaty was signed. We have rightly supported some of the world’s most vulnerable countries to clear landmines after conflict, building up considerable knowledge and experience in the mine action sector. It is a source of great pride for this country that the two largest landmine NGOs in the world are British: the HALO Trust, of which I am proud to be an ambassador, and the Mines Advisory Group, with which I work regularly on these issues.

The fact is, though, that the potential of many countries is still being held back by the terror of landmines from long-ended conflicts, as every contributor to the debate has underlined. As we know, they restrict the movement of people and humanitarian aid. They deny people access to water and often delay peace processes. The proliferation of landmines means that land for productive use is often lost, and it hinders further development initiatives for the people who need it most. Indeed, over \$590 million was made available for de-mining activities globally in 2021, but that was, unfortunately, a 7% decrease from the previous year.

As we know, the vast majority of the funding comes from just a handful of rich countries, including the United Kingdom. The UK supports de-mining through its global mine action programme—MAP—via the FCDO. Sadly, as the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) pointed out, there has been a steady decrease in how much the UK funds that programme by. Indeed, as he pointed out, it was reduced by £53 million last year, to £89 million. I join him in urging the Minister and the Government to restore that funding. It is absolutely critical.

As of October 2022, 56 countries were contaminated with anti-personnel landmines. The most affected regions are Asia and the middle east, with 23 mine-contaminated states. There are still significant clusters in Africa, and in 2021 there were over 100 casualties in Colombia, a country I visited last year.

Wendy Morton: The hon. Gentleman speaks about landmine contamination and how long it can take to de-mine an area of land, and gives further examples of countries with landmines. It is estimated that explosives can take between 10 and 90 years to leach because of the casings and corrosion. Therefore, land is at risk for a long period of time. Now we have much better ways of decontaminating land, but does he agree that the urgency to go and tackle landmines becomes even more important? The longer they are in the land, the more contamination can occur. That must surely impact the ability to restore the land for agricultural use, for instance.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the right hon. Lady for her extremely important points. Indeed, when I was in Colombia last year I went to see the HALO Trust headquarters in Bogota. I was told that vast areas of land were contaminated with perhaps half a dozen mines, but of course nobody knew where they were. That meant that the whole area was out of bounds and could not be put into productive use.

As many right hon. and hon. Members will know, Colombia, like much of Latin America, is incredibly fertile. Drop a seed and it will grow into a plant or food or whatever is needed. The release of that land through decontamination is vital. I was impressed at the way that HALO had gone about decontaminating that land. There were very few landmines, but a huge amount of land was released for agricultural and development purposes. As we have heard, over 5,500 people were casualties of landmines in 2021, with just under half of them dying from their injuries. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, about half of the victims were children. That should bring great shame to every human being on the planet.

I would like to turn now to the war in Ukraine, as many colleagues already have. It is shocking to realise that it will take a minimum of 365 months, at this point in time, to de-mine Ukraine as a result of Russia’s illegal and unprovoked invasion. That is about 30 years. If that does not summarise the true cost of these appalling weapons, nothing ever will. Based on a calculation that the war ends today, the cost of the reconstruction of Ukraine would be more than \$500 billion. Each day of fighting results in at least a month’s worth of landmine clearance. It has to stop and I hope the world will work harder to make sure that it does.

Even more shockingly, the Ukraine Government estimate that around 40% of Ukraine—about 250,000 sq km—may now need to be searched and cleared of mines and unexploded ordnance. That equates to an area larger than the United Kingdom. More than 120 minefields have so far been identified in northern Ukraine alone. In addition to the anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, tens of thousands of artillery rounds are being fired every single day, with thousands failing to explode. I would like to ask the Minister what message it sends to the world that the UK still has not ratified protocol V of the convention on certain conventional weapons, which requires the clearance of unexploded ordnance from conflict zones.

In 2021, the then FCDO Minister of State, now the Foreign Secretary, told me that the Government were

“undertaking a comprehensive cross-Government review of Protocol V ratification”.

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

I would be grateful if the Minister could update the House on the Government's progress on protocol V of that treaty, if she is able to. If not, could she kindly write to me about it?

I pay tribute to the work that the HALO Trust is continuing to do in Ukraine and across the world. It has vital projects in Afghanistan, where this Government's botched evacuation certainly did not help the situation, and in Somaliland, Somalia and Ethiopia, where landmines are still a leading cause of civilian casualties. Indeed, we heard recently from General James Cowan, the chief executive of the HALO Trust, that he has been in talks with the Taliban authorities in Afghanistan to try to continue to employ women to clear those mines. It is vital to HALO that men and women from the local communities are part of the landmine clearance teams. They need to own it, as he always says, and be part of it, because it will benefit them. I praise HALO for that.

As I said, the HALO Trust employs local people and empowers populations with its work to keep their communities safe. The work does not stop at de-mining. In Somaliland, for example, HALO's environmental projects include the employment of local people to dig soil bunds to capture rainwater and prevent topsoil erosion, reseed grazing land, establish tree nurseries and plant saplings. I hope later this year to see some of those programmes for myself in El Salvador and Guatemala—part of the region I cover in my FCDO brief. That vital work is so important to the prosperity of our international partners and allies, as well as to ending conflict, so how are the Government working with NGOs such as the HALO Trust to further projects of that type?

Innocent civilians should never have to live in fear alongside landmines that could still detonate and kill or maim them in an instant. On the Opposition side of the House, as I am sure throughout the whole House, we are committed to empowering everyone who wants to help to rid the world of landmines. We look forward to working with them in Government to make the world a safer, more secure place. I am absolutely sure that the current Government share that full commitment.

2.31 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing this timely and always important debate and to colleagues for sharing their concerns and experience and, indeed, the passion they feel for this issue and for how we can continue to be a real leader in this area.

Our colleague the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I think I can say with confidence that he is a friend to us all—reminded us that the topic of the debate is not only about far-flung, war-torn countries that we see on our television screens. It can be very close to home, and indeed has been for him, and we all need to remember that landmines have killed and maimed our own neighbours and our own citizens. That is a sobering thought in a debate that often takes us to faraway countries.

I put on record, because I think he is about to stand up in the main Chamber, that the Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), would have been pleased to respond to

this debate, because the topic is at the heart of his brief, but he is currently occupied on those other Benches. It is my pleasure to be able to respond on behalf of the Government today.

Earlier this month, the world marked the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action, when we celebrate progress towards a mine-free world, despite the setbacks we continue to see. Of course, there is much more to be done, because these indiscriminate weapons continue to cost lives, rob people, young and old, of their limbs, destroy their livelihoods and hinder development opportunity.

The debate provides a good opportunity to reflect on the UK's world-leading work to rid the world of this menace, and I am grateful for the thoughtful contributions from all our colleagues today. I will do my best to respond to all the points raised but, as ever, where I do not have a proper, full answer to hand, I will ensure that the Development Minister and his officials respond in a timely manner.

The UK was among the first to sign the 1997 anti-personnel mine ban convention and the 2008 convention on cluster munitions, which have catalysed progress. The first, the Ottawa convention, now has 164 member states and 30 of them have met their obligations to clear territory contaminated by landmines. That includes the UK, with its responsibilities, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills knows well, as she announced the conclusion of our work in the Falklands back in 2020. I thank her for her work. I know her commitment in that space, and she will continue to champion other countries that have yet to be able to look up and breathe a sigh of relief that they are clear of mines after a war that their country endured.

In the Falklands, nearly four decades were spent clearing more than 10,000 landmines and other unexploded remnants of war. That eventually allowed them to be free of that deadly legacy, but four decades gives us an idea of the time involved, even for what we know to be a relatively small area of land. We are very proud of the completion of that project, which underlined and demonstrated the UK's commitment and real leadership on mine action. We continue to be a strong advocate for such work globally, including through our recent presidency of the convention on cluster munitions.

The hon. Member for Strangford educated me—I was not expecting to learn something today about my actual brief as the Minister with responsibility for the Pacific—about how the Solomon Islands only recently freed its citizens from the fear of landmines. It is safe to say that we learn something new every day. That is something I will be able to take with me as I travel around the Pacific islands. I will also consider how else the voice of the UK might be able to support such areas.

We are a generous donor, as well as a centre of expertise, including through the HALO Trust. I am sure, Mr Mundell, you are frustrated by not being able to champion one of your constituency's great charities and organisations today, but we all know you to be a doughty champion of it, so we all speak on your behalf in thanking the trust and the Mines Advisory Group, our other real leader in this field. They are world-renowned, mine action NGOs—I speak with great honesty, as I have worked closely with both. We are grateful for their brave and tireless work to rid the world of this scourge.

I have had the privilege of seeing both organisations at their training bases, meeting some of their experts and indeed being taught by those experts how to go about work on an area of contaminated land. They also do powerful work to educate young people who have to live in mined agricultural areas while demining continues. One can only imagine what is in such children's backyards. I found that even doing the simulated training and imagining being in that sort of situation was nerve-racking. The people who teach and support locals to develop those skills are genuinely extraordinary people: I record my thanks and that of all Members for their incredible work.

The sad fact remains, however, that 56 countries around the world remain contaminated by landmines and the explosive remnants of war. The number of people killed or injured each year is profoundly troubling: there were at least 5,500 casualties in 2021 alone, of whom more than 1,600 were children. That is not just historical; in the past year, new mines have been laid in Myanmar, and in Ukraine as a result of Russia's barbaric and illegal invasion.

New wars bring new horrors, with this long tail of threat to civilians who have to continue their daily lives among the minefields, even after the wars eventually run out of steam. That is incredibly difficult. We need to continue to find ways of dealing with that because, beyond people losing their lives and suffering life-changing injuries, the contamination harms the whole economy of a country, and society has a sense of unease, because it is unable to step away after its war. That hinders development and prevents people from being able to live freely and safely, which we all want to see.

We see that from farmers in Laos who are unable to use contaminated fields, to children missing school in Zimbabwe because they cannot get there safely. As colleagues have mentioned, people in Afghanistan are blocked from accessing basic services such as water supplies and healthcare by the deadly legacy of mines, including improvised devices. Now, on our screens, we see Ukrainians unable to return safely to their homes.

In my work as the Minister with responsibility for Myanmar I have worked closely with our teams who are presently based in Thailand because they cannot be in-country. They work with schools and in internally displaced people camps to teach children how to live among dangerous and continually newly laid minefields.

Wendy Morton: It is good to understand the Minister's perspectives from her time as Minister of State with responsibility for the Indo-Pacific. On education, does she agree that women have an important part to play? We often talk in this place about the role of women in development and the peace and security agenda, and they can often go into communities that perhaps a man cannot. They can have a role to play in breaking down barriers and boundaries and doing that really important education piece.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. In fact, female officers in the British Army have shared stories with me about serving with their male counterparts in Afghanistan and Iraq. They were often the only people able to go and talk to women in their homes to try and understand what the challenges were. They were able to work with those women to find

solutions. Those women simply could not engage with our male soldiers, even though they, of course, offered a similar relationship. We underestimate what can be done.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), has highlighted how, in many cases, HALO and others recruit and train women to be the expert de-miners themselves. In a practical sense, it is a motivating skill to develop, but it is an incredibly high-risk one. However, women are stepping up and taking on that protective responsibility to ensure that their children can get to school and go and collect water, and that people can use their agricultural land again to help their livelihoods.

My right hon. Friend is right. We need to champion women and consider not only how much strain they often carry in their communities through the ravages of war, but the skills they have to develop afterwards to help their families get back into an environment that will be safe for their children's futures.

That is why we will continue to support mine action projects across the world. As colleagues have highlighted, the global mine action programme—GMAP, as it is known—is our main vehicle for that. Over the four years from 2018 we invested £146 million across 14 countries. That helped to clear and confirm safe nearly 500 million square metres—Members should try to get their heads round that; it is a lot of land to check inch by inch—and saw more than 4 million people taught about how to stay safe around contaminated land.

We have explored options to attract new funding and led discussions at last summer's meeting of parties to the anti-personnel mine ban convention. We have also assisted countries in Africa and Asia to develop strategies and priorities for mine action and helped to build the capacity of their national implementing organisations.

There is no escaping the fact—colleagues have raised this—that our development budget has come under real pressure in recent years, and the pandemic and Russia's brutal war in Ukraine have taken resources in particular directions. Despite that, we launched the third iteration of our GMAP last spring, working with HALO and the Mines Advisory Group across eight countries. This included £2 million for an immediate response to tackle new contamination in Ukraine.

We will continue to build on our work this year. I can confirm a budget of £12.3 million to deliver de-mining, risk education and national capacity building globally, alongside additional funding for Afghanistan. In the short term, we are continuing to fund mine action work in Angola, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Ukraine and Zimbabwe. Through GMAP3 those countries have NGO-funded expertise continuing to quietly clear the mines and teaching local people how to do so for themselves.

We have signed a two-year £5.5 million contract for mine action work in Afghanistan, which encourages safer behaviours and increases access to basic services. Afghanistan consistently records the highest annual numbers of civilian casualties. My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills will be pleased to hear that we are making preparations for further, longer-term contracts covering multiple countries, including Ukraine, to replace the current short-term arrangements.

We are continuing to innovate. In Cambodia, we are using a development impact bond model, creating partnerships between the public, private and voluntary

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

sectors to solve challenges. We have signed an agreement with APOPO—do not ask me to tell you what it stands for; it is a Belgian acronym. It is an international non-profit mine action organisation that clears mines using specially trained detection southern giant rats—these are known as “hero rats”, obviously. Training can take nine months, and the rats will work for up to five years before retirement, developing skills to be able to identify and pinpoint where mines are. Agricultural experts will then be able to help local farmers to be able to grow organic rice in these newly and safely created land spaces, and then sell it. We hope they will be able to use their land once again to create an income for their families and communities.

I will highlight again that I am conscious of a number of questions that I am unable to provide answers to today, but I will ensure that those are provided to Members. We will continue our action to rid the world of landmines and deliver a safer, more prosperous future for those living under the shadow of these deadly weapons and other unexploded remnants of war. The UK Government’s commitment to funding expert NGOs that are teaching and clearing will remain for as long as it is, sadly, needed. We will also continue to advocate for the conventions, working with our international partners and funding our global mine action programme, including the innovative projects I have mentioned—and others that may come forward—to provide the chance of a safer life and the opportunity for a livelihood for all those left behind after wars end.

2.46 pm

Wendy Morton: We have had an excellent debate this afternoon. I am grateful to hon. Members for coming to Westminster Hall today and for the interventions

from the hon. Members for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), and also from my friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—it would not be a Westminster Hall debate without him, and he made, as ever, a really important and valuable contribution.

In her summing up, the Minister reflected that the issue of landmines is truly global, from almost on our doorstep to right around the world. We have demonstrated our commitment to and interest in the topic, and it was really interesting to hear from the Minister. We will keep pushing and gently nudging her on funding and commitments—I am sure she would expect that—but we will do it in a polite way, as she would also expect, because there is huge support for this topic across the House.

The Minister set out some of the things we can continue to push and look for in what the Government will be doing. She said she had learned something today about the Solomon Islands; well, I must admit, I had never heard of hero rats before, so I look forward to hearing a bit more about those. However, I will not necessarily end on a light point: this has been a serious debate, but it has been a very timely and good debate.

Finally, I am really pleased that you were able to be in the Chair today, Mr Mundell, because we know of your commitment to and passion for this topic. You are very fortunate to have HALO in your constituency. Thank you for chairing us and keeping us all in order.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered land mine awareness.

2.48 pm

Sitting suspended.

Medicinal Cannabis: Economic Contribution

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

3 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the economic contribution of medicinal cannabis.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating this debate. This slot on a Thursday afternoon is a challenge for many Members to attend because they have constituency commitments on a Thursday afternoon, but I am confident that we will have a good-quality debate and, importantly, that the issues I want to raise will be put on the record.

I am conscious that a number of these issues relate to the Department for Business and Trade and that my hon. Friend the Minister will obviously respond in his capacity as a Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care. I hope that if any issues are not within my hon. Friend's remit and he does not feel able to respond, he will undertake to take them forward with ministerial colleagues.

Many Members will have been introduced to the issue of medical cannabis by constituents getting in contact to tell them, as their MP, about the real difference that this form of cannabis has made or could make to their own or their families' lives. Such testimonies, along with scientific study after scientific study, led to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), when he was Home Secretary, legalising medical cannabis in 2018, and thereby ending the potential criminalisation of those living with or just trying to manage multiple sclerosis, cancer or epilepsy. That was a significant step forward for patients.

Some 17,000 UK patients are estimated to have been prescribed Sativex, nabilone and Epidyolex in the UK last year. I am sure that many Members of Parliament could tell a story from their constituents about what a difference such prescriptions have made to the quality of users' lives by easing agonising muscle stiffness, by reducing chemotherapy-induced sickness, or as a therapy for seizures, especially for children.

The 2018 legal changes were also a significant step for the medical cannabis industry in the UK. We should be clear that medical cannabis is just that. This is a legitimate industry, and an industry of the future. Its products do not come from humid, tinfoil-draped sheds or sunlamp-lit lofts; they come from laboratories and facilities that are as controlled an environment as those that synthesise a vaccine, for example. I know that to be the case, having seen at first hand such facilities being developed in my own constituency. The medical cannabis industry is one of legal and professional standards, rigorous regulators, approvals, licensing, inspections and almost endless specialist equipment—be it quantum sensors, microscopes or leaf barometers—not to mention stringent safety and security protocols.

Of note is not just the standards to which the cannabis is produced but the volumes produced. In the UK in 2021, some 59 hectares were harvested, producing

329 tonnes of cannabis for medical and scientific purposes. Of that, 213 tonnes were exported—more than half the reported world total. Beneath those impressive headline figures, though, is the impact that the industry can have on local economies and local communities. That is why I have been and remain very supportive of the development of a facility in my constituency by Hilltop Leaf.

Too often, investment in new industries is funnelled into enormous singular developments captured by large corporate interests, or it goes straight into cities. Rural and agricultural communities such as those I represent often get overlooked, with seemingly only wind farms and tourism receiving investment. The medical cannabis industry is an antidote to that.

In many ways, I feel the growing of medical herbs is a form of farm diversification—an evolution of horticulture that builds on local strengths and skills. I hope that the investment by Hilltop Leaf, with one of the largest greenhouses in the UK, will demonstrate that medical cannabis can have a transformational impact on local communities. It will bring a variety of good horticultural, administrative, managerial and logistical jobs that I hope will anchor young people, who often feel the gravitational pull of large cities for the want of opportunities in a rural area such as the one I represent, which has seen the demise of traditional industries such as textiles. It could also meet nearly 10% of the UK's 2019 domestic need.

For all the successes of the UK cannabis sector to date, it could be so much more. Bureaucratic, legal, administrative, regulatory, medical, licensing and planning issues all inhibit the industry's potential and hinder vital investment in rural Britain. Indeed, the over-onerous process for being licensed in the first instance has given me cause to worry about the development in my constituency stalling. I am afraid the UK's approach to the industry is incoherent and insufficiently consistent.

Yes, medical cannabis can be prescribed, but only by specialists, and that is predominantly being done outside the NHS, particularly in Scotland. Although I said earlier that in 2021 some 17,000 people received legal prescriptions for medical cannabis, it is conservatively estimated that next year there will be approximately 337,000 potential patients. That could be many times larger should new conditions be covered. This state of legality but inaccessibility is grossly unfair, and is contrary to the principles of our health service that those who can pay can get private prescriptions—or source their requirements from drug dealers—while those who cannot pay go without. All the while, there are almost 24 million prescriptions for opioids in the UK. Those figures, in differential terms, are staggering.

The potential savings for the NHS in the prescribing of medical cannabis have been detailed, with one US study showing a potential provider saving of 29% because of reductions in opioid dosage. As I said, by confirming the efficiency of medical cannabis in helping with certain conditions while stopping it being readily available, we are pointing those who are desperate to illegal markets. Do we really think that patient safety is best served by criminal suppliers, who provide a product of poor quality that is likely to contain contaminants because of the fashion in which it was grown? I certainly do not. Do we need to see the benefits for British growers, supply chains, jobs and tax revenues bypassed and go instead to criminals and smugglers, both here and overseas?

[David Mundell]

Clearly not, especially when the medical cannabis sector has a potential value to the UK economy of more than £1 billion.

Our incoherence also extends to cannabidiol, or CBD. We allow its purchase—indeed, the UK's CBD market is the second largest globally and was worth £300 million in 2019—but our hemp licensing measures mean that the flowers and leaves, where CBD is found, must be destroyed. As such, the CBD market fulfils its needs through overseas imports, and British supply chains do not benefit. Growers are necessarily forsaking the opportunity to yield a crop of £10,000 per acre, compared with £400 for wheat, because of this approach. Such yields would be a real boon for rural Britain.

If the UK's regulatory, legal and medical frameworks were in line with those elsewhere, it is estimated that up to 100,000 jobs of the future could be created, and they would be good-quality jobs, as I have already set out. It is an opportunity that should be within our grasp, but unfortunately we currently do not seem able to take it forward. On 14 November last year, I was disappointed when a fellow Member asked the Business Department about its willingness to take forward the approach to the medical cannabis industry as part of its medical sciences strategy and commitment for the UK to be a world leader in such fields; unfortunately, the then Minister gave what I regarded as a lukewarm and non-committal answer.

As I am sure the Minister and all present will agree, nascent industries need nurturing, and the medical cannabis sector is no different. Much like the plants that the sector grows, the industry is seeking the conditions to grow. I hope the Government will be minded to support the sector and the economic benefits it could bring, particularly to rural Britain. This should not be considered an ask for wholesale legalisation, which is a completely different debate; it is an ask for consistency and coherence for the industry, and for access to medical cannabis for NHS patients.

We need the various strands in Government to be stitched together to provide support, rather than maintaining a strange patchwork of overlapping and clashing components. The UK Government and, where appropriate, the devolved Administrations should therefore accept the need to review the prescribing process, medical guidelines, acceptable tetrahydrocannabinol levels, and the overlapping legal and regulatory components. My specific ask of the UK Government is that they appoint a senior official to do so holistically, and that individual should be mandated to engage directly with the industry.

With coherent and consistent oversight, and by bringing the UK into line internationally, the medical cannabis sector could help to get rural Britain, and particularly constituencies such as mine, growing economically. In doing so, we could supply our domestic market with homegrown supplies and, even more importantly, relieve the pain and suffering of hundreds of thousands of our constituents, if they could access the prescriptions they need.

3.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell)

for leading the debate and for setting the scene so well and in such a balanced way. In his introduction, he said that we all have constituents who have benefited from medicinal cannabis. I have one such constituent, and I want to speak about that young girl and her family, because I have seen at first hand exactly what medicinal cannabis can do to improve health, to lift the fortunes of a family and to give them the encouragement that they need.

As the DUP spokesperson for health, these issues are very important to me. I have seen at first hand the impacts that medicinal cannabis can have on people who are ill. It is sad that it does not work for everyone, but it has certainly worked in cases that I am aware of. There are success stories, but also a large proportion of people for whom it does not work. However, for those who are fortunate enough to see results, it is a crucial treatment that can ultimately save lives. I am here today to celebrate that.

By their very nature, issues such as this can sometimes be contentious. The right hon. Gentleman set the scene well and got the balance right. I congratulate him on that because he presented the issue well. This subject sometimes sparks debate, but we would try anything if it gave someone a better chance at life.

There is never a debate on this topic in which I do not highlight the benefit of regulated medicinal cannabis prescription by talking about lovely Sophia Gibson. She is a young girl who, at about six or seven years old, was having epileptic fits every day of her life. In my office, I have a photograph of her from when she was smaller. She is the daughter of Danielle and Darren and has Dravet syndrome, which is incurable, and she will continue to have seizures until her wee body can no longer cope.

Medicinal cannabis is not the cure for Sophia—there is no cure—but that young girl's quality of life has changed dramatically. I can remember when the epileptic fits were of such ferocity and in such numbers that it was impossible for that young girl to have a normal life, but today her life has changed. The prescription from the health board changed not only her life but the lives of her distraught parents. She was in hospital every month and was missing months of schooling at a time, but Sophia's THC prescription has enabled her to attend school, because the intensity and number of her epileptic seizures has drastically reduced.

I recall the meeting that I had in this House with the then Minister, Mark Field, and Sophia's mother, Danielle. I have said it before in this House and I will say it again: the Minister was such a help to Danielle, young Sophia and the whole family in moving forward. Ultimately, through Mark Field's help, the assistance of the health board back home and the Department here, Sophia was able to receive medicinal cannabis and her life changed. That is what I see: I see a real difference in a young girl who was potentially looking at a life that was going to get worse and worse.

I have a wee nephew. I often say this, and I say it with regret because medicinal cannabis was neither available at that time nor did I have knowledge of it. My sister, Joy, has one child. He has epileptic fits. I often wonder whether, if he had had access to medicinal cannabis, it would have been possible to have changed his life. I am not saying that would have been the case, but now it is too late, because he has had so many years with the condition that it is impossible to put his life back.

Sophia still needs 24-hour care, but she can also live a life with her family. It did my heart glad to see her travel, as she did just last year with her family to Disneyland Paris. The family always bring their pictures in to encourage me; it is good to see her progress through the pictures. I saw a picture of Princess Belle dancing with Sophia. That would not have been possible without the blood, sweat and tears, the dedication and commitment, of her mum and dad, who did not cease until their daughter got the medication—they would do anything for their child, as parents do; and how right they are—or without the Health Minister at the time, Mark Field. Nor would it have been possible without the will of this House to take steps to provide for the safe classification of this drug for medicinal purposes.

While I celebrate Sophia's victory, I also support my colleagues in trying to secure access for more children like her. That is why I am here today. When I saw the title of the debate, I automatically said to Naomi, my speechwriter, "I've got to be here for this debate—it's important to me." I have seen first hand the improvement to Sophia's quality of life, and I want more people to be able to access this treatment for that purpose. I want to clarify: I am not looking for a free-for-all—and I do not think the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale is either, by the way. I want a process that allocates the drug in specific circumstances, as directed by the Health Department. I do not think we are currently there.

There are so many companies that are investing in cannabis plant products for healthcare, because the benefits for those it works for are incredible. We know that the UK is the world's biggest producer and exporter of legal cannabis for medical and scientific purposes. Globally, there is a rising trend in the legal production and use of cannabis for medicinal and scientific purposes. Jazz Pharmaceuticals has offices in Oxford, Cambridge and London, and manufactures the products Epidyolex and Sativex, and Target Healthcare makes certain bedrocan cannabis oils in the UK. In 2019, a major US cannabis company set up its European headquarters in—guess where?—Belfast. Colorado-based Mile High Labs, which is the largest extractor of cannabidiol isolate in the world, established its base on the Boucher Road in Belfast, so we have moved forward.

The benefit of medicinal cannabis to individuals and their families, as well as the economic benefit that is starting to arise from it, is reason enough to review the approach. That is what the right hon. Member is asking for, and I support his request. We are talking about allowing wider production and delivery within—ever mindful of what I said earlier—the strictest of frameworks. I will be clear again: I am not in favour of legalised cannabis in any other capacity than GP or consultant-led, and within the strictest medical protocols. But I believe that we can and should provide a safe and effective product to help those who need it for specific reasons within the pro forma.

I again thank the right hon. Member for introducing the debate. Sophia is my example of a young girl who has progressed to the point where she can attend school regularly. I met her at one of the fun days down on the West Winds estate in Newtownards last year. What a difference I can see in that wee girl. The wee girl in the photograph in my office was, at the time, having fits every half an hour or 45 minutes. Today, her and her parents' lives have changed. In Sophia's case, medical

cannabis gave her a chance to live her best life with a debilitating condition. That is vitally important. I know each one of us in the Chamber wholeheartedly supports that. Can we make someone's life better? I think we can. Sometimes when we do so, it is such a magnificent occurrence that it leaves a lasting effect on us.

3.24 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on securing this debate and on the way he opened it. It is of course a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I agree entirely that if this were a debate about the wider use of cannabis, about encouraging its use or, worse yet, about its legalisation for recreational use, neither he nor I would be speaking in favour—we would be speaking strongly against. But that is not the debate we are having today. We are talking about the prescription of medical cannabis by doctors for use by patients such as Sophia, the hon. Gentleman's constituent. I will come on to my own constituent whose involvement in this process leads me to be here.

It is worth recognising that the debate about whether we should prescribe medicinal cannabis medicines to patients who can benefit from them has been resolved. We have had that discussion and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale mentioned, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) made that necessary change to the law in November 2018 so that such medicines can be prescribed within the law, and medicinal cannabis was rescheduled under the law to ensure that that was a legitimate process. That was, in my view, entirely the right change to make. I argued for it at the time, and I was involved in that process.

The credit must more substantially go to the family of my constituent Alfie Dingley. Alfie is a young boy whose circumstances are very similar to those of the constituent of the hon. Member for Strangford. He used to have a number of seizures a day of very great severity, and cannabis-based medicine has had a transformational effect on him. As a result, his family campaigned effectively and robustly for the change we have seen, and they deserve huge credit for it. I am delighted that they are here in the Public Gallery today. Alfie's mother, Hannah Deacon, has been campaigning not just for Alfie's benefit, but for the benefit of others who can also derive considerable beneficial change from these medicines.

We have already had a change to the law to allow medicinal cannabis to be prescribed and to deliver benefits to patients who can have it, but all of us who thought that that was a good change to make had rather expected that considerably more progress would have been made by now in ensuring that medicinal cannabis products are made available to patients who can benefit from them. It is a matter of profound sadness and regret, and it should be of concern, that only three NHS prescriptions have so far been made for these types of medicines. That cannot be right. I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will recognise that the logic of the legal change made in November 2018 was that we would make these medicines available to those who need them, and we are nowhere near that objective.

[Sir Jeremy Wright]

As I say, we have crossed the Rubicon. We have made the decision that medicinal cannabis should be made available to those who need it, and it seems to me that we need to follow through on the logic of that decision. The logic of that decision is not just that, in a medical context, we should make these medicines available to those who need them, but that we should also support their provision domestically. Therefore, the debate that we are having this afternoon, at the instigation of my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale, is about ensuring that the logic of our decisions is followed through, and that the UK economy can derive the necessary benefit from those sensible decisions.

We know that medicinal cannabis will be produced somewhere, and of course we must want it to be in order to have those products available for prescription within the NHS and the broader healthcare architecture. Why, then, would we not encourage the production of medicinal cannabis in this country, so that there can be a direct domestic financial benefit from it? It simply makes no sense to create a demand and then refuse to allow our domestic producers to meet it, and instead to import all the products.

Doing that is not just a wasted economic opportunity, but has a direct healthcare effect. That is why it is of benefit that my hon. Friend the Minister is answering this debate. If we were talking to a Minister from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, we could talk about the benefits that these crops bring in an sense. If we were talking to a Business Minister, we could talk more about the direct financial benefits that have been mentioned. However, since a Health Minister is here, we can also talk about the direct benefits of a more secure supply chain to those receiving these medicines.

This is not just a theoretical concern. Alfie Dingley and his family had periods of intense worry during the Brexit process. They were concerned about the security of supply of what Alfie needed, which at that point was coming from the Netherlands. The potential disruption of that supply was evident. I put on record my thanks to the Minister's predecessors, who were able to intervene and ensure some security of supply. However, that took up a good deal of ministerial time, because we were seeking to secure supply from overseas, when we could have so much more easily had that supply domestically. This is not just an economic argument, although I support the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale about the economic benefits. There is a direct healthcare benefit to ensuring that we have a domestic supply of these products.

I support the arguments made by my right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Strangford. It is sensible to follow through on the logic of the decisions that we have—in my view, rightly—already made. We must therefore support domestic supply and address the bureaucratic obstacles in the way of securing that supply, which my right hon. Friend rightly described. I hope the Minister will reassure us that he and colleagues in other Departments will be able to work together to achieve that security of supply and those financial and economic benefits. Most importantly, patients who benefit from these medicines should not just receive them by prescription, but be

reassured that their future and their supply is secure because we have developed a sustainable domestic industry in the production of medicinal cannabis.

3.32 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on bringing forward this debate. I put on record that I am a trustee of the charity Intractable Epilepsy, whose aim is to raise money to fund the purchase of medical cannabis for children with intractable epilepsy. Details are contained in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

It is appropriate that this debate is being held on 20 April. I wish a happy 4/20 to everyone—some people know what I am talking about. In March 2019, the then Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), reassured parents of children living with life-threatening epilepsy when he said that medical cannabis would be made available on the NHS. Of course, that never happened. Instead, he threw the problem over the wall and left the health professionals to deal with it, and they have not.

I think I have raised the issue of the provision of medical cannabis 36 times in this place. Every time, the UK Government have ignored my plea and reverted to their default position of “cannabis is bad”. Their lack of knowledge is evident in the way that they confuse synthetics such as Spice and Mamba with marijuana. That is the background against which parents and guardians have constantly lobbied the UK Government to provide medical cannabis on the NHS. I have tried to support them as best I can.

Clearly, we were wrong in our approach, and I apologise to those children and their parents for my shortcomings. I appealed to the moral or ethical need. I appealed to the compassion that this Government repeatedly tell us they have. I have found today that what I should have done is make the economic argument instead, as the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale has done. The UK Government have ignored the parents struggling to raise the thousands of pounds required just to keep their kids alive, but once we start highlighting the potential for making money, their ears prick up. I am not criticising the right hon. Member; if that is what it takes to get the Government to engage, then so be it, because engage they must. People are suffering needlessly.

I went to great lengths in my Budget speech to highlight the benefits to the UK Government of supporting the hemp industry. Much of the argument about medical cannabis is the same, because it is the same plant that we are trying to grow. The UK Government's insistence that cannabis is a class B drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and in schedule 1 to the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001, and that all varieties are treated the same, means that we fail to understand that cannabis is a very complex plant with over 483 compounds. Because of the UK Government's bias and ignorance, they have turned their back on the plant's potential and known benefits.

In fact, the hemp plant has over 50,000 uses, and medical cannabis is only one. Finding markets for hemp would not be a problem. I allow myself the indulgence of reminding us all of some of those uses. It is estimated that a medium-sized economically viable establishment

would employ 120 people. When hemp was widely grown back in the 16th century, in the enlightened days of King Henry VIII, it was used to manufacture rope and canvas for the King's Navy, but we now know that we can make clothing, shoes, biodegradable plastic, insulation panels, food, paper, biofuels and medicine. Those products will sell and be profitable, and the Government could reap the benefits.

But the benefits do not end there. Hemp absorbs 22 tonnes per hectare of atmospheric carbon during its four-month growing cycle. Hemp produces four times the biomass of the same sized area of forest, which makes it a far more sustainable source of material. Hemp does not need pesticides, insecticides or fertiliser to grow in the UK. Hemp has natural anti-microbial properties, so it passively cleans the air in buildings. Hemp has a high capacity for moisture absorption, which allows for controlled atmospheres in buildings. Hemp construction materials act as a long-term carbon sink. One £60 million investment would create a facility that is capable of growing 32,000 acres per year. That would sequester over 207,000 tonnes of CO₂ per annum. That is the CO₂ photosynthesised by the hemp in its four-month growth and does not include the carbon sequestered into the soil or the net effect of replacing high embodied carbon products from international supply chains and their emissions.

As a wee bonus, hemp regenerates the soil that it grows in, so it would work well in crop rotation. It increases winter wheat and spring barley yields by 16% to 18% when they follow hemp in rotation. It cleans groundwater, by which I mean that it has a deep root mass that absorbs residual pesticides and insecticides from the soil, which prevents run-off into streams and rivers, and therefore avoids costly remediation by the water companies to achieve UK drinking water standards. The barrier to this industry raising the funding it requires is licensing. This is the licensing problem that, as far as I am aware, Hilltop Leaf, the company mentioned by the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale, is currently banging its head against. Hilltop Leaf wants to grow and expand. It has built the facility, but it cannot get a licence from the UK Government to allow it to expand.

The problem with licensing is the categorisation of cannabis. To make the cannabis industry a success, the Government have only to open their mind to the reality of what it is and distribute the appropriate licences to the appropriate growers. That will be possible only if cannabis is re-categorised. I welcome everything and anything that encourages the provision of medical cannabis, but the UK's Government's knowledge has to increase if they are truly to capitalise on the hemp plant and provide the good outcomes that are available. I would prefer the UK Government to come to the table driven by a desire to provide medicine for people suffering from a range of conditions—and we will need a supply chain from private companies to do that—but if they are drawn closer by the lure of tax revenue, so be it. But we cannot wait any longer. The patients who require medical cannabis to help them towards better lives have waited far too long for this Government to recognise their needs and act accordingly.

Finally, the argument that we need more research is no longer viable. The argument that cannabis is bad and that we cannot countenance its use is misplaced. Rather than standing on the sidelines shuffling their feet, it is

now time for the UK Government to be proactive in funding and promoting the growth of the feedstock, the academic research and the production of the medicines, in providing and promoting the necessary training for GPs to allow them to prescribe, and in ensuring that the legal framework exists to allow those in the medical profession to carry out their duties, while protecting them and their patients, which by my reckoning would mean the involvement of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Business, the Home Office, the Department of Health and Social Care and—as there is no show without Punch—the Treasury. Minister, it is time to go to work.

3.40 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and to be present for this debate. I take what the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) said about it being in a late slot on a Thursday, but it is an important debate, and I am pleased that we have had time for contributions.

The right hon. Gentleman clearly outlined the case for a legitimate industry of the future. He asked the Government for consistency and coherence in their approach to the industry. I wish him luck on getting Government coherence on policy for many nascent industries, but the point was well made about good standards of production and the importance of jobs, particularly in rural economies such as the one he represents.

Many people present—and, on other occasions, many who could not be here this afternoon—have spoken movingly about constituents, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) did. He spoke about the difference that earlier movement would have made to his nephew.

We welcome the constituents of the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), who were present to hear the debate, as they have been on many similar occasions over the past few years. He made the sensible point that the 2018 decision logically necessitated action from the Government, and said that the insecure supply chain is worrying for so many families across the country. Having an industry in this country would alleviate that worry.

Finally, we heard from the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), who has raised the issue 36 times. I work well with him on Committees, and he is a persistent campaigner on this and many other subjects, so I suspect he will be here for a 37th and a 38th time as well. He has done a huge amount of work in the area. He took us on a trip into history, and spoke about the importance of many such plants to the wider economy, and on the need for the Government to have more knowledge when it comes to the logic of their decision making on supporting the industry.

This debate is about the economy, and points have been made well. As we have a Health Minister present, however, it is worth recapping why we have not made greater progress since 2018, in particular for those campaigners who worked so hard. Despite that 2018 decision, the trials and clinical research that would help the wider industry have moved at a glacial pace, so across the NHS, since 2018 only five people have been prescribed medical cannabis. That is ridiculously slow, and so many people have to go private.

[Karin Smyth]

Five years later, it is totally unacceptable that so little progress has been made. It would be helpful if the Minister could set out what steps he is taking to empower and accelerate research in this space. I hope he will not dodge the question by saying that the issue is simply one for clinicians. The Government have a responsibility—the Minister is nodding, and we await his reply with interest, but there seems to be a lack of urgency on the issue, which is concerning. People are suffering right now. We have heard again this afternoon about children who are fitting, sometimes 100 times or more. Accessing care is, in some cases, pushing families to the brink of destitution. We should do everything we can to support those people.

If research is needed before clinicians feel comfortable prescribing, then it is incumbent on the Government to support clinicians. We need more streamlined clinical trials and better engagement with clinicians. We do not want to be back here in another two years, having a rerun of this debate. In 2020-21, the then Minister said:

“It will take time to generate further evidence and see the results of clinical trials. The Health Secretary and I are committed to doing everything in our power to accelerate this work.”—[*Official Report*, 4 November 2021; Vol. 702, c. 1120.]

If the Minister could update us on where this work has got to, and whether the Government are any closer to finding a solution, that would be welcomed by people tuning in today, and to the families present.

Finally, I would be grateful if the Minister set out what action he has taken to support people in the system right now—those living in extreme pain who are paying thousands of pounds to access treatment. There is consensus on this issue, as we have heard. The debate has been had and a decision has been made, but we can and should do better. In that spirit of consensus, we would all like to see some progress from the Minister.

3.45 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on securing this important debate, which would be considerably better attended if it was held on any other day, because I know from my inbox and from speaking to Members from across the House that there is considerable interest in this issue.

Although this is the first debate on this important topic that I have responded to as a Health Minister, I know that the House has debated medicinal cannabis at great length in the past, in good, constructive debates. I appreciate the depth of passion that hon. and right hon. Members from across the House have on this issue. I recently met members of the all-party parliamentary group for access to medical cannabis under prescription and, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I visited one of Jazz Pharmaceuticals's sites to learn more about the industry, the applications of its products—the medicines—and the challenges that it faces. I also learned about the huge opportunities for not just UK life sciences and UK plc, but, importantly, our NHS and patients.

I note that the interest from my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale is largely a constituency one; he talked about Hilltop

Leaf. He has long championed investment in Scotland, particularly in rural and remote areas, where it has sometimes been a challenge in the past to attract certain high-skilled jobs. This issue is an example of that—and here, the investment would be accompanied by research capability. My right hon. Friend has eloquently and articulately made his case. I am very much alive to the fact that this is a complex issue, and complex issues rarely have simple solutions. I will try to respond to as many of the points that he and other hon. Members have made in the available time, which is reasonably substantial—in a Westminster Hall debate, it is rare to have more than seven or eight minutes in which to respond.

As my right hon. Friend pointed out, this issue crosses multiple Departments—the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Business and Trade and, vitally, the Home Office, which has been alluded to, and NHS England. There was mention of the calls to grow the UK CBD industry, and hemp farmers' harvests. I am straying somewhat out of my health remit for a moment to polish off some of these points, in so far as I have the bandwidth to do so. I understand that the Home Office has no plans to permit cannabis cultivation without a licence—my right hon. Friend pointed to the licensing programme and the challenges thereto—or to remove the distinction between the industrial hemp regime and the standard cannabis cultivation regime. I cannot say anything more specific on that. As I hope my right hon. Friend will agree, it is well outside my area of knowledge and expertise, and my brief. However, I do understand, having done some rudimentary research and obviously from my conversations with Jazz Pharmaceuticals, that this relates to plants being grown outside versus inside, and the use of leaves and flowers specifically.

Ronnie Cowan: If the Minister is struggling to understand, I am more than happy to give him a copy of the report by the all-party parliamentary group on industrial hemp and CBD products called “A Plan for a Legal and Regulated UK Hemp and Cannabis Sector”.

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Member for that; I will gladly take a copy on the way out. I hope he will excuse the fact that I am not an expert in this field, but I will happily take that report as my weekend reading and read up on the subject. I certainly agree to take this up with my counterpart in the Home Office, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale requested, and I am sure he will, too. I will especially take away my right hon. Friend's important points on licensing, and on how the Government can support companies that want to invest in the UK, or that are here and want to diversify their agricultural business, and want to get the licences required to grow these products.

Sir Jeremy Wright: All of us understand that the Minister does not speak for each of the Government Departments responsible for this area, and I know he will take away from this debate that nobody is arguing that there should not be licensing of this process. There are obvious concerns that need to be met by regulatory intervention. The concern is the fragmentation of the regulatory landscape that applies to those seeking to grow these products. I am sure that the Minister can

assist us by helping to better co-ordinate the way in which regulation is applied, as we are not seeking a removal of licensing.

Will Quince: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his intervention. I think we are probably in violent agreement on this point. I cannot specifically speak to regulation or licensing from a Home Office perspective. We are talking about a controlled drug; that may come as a disappointment to the hon. Member for Inverclyde, but it is—and is likely to remain, I hasten to add—a controlled drug. I will turn later to regulation from the perspective of the Department of Health and Social Care, but it is really important that there be consistency and coherence, and that we treat these products as we would any other medicinal product. However, my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale makes his point well, and I will raise it with Home Office colleagues.

More broadly on growing a UK CBD industry, I am of course aware of the growing consumer CBD wellness market. One only has to walk down any high street to see CBD products advertised in windows, and indeed in major supermarkets. DEFRA, which I did not mention, and the Food Standards Agency are taking action to regulate this side of the market. Importantly, that will protect consumers by ensuring that only safe, high-quality products are placed on the market. That is vital. Consumers will also be protected against misleading health claims. I was recently told about CBD products that come in aluminium cans, but in fact the CBD remains on the aluminium and is not contained in the product. That is just one example. This is a very complex area that I do not want to delve too much into, as it is very much a DEFRA and Food Standards Agency lead.

The Food Standards Agency is working closely with the Home Office on how CBD products are regulated, considering their composition and the possible presence of a controlled substance. This is very much a live issue, and I am told that the Home Office has sought the advice of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. I understand that the Government intend to respond to the ACMD recommendations on this matter shortly.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) both raised a point about regulatory barriers. Not that this reminder is needed, but it is perhaps helpful if I remind the House that cannabis-based medicines are controlled drugs and are therefore regulated by the Home Office, which is responsible for all controlled drug regulation legislation. Then there is the controlled drugs licensing regime, which supports cultivation, research and, where the issue crosses over into the health sphere, clinical trials in the UK. This licensing regime enables the possession, supply, production and import and export of those controlled drugs to support industry, pharmaceutical research and healthcare. However, more and more these products are being grown in the UK, including Jazz Pharmaceuticals, for use in research.

Ronnie Cowan: This time, when the ACMD makes recommendations to the Government, will the Government acknowledge and accept them? They have knocked back its recommendations a couple of times in the past, most recently over nitrous oxide.

Will Quince: The hon. Member tempts me—it is always tempting—to respond on behalf of another Government Department and Minister. I mentioned that because it is my understanding that the Government intend to respond to the report and the recommendations. I am not the responsible Minister, so it would not be appropriate to comment, but I will gladly point the hon. Member in the direction of the Home Office Minister who will have responsibility for responding, and will ensure that he has the opportunity to have a conversation with them.

The point I was making is that the overall legislative framework on illicit drugs seeks to control harmful substances while enabling appropriate access to those drugs for legitimate medicinal research and, in exceptional cases, for industrial purposes. The example I touched on is Jazz Pharmaceuticals, which—I do not believe this is a secret—is providing a product for clinical trials here in the United Kingdom. That is something that I think we all welcome. I know that the legislation has recently been reviewed by the independent ACMD, which concluded that no legislative amendments are currently required, as there is not yet sufficient evidence that the law needs amending.

Turning to a key point of the debate—cannabis for medicinal use, which falls firmly within my sphere of influence—I am hugely moved by so many of the cases that I have heard about, and I will come back to the specific cases that right hon. and hon. Members have raised today. These are really difficult, because my overriding priority as a Health Minister must always be to ensure that patients have access to medicines that are proven to be safe and effective. That is the biggest challenge, and it is why I am committed—the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) rightly challenged me on this—to galvanising research in this area; that is key to unlocking so much of this debate.

The prospect of a future in which more licensed—I put the emphasis on “licensed”—cannabis-based products that are proven to be safe and effective can be prescribed on our NHS to help relieve suffering is genuinely exciting. That is where I desperately want us to get to as quickly as possible, but herein lies the problem. There are clinical concerns, which, having spoken to clinicians, I share, about the limited evidence on the safety and efficacy of unlicensed cannabis-based products. Only in a few cases have enough clinical trials been done to prove scientifically that the drug is safe and effective. However—I want to labour this point—progress is being made.

Let me turn to the cases of Sophia and Alfie, which were raised by the hon. Member for Strangford and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam. I have two young children and am deeply moved by these stories. The debate around medicinal cannabis often centres on children with difficult-to-treat epilepsy, for whom I think the law was changed under my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), when prescribing was made legal in November 2018. Of course, as right hon. and hon. Members have pointed out, that was to enable those children to access a product that their families believed would ease the symptoms of their desperately difficult-to-treat conditions, if a prescriber deemed it clinically appropriate.

I know acutely, because I have spoken to campaigners and members of the all-party parliamentary group, that there is disappointment that the law change did not relate to routinely being able to get these products,

[Will Quince]

funded, on the NHS; that is rightly governed by a range of processes and procedures, to ensure the equitable distribution of funding. The NHS prioritises medicines that have proven their safety, quality, efficacy and cost effectiveness. Coming back to the heart of the issue—the hon. Member for Bristol South is right to push me on this—that is why research is absolutely essential, and I will talk about that a bit more in a moment. The Government have done all we can to remove legislative barriers, but it is now largely up to the cannabis industry to prove that its products are safe and effective for children.

Ronnie Cowan: What you are saying is that if I can afford to pay for a private prescription, I can access medicine that you are saying is not proven to be effective, because you are not going to allow its use on the NHS; it has to pass other tests. What about bedrocan? That is manufactured in the United Kingdom, so we do not have to import cannabis from the Netherlands anymore. Hilltop Leaf wants to grow and help to produce the product. The supply chain is already there for us, but you will not allow it to be prescribed. You will not train GPs, and you will not give them the legal framework to work in so that they can actually prescribe that for children on the NHS, but if I can afford to buy it privately, I can buy it privately.

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman raises a fair point, but he raises it as if this is something new or novel; it is not. All medicines in this country are either unlicensed or licensed. For use and prescription in the NHS, they need to be licensed. That means that they have gone through both the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency process and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence process, which proves that they are safe, effective and—through the NICE element—cost effective. That is the difference here.

The “cost effective” factor relates to NICE. That is the reason I talk about why it is important that the cannabis industry steps up and proves that its products are safe and effective. I did not talk about cost effective; I am talking about safe and effective, because that element is through the MHRA. Let us not forget that many of these cannabis-based companies are multinational; they are not telling me that they cannot afford to go through the same process that any other pharmaceutical company can go through and has done to get their products prescribed through the NHS. Part of it is research and part of it is those companies stepping up and proving that their products are safe and effective for these children, more generally, through the MHRA process.

Ronnie Cowan: I am curious. What we have done is—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. Can the hon. Gentleman return to parliamentary language in this intervention? I am not participating in this debate at all. The hon. Gentleman referred to “you” in his last intervention, so I would be grateful if he could return to normal language.

Ronnie Cowan: The Minister is saying that he is allowing a licence for a product to be manufactured in the United Kingdom, in East Kilbride, so that is okay.

We are allowing it to be manufactured here in the United Kingdom—that is all right. We are saying that people cannot get it on the NHS, but it is okay for other people to have it. Surely it has passed all the tests that we need it to.

Will Quince: I do not want to labour the point, but the point is that it has not passed those tests. It is either a licensed product or an unlicensed product. To be licensed, a product must go through the MHRA process. That is something that these products have not done to date. Yes, they can be manufactured here and prescribed privately, at the risk of the doctor—the private general practitioner—but for a product to be prescribed on the NHS, it needs MHRA and NICE approval.

There are some exceptions to that, because the law was changed in 2018, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam referred to, for a specialist doctor or for some very specific conditions. He asked why there have been only three prescriptions. I did not know that that was the exact figure, but I will check; regardless, it sounds very low. I suspect that the reason is that the decisions are taken at the doctor’s own risk, and among general practitioners there is reticence to prescribe an unlicensed product that has not gone through the MHRA and NICE process.

Sir Jeremy Wright: The Minister is probably right, but I am sure that when he looks at this again he will also want to look at the NICE guidelines that apply, which are extremely restrictive. The risk to an individual doctor from making a decision to prescribe will be perceived to be much higher if the NICE guidelines appear to deter such a prescription. The Minister is right that there are many elements to this, but one of them is how much we encourage doctors to believe that this is the right thing to do. I go back to the point that I was making: there is some logical dissonance here. We have said already that it is right to reschedule these products as far as the Home Office is concerned. We are starting to see prescriptions in the NHS, but not in the numbers that will benefit the maximum number of patients.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. We have not been short of time this afternoon, and every hon. Member has had the opportunity to speak. Interventions should be brief and to the point.

Will Quince: Thank you, Mr Stringer. My right hon. and learned Friend makes a good point. When we meet the members of the APPG, it is very hard not to be moved and to want to do all in our power to bring about the change that people want to see. I have considered the calls to change NICE guidelines, which have recently reviewed the basis of these products, but I am afraid the guidelines are unlikely to change until the evidence base develops, and that will happen through clinical trials and evidence. That is why I say all roads lead back to building an evidence base and a clinical trials base. That is the crux of this debate.

In January, the National Institute for Health and Care Research issued guidance recommending that the NHS prescribe cannabidiol to patients with a rare, seizure-causing genetic disorder, which is, I think, the fifth condition for which a cannabis-based treatment

has been approved by regulators and offered to NHS patients in England. I understand that the treatment is also available and approved in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The NHS now funds thousands of these medicines each year.

I mentioned Jazz Pharmaceuticals earlier. I am not sponsored by it; it just happens to be the manufacturer and provider that I visited. It is a good example of the trailblazers in this space that not only create, but undertake the research, manufacturing and—the key part—licensing of cannabis-based medicines. It has shown what can be done. The key is very much in the research.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale mentioned consistency and coherence in policy, which is why it is key that we treat cannabis-based products as we would any other medicinal product that we wanted to prescribe on our NHS. There is an economic case as well, although that is not what drives the Government. My whole focus in this is what is right for our NHS and patients. I am aware that there is huge hope and patient demand for access to medicinal cannabis, and that it is claimed that it can help with an array of medical conditions from chronic pain to anxiety; I believe there is also research under way at the moment on how cannabis-based products might be able to help with psychosis. I very much hope that those trials are successful. That is the right approach.

To date, much of the evidence suggesting cannabis could be an effective medical treatment is anecdotal or observational. As I mentioned earlier, only for a handful of conditions have enough clinical trials been done to prove scientifically that the drug is safe and effective. However, I am acutely aware that there are thousands of patients who now pay to access those unlicensed products on private prescriptions. Having spoken with campaigners and members of the APPG, I also know that some patients believe that funding cannabis on the NHS will reduce overall healthcare costs by alleviating symptoms and reducing the extent of hospital visits and other treatments. I understand and hear that case, but—I apologise for labouring the point; I have to keep coming back to it—before any new medicine can be proven to be cost effective, it must be proven to be safe and clinically effective. That is why research is so essential.

The Labour Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bristol South, asked what steps we are taking. That is a challenging question, because it is a pioneering area of research. Following collaborative work with clinicians and patient representatives, the NIHR and NHS England have confirmed support for two clinical trials into early onset and genetic generalised epilepsy. If you will permit me, Mr Stringer, I would love to use this debate to highlight a tender opportunity that will be launched by University College London in the next few weeks. UCL is seeking a supplier to assist in a world-first randomised control trial comparing cannabis-based medicines containing CBD and THC in the treatment of drug-resistant epilepsies in adults and children. I hope that that tender process is successful and that UCL finds a commercial partner to supply products for the trials so that they can commence as soon as possible.

Ronnie Cowan: I have three kids and two grandkids. If one of them was suffering from intractable epilepsy and I had them on bedrocan, and they were either

seizure-free or had the condition under control, I would not want to hand them over to a random control test where they might be fed a placebo and therefore incur more damage. Would the Minister?

Will Quince: That is a difficult question to answer. We need people to take part in clinical trials, which are the answer to so many of the challenges that we face in the health sphere. That is how we build the evidence base. I do not know what the study will involve in terms of the detail and the potential for a placebo, but I will put the hon. Gentleman in touch with UCL and those who are looking to run the trial so that they can give him a measure of comfort and reassurance. On his point more generally, the biggest risk is that the industry does not engage with the tender process. Notwithstanding the hon. Gentleman's point, I hope that all right hon. and hon. Members here today will help me by amplifying my call for the cannabis industry to come forward and engage with this pioneering and world-first research. I have also committed to a roundtable with the all-party parliamentary group, and I invite all right hon. and hon. Members in the Chamber today to attend that, too, because it is very important that we hear all of the issues.

Once again, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale for securing this really important debate. I look forward to engaging with him and Members from all parties. To the point made by the hon. Member for Bristol South, I am absolutely committed to better determine why the cannabis industry is not, in the way that so many other pharmaceutical companies do, investing in the routine research required to prove that its products are safe and effective. I will of course explore how best to engage with industry on the issue. Until then, I implore companies to explore supplying their products to the UCL clinical trials. As I have said, they will be a world first and will give us the evidence that we need to determine whether the products should be funded in the NHS. I wish them every success. I genuinely hope that they provide that evidence base.

On the matters concerning the cultivation and licensing of cannabis and cannabis-based products, I will, as I promised my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale, raise that with my counterpart, the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, who I know will champion this cause, too. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this afternoon's debate.

4.12 pm

David Mundell: I feel that we have had a very useful debate. Like you, Mr Stringer, I chair these sittings and it is extremely good to get half an hour from a Minister rather than five minutes. Although it was not necessarily comfortable for him, we were able to cover a lot of ground. Whether deliberately or otherwise, he came back to one of the issues that I raised, which was the need for co-ordination in Government on this issue. The hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) read out the list of Government Departments with an interest in this matter, and I am sure there are others that were missed, such as the Cabinet Office and the former bailiwick of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), the Law Officers. There is a need for co-ordination. I do

[David Mundell]

not think the Minister was saying this, but we cannot push back to the industry and say, “Well, actually, it’s your job to co-ordinate all these different bits in Government.” The industry needs to have a clear “in” or conduit to Government to discuss and engage on these issues.

I fully understand, having been a Minister myself, that it is not possible to commit the Home Office—of all Departments, it is certainly not possible to commit the Home Office. We know how government operates, but we need to have a co-ordinated approach with which the industry can engage. Of course the Minister is right that this should not be economically driven in terms of the clinical decisions, but we have already made the decision, as my right hon. and learned Friend said. We are not debating whether this should be done; that decision has been made, and now we want to do it on a basis that benefits not only the patients, but the economy of the United Kingdom.

It is always poignant to hear individual examples. In any debate in which he participates, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is particularly good at bringing the discussion down to the personal level of individual examples, and I thank him for doing that today, as I do my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam. I have had the pleasure of meeting Alfie’s mother in my constituency. She is a very powerful advocate, but I do not believe, or

think that anybody who has taken part in this debate believes, that the pain and suffering of anybody should be the requirement for us to do the right thing.

I was remiss in my opening remarks in not referencing the APPG, because I have engaged with it and particularly the hon. Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), who are also strong advocates on these matters.

Although I did not agree with everything that the hon. Member for Inverclyde said, which is often the case, what I did admire particularly was his passion for this subject, which came across clearly. It is shared by many hon. Members across the House.

I welcome the opportunity that we have had to air the issues, and the Minister’s full and well intentioned response, but we need to see action. I reiterate that the principal ask is for co-ordination within Government to take this forward. We are not requiring those in the industry and those lobbying for patient interests to manage the process across a wide range of Departments. That is one doable ask that could flow from today’s debate, and I hope that it will.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the economic contribution of medicinal cannabis.

4.17 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 20 April 2023

CABINET OFFICE

State of the Estate in 2021-22

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): I have today laid before Parliament, pursuant to section 86 of the Climate Change Act 2008, the “State of the Estate in 2021-22”. This report describes the progress made on the efficiency and sustainability of the central Government estate and, where relevant, records the progress that Government have made since the previous year. The report is published on an annual basis.

[HCWS732]

EDUCATION

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel: National Review Phase 2

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): The child safeguarding practice review panel today published phase 2 of its national review into safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings. I want to thank the panel for their vital work on this review which has focused our attention on this particularly vulnerable group of children and brings to prominence their distinct needs. I am grateful, too, that the review highlights the importance of care provision being respectful and non-discriminatory. All children with disabilities and complex health needs deserve the best support, protection and care from all those who are charged with looking after them.

I was appalled to hear of the abuse and failings in three dual-registered children’s homes and residential special schools in Doncaster, owned by the Hesley Group. Due to the ongoing live criminal investigation, I am unable to comment on the specifics of the case, but my thoughts are with the children and their families who suffered abuse and neglect in settings where they should have been safe and cared for.

I, and the Department’s officials, take the welfare of these children incredibly seriously and we have taken swift action to improve children’s safety in response to phase 1 of the review. Most importantly we have now received assurance that all local authorities have reviewed the safety and welfare of all children placed in specialist residential provision. This is an area where we all need to remain vigilant given the inherent risks in the nature of residential provision which the report identified. In January, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education met with providers of residential special schools and children’s homes to consider the changes needed to ensure that disabled children with complex

health needs are kept safe. We have also been working with stakeholders including the Local Authority Designated Officer Network, Ofsted, the Home Office and the Association of Directors of Children’s Services to review the role of the local authority designated officer, the officer responsible for managing allegations against adults who work with children.

Our comprehensive reform programmes to transform children’s social care and the experiences for children and young people with SEND lay the foundation for improving outcomes for this group of vulnerable children. As we consider the review’s phase 2 recommendations, we will continue to engage with providers to tackle the issues that the review highlights. We are working closely with the sector and with care experienced young people to review the current regulatory system governing the care of children who are looked after. In “Stable Homes, Built on Love” we committed to developing plans for a financial oversight regime of the largest providers of children’s homes and independent fostering agencies, and we are working with regulatory bodies to understand what more is needed to strengthen their inspection and regulatory powers to hold providers of children’s homes to account.

We agree with the panel that safe, sufficient and appropriate provision is needed for all children with disabilities and complex health needs. That is why, in the SEND and alternative provision improvement plan, we have committed to introducing local SEND and alternative provision partnerships. These will bring together partners across education, health and care to set out the provision and services that should be commissioned, in line with the national SEND and alternative provision standards. We plan to publish non-statutory guidance outlining expectations for local partnerships and will seek to introduce primary legislation at the next available opportunity to put these partnerships on a statutory footing.

In addition to this, in “Stable Homes, Built on Love” we described our vision for regional care co-operatives to promote better collaboration between children’s social care and partners in the commissioning and delivery of homes for looked after children. We are investing in two pathfinders to co-design and test the model, and will work with the pathfinders to include measures to improve commissioning for children with disabilities and complex health needs, as recommended by the national panel.

We value the children’s social care workforce and we agree with the review findings that highlight the importance of a stable and skilled workforce in children’s homes and residential special schools. We have already committed in “Stable Homes, Built on Love” to develop a programme to support improvements in the quality of leadership and management in the children’s homes sector and will be exploring proposals for introducing professional registration of the residential childcare workforce. We recently launched a workforce census which included residential special schools and covers recruitment, retention, diversity and qualifications and training of the workforce. Most significantly, our reforms prioritise compassion at the heart of the care system to create stable, loving homes.

We need to ensure that children with disability and complex health needs are fulfilling their potential and have committed to track the experiences of children with a disability through the care system. We will establish

pathfinders in up to 12 local areas, to start delivering our family help reforms. This will provide the right support at the right time so that children can grow up safely and thrive with their families. We will incorporate a strong focus on specific support for disabled children and their families in our pathfinder testing.

Listening to the voice of all children is important and is particularly significant for disabled children. This year we will consult on revisions to the national standards for advocacy and guidance for children and young people. These draft standards apply to children in receipt of social care services, residential settings (including residential special schools) and secure settings. The draft standards have been strengthened and will include a new standard on “non-instructed advocacy” for children and young people unable to instruct an advocate for themselves, to enable children and young people to communicate their views in ways that work for them. Additionally, we have set out in “Stable Homes, Built on Love”, our commitment to work with the sector to develop a model of opt-out advocacy for all children in care that will empower and listen to children and young people.

I am grateful for this review and the recommendations that it makes to improve the system for a cohort of children who are often overlooked. As we consider the review recommendations in more detail, we will work closely across Government and with partners to reflect on the requirements of children with disabilities and complex health needs, recognising the importance of non-discriminatory care for children and families. There is more that can be done to support and protect these children and we intend to focus our existing reform programme to ensure that they consistently receive the care and support that they need and deserve, enabling them to thrive and fulfil their potential.

[HCWS728]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Office for Police Conduct Annual Report and Accounts 2021-22

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): I am today publishing the annual report and accounts of the Independent Office for Police Conduct. The report has been laid before the House and copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS729]

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse: Government Response

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): I wish to inform the House that the Government will now be publishing its response to the final report of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in May 2023. This is a slight delay to the inquiry's request that we respond by 20 April 2023.

The inquiry published its final report on 20 October 2022 following seven years of investigation into the failings of institutions across the country to properly safeguard and protect children in their care from this most horrific crime.

The final report heard from over 7,300 victims and survivors, and provided shocking insights into the abuse suffered by children, and draws out stark failings by institutions, leaders, and professionals to protect them from harm. I am absolutely clear that we must address the failings identified by the inquiry and continue to work right across all sectors to each play our part in doing all that we can to protect children, provide support to victims and survivors, and pursue vile offenders and bring them to justice as quickly as possible.

I appreciate that it is conventional that the Government respond to statutory inquiries within six months of their final recommendations. However, over the course of the next month, there will be local elections—in the run-up to which the Government are bound by pre-election guidance—and other events which will attract significant media interest.

I am determined that these events should not detract from the interest and attention rightly due to the inquiry's final recommendations, hence the decision to publish in May.

I have already shown my commitment to consult on the introduction of a new mandatory reporting duty across the whole of England, a central recommendation in the inquiry's final report. If introduced, it would mean that individuals who work with children are legally required to report child sexual abuse, or face sanctions. We need to address the under-reporting of this crime across the whole system to robustly tackle it.

I cannot thank the victims and survivors who have come forward to share their experiences with the inquiry enough: I commend your bravery and courage in sharing your experiences and calling for change. I am determined to deliver justice for victims and survivors and ensure that the failures that allowed these appalling crimes to happen can never take place again.

We are committed to continuing to work to tackle all forms of child sexual abuse regardless of whether it takes place here or overseas, and it is crucial that we seize this moment to reignite national conversation about this horrific crime and bring it out of the shadows, and to support those who have suffered or are suffering to be able to tell their stories and report what has happened.

I will keep the House updated when we publish the Government's response in May.

[HCWS731]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Construction Product Testing: Independent Review

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): This Government are transforming the built environment through a culture of safety and high standards. The Building Safety Act 2022 brought into law far-reaching reforms that give residents and homeowners more rights, powers and protections across the country.

We recognise the historic failings in the system by which construction products were tested, assured and made available for sale. We have seen the tragic evidence of that all too clearly. To consider those failings in more detail, we commissioned an independent review of construction product testing from Paul Morrell OBE and Anneliese Day KC, which has been published today.

I would like to thank the reviewers for the comprehensive and thorough assessment of the current system and for their report and recommendations. We recognise that more needs to be done and are carefully considering the recommendations put forward by the independent reviewers.

The Government are committed to ensuring the testing regime for construction products is effective and inspires public and market confidence. It must be based on high standards and complete transparency. People must be assured that products used on their homes and other buildings are safe, and have been proved to be so; that they are used correctly and appropriately at every stage from design, installation, use, and even to disposal; and that those who manufacture and work with them are competent professionals. Those who try to misrepresent or misuse their products or mislead their customers must be sure that they will be found out and held to account.

I will also consider how our regulatory regime can ensure that only responsible businesses can make and sell construction products. It is unacceptable that cladding and insulation manufacturers have neither acknowledged their part in the legacy of unsafe buildings in the United Kingdom, nor contributed to the cost of remediating buildings.

To deliver the change we need, I will set out our proposals for reform of the UK's construction product regime in due course, building on the work of this review. Nothing is off the table as we consider this new regime, and I welcome contributions from all who share our goal of a safer built environment.

A copy of the independent review will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS730]

Petition

Thursday 20 April 2023

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

Cost of living

The petition of residents of Birmingham, Edgbaston, including Harborne, Quinton and Bartley Green.

Declares that the cost of living has reached crisis point, with the consequence being an increase in homelessness and fellow constituents being left to go cold and hungry.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to take urgent action that will see:

1. An extension of the windfall tax to cover the costs of capping energy rates to stop bills going up this winter.
2. Insulate homes to help families save money on their energy bills now and in the long-term.
3. Support homeowners to protect their homes by bringing interest rates down on mortgages.
4. Protect those who pay rent to ensure a sudden spike in rent prices does not lead to an increase in homelessness.

And the petitioners remain etc.

—[Presented by Preet Kaur Gill, Official Report, 14 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 802 .]

[P002806]

Observations from The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The Government thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Edgbaston Preet Kaur Gill MP, for submitting the petition alongside the corresponding online petition.

The Government understand that people across the UK are worried about the cost of living and recognise the challenges facing households. That is why decisive action has been taken to support households across the UK, while remaining fiscally responsible.

The spring Budget 2023 goes further to protect struggling families and help with high energy bills. The Government are extending energy support by keeping the energy price guarantee at £2,500 for the next three months from April, saving households an additional £160, bringing total Government support for energy bills to £1,500 for a typical household since October 2022. Alongside this, further steps are being taken to support households with energy bills by ending the premium paid by over 4 million households using prepayment meters across the UK and cancelling the planned increase in fuel duty and keeping rates at current levels for the next 12 months. The Government are also developing a new approach to energy consumer protection from April 2024, including consideration of a social tariff.

This is in addition to the support the Government announced at autumn statement including new cost of living payments in 2023-24, helping more than 8 million UK households on eligible means tested benefits, 8 million

pensioner households and 6 million people across the UK on eligible disability benefits. The Government are also protecting the most vulnerable in society, many of whom face the biggest challenge in making their incomes stretch, by increasing benefits in line with inflation. We are also allocating an additional £1 billion for the household support fund to help with the cost of household essentials including food, energy, and water bills, bringing total funding for this support to £2.5 billion since October 2021.

Taking all these actions together, Government support to households to help with higher bills is worth £94 billion across 2022-23 and 2023-24.

The petitioners have called for an extension of the windfall tax to cover the costs of capping energy rates. At autumn statement 2022, the Chancellor increased the energy profits levy from 25% to 35%, bringing the headline tax rate for the oil and gas sector to 75%, one of the highest rates globally. The levy was also extended until March 2028.

The Office for Budget Responsibility expect the EPL to raise just under £26 billion between 2022-23 and 2027-28. This significant source of tax revenue has already helped fund vital cost of living support, including the energy price guarantee on household energy bills and additional support for those most in need. Revenues from the levy are on top of around £25 billion in tax receipts from the oil and gas sector over the same period through the permanent tax regime. This reform alongside the new tax on electricity generators also announced at autumn statement ensures that energy companies contribute to the UK's collective efforts to strengthen public finances, and fund cost of living support and public services.

The petitioners have called for a nationwide programme to insulate homes. The Government recently announced a new long-term commitment to drive improvements in energy efficiency to bring down bills for households, businesses and the public sector with an ambition to reduce the UK's final energy consumption from buildings and industry by 15% by 2030 against 2021 levels. Some £6 billion of new Government funding will be made available from 2025 to 2028, in addition to £6.6 billion allocated this Parliament.

This provides long-term funding certainty, supporting the growth of the supply chain and ensuring delivery is scaled up over time. All households in council tax bands A to D in England in poorly insulated homes are currently eligible for Government funded energy efficiency measures via the great British insulation scheme. By contacting energy suppliers, hundreds of thousands of households will the opportunity to receive this support, which will save an average of £300 to £400. The Government are also acting in other areas to support energy efficiency. As announced in the 2022 spring statement, the Government are removing the 5% VAT charge on the installation of energy efficiency materials in Great Britain over the next five years and permanently reversing restrictions imposed by the Court of Justice of the European Union, removing complex eligibility conditions and reinstating wind and water turbines as qualifying materials. This represents a £280 million tax cut to support investment in energy efficiency over the next five years.

The petitioners have called for support to homeowners by bringing interest rates down on mortgages. The pricing of mortgages is a commercial decision for lenders in which the Government do not intervene. However, as

the Chancellor has said, sound money and a stable economy are the best ways to deliver lower mortgage rates, more jobs and long-term growth. One of the PM's priorities for this year is to halve inflation. In order to do this the Government are remaining steadfast in their support for the independent Monetary Policy Committee at the Bank of England as it takes action to return inflation to the 2% target and takes difficult but responsible fiscal decisions to avoid adding fuel to the fire. The spring Budget focused on getting the economy growing by boosting labour supply, as labour market conditions are a key problem affecting UK businesses' growth, as well as a significant driver of domestic inflation. Measures we have taken at Budget 2023 will reduce headline inflation this year. If mortgage holders do fall into financial difficulty, Financial Conduct Authority guidance requires firms to offer tailored support. This could include a range of measures depending on individual circumstances.

The Government have also taken a number of measures aimed at helping people to avoid repossession, including support for mortgage interest loans for those in receipt of an income-related benefit, and protection in the courts through the pre-action protocol, which makes it clear that repossession must always be the last resort for lenders. As of 3 April, those on universal credit can apply for an SMI loan after three months, instead of nine. The Government have also abolished the zero earnings rule to allow claimants to continue receiving support while in work and on universal credit. HM Treasury is regularly in contact with mortgage lenders on all aspects of their mortgage business to understand their position and current lending conditions, including most recently at a roundtable hosted by the Chancellor in December. At this meeting, the Chancellor made clear his expectation that lenders should live up to their responsibilities and support any mortgage borrowers who are finding it tough right now.

The petitioners have called for further support to renters. The Government understand the pressures people are facing with the cost of living and that paying rent can often be a tenant's biggest monthly expense. It is for

landlords and tenants to agree the amount of rent that should be charged, according to individual circumstances. We strongly encourage early communication about what adjustments to rent are sustainable for both landlords and tenants.

The White Paper, "A Fairer Private Rented Sector", published on 16 June 2022, outlined our proposed reforms to make the private rented sector fairer and more secure. This includes allowing increases to rent only once per year, ending the use of rent review clauses, and improving tenants' ability to challenge excessive rent increases through the first tier tribunal. These measures will help to prevent unfair rent increases for tenants, while ensuring landlords can continue to make necessary changes to rent. We will also rebalance the law to deliver a fairer deal for tenants through ending section 21 "no fault" evictions. Ending section 21 and introducing periodic tenancies will reduce unwanted and costly house moves for tenants, will aid tenants' negotiating ability and will enable tenants to leave properties easily without remaining liable for the rent. Removing section 21 will empower tenants to challenge an unfair rent increase without the threat of a revenge eviction hanging over them.

We recognise however, that some vulnerable households may find themselves at risk of homelessness and may need additional support. The Government want to make sure councils can respond effectively to support households and homelessness. We are therefore providing over £650 million over the next two years through the homelessness prevention grant, for local authorities to help tackle homelessness before it occurs. The grant supports local authorities to deliver their statutory duties to prevent homelessness and it can be used flexibly to work with landlords to prevent evictions or offer financial support for people to find a new home.

The Government are continuing to keep the situation under review, and focus support on the most vulnerable whilst ensuring we act in a fiscally responsible way.

Thank you for taking the trouble to make us aware of these concerns.

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