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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 9 May 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Investment Zones

1. **Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of investment zones on the performance of the economy. [904814]

25. **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of investment zones on the performance of the economy. [904838]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I would like to inform the House that the Chancellor is not with us today because he is at the G7 in Japan.

The refocused investment zones programme will grow the UK economy and bring investment to areas that have traditionally underperformed economically. The programme will catalyse 12 high-potential, knowledge-intensive growth clusters across the UK, including four across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, in our key future sectors.

Peter Gibson: I warmly welcome the Government's announcement that the Tees valley will be the location of one of their new investment zones, and this £80 million investment will unlock new opportunities for my region. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is further evidence of levelling up for Darlington and the Tees valley? Can he outline a timescale for when we will see things start to happen?

John Glen: The Tees Valley investment zone will boost productivity and drive sectoral growth while providing benefits for the local communities that my hon. Friend represents. The Government want to make rapid progress on delivering investment zones. We are engaging with partners to ensure that we can support those with the ambition to move at speed, and we intend to have all proposals agreed by the end of the financial year, and sooner if at all possible.

John Stevenson: Business investment and wealth creation will clearly be central if we are to rebalance the economy and close the gap between less successful and more prosperous areas. Would the Minister therefore agree

that prioritising investment zones in areas that need a helping hand is the right course of action? And does he envisage an investment zone in the borderlands area in the near future?

John Glen: My hon. Friend is tireless in his advocacy for his constituents. The areas of England that are eligible to host an investment zone were identified through a rigorous analytical assessment that reviewed every place in England and shortlisted based on their strengths in innovation, productivity, potential and levelling up need, as well as the strength of local leadership, knowledge assets and sectoral strengths.

The borderlands area is already benefiting from the £452 million borderlands growth deal, which was signed just two years ago and aims to create 5,500 jobs. My hon. Friend is also familiar with the recent £134 million investment signed off through the housing infrastructure fund, leading to 10,325 homes in St Cuthbert's garden village.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister mentioned the four investment zones, including one for Northern Ireland, in his opening answer. Of course I make a plea for my constituency, as everyone will. What discussions has he had with the Department of Finance back home about a potential investment zone in Strangford, to ensure that people in my constituency can have the same opportunities as people across the United Kingdom?

John Glen: I think the whole House will agree that the hon. Gentleman must be the most effective advocate for his constituents. We will see what happens. There will be a rigorous process, including wide consultation, and we expect to have an outcome that benefits his constituents and people across Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The incentives offered by investment zones include 100% business rates relief and enhanced capital allowances. With the exception of reduced national insurance contributions, it is hard to see the difference between an investment zone and an enterprise zone. What additional fiscal support are the Government providing to differentiate these investment zones from enterprise zones?

John Glen: The key distinction is that we have identified areas that have clusters, often relating to a university, and that have potential in a key sector. The investment zones will be worth £80 million over five years, and we are obviously working very closely with partners. It is difficult to be precise about the numbers, because there will be bespoke collaborations depending on which sectors are involved.

Stewart Hosie: I thank the Minister for his answer but, of course, enterprise zones and, indeed, their near cousin, the freeport, also spoke about clusters in the same kind of language. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that investment zones do not suffer from the same problem as enterprise zones and freeports, which was a woeful failure to deliver the number of permanent, good-quality jobs that was initially promised?

John Glen: That is a legitimate concern to raise and it is why we have followed the analytical approach to which I referred. We will be working closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to look at each proposal by the end of the year. We will be having that certainty on the tax incentives over those five years and making local authorities an accountable body for the delivery of this. The right hon. Gentleman's whole political doctrine is about the distinctions that exist in different communities around the United Kingdom, and that is why we have a variety of interventions designed to make an effective impact in different places across the UK.

School Meals: Impact of Inflation

2. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the potential impact of inflation on the provision of school meals. [904815]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Chancellor has regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a range of issues. The autumn statement 2022 provided an additional £2.3 billion in funding for schools this year and next, over and above the totals announced at the spending review in 2021. That means that school funding next year will be £58.8 billion, exceeding 2010 levels of per pupil funding in real terms. That will help schools to manage costs, including those of school meals.

Munira Wilson: Since Liberal Democrats in government rolled out universal infant free school meals in 2014, funding for them has increased by just 11p. Given the soaring food costs, that is resulting in a real shortfall in meeting schools' costs, which is having to be subsidised by cutting teaching budgets. The shortfalls range from 11p per meal in my local authority area of Richmond upon Thames to as much as 39p per meal in Hampshire. Will the Treasury provide the extra cash so that free school meal funding reflects the true costs that schools face or will the Minister continue to leave our schools and children short-changed?

John Glen: I do not agree with that analysis. The free school meals funding for 2023-24 was set in line with precedent every year, using inflation forecasts in the autumn prior. About 1.9 million pupils are claiming a free school meal at lunchtime, which equates to 22.5% of pupils in state-funded schools; together with the 1.25 million infants supported through the universal infant free school meal policy, this is having an impact. However, I recognise the pressures across the whole economy, which is why, as I said, the Government gave those additional funds in the autumn statement last year.

Financial Services Sector: Regulatory Framework

3. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the regulatory framework of the financial services sector. [904816]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): The Edinburgh reforms take forward the Government's ambition to maintain the UK's position

as a world-leading global financial centre, while ensuring that our financial sector remains robust in the face of market shocks. In particular, they introduce a new secondary duty of facilitating growth and international competitiveness, which is a first for UK regulators.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Clearly, the culture and performance of regulators is one key consideration for firms when they choose to invest in the UK. What steps is he going to take to introduce key performance indicators for financial regulators to report on their delivery against the new growth and competitiveness objective in the Financial Services and Markets Bill? Is he considering adding any measures to the Bill that would strengthen the independent scrutiny of regulators?

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend does great service as chair of the all-party group on personal banking and fairer financial services, so he knows of what he speaks. Today, the Government published a call for proposals on the metrics that regulators should publish to support scrutiny of their work; as every business leader knows, what gets measured gets managed. That responds to the significant interest shown by industry and Parliament in ensuring that appropriate and transparent public measures are in place to support scrutiny of the regulators' performance. The Government are clear that with great power must come greater accountability.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): One measure that would improve the regulatory framework for mutuals in the financial services sector, such as Royal London or Liverpool Victoria, would be the introduction of permanent mutual shares. Given that such a reform would allow a new safe route to access the capital that such financial mutuals need to expand—and without having to demutualise—will the Minister explain why the Treasury is still dragging its feet on the introduction of such a significant reform?

Andrew Griffith: The hon. Gentleman and I have talked a number of times about this. I do not think it is fair to say that the Treasury is dragging its feet. We have supported reform of the mutuals sector. We welcome a diversity of provision, which involves a greater expansion of and more commercial freedom for the mutuals sector. With the Law Commission, we are looking to take its work forward to see whether we can help, and I am always happy to sit down with him, or with any representatives from the sector, as part of my widespread programme of engagement.

Energy Costs: Support for Businesses

4. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What fiscal steps he is taking to support businesses with energy costs. [904817]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): The energy bills discount scheme will provide all eligible businesses and other non-domestic energy users with a discount on high energy bills for 12 months from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. It will also provide businesses in sectors with particularly high levels of energy use and trade intensity with a high level of support. The scheme will help those locked into contracts

signed before recent significant falls in the wholesale price manage their costs and provide others with reassurance against the risk of prices rising again.

Christine Jardine: Speaking to businesses in my constituency of Edinburgh West over the past week, I have been hearing that they are not finding the help that they need. The combination of the cost of living crisis, energy costs and business rates is pushing them towards a crisis. The Federation of Small Businesses estimates that 93,000 small businesses could go out of business this year because of high energy costs. Do the Government accept that more will have to be done, particularly to help small companies renegotiate tariffs, and will they tell me what they intend to do about that?

Gareth Davies: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point, and this Government are very alive to the issues that businesses face across the country. She will be aware that, last year, the energy bill relief scheme was unprecedented in its nature and scale, and that the Government were always clear that that would be time limited and intended as a bridge for businesses as wholesale gas prices come down. Those prices have now come down quite significantly, but we do have the energy bills discount scheme, which strikes the right balance between supporting businesses for another year, but also limiting the taxpayers' exposure to volatile energy prices.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): The Treasury was quick to act during the pandemic when hoteliers in Aberconwy told me that banks were directing them to their premium lending products instead of the Government's coronavirus business interruption loan scheme. Now those same hoteliers are telling me that the energy supply market seems to have failed. They are seeing their bills tripling just as market rates drop below Government support levels. They fear that the supplier's thumb is on their side of the scales. None of this will be new to the Minister, so can he please tell me what he is doing and can he meet me and sector representatives to make sure that some common sense is brought back to energy supply contracts?

Gareth Davies: My hon. Friend is a great champion of businesses in his constituency. In the first instance, I advise businesses always to contact suppliers to discuss their contracts. We are alive to the fact that some businesses are having difficulties securing the benefit of falling wholesale prices from their energy suppliers. In January, the Chancellor wrote to Ofgem, which oversees the energy market for consumers, and Ofgem has now launched an investigation into the non-domestic energy market. We await its conclusions, and, at that point, I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Inflation

5. **Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** What recent steps he has taken to reduce the rate of inflation. [904818]

9. **Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con):** What progress he has made on reducing the rate of inflation. [904822]

11. **Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con):** What progress he has made on reducing the rate of inflation. [904824]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): The Government's three economic priorities this year are to halve inflation, grow the economy, and get debt falling. This will require patience and discipline. Countries around the world are facing rising prices and we will not be able to make that go away overnight, but by sticking to our plan, we will halve inflation this year and help to ease the pressures that people are facing.

Mr Hollobone: Food price inflation is increasing far faster than the overall average increase in prices. This is affecting the poorest the hardest in Kettering and across the country. Is there any good news at all from His Majesty's Treasury about the prospects for food price inflation over the next 12 months?

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituents. The Office for Budget Responsibility this year does expect food, tobacco and alcohol inflation to fall significantly, and that is not all. The Government recognise the challenges facing households due to the elevated cost of living in general, including food, so we took action at the spring statement to support struggling families. Taken together with previous action, support to households to help with bills is worth an average of £3,300 a year across this year and next.

Mr French: The Government are absolutely right to prioritise reducing inflation given the significant impact it is having on families and businesses across the country. I welcome the support that the Minister has just outlined for families in my constituency of Old Bexley and Sidcup. Can he confirm what assessment has been made by the Treasury of the impact of more than a decade of abnormal monetary policy following the global financial crisis?

Andrew Griffith: As my hon. Friend knows, monetary policy is the responsibility of the independent Monetary Policy Committee and the Bank of England. We will continue to work closely with them to ensure that monetary and fiscal policy are well co-ordinated. The Chancellor reconfirmed the inflation target of 2% at the autumn statement and confirmed that this Government will not change the target.

Mark Menzies: While inflation is now heading in the right direction, the effect of the price rises is still being felt by Fylde's older people. What steps is my hon. Friend taking and what conversations has he had with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that Fylde's retired residents are well protected?

Andrew Griffith: I and my colleagues work closely with colleagues in the DWP, as my hon. Friend knows, on behalf of pensioners in Fylde. More than 8 million pensioner households will receive a cost of living payment of £300 this winter, but more than 12 million pensioners have benefited from a 10.1% increase to their state pension. That is the biggest percentage rise in the state pension for more than 30 years and its biggest-ever cash increase.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): As the Minister rightly said, monetary policy is made independently by the Monetary Policy Committee in this country. However, the Government are responsible for economic stability, and for that we need investment. What policies of the past couple of years does the Minister believe have got us into this position with inflation, and how are the Government going to make sure that we have better economic stability, given their recent record?

Andrew Griffith: The hon. Lady omits to mention both the headwinds from the global pandemic and Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Any financially literate conversation on this subject has to acknowledge that we see very similar rates of increase in inflation and rising interest rates across the developed world. In that context, this Government are focusing on stability, ensuring that we continue to pay down debt over the cycle and do not do as the previous Labour Government did and leave a note behind for their successors saying that there is no money left.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Food price inflation stood at 19.2% in March, up from February. That is causing severe problems for many in my constituency, particularly those who have no recourse to public funds status, meaning that they are not entitled to any support from the Government whatsoever. What will the Minister do to help those people, who are struggling and heading for the food banks because they cannot afford to make ends meet?

Andrew Griffith: In the interest of time, I will not repeat for the hon. Lady the support for households, which averages £3,500 across the United Kingdom. If she has constituents with particular needs, the Government have recently extended the £1 billion household support fund and I suggests she works with her local authority to try to meet their needs through that.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Inflation is hitting not just individuals and families, but councils and potentially infrastructure projects. Lodge Hill junction on the A34 in Abingdon is one such key piece of local infrastructure, and when completed, will support jobs and housing across Oxfordshire and Science Vale and the economy as a whole. Homes England and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities say that the final piece of that funding now sits with the Treasury in the brownfield, infrastructure and land fund. Will the Minister meet me so that I can explain why this is such an important piece of funding to be released, and please can the Government supply the last piece of this puzzle so that we can deliver Lodge Hill junction once and—

Mr Speaker: Order. That has absolutely nothing to do with the question. It is a bit of a struggle, is it not? Do you think you can answer it, Minister? No. Okay.

Hair and Beauty Sector: Disguised Employment Practices

6. **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of disguised employment practices in the hair and beauty sector on tax revenues. [904819]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): As the Minister responsible for His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, may I wish His Majesty the King and Her Majesty the Queen a very long and successful reign and say that its 63,000 members of staff will be proud to try to help His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, as they are bound to do? The Government are aware of concerns about employment practices in the hair and beauty sector. The concerns are largely focused on the so-called rented chair model, which is a long-standing practice and a legitimate alternative to employing stylists, provided that the parties involved follow the relevant rules. The Government are committed to tackling disguised employment and HMRC will consider any evidence suggesting that businesses have misclassified individuals for tax purposes.

Mrs Latham: It is estimated that 70% of the hairdressing industry is currently operating under a self-employed model to avoid pay-as-you-earn, national insurance and VAT. According to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs guidelines, those salons often amount to disguised employment. The problem is that all apprentices—and 90% of hairdressers learn through apprenticeships—must be trained in salons that pay their tax, an increasingly unattractive model. Will the Minister consider how we can taper VAT rates or enforce disguised employment rules more stringently to ensure that we have appropriately trained hairdressers in future?

Victoria Atkins: I am sure that I am joined by all Members of the House in thanking my hon. Friend for her interest in ensuring that we have hairdressers in 15 years' time. We recognise the important role that hairdressing salons play in the education and training of apprenticeships. Indeed, funding for employer-led apprenticeships will grow to £2.7 billion in 2024-25, which will help to pay for the cost of training and assessment. However, she is quite right to pinpoint the need for those participating in the hairdressing industry to ensure that they are following the rules correctly. It is not their choice; there are very strict criteria, and they must make sure that they follow them. I very much look forward to discussing this in further detail with my hon. Friend later this week or next week.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The hair and beauty industry is characterised by a high percentage of female entrepreneurs and young people. However, that workforce continues to be at risk of disguised employment. What steps are Ministers taking to ensure that self-employed individuals are aware of their tax expectations so that women and young people can continue to thrive in that sector?

Victoria Atkins: Is it not wonderful that we have so many women setting up their own businesses and taking that step into entrepreneurship? [*Interruption.*] Oh, there is chuntering from those on the Labour Benches; they seem to disagree. The hon. Lady is right that we should ensure that we help entrepreneurs, whether male or female, to understand the rules when it comes to tax. That is why we provide guidance and support for customers to help them understand employment status, and we have agreed guidelines specifically with the National Federation of Hairdressers to help it communicate with its industry about which rules apply to which hairdressers.

People on Lower Incomes: Financial Support

7. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to support financially people on lower incomes. [904820]

15. **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): What steps he is taking to support financially people on lower incomes. [904828]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government are taking action to protect struggling families by providing support, worth £3,300 per household on average over this year and last, to help with higher bills. That includes targeted support for the most vulnerable in our society through additional cost of living payments and the uprating of benefits by 10.1% this year. The Government have also increased the national living wage by 9.7%, representing an increase of more than £1,600 in the annual earnings of a full-time worker on the national living wage.

Alexander Stafford: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the best support in the cost of living crisis, beyond the £94 billion that the Government have already spent, is the cutting of inflation to ease pressures—especially on food, fuel and energy—for families in Rother Valley and up and down the country?

John Glen: I absolutely agree. The Government are doing three things to reduce inflation: we are remaining steadfast in supporting the independent Monetary Policy Committee at the Bank of England as it continues to take action to return inflation to target; we are making responsible decisions on tax and spending, so that we are not adding fuel to the fire; and we are tackling high energy prices by holding down energy bills for households and businesses, alongside investing in long-term energy security.

David Simmonds: Lowest-income households in my constituency are the biggest beneficiaries of a strong economy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that reducing debt, reducing inflation and balancing the books are the most effective Government interventions to support low-income households?

John Glen: Absolutely. It is right that we continue support for the cost of living challenges. I have mentioned the energy price guarantee; we are also sticking to that plan to avoid unnecessary inflationary pressure. [Interruption.] On average this year, as a result of Government decisions made from—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members will have to continue their conversations at another time. Carry on, Minister.

John Glen: As a result of Government decisions made from autumn statement 2022 onwards, households in the bottom half of the income distribution will see, in cash terms, twice as much benefit from Government support as households in the top half of the income distribution.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I listened with interest to the answer that the Minister gave about support for households, but it does not match the

reality in Rotherham, where constituents have had increases in rent, mortgages, fuel and food, as well as cuts to public services. What is he going to do to deliver the support that we need to make ends meet, because the offers on the table are not cutting it?

John Glen: Everyone can see that the Government have made a range of interventions over the past two years, which means support for all of those on means-tested benefits—8 million people. Eight million pensioner households will benefit from the non-discretionary payments, effectively. The household support fund, which we repeated, provides another £1 billion to give local authorities discretion in individual circumstances to offer supplementary support. Of course, I recognise that this is an incredibly challenging time for the most vulnerable, but we have tried to target those interventions on them, listening to the Low Pay Commission and increasing the national living wage to £10.42. We recognise that these are difficult times, but we will get through them.

Tax System: Fairness

8. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to ensure fairness in the application of the tax system. [904821]

20. **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to ensure fairness in the application of the tax system. [904833]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): It is right that everyone contributes to sustainable public finances, and the Government are ensuring that those with the broadest shoulders pay their fair share. The spring Budget took steps to tackle avoidance and to improve the ability of His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to collect tax debts. That is alongside taking millions out of tax altogether by consistently raising personal tax allowances. An average of more than £3,300 of assistance per household in the UK has been provided for help with the cost of living over this year and last.

Daniel Zeichner: Last week, energy companies announced record profits—some £60 million a day from North sea oil and gas. Today, the *Daily Mirror* reports that last month 2 million people were unable to pay a bill, so why on earth do the Government not close those huge, huge holes in the levy on North sea oil and gas profits, and get that money to the people who need it?

Victoria Atkins: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman is being quite fair, as he neglects to tell the House the rate of levy for those companies. He will understand why we have said to businesses that want to invest to improve energy security in the United Kingdom that we will support such investment. That is in our interests, as we have heard today concerns raised by Members of Parliament on behalf of their constituents about the cost of living and the impact particularly of energy prices.

Richard Burgon: The Government recently announced a huge tax giveaway to the very wealthiest, allowing them to stash vast sums in their pensions tax-free. The £1 billion annual cost of that handout would cover the

cost of free school meals. Food banks gave out a million food parcels for children last year, so why do the Government think that this tax cut for the super-rich is a priority?

Victoria Atkins: I gently remind the hon. Gentleman of the conversation that happened at the Budget—I hope he recalls it—about the need to get doctors, consultants and those in the public sector back into the NHS. We heard from doctors themselves—the British Medical Association and others—that there were barriers in the pension tax rules which stopped them continuing to serve. I am delighted if those rules help more doctors to serve our NHS and help our constituents who are patients—helping doctors to continue to serve in that vital public service. The difference between Conservatives in government and Opposition Members is that we listen to people, and we deliver what we need to keep the economy going and help our NHS.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): One of the best ways to ensure fairness in the tax system is to let people keep more of their hard-earned money. Last summer, the Prime Minister outlined a plan that would cut the basic rate of income tax to 15p in the pound by the end of the decade. Can the Minister let me know when that plan will be outlined in more detail?

Victoria Atkins: I hope my hon. Friend has been listening to what the Chancellor said at spring Budget and in speeches since then about the need for fiscal responsibility. We have to be fiscally responsible; we have acknowledged that. We have had to make some very difficult decisions along the way, but we are clear that halving inflation, tackling our debt and growing the economy will enable us to make the sorts of tax cuts that he and I both want to see so much.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): Tens of thousands of people have been affected by the loan charge, with some having faced well-documented distress and harm as a result of HMRC's approach. At the same time, HMRC has been issuing fewer than two fines a year against the architects and enablers of failed tax avoidance schemes. It is absolutely right that disguised remuneration schemes are tackled fairly and effectively, so how on earth can the Conservative Government justify such a light-touch approach for the promoters of such schemes, while many of those caught up in them face such a nightmare?

Victoria Atkins: I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the strengthening of HMRC's powers to tackle promoters of tax avoidance in the Finance Acts of 2021 and 2022, with a further tough new package of measures to ensure that promoters face stronger sanctions much more quickly. These measures will raise £130 million over the next five years and are already being used. We have already published the details of promoters and tax avoidance schemes in order to help consumers, and we have also published HMRC stop notices, because we want to help taxpayers who want to do the right thing to understand which promoters should be avoided.

Inflation and Economic Growth Forecasts: G7 Countries

10. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What comparative assessment he has made of forecasts for the UK's rates of (a) inflation and (b) economic growth with those for G7 countries in 2023. [904823]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): Compared with the G7, the UK had the highest rate of growth in each of the past two years. The International Monetary Fund UK growth forecast for 2023 has been upgraded by more than that for any other G7 country, and the IMF has said that the UK is "on the right track" for economic growth.

Alex Cunningham: The Minister paints a pretty picture. The British people want hope for the future, but all they see is Britain continually lagging behind on the global stage and prospects for their families getting worse. The IMF says that Britain will have a smaller economy by the end of the year and the poorest growth of the G7 over this year and next. In March, UK inflation was the highest in western Europe, and projections show that it will be the highest in the G7 this year, while food prices are rising 50% faster than in the G7. Whose fault is it?

Andrew Griffith: It is certainly the hon. Gentleman's fault if, having asked that we assess performance across the G7 and we do precisely that, he does not like the answer. The reality is that across the G7, growth has fallen and inflation has risen, but we know the sources of that—it is not this Government; it is the fault of Putin and the global covid pandemic, whether the Opposition like it or not.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is right to ignore the gloom and negativity coming from the Opposition Benches. They will always find a reason to talk down the British economy. Is it not the case that today, with more people in our country going out to work than ever before, our economy is demonstrating a dynamism and resilience that few other economies around the world can emulate and a dynamism that we do not get with a Labour Government?

Andrew Griffith: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Resilience is a strong word, and thanks to the actions that this Government have taken over the past six months, the Office for Budget Responsibility has confirmed that the UK is now expected to avoid a recession this year.

Withdrawal from the EU: Economic Impact

12. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the UK's withdrawal from the EU on the economy. [904825]

17. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the UK's withdrawal from the EU on the economy. [904830]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): The UK has grown faster than France and at a similar rate to Germany since leaving the single market. It remains challenging to separate the effects of Brexit and wider global trends on the UK economy, such as

the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, adding pressures to trade, prices and the wider economy. We continue to support businesses trading with the EU and help them to seize new opportunities with fast-growing economies around the world, including through our free trade agreement negotiations.

Kirsten Oswald: Happy Europe Day, Mr Speaker. In recent months, we have seen tech companies attack Brexit. The world-leading chip company Arm opted to float stock only in the US because of how bad a place the UK is to do business, so we have culture, tourism, the NHS and now tech all suffering because of Brexit. How grateful does the Minister feel that the Leader of the Opposition has dropped his and his party's principles and are supporting this costly Brexit?

Victoria Atkins: Crikey, I am going to leave it to the Leader of the Opposition to flip-flop his way through that particular policy. What I can tell the hon. Lady is that we are the best place in Europe to invest in tech. We are only the third economy in the world with a \$1 trillion tech sector; we are ranked as the world's fourth most innovative economy; and we have created more unicorns than France and Germany combined.

Patrick Grady: Unicorns and fantasies are largely what we hear from Members on the Government Benches these days. The reality is that the Music Venue Trust reckons that grassroots venues are closing at a rate of one per week, bands from Europe find it increasingly difficult to travel here, and our hospitality sector more generally is experiencing catastrophic staff shortages. Is Lord Heseltine not right when he says that Brexit has been

"a classic mistake, a terrible"

horrible miscalculation, and the

"elephant in the room of our present economic difficulties"?

Victoria Atkins: I am interested that the hon. Gentleman dismisses these incredibly successful unicorn start-ups in the UK economy. I hope that he will not dismiss their continuing success as we continue to support them through the various tax reliefs we are offering them and investment, including our most recent research and development tax reliefs. I would also point out to him that of course Scotland will benefit from some 73 trade deals secured with non-EU countries—benefits that include control of our fishing waters, something that I know is a matter of great concern to Scottish residents.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Minister.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I am never quite clear why, if we do not like trade barriers, the answer is to erect even more of them. The Government said that through the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, they would get rid of 4,000 laws built up during our time in the EU. The Prime Minister even got his shredder out to show us what this would look like, and the Government said there would be a sunset clause to make sure all this happened by the end of the year. Voices from both business and the trade unions have said that this could cause even more chaos and uncertainty and undermine workers' rights, in breach of the promises made by Ministers at the time of the referendum. Can the Minister confirm

whether, after marching their troops up to the top of the hill and getting the Back Benchers very excited, the Government are keeping the sunset clause to have all this done by the end of the year?

Victoria Atkins: I do not know whether I can speak on behalf of the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, who is the portfolio holder for that piece of legislation. What I do know is that the Bill is currently before the House of Lords, and will no doubt be scrutinised very carefully by their lordships. I can also reassure the House that we are taking a careful and considered approach to the benefits—the regulations, the laws—that Brexit presents to us, and we know from our discussions with businesses that business certainty is something that we all want to strive for and achieve. I am sure that once this Bill has been scrutinised by the House of Lords—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I have got another question to come. The Minister should not worry; there will be another chance.

Mr McFadden: I think business certainty might be improved by an answer to the question.

Inflation is at 10%, the highest in the G7, and food inflation is at 19%. The former Prime Minister—the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), to avoid confusion, because there are a few former Prime Ministers—promised us that

"there will be no non-tariff barriers to trade",

but we already know that many small businesses are giving up exporting to the EU altogether because of costs and delays. With inflation already at those levels, the Government have picked this moment to impose a new system for checks on EU goods that is estimated to add £400 million a year to the cost of goods coming into the UK. Can the Minister tell us why the Government are picking this of all moments to add these new costs and price rises to UK consumers who are already struggling to make ends meet because of the biggest cost of living crisis in decades?

Victoria Atkins: Just to clarify, I was being respectful of not just this House, but the right of the other House to scrutinise legislation. I hope the right hon. Member would agree with that, as the fine parliamentarian that I know he is. On business certainty, through this legislation, and also importantly through the measures we are setting out through the Windsor framework and the arrangements at borders, we are seeking to give businesses exactly the certainty they need after Brexit. We all accept that leaving the European Union and the single market was a generational change—a seismic change in how we wish to do business—but unlike the Opposition, we believe in Brexit and the opportunities it can provide our businesses, and that is why we are taking these measures through carefully and considerately with businesses.

Public Spending: Value for Money

13. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure value for money in public spending. [904826]

24. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure value for money in public spending. [904837]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): As the Minister for public spending, I oversee the Government's budgeting system, and a key element of that is incentivising Departments to manage spending effectively so that value for taxpayers' money is maximised. That is why the Government launched an efficiency and savings review at the autumn statement 2022. Through the review, Departments re-prioritised and identified further efficiencies, building on the 5% efficiency challenge set out in the spending review 2021, to better deliver value for money for the taxpayer.

Afzal Khan: The then Chancellor, now Prime Minister, spent £1.3 million of public money on focus groups, which included asking what the public thought of him. Following the public's resounding rejection of the Tories in last week's elections, we now know what the public think of him. Will the Government stop wasting taxpayers' money to boost the Prime Minister's ego, do the right thing and call a general election?

John Glen: No.

Nick Smith: Some £7.9 billion was wasted on useless and overpriced personal protective equipment; meanwhile, opportunists who saw the Tories coming are now profiteering on the back of the public purse. Does the Minister regret that this money was not spent wisely? Nearly £8 billion could buy us 20 new hospitals.

John Glen: Our priority was clear throughout the covid crisis, and that was to get PPE to the frontline as quickly as possible. Due diligence was carried out on all companies that were referred to the Department. Despite all those steps being taken, some instances of fraud did occur with unscrupulous suppliers taking advantage of the situation. This Government take that fraud seriously, and the Department of Health and Social Care is exploring every available option to bring those who commit fraud to account. We have also made a number of other interventions, including investment in the taxpayer protection taskforce to normalise higher compliance activity in HMRC, alongside other measures to deal with fraud elsewhere in some of the emergency schemes that we set up to help this economy and this country get through covid.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Last week, the Public Accounts Committee revealed that our country lost £9 billion-worth of tax revenue during the pandemic because HMRC redeployed 4,000 staff members whose jobs were to chase down tax avoiders. The Prime Minister was Chancellor at the time and presumably signed off that decision. Can the Minister tell me whether the Prime Minister did that as a deliberate act to give the green light to tax avoiders, or is it just another example of Tory incompetence?

John Glen: I think that is a ridiculous suggestion, to be honest. HMRC received £863 million to modernise the tax system, and that included £136 million invested over the spending period to deliver improvements in terms of a single customer record and account. On what happened over covid, I have already set out the investment we made, including the £100 million in the

taxpayer protection taskforce. We take fraud very seriously. Now it is about HMRC looking at financial records of excessive trading to come to terms with those businesses that used some of those schemes fraudulently. We will continue to work on that.

Topical Questions

Mr Speaker: I call Carla Lockhart. She is not here.

T2. [904840] **Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Three of the Prime Minister's five priorities are economic priorities: to halve inflation this year, to grow the economy and to reduce debt. We are on track to halve inflation this year to ease the cost of living. We have taken the difficult, but responsible decision needed to get net debt falling and secure the future of public services, and we have a clear plan to grow the economy to create better paid jobs and opportunity right across the country.

Ashley Dalton: The consumer voice organisation Which? has recently found that 2 million UK households missed a key payment for their mortgage, rent, loan or credit card. Last month alone, 700,000 of these related to housing, so when will the Tory Government wake up to the fact that the cost of living crisis is far from over and what do they intend to do about it?

John Glen: In previous answers, I have set out a number of the interventions the Government have taken to help the most vulnerable. I have mentioned the household support fund, the benefits that accrue to all those who are on means-tested benefits, particularly pensioner households, and those who are eligible for disability benefit. As I have also said, the money that the Government have made available is designed to focus on those who are most in need, and we will continue to look out for the most vulnerable through this difficult time.

T3. [904841] **Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con):** Does my right hon. Friend agree that fiscal responsibility is vital if we are to cut inflation and grow the economy? Does he also agree that the Labour party's £90 billion of unfunded spending commitments would put all of that at risk, with higher taxes and more borrowing the inevitable result?

John Glen: I could not agree more. Responsible public spending is at the core of getting our economy into a state where it can grow, and the £90 billion of unfunded spending pledges made by Opposition Members will be scrutinised very carefully, I am sure, by many in the months ahead.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Conservatives have now had 13 years in office—wages lower, the weekly food shop astronomical, energy bills unprecedented, 24 Tory tax rises and the national debt has ballooned

—so can I ask: after 13 years of Conservative Government, does the Minister think that people feel better off, or worse off?

John Glen: What I can tell the right hon. Lady is that, since 2010, there has been a 25% increase in real take-home pay for workers on the national living wage and, recently, the national living wage increased to £10.42 an hour—a 9.7% increase—for those over the age of 23. In 2009-10, there was a deficit of £158 billion. Before we got into covid, it was down to £38 billion. We have gone through the most tremendous challenges that this country has seen for about 100 years. I think most people in this country understand that this Government have acted on the challenges we have faced in office.

Rachel Reeves: The Government have had 13 years, and the answer to the question “Do people feel better off?” is a resounding no. This morning, I met 22 newly elected council leaders from the Labour party, who are creating emergency plans to help to tackle the cost of living crisis in their communities. Why will the Conservative Government not play their part, do the right thing, close the loopholes in their oil and gas tax and help working people in Britain, as a Labour Government would do?

John Glen: I congratulate those successful across the country in last week’s elections, but what business leaders want and what the country wants is steady policy making, delivering growth in the economy, dealing with the biggest scourge on the economy, which is inflation—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Lady says from a sedentary position that we have had 13 years. We spent £400 billion when we had a global pandemic, where we had to shut down the economy. When we came out of it, we had high inflation consequential on a war that we have not had in Europe for over 70 years. Those are the realities and that is what this Government have responded to.

T6. [904844] **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): Regenerating our town centres was a key part of the local election campaign in Torbay. Would my right hon. Friend meet me, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) and the new leadership of Torbay Council to discuss what further fiscal steps can be taken to support those aims?

John Glen: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend. I congratulate him on his leadership of his council candidates last week and the excellent result that he secured. Of course, we have invested in many coastal communities across the country, and we are keen to discuss the specifics of how the Government can support him as he drives that local constituency and economy forward.

T4. [904842] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Today, manufacturing body Make UK warned the Government that, to tackle regional inequalities and compete on a national stage, we need a national industrial strategy as a matter of urgency. Do Ministers recognise that the reason wages in the north-east are falling under the Tories is their lack of an industrial strategy and their failure to follow Labour’s example

and commit to a modern industrial strategy that invests in the industries of the future and delivers good-quality jobs across our country?

John Glen: No, I do not recognise that characterisation. What I recognise is that the Government are determined to see the economy grow. I see investment in investment zones focused in the hon. Lady’s region, working with the excellent universities that she is familiar with. I see a Government who are putting £100 million into the foundation model taskforce, £900 million to invest in a supercomputer to fund AI, a quantum strategy that is generally seen as world leading, as well as £160 million of investment in the tech sector. So this is a Government who are committed to the growth industries of the future.

T8. [904846] **Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust was pleased to hear that it is to receive £400 million for a new hospital, but I understand that the money is still with the Treasury. Can my right hon. Friend please confirm when UHL will receive the £400 million, and whether that might be increased to account for construction cost rises?

John Glen: Delivery of new hospital infrastructure and prioritisation within health budgets is a matter for the Department of Health and Social Care, but I know from frequent conversations with the Secretary of State that he is working tirelessly to ensure as many new hospitals as possible, and that wider improvements to the health estate can occur. I shall make representations to him after these questions.

T7. [904845] **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It has been reported in the press today that, prior to any investment, BP and Equinor sought written guarantees that assets at the Teesworks site had not been acquired as a result of an “unacceptable act”, and that directors

“will not hide or dissimulate the nature, origin, location, disposition or ownership of assets, rights or values.”

It is just extraordinary. Given the importance of that freeport to investment and jobs in Teesside, can the Treasury confirm whether it too has made any similar checks?

John Glen: I am sorry, I cannot answer that question. But I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to look at the serious matter he has raised and get an answer for him.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The Chief Secretary to the Treasury knows that the long hidden business case for East West Rail represents a bad deal for taxpayers, and that MPs from across Parliament have written about greener, better alternatives for growth in the Ox-Cam arc. He will know that on Thursday the Conservatives won the mayoralty in Bedford for the first time because the Conservative candidate, Tom Wootton, called for a review of Bedford Council’s working and its support for East West Rail. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss that further urgently?

John Glen: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend, and congratulate the Mayor of his home town of Bedford for the success he had last week.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): We are clearly falling pretty short of where we need to be if we are to tackle net zero. Recent research by E3G and the World Wide Fund for Nature into clean investment showed that the gap is currently between £81 billion and £111 billion between now and 2030. That is equivalent to a quarter of the investment required in that crucial economic sector and every other sector of the economy. Public investment clearly needs to be a key driver in reaching net zero, so I wonder whether Ministers would consider increasing the capacity of the UK Infrastructure Bank on that.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): The Government are leading the way with the recently published green finance strategy, but that stands as part of a broader piece of work, unleashing productive finance into all parts of the economy and in particular funding the transition, which is capital intensive.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I thank the Chancellor for two weeks ago meeting Leicestershire MPs and the senior leadership of the county council to discuss funding there. Of particular concern is the core funding of special educational needs and disabilities, social care and transport such as buses. What more can the Minister do to address the problems with county council funding that we have in Leicestershire?

John Glen: I know my right hon. Friend the Chancellor welcomed that meeting on 25 April. The Government remain committed to improving the local government finance landscape, and in doing so they will work closely with local partners, including Leicestershire, and take stock of the challenges and opportunities across the sector. I thank my hon. Friend for his deep thinking into how improvements can be made.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Why are the Prime Minister and Government Ministers so keen to protect non-dom status while not investing sufficiently in our NHS, as Labour would do?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): I hope the hon. Gentleman knows that we are spending record amounts on the NHS. We are also mindful that non-doms pay some £7.9 billion in UK taxes on their UK earnings and have invested some £6 billion since 2012. So we are mindful of the very real impact that they make on our revenues, but we have managed to tighten the rules around non-dom status, and that is why—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Jonathan Gullis.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Day one on the job and Labour in Stoke-on-Trent talk about cancelling the £56 million of levelling-up funding, which is UK-leading, going to the great city of Stoke-on-Trent. Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury confirm that

the Conservative Government will have the backs of the people of Stoke-on-Trent and deliver this important levelling up?

John Glen: We are very committed to the people of Stoke-on-Trent and recognise that enormous investment, thanks to my hon. Friend's work in campaigning for investment through the levelling-up fund. It is down to the council to deliver on that significant investment and make a difference on the ground.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): The transition to net zero should be the overarching priority for all of us. With that in mind, when will the Treasury finally get its act together with the Acorn project in the north-east of Scotland and accelerate its funding to ensure that the people of the north-east of Scotland do not just have to listen to warm words about the just transition, but can get a job in the just transition?

John Glen: I think that we have made commitments on the first phase. The Chancellor is considering the next steps further and will update the House in due course.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The *Financial Times* is reporting today that there have been meetings between the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care about compensation for victims following the infected blood inquiry. Will the Minister confirm that those meetings have taken place and who was present, and offer reassurance to those who were infected and affected that compensation will be implemented in full, as Sir Brian Langstaff has recommended?

John Glen: I believe that the Minister for the Cabinet Office updated the House on this matter a couple of weeks ago, and I am sure that he will be keen to do so again when those conversations have taken place.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): This morning, before I left my constituency, I attended a rally organised by "Hands off Howden Park" and "Save our Pools", which are two incredible campaigns in my constituency trying to protect our arts venues and pools from closing. Unfortunately, they have been mismanaged by the Labour and Conservative administration, and those results are the reality to be faced after a decade and a half of austerity has decimated public funding. When will the Government stop wasting money on things like Brexit and nuclear weapons and properly fund our pools and arts venues?

John Glen: We do not typically make specific decisions on local authorities from Whitehall, but we have committed to significant additional funds for local authorities and funding for the Scottish Government through the Barnett formula. I will leave the hon. Member to continue to lobby and campaign with her constituents to get those decisions made on the ground.

Coronation: Policing of Protests

3.33 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the policing of protests during the coronation.

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

The coronation was a once-in-a-generation moment, a moment of national pride and a moment when the eyes of the world were upon us. It was a ceremony with roots over a millennium old, marking a renewed dedication to service by His Majesty the King in this new reign. The coronation went smoothly and without disruption. I thank the 11,500 police officers who were on duty alongside 6,500 military personnel and many civilians.

Today, Commissioner Mark Rowley has outlined the intelligence picture in the hours leading up to the coronation. It included more than one plot to cause severe disruption by placing activated rape alarms in the path of horses to induce a stampede and a separate plot to douse participants in the procession with paint. That was the context: a once in a generation national moment facing specific intelligence threats about multiple, well-organised plots to disrupt it. The focus of the police was, rightly, on ensuring that the momentous occasion passed safely and without major disruption. That was successful. All plots to disrupt the coronation were foiled by a combination of intelligence work and proactive vigilant policing on the ground. I would like to thank the police and congratulate them on that success.

At the same time, extensive—[*Interruption.*] Wait for it. At the same time, extensive planning ensured that protests could take place. That was also successful. Hundreds of protesters exercised their right to peaceful protest, including a large group numbering in the hundreds in and around Trafalgar Square. Where the police reasonably believed they had grounds for arrest, they acted. The latest information is that 64 arrests were made. I will not comment on individual cases or specific decisions, but the arrests included a person wanted for sexual offences, people equipped to commit criminal damage with large quantities of paint, and arrests on suspicion of conspiracy to cause public nuisance, often backed by intelligence. The Met's update last night included regret—to use its word—that six people arrested could not join the hundreds protesting in Trafalgar Square and nearby. The Met confirmed that those six people have now had their bail cancelled with no further action.

The police are operationally independent and it is primarily for the Mayor of London to hold the Met to account, but let us be clear: at the weekend officers had to make difficult judgments in fast time, in a highly pressured situation against a threatening intelligence picture. I thank the police for doing that, for delivering a successful a coronation and for enabling safe, peaceful protests.

Joanna Cherry: On Saturday, millions of people greatly enjoyed the coronation ceremony. Others, who wish to see a republic, chose to protest peacefully, as is their right in a democratic society. Protests in Glasgow and Edinburgh went off without incident. In London, however, protesters who had gone to considerable lengths to liaise with the Metropolitan police in advance of their

protest to clear both the nature and the location of the protest, were detained, searched, arrested and held in the cells from 7 am until after 11 pm. All six of those arrested have now received letters saying there will be no further action taken against them. There were a number of other arrests of concern, but because there are no legal proceedings in respect of the six, and therefore no reason for Parliament not to begin today to address what happened to them, I will focus on them.

Graham Smith, the leader of the group Republic, tells me that the arresting police showed absolutely no interest in contacting the liaison team and seemed focused on luggage straps holding placards together, which they said might be used to lock on. The Joint Committee on Human Rights has repeatedly stressed that public authorities, including the police, are under a negative obligation not to interfere with the right to protest unlawfully and a positive obligation to facilitate peaceful protest, so why did police arrest protesters who had gone to such great lengths to clear their protest in advance, and why did they do so on grounds that they now admit were not sufficient to charge them and without following up with the liaison team? What do citizens need to do now to clear a protest in advance?

On the BBC Radio 4 “Today” programme, Sir Peter Fahy, the former chief constable of Greater Manchester police, said that what happened has to be seen in the context of media, political and public pressure on the police. He referred to what he called

“some pretty direct and personal feedback”

brought to bear on Sir Mark Rowley before the Home Affairs Committee on 26 April by the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson)—I have notified the hon. Member that I would mention him, Mr Speaker. So, was political pressure brought to bear on the police? Sir Peter also said that the legislation, the Public Order Act 2023 and the policing Act, is very poorly defined and far too broad. That was what Opposition MPs warned of, particularly regarding offences such as locking on. Will the Minister review the legislation and set up an inquiry into what happened to those six citizens on Saturday?

Chris Philp: I have the greatest respect for the hon. and learned Member and take her questions seriously. She asked about pressure; the police are operationally independent and make decisions independent of Government. Ministers received a briefing, particularly as the intelligence picture escalated in the 24 hours before the event. The Mayor of London also received briefings, as did the shadow Home Secretary on Friday, I believe. There is nothing out of the ordinary in Ministers receiving briefings, not least because the police and other security and civilian agencies need to co-ordinate. The House has just debated and scrutinised the legislation at some length, and there are no plans to change it.

On the six people arrested and the question of protests more generally, I repeat the point I made in my initial answer: hundreds of people exercised their right to protest peacefully. As the hon. and learned Lady said, that was done following engagement with the Republic protest group. The fact that hundreds of people were able to protest peacefully is testament to the right of peaceful protest.

I do not want to get into the details of the six people because, frankly, neither the hon. and learned Lady nor I has all the facts. But clearly, when the arrests were made,

[Chris Philp]

the police reasonably believed that there were grounds to do so. I emphasise again that several hundred people were able to peacefully protest on that day, as is their absolute right.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Nobody should question that it was a difficult time and a difficult task for the Metropolitan police. Nobody should question that, to a large extent, they carried it out brilliantly and gave us a marvellous occasion this weekend. That being said, within one week of the Public Order Act entering the law, and in its first serious use, we end up with the head of the Met having to apologise to people who were wrongfully arrested. In the event that the Home Affairs Committee reviews this matter and comes back with recommendations on how to change guidelines and perhaps laws, will the Home Office take that on board?

Chris Philp: I caution my right hon. Friend against asserting that those people were wrongfully arrested. That is a legal threshold and it has not been established that it was met. On the issue of testing the legislation, I draw the House's attention to the fact that this was a once-in-a-lifetime event, which took place against an intelligence backdrop that suggested that there were multiple, well-organised plots to cause serious disruption. Had they proceeded, they would have been taken very seriously by this House and been seen around the world. I do not think one can infer from what happened at the weekend that the recently passed legislation is defective.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The coronation of King Charles III involved the largest police effort ever undertaken. I thank the thousands of police officers who ensured that so many people were able to enjoy such a historic occasion without incident. Rightly in our democracy, the police had operational responsibility and had to take decisions at pace and under pressure. Rightly in our democracy, we have scrutiny and accountability where problems arise. Hundreds of people who chose to do so were able to protest. As the Minister stated, some plans to disrupt were foiled, but serious concerns have been raised about some of the arrests.

The six people from Republic were arrested under new powers in the Public Order Act for "being equipped for locking on",

which came into force two days before the coronation. They have now been released with no further action, and the Met has expressed regret. The Minister knows that I have warned him and his colleagues repeatedly that the new powers mean that people might be arrested for the wrong thing, such as carrying in their bag a bike lock or, as in this case, some luggage straps. Many former police officers have warned that the powers put the police in a difficult position and risk undermining the notion of policing by consent.

The arrests raise questions that we want answers to. Why did the arresting officers not know or take into account that Republic had been working with the police? Why were those people held for 16 hours? Does the Minister support the Mayor of London's review, so that

Parliament can see the lessons to be learned? Will the Minister ask the inspectorate and the College of Policing to monitor and review the new public order powers and report back to Parliament? Will he support the recommendations in the inspectorate's report for more specific training on public order for our officers?

This weekend was a celebration, and one that could not have happened without the dedication of our police service. But just as important to our British democracy as our constitutional monarchy is our historic model of policing by consent, trust and our freedom to protest peacefully. It is our job as Members of Parliament to come up with laws that solve problems rather than creating them. I urge the Minister to learn the lessons and take responsibility for protecting that careful balance between the police and the people.

Chris Philp: I agree with the shadow Minister that it is important to maintain the balance to which she refers, but as I said in my opening and subsequent responses to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the right to protest was, for those hundreds of people, protected. The protests did happen, and indeed there is no question, in principle or in any legislation, but that the right to peaceful protest is sacrosanct. In recent months, however, we have seen that right being stretched into acts that were deliberately disruptive, when people have sought to close down the M25 and to close down the streets of London, not so much as an act of protest as to deliberately inconvenience the public. That is where we draw the line.

At the weekend, broadly the same test was applied. Peaceful protest is, of course, absolutely fine, but activity that was designed to seriously disrupt the coronation—including potentially causing a stampede of horses or covering the ceremonial procession in paint—was not acceptable. I think we can agree that this was a unique situation. The police had to make very difficult judgments and decisions in a very short time, against an extremely threatening intelligence picture, and the facts were often unclear at the time. I think all of us here should accept that those are difficult decisions. While it is for the police to answer operationally, I think that if they were here, they would say that they acted lawfully at the time to the best of their reasonable belief. However, I do want to put on record that the right to peaceful protest is sacrosanct, and I am sure that no one on either side of the House would ever seek to undermine it.

Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Does the Minister agree that, as a matter of law, the police are entirely within their rights to arrest individuals in order to prevent a crime? That happens somewhere in the country pretty much every day. Obviously, the police do not wait until a crime is committed—until the active offence is committed—before acting. If they know from intelligence received that an armed robbery was about to take place, they do not have to wait until it is taking place before acting, and the same applies here. Does the Minister agree that the police did an excellent job in very difficult circumstances? This is a Government who support the police; we will leave the Opposition parties to support those who do not follow the law.

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is not at the Bar now. He must ask shorter questions.

Chris Philp: It is easy to criticise after the event, but yes, I do agree that the police did a good job in extremely trying, difficult and fast-moving circumstances, and in which judgments were inevitably difficult.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has said that the Public Order Act is incompatible with the right to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, and it is deeply disappointing to hear both Labour and the Conservatives make it clear that they are wedded to legislation that undermines our rights to protest. Graham Smith, the CEO of Republic, has said:

“These arrests are a direct attack on our democracy and the fundamental rights of every person in the country... The right to protest peacefully in the UK no longer exists. Instead we have a freedom to protest that is contingent on political decisions made by ministers and senior police officers.”

That is entirely unacceptable.

In the statement that he has issued, Sir Mark Rowley said:

“Having now reviewed the evidence and potential lines of enquiry we do not judge that we will be able to prove criminal intent beyond all reasonable doubt.”

So these arrests were not necessary. Sir Mark also said:

“I support the officers’ actions in this unique fast moving operational context.”

That suggests that there is no certainty that if similar circumstances occurred, the same thing would not happen again. Will the Minister tell me what protections people can expect when they, in good faith, engage with authorities before protests to prevent this kind of thing from happening, only to find it happening again, and does it concern him that a journalist was among those arrested?

Chris Philp: It is entirely inaccurate to say that the right to protest does not exist. As I pointed out, hundreds and hundreds of people did peacefully and lawfully protest on coronation day. They did so unmolested and unimpeded, which goes to show that the idea that the right to protest does not exist anymore is absolute nonsense. What does not exist is the right to cause disruption to other members of society. That is what our laws seek to prevent.

In relation to the Human Rights Act 1998, and particularly articles 10 and 11 of the European convention on human rights, the Public Order Act 2023 has a section 19(1)(a) statement on the face of it, saying that legal analysis finds the Act is compatible. If the hon. Lady studies articles 10 and 11, particularly the second paragraphs, she will see that qualified rights are able to be balanced against the right of democratically elected legislatures to legislate to prevent criminal activity, including disruption.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that the Metropolitan police did a great job? They took the necessary action to protect the public during a unique state event. We have heard not one word from Opposition Members—and will not hear anything in what is yet to come—that provides evidence to the contrary. It is reassuring that, for once, the Metropolitan police acted on the side of the hard-working

public who want to have the opportunity to enjoy events, rather than being the victims of left-wing protest groups.

Chris Philp: I agree with my hon. Friend.

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

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I add my thanks to those involved in the arrangements for the coronation and keeping the public safe. However, the Home Affairs Committee will no doubt want to look at the policing of protests at the coronation and, in particular, the specific provisions in the Public Order Act 2023, brought in just last week and used to arrest members of Republic.

We have heard a lot about the operational independence of the police this afternoon. Will the Minister explain why on 27 April the Home Office’s police powers unit sent an official letter to Republic, ahead of the coronation? Republic has no history of its members locking on. How many other organisations and groups received such letters? On what basis were they sent those letters? Will that practice now be the norm for the Home Office?

Chris Philp: I do not believe that any such letters were sent in my name, so I cannot comment on who may have received them. I suspect, although I am not certain, that those letters related to clarifying the new statutory provisions that were recently brought into effect through the Public Order Act 2023. The operational independence of the police is important, because Parliament legislates and it is then for the police to apply those laws without fear or favour, and they did so on this occasion.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): There has clearly been a misunderstanding, despite the police doing a brilliant job, and that is why there has been an apology. But would the Minister not expect that misunderstanding to have been resolved well within the 16 hours for which the six were incarcerated? Surely there should be some questions asked about that.

Chris Philp: Again, exactly what happened is an operational matter for the police. Clearly, last Saturday the police had a lot going on in central London, policing the largest public event we have ever had in our country’s history. I do not know—in fact, no Member of this House knows or can know—precisely what inquiries were being undertaken while the decision ultimately to release those individuals was taken. Complaint processes are available if any individual member of the public wants to follow them. They are available to anyone who is arrested or encounters the police. If someone feels that the police have behaved unreasonably in a particular situation, they are able to use those complaint procedures.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Is it not the case that the arrests of peaceful protestors at the weekend were not an aberration, but exactly what the Public Order Act is designed to do—to clamp down on legitimate peaceful protest, which should be a basic democratic right in this country?

Chris Philp: No, that is not the purpose of the Public Order Act, which is designed to prevent people from deliberately disrupting the daily lives of their fellow citizens, as we have seen with the locking-on on public highways,

[Chris Philp]

which causes enormous traffic jams that stop people getting to hospital, getting their children to school and getting to work—we have seen 10-mile tailbacks on the M25. We had specific intelligence that people planned to disrupt the coronation by creating a stampede of horses and by covering the ceremonial procession in paint. The Public Order Act is designed to stop such disruption while, of course, allowing peaceful protest. That is its purpose.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Given the heat of this debate, I must add, as a Greater London MP, that it is complete and utter nonsense to say that people can no longer peacefully protest in London. I attended my first protest a couple of weeks ago, against the Mayor of London's disgraceful ultra low emission zone, and we were left to protest peacefully. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, over the weekend, the 11,500 police officers and armed forces personnel did an excellent job of policing and keeping the public safe during the fantastic coronation celebrations?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend puts it very well, and I join him in opposing Sadiq Khan's appalling ULEZ idea.

The police and armed forces did a great job of policing the coronation. Between the Metropolitan police and Thames Valley police, who policed the Windsor concert the following day, almost 30,000 officers were deployed at one time or another during the relevant period. I think 11,500 officers were deployed on the day of the coronation itself, in addition to 6,500 armed forces personnel. There were 312 protected people who came to this country from around the world, and we deployed almost 1,000 close protection officers. All those officers did a fantastic job in a moment of national pride for all of us.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am a little surprised that the Minister apparently accepts, without question, the proposition that the Metropolitan police now apologises to people who have been lawfully arrested. Even by his standards, that is something of a novel departure.

The Public Order Act has given police officers broad and sweeping powers, which in turn require the police to exercise discretion and judgment with no context or guidelines. If there is no change to this legislation, such things will keep happening. There should have been better pre-legislative scrutiny of the Act, but there was not. Will he now commit to allowing post-legislative scrutiny?

Chris Philp: Many pieces of legislation require on-the-ground interpretation, whether by the police or subsequently by the courts in case law. Indeed, the new Act contains much more precise definitions of what constitutes serious disruption, which was previously extremely ambiguous. The police and others had called for that clarity. Obviously, the House is welcome to conduct scrutiny whenever it wants. It is standard for new legislation to be subject to post-legislative scrutiny some time later, but in many areas this new Act, which recently received Royal Assent, provides additional specificity, clarity and precision that were previously lacking.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The Minister rightly said that hundreds of people protested against the once-in-a-generation coronation. Hundreds of thousands of people were present to celebrate the coronation, and millions in the United Kingdom and around the world were watching. I am getting pretty fed up with the police apologising all the time. Ordinary police officers who do a decent job, as they did on Saturday, find their morale at rock bottom when, after being instructed by the Metropolitan police on 3 May that

“We will deal robustly with anyone intent on undermining this celebration”, someone apologises because they did just that.

Chris Philp: I recommend that Members on both sides of the House read the Metropolitan Police Commissioner's article in today's *Evening Standard* robustly setting out the background and defending the police's approach to the coronation. My hon. Friend refers to the expression of regret that those six people were unable to join the hundreds of others who protested peacefully. Those hundreds of others were exercising their right to peaceful protest, as they are perfectly entitled to do. It is worth mentioning in passing, as he did, that they were in a tiny, tiny minority, but that does not undermine their right to protest if they so choose.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): This is obvious to anyone who looks at it; we take a piece of draconian legislation, such as the Public Order Bill, we rush it through this place, via an unelected Head of State, who gave it consent, and we hand it to a failing institution such as the Metropolitan police, who then decapitate the leadership of the republican protest movement. What do we expect? This piece of legislation is doing exactly what it says on the tin: it is stopping peaceful protest.

Chris Philp: That is absolute nonsense. This legislation is preventing disruption to the lives of our fellow citizens. I wholly repudiate the suggestion that it was rushed through; there was extensive ping-pong, which I do not recall the hon. Gentleman turning up to, although he is so concerned about scrutiny. As for his comment about the process for a Bill gaining Royal Assent, I will not dignify that with a response.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I cannot think of a greater waste of time than an inquiry into this matter. The police did a fantastic job over the weekend. They took actions under pressure, having to make decisions quickly to ensure that a great national event went ahead without any kind of negative event—I am glad that that happened. Does the Minister share my concerns that some Just Stop Oil protesters think they might have found a loophole in the Public Order Act and can get away with slow marching? Will he assure me that that is not the case and that we will not continue to see Just Stop Oil protests cause havoc in our towns?

Chris Philp: Just Stop Oil has adapted its tactics since it blocked the M25 in November, causing 10-mile tailbacks, after which a number of arrests were made, with some of the people involved then being remanded in custody. It has changed to these slow walking tactics, but the police are applying cumulative disruption tests to those, using section 12 of the Public Order Act 1986 and making notices under that Act. Following recent disruptions in the past 10 to 14 days, the roads have typically been cleared within 10 minutes, which I am sure Londoners, my constituents and others, will welcome strongly.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Minister just said that the right to peaceful protest is sacrosanct and no one would seek to undermine it, but I put it to him that that is exactly what his Government have just done: Ministers are criminalising protest. Just because some people were allowed to protest, that does not mitigate against the fact that a number were not. Let me just correct him: those who were arrested and kept in were not causing an obstruction, which is presumably why the police went to apologise to them afterwards. Does this not show that the powers the Government have handed to the police are dangerously broad and liable to gross misuse, as many of us have pointed out? I urge him again to review this legislation urgently.

Chris Philp: I do not accept that analysis. The powers are designed to prevent disruption where it might occur or where it is occurring. That includes things such as locking on, which we have seen cause huge disruption on the streets of London. The law allows peaceful protest where it is not disruptive and where people do not plan to cause disruption, which is why hundreds and hundreds of people, albeit a tiny minority of the total there, were able to protest peacefully. Where someone is preparing to commit or is committing a criminal offence, such as disrupting a procession, it is reasonable for the police to act.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): As the secretary of the National Union of Journalists' parliamentary group throughout the passage of the public order legislation, I asked for and was given assurances by Ministers that it would not impede upon journalistic freedoms. Yet, on Saturday at least one journalist was stopped and searched—nothing was found. He was handcuffed, he had his credentials torn off him and he was then detained for 16 hours. He is a member of Bectu and a professional film maker. Will the Minister investigate why the assurances this House was given on media freedom were not adhered to?

Chris Philp: The new legislation contains a specific clause, added during its passage, protecting journalistic freedoms. An incident took place in Hertfordshire a few months ago, in November, I believe, where a journalist was incorrectly arrested and the relevant police force, Hertfordshire, apologised subsequently. The Government then legislated in the recent Bill, with a specific clause protecting journalistic freedom. I do not want to comment on an individual operational matter, not least because neither the right hon. Gentleman nor I have the full facts. As I said, if an individual or others feel that they were not fairly or properly treated, there is a complaints process they can go through. Parliament, however, has made its view clear.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Does the Minister agree with the former Greater Manchester police chief, Sir Peter Fahy, who has extensive experience of public order policing, who previously said that the Public Order Act was

“poorly defined and far too broad”

and who added this weekend that we now

“see the consequences of that”?

Chris Philp: No, I do not agree, and I have already explained why.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): The Minister has repeatedly used the example of hundreds being able to protest as evidence that our right to protest has not been undermined. But when people can be pre-emptively arrested on the flimsiest of pretences and then thrown in a police cell for the best part of 24 hours, how can he reassure people who are attending a protest, or even walking near a protest, that the same thing will not happen to them? How can he claim that our right to protest is not being undermined by his Government?

Chris Philp: I have mentioned the ECHR compatibility, particularly in relation to articles 10 and 11. Before the police can arrest anyone, they have to have reasonable grounds for suspicion that an offence has been committed. Obviously, individual operational decisions—in this case relating to six people—are something that can be looked into subsequently if that is necessary, but the Public Order Bill, as passed by Parliament, does nothing to criminalise lawful protest. As I have said, hundreds and hundreds of people did exercise exactly that right, although they were in a tiny minority.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): There is no doubt that the police have a difficult job in making swift on-the-ground judgments, but their job is made harder when they do not act in a consistent manner. I had an eyewitness account that a protester was allowed to go in among the republicans unchallenged, jostling them and acting in a provocative manner right in front of the police for about 10 minutes before the police intervened. There was no doubt that that was disruption, but the police did not act for quite a long time. Does the Minister agree that that sort of thing creates the impression that some types of protest are more equal than others?

Chris Philp: I have not heard that particular account before. It is not really appropriate for me to comment on something that I have just heard about on the Floor of the Chamber. However, I have already drawn the attention of the House to the procedures that are available to members of the public. I do appreciate the hon. Gentleman's opening comment that the police had a very difficult job. They were under enormous pressure; they were dealing with a number of intelligence threats that I outlined at the beginning of my response. Things were moving very quickly. Often the picture was confusing, and often things had to be done in a rush, so I do appreciate his acknowledgment of the very difficult job that the police had to do, but I think they rose to the occasion.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I voted against the Public Order Bill at every stage, but as a former police officer I highlighted, from Committee onwards, the need for training to give police officers the capacity and capability to exercise their powers so that those dynamic pressures that the Minister has just referred to can be dealt with appropriately. How many officers, at what rank, were trained in relation to this legislation prior to attending the coronation on Tuesday, and what did the training consist of?

Chris Philp: The overall gold commander at the event is one of the Metropolitan police's most experienced public order commanders—at the rank of commander. Many officers have had specialist public order training

[Chris Philp]

in the course of their career, but training must keep up with legislative changes. The College of Policing and others will be issuing the relevant guidance to ensure that that is addressed.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the Metropolitan police's expression of regret regarding the arrest of six anti-monarchy protesters this weekend is an admission of guilt, and does he accept that that is a chilling violation of basic democratic rights that demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Public Order Act should be immediately repealed?

Chris Philp: No, I do not agree.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Minister has a real brass neck. The Tory Government brought in this draconian legislation, yet he tells us that the police are operationally independent of the Government, as if this is nothing to do with their actions. Human Rights Watch has said that what we saw was,

"something you would expect to see in Moscow not London."

Given that reportedly only 6% of those arrested for protesting against the coronation were charged with anything at all, does the Minister agree that the new legislation is nothing but an advert for how to impede people's right to protest?

Chris Philp: With great respect, that is nonsense. Comparing the policing of the coronation with Putin's Russia, where opposition figures are incarcerated and people such as Alexei Navalny are in prison and suffering the most appalling and inhumane treatment, is an insult to the appalling treatment they are suffering and not at all respectful to those being oppressed in Russia. Hundreds of people peacefully protested against the monarchy—they were a tiny minority, but they did protest—and the police only made arrests, 64 in total, where they had reasonable grounds to believe that a criminal offence had been committed or was in preparation. If anyone feels the arrest they experienced was not proper or appropriate, there are mechanisms they can use to complain and to seek redress.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I appreciate that this was an exceptionally challenging weekend for the police, but I am particularly concerned about the arrest and detention of members of the Westminster Night Stars team, volunteers out in central London helping to keep people safe. Communication between local authorities, the police and other agencies is critical. Can the Minister assure me that he will find out what went wrong in that communication to ensure that lessons are learned, so that volunteers who are out supporting the police in their work do not get arrested because of a breakdown in such communication?

Chris Philp: I agree that communication between local authorities and the police is important and that that join-up needs to happen. The question the hon. Lady asks is probably best directed via the police and crime commissioner for the Mayor of London, who I am sure will be happy to take up the query.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): No one will wish the new commissioner of the Met success more than London MPs, whose constituents have suffered a catalogue of institutional harm under his predecessors, but his statement in the *Evening Standard* today is political somersaulting from start to finish, including justifying arrests because celebrating crowds "applauded and cheered" them. Is that not a direct result of the undue pressure put on the commissioner by a Conservative party that increasingly picks and chooses when it follows the rule of law?

Chris Philp: I do not accept that. I have already pointed out the operational independence of the police and I have said that briefings by the Met on the coronation were received not just by Home Office Ministers, but also by the shadow Home Secretary and the Mayor of London, all of which was completely proper.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The whole world could see on Saturday the effects of the public order legislation on policing, trying to prevent legitimate peaceful protest in a democracy. Will the Minister reply in a considered and reasonable way to say that he will undertake a full review of the operations of the Public Order Act thus far on preventing peaceful protest in this country, as an example of how a democracy is prepared to admit it has got something wrong and change it?

Chris Philp: No. What we saw on Saturday was the police doing their best, in very difficult and challenging circumstances, to prevent disruption while allowing and facilitating peaceful protest, which indeed went ahead.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): There is an unwritten law in Scotland that the best policing is carried out with the consent of the public. What is it about the Met that means that the policing of public events is heavy-handed and often completely wrong in its tone? When that becomes part of the policing approach, does that not undermine public confidence in the police itself? Will the Minister review urgently the basic training needs at the Met, and does this Government dictate through the Public Order Act not get in the way of good policing?

Chris Philp: Training is very important, as the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) mentioned a little while ago, but, once again, I do not think we saw any trampling on the right to protest. We saw hundreds of people exercising their right to protest. I urge the House to keep in mind that this was a unique, once-in-a-generation event. The eyes of the world were upon us and there were numerous intelligence reports, which I was briefed on and perhaps the shadow Home Secretary was briefed on too, indicating well-developed plots to disrupt the coronation. The policing response needs to be considered in that context.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Following the arrests of peaceful pro-democracy campaigners on the route of the coronation on Saturday, the Security Minister's claim that the weekend would "showcase our liberty" has fallen flat. Can the Minister explain why the Home Office, and not the Metropolitan police, wrote what protest groups have referred to as "intimidatory" letters about the public order powers, and will he provide a

comprehensive explanation of why journalists are now being arrested when section 17 of the Public Order Act prohibits it?

Chris Philp: As I said earlier, those letters were not, as far as I can recall, sent in my name. They may well have been attempting to be helpful by clarifying recently enacted legislation that some groups may not have been familiar with; it is not unreasonable to try to ensure that relevant parties know when the law changes. On journalistic freedom, as the hon. Lady says, this House—supported by the Government—voted particularly and specifically to protect journalists, and that is the right thing to do. If anyone feels that that has not been properly implemented, complaints procedures are available.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Among those arrested on Saturday was Rich Felgate, a documentary filmmaker, who identified himself as a journalist. He claims that a police officer ripped off his press credentials, and that he was then arrested and detained. The Minister will know that Rich was one of four journalists and filmmakers who were arrested and detained in or near my constituency in Hertfordshire last November. It is incomprehensible to me that after the outcry last November, police forces can keep getting the basics wrong when it comes to protecting the freedom of the press and the right of journalists to do their jobs. Will the Minister look again at the legislation and consider the proposal for a statutory duty on police to facilitate peaceful protest and for a code of conduct so that the police and protesters know where they stand?

Chris Philp: As I have said two or three times already, the new Public Order Act contains a section—the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) suggested a moment ago that it was section 17—specifically to protect journalistic freedom. Of course, that came after the incident in Hertfordshire. If there are particular individual cases where the new law, and indeed the wider ECHR and common law right for journalists, is not being applied, there are complaints mechanisms. But this House, supported by the Government, has legislated specifically to protect journalistic freedoms.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Given what happened to the six individuals on Saturday who were clearly not involved in any plot to use rape alarms or paint to disrupt the coronation—otherwise, why would the police have apologised to them—what confidence can the organisers of any future protest have that what they are told in advance planning meetings with the police can be relied upon on the day?

Chris Philp: Without wanting to go into too many specifics, I believe that the police assessment at the time did not relate in this particular case to rape alarms or paint but to locking-on equipment. The right hon. Gentleman says that it is clear, but of course, many things are clear with hindsight; they are sometimes less clear in the heat of a live operation. In terms of assurance on the right to protest, the Public Order Act does not in any way infringe or undermine the right to protest. Indeed, we saw on Saturday quite a reasonably sized group—a few hundred people—protesting at the coronation event without any impediment, and these days we see Just Stop Oil protesters protesting almost daily, so there is evidence in front of us showing us how the right to protest unfolds on a near daily basis.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): On Saturday, we saw Metropolitan police officers pre-arresting people whose only offence was to want an elected Head of State. Despite their planned peaceful protests being pre-authorised, UK citizens who had committed no crime whatsoever were taken off the streets and detained simply because of their political beliefs. Is that not exactly how this anti-democratic, draconian and authoritarian piece of legislation was designed to work, and is it not proof of what makes the legislation so dangerously wrong?

Chris Philp: No, the legislation does not in any way criminalise or prevent protest. We see protests happening on a daily basis, including on Saturday. The legislation enables the police to prevent disruption. They need to have a reasonable belief in order to do that. If anyone feels that in this very small minority of cases—a tiny minority of cases—those powers were misapplied, there are complaints procedures, but the vast, vast, vast majority of people wishing to protest on Saturday did so.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Can the Minister confirm whether the right to peaceful protest applies only if an individual's views chime with the Government's?

Chris Philp: I am not sure that that question merits an answer. The legislation is clearly politics agnostic, and it is for the police to apply it without fear or favour.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that the troubling scenes witnessed during the coronation vindicate Opposition Members who warned that the Government's new anti-protest laws would be used to stifle dissent and limit freedom of expression? Does he accept that if we are to protect the most fundamental right of free speech, the Public Order Act must be scrapped in its entirety?

Chris Philp: No. As I have said repeatedly, the Public Order Act and associated legislation are designed to prevent disruption to our fellow citizens' day-to-day lives while enabling peaceful protest.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) on securing the urgent question. The seemingly random way in which the Metropolitan police can apply the law only to fully exonerate those arrested soon after is something that one might see in an illiberal democracy like Hungary or Turkey, and all this just a week after the Security Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and said that the coronation was a chance to “showcase our liberty”. Does the Minister agree with their colleague? Are these arrests a showcase of British liberty?

Chris Philp: The fact that hundreds of people protested against the monarchy, albeit they were a tiny minority of the crowds, demonstrates that the right to protest is unfettered, as does the fact that, as I speak, and as we have this discussion here in Parliament, I suspect there are Just Stop Oil protesters somewhere in London no doubt up to their protesting activities. The right to protest is sacrosanct, and it is protected, not least by the European convention on human rights, but also by our domestic legislation, which is something we should all be pleased about.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Minister has repeatedly told us that there was evidence of, in his words, a well-developed plot to misuse activated rape alarms in a way that would clearly have been criminally reckless, which no one would condone. Given that that plot was so well developed, with the exception of three Night Stars volunteers who have been mentioned, can the Minister tell us, of all the people arrested, how many were found to be in possession of rape alarms, how many have been charged with intent to use those rape alarms for criminal purposes, and how many rape alarms were seized on Saturday? If the answer to all those questions is nil or next to nil, does he accept that in this case the police intelligence was badly and dangerously misinformed?

Chris Philp: I think that there is an update on all the arrests on the Metropolitan police website, which provides some of the information for which the hon. Gentleman asks. Some arrests were made close to the ceremonial footprint, including people who had large quantities of paint. Other arrests were made at locations away from the ceremonial footprint at what might be described as a safehouse. The briefings that I received from the Met the night before—I believe the Mayor of London received them and possibly the Home Secretary; I am not sure—indicated multiple, well-developed and credible plots materially to disrupt the coronation, and it is greatly to the credit of the Metropolitan police that they prevented those from unfolding.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Participating as I have done in protests across Northern Ireland—all peaceful protests in the politics of Northern Ireland—I recognise that the Government are trying to ensure that peaceful protest can take place. The coronation weekend has been a globally celebrated event, and something on which the United Kingdom will look with pride for many years to come. The 64 arrests were made, as I understand it, in relation to intelligence that suggested that there would be deliberate attempts to cause nuisance on coronation day. Will the Minister join me in thanking the Met police, as opposed to critiquing them, for carrying out their duties in a swift manner, to enable people to celebrate the coronation of His Majesty the King in peace and without disruption?

Chris Philp: Yes, I would like to join the hon. Gentleman in thanking the police, the armed forces personnel and the civilians involved in laying on the coronation for a successful and, ultimately, peaceful event, despite the plots that were uncovered in advance. I also thank the police for ensuring that those protests were able to take place. It is an event that, overall, this country can be proud of. I am sure all of us want to wish King Charles III well at the beginning of his reign and say, “God save the King.”

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for answering the urgent question.

Recovering Access to Primary Care

4.25 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the primary care recovery plan. For most of us, general practice is our front door to the NHS. In the last six months, over half the UK population has used GP services, and GPs in England carry out around 1 million appointments every single day. They are doing more than ever. General practice is delivering 10% more appointments a month than before the pandemic—the equivalent of the average GP surgery seeing about 20 additional patients every working day. There are more staff than ever, with numbers up by a quarter since 2019, and we are on track to deliver our manifesto target, with an additional 25,000 staff already recruited into primary care. We are investing more than ever, too, with the most recent figures showing that funding was around a fifth higher than five years before, even once inflation is taken into account.

But we know that there is a great deal still to do. Covid-19 presented many challenges across the health service, leaving us with large numbers of people on NHS waiting lists, which need to be tackled. In general practice, patient contacts with GPs have increased between 20% and 40% since before the pandemic. As well as recovering from the pandemic, we face longer-term challenges, too. Since 2010, the number of people in England aged 70 and above has increased by a third, and this group attends five times more GP appointments than young people. Not only that, but advances in technology and treatments mean that people understandably expect more from primary care systems.

Today I can announce our primary care recovery plan, and I pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), for his work on this plan. I have deposited copies of the plan in the Libraries of both Houses. Our plan will enable us to better recover from the pandemic, to cut NHS waiting lists and to make the most of the opportunities ahead by focusing on three key areas: first, tackling the 8 am rush by giving GPs new digital tools; secondly, freeing up GP appointments by funding pharmacists to do more, with a “pharmacy first” approach; and thirdly, providing more GPs’ staff and more appointments. NHS England and my Department have committed to make over £1.2 billion of funding available to support the plan, in addition to the significant real-terms increases in spending on general practice in recent years. Taken together, our plan will make it easier for people to get the help they need.

The plan builds on lots of other important work. Last year, we launched the elective recovery plan, which is making big strides to reduce the backlog brought by covid-19. We eliminated nearly all waits over two years by last July, and 18-month waits have now decreased by over 90% since their peak in September 2021. By contrast, in the NHS in Labour-run Wales, people are twice as likely to be waiting for treatment than in England. They still have over 41,000 people waiting over two years and nearly 80,000 waiting over 18 months. In addition, this January, I came before the House to launch our urgent and emergency care plan, which is focused on how to better manage pressures in emergency departments, with funding to support discharge to improve patient flow in hospitals. Today’s plan is the next important piece of work.

Turning to the detail of the plan, our first aim is to tackle the 8 am rush. We will do that by providing GPs with new and better technology, moving us from an analogue approach to ways of working in the digital age. An average-sized GP practice will get around 100 calls in the first hour of a Monday morning. No team of receptionists, no matter how hard-working, can handle such demand. About half of GPs are still on old analogue phones, meaning that when things get busy, people get engaged tones. We are changing that by investing in modern phone systems for all GPs, including features such as call-back options, and by improving the digital front door for even more patients. In the GP practices that have already adopted those systems, there has been a 30% improvement in patient feedback on their ability to access the appointments they need. That also reflects the fact that online requests can help find the right person within the practice, such as being directed to a pharmacist for a medicine prescription review or to a physio for back pain.

In doing that, we will make the most of the 25,000 more staff we now have in primary care. Today's plans fund practices without this technology to adopt it, while also providing them with staff cover to help them manage a smooth transition to the technology. Indeed, many small GP practices in particular find it hardest to fund new technology, or to manage the disruption that comes with transitioning to new ways of working, so we are funding locum cover alongside the tech itself. Notwithstanding that, people will always be able to walk in or ring if they prefer; if someone wants to ring up and see someone face to face, these investments will make that easier, too.

We also want to make sure that patients know on the same day that they make contact how their request is going to be handled. Clinically urgent issues will be assessed on the same day, or the next day if raised in the afternoon. If the issue is not urgent, an appointment will be scheduled within two weeks, but crucially, people will not be asked to call back the following day. Instead, they will get their appointment booked on the same day or be signposted to other services.

The second area of the plan is Pharmacy First. As well as giving GPs new technology, I know that we need to take pressure off GPs where possible by making better use of the skills of all clinicians working in primary care. We saw the incredible role that pharmacists played during the pandemic—their capacity to innovate and deliver for the communities that they served, freeing up GP appointments in doing so—so the second part of our plan is to introduce a new NHS service, Pharmacy First, on which we are already consulting with the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee.

Some 80% of people live within a 20-minute walk of a pharmacy, so making it easier for pharmacists to take referrals can have a huge impact. Referrals might be from GPs, NHS 111 or, from next week, urgent and emergency care settings. Community pharmacies already take referrals for a range of minor conditions, such as diarrhoea, vomiting and conjunctivitis, but with our Pharmacy First approach we can go further still. We will invest up to £645 million over the next two years so that pharmacists can supply prescription-only medicines for common conditions, such as ear pain, urinary tract infections and sore throats, without requiring a prescription from a GP.

One of the most significant shifts we are making is on oral contraception. Pharmacists can already manage the supply of contraception prescribed elsewhere; from later this year, they will also be able to start women on courses of oral contraception. This is another way in which, in light of our women's health strategy, we aim to reduce the barriers to women accessing contraception. Pharmacists will also be able to do more blood pressure checks, which is one of the most important risk factors for cardiovascular disease. Not only will those kinds of steps make it easier for people to get the care they need, we expect them to release up to 10 million appointments a year by 2024-25.

The third part of our plan is about providing more staff and more appointments. We are making huge investments in our primary care workforce, and are on track to meet the manifesto commitment of 26,000 more primary care staff by next March, meaning that we have more pharmacists, physios and paramedics delivering appointments in primary care than ever before. In 2021, we hit our target of 4,000 people accepting GP training places, and our upcoming NHS workforce plan will set out how we will further expand GP training. We are also helping to retain senior GPs by reforming pension rules, lifting 9,000 GPs out of annual tax changes. These are the pension reforms that the British Medical Association welcomed, describing them as “significant” and “decisive” changes and citing them as “transformative for the NHS”.

As well as freeing up more staff time, our plan cuts bureaucracy, too, so that GPs spend less time on paperwork and more time caring for patients. We will remove unnecessary targets, improve communication between GPs and hospitals, and reduce the amount of non-GP work that GPs are being asked to do. For example, patients are often discharged from hospital without fit notes, meaning that they then have to go to their GP to get one. By the end of this year, NHS secondary care services, which understand those patient conditions better, will be able to issue fit notes, and we have streamlined the number of targets on primary care networks from 36 down to just five. Taken together, this work will free up around £37,000 a practice.

Today's primary care recovery plan funds and empowers our GPs and pharmacists to do more, so that we can prevent ill health, keep cutting NHS waiting lists and improve that vital front door to the NHS for many millions of people. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

4.36 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. This announcement was meant to be the Prime Minister's relaunch after he received a drubbing in the local elections. Unfortunately for Conservative Members, it seems that the Prime Minister is bouncing back in true Alan Partridge-style.

Having read that Downing Street had drawn up plans for a health-focused mini relaunch, I eagerly tuned into the radio this morning to hear the Health Minister, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien). What was the Conservatives' message to the public this morning,

[*Wes Streeting*]

following their worst defeat since 1997? They are breaking their manifesto commitment to recruit 6,000 new GPs. Once again, the Conservatives have over-promised and under-delivered.

I think the Secretary of State just admitted to missing his target to eliminate 18-month waits by April. Is that the second broken promise of the day? It is hard to keep up. Millions of patients are waiting a month to see a GP, if they can get an appointment at all, in pain and discomfort, unable to go about their normal lives. That is the price patients are paying every day for 13 years of Conservative failure. The Prime Minister has no idea what it is like to be most people in this country. He is completely out of touch with what NHS patients are going through, and that is why he cannot offer the change the country is desperately crying out for.

The Health Secretary has called this announcement the GP access recovery plan. What is this a plan to recover from, if not his party's appalling record of under-investment and failure to reform? Does he now regret the 2,000 GPs cut since 2015, the 350 GP practices that have closed in the same time, and the 670 community pharmacies that have shut up shop on their watch? Is expecting the Conservatives to fix the NHS after they broke it not just like expecting an arsonist to put out the fire that they started? It is just not going to happen.

It is not just the voters who are turning to the Labour party for answers; the Government are, too. In January, we set out our plans for the future of primary care, including allowing pharmacies to prescribe for common conditions, opening up self-referral routes into things such as physiotherapy, and ending the 8 am scramble. Sound familiar? The problem is, that is where the similarities end, because what the Conservatives offer today is a pale imitation of Labour's reform agenda. Where is the plan to give patients real choice? There is nothing on enabling patients to see the same doctor at each appointment, when doctors themselves tell us that continuity of care is important. There is nothing on allowing patients to choose whether they are seen face-to-face or over the phone, merely the promise of better hold music and the "invention" of things such as call-back, which has existed for many years. In fact, where is the plan for better mental health support, more care in the community and in people's homes and more health visitors to give children a healthy start in life, or have all those issues been dumped into a box marked "Too difficult"?

The Secretary of State says that patients will get an appointment within two weeks as if it is some kind of triumph. When we were in government, we delivered GP appointments within two days. When will this pitiful promise be delivered? There is no date or deadline. By when can patients expect the 8 am scramble to end? There is no date or deadline. When will patients with urgent needs be seen on the same day? There is no date or deadline. In fact, I wrote to the Minister and asked him how many patients are currently not seen on the same day. He said he did not know and that the Department does not hold that information. What is the point of these pledges if Ministers do not know whether they are being met? The document says that the NHS and the Department have "retargeted over £1 billion" to pay for

the announcements, but not where that money has come from. Where has the Secretary of State cut NHS services to pay for these announcements?

The Secretary of State's plans for patients to refer themselves to physios for back pain, bypassing GPs, could lead to 5,000 cancer patients missing their diagnosis. That, as perhaps he remembers, was according to—that is right—the Conservative party back in February. Three months later it is the Government's policy, so perhaps the Secretary of State can clarify: was the Conservative party telling porkies back in February, or does he simply not know what on earth he is doing? Given that this is meant to be a primary care recovery plan, where is dentistry? NHS dentists are in even shorter supply than Conservative council leaders.

Finally, let me turn to the super-massive black hole at the heart of today's announcement: where is the plan to train the doctors and nurses the NHS is so desperately short of? Labour has set out our plan to train 7,500 more doctors and 10,000 more nurses each year, paid for by abolishing the non-dom tax status. When will the Secretary of State finally admit he does not have any ideas of his own, and adopt Labour's plan? After 13 years, the Conservatives have no plan to give the NHS the staff it needs, they have broken their promise to recruit 6,000 new GPs and they have missed a golden opportunity to give patients real choice. Only Labour has a plan to rebuild and renew the NHS, and that is why people across the country are coming home to Labour.

Steve Barclay: The hon. Member started with the message to the public, and the message to the public can be seen by what key figures in the sector say about this recovery plan. Let me just share that with the House. The Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee says that the plan is

"the most significant investment in community pharmacy in well over a decade".

The Boots chief executive says that this is

"great news that they'll be able use their clinical expertise more widely".

The Company Chemists Association says that it is a

"real vote of confidence for the future profession".

The message to the public from the industries in this sector is clear that this is a well thought through plan which will have a beneficial impact for patients. I will give one final quote: the chair of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society says that this plan will be

"a real game-changer for patients",

and that is what our focus has been.

The hon. Member raised the issue of our delivery against the 18 months target. It is very generous of him to give me the opportunity to share once again with the House the contrast with Wales, but perhaps he missed it first time around. We have reduced the wait for 18 months by over 90%, yet Wales still has vastly more—over 80,000 waiting there—and that is from a much smaller population. Wales still has over 40,000 waiting more than two years, a target that we virtually eliminated as long ago as last summer. Those who want to see what a Labour Government would mean for the NHS can see it with the performance against the two-year waiting list and the 18-month waiting list in Wales, so it is very generous of him to give me the opportunity to share that once again with the House.

The hon. Member talks about what the recovery plan is for. Clearly, the pandemic has placed huge pressure on primary care, and we can see that just from the increased volumes of appointments that primary care faces. Again, I touched in my opening remarks on the fact that GPs and primary care are seeing more than 10% more appointments than before the pandemic—1 million appointments a day. It is clear why we need to invest in new forms of working, online booking technology and cutting bureaucracy: it is so that GPs can focus on the aspects of their role that apply purely to GPs and we can better use the 25,000 additional roles that are being recruited into primary care.

The hon. Gentleman talked about his direct referral policy. We actually announced our policy guidance in December, a month before his announcement, so it is something of a stretch to say that we are following his approach. He again kindly raised the issue of mental health, which gives me the opportunity to remind the House of the increased funding that this Government are making in mental health. That was a key priority when my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) was Prime Minister and a cornerstone of the long-term plan, with an extra £2.3 billion going into mental health. But we did not stop there. At the Budget, the Chancellor further prioritised mental health—for example, mental health digital apps were a cornerstone of the measures for economically inactive people. We are recruiting an additional 25,000 roles into primary care in recognition that specialists are needed, whether physios, pharmacists, paramedics or specialists in mental health support.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about other aspects of primary care such as dentistry. We have said frequently that we have a recovery plan for dentistry that we will announce shortly, so that should not be news. On funding, it is slightly bizarre that, although this plan announces more than £1 billion of new funding for primary care, investment in tech, new ways of working, additional staff and empowering our pharmacists, who bring great clinical expertise that we can better harness, the hon. Gentleman, rather than welcoming that, went back to the hackneyed non-dom funding. We have heard that so much before and it has been spent so many times. We have set out ways of best using the skills of our GPs and of the additional roles, where we are delivering on our manifesto with an extra 25,000 already recruited. Above all, we have set out ways of best using our pharmacists, who are a huge resource that we can better use. That is why we are targeting more than £600 million additional funding into pharmacists, which will allow people to better access the care they need in a timely fashion.

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

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I welcome the plan, which I note the Government have released at the first possible moment after the local election purdah period. Members of the Health and Social Care Committee and I will study it carefully, and I know the primary care Minister has already agreed to come before us so that we can give it a good going over. My question is about timing. How quickly can investment in the 8 am scramble part of the policy make a difference to those practices that do not have it? The Secretary of State said that they

were already negotiating with the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee, so how quickly can that very welcome new investment get to the frontline of community pharmacy?

Steve Barclay: The short answer is this year, but the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee is right to focus, as with all recovery plans, on deliverability. I hope he will take comfort from the fact that around half of GP practices already have cloud telephony, which is why we are so confident that it is the right approach. It is one that is already working. We are seeing from patients' positive feedback that they hugely value online booking and call-back systems, but they also allow primary care to better triage calls to specialists and therefore to use the additional roles we have recruited in an optimum way. That will be rolled out this year, but it is already up and running and we can see that it is working.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I would like to take the Secretary of State out of the bubble of Westminster and the green Benches and into the reality of what is happening on the ground in my constituency. We have the second highest number of A&E attendances for minor injuries—people who should be going to their GP. We are the most under-doctored and second most under-nursed area in north-east London and, last year, just under 9% of patients could see their GP within 14 days of requesting an appointment. So for me, the recovery plan announced today is deeply underwhelming. I hope that the Secretary of State can answer these three questions. When will he, not plan, but deliver the 6,000 extra GPs promised? What work is he doing to move GPs from working part time to putting in more hours at the frontline with their patients? Where is the commitment to deliver face-to-face appointments for those who want them in my constituency? Only when I have answers to those questions will I feel confident that there really is a plan for GP services in Barking and Dagenham.

Steve Barclay: I know the right hon. Lady well, having served with her for four years on the Public Accounts Committee, so I hope that she will not mind me being slightly surprised about being told, as someone who lives in the Fens and not in London, that I am in the bubble. On her points, obviously, we have 37,000 more doctors than when the Government came to power. Directly, the changes to pensions lift about 9,000 GPs out of the tax changes. It is also about training more—4,000, compared with 2,600 in 2014—so being on track in terms of the number we are training. It is also about the additional roles that we are funding, the 25,000 and the manifesto commitment of 26,000. Also, the pharmacy announcement is all about freeing up GP capacity for face-to-face appointments for those who want come in. By enabling pharmacy capability for those who want to get oral contraception, have a blood pressure test or access services for the seven common conditions—including urinary tract infections and ear infections, for which prescriptions can then be given—we will free up GP time for face-to-face appointments. If we look at last year's patients survey, we see that about two fifths of patients hugely valued continuity of care and face-to-face, which means about three fifths preferred to prioritise speed of access, rather than seeing the same GP or seeing someone face to face. So it is about tailoring the offer to what the patient wants, and patients do not always want the same thing. Some want speed and pharmacies can deliver that.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his announcement on pharmacy, for which I have been calling for a number of years. We ought to be making more use of this massively skilled body of medical professionals, particularly to free up GPs. For many people, they are the front door to the NHS more than the GP surgery is. Could he confirm that, for the additional work that they will be doing to support our NHS, they will get some reward?

Steve Barclay: First, I commend my hon. Friend because this is an issue that she has championed and she has been right to do so. These are degree-qualified clinical roles, so it is sensible that we make far better use of the skills that they offer. We saw during covid just how much value they offer to their communities. I confirm that they will be paid for these roles; that is what the additional funding is all about. She has been right over the years to highlight the importance of pharmacies and what they can offer, and that is what this announcement is all about.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): First, I thank the GPs in my constituency and their staff for the job that they are doing for my constituents under the most enormous pressure. I want to include in particular GPs' receptionists in that for the up-front service they give; there is particular pressure on them. GPs—often in their 50s—are saying to me that they want to leave and give up not because of pensions but because of the overbearing workload they have, and the incredible centralisation and red tape coming from NHS England at national level. They look for new GPs coming through and see so many trainees and qualified doctors now going off to Canada, New Zealand and Australia because the terms and conditions of work are better there. When will we see from the Secretary of State the workforce plan that has been promised over and over again—it was supported by the Chancellor when he was Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee—to deliver the amount of training we need and the efforts to retain the GPs we already have?

Steve Barclay: I agree and thank the hon. Member, who is absolutely right to recognise the huge amount of work done by GPs and their staff, including receptionists. That is why the recovery plan is very much targeted at recognising the workload. I flagged in my statement the additional volume of patients that a typical GP surgery is seeing and that reflects the huge amount of work that is done. I think pensions were a factor, certainly in the feedback from the profession. The issue was raised. The changes the Chancellor announced take 9,000 GPs out of the tax changes, but the hon. Gentleman is right—that was not the only factor; the workload was another. The recovery plan looks to cut bureaucracy and, as I say, reduces the targets to five. It also looks at areas where there are appointments that we do not feel are necessary—so it looks at how secondary care can do fit notes, for example, rather than someone needing to go to the GP to get one. There are areas where we can streamline GPs' workload and that is what the recovery plan does. On the workforce plan, we have said on a number of occasions that, post purdah, we would set that out very shortly. We will have more to say on that in due course.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I join the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) in inviting the Secretary of State to thank all our GPs

for their incredible work. I very much welcome his statement. Will the Pharmacy First plan enable places such as Harwich and Dovercourt in my constituency to increase the out-of-hours cover that pharmacies provide? Otherwise people will have to travel miles just to get a prescription. Also, where are all these new GP staff going to be put? Most GPs have very cramped premises. West Mersea surgery in my constituency has been trying to develop new premises for a long time, unsuccessfully because the GPs' partners will not take the risk. At the Mayflower surgery in Harwich, there is empty space in the building rented by the NHS from a failed Labour private finance initiative project, but the GPs cannot afford to pay the rent, so the space sits empty, although it is still paid for by the taxpayer. What are we going to do about that?

Steve Barclay: First, I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the work that GPs do in his constituency, as they do elsewhere. On pharmacies, part of the reason for the investment is to support pharmacy, including in rural settings. The more funding going in, the more they can prescribe. The more things they are able to do, the better the business model. There are more pharmacists and more pharmacy shops than there were in 2010, but it is important we make the business model more viable and that is what the announcement does. On estates planning, that is an issue for each integrated care board to consider. He mentions a specific issue locally with a former PFI and how it is being used. That is not a new issue. I sat on the Public Accounts Committee when it was chaired by the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and I remember looking at many a Labour PFI. The regional fire control centres were a case in point; the estate could no longer be afforded and the space was empty. If there is an issue like that, I will be happy to look at it in due course.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary pharmacy group and as a pharmacist myself, this is a step in the right direction. However, I have spoken to many pharmacists and many in the sector, and we believe that, for the policy to unleash the full potential of pharmacy, there needs to be proper investment in the workforce plan. What we are seeing is pharmacists who can prescribe leaving community pharmacies and going into other sectors. It is great that they have the ability to prescribe, but if the pharmacies are not there the full potential cannot be unleashed. Secondly, we have a funding crisis, with many pharmacies closing, so the plan needs to be accompanied by further funding and steps to address the medicines supply chain.

Will the Minister clarify a few points? Will pharmacists be paid competitively for their prescribing skills? In previous Government announcements, that has not been the case. Pharmacists would like to feel valued from this announcement. Will the announcement be followed by actual support for premises as well? I am sure the Minister is aware of pharmacists who have challenges, for example, in accessing a patient's record, and who do not have the workforce needed to take time out to go out to speak to patients. Will he meet me and the APPG to discuss those issues further?

Steve Barclay: First, I thank the hon. Member for recognising, constructively, that this is a step in the right direction. As the quotes from the sector show, many

working within pharmacy welcome it. As I said a moment ago, there are 20,000 more pharmacists than in 2010. The additional funding, including—directly to her question—for prescribing, will make the business model more viable and therefore support the workforce within the pharmacy sector.

We are working on IT as part of the recovery plan. There is a big read-across into the NHS app and how we better empower patients both to access their own medical records and to find the right services, including by being directed from the NHS app to pharmacies.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I welcome today's announcement, which will undoubtedly widen access to primary care services. However, will my right hon. Friend consider investing in point-of-care diagnostic testing in pharmacies and GP surgeries, to speed up the diagnostic pathway and help to reduce NHS waiting times?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises a great point. I am extremely keen on how we can improve diagnostic testing and make it more accessible. As she knows from her time in the Department, early treatment is more effective and more cost-effective. Looking at more home testing, more testing at pharmacies and more work with employers to accelerate early detection is a win for patient outcomes and for delivering care in a more affordable way.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Liberal Democrats and many others in this House have called for a pharmacy first approach for a long time, but there appear to be two major problems with today's announcement. The first is that the Government's own plan says that the money will be re-targeted; I would be grateful to know from the Secretary of State which other service will miss out.

In my constituency two pharmacies have already closed, and across England 16% of pharmacies have said that they do not think they will survive another year. How does the Secretary of State expect people to access a pharmacy first if their pharmacies continue to close?

Steve Barclay: As I said, there are more pharmacists than in 2010 and more people working in the pharmacy sector—the numbers have gone up by 24,000 since 2010—so to address the hon. Lady's second question, there are more. On funding, as I said in my statement, this is new funding for primary care. That is the commitment that we made, and it should be welcomed in the primary care sector.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I welcome the statement. I notice the difference in opinion on the Opposition Benches between the people who know what they are talking about and the people who do not.

Pharmacy First is a brilliant idea, and I thank the Secretary of State. I very much hope it will be welcomed by pharmacies in my patch. I want to reiterate some of the points that have been made. First, some of my pharmacies have been under a lot of financial pressure recently. Will the financial package be able to support them and make them feel valued, considering what extraordinarily good value for money they are? Related to that, will any financial support or grants be made available to pharmacies—especially the smaller ones in

some of my rural areas and small towns—so that they can have a room to see patients and take advantage of this great Pharmacy First scheme?

Steve Barclay: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments. There is £645 million of funding over the next two years to support the expansion of this work through Pharmacy First. As I said a moment ago, the estates programme is more an issue for the integrated care boards. We should not try to determine all the decisions on estates from Westminster; it is right that we let the 42 ICBs have more discretion over what is the right estate strategy in their area. I am sure that his local ICB will hear his representations.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I completely support the idea of pharmacists being able to do more. For instance, it makes more sense that someone with shingles can go to a pharmacist today to get antivirals prescribed. My fear is that what has been announced today does not fully understand the crisis in primary healthcare. According to the numbers given by the Government's own Ministers, in September 2015 we had 29,364 fully qualified GPs in England, but last September we had 27,556. By the Government's own numbers, that is 2,000 fewer. Community pharmacies have gone from 11,949 in 2015 to 11,026—a nearly 10% fall. Do we need to do more to enthruse people to work in our NHS across the whole of primary healthcare? Would it be a good idea to change the model for GPs, so that we have more salaried GPs?

Steve Barclay: I have touched on the numbers a few times, but let me give the hon. Gentleman the precise figures. There are 335 more pharmacists than there were in 2010, so it is simply not the case that there are fewer. There are 2,000 more doctors in general practice, and there are also the extra 25,000 in additional roles. As I have said, someone who wants a prescription review should see a pharmacist, and someone with back pain should see a physiotherapist; not everything has to go through a GP, and it is better for GPs' time to be used more effectively. There are also more doctors in training: 4,000 are receiving training in primary care, as opposed to 2,600 in 2014. So we are seeing more staff, more effort on recruitment, more effort on retention through the pension changes, and better use of the additional roles.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I am pleased that the Government are looking at how they can best support GPs and improve access to primary care, but how will these plans protect and enhance the role of GPs who dispense in their own practices? How will my right hon. Friend deal with concerns about antibiotic resistance, and how will he solve the root cause of the problem, which is the fact that there are not enough GPs?

Steve Barclay: In respect of my hon. Friend's first point, these plans will not make any changes. As for the second, about prescribing, that will be part of the consultation, and we will be learning lessons from what is being done elsewhere: for instance, Pharmacy First is already up and running in Scotland. We are looking into what tests can be performed alongside those prescribing rights so that antimicrobial resistance is targeted effectively.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The steps proposed in the statement reflect what Labour has been calling for, and are well overdue. I am glad that at least some steps are being taken, but they fall well short of the scale of the challenge that we face. Pharmacists need to work in a strong primary care environment. We need to see more GPs, an increase in primary care services, and more tests, diagnoses and minor procedures carried out in the community, speeding up primary care and taking the pressure off secondary care.

Three years ago, I met Ministers and officials in the Department to seek advice on and support for the rebuilding of the rundown Heston health centre in my constituency. What is the Government's strategy on the rebuilding of rundown primary care facilities, not only to assist the recruitment and retention of GPs but to better facilitate the work taking place between GPs, pharmacies and other community healthcare services?

Steve Barclay: There seems to be a slightly confused response from the Opposition. They challenge this announcement on the grounds that they are not happy with it, and in the same breath claim that it is part of Labour's plan or a step in the right direction. They need to make up their mind.

As I said in response to two earlier questions, it is for the integrated care boards to adopt estate strategies in their areas. Not all decisions about estates should be made centrally. However, one of the changes that we are setting centrally involves embracing more modern methods of construction and a more modular approach. The unit cost of that approach is much lower, and when the level of confidence is higher, the contingency cost is much lower as well. So we are changing the way in which we build our estate, but the estate strategy is an issue for the ICBs.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): As the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) will know, it takes five years to obtain a master of pharmacy degree and to become fully qualified. Training continues as pharmacists continue in their work, so they are a valuable resource, and I welcome the statement. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will know, in France, for instance, where it costs €26.50 to see a GP, most people would choose to see a pharmacist first, but is he sure that by taking pressure off general practices, he will not overwhelm pharmacists such as mine in Lichfield and Burntwood?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the practice in other countries, and the fact that patients are very happy to visit pharmacists when that is more appropriate for the treatment that they are using. That is what the Pharmacy First strategy and the learning of lessons are all about, although we must also think about how to mitigate some of the risks connected with antimicrobial resistance. In the context of the impact on pharmacy, I refer my hon. Friend to what has been said by those in the sector. This is a move that they have called for and have now welcomed, and it responds very much to our discussions with pharmacists who have said that they can do more and are keen to do more, but need the funding to enable them to do so—which is what Pharmacy First delivers.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The impact of today's announcement will be miniscule compared with the scale of the challenge facing primary care right now. In York, our GPs are innovative and ambitious—far more ambitious than the Secretary of State—and want to bring real change to the way pathways operate. In light of that, will additional money be available for innovation in primary care, so that GPs can meet the challenge and lead the change that is needed?

Steve Barclay: There is funding in other parts of the Department's budget, not least for tech innovation and the work we are doing on artificial intelligence. There is further scope to use AI in demand management, for example to relieve pressure on GPs by looking at changes in the behaviour of frail or elderly patients and picking up changes early. The use of AI presents a significant opportunity. There are questions about how we can use data better; indeed, there are challenges for those across the House in how we can use data better to manage pressure within primary care. So there is funding elsewhere in the Department's budget, in addition to what I have announced here.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I am pleased to inform the House that my mother has moved in with my wife and me, from the Secretary of State's constituency. One of the joys of living with my mother is helping her with Tesco orders and Amazon deliveries and with surfing what she calls the interweb, and I am looking forward to helping her with the new NHS app. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that enabling many more people to use the NHS app, including Mrs Bristow, and having many more services available on the NHS app is more convenient for patients and will free up GP time, so that GPs can do what they should be doing?

Steve Barclay: I am happy to recognise the scope for Mrs Bristow and many others to make more use of the NHS app. That app is all about empowering the patient and enabling them to get the right care, in the right place, at the right time, whether from a pharmacist, one of the additional primary care roles we are creating or a GP where applicable. The NHS app can free primary care practices from many of the tasks that are currently placed on them, such as people phoning for their records or repeat prescriptions. It is a key part of streamlining such tasks.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): In my constituency, we have lost GPs and surgeries. There are increasing numbers of people on fewer and fewer lists. Community pharmacies are under pressure and some have closed, so people then go to the local hospital, Whipps Cross University Hospital, which is struggling, with 100% bed occupancy rates. The Secretary of State has been ducking making an announcement about funding for the new Whipps since he took on the job, but that hospital is struggling every day. My question is twofold: when will the Secretary of State announce the workforce plan for primary care, and when will he finally get around to making an announcement for Whipps Cross University Hospital?

Steve Barclay: Far from ducking Whipps Cross, I have actually been and visited in person, so I am very familiar with the issue and I recognise the importance of the new hospital programme. I hope to make an announcement

about that programme and about the workforce plan shortly, just as I am doing today about the primary care recovery plan.

In today's plan, the hon. Gentleman may want see at the proposals to look at the contribution to pressures on primary care from new housing developments, and at what changes might be made to ensure that where such developments take place, funding from them goes not only to new schools, as it frequently does, but into primary care, and particularly GPs.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I warmly praise all those who work in primary care in my constituency, including Dr John Henderson and Dr Stephen Price, who are the leaders of my two primary care networks.

It is great to see another 25,000 staff in primary care. They now need somewhere to work, including somewhere in the middle of Leighton Buzzard before we get the extra health facilities next year. When we build tens of thousands of extra houses, my experience, over decades, is that no Government, comprised of any party, have made sure that extra primary care facilities come on stream with as much certainty as a new primary school. If we could crack that, we would do a huge service to the whole nation. Please could the Secretary of State make it his personal mission to do that?

Steve Barclay: We plan to change planning guidance this year to address that specific issue. I have visited my hon. Friend's constituency, and we resolved one of the issues in relation to the estate, which was extremely constructive. I know he has been discussing a further issue with the Department, but I hope he can take some comfort that his representations have been heard. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), is planning to make changes to the guidance to better ensure that, where there is new housing, a contribution is made to primary care.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The problem in primary care is that we do not have enough GPs to meet the demand for appointments. The problem is not with the telephone system. The area I represent has one of the lowest ratios of GPs to population in the whole country. Will the Secretary of State support our campaign to train more doctors at Hull York Medical School, and for Hull York Medical School to set up a training facility for pharmacists and dentists?

Steve Barclay: As I said in my statement, we have 4,000 doctors training in primary care, compared with 2,600 in 2014. We are also looking at how we can better retain the GPs we have. That is why we made the pension changes, which will affect around 9,000 GPs. It is also why we are looking at additional roles to take pressure off GPs, and at how we can reduce some of the burden of bureaucracy, too. We are training more doctors, and we are looking at retention and bureaucracy. No one is suggesting that this is solely an issue of telephony or online booking, as the hon. Lady suggests, but all of this will help to relieve pressure on extremely busy primary care.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I am pleased to be talking about primary care, for obvious reasons. It is important that the Government made the pension changes,

which will make a difference to retention, but I am also pleased with the next part of the plan. When I was a clinician, 15% of my workload was chasing letters and administration, which is borne out by the evidence we have heard on the Health and Social Care Committee. Will the Secretary of State comment further on the bureaucracy he is cutting? Will he ensure that this is the first step in pushing down on that bureaucracy, as that will improve the welfare of both our workforce and our patients?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend has a great deal of experience, and he is right to focus on the amount of clinical time often spent on non-clinical issues. Sending reminders through the NHS app will reduce non-attendance. We are also looking at the key interface between secondary care and primary care, as well as considering which appointments can be done elsewhere, such as through pharmacies and the additional roles. The online booking system can better triage people to the right place, and there will be some self-referral in order to take pressure off GPs—not for things that carry a clinical risk, such as internal bleeding, as the Opposition suggest; but for things like hearing aids. If a person has taken a hearing test, they will not need to clear an appointment for a hearing aid through their GP.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I reinforce what colleagues have said. This is a step in the right direction, but it fails to grapple with the grave situation in which there has been a threefold increase in waiting lists since 2010, including a twofold increase since 2019, before the pandemic. In Oldham we have fewer GPs and more patients with increased acuity, so when will we get our fair share of the promised 6,000 GPs?

Steve Barclay: I have recognised throughout that demand has increased. Primary care is treating 10% more patients than before the pandemic, with around 1 million appointments a day. There is more demand, not just because of the pandemic but, as I said in my opening remarks, because we have a third more people over the age of 70, and they are five times more likely than younger people to go to their GP. That demographic change, the impact of the pandemic and a change in public expectations of advances in medicine are all creating additional pressure, which is why it is right that we use the full range of additional roles and that we invest in technology, in addition to the 2,000 more doctors in general practice.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): GPs, pharmacists and primary care teams do an incredible job for local people in the Stroud district, and I look forward to the funding flowing to our pharmacists, as many of them have made a constructive case for it. A local GP told me that he believes a national education campaign is needed to advise patients of when to access general practice and when to access other services, such as pharmacies. I think this is a good idea, given today's announcement. Will the Government take it up?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on this and we plan to have a communications campaign. The front door to the NHS can often be confusing for people—whether they should go to primary care, a pharmacy, accident and emergency or elsewhere. We

[*Steve Barclay*]

will have a campaign, not just linked to the opportunity to access care through Pharmacy First, but looking at the technology innovations we are bringing on stream, particularly on the NHS app. We are also making changes to 111. So there will be a communications campaign, on exactly the lines she references.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I wish to thank all the primary care workers in my constituency. Despite the Minister's assurances, 600 pharmacies have closed since 2015, which is having a significant impact on our most disadvantaged communities. Does he agree that more funding is needed to prevent more pharmacies from closing and to fix the broken NHS? Will he join me in condemning the Rowlands Pharmacy on Lodge Lane, which is pulling out of the community and preventing another pharmacy from taking its place?

Steve Barclay: I join the hon. Lady—as I did the other colleagues from across the House who have done this—in paying tribute to the primary care staff in her constituency for the work they do. We have touched a number of times on the fact that there are both more pharmacies and more pharmacists than there were in 2010, so there is more capacity. However, we also recognise the scope to better use the expertise within pharmacy, which is why an additional £645 million of investment—new funding—is going into pharmacies over the next two years.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I am married to a trainee GP, so I have read all 46 pages of this excellent plan—reading it makes me different from those on the Opposition Front Bench. Importantly, the plan is littered with examples of brilliant practice up and down the country, with case studies that should be adopted more widely. Almost all of them come back to the use of technology. Will the Secretary of State say that he will target the help needed to adopt that technology at the practices that need it most, which are so often those in coastal constituencies such as mine?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is right about the opportunity that tech offers to deliver changes at scale and the fact that this is proven technology that is working and already up and running in many primary care settings. So often within the NHS the challenge is not the initial innovation—we get pockets of wonderful innovation—but how we industrialise it across the wider NHS. This recovery plan focuses on that, looking at how we scale the case studies to which he refers. About half of primary care does have digital telephony. The opportunity here is to target that funding at the other half; that is often the smaller GP practices, as well as those in coastal communities, because they find the transition to tech more difficult. That is why a key part of this recovery plan is about the investment in not just the tech, but in locums, to provide cover so that staff can make the transition to that new way of working.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The NHS workforce plan has been promised for years. Meanwhile, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) says, we are short of GPs, pharmacists and dentists in Hull. Will the Secretary of State answer the question

she put to him: can we please build on the excellent work of the Hull York Medical School to set up a dental training school there, and a school of pharmacy and one for ophthalmologists? That would help in the longer term, but we need a proper workforce plan and the Government need to get on with it.

Steve Barclay: As I have said several times, we will publish a workforce plan shortly. We are committed to that and the Chancellor set that out in the autumn statement. Of course, when he was doing this job and when I was previously in the Department, we expanded medical undergraduate places by a fifth, so there was an increase then. I have said that we will also set out a dental recovery plan in due course.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I very much welcome these plans to improve access to primary care, particularly around the 8 am scrum, which is beneficial neither for patients nor for NHS staff. In North Staffordshire we have some very good GP practices, but also some very poor ones, which we need to see improve. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, with these new measures, the archaic practices that we see in some of those GP surgeries will be outlawed, and that we will put in place the new services as soon as possible?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend touches on an extremely important point. The measures will provide, for all Members of the House, much greater transparency on the variation between primary care settings. I am keen that we should publish much more information showing, within constituencies, the differences in the services offered by different primary care settings. We already see that between those that have digital telephony and online booking and those that do not, but we also see that in other indicators, and I am keen that he and other Members of the House get visibility of that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. The primary care recovery plan is very welcome, and it will be wonderful for NHS England when the goals are achieved. However, I have a very specific question about Northern Ireland. My constituents are struggling to get hold of their medical records over the phone for personal independence payment assessments and appeals. He referred in his statement to improvements in the app system. What discussions will he have with the Department of Health in Northern Ireland about introducing a similar system to enable patients in Northern Ireland to access their medical records via an NHS app?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Member is right to recognise the importance of access to medical records. It is a key part of the functionality that we are delivering through the NHS app. He is correct that that is focused on England and not on Northern Ireland, but I am very happy for us to have discussions with him and his colleagues in Northern Ireland on any shared practice.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): Today's welcome announcement will help patients get prescriptions directly from hard-working, resilient but sometimes overstretched pharmacies, freeing up GP appointments. Will my right hon. Friend outline how pharmacies in my constituency of East Devon will be able to access funding and support to deliver this?

Steve Barclay: The funding will include for prescriptions for the seven common conditions, which form part of Pharmacy First. That will be part of a new NHS service that will be offered, as set out in this plan. That is what the £645 million over the two years is targeted at, and obviously we will have further discussions with the sector on the roll-out.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I very much welcome this recovery plan. It is the right thing to do and will make a big difference. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is also critical for rural communities to have local and convenient access to GPs? With that in mind, will he redouble his Department's efforts, alongside the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West ICB, to find a way to fund the construction of Long Crendon's innovative model to replace the old village surgery, which sadly had to close under covid. This will not only deliver first-rate primary care to the village of Long Crendon and surrounding villages, but relieve the pressure on Brill surgery, where patients find themselves displaced to.

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend has raised this issue previously, and he is quite right to champion it—I know that it is hugely important to his constituents. I hope the ICB will take heed of the issue he raises, particularly in relation to the level of visibility on the estate plan. Based on our conversations, I think that more can be done to share that with him. I urge the ICB to engage closely with him to make sure that the estate plan addresses the very real needs that his constituents have identified.

Points of Order

5.28 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will remember that the first debate in this House that arose from a public petition took place in 2011, on the Hillsborough stadium disaster. I am sorry to tell you that one of the campaigning journalists who made that debate happen, Dan Kay, died this weekend. Dan made an extraordinary, pioneering contribution to journalism and he was an incredible support to bereaved families and survivors during the very traumatic second inquest. May I seek your advice on how I can mark his life for the record and offer the support of this House to all those who loved him?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. While she will understand that it is not a point of order for the Chair, she has succeeded in putting this sad news on the record. I am sure that colleagues in all parts of the House will wish to join her in sending condolences to Dan's family and friends.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I too seek your advice. Over the past few weeks, I have tabled several written parliamentary questions to ascertain what meetings are being held in Government to implement the recommendations of Sir Brian Langstaff's second interim report on the infected blood scandal. I have asked for details on the number of meetings, who attends, who chairs those meetings and if there have been any meetings for the devolved Administrations, but I have been refused that information. Today there was a report in the *Financial Times* that meetings have been held by the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care about compensation. I raised the matter in Treasury questions and I was referred to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who has consistently refused to disclose any information. Can you please advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how I can obtain the basic information showing that the Government are acting "at pace", as the Minister for the Cabinet Office claims, setting out for those infected and affected what meetings are being held to implement Sir Brian's recommendations?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the right hon. Lady for that point of order. I can see that she has been going around the houses with different Departments. The Secretary of State for Health is still in the Chamber and will have heard what she has said. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench and the Whips will also have heard and will be reporting back as we speak that this matter has been raised, and perhaps will pass it through to the Cabinet Office. It may be that not all the meetings that she has asked about have been collated already, but one hopes that that might happen at some point soon, because I know how anxious she and many Members of the House are to know that progress is being made on the issue.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Cleveland Police area now has the highest crime rate in the country, yet according to the latest Home Office figures, the force has 250 fewer police officers than in 2010. ITV Tyne

[Alex Cunningham]

Tees has run a series of features on these terrible failures by the Government and their effect on our communities on Teesside, yet Home Office Ministers continue to refuse to speak to reporter Rachel Bullock, who wants to give them a chance to respond to her report. Could you please advise me on how I can encourage Ministers to engage with regional media? Do any of them have any plans to come to this House so that Members can hold them to account on this matter?

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I support my hon. Friend in his request for a statement, because Cleveland Police has not only the highest incidence of crime, but the lowest rate of recruitment. Crime is surging and we are relying on a return of a couple of hundred recruits. We are still hundreds short. I support my hon. Friend's request for guidance on how we might secure a statement from the Minister on this critical point for our communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank both hon. Gentlemen for their points of order. I am sure that both of them will realise that I am not responsible for whether Ministers engage with regional media; that is clearly up to them. I am also not aware of any plans for Ministers to come to the House on this issue. The Table Clerks will provide advice as to how the hon. Gentlemen might like to raise particular issues in the House. They are both very experienced Members, so I am sure they know how to table, for example, parliamentary questions, and I expect they will do so any minute. Those on the Treasury Bench will have heard their comments and I am sure will pass them back to the relevant Ministers.

Cladding Remediation Works (Code of Practice)

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

5.34 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for a statutory Code of Practice to set standards for cladding remediation works in occupied buildings; and for connected purposes.

There has rightly been a lot of focus in this place and across the country on the need to make buildings safe, particularly high-rise buildings. Next month is the sixth anniversary of the Grenfell tragedy. Everyone in this House will remember every single person who lost their life in that tragedy. It is right that, in the aftermath, there has been a huge focus on ensuring that buildings are safe—that has got a lot of attention.

There have been many cases in Ipswich of buildings that were not safe but have been or are in the process of being made safe. It is also right that attention is paid to how we pay for those works. Ensuring that leaseholders do not pay is something that I have spoken about many times before. I welcome the passing of the Fire Safety Act 2021 and the Building Safety Act 2022.

What has got slightly less attention is how such works are carried out. In Ipswich, we have a number of examples of cladding remediation works taking place. In one key example, there has been no respect for the residents, who are expected to continue to live inside those buildings as the works are taking place. I have spoken to the Minister before about the case of St Francis Tower in the heart of my constituency. Quite frankly, it has become a scar on the landscape. It is a constant reminder. When my constituents look at that building, which could not be more visible across the town, they think about the lives of those who have been expected to live inside it.

When the shrink wrap initially went on St Francis Tower, the works were expected to take eight months. Now, here we are almost two years later, and despite repeated emails and letters from me to the agent, I cannot get an answer; I cannot get a timescale for when the shrink wrap will come off. Let us be clear about what the shrink wrap is: it completely blocks out all natural light. For more than two years, a large number of my constituents have been expected to live in conditions that I would feel guilty having animals live in—no natural light, non-breathable material, terrible communications from the agent, repeatedly missed timescales with no explanation or justification. Even at this point, hundreds of my constituents are looking towards the summer, thinking that there will be no end point.

In addition to the main shrink wrap, we have recently had a blue film that prevents many of the windows from being opened. Constituents say that they cannot even cook because of poor ventilation. I have been inside the tower three times. The flats are small and do not have balconies or outdoor space. I remember talking to one constituent, who said that she used to derive great joy from having plants on her windowsill, but they were all dying because no natural light was allowed in by the shrink wrap. I believe that I have done everything I can. Block Management, the managing agent; RG Securities, the freeholder; and Oander and Gilmore, the contractors, have failed in their duty to stand up for residents.

We have other examples in Ipswich. Naively, when I went inside St Francis Tower, I could not believe that it was legal; that such conditions were allowed in today's society. When a Minister visited the tower block, he said that it was "one of the worst" and most shocking examples that he had ever seen. What is the proposed code of practice about? It is about trying to ensure that what has happened at St Francis Tower never happens again anywhere else. We have some better examples in Ipswich involving other buildings for which the material used has been slightly better than that used for St Francis Tower. At Orwell Quay, for example, there is more of a netting material, which is better at letting natural light in and is more breathable. The companies involved have been much more responsible.

I thought that all the high-profile campaigning that the local newspaper and I did would pressure the companies involved to act with more corporate and social responsibility. I was naive; I was wrong. Now is the time to bring in a code of practice to ensure that rogue freeholders and rogue agents are held to account for behaving in a way that has had a detrimental and shocking impact on the quality of life of my constituents, whom I stand here today to represent forcefully—as forcefully as I need to. I have spoken to the Minister, and I understand that a code of practice is likely to be introduced, but it is absolutely vital that it has teeth. It cannot be dismissed as a flimsy document, which is why I believe it needs to be legally binding. If there are cases of building agents, freeholders and contractors disregarding it, they should be held accountable—there should be penalties.

What sort of things should the code of practice cover? It should cover the type of material used. It is vital that it does that, and we have to look at materials. I understand that when works take place and cladding is removed some kind of covering is needed to protect the structural integrity of the building, but is it beyond the wit of man to come up with a solution that does that, but which does not have a shockingly detrimental impact on the people expected to live in such buildings? It is important that standards are set on the level of communication with residents who are expected to live in those buildings, and that we give residents enough notice to plan, as well as the ability to relocate if it is felt that the works are too detrimental on people's standard of living. We also need to consider points about ventilation and timescales. When timescales are repeatedly missed, there should be some kind of sanction.

Since I was first elected as the Member of Parliament for Ipswich cladding issues have been a key matter for me. The Minister will know about the situation at Cardinal Lofts and that, because of poor ventilation there, constituents have been relocated. Even now, they are in temporary accommodation, but sometimes for only three or four months. They do not know what is going to happen at the end of that period. There are a number of problems associated with Cardinal Lofts.

The Bill focuses on an issue which, I predict, will affect the constituencies of many hon. Friends and hon. Members. There will be examples in constituencies across the country. St Francis Tower was one of the first beneficiaries of the building safety fund—good. The building has been made safe—good. We understand and welcome that, and most of my constituents in such buildings accept that there will be a certain level of disruption. I look at St Francis Tower every day and hold myself partly responsible, as I have not been able to get the covering removed—I will be honest about that—but we are here now. I welcome the fact that a code of practice is being discussed, but we must make sure—this is why the Bill is necessary—that it is not a flimsy document and that these companies, which are morally responsible, are held to account.

I hope that this ten-minute rule Bill will get the support of the House and everyone in this place, and that it secures a Second Reading. One way or another, whether or not it is through this Bill, the key thing for me is that we put safeguards in place to make sure that there are no more St Francis Towers ever again, that such practices are made illegal and that those responsible are held to account.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Tom Hunt, Elliot Colburn, Stephen McPartland, Royston Smith, Sir Peter Bottomley, Mark Menzies, Sir John Hayes, Paul Bristow, Dr Dan Poulter, Miriam Cates, Lee Anderson and Danny Kruger present the Bill.

Tom Hunt accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 303).

Energy Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

5.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Grant Shapps): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

For much of the past 50 years since the oil shock and energy crisis in the 1970s, Britain has enjoyed abundant and reliable electricity. Over these years, some may have traded in their teasmades for barista coffee machines, swapped their electric fondue sets for air fryers or replaced cassette players with Spotify—I do not know why I am looking at the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband)—but energy has remained largely plentiful for the best part of half a century. In the past 15 months, that secure foundation has been fundamentally shaken, with Vladimir Putin’s brutal invasion of Ukraine and his subsequent attempts to weaponise energy forcing up bills for millions of families.

This Government have stepped in and paid half the typical energy bill this winter, but frankly, those are just stopgap measures. Putin’s war marks a fundamental turning point for Britain and the world’s energy security. After years of growing reliance on fossil fuel imports around the world, this is a moment when the globe has woken up and needs to apply changes to its energy supplies for the future.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I know it is early, but will my right hon. Friend allow me to intervene?

Grant Shapps: If my right hon. Friend will give me a moment, I will make a little progress first, and he can be sure that I will give way shortly.

We will replace those oil and gas imports with home-grown renewables and, critically, nuclear power to deliver resilient and reliable energy, powering Britain from Britain. We will reduce wholesale electricity prices to among the cheapest in Europe by 2035, protecting the British consumer from volatile international energy markets.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I agree with the Secretary of State that we need more energy independence and more domestic energy, so why does the Bill propose a 140% increase in imported energy through interconnectors, which will make us more dependent and very vulnerable?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent comment, as ever, on interconnectors, but I would point out that with the growing number of interconnectors, particularly electricity interconnectors, last winter, for example, we were able to export 10 TW to France through interconnectors, providing us with income. The answer is that they work in both directions, and in some cases, they provide the reliability of, for example, France’s vast nuclear fleet of 56 reactors. When those reactors were down last winter—because even nuclear power sometimes has to come offline—we have been able to export our power to France, and it has been a net export. Our mission is to secure the clean and inexpensive energy that Britain needs to prosper.

Sir Desmond Swayne: On clean energy, I am very enthusiastic to see the hydroelectric generator that we used to have on the Avon at Ringwood generating electricity

once again. Will my right hon. Friend use the powers afforded to him in clause 273 to take on the huge barriers to entry that prevent community energy generators from selling to customers?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of hydroelectricity in the overall energy mix. It is something that we are working on, he will be pleased to know, and I am happy to offer him a meeting with the Bill Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), to discuss his constituency case in more detail.

Several hon. Members rose—

Grant Shapps: I will give way in a few moments; let me just make a few lines of progress.

All of this is why, earlier this year, I was appointed to lead the new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. It is why, just 50 days later, we published our ambitious “Powering Up Britain” blueprint for the future of energy security in this country. We are bringing all that work together in the Bill before the House.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): We all celebrated the Government’s decision to move the Teesside carbon capture, usage and storage and power project to the next stage. Today in a written ministerial statement, a Government Minister, the hon. Member for Derby North (Amanda Solloway), said that she was delaying by another four months a decision on whether those plans will get planning permission. Can the Secretary of State understand why this delay will set alarm bells ringing on Teesside and how it will impact the project, and can he explain why the delay is necessary?

Grant Shapps: As the hon. Gentleman will know, Ministers must be quite careful when commenting on the quasi-judicial planning decisions that his question goes into, but he should not mistake—nor should anyone in this House—this Government’s determination to get on with things like CCUS and hydrogen. That is why we have announced a £20 billion programme for CCUS, the largest of any country in Europe. As I say, though, and as he well knows, specific planning decisions are matters that the planning inspector advises Ministers on.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State talks about powering up Britain, but perhaps he could take some lessons from how the Welsh Labour Government and Welsh Labour councils are powering up Wales. The other week, I visited a very important development in Rumney in my constituency, where there is a new mixed housing development. Every single one of those properties has a ground source heat pump, photovoltaics on the roof and an electric vehicle charger on the drive. They are well insulated, they are using sustainable materials, and they are bringing down costs for consumers now, but also contributing to net zero. Is that not the example we should follow across the UK?

Grant Shapps: I am pleased to report that on what is, I think, a largely uncontroversial Bill, we are working very closely with the devolved Administrations and trying to

learn lessons from each other, in order to support the whole country in this energy security move. This Bill is the longest and most significant piece of energy legislation to ever come before the House; it is a critical part of making Britain an energy-secure nation. On that point, I thank colleagues across the House for their positive engagement with me and with the Bill Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, in the lead-up to this debate. I know there is much in the Bill that already has cross-party support.

Sir Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for the Bill, and I welcome its key objectives, as I think everyone in this House does. However, a number of amendments were made in the other place, particularly one relating to a net zero duty for Ofgem. Those amendments are now in the Bill. Could the Secretary of State clarify whether the Government will support all of them, particularly the one on Ofgem?

Grant Shapps: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. We will be looking very closely at the proposed amendments—the Bill Minister himself will be addressing those in detail, which is the right way to do it—and of course, the regulator is already very largely focused in that direction. As I often point out, of everybody in this place I have a particular interest in making sure we achieve what we have set out to do, because this House has kindly legislated to send the Secretary of State for Energy to prison if they do not meet the net zero commitments, potentially through contempt of court. We take these things seriously, but my right hon. Friend will wish to hear more on that issue from my hon. Friend the Energy Minister.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is fair to say that the amendment about putting a statutory net zero duty on Ofgem does not need much studying. On the issue of clean, inexpensive energy, Hinkley Point C is now going to cost £33 billion. We know that Sizewell C will cost in the order of £35 billion if that follows, and the existing clean-up for nuclear radioactive waste is in the order of £230 billion, so where on earth does nuclear fit into the definition of clean and inexpensive?

Grant Shapps: We are talking about energy security, and about a tyrant costing all our constituents a fortune, and SNP Members do not want to fix it. They do not want to have reliable nuclear power—they stand against it. They stand against oil and gas. I do not know where they expect all this energy to come from in a reliable way in the future. However, where there are differences, I want to be constructive with the hon. Gentleman and, of course, the devolved Administration. By and large, that is the way in which this Bill has progressed, so on the other issues—the amendments—we will of course try to find ways to work with the House in considering all of them.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Grant Shapps: I will make a little progress, and then I will give way again. I just want to say a big thank you to a lot of Members for their work on energy and on considering this Bill, such as the net zero review led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood

(Chris Skidmore); the pre-legislative scrutiny that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee carried out on parts of the Bill; the 1922 BEIS Back-Bench committee's ongoing consideration of the issues we face; and many others in this House.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Secretary of State say a little about hydrogen? As he will know, there is real concern about putting a hydrogen levy on household bills at a time when so many people are already struggling to pay those bills. Will he look again at where to put the funding for hydrogen? Secondly, will he accept that using hydrogen for households—for home heating—is very inefficient? It is expensive, and it brings safety risks. We do need hydrogen for hard-to-decarbonise sectors, but will the Secretary of State rule out using it in homes?

Grant Shapps: It is certainly the case that hydrogen comes with complications when it comes to home heating, which is why we have a couple of different trials ongoing to understand some of the impacts. We will know more once those trials have been carried out. However, the hon. Lady asked specifically about a levy, so I should point out that the Bill will not itself introduce a levy. She is right that we need to see the results of trials before we understand how that should operate, so we will wait a little while.

Several hon. Members rose—

Grant Shapps: I will make a little progress before I give way again.

Turning to the contents of the Bill, I think it is helpful to consider them in three themes. The first is about liberating private investment in clean technologies, helping reduce our exposure to the very volatile gas prices in the long term. For example, the Bill will help us to exploit our absolutely extraordinary potential for carbon capture, usage and storage, as well as low-carbon hydrogen, potentially for industrial use. This country has a vast storage reservoir beneath the North sea, much of it once filled with oil and gas. There could be enough capacity to store up to 78 billion tonnes of carbon. I appreciate that people have difficulty imagining what that would look like—I know I did. The answer is that it is the equivalent weight of 15 billion elephants, if people are better able to imagine that, or to put it another way, an atmospheric pressure roughly the space of 200 million St Paul's cathedrals. In short, our geology provides us with a lot of space under the North sea, and if we are able to fill the UK's theoretical potential carbon dioxide storage capacity with CO₂, the avoided costs at today's emission trading prices could be in the region of £5 trillion. We have the potential for a geological gold mine under the sea, and the Bill helps us to access it.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): CCUS is very important to me and to my constituency. EnQuest, the operator at the Sullom Voe terminal, sees the next generation of the use of that terminal involving CCUS, but does that not reinforce the point made by the right hon. Member for Reading West (Sir Alok Sharma), in relation to Ofgem's remit? Does it not sit very nicely with the recommendations that the Secretary of State has received from Tim Pick, his offshore wind champion, who has also made the point that Ofgem's

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

mandate must be reshaped to bring it into the appropriate framework for net zero challenges? That remit has not been touched since 2010.

Grant Shapps: The reality is that the Government have committed to those targets, as has the whole House, because the law has already been passed. We have the carbon budgets, one to six; I think we exceeded one, two, three and four, but we are on track for five, and a few weeks ago, I set out in “Powering Up Britain” how we plan to meet carbon budget six as well. The conversation about whether the regulator has an individual duty is an interesting one, but the reality is that in truth, we are all headed towards that cleaner energy system.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will recognise that, to keep costs down, to get electricity to the places where it is needed and to avoid us having to pay offshore wind producers to switch off when there is no capacity, we need something like 600 km of electricity wires between now and 2031. Over the past eight years, we have built only about 32 km. Can I press him on the proposal in the 1922 Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy committee report that there should be a new planning allowance to have those cables going down the side of transport corridors such as motorways and train lines?

Grant Shapps: I met my right hon. Friend to discuss some of the ideas in the report and I am grateful for all of them, including the idea of cables running along existing transport routes. I am pleased to let her know that we are taking forward many of the suggestions from that particular committee, as well as those from elsewhere in the House. There is much in the Bill to assist with organising and planning, but there is much more to do as well. I am grateful for her assistance in all this.

By introducing business models, we want to get the advantage of that long-term potential geological storage, with revenues and a potential CCUS industry that could support something like 50,000 jobs, with another 12,000 in hydrogen by 2030. We will also build the market for low-carbon heat pumps to 600,000 installations a year by 2028, and accelerate the transition to ultra-efficient electric heat pumps to reduce our reliance on the volatile global gas market and improve our own energy security in return.

We will also bring forward reforms to test new methods of decarbonising heating, which is where we come back to the hydrogen trials. We will have a first-of-its-kind hydrogen village trial that will convert up to 2,000 properties to hydrogen for heating, instead of natural gas, and repurpose the existing gas network infrastructure for 100% hydrogen. Through that, we can find out about the efficiency, or otherwise, of building a hydrogen heating network. I put on record that I understand there are challenges, which is why we want to test this first.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): There is a lot in the Bill that is commendable for improving energy security and decarbonising energy production, but where it is perhaps lacking some ambition is in reducing energy emissions, particularly for homes.

We know that poorly insulated homes in particular are expensive, at a time of a rising cost of living, to heat, but we also know that we can do a lot more in this area. Will my right hon. Friend accept amendments as the Bill progresses to improve on the loss of energy and heat and on home energy efficiency?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is always easier not to expend the energy in the first place, but to save it. That is why we have been pleased to get from something like only 14% of homes having a decent energy rating in 2010 to 47% now, and we will get to more than 50% this year. We have invested more than £12 billion in this work in the last spending period and going forward to 2025-28. We are serious about securing the energy efficiency of homes and he is right to highlight that as a key concern.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I hope the Secretary of State will be able to stay on to have the benefit of my constituents' experience of the hydrogen village trial so far. Can he confirm, as per previous correspondence with Ministers, that the Government will still expect to see strong public support before agreeing to proceed with any trials?

Grant Shapps: I have been following the discussions in Whitby in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and I want to be clear: we have no desire to trial hydrogen with communities that do not want to see disruption. On the other hand, I know that other communities are keen on it. For the reasons already discussed in this debate, there are clearly pros and cons in switching to hydrogen for household heating and it will not be appropriate everywhere. That is why we want to learn from those trials, but it is also important to recognise that hydrogen for industrial use is a different matter. We are feeling our way into all this. Together with what we learn from the H100 neighbourhood trial in Fife, the village trial will provide critical evidence to inform decisions on hydrogen in heat decarbonisation, which will not be taken until 2026.

Alan Brown: I appreciate the Secretary of State giving way on this matter. Just on the point of hydrogen trials and effectively doing it with consent, one of the clauses in the Bill allows companies to go in and disconnect people from the gas grid to facilitate trials. Surely that is the polar opposite of doing it by consent.

Grant Shapps: That is a misreading of what the Bill does. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman: I refer to the answer I just gave. Given my record of campaigning against what happened with prepayment meters, he will know that that would never be the intention. The element in the Bill is to enable those trials to take place where they would not be able to otherwise, but as I just indicated to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), that certainly would not be forced.

The second pillar in the Bill will help to strengthen our energy security and minimise cost to consumers. It will pave the way for an independent system operator and planner, or ISOP, whose focus will be on building a better, more reliable energy system. The ISOP will maintain our energy security, operate at the cutting edge of net zero with long-term ambitious plans and bring electricity

and gas systems together into a single institution, enhancing our ability to plan for our energy system in the future and to reduce costs.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May I bring up the question of clean energy for aviation? In terms of sustainable aviation fuels, can the Secretary of State give us some assurance that we will have a home-grown UK sustainable aviation fuel industry, so that it is something we do here and do not import from overseas?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend may know that I helped to establish the Jet Zero Council, which has been working for nearly four years to answer exactly this problem, bringing together academia, industry and government. The upshot of that is that this morning I was honoured to be with His Majesty the King, in his first public engagement since the coronation, at the Whittle Laboratory, where he was turning the first sod to build a new £50 million building that will work primarily on sustainable aviation, including fuels. As Transport Secretary, I also set a 10% requirement for sustainable aviation fuel by 2030, ensuring that we lead the world in the production of this new industry, too.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Grant Shapps: I will come back to colleagues, but I will make a bit of progress first. We will also enable a competition in onshore electricity networks, which could see consumers save £1 billion by 2050, and we will protect almost half a million heat network customers, ensuring that smart energy systems are both safe and secure.

The third pillar of the Bill is to deliver a safe, secure and resilient UK energy system. We will not allow malicious actors to affect that. Sometimes that could be dangerous protesters or those using energy as a weapon, as we have seen with the recent disruption, and the Bill helps to address that point.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Secretary of State is being incredibly generous with his time. On this point about vital fuel resilience, is he aware there is significant concern among refiners and other companies in this space about the breadth of the provisions in the Bill and the powers of direction that the Secretary of State could have over these companies? They have concerns around the commercial and competitive position that puts them in. Will he give a commitment that the Government will continue to look at the phrasing of those provisions in the Bill in Committee?

Grant Shapps: To answer my right hon. Friend directly, I do not have concerns about the provisions, but I hear his concerns, and I will ask my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine to meet him to address them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Grant Shapps: Again, I will make a little progress before I take the next set of interventions.

Offshore wind provides a secure and resilient source of energy, and we are already global leaders in offshore wind, with the world's largest wind farm in the North

sea. We also have the world's second largest wind farm and the third largest. The fourth largest is being constructed now at Dogger Bank, and that will become the largest in the world. In other words, we have become global experts in delivering offshore wind, and that is why this country is now selling that technology and expertise elsewhere in the world. It is also why we have a leadership role in offshore floating platforms; we have both the first and the largest such platform in the world. We are also introducing reforms to assist with security at civil nuclear sites, and we are ensuring that offshore oil and gas regulatory regimes protect habitats as new technologies are developed.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I want to bring my right hon. Friend back to his comments about energy security. The Bill outlines lots of ways in which that will be achieved, but he will be aware that the vast majority of materials needed for renewable energy are processed in China. Are we not therefore in danger of creating the same situation with renewables as we had with fossil fuels and Russia, and what assessment has he made of energy security in those particular areas?

Grant Shapps: I very much share my right hon. Friend's concerns. I was recently at the G7 in Japan, where we signed an agreement with other nuclear powers from the G7 on exactly this issue of energy security. Of course, we have Urenco—a third owned by the British Government—which is in many ways very advanced on the production, fabrication and other elements of uranium. It is part of the mix and we must ensure we are able to do that, so I thank him for his question.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. This goes back—I was standing up a few minutes ago—to the question from the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) and it is on energy efficiency. I have 14,000 households in Oldham that are fuel poor. They have seen their gas bills double, their electricity is up nearly two thirds, and some of them have said to me, "Why are we going through this, and when can we have our houses made more efficient so we're not having to spend so much on this?" Why could that not be funded by a windfall tax on energy producers, given that, for example, BP said last week that it is making £60 million a day in profits? *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just a little reminder that, if colleagues intervene on the Secretary of State, it is customary for them to stay until the end of his speech.

Grant Shapps: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. This does go back a little way, so it is worth reminding the House that we have gone from 14% of homes being A to C—energy secure, essentially—to 47%. Energy company obligation plans were put in place and plans 1, 2, 3 and 4—*[Interruption.]* The shadow Secretary of State is chuntering along, saying they are not going very well, but I have just explained that nearly half of homes have now been greened up. Primarily, it is social homes that have been taken to that level, so I am very interested and concerned to understand why her own local authority has yet to follow some of those plans, and I look

[Grant Shapps]

forward to its getting on with the job with all the money being made available to do that. She is absolutely right—I actually agree with her—about the energy producers. That is why we have taxed them at a punitive 75%, and we have handed those billions of pounds to her constituents and businesses, paying roughly half of the typical energy bill in this country.

In addition to the measures already contained in the Bill, we will go even further. Following on from the “Powering up Britain” plan, we will table four sets of amendments to achieve these goals. First, we will amend the Bill to provide Great British Nuclear, a new flagship body, with the power to enable nuclear projects and support the UK’s nuclear industry with a specific role to support Government in rebuilding our civil nuclear industry. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine is our country’s first Minister for nuclear in relation to that plan.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I compliment the Secretary of State on bringing forward this huge, much-needed and excellent Bill. I want to take him back to his point about the Secretary of State’s and other Ministers’ powers of intervention. The scale of investment that these plans will rightly require in whole swathes of the new technologies to be introduced will be vast; a vast amount of cash will be required to be invested not only in the UK, but internationally. Reducing the cost of that investment is essential, and reducing the uncertainty and risk of political intervention will make a dramatic difference to both the efficiency of that investment and the productivity of our economy. Will he please commit to making sure that we improve the regulatory certainty—the legal certainty—in which all those investments will be made by reducing the opportunity for politicians to meddle, be they on our side of the House or those, I hope at some very distant future date, on the other side of the House?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Yes, I provide that commitment—the Bill attempts to do exactly that in some of the ways I am about to describe—and he is absolutely right about lowering the costs by lowering the uncertainty for investors as well.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Grant Shapps: Again, I will just make a bit of progress. I am concerned that others want to speak in the debate.

Unlike wind power, nuclear energy is not dependent on the weather, so by ramping up capacity, we will help a lot. It is worth the House knowing that every single one of the operational reactors in this country was actually commissioned by a Conservative Government. I am delighted that Labour Members are now joining us on this, and I know that they also agree—although not all Opposition Members—that small modular reactors are an important part of our nuclear future. They will boost energy security, unlock thousands of jobs and play a crucial role in stabilising electricity prices in the long term.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned jobs, and research by Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen has shown that 90% of the highly skilled professionals in oil and gas have skills

that could be transferred to adjacent energies. However, there is currently a shortage of people going through higher education. What are the Government going to do to address the skills gap, but also to ensure that we do not lose employment in existing energy sectors in the way that we have in other industries, such as shipbuilding and steel, over the decades?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about skills, and the skills gap is very important. I recently had a summit with our French counterparts that was specific to skills in the nuclear sector, where there are very similar issues. We are working with our colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions, the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Education on exactly the subject of skills that she raises. My hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine is working actively with them on this Bill, and I know he would be delighted to discuss that with the hon. Lady.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Grant Shapps: I will just make a small bit of progress, and then I will give way again.

Secondly, we will amend the Bill to deliver on the support package for energy-intensive industries, protecting them from high electricity prices. This will bring prices for UK businesses in line with global competitors, preserving jobs and investment in the strategic foundation industries—steel and chemicals, for example. Bringing down prices will also remove a barrier to those traditional carbon-intensive industries decarbonising, in some cases by switching to electrification.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Grant Shapps: I will give way in just a moment. Let me make a little bit more progress.

Thirdly, we will table amendments on hydrogen transport and storage, alongside the hydrogen production measures already in the Bill. Finally, we will propose further amendments related to carbon dioxide storage licensing to help us maximise the extraordinary potential—I talked about it before—under the UK continental shelf, which is so important.

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend knows my views on sustainable aviation fuel, and I will come back to that should I catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker. On the issue of small modular reactors, there is no way that a country such as France would allow a non-French firm to be the backbone of its nuclear industry. We do not want to take such an isolationist view, but it would be a travesty if the work in this field did not bring jobs, expertise and industrial success to this country. Can my right hon. Friend give me an assurance that he will make sure we do not make the mistakes of the last Labour Government, who sold off our nuclear industry, and will he encourage the development of a domestic nuclear industry?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend will know that the world’s very first civil nuclear reactor was Calder Hall in Cumbria, and we led the world, but, as he said, we switched off or stopped investing in nuclear power.

That was a great shame, because we are now having to work to get back to 25%, which is our objective. He is right in another way as well, because for several decades one company has been responsible for running what are essentially small modular reactors in the nuclear Trident fleet under the water, and successfully refuelling once every 25 years. We have a certain lead in this area, and it is very important that we get on with small modular reactors. That is why we are having a very brief competition, with the results coming by October.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Secretary of State rightly addresses the need to decarbonise and support industries that have been high users of carbon. The Bill as currently amended includes a ban on opening new coalmines, thanks to the Liberal Democrats in the other place. What possible reason could there be for the Government not to support that?

Grant Shapps: Conservative Members believe in getting on and doing things, which is how we have ended up going from nearly 40% of our electricity coming from coal just 10 or 11 years ago to the position this year, when I expect that to drop to about zero. The Liberal Democrats are still fighting the battles of yesterday. They are still concerned about building more power stations for coal, but no one is doing that. The issue is already in the distant past.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Grant Shapps: I want to finish my speech so that other Members can speak, which is only fair. As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, the entire UK will benefit from measures in the Bill, bringing jobs, economic growth and clean energy to the whole country. From the outset the Government worked closely with the devolved Administrations and with Members across the House, and I hope they will continue to do so.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab) *rose*—

Grant Shapps: On that point, I will give way to the hon. Lady.

Anna McMorris: I thank the Secretary of State. The Bill is sending mixed messages across the world, issuing 100 oil and gas licences while not ensuring that renewable energy projects are connected to the grid. On the devolved Administrations, when will the Secretary of State speak to and learn from Wales and the Welsh Government about the project I am proud to have introduced, Arbed, and about upgrading our insulation in homes, creating new skills and tackling the urgent climate crisis?

Grant Shapps: As I mentioned before, we are working constructively across the whole UK on energy security. I am not sure I follow the hon. Lady's first point. She seemed to be saying that we should import oil and gas from elsewhere, using about twice as much carbon, rather than exploiting our own. I want to work as closely as possible on those issues with Members across the House.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Let me bring the Secretary of State back to the independent system operator and planner. We in this House should

always be wary of creating new regulators, and we must be clear about their exact purpose. Will he explain in a bit more detail how the ISOP will operate with Ofgem, and the relationship between the two? Clause 123 states that the ISOP will

“have regard to the strategic priorities set out”

by the Department. We must be clearer about whether Members of the House and the Government will be able to direct the ISOP to do what we want it to do and deliver on the ambitious plans in the Bill, which we hope will be successful.

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right to raise that concern, but he will be pleased to hear that that is exactly the purpose of this structure. The ISOP should be able to take instruction and guidance about its policy, to ensure that we do something that is not really possible at the moment, which is to combine oil and gas input into our network in a much more strategic way. That is required more now than ever, given the extraordinary mix of energy that goes into our network.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Grant Shapps: I will make a little more progress, as I am coming to a conclusion.

I started by describing some of the changes of the past 50 years. Who knows what futuristic gadgets will be in the home of the right hon. Member for Doncaster North in the decades to come? Perhaps AI coffee machines that produce the perfect cuppa before he even realises he needs a brew, or intelligent music hubs that decide what he will listen to before he decides himself. There may even be personalised music, invented on the fly. I do not know what those developments will be, but I know that the energy we use to run those services will be far cleaner and much more secure, and that will be thanks in part to measures in the Bill. Just as we once bounced back from the crisis of the '70s, the Bill will ensure that we never again allow British consumers to be held hostage to the likes of a tyrant such as Putin.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Grant Shapps: I will conclude, if the hon. Lady does not mind.

I hope Members across the House will recognise the opportunity that the Bill represents, with the massively increased investment in jobs and economic growth, to support our long-term ambition to lower energy bills and ensure that in future, we power Britain from Britain. I commend the Bill to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The Secretary of State was generous with his time in taking interventions, not least from Members who wish to catch my eye in the debate. I warn that there will be a time limit, which is likely to be five minutes or less, depending on the other opening speeches. If any Member feels that they may not have notified the Speaker's Office that they wish to speak, they should let me know, as that will also affect the timings.

I call the shadow Secretary of State.

6.25 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker. I will begin by welcoming the arrival of the Bill to the House. I thank the Secretary of State and his Ministers for their willingness to engage in discussions on the Bill, which, as I will explain, we support. Given his speech, after the next election I look forward to him providing some AI consultancy for my house, once he has some more time on his hands.

For us, the central truth that frames this Bill is, as the Secretary of State said in his speech, the energy bills crisis, with bills still double what they were 18 months ago. This crisis demonstrates the urgency of getting off expensive fossil fuels and moving to clean power. Clean power is the route to cheaper bills, energy security, long-term sustainable jobs and tackling the climate emergency. The peril for Britain is the deep uncertainty about whether the Government are doing what is required to make the transition happen with the urgency needed. Let us look at the last couple of months alone. In March the Climate Change Committee stated that the Government are “asleep at the wheel” on their 2035 decarbonisation target. In the same month the National Infrastructure Commission said that

“movement has stuttered further just as the need for acceleration has heightened.”

The cross-party Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee said in April:

“At the current pace of change, the UK is set to fail to hit its target of decarbonising the power sector”.

The common theme is one we have heard many times about this Government: they act as if this was not the emergency it is. The Bill needs to put that right, so we apply three tests to it: does it represent an all-out sprint for zero-carbon power, the linchpin of a net-zero country; does it provide a proper plan to spread the benefits of cheap, clean power to working families across Britain; and does it provide an industrial policy that means we can win the global race for the jobs of the future? In that context, we will give our support to the Bill, because we welcome many of the measures in it and believe they are long overdue. We have long called for the independent system operator and planner—I will come on to that—as well as the CO₂ licensing regime, because, as the Secretary of State said, carbon capture and storage is important for the future. We welcome measures to support hydrogen, nuclear and action on the grid, and a number of other aspects of what we might call “green plumbing”, which is largely what the Bill is about. We also welcome the improvements made in the other place, for which I thank their lordships. I will come on to those in the course of my speech.

But despite the things we welcome, set against the tests I listed we believe that the Bill still lacks the urgency and long-term strategy required. If the pace and scale at which we need to transform our energy system is akin to climbing a mountain, the Bill is a route map to basecamp, but it will not take us to the summit. It is too half-hearted on the zero carbon sprint that we need, it does not take sufficient measures to make working people the priority in the energy transition, and with the pace being set by President Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act—I am sure Members hear this in their constituencies—it does not put Britain enough at the

forefront of the race for low-carbon jobs. That is why we will be seeking further improvements to the Bill during its passage.

Let me start with the sprint for zero-carbon power. Last summer, renewables were nine times cheaper than oil and gas. Today, even after the recent fall in gas prices, they remain multiple times lower. However, onshore wind—among the cheapest, cleanest, and most quickly deployed sources of energy available to us—remains effectively banned in England. That is thanks to the decision in 2015 to put it in a unique category of difficulty compared with other local infrastructure, so that one objection can defeat a project. Indeed, it is now far easier to build an incinerator or a landfill site than an onshore wind farm.

This ban has meant that in the eight years since 2015—the Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero was candid about this earlier this year—just three wind farms have been built in the whole of England. Since 2015, we have had five Prime Ministers and just three onshore wind farms. I make that to be three fifths of the wind farm per Prime Minister—that is my great maths. That is quite the record.

Members across the House will have different views on wind farms, but the cost of the ban—[*Interruption.*] The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero is chuntering from a sedentary position, but these are his figures, which he said at Energy questions. According to Carbon Brief, the cost of the ban is more than £5 billion. That is £180 per household because of the expensive gas that we are importing when we could be using onshore wind. In future, failing to achieve the doubling of onshore wind deprives us of another 20 GW of power. Any self-respecting energy Bill would lift that ban. Even the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who is sadly no longer in his place, called for the ban to be lifted when he was briefly Energy Secretary—that was not a glorious time, but he got it right when he argued for bringing that position into line with other infrastructure. In December, in a promise made by the Government, the Communities Secretary said that, by the end of April, the ban would be lifted. We have gone beyond the end of April.

I hate to say this, but the dinosaur tendency in the Conservative party seems to have prevailed once again, and I am afraid that, on this, the Energy Secretary is actually the dinosaur-in-chief. Despite all of the evidence, and despite 78% of the public supporting onshore wind, according to his own Department’s polling, he said in the midst of the energy crisis that he was not in favour of onshore wind because it is “an eyesore”. He is the self-styled TikTok moderniser, but he is more of a pterodactyl nimby stuck in the past on this. [*Interruption.*] I will take Wallace and Gromit over a pterodactyl nimby.

As well as that drive for all forms of zero-carbon power, we need this. I therefore appeal to right hon. and hon. Members across the House, because this should not be a party political issue. Labour will seek to amend the Bill to bring about the simple position of the right hon. Member for North East Somerset that onshore wind, which is supported 20:1 by the public, should have the same planning rules as other local infrastructure.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman was engaging in palaeontological analysis. If I can bring him to the slightly more recent past,

he named the number of wind farms given planning permission since 2015, but could he name the number of Labour Energy Ministers between 1997 and 2010 and how many nuclear projects they commissioned?

Edward Miliband: Actually, I was talking about onshore wind farms that had not just planning permission and consent—[*Interruption.*] I will tell the hon. Lady simply. In 2006, Tony Blair changed the policy to be in favour of nuclear. When I left office in 2010, we identified 10 new nuclear sites, and there have been 13 years since then. How many nuclear plants had been built and made operational? Precisely zero. The Secretary of State had to talk about the previous Conservative Government, who left office 25 years ago—that is indeed stuck in the past.

Chris Grayling: Given the importance of nuclear and what the right hon. Member has just said, why did the last Labour Government sell off Westinghouse, which was owned by Britain and was the main repository of our nuclear skills?

Edward Miliband: The right hon. Member wants to re-litigate the last Labour Government. Let us talk about the future. We want nuclear to move ahead, and actually the Government have had 13 years and failed to do it.

Alan Brown: Will the shadow Secretary of State give way?

Edward Miliband: No, I will not.

Let us talk about how we can get an energy system that is fit for purpose. Nowhere is that more true than when it comes to the grid, where the delays that have been allowed to build up are a disgrace. For all of the Conservative party's boasts, this is what Keith Anderson of Scottish Power says about the delays to the grid:

“The wind farms that are coming online today were approved when Gordon Brown was in power—that’s a long time ago and we need to be much faster to move beyond this crisis”.

The new independent system operator is a step forward, but there are questions remaining about whether it goes far enough in its powers, remit and independence.

What the energy system sorely lacks at the moment—this goes to the question that the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) asked the Secretary of State—is a guiding mind. It is about not simply balancing the system day to day and hoping that the market provides—this is the purpose of the regulator—but planning for the future of the system as we transition. This is the point: at the moment, that planning role is a job for everyone—the Energy Department, Ofgem and the network companies—but the ultimate responsibility of nobody. That needs to change with the ISOP so that we auction offshore wind in the right places, we plan and build the grid in the right places and on the right timescale, and we have the right amount of power in the system in the years ahead. For us, that is the purpose of ISOP, and during the Bill’s passage we will test out whether its proposals for ISOP adequately meet that vision.

If the regime is to work—I concur with the interventions on the Secretary of State—we need a price regulator in Ofgem that supports and never stands in the way of change. I hope that the Secretary of State’s failure to say that he would oppose such an amendment is a good

sign, but obviously Ofgem should have a formal net zero duty. I think that was recommended by the net zero tsar, the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), and it was rightly inserted by the House of Lords. However—this is boring but very important—we also need to sort out the issues of planning.

The National Infrastructure Commission recently produced an important report about the delays to planning. It said that, in part, that was the fault of Government, who have not updated their energy national policy statements for a decade. It also said that there should be a statutory duty on the Government to review them every five years, and we agree. Here is the other thing that is important: all relevant regulators, including the Planning Inspectorate, should have a net zero duty, because otherwise we will find the system being slowed down and gummed up. Of course, the views of local people are important and must be taken into account, but we must also make progress.

The Bill could achieve those things to speed up the planning process. However, even if we get all the forms of low-carbon power that we need—I think that we should have all of them—and we sort out the grid and planning, there is an obvious question that the Secretary of State did not address. Even if we get all of those renewables and indeed nuclear, the price of electricity is currently tied to the prevailing price of gas. We do need reform of that system. Labour first called for that in January last year, and I say to the Secretary of State that we will be talking about that in the Bill Committee. We believe that there should be a commitment in the Bill to a timetable for that delinking; otherwise, we will get more drift and delay and we will not reap the benefits of the move to zero-carbon power.

On the one hand, we need the drive to zero-carbon power, but we also need a decisive shift away from the high-carbon expensive path—again, that was raised earlier—and unfortunately the Bill does not attempt to make that shift; it is business as usual on fossil fuels.

On coal, the Secretary of State rather dismissed the intervention of the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). Yes, there has been a good record on coal in the last decade. [*Interruption.*] He says “Thank you”, and he wants to chunter away, but opening a new coalmine drives a coach and horses through that record. [*Interruption.*] He says that it does not. We cannot go around the world, as did the former President of COP, the right hon. Member for Reading West (Sir Alok Sharma), telling everybody that they have to power past coal, and then say, “But not us,” because that totally undermines our moral authority. Here is the thing: the steel industry in Britain says it will not use the coking coal, it will not provide the long-term jobs that Cumbria needs and it sends utterly the wrong message on climate. That is why their lordships inserted a provision to ban new coalmines. Labour supports that amendment.

Labour will also table an amendment to ban dangerous, expensive, unpopular fracking. I know that Conservative Members want to say the Truss period was a bad dream—Bobby Ewing in the shower and all that. [*Interruption.*] I am showing my age, that is true. I am a big “Dallas” fan, actually. Labour will table an amendment on fracking.

We also believe—this is an important point—that the Bill should remove the 2015 duty to extract every last drop, the so-called maximum economic recovery, from

[Edward Miliband]

the North sea. I can do no better than to quote the net zero tsar, the right hon. Member for Kingswood, praised by the Secretary of State, who did a very serious piece of work—Government Front Benchers are nodding. What he said could not be clearer:

“developing new oil and gas fields is incompatible with limiting warming to 1.5°... There is no such thing as a new net zero oilfield.”

Those are not my words, or those of the Liberal Democrats or any other party in this place. [Interruption.] The Secretary of State starts chuntering, but he should talk to his own net zero tsar, who did a brilliant report that he himself praised.

Let me just explain, for the benefit of right hon. and hon. Members, why that is the right position. That approach will have no impact on bringing down bills. How do we know that? Because every previous Energy Minister has said that. Gas and oil are traded on an inter—[Interruption.] Just pipe down for a minute. The price is set on the international market and 80% of our oil is exported. It drives a coach and horses through any possibility of keeping global warming to 1.5°, according to hundreds of leading scientists and the right hon. Member for Kingswood.

Here is the other thing, which is a new part of this. We now know how much the Government are having to shell out to the oil and gas industry to persuade it to make this investment, because it is in the detail of the Budget Red Book: over £11 billion. The current Prime Minister, the previous Chancellor, introduced a windfall tax, but then he introduced an absolutely massive super-deduction—not available now to any other industry, including renewables—of over £11 billion. Massive, massive cost to the taxpayer, no impact on bills, the oil from Rosebank exported, and driving a coach and horses through our climate commitments—no wonder the net zero tsar concluded that it is the wrong policy for Britain. It is. Government Members can carry on pretending that business as usual is consistent with the science and consistent with what we go around the world saying, but it is not and the net zero tsar has rightly said so. Labour will seek to improve the Bill so that it delivers on the zero-carbon sprint we need.

Next, I want to turn to the second part of my remarks—I will try to speed up, Mr Deputy Speaker—on what the Bill can do to ensure the fairness of the transition. We know that the fairness of the transition is essential if we are to take the public with us, and we know there are huge opportunities. I want to come back to the issue of energy efficiency, because Government Members go on and on about their great record on energy efficiency. Here are the facts. In 2010, there were 1.6 million energy efficiency upgrades. In 2022, there were 160,000 equivalent measures. In other words, there were 10 times more when the last Labour Government left office than there are now.

We know why that has happened. The Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), has done many important and learned reports on this question. Massive cuts were imposed on energy efficiency schemes when David Cameron said, “cut the green crap” and the investment has not recovered. That is why the UK Business Council for Sustainable Development says it will take almost 200 years

at the current rate to get all homes up to EPC C—200 years. That is not just bad for the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), who intervened earlier, and the constituents of many others in this House; it also means we import more gas and use more gas supplies. The estimates are that we could cut gas demand by 20% if we got all homes up to EPC C.

Bim Afolami: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way in an unexpectedly amusing speech from the Opposition Front Bench. On gas and fossil fuels, he made a serious point which should be responded to. The International Energy Authority said that even by 2045 fossil fuels will still make up between 28% and 30% of our total energy mix. Fossil fuels will be with us for decades to come, although of course everybody in this House is working to bring their use down as fast as possible. In the transition period, particularly in relation to gas, does he accept that we will have to, as best we can in existing areas that are within our control, improve our energy security and resilience by exploiting our own gas rather than importing more, as he has just referred to?

Edward Miliband: I have great respect for the hon. Gentleman. Let me try to explain the position. Nobody is talking about turning off the taps in the North sea. The question is this: do we defy the International Energy Agency? He cites the IEA. The IEA says, in absolutely clear terms, that if we invest in new fields in the North sea and have new exploration, we will bust way through 1.5°. The point is that every country can say, “Well, we’re going to do it, but you shouldn’t.” But if we do that, we will end up at a 3° world. That is what all the scientists tell us.

One great thing in this House, compared with other countries, is that we have established a cross-party consensus on following the science. But the science could not be clearer. That is why 700 scientists wrote to the newspapers a few weeks ago to say, “This is our view.” That is why the IEA says it. That is why the UN Secretary-General says it. That is why the net zero tsar, when he looked at the evidence, said it. It is not me making it up; it is what the clear evidence is. The hon. Gentleman is right that we will continue to use our existing fields, but to grant new licences and new exploration, defying what all the science tells us, would be a betrayal of future generations. I do not pretend it is easy—I do not—but it is absolutely crystal clear. [Interruption.] They say, “More imports.” No, the answer is to get off fossil fuels and drive towards low carbon.

On fairness, energy efficiency—the Lords have done us a favour and I hope that we keep their amendments in the Bill—is incredibly important. Part of making the transition fair is striking the right balance between levies on bills and public expenditure. When I was Energy Secretary we introduced things through levies, so I am not saying that the Labour Government did not do it, but there is a balance. The Treasury is never keen on investing public money—not just under this Government, although it may be particularly true under this Government—but we have a problem and I have to be honest with the House about it.

If any cost in green investment must be borne through levies, we will pile more and more on to bill payers. Take hydrogen. There is a strong economic case for investing

in hydrogen through public investment. That is what the US is doing. Much of the benefit of new investment in hydrogen will go to industry—not consumers directly—which will be at the front of the queue for its use. Putting the cost of hydrogen on consumer bills, as the legislation originally proposed, is not the right way forward. I know that discussions in Government are tricky, to put it mildly, but I say to the Secretary of State that the right thing to do is surely to make public investment, through public expenditure, in hydrogen, not just bung the money on to bill payers. In the course of discussing the Bill, I hope we know how much will be put on to bill payers. We cannot just add levy after levy because the Treasury says, “We don’t want to invest.”

I shall conclude on Britain’s place in the race for the low-carbon jobs of the future. The Inflation Reduction Act has had a massive impact in the US, where nearly 10 times more jobs have been created in low carbon and renewables in seven months than we have seen in the UK over the last seven years. The Bill should be our answer to IRA but, in truth, the Government face a number of different ways: first, they say, as the Secretary of State did, that it is “dangerous”; then they say that we are already doing it; then they say that we will have a response in the autumn. With every day that goes by, we hear another business say, “We are losing the global race.” It may interest the House to know that there are 23 clean steel demonstration projects across Europe. There are none in the UK. Forty gigafactories are due to open across Europe by 2030, but just one is certain in the UK. Where is the national wealth fund in the Bill to invest in our ports, clean steel and gigafactories? It is in the interests of all parties in the House to put pressure on the Government to make the investments to put us in the lead in the race for green jobs. Today, the chief executive of Johnson Matthey said that we have lost the race for gigafactories and are in danger of losing the race for green hydrogen.

Every country that leads the world in renewables has a publicly owned energy generation company. Why doesn’t Britain? This is not a matter of ideology. EDF, Ørsted, Vattenfall and Statkraft all invest in our infrastructure. These are state-owned companies. It is an extraordinary fact that 46% of our offshore wind assets are owned not by foreign companies but by state-owned foreign companies. That means that the proceeds go back to those countries and they build the supply chains. I welcome GB Nuclear, but GB Energy is a much wider version of that. GB Energy is about understanding that reality and saying, “Why not Britain?” This is a moment of peril for Britain in the race for low-carbon jobs. This Bill is not the answer.

It is Labour’s view that the Bill is necessary but not sufficient given the scale of challenge and opportunity that we face. We welcome many of its measures, which are long overdue reforms that will make the delivery of net zero easier. On the basis of the common ground that does exist, we will work constructively with the Government. The Bill will be useful to whoever is in government after the next election, but for all its length, the truth is that it is further proof that Britain will require a new Government to do what is truly needed to lower bills, give us energy security, create jobs and show the climate leadership that we need.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): About 28 people want to speak in the debate, which is quite a lot. I will start with a time limit of six minutes, but after the Scottish National party spokesman has spoken I will be able to work out whether we can stay at that or it will have to go down.

6.52 pm

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Southfork—excuse me, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). I was delighted to learn that he will support the Bill, and he is quite right to do so. I was pleased to learn that he reads the report of the Environmental Audit Committee. I commend them to other Members who have not had that opportunity.

I also support the Bill. As the Secretary of State said, it is a monumental piece of legislation—the largest piece of energy legislation in my political lifetime and that of most people in this House, I suspect. Energy is at the heart of our economy. It drives the competitiveness of this country versus our peers. As we have seen from the impact of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, when things go wrong, those countries that cannot account for their own energy security and resilience are left at the mercy of the autocrats. That is not a position that this country should be in, given our geographic position and access to resources.

The Bill is a vital first step in the journey to the vision that the Secretary of State set out in “Powering Up Britain”, but I may disappoint him slightly by saying that it lacks what is really needed: a vision to get us to 2050. We need a 27-year plan to establish how we will drive electricity generation and get it to the places that it needs to go, in order to achieve net zero Britain. I hope that during the passage of the Bill, if additional comments and suggestions are made to the Front Bench, they will take them in a positive spirit in that direction.

The scale of the challenge is enormous. We need five times the current electricity generating capacity to decarbonise our economy, ignoring any increase in GDP during this period. The UK is trying to do that in a globally competitive environment, as we just heard from the right hon. Member for Doncaster North. This is a time in which international investors, whether state-owned electricity companies or financial investors, are looking for the markets to invest in energy generation that will provide them with the quickest route to completion of the deal, whatever kind of a deal that is. One big challenge that the Bill seeks to resolve is removing some of the barriers to implementation and reducing some of the risk. That is where it has a great deal to offer. The key is to provide confidence to the international community and the domestic supply chain that this country knows where it is going, will facilitate the way to get there and will do it quickly.

I have three quick points to make in my six minutes. The UK has allowed our existing nuclear fleet to age without previous Administrations taking the necessary decisions. The Labour party was completely incapable of taking decisions about nuclear and, frankly, in coalition the Lib Dems were no better, and applied the brakes. I welcome the Government’s having made the difficult decisions to start the process of renewing our nuclear fleet.

[Philip Dunne]

I welcome what the Secretary of State has said today on the competition launched to identify two projects by November from a design perspective. I urge him and his nuclear Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie)—who is very welcome in his place—to ensure that the UK takes advantage of this opportunity to recover our leading position in nuclear technologies, by giving some clarity on what happens after the design competition has made its determinations. We need to maintain the development of novel technological solutions so that the UK once again becomes a nuclear energy hub of expertise.

I wrote to the Secretary of State last week on the subject of solar power. In connection with that, the EAC has launched an inquiry into the grid, which, as others have said, is not in a fit state to cope with the massive electrification of the economy. I encourage external observers and commentators to provide evidence to our inquiry into enabling the sustainable electrification of the UK economy, which will focus on the role of the national grid and reducing barriers to access. The right hon. Member for Doncaster North identified some statistics. Today, attaching an onshore solar farm to the grid in the UK takes 13 years. The queue is that long. As one can imagine, that is something of a deterrent to anybody thinking about doing that. We have to cut that significantly, and planning is a big part of that.

Cutting the time to provide consents while enabling communities to have their say is the Rubik's cube challenge that the Bill seeks to address. Similarly, we must ensure that we have confidence in supply chains to supply the capabilities that we wish to introduce in this country. As has been said, finance is internationally mobile. The money is there to fund the projects but only if those projects can be delivered.

Finally, I have a quick note on community energy. I declare that I am a member of the Ludlow Hydro Co-operative, which is a very good, small-scale scheme providing electricity to local communities. Their lordships have made some suggestions to encourage other such schemes, and I hope the Minister will look upon them favourably.

6.59 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): For once, I find myself in the unusual position of debating legislation that I do not intend to reject out of hand. I have to admit that I broadly welcome most of the measures in the Bill, particularly those relating to carbon capture and storage and hydrogen models. That said, I must put on record my objection to all the comments that have been made about nuclear. Nuclear is the only energy technology that has become more expensive rather than cheaper over the years, so talk of its making our bills less expensive is collective madness. We need to move away from that. As for the talk about small modular reactors, no design has even been approved for their implementation yet. I do not know how the competition can be judged when there is no approved design for SMRs, and I understand that the process that is going on will take at least another 18 months.

Another aspect of the Bill that I cannot get my head round is the fact that the so-called revising Chamber was deemed to be the right place in which to introduce it.

That seems counterintuitive to me, but I will say to the Secretary of State that, if the other place was indeed deemed most appropriate for the purpose, the House should trust the five amendments that were made there and recommend that they should remain in the Bill. Let me say for the record that I support them.

The amendment that would prevent any new coalmines from being opened by the Coal Authority or its successors makes sense if we are serious about net zero. We cannot have the hypocrisy of lecturing developing countries about the use of coal while considering extracting coal ourselves. We cannot have the hypocrisy of Tory MPs' decrying Germany for using coal while at the same time supporting the new Cumbrian coalmine. We need to end the pretence of a zero emission coalmine that ignores the emissions from the carbon embedded in the coal that is about to be burnt, and we need to end the hypocrisy of arguing for indigenous coal for steel coking in the UK when the coal is generally not suitable for the purpose and 84% of it will be exported to be burnt elsewhere.

As for the amendment to ensure that meeting the UK's net zero targets becomes a specific part of Ofgem's general responsibilities, that is just plain common sense. We have heard a number of interventions in support of it, and indeed it is one of the recommendations in the Skidmore review, as well as being called for by representatives of the wider industry including Energy UK, RenewableUK, the Climate Change Committee and the National Infrastructure Commission, and groups such as the Green Alliance. It is logical to assume that, if the Government object to Ofgem's having a net zero mandate, they are signalling that they are not serious about doing everything possible to meet the net zero target—and when are they ever going to publish the long-delayed strategy and policy statement for Ofgem? For too long they have seemed to suggest that Ofgem should have responsibility for policy considerations when awkward questions arise, when it is clearly their responsibility to set policy decisions for Ofgem in that strategy and policy statement.

For years I have been going on about the unfair transmission grid charging system which penalises Scottish sites where the best load factor and wind resource can be found. As has been re-confirmed by the Green Alliance, the current system, overseen by Ofgem, favours electricity coming from Europe rather than wind farms built in the UK's windiest areas. On average, according to the alliance, EU electricity generators paid 16 times less in transmission charges to send their energy to England last year than the cost of bringing energy down from Scotland, and Scottish generators are now at a significant disadvantage in comparison with sites in France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Denmark and Norway. What kind of perverse logic is that?

Worse still, National Grid ESO has confirmed that £4.6 billion was paid in constraint payments last year, mainly owing to the lack of grid capacity between Scotland and England. If ever there was an example of lack of strategy and forward thinking between the Government and the regulator, this is it. Paying wind farm developers to stop generating because of a lack of grid capacity, while either paying fossil fuel generators to ramp up gas generation to meet the demand or

importing from the continent at the same time, is madness. Those constraint payments could easily have covered the cost of grid upgrades.

As well as the need for grid build-out to facilitate the renewable energy targets, there is a need for the Government—if they want to deploy renewable energy—to listen to what the industry is saying about the pressures of inflation and how it will struggle to meet the strike rates that have been suggested for allocation round 5. Indeed, some of the biggest developers mentioned by the Secretary of State are struggling to deliver on their AR4 commitments. We need to learn from the Spanish auction, which was a complete failure, to listen to industry and to ensure that that failure is not repeated as we try to deploy renewable energy as quickly as possible.

The Government's own offshore wind champion has pointed out that they will be well short of the 2030 target of 50 GW of offshore wind. The Government should consider revising the “first come, first served” approach and the ability to hold on to grid consents, which is a prize that companies seek to retain. We need to move away from that system and allow access to the grid for companies that can deploy quickly. The Government rightly talk of speeding up consent processes in England and Wales through the planning system, but we must ensure that Scotland is not left behind. The Scottish Government have made contact with his Department. I am sure he understands that, while Scottish Ministers have responsibility for signing off planning consent for major infrastructure projects, the regulations themselves are reserved to Westminster under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989. The two Governments need to work together to revise those regulations so that Scotland is not left behind.

Several bodies, including Energy UK and the Climate Change Committee, have called on the Government to apply a net zero test to all policy, regulatory, spending and taxation decisions. I support that, because I know that we need to move away from silo working and ensure that there is a joined-up net zero policy across all Government Departments. I also think that the UK Government should learn from the Scottish Government's establishment of a Just Transition Commission to place fairness and long-term job creation and transfer at the forefront of net zero, and I call on them once more to match the Scottish Government's £500 million just transition funding.

I also support the amendment on community energy. As a co-sponsor of the Local Electricity Bill, I support the suggested change to provide a framework to support the growth of a community and smaller-scale electricity export guarantee scheme. It has already been supported by Community Energy Scotland, and 318 MPs now support the Bill, including 125 Back-Bench Conservatives—more than enough to win a vote in the House. The concept is also backed by more than 110 local authorities—including my own, East Ayrshire Council—and more than 80 national organisations.

The organisation Power for People deserves the most credit for getting the campaign to this stage. It is estimated that community energy generation could grow between 12 and 20-fold in size over a decade, which could mean up to 10% of electricity being generated by community-owned projects. That would facilitate additional investment providing returns for communities, building better network

resilience with small schemes scattered across the grid—and, of course, that is far better value for money than the £70 billion or so for two large-scale nuclear power stations. In 2021, according to Power for People, community energy groups spent more than half a million pounds on energy efficiency upgrades, helping 21,000 people to reduce their energy bills, while nearly 60,000 individuals were engaged in energy efficiency initiatives. This means reducing energy demand in the entire system. It is clear that the reinvestment of returns by community schemes is a virtuous circle.

A policy that was successful in the past was the feed-in tariff, which secured the deployment of small-scale generation projects, particularly small-scale hydro projects in Scotland. Those projects work: they are proven technology, and last for decades. That is why we need pricing certainty for such generation. Some form of export price guarantee could reinvigorate hydro schemes around the 5 MW capacity, as delivered by companies across the Scottish highlands, such as Green Highland Renewables. It makes no sense for them to have reached maximum efficiency and expertise in terms of designers and contracts, but then to have the rug pulled from under their feet and that expertise lost.

On that subject, I want to put on record again the plea to find a way forward for pumped storage hydropower. I was disappointed that the Minister for Nuclear and Networks, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), said at the Scottish Affairs Committee that that would not happen any time soon. That technology can be deployed right now. It is proven technology that can be deployed fast, and we should be moving forward on it.

On energy efficiency, the Secretary of State was again boasting that the stock of properties rated EPC or above has increased from 14% to 47% since 2010. Yes, that is progress, but it is progress based on addressing the easiest homes first. Clearly, if only 33% of stock has been addressed in 13 years, the target for completing the rest by the target date of 2035 will not be met.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): My hon. Friend mentioned energy efficiency. Is he as concerned as I am that there was no mention of strengthening minimum energy efficiency standards in the Bill, but measures to create powers for the Secretary of State to remove European performance of buildings regulations in the UK are included?

Alan Brown: I certainly share my hon. Friend's concerns. It looks as if that is another Brexit dividend in reverse, where we could end up falling behind our European counterparts as those regulations have helped to drive forward standards in the UK.

To return to the Government's efforts to upgrade stock and meet the 2035 target, we have to bear in mind that, even as house building continues, new housing is not being built to the correct energy efficiency standards, meaning that as time goes on the number of retrofits that will be required will increase. That is completely illogical and needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

On the slippage on targets, simultaneously, energy companies are finding it difficult to find homes that meet the criteria required for ECO4 upgrades. They are struggling to hit targets. It is clear that the Government will have to revise costing proposals for the scheme, or

[Alan Brown]

ECO4 will collapse completely. Of course that will mean the supply chain will move elsewhere and it will be hard to recover the situation. I ask the Secretary of the State to have a wee think on that.

Without action on housing and buildings, there is no plausible path to achieving the fifth carbon budget or meeting the 2030 statutory fuel poverty target. The reality is that about 7 million homes are now classed as being in fuel poverty. Energy efficiency requires much greater urgency, especially in the private rented sector. Now is the time for a proper fair social tariff; I would be happy to support amendments in that area in Committee.

There is no doubt that hydrogen production is needed as part of the net zero pathway. It can provide fuel for shipping, aviation and HGVs, for example. It will be vital for decarbonising some energy-intensive industries. However, there is a growing understanding of the reality of the cost of hydrogen production, which means it is extremely unlikely to be part of a large-scale domestic heating switch-over.

I have previously supported the H100 Fife project, which I want to see come to a conclusion as we need to have an evidence base. However, in reality, hydrogen looks to be too costly and is unlikely to be a solution. Low-carbon expert Jan Rosenow, who was a special adviser to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee when we looked at heat decarbonisation, has identified and looked at 36 independent studies that do not predict any large-scale use of hydrogen for heating.

I can see the arguments in favour of hydrogen blending and its benefits as an interim measure to reduce the use of methane gas in heating systems, but more than 20 organisations have written to the Secretary of State outlining their belief that it will be too expensive and just another burden on bill payers. We need clarity on what the hydrogen levy will look like. We know the Government want to pass it on to bill payers, but what is the anticipated cost to consumers? How can an additional levy on bills be justified at this juncture? When France and Germany are investing heavily directly in hydrogen development and with the Inflation Reduction Act in the United States, the Government's levy proposal means the UK will just fall further behind.

Another concern that I have raised with the Secretary of State is about a clause in the Bill that could allow forcible disconnection from the gas network to facilitate hydrogen trials. It is really important that we do not go down the route of forcing people to disconnect, because that is no way to get the public on side.

There is a lack of joined-up thinking. The Government have said they have aspirations for hydrogen blending, but the current health and safety regulations allow a maximum limit of 2% of hydrogen to be blended into the system. At the moment, there are no proposals to change that legislation, so again the Government's own targets cannot be met because they have other legislation that needs to be changed to make that happen.

Turning to carbon capture and storage, I welcome the legislation for the licensing and funding models, which is long overdue. This is enabling legislation, and it is clear that there are no definitive models proposed yet. There are also no clear funding pathways. We have the

£20 billion a year pledge from 2028, but that has no corresponding budget line and it is at the behest of a future Government. This Government always say that they cannot bind the hands of a successor Government, so saying they can guarantee the £20 billion a year pledge is clearly at odds with that.

In the here and now, we still do not have certainty over the track 2 timeline. I ask the Secretary of State once again, when will Acorn get the backing it deserves? The Scottish Government's 2030 targets cannot be met without it. Without further CCS clusters, the UK will miss its own targets as well. It is no surprise that the Carbon Capture and Storage Association has written to the Secretary of State outlining its concerns.

In conclusion, I turn to devolution. The Bill is littered with comments that the Secretary of State must consult "the Scottish Ministers, if the regulations contain provision that would be within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament if it were contained in an Act of that Parliament".

The requirement only to consult is not good enough. As an absolute minimum, the UK Government should seek to work with and obtain the permission of the Scottish Government where regulations relate to devolved competency. This is another example of a power grab, as the matter is set out in the Bill instead of there being collegiate working. I ask the Secretary of State to think again on this, because it is outrageous that 29 clauses have that wording. That relates directly to what I said earlier about the need to revise section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 to ensure that the Scottish Parliament has full competency over planning, which should be a devolved matter.

Going forward, these matters need to be addressed, and there are many issues that need a strategic overview. I would be happy to work with the Government on that, and I will certainly bring forward amendments in Committee.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Chris Skidmore to speak for six minutes.

7.17 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I welcome the Bill. I hope all parties will recognise that the Bill is an important and much needed piece of legislation, which I hope we can find consensus to support tonight. Many across the energy sector have waited too long for the provisions in the Bill; we cannot afford any further delay.

It is to the issue of delay that I wish to speak today. As the former Energy Minister who signed net zero into law and most recently, as has been noted, chaired the independent review on net zero, I believe the greatest threat to our future ambition to deliver on net zero is the endemic and systemic delay in creating the capacity and capability needed to decarbonise our energy systems. We simply cannot will the means, expecting that because we say we will deliver, net zero will happen. It will not. Unless we address the fundamental challenges of grid infrastructure, storage and capacity, we will not get there.

The net zero review set out how the Government can tackle those delays and implement their climate commitments, both by taking action now—the Bill is a huge opportunity to achieve that—and by providing the certainty, clarity, consistency and continuity of long-term policy direction that is needed to unlock future private inward investment. We can provide certainty in this place by working across parties to build on the long-term political consensus for net zero. Indeed, the Climate Change Act 2008, led by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), has been held up globally as a model for what stable political action on climate change can deliver.

Back then, it was the Conservative party in opposition that pushed the Labour Government to go further, to be more ambitious, in their climate leadership on emissions reduction. Thanks to the actions taken by both parties, and across all divides, the UK is a global leader in the G7, having reduced our emissions further than any other industrialised nation, and we can do the same now.

Although many provisions in the Bill are welcome, we can once again, with cross-party support, go further faster and raise our ambitions. The amendments made in the Lords are all welcome additions. Indeed, many were recommended in the net zero review. I therefore support their continued inclusion and, if needed, will seek to re-table many of them. I will also seek to work across the House, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the environment, to table additional amendments that I believe are realistic and achievable to help the Government meet both the needs of the energy sector and their own legal and net zero commitments.

It is in that spirit of cross-party consensus that I believe it is our duty as legislators not only to make this Bill the best it can be, but to ensure that we do not delay any further the reforms that are needed to make our regulatory and planning systems, which are holding back net zero, fit for a net zero purpose.

This opportunity to reform our energy system will not come again in this Parliament. For me, as someone whose constituency is being abolished at the next general election and who is standing down, the opportunity will perhaps never come again. I hope the Minister and the Government will recognise that I stand here tonight, and throughout the passage of this Bill, to be helpful, although they might not feel that I am being helpful, and to raise our ambition by amending the Bill. Although they might not thank me today, in time I hope the Minister and the Government will understand that I and others who seek to improve the Bill have no choice, for there is no time left in which to act.

7.22 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore). I agree with every single word he said. If we do not work together on this, we really will be failing our constituents.

I support this big, important and complex Bill, but the test we should apply is very simple: will it give us the tools we need to achieve energy security in a net zero future? As the right hon. Gentleman said, we know exactly what needs to be done. We now need to get on and make it happen.

Some of the policy changes have turned out to be quite simple. The decision to say that petrol and diesel cars cannot be sold after 2030 has been brilliantly effective, because it has led to a huge increase in innovation and to new electric models coming on to the market, but other areas are much more complex.

I will address my remarks to the transition in home heating, which is intensely personal to all our constituents and, indeed, to all of us. There are currently 23 million homes in this country that are dependent on gas for their heating, which we know will have to change because the point will eventually come when no more natural gas comes through the pipes. The policy question is, what will replace that gas? Will it be electric heating, in the form of heat pumps or electric boilers? Will it be district heating? Will it be, for some consumers, hydrogen?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I support what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. The Government should also consider hydrotreated vegetable oil. We have a depot at Carryduff in my constituency, and the National Trust property at Portaferry and properties in Millisle are using it. It is a proven option. Does he feel the Government need to widen the net and consider HVO as a possibility?

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because I think we will need all the current technologies and all the technologies that have yet to be invented to meet this challenge.

Of course, the advantage of heat pumps is that they are extremely efficient. Provided that the electricity comes from renewable sources, and all our electricity will come from renewable sources in the not-too-distant future, they are genuinely zero carbon. They work very well in some houses, but they do not work in others. I think of a row of 40 back-to-back houses in my constituency. The doors open on to the street, so where exactly would they put a heat pump? Well, they would not.

Hydrogen is also zero carbon when it is burned, but for hydrogen to work it has to be made through electrolysis using renewable electricity—so-called green hydrogen. There are other ways of producing hydrogen. There is the blue hydrogen question. Can we truly capture the CO₂ and hold it through carbon capture and storage?

The other advantage of hydrogen is that it is “boiler out, boiler in”. Nothing else has to be changed, but there are practical issues, which the Secretary of State mentioned, when it comes to safety and operation. The gas companies are working on that, although it is worth remembering that 50% of coal gas is hydrogen. Many of us lived through the burning of a fuel that is 50% hydrogen, but hydrogen will succeed as a long-term replacement in some cases only if we can produce enough green hydrogen quickly enough, which requires a huge increase in renewable electricity, because the disadvantage of green hydrogen is that it is not very energy-efficient to produce. Three units have to be put in to get one unit of heat, although we currently pay turbine operators to turn off their turbines when the grid cannot take the electricity they would otherwise produce. It is obvious—why do we not use it to produce green hydrogen for storage?

As I said to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I think we will need all the technologies, in all sizes and colours, to succeed. I do not think it is

[Hilary Benn]

the Government's job to pick one or another. The Government's job is to encourage them all. Where I think the Government have a responsibility is in quickly clarifying how plans to decarbonise home heating in particular places will be pulled together, because with great respect to the new Department, it will not come up with a plan for the city of Leeds and its 800,000 people. The sooner it is clear how the local authority, working with Ofgem, the energy companies and others, will decide what are the appropriate technologies to make the transition, and in which places, the better.

My final point is on the important question of who will pay for this change. My right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) made this point in his excellent speech. We cannot have a transition to net zero in which some people end up having to pay, or being asked to pay, huge costs. We all have constituents who can barely pay their gas bill at the moment, and we cannot ask them to pay for the cost of a heat pump, even with one of the Government's 90,000 grants. Those grants will not convert 23 million homes. Frankly, we are way off the pace when it comes to home heating. That means that when a gas boiler dies, the homeowner, social landlord or landlord will put in another gas boiler because it is currently cheaper than a heat pump.

We have to get to net zero in a way that is fair to people, wherever they live and whatever they do. We cannot lumber them with costs that they simply cannot afford. If we seek to do that, those 23 million homes simply will not be converted. That is why, in this Bill and in many other ways, we need more clarity and more speed. When the Bill completes its passage through this House, I hope it will emerge even better equipped, with all the tools we need to do the whole job.

7.29 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). I agree with a lot of what he said, particularly his focus on affordability for the people we represent in this House. I will make sure that my remarks address that point.

The first thing we must remember is that we are all on the same side on this Bill; there is huge cross-party support for what we are trying to do. More precisely, we know that for a cleaner, more renewable, cheaper energy system—cheaper for the people we represent—we need to electrify as much as we can and produce that electricity with as much green energy as possible. That includes nuclear power, in order to make sure we have that baseload in place.

I want to talk a little about cost, because until the right hon. Gentleman's speech, too much of this debate did not address the fact that unless our constituents can pay their bills and businesses can be run affordably, not only do we not have a thriving economy, but we do not have a thriving society. We know what we need to do over the long term to reduce those costs, but we are in a transition, and I will repeat some of the points I made in intervention on the shadow Secretary of State, particularly in relation to gas.

We all support moving to a net zero future, but in the transition to that point we are going to need to expand our gas storage and oil refining capacity in this country.

The Bill needs to do even more than it already does in that regard. I say that not because I want to burn fossil fuels, but because in the transition to get to the place that we know we need to get to—we can argue about how best we achieve that—if our constituents see their bills going through the roof, the support for the net zero agenda will plummet. So I am concerned about making sure that, as we go through this transition, we keep bills down for our constituents while making the necessary investments for the longer term.

Other Members have mentioned the need to invest in our grid. I believe it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) who said that it is ridiculous if we are taking over a decade to plug in new renewable energy into our grid system. I would like more clarity from the Minister and the Government on how, practically, the measures in the Bill will increase the investment in the grid and the speed with which that will happen, because we do not have forever to wait. All of us will hear examples from our constituencies or elsewhere of that huge delay, and all of our strategies and policies do not mean anything unless we can get them plugged into the grid. That requires real urgency and I look forward to the Government explaining more in that regard.

I wish to make two further points, the first of which is on energy performance certificate standards. This is a small thing on some level but it really matters, because for anyone who owns a home, wants to do the right thing, and can afford to make the investments to make their home more energy-efficient, while reducing the cost of their bills—and why should they not invest to do that?—the EPC we currently have is not fit for purpose, as we all know. I would like more clarity on how we are going to improve it; whether an updated EPC will be focused on the environmental aspect or the bills aspect, or both; and how it will come about. Unless we can do that, businesses, individuals and communities across the country will not know what they need to do, or the investments they need to make and when, to reduce the cost of their energy and the cost for our climate.

The final point I wish to make is about ISOP. I do not want to bore the House, but the detail on that is important and I intervened on the Secretary of State about it. Clause 123(1) explains that ISOP must “have regard” to the strategic policy statement issued by the Government, but subsection (2) then says, “If it can't achieve a policy aim, it should explain why and how.” We need to beef that up. We need to explain more precisely that when the strategic policy statement is made by the Government, ISOP will be a delivery mechanism, nothing more. This is not the intention of the Government or of anybody in this House, but I fear that unless we can make that clearer, Ofgem will perhaps be doing one thing, ISOP will be thinking it is doing something slightly different, and the Government's strategic intention will be something different again. We should examine that in Committee.

I should have drawn the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as chair of the Regulatory Reform Group, in that regard. Overall, I support this good Bill and I am glad it has cross-party support.

7.35 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I welcome the Bill, but I must say that I am extremely disappointed by the Government's paltry efforts on energy to date. It is

now a year since the horrific invasion of Ukraine by President Putin, which should have been a brutal wake-up call. Not only do we need accelerated investment in renewables because of the extreme urgency of tackling the climate emergency and ensuring that we reduce our carbon emissions, but Putin's invasion reminded us of the strategic importance of energy security. We have plentiful natural resources and we can provide ourselves with energy security with wide-ranging investment in renewables. Then we come to the issue of cost, as renewables, particularly onshore wind, are now proving their cost-effectiveness.

So whether it is about tackling the climate crisis, energy security or price, the Government should be making investment in renewables an absolute top priority. Despite the Department's document citing onshore wind as one of the cheapest and easiest forms of electricity generation, they are still being mealy-mouthed about lifting the ban on onshore wind in England. This bill should include a clear lifting of that ban. We know that business needs certainty in order to invest, and the Bill misses the opportunity to give the onshore wind business that certainty.

Now is a crucial time for industry more widely to be investing in the green technologies of the future. Many industries such as steel and manufacturing face huge transition costs to reach net zero, and they will be making unprecedented investments in new methods of production and new production lines. They will be looking very carefully at which countries offer them the best deal on siting their production lines of the future. Not only is it essential that the Government respond to the game-changing US Inflation Reduction Act, and similar moves by the EU—I do not know why they are dragging their feet, as industry is crying out for information and will simply go elsewhere if it does not get it—but they need to address energy costs.

Time and again, not just our energy-intensive industries but swathes of manufacturing cite high energy costs as a massive disincentive to continuing their operations in the UK. This situation is absurd, and it would be laughable if it were not so tragic that we have so much potential for cheap energy and yet we offer industry sky high prices. The Government need to give industry long-term certainty on cheap, competitive energy prices if we are to have any hope of new production lines being sited here and providing the valuable green jobs of the future.

Make no mistake: if we do not get certainty on consistent, cheap energy prices, we will lose vital investment in the new production lines, with massive jobs losses. Our competitor countries have major state-owned companies pushing forward with renewables, but the UK Government shy away from any such idea. Such a company can really accelerate investment in renewables. The Welsh Government are now establishing one such company and a future Labour UK Government would establish a Great British energy company to do likewise.

Of course it is not just industry that is desperate for cheap energy; householders have been staggered by the price rises in energy this winter. Even when they make determined efforts to cut down on the number of units they use, they are still stung by rocketing standing charges, for which they can see no good reason. It seems completely perverse that the price of electricity produced by cheap renewable generation is linked to the price of gas.

That urgently needs reform and, yet again, this Bill is a missed opportunity to tackle the problem. Nor are the Government doing anything to close the windfall tax loophole that allows oil and gas companies to continue to rack up enormous profits while householders struggle in cold and often damp houses.

Of course, that brings me to that other great failure: the Government's failure to invest effectively in home insulation. If that had been actively pursued by the Government in the past, energy bills for millions of householders could have been reduced by now.

It is also high time that the Government resolve the problems of the national grid's lack of capacity with the difficulties and delays in connection. It is vital that we have an effective grid to get energy from where it is generated to the areas of population and industry where it is needed. Not long ago we witnessed the fiasco of electricity generated in Scotland failing to reach consumers in England because of the current lack of grid capacity. But it is not enough to catch up with the present. I know that the Minister for Climate Change in the Welsh Government, Julie James MS, has flagged up the huge quantities of electricity that will be generated by offshore wind in the Celtic sea. She has raised with the UK Government the vital work needed to increase the grid capacity to transmit this energy to where it is needed across the UK. I would be grateful for a categorical assurance from the Minister that increasing grid capacity will be an absolute priority.

Community energy schemes can bring great benefit to local communities, so will the Minister, when he winds up, commit to retaining the amendments to help encourage such community energy schemes. I urge the Government: to retain the amendments made in the other place; to support our amendments to deal with grid delays; to expand home energy efficiency measures; to ban fracking, as indeed we have already done in Wales; and to lift the ban on onshore wind in England, all of which would make for a better Bill.

7.41 pm

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): This is a large and technical Bill that sets in place important frameworks, particularly when it comes to carbon capture and storage and the wider deployment of hydrogen and heat networks. I will address my comments, in the time that I have today, to part 3 of the Bill, particularly the support for low-carbon heating schemes and the opportunity that this provides for doing something creative for the off-gas grid homes in this country. It links to the earlier intervention of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and to a private Member's Bill that I introduced at the beginning of this year.

At the moment, we have 1.7 million homes in this country that are currently off the gas grid, most of which use kerosene at the moment. Under the current Government plan, which is born out of a strategy that dates all the way back to 2017—several Governments ago—the intention is that all those 1.7 million homes would be banned from having a replacement boiler after 2026 and told that, instead, they must have, effectively, either an air source heat pump or a ground source heat pump. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, there is a role for those heat pumps, but they are not for every home. In particular, in rural

[George Eustice]

and especially coastal areas, air source heat pumps can be prone to rusting and decay. It is also the case that they need a lot of insulation to make them work, and, in some older homes, high levels of insulation mean less ventilation, which can lead to problems with damp, mould and all of the health problems that go with that.

Perhaps, more important than anything, the capital cost of these air source or ground source heat pumps for a single property is around four times that of a conventional boiler.

Alec Shelbrooke: My right hon. Friend touches on a point that I was going to raise later. My concern about the banning of gas boilers from 2024 is the impact that that will have on industry and on farming in particular, especially in relation to those costs. Farming is under a lot of pressure at the moment. Does he agree that this is similar to the argument that he is making about households in 2026?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central said, we need a diversity of different technologies because it is essential that we have all the tools in the box to achieve our objectives.

There is also a wider problem with the current Government strategy. Just before we get to 2026, we can envisage plumbers and boiler engineers across the land going out to people and saying, “If I were you, I would get a new boiler now because the drawbridge is about to come up.” That will probably mean that we will have a surge of investment in boilers at just the wrong time. On top of that, there is likely to be a “mend and make do” approach that will stretch for many years. All of this means that the objective of making carbon reductions, and getting not just to net zero but to our objectives under carbon budget 5, gets potentially further away, rather than closer.

The good news is that there is a better way. In recent years, the technology and supply of renewable liquid fuels have developed. If we were to use renewable liquid fuels such as hydrotreated vegetable oil, there is a great opportunity for us to get an 88% reduction in our carbon emissions, but far faster than the current Government strategy. It could get us an 88% reduction by carbon budget 5 simply by having an adaptation of those existing boilers.

A pilot in my own constituency has been testing hydrotreated vegetable oil. Residents who have used it report that it burns more efficiently. Some say that the use of the fuel is around 30% lower than with kerosene. The people at the church hall like it because they need intermittent heat, and they can switch it on without having a heat pump running continuously, wasting all that energy. The staff at the school like it because it works for their Victorian building. There is a huge amount to be said for opening the door to the deployment of these renewable liquid fuels. The Government already recognise this, because the renewable transport fuel obligation, introduced in 2007, creates an incentive scheme to require both importers and refiners of fuel to source some of that from renewable sources, such as hydrotreated vegetable oil. The Bill is an opportunity to extend the architecture of the RTFO, a long-standing scheme, to domestic boilers as well so that we can have that incentive.

I know that some officials in the Department argue that we cannot be certain that hydrotreated vegetable oil comes from renewable sources. I do not accept that. There is a British standard—an accreditation scheme for HVO that comes from renewable sources. It would be very easy for the Government, through regulation, to insist that only British standard-certified HVO would be allowed for this purpose. The officials have also raised questions about the supply of renewable HVO, but we are seeing an exponential rise in supply both from the United States and from the European Union and the potential to develop it in this country as well.

I very much hope that the Government will look favourably on amending the Bill—clause 104 of part 3 of the Bill would be key—preferably with their own amendment to give respite to 1.7 million homes in rural locations. If not, I shall seek, if I have the support of the House, to amend the Bill. My private Member’s Bill attracted huge support not just from Conservative Members, but from Members across the House, and the Government should consider it.

7.47 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): It is a pleasure to speak on Second Reading and to follow the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). Energy policy has been at the forefront of political debate in the UK for many years as policymakers grapple with the challenges that humankind faces with climate change. However, the war in Ukraine and the subsequent huge increases in energy prices over the past year have brought an immediacy to the debate not only from an environmental point of view, but from a social policy point of view. There is general political consensus around the need to decarbonise the UK’s energy system and to vastly increase domestic clean energy generation. There are, of course, differences around the speed of the transition and what technologies to prioritise.

Many consider the Bill to be too timid in its approach, believing that the UK Government should be prioritising renewables over nuclear and using the Bill to make a meaningful push on home energy efficiency. I shall be supporting new clauses 272 and 273 inserted in the other place promoting local electricity production as the Bill proceeds through its stages in this House.

From a Welsh perspective, I would normally use a debate such as this to ask why a country such as mine, which is a net exporter of electricity, a superpower in terms of the percentage of electricity production generated for export—it produces twice our domestic requirements—should suffer from appallingly high levels of household fuel poverty. The latest Welsh Government estimates that I have been able to find puts the figure at 45% of all Welsh households. However, instead of making broader political points in this debate, I want to concentrate on two local issues which I have been dealing with on a constituency basis. One unmistakable fact facing us on our decarbonising journey is that there will be a requirement to increase electricity transmission and distribution infrastructure capacity significantly. Whether that is infrastructure to transmit electricity from generation sites to the National Grid or infrastructure to distribute electricity to homes to meet the demands of domestic heating and charging the electric vehicles of the future, the impact will be felt acutely in rural areas.

In my own constituency earlier this year, Green GEN Cymru, part of the Bute Energy group, published proposals for a new 132,000-volt double circuit overhead line, supported on steel pylons between the substation on the yet-to-be-approved Nant Mithil Energy Park in the Radnor Forest area in Powys and a new substation to be generated by National Grid on the existing 400,000-volt transmission line near Llandyfaelog at the southern end of my constituency.

We are talking about 60 miles of 27-metre-high pylons from near the English border in mid-Wales through some of the most beautiful scenic landscapes in Wales. Considering that the length of Wales, as you well know, Mr Deputy Speaker, is 130 miles, the scale of the project from a Welsh perspective is clear to all. The line will run right through the heart of the Carmarthen East and Dinefwr constituency, following the route of the majestic Tywi valley.

Carmarthenshire is branded as the garden of Wales and the Tywi valley is its centrepiece. We are blessed in Wales with some of the most incredibly beautiful places in the British Isles and beyond. The Tywi valley is one such area and is designated a special area of conservation. Such is its scenic beauty that the UK Government have supported a levelling-up bid by Carmarthenshire County Council to develop a cycling path between Carmarthen and Llandeilo along a disused railway, which I hope one day will be extended to the top of the valley in Llandovery.

The Tywi valley is home to some of Wales's most important historical sites: Llandovery, Dinefwr, Dryslwyn, and Carreg Cennen castles, the iron age fort at Gam Goch, Paxton's Tower, the National Botanic Garden of Wales, Aberglasney Gardens and Gelli Aur and Dinefwr mansions. Beth Davies from Llanwrda writes of the Tywi area:

"It captures the soul the heart and the mind, the beautiful valley that's one of a kind."

If the current route continues to be favoured, then it appears to me that undergrounding is the only option that will be supported by the communities of the Tywi valley. Other countries are adopting that approach. In Denmark, all existing 150,000 and 132,000-volt overhead cables are to be undergrounded by 2040. In the United States, I am given to understand that they are encouraging the undergrounding of new electricity infrastructure along existing transport routes such as railways. Germany approved plans in 2015 to underground 1,000 km of high-voltage cables in response to public opposition to new overhead cables.

To achieve its ambitions, Green GEN Cymru has applied to Ofgem for a licence as an independent distribution network operator. It would be very helpful if, when Ofgem considers that application, it takes into account the views of the local community before we move to the planning stage. In relation to this particular project, planning powers are devolved to the Welsh Government. However, Ministers will be aware that the current battle in the Tywi valley will be replicated across the whole UK.

Before I close, I want to touch on changes to the boiler upgrade scheme that have had an impact on a company in my constituency. In February, Ofgem summarily removed certain biomass heating systems from their boiler upgrade scheme product eligibility list, leaving businesses that specialise in the supply and installation of renewable heating systems in rural areas in a very

exposed position, unable to fulfil orders. Following concerns expressed by the industry and, I would like to think, my early-day motion, some of the products were reinstated—but not the Klover Smart 120 and Smart 80, which my constituent believes are the best replacement options for the range-style boilers often found in Welsh rural dwellings. Although that point does not apply directly to the Bill, I would be grateful if the Minister bore it in mind.

7.53 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): In the short time I have, I will focus my comments on vehicle propulsion, but first I draw on the comments from my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) and the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) that the cost we pass on to the public must be minimised. I hope the Minister will take note of the points about the hydrogen levy before Committee stage. It is misguided and it is in the wrong place. We have to take the public with us on this—we cannot keep adding to people's bills to try to make things work. I hope the Minister will take that point away.

Much has been said about energy security and trying to get away from the situations we face with Russian gas, fossil fuels and so on, but I am concerned that we are moving into another area of energy dependence on another autocracy or dictatorship, China. I raised this point with the Secretary of State earlier, and he focused on uranium, but that was not what I was getting at. China has sucked up the processing of many of the materials in the world that are needed to make renewable energy. According to statistics put forward by Morgan Stanley, China refines 59% of the world's lithium, 80% of the cobalt, 69% of nickel sulphate, 95% of magnesium, 100% of spherical graphite, 69% of synthetic graphite, as well as producing 70% of battery cells, 78% of cathodes and 91% of anodes.

To build on that, the Mercator Institute for China Studies, a German think-tank, says about nickel processing in Indonesia:

"In 2014, Indonesia banned the export of unprocessed nickel, prompting a wave of Chinese investments seeking to secure battery materials. With China's help, Indonesia plans to boost its share of global nickel production from 28 to 60 percent... Already several multi-billion USD nickel-focused industrial parks are sponsored by Chinese companies."

On cobalt in the Democratic Republic of Congo, MERICS states:

"The DRC is home to over half of the world's cobalt reserves and was responsible for two-thirds of mined output production in 2020. Chinese companies control up to 70 percent of the Congolese mining portfolio, but mining contracts...are under review by the DRC."

MERICS also comments on the Lithium Triangle,

"a region around the borders of Argentina, Bolivia and Chile. It is thought to hold around half of the world's lithium reserves. Between September and November 2021 alone, four separate Chinese companies announced acquisitions cumulatively worth USD 1.2 billion."

That is the reality we live in today. A parallel can easily be drawn to what a hostage to fortune it could be if an autocracy or dictatorship took a direction we were not happy with. We have seen that happen in terms of fossil fuels with Russia.

[Alec Shelbrooke]

So what do we do about it? The Bill makes some progress here, but I think we must come up with another technology that can work alongside electric vehicles. I want to draw attention to the fact that we do not put enough energy into hydrogen combustion. There is a lot of research going on. I am a big motorsport fan and I have been taking the magazine “Autosport” for over 30 years, so I will quote from its engineering supplement on 16 March 2023:

“‘People think hydrogen infrastructure is complicated and it doesn’t have to be if you look at it in stages,’ reckons Cosworth CEO Hal Reisinger, his company one of many including ORECA to have invested in hydrogen test cells. ‘Internal combustion engines can be very easily converted to hydrogen; put different injectors in, remap the ECU and there’s this entire infrastructure of engines that are available. It’s much easier to establish a hydrogen infrastructure than an electric infrastructure.’”

There are indeed great demands coming if we want to achieve the target number of electric vehicles. By the Government’s own estimate, the global demand for electric vehicle battery materials is projected to increase by between six and 13 times by 2040 under stated policy. World copper production has to double to be able to meet production policy, yet there was a report only last week that not enough new mines are being exploited to reach the current copper production level.

Hydrogen combustion does have issues. The compression of the hydrogen has to be 700 bar. There are questions about how we manufacture and store it. If we get the technology wrong, it produces dangerous levels of nitrogen oxide. That will have to be addressed, and so will the weight.

However, my argument is that there is an alternative that technically can work. I know that other companies, including JCB, have done a lot of research into it. I urge the Minister, when we are looking at development budgets, to start to put some hydrogen combustion development in there. We could refocus the automotive transformation fund, which perhaps has been too focused on electric vehicles and needs to look at other areas. There is a geopolitical and geostrategic effect that is occurring after some of these policies have been written, and we must be able to adapt and move along.

Every hon. Member in this Chamber wants to move towards a net zero society, but if we do not do so sustainably, taking the public with us, we will find that harder and harder to do, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth outlined with regard to the buying of gas boilers making the situation worse. Recognising that the supply of the rare earth elements that are needed may provide hostages to fortune with countries such as China, I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to look into how the Government can help companies to research and develop hydrogen combustion.

7.59 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke). Like many across the Chamber, particularly those on the Labour side, I rise to call for a more robust response to the climate emergency. My definition of “emergency”—and, I am pretty confident, that of most people in the Chamber—is to do with getting a move on and doing things at pace. Of course,

it has been some considerable time since Parliament declared a climate emergency, yet the Government’s track record has been woeful at times.

Having said that, like others, I welcome the Bill’s Second Reading. Like the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), and other Labour Members, I would like to see more of a focus on clean energy. Our ambition is to power up the UK with clean energy by 2030. That will mean an end to the ban on onshore wind, an effective ban on fracking, turbocharging solar, and connecting to the grid some of the great projects up and down the country, including, in my patch, tidal energy from the River Mersey and its estuary.

The focus of my speech will be the proposals for a hydrogen levy, adding to already astronomically expensive bills for consumers not just in my constituency but up and down Britain. That is the wrong solution at the wrong time. Such a levy would be yet another subsidy for the fossil fuel industry for a technology that will not work for domestic use. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) will expand on that by raising the trial in Whitby. I can assure the Minister that that trial is not going very well at all. My hon. Friend will expand on the reality of that.

My constituency and the surrounding areas have energy-intensive industries such as Ineos-Inovyn; Stanlow, which is just up the road; and Tata Chemicals. Hydrogen can provide a solution in terms of decarbonising at speed—I understand that, and it is recognised in the Bill—but I am fundamentally opposed to hydrogen for use in domestic premises. The evidence is crystal clear. My opposition is based not on emotion but on scientific evidence. A major peer review of 32 independent scientific studies found that none of the pilots and research supported widespread use of hydrogen for domestic heating. Indeed, MCS, a company based in Daresbury, has expressed evidence-based concern as well. The Select Committee concluded the same. The use of hydrogen for domestic use would mean 70% to 80% more on consumer bills, if we look at current gas-based consumer bills, and could result in 45% more gas importation. We should surely be moving away from that. The focus must undoubtedly be on investment in heat pumps—air and ground—for domestic use. That would provide energy at less than half the cost of the current market.

I call on all parliamentarians to make an informed choice, based on evidence, on the domestic use of hydrogen, and to support the amendments to remove it from the Bill.

8.4 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), but I have a different view from his. It is worth remembering that this country has reduced its carbon emissions very substantially over the last decade—twice as fast, in fact, as the European Union. It is worth remembering that when we say that we are not making progress. There is an awful lot to do, as we have heard, and we cannot rule out any options, so legislating against a particular technology is not where the Government should be. We have to be technology-neutral. Frankly, we will need all options if we are to get to net zero; we cannot simply rule out one or the other.

We will have houses heated in one way and others in another way; we in this House cannot simply take the decision to blanket refuse a particular approach.

There are things that we should encourage. Frankly, I cannot see why we do not put in place robust rules on building solar into every new building—particularly every new commercial building. We can do things that do not close options but take us a step down the road. The Government should be taking such measures, but they probably fall into the pot of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities rather than that of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.

I will focus in particular on an area of energy that has been touched upon only briefly in an intervention: the whole issue of aviation fuel. If we are to achieve net zero, we need an aviation industry that also moves rapidly towards net zero, and that is not an easy task. It is a particularly difficult task for the aviation sector because the technology is not yet there to make significant progress in that direction. But it is getting there, and we have to do what we can to encourage it, because the aviation sector is hugely important to this country. Both sides of the House have agreed in the past that its importance needs to be supported and protected. That was noted in particular when we voted on the expansion of Heathrow airport: the vast majority of Members supported the industry on that night. We have to continue doing so while accepting that the industry has to transform itself. It cannot simply stand outside the plans to deliver net zero; it has to change.

The industry will change—insofar as we can currently see the technological routes—in two different ways. First, hydrogen will play an important part in the future of the aviation industry. The first very short-haul 19-seater passenger planes with hydrogen technology powering them are already being tested, and that is a positive step forward. There will be some electrification of aircraft, but only at the smallest end of the scale. Given the way in which technology is developing, it is realistic to assume that, by the middle of the 2030s, we will start seeing short-haul passenger aircraft—the A320s and A319s, or their equivalents and successors—powered by hydrogen. However, there is very little prospect any time soon of long-haul aircraft being powered by hydrogen or electricity. We will not abandon travel around the world. That would be disastrous, not just economically but for a whole raft of reasons. If we took away long-haul aviation, serious damage would be done to conservation efforts around the world, for example.

We will need what is called sustainable aviation fuel. The benefit of that fuel is that it can, to a significant degree, be produced from waste. By waste, I do not just mean more biowaste; I actually mean municipal waste. Some of the early projects to create sustainable aviation fuel have used municipal waste—black binbag waste from people's homes. That is a huge opportunity, but we have to support the development of that industry. We live in a world that is increasingly shaped by what is happening in North America, including the United States' Inflation Reduction Act—a slightly strangely named piece of legislation if ever there was one—and what will now happen in the European Union as a result. I am a strong free marketeer, but we cannot ignore other countries taking a different path and simply allow important industries, such as the one that will emerge to produce sustainable aviation fuel, to go elsewhere.

We will have that fuel anyway. The airlines will buy it and use it, and they will fly to other countries, which will have sustainable aviation fuel to put in the jets. We will have to do the same.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech focusing on exactly the right issue. As a former aviation Minister and chair of the all-party parliamentary group on aviation, I know that the aviation industry sees this as vital for its future. He touched on the point that, if we do not make SAF, we will still use it and it will be made elsewhere. Will he touch on the economic opportunities for this country, and will we simply lose them if we do not put into that technology now?

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. He is an experienced former aviation Minister and has huge knowledge of this area—he is absolutely right.

This industry is going to happen. Indeed, it is already developing in fledgling form around the world. It will certainly happen in the United States, where huge effort has been put into making it a reality. We have to have that industry here. There is no point seeing yet another industry developing around the world in this new technology and standing to one side and saying, “Well, other people can do it—we will bring it in by tanker.” That would be a betrayal of our aviation industry and a betrayal of the industrial base of this country, and we must not let that happen.

What do we need to do? We need to get this technology—this industry—up and running in the UK with something we have done in a variety of areas. We need a contracts for difference scheme. It is an attainable option, and has been done by Government before. I very much hope that the Government—this Department in partnership with the Department for Transport and the Treasury—will take that road. However, we cannot wait very long. It has to happen soon, and we have to put down a marker that says that we are going in that direction. We need to start doing the work on what a detailed scheme would look like.

The aviation industry is desperate for that to happen. The Minister knows, as do other Departments that have been looking at this—the Department for Transport has been doing so, as has the Treasury—that it does not have to be done at the expense of hydrogen. There are people who say that SAF does not really matter because we are going to do hydrogen, but we need both. We need short-haul planes powered by hydrogen and we need long-haul planes powered by SAF. That is the future of aviation.

I hope that the Minister will be able to give us comfort today, and as the Bill proceeds through the House, that the Government as a whole will deliver that. However, I would put down a marker. If by Report stage we do not have some clear signposts that the Government are going in that direction, I will table an amendment that will mandate them to introduce a contracts for difference scheme in the next 12 months, and I will seek the consent of the House for that. I know that Conservative Members who support my concerns will support such an amendment.

I am lobbying this at the Minister, saying that we need to get on with it, but may I ask him, over the next few weeks, as the Bill goes into Committee, and as he

[Chris Grayling]

discusses with ministerial colleagues the way forward for the Bill, to seek to make a firm commitment to a contracts for difference scheme for SAF so that we can deliver for this country an industry that will be vital for the future?

8.12 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I appreciate that hon. Members want to demonstrate cross-party support for net zero. Yes, by and large, we agree about decarbonisation, but sadly we do not agree about the speed of that process. The UK has a responsibility to go much further and faster than most other countries because we are disproportionately responsible for the cumulative emissions that are already in the atmosphere.

We were the first country into the industrial revolution—the fossil-fuel industrial revolution—and we need to be the first country out of it. I have not heard enough urgency from Members on either side of the House about that this evening. Winning slowly on this issue is the same as losing. The bottom line is that there can be no new exploration for fossil fuels if we are serious about doing our fair share to avoid the worst of the climate crisis. The report by the United Nations environment programme on the production gap states clearly that “governments still plan to produce more than double the amount of fossil fuels in 2030 than will be consistent with limiting global warming to 1.5°”.

Ministers often seek to justify new oil and gas developments in the North sea in the name of energy security, but that is profoundly misleading. The majority of fossil-fuel projects in the pipeline are for oil, not gas, which will do nothing to boost energy security, given that we currently export at least 80% of the oil we extract because it is not even the type that is used in UK refineries.

That defence also exposes a paucity of imagination and a failure to grasp what true energy security looks like. True energy security is about abundant and cheap renewables. It is about a flexible energy grid. It is about properly insulated homes and it is about better storage. I urge Ministers to grasp this opportunity genuinely to transform the future of our energy system so that it works for people and planet.

What is most striking about the Bill is its failure to wean us off fossil fuels—the very thing that is choking our planet and driving high energy prices. I endorse the Lords amendment on the prohibition of new coalmines. It was simple in its drafting but vital in its importance. The Minister will no doubt note that it does not only cover coal for energy; it covers coal in its entirety, extending its reach to the newly approved Whitehaven coalmine—and so it should, because that stranded-asset coalmine would produce vast amounts of climate emissions. It is neither wanted nor needed by the UK steel industry, and it is not wanted in Europe, which is rapidly moving towards green steel. I urge the Government to retain the amendment to the Bill.

We need to go much further than that, and reduce our wider reliance on all fossil fuels, not just coal. As a first step, that must involve a review of the outdated and dangerous duty to maximise the economic recovery of petroleum from the North sea. It is beyond imagination that at a time of climate crisis we still have on the statute book an obligation to maximise the economic recovery

of oil and gas. We need to move away from that. We also need to move away from the extraordinary position on the so-called windfall tax.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I am listening to the hon. Lady's speech with great interest, and want to pick up on one part of it. On moving away from maximising economic recovery, does she agree that we are already less than 50% dependent on our own domestic sources of oil and gas? Does she agree with the Climate Change Committee's assessment that our dependence on oil and gas will decline more slowly than our ability to replace it, so we will become more dependent on imports? What she has recommended will not stop our use of oil and gas—it will just make us more dependent on imports.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I totally disagree. The option before us is not to use home-grown fossil fuels versus imported fossil fuels. The choice—[*Interruption.*] No, it is not. The choice before us is whether we continue to depend on fossil fuels or whether we shift to a green transition much faster. I appreciate why that is difficult for him to understand. Having listened to the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), who spoke about the future of aviation, I was struck by the fact that nowhere in his speech was there anything about demand management. People are looking for technical fixes the whole time without recognising that the bottom line is that there are climate limits to what we can do.

David Duguid: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Lucas: No, I will not, I am sorry. Some climate limits mean that we need to change behaviour as well as depending on new technologies.

I was about to talk about the windfall tax and the gaping hole that allows corporations to claim £91.40 for every £100 invested if—perversity of perversities—they reinvest that money in yet more oil. This comes at a total cost to the taxpayer of nearly £11 billion—enough to give an inflation-matching pay rise to every NHS worker and teacher for a year. Instead, the North Sea Transition Authority should have a duty to help meet the UK's climate commitments and deliver a managed and orderly phase-down of UK petroleum. This, of course, must come with a requirement to support a just transition for oil and gas workers and communities—a clear pathway coupled with financial support to enable them to move into green jobs. Crucially, we need to see no new licences, which means that Ministers must give up any idea of giving a green light to projects such as Rosebank, the UK's largest undeveloped oil field, which would produce more emissions than 28 low-income countries combined. That would be the definition of recklessness.

The Energy Bill aims to deliver a “cleaner, more affordable and more secure energy system”, which is a worthy aim. I very much hope the Government listen to hon. Members on both sides of the House who have talked about introducing a new duty on Ofgem to abide by net zero requirements. The amendment on that tabled in the other place received cross-party support, and I cannot see why the Government would not want to make sure that we retain that.

The Government have repeatedly said that they wish to see more community energy generation, but they objected to amendments on that in the Lords on the grounds that they constituted a subsidy. That is not the case. Rather, those amendments would give community energy schemes fair access to the market. If the Government are serious about community energy, they have to find a way to bring community energy to market, precisely by the kind of mechanism—a fixing of price—that we already use with contracts for difference. I urge the Government to accept retain the amendments on community energy, or offer a workable alternative.

In the very short time I have left, I would love to say more about energy efficiency and the need to insulate our homes properly. The cheapest energy is the energy that we do not need to use in the first place, and I despair of the fact that the Government have still failed to come up with the community-led, local authority-led, street-by-street home insulation programme that would achieve proper progress on this.

In the very few moments that are left I want to say a few words about nuclear. Government support for this nuclear white elephant, formalised by the Bill, is beyond ludicrous. We have already discussed the cost of nuclear—it is massively expensive and going up in price—but it is also massively slow. The Government have accepted the goal of decarbonising the UK's power system by 2035. Given that it will take eight to 10 years to produce new nuclear, it will make absolutely no difference to that decarbonisation target. It is too expensive, too slow and it needs to come out of the Bill.

8.19 pm

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I rise to support the Bill. I was hoping to hear from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) a few more of the positive things that this Government have achieved, which are important to acknowledge, so that people can see that progress has been made, not least the fact that half of all our electricity is now generated from renewable energy sources—something we could be forgiven for missing in her speech.

I do not want to repeat what has been said in the debate, much of which I agree with, but I want to bring up two particular issues that I hope the Minister will take note of: fusion power and lithium-ion storage facilities. He will not be surprised by that. They both illustrate the ingenuity of our scientists and the fact that, as our understanding of new energy sources develops, the Government's response to those energy sources needs to develop and those technologies need different regulation.

Let us take fusion technology first. Last year I visited General Fusion in Vancouver, British Columbia, an incredible Canadian firm working with the Culham Science Centre in Oxfordshire, which will be the home to the firm's fusion testbed. We should be very proud of that. The Bill fundamentally changes the way in which fusion technology is regulated in the UK, because we understand it much more now. The current regulatory regime characterises fusion in the same way as nuclear, which is just plain wrong. To better recognise the fusion process, the Government are rightly introducing measures in clause 110 to remove fusion from nuclear site licensing requirements. That is very welcome. It is more accurate.

It provides confidence to investors, the industry and the public alike, and it is an example of how the Government are recognising the need for regulatory changes.

That is in contrast with the issues around lithium-ion battery storage facilities, which are covered in clause 168—the Minister knows where I am going next. For the first time, the Bill recognises that electricity storage is separate from electricity generation. It is a new sector. In the past, power stations were designed to match consumer demand. With around half of our electricity now generated by wind, it is essential to store electricity to help out when the wind is not blowing, to put it plainly. Over 90% of our UK electricity storage capacity is in lithium-ion batteries, and while recognising energy storage, the Bill is silent on issues that are fundamental to the future of this sector, including fire safety.

Alec Shelbrooke: Does my right hon. Friend agree that a lot more research needs to be done on where these storage facilities are based? Thermal runaway can cause fires that take several days to put out, and some of the chemicals used to extinguish those fires are toxic. There are planning applications coming forward for facilities that are far too close to people's homes.

Dame Maria Miller: My right hon. Friend is right that there are hundreds of applications coming forward in around 350 constituencies, and I urge Members to check whether any such applications have been made in their patch.

I would like to draw on a slightly different issue, which is that if we do not have the right regulation for lithium-ion battery storage, we will not attract investment into this area in the future, because we will not be encouraging those lithium-ion battery storage facilities to be designed in a way that mitigates the risks we know exist. At the moment, the planning application process takes no account of the proven fire risks that my right hon. Friend just referred to with lithium-ion battery storage plants. Thermal runaway is a chemical reaction caused by overcharging or a design fault, and these fires cannot just be put out; they can only be stopped by cooling with large amounts of water over several days, which creates toxic fumes and polluted water runoff. Even though the use of batteries for this purpose is relatively new and there are currently only 35 such facilities in action, we have already had one major fire in Merseyside in 2019 that took 59 hours to put out.

This new technology is being rolled out at lightning speed, with 473 new sites under way, yet there is still no planning guidance for local authorities, no requirement to obtain an environmental permit from the Environment Agency and no requirement for the fire service to be consulted over designs or locations. The Bill must directly address that gap in regulation. Since I raised the problem with Ministers in July last year, and following a roundtable with five Departments in March, there now appears to be agreement that regulatory change needs to be considered. This Bill is exactly where it needs to be addressed, and I am happy to table amendments to that effect if the Government are not able to do so themselves.

In an open letter to all Hampshire council leaders, Neil Odin, who is the fire chief of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Fire and Rescue Service, stated that these batteries

“can malfunction and lead to an intense fire, and when they do, pose a significant harm to the environment”.

[*Dame Maria Miller*]

That is coming from the head of one of the largest fire authorities in the country. I believe they also pose a significant risk to people, including firefighters, and I hope that in advance of Report the Minister will work with me to amend the Bill, so that lithium-ion battery storage can continue to play a hugely important role in realising the Government's ambitions but with the right regulatory governance in place, not only to ensure the safety of our residents but to encourage insurance companies and those who want to run these facilities to do so in the future.

8.26 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I would like to talk a little bit about the hydrogen village trials and the experience of the process in Whitby, because it has told me—and, indeed, this debate has highlighted—that it is not at all clear that we have the answers yet to how to reach net zero in home heating. Without that certainty, we do not have a hope of persuading people that the disruption, inconvenience and expense they will face is a sacrifice worth making to possibly at some point in the future reach net zero. I say that knowing that the vast majority of my constituents are persuaded of the urgent need to tackle climate change, as am I.

Most importantly, these changes can only be done with people, not to them. That message does not appear to have been understood by those promoting the hydrogen village. Once consultation started, local residents came to me time and again, having been left with the clear impression that they would be forced to switch to a hydrogen supply whether they wanted to or not. People were told that the trial was happening and they had better get used to it—so much for taking people with us.

We have thankfully moved to a point where people now have a choice between staying on natural gas and moving to hydrogen for the duration of the trial. That was what I thought the original proposal was going to be—it is certainly what it should have been—but this last-minute revision to the proposals is too late in the day, as many have already made up their minds. Given that only a few months ago I was being told that allowing people to stay on natural gas was not possible because

“we are aiming to emulate a rollout scenario in which natural gas heating solutions are no longer an option”,

I am more than a little cynical about the reasons for this late change of heart.

Although it is a positive that we have finally reached the point that we should have been at from the outset—that those taking part in the trial will have a genuinely free choice about whether they do so—because of everything we have been through, the take-up of hydrogen is likely to be small, and certainly not be the mass roll-out that was originally planned. As such, the question for the Government is whether all the effort and expense that will go into the trial will be worth it, given the likely low take-up.

We may have already learned the most important lesson, which is that if we do want to decarbonise the domestic energy market, technological change cannot simply be done to people. The Government need to decide which technologies they want to prioritise and then take a lead in persuading people that the choice

being made is the right one, both for the individual and for the planet. However, when that choice is made, I ask them to please make sure that they have as many answers to the questions as possible, because my constituents know that, at the moment, the Health and Safety Executive has not signed off the use of hydrogen in the trials. They know that the energy needed to create green hydrogen is currently far greater than that which would be needed for other renewable sources. They know that it will cost them more, and that up until now 37 independent studies have shown that hydrogen is unlikely to play a significant role in home heating.

Even if we do get to a point where the safety and cost concerns are addressed, every week that passes sees another report or study pouring further doubt on the claims that hydrogen is part of the future for domestic heating. When my constituents see those reports, they are bound to ask why they are being put through this, and to ask the question I put to the Minister: if he is persuaded by the increasing number of studies—if he thinks that hydrogen in the home is unlikely to play a part in the future mix—why does he not just call a halt to these trials now? However, if he thinks that the time and money being expended is worth it, I ask him to please say so and be explicit about why the trials are proceeding and what the benefits are, as the majority of my residents have made up their minds that the risks far outweigh any potential benefits.

On the subject of residents' views, I am pleased that the local council has agreed to my suggestion that a ballot of residents take place, so that there is a genuinely independent measure of public support for the trial. I am pleased that the Government have previously indicated that they will expect to see strong public support as a condition of the trial; I would be even more pleased if that were said explicitly in the Bill.

Returning to the importance of taking people with us, I find the clause in the Bill that gives gas transporters the right to forcibly enter properties in order to conduct the trial deeply concerning and completely against the spirit of what those trials should be about. As it stands, the clause offers sweeping powers for gas network operators to go into properties. It would be welcomed, both by myself and by my constituents, if the Minister could commit that those powers would only be used in an emergency and as a last resort, and say whether anything can be done to amend the Bill to make it clear that that is the case. I do not believe for a minute that the Minister thinks it would be a good idea to send engineers into someone's home to forcibly change their supply to hydrogen just for the purposes of the trial, so it would be good if the legislation reflected that.

In conclusion, hydrogen certainly has a role in industry. It probably has a role in transport too, but in the home that role seems far less certain. The uncomfortable reality is that we have yet to find the panacea for decarbonising home heating. Moving to unproven, uncertain technologies is not going to wash with the public, especially when they are being asked to make a significant sacrifice, and always when they are not going to be given any choice. Given the money that has been spent so far on persuading people of the merits of hydrogen in the home, the fact that I and the majority of my constituents are now more sceptical about it, not less, should give everyone food for thought about whether this whole exercise is really just a case of selling ice to Eskimos, and whether

it needs to continue at all. I believe that Cadent has been given more than enough opportunity to demonstrate that these trials could be a good thing, but it has failed to take that opportunity. That is probably because, at the end of the day, this experiment just does not stack up, and the idea that my constituents would end up paying for it through a hydrogen levy just adds insult to injury.

8.32 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): In the short time available, I want to focus on an aspect of the Bill that has not yet been discussed in this debate: the new regulations on district heat networks. I am very grateful that the Government have listened to concerns—not just from me, but from colleagues across the House who have district heat networks in their constituencies—about just how damaging those networks' unregulated nature can be. That can be seen on the New Mill Quarter estate in my constituency, which I have raised a number of times in this place. I will outline briefly why this new regulation is so needed and why it is welcome, but also where I would like the Government to look into potentially going further.

To give a quick bit of context, the New Mill Quarter estate in Hackbridge is heated by a series of insulated pipes that stretch from the incinerator in the north of the constituency across redeveloped farmland to heat those homes, but it has been bedevilled by problems. It is not even online yet: it is currently being powered by a back-up gas boiler system, and it has suffered a number of blackouts and two call-outs from the London Fire Brigade and, practically, seems to have had a huge failure. I do not have time to go into that subject now, but I draw Members' attention to some of my other contributions in the House on it.

Blackouts are probably the No. 1 reason why regulation is needed. The reliability of district heat networks is a massive problem, and not just in New Mill Quarter in Hackbridge; it has happened across other estates in London, such as Oval Quarter in Lambeth, New Festival Quarter in Tower Hamlets and multiple estates in Southwark—no guessing which party runs those local authorities.

Customer satisfaction is lower for customers on district heat networks, rather than gas boilers. A 2017 survey conducted by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy found that district heat network customers were much less satisfied with their service than those with other forms of energy.

Bills are another big issue. The cost of living is a massive concern for all our constituents right now, and the No. 1 concern that comes up time and again when I talk to Carshalton and Wallington residents is meeting the cost of their energy bills. We need to empower Ofgem to force the pricing model of district heat networks to be comparable to the market average. That is incredibly important, and I am grateful to the Government for looking at that in detail and taking steps in that direction. The residents of New Mill Quarter are facing energy bills higher than the market average. They are not protected by, for example, the energy price cap, because it is an unregulated piece of heating. I very much welcome the Government's measures, which will provide a lot of reassurance not just to residents of New Mill Quarter, but to others living under a district heat network.

The final thing that I welcome the Government taking action on is simply the monopolistic nature of heat networks. Customers cannot change and go to a new supplier, because a district heat network forces those living within it to use that heat network. They cannot shop around for a better deal and they cannot rely on the market—this is important to me as a free-market Conservative—to drive down prices while driving up reliability. Regulation therefore is so important, and I am grateful that the Government are taking steps in that regard.

One area I would like the Government to look at further is future-proofing district heat networks. Many of them are future-proofed by their very nature, but for those that are heated by incinerators, such as the one in Hackbridge, I can see a glaring problem coming down the line. The Government outlined in their waste minimisation strategy that they want to phase out incineration as a form of dealing with waste. All of us across the House support the reduction and stopping of incineration as a form of dealing with our waste. Incineration is only slightly better than landfill—only very slightly. It is not a net zero-conducive form of waste management, as we rely on creating waste to feed it.

The problem we can see in estates such as New Mill Quarter is that we will have an incinerator that becomes less and less needed as the years go on. We then have two options: either we have to import waste to feed the thing and keep the heating going, which obviously is not conducive to any net zero ambitions; or the thing has to be turned off, and what happens then? That entire estate was new build, built specifically with the infrastructure to deal with the incinerator. I might be long dead by the time it happens, but the problem is coming, and we should not leave it to a future generation to solve. We should look at future-proofing that now.

David Duguid: I am interested in what my hon. Friend is saying about heat networks and wonder whether he might agree with something I have learned just recently. It is a proposal from a stakeholder who deals in renewable energy, including hydrolysis to create hydrogen. That generates a lot of heat, and their suggestion is that we declare heat as a utility in a wider form. Would that help his purposes?

Elliot Colburn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it relates to a point that a number of colleagues have made today: we cannot mandate the use of one technology or a very small number of technologies; we need to have that collective option. I urge the Government to err on the side of caution because, under their own ambitions, district heat networks could account for something like two fifths of the UK's heat provision. Given the problems that have existed in Hackbridge and across multiple estates, and not just in London, I urge the Government not to put all their eggs in one basket by relying on district heat networks as a singular answer. I agree with my hon. Friend. There are plentiful supplies of renewable energy out there. We need to make sure that we are neither mandating nor preventing the use of any one. We should be using all those potentials to reach our net zero ambitions and provide more domestic energy security.

I very much welcome the measures set out in the Bill and urge colleagues to support it. It will certainly have my support tonight.

8.39 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Our biggest task worldwide is to get to net zero. We must transform our entire energy system. The Liberal Democrats welcome many of the Bill's proposals. However, it is simply not ambitious enough. We need bold action now to protect consumers from spiralling costs and to put us on the path to net zero.

The Government continue to protect the oil and gas giants. Typical direct debit customers have seen their annual gas and electricity bills almost double, while oil and gas giants have announced record profits. Last year, Shell forcibly installed prepayment meters in over 4,000 homes while making £32 billion in profit. UK consumers have been among the least protected in Europe. When will this Government put struggling UK citizens first?

The energy price cap is not fit for purpose. The current price cap is set at a high level to incentivise people to switch energy suppliers, but research shows that vulnerable customers who struggle to pay their energy bills are much less likely to switch suppliers. We Liberal Democrats would reform the price cap to protect these customers by bringing in a capped tariff set lower than the existing price cap. I urge the Government to consider this.

The best way to reduce energy bills is to move harder and faster towards renewables. However, a lack of grid capacity is seriously holding back renewable energy projects. Many face delays of up to 15 years. In Wokingham, for example, the Liberal Democrat council has been told that its first ground-mounted solar farm project will only be connected in October 2037, a decade later than originally promised. How can we decarbonise our power system by 2035 when ready-to-go renewable projects cannot get the grid connection they need?

Britain will have to build seven times more transmission lines in the next seven years than it has built in the last 20. This huge task will require a major change in approach by the regulator. Ofgem is not empowered to consider the benefit of long-term investment, as its remit focuses on short-term costs to consumers. This is a major reason behind the lack of grid investment. In the other place, an amendment was agreed to give Ofgem a specific statutory net zero objective. I urge the Government to keep this provision in place.

The Bill, as amended, also now contains a ban on opening new coalmines. Less than two years ago, the Government announced that they were leading an international effort to end the use of coal, yet soon afterwards they gave the greenlight to the Cumbria coalmine, a gateway to allowing more fossil fuels in the UK and flying in the face of our net zero commitments. The Government must ensure that this ban on new coalmines remains part of the Bill if they are to retain a shred of credibility on climate action. Huge changes to people's lives will be required to get to net zero. We must bring people on board, or there is a risk that people will not accept the necessary changes, making our progress to net zero more lengthy, costly and contested.

Community energy provides cheaper, greener power and distributes benefits locally. The community energy sector has the potential to be 20 times bigger by 2030, powering 2.2 million homes and saving 2.5 million tonnes of CO₂ every year. However, community energy projects

currently generate just 0.5% of the UK's electricity. This is because the financial, technical and operational requirements involved in becoming a licensed supplier put initial costs at more than £1 million. The amendments agreed in the other place would rectify this, and they must remain part of the Bill. Ministers have said repeatedly that they want more community energy. Now is the time to show that they mean it.

Some 77% of people say that they would support a new onshore wind farm being built in their area. Our UK communities know that renewables are the solution to our energy crisis. However, this Government continue with their dogmatic opposition to onshore wind and solar. The Bill does not contain provisions to roll out solar power, and the effective ban on onshore wind remains.

Another disappointment is that the Bill does not contain provisions to cut flaring, venting and leakage of methane from gas and oil platforms. Methane is a potent greenhouse gas, with 80 times the warming effect of CO₂. It accounts for 13% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The UK has signed the global pledge to cut methane levels by 30%, and a ban on oil and gas flaring and venting in the North sea would dramatically reduce methane emissions. It is supported by the Environmental Audit Committee and the Government-commissioned independent review of net zero. We must mandate monthly leak detection and repair activities. The North Sea Transition Authority must identify and publish a league table of the best and worst performing companies, so that methane emissions can be publicly monitored. We can reduce methane waste by 72%, but the Bill is currently silent about that and needs amending. We still have much to do to protect consumers and reach net zero. The Bill, although substantially improved in the other place, still does not go far enough. As it passes through this House, we must ensure it does not become a missed opportunity.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call David Duguid.

8.45 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is excellent to see you in the Chair tonight, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me say from the outset that the main message I receive from all parts of the energy sector—the Minister will know how many parts of that sector exist in my constituency—is this: let's get the Bill passed; let's get on with our job that needs to be done. That said, this is a complex Bill. We have heard about some of that complexity tonight, not least the various conflicting priorities that it is the Minister's unenviable task to sort through.

I will not go through every part of the Bill as time will not allow—in fact, time probably will not allow me to go through the topics I wish to try to talk about, so I will get on with them. Oil and gas has been spoken about already, but the “inconvenient truth”, to steal a phrase from former Vice-President Al Gore, is that we are not going to get to 2050, keeping the lights on, homes warm and the economy moving, without oil and gas, albeit at greatly reduced demand. It therefore stands to reason that we will not get to net zero by 2050 without carbon capture, usage and storage, and I want to talk about the Scottish cluster in particular.

Before the energy profits levy was introduced, the oil and gas industry was already paying 40% tax, compared with most businesses paying 19%, which rose to 25% last month. With the EPL, the oil and gas industry is now paying 75% tax on oil and gas profits—not on global profits, but profits made in this country. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, it will pay around £15 billion in financial year 2022-23. That represents a fifth of the UK's corporation tax receipts, from exploration and production alone.

The Climate Change Committee's ambitious net-zero pathway profile predicts that demand for oil and gas will decline at a slower rate than domestic supply. It is hugely important that we are able to access our own domestic supplies to meet that continuing, albeit declining, demand. It is also hugely important, as the Minister knows, that the industry is adequately engaged through the passage of the Bill. Oil and gas companies, and their employees, skills, technology and expertise, stand ready to help the Government and this country not only to deliver our energy security needs, but to invest and drive the energy transition that, as should have been said, is at the centre of the North sea transition deal that was signed between the Government and the oil and gas sector in 2021.

The industry and Governments must continue to work together to make the most of our homegrown industry and supply chain in which, crucially, most of the 200,000 oil and gas jobs in the UK exist. With that in mind, I reinforce calls that I know the Minister has already heard from the industry through the trade body Offshore Energies UK. In the immediate term, we need to introduce a clear mechanism, or announce what such a mechanism will be, by which a trigger or a floor price ensures that the 75% tax rate is applied only to company profits that are earned from the excessively high market price environment. In the medium to long term, we must legislate for an effective decarbonisation investment allowance that allows for decarbonisation expenditure, which is essential to delivering the UK's net-zero ambitions and North sea transition deal emission targets. There are longer-term requests, of which I am sure the Minister is aware.

A huge part of our decarbonisation effort is this Government's strategy to deliver up to 30 megatonnes of carbon capture and storage by 2030. I welcome the Chancellor's announcement in the spring statement of £20 billion to help deliver at least that commitment of four CCUS clusters in the UK by 2030, and more beyond that. The £20 billion is for 20 years, from this year. Last month the launch of track 2 of the cluster sequencing process was widely welcomed by industry stakeholders and project developers alike. That includes the Acorn project in my constituency, and the Scottish cluster more generally. Despite continued efforts to downplay the status of that project by SNP Members and Members of the Scottish Government in particular, work on that project has never stopped. In fact, more than £40 million of UK Government money has been directly invested into the Scottish cluster, compared with £80 million promised by the Scottish Government and then withdrawn, with clarity not provided on exactly where that £80 million has gone.

As I said, the sector is impatient to get on with the work to be done on energy security and decarbonisation. Speaking for not only the Scottish cluster but CCUS

more broadly, the announced streamlined approach to track 2 is very much welcome, but, as I am sure the Minister realises, even more welcome would be a clear and rapid process for rolling out track 2 clusters, building on the lessons learned from track 1. For example, it would be extremely helpful to award initial capture projects swiftly—and concurrently, if possible—with transport and storage licences. May I also ask for the inclusion of shipping and other non-pipeline transport of emissions, bearing in mind that most centres of industrial activity around the UK do not currently have clarity on what their pathway for decarbonisation will be?

Finally, on CCUS, given direct air capture's current absence from the Bill as a carbon capture entity, will the Minister clarify what role that will play? Will it need to be included in the context of the appropriate clause—I think it is clause 63—of the Bill? If the Government cannot table that amendment, would it be helpful for me to table such an amendment, as others have offered? I am sure we can discuss that in more detail as Committee approaches.

8.51 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who was effective in outlining the many complexities inherent in the transition of our energy system from dependence on fossil fuels. It is a complexity that we must bear in mind as we discuss the Bill. I welcome many of the measures in the Bill that are designed to provide a cleaner, more affordable and more secure energy system. However, I am concerned that more is required to address some of the short-term issues that we face.

Of course, I need not remind the House of the widespread concern that households across the UK are particularly vulnerable to any further increases in the cost of energy. We are told that energy bills might increase by some 17% this year. Hon. Members will know as well as I do that many households struggled last winter. They have had to exhaust their savings, and some have had to take out loans to meet the costs of last winter, so they are vulnerable to any further increases that might come next.

Citizens Advice Cymru has seen a sharp increase in the number of people seeking debt advice. It reports that more people are now falling into arrears on essential household bills. The charity saw a 150% increase in the number of people seeking advice on debt relating to energy bills between February 2020 and February this year. That further underlines the vulnerability of so many of our households and how exposed they are to any further increases in the cost of energy. Before I go into some of the Bill's longer-term measures, I would like to impress on the Government that, before next winter, there is still time to bring forward measures to support some of those vulnerable households and ways of financing them.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Does the hon. Member share my concerns, which I think are widespread, about the plight of people on prepayment meters who are struggling to pay for energy? Does he share my disappointment that nothing has yet made it into the Bill that would protect people on prepayment meters in particular from so-called self-disconnection, where, when they run out of money, they are automatically cut off from all gas and electricity?

Ben Lake: I thank my hon. Friend for making that important point. I think we all agree that customers on prepayment meters are among the most vulnerable consumers of energy and electricity in the country, and they should be prioritised as we look to help households with the cost of energy.

It was mentioned earlier that one way of financing greater support for households could be a new tax on share buybacks. We have read in the news about Shell and its £3.2 billion plans announced in that regard, and we must question whether such funding could be used to increase support provided under the energy price guarantee in advance of next winter. Another round of the alternative fuel payment could be guaranteed, set at a level which better reflects the increase in the cost of alternative fuels experienced by off-grid households. In that regard, I am very grateful that the Government and the Minister are considering additional support for energy-intensive businesses not connected to the mains gas grid. That should be a priority.

Looking beyond next winter, I think Members will agree that the Bill offers a golden opportunity to step up investment in the energy efficiency of our housing stock. In the long term, reducing our energy demand represents one of the most important contributions to forging a more resilient and sustainable energy system, helping to permanently slash energy bills for both households and businesses alike. I have previously called for the £6 billion for energy efficiency measures, committed in the autumn statement, to be brought forward. The spending profile should be brought forward as much as possible. The more we can prioritise the investment of energy efficiency, the better. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fuel poverty, I emphasise that point and, in doing so, ask that the Government consider setting clearer pathways for improved energy efficiency standards for our housing stock.

The case for prioritising energy efficiency measures is well made, but for the avoidance of any doubt the New Economics Foundation estimates that had all homes in England and Wales been upgraded to EPC C by October last year, the energy price guarantee would have cost £3.5 billion less during its first six months. A Welsh home installation programme, set out by the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, could save the Welsh NHS £4.4 billion by 2040 in improved health outcomes.

It is important that current energy company obligation schemes are delivered properly. Between April last year, when ECO4 commenced, and December, approximately 25,000 households received support. Given that that amounts to less than 6% of the 450,000 households ECO4 is supposed to support over its four-year lifetime, we should be concerned about the pace of the roll-out so far. Constituents and installers alike have contacted me to complain about the scheme's deficiencies, which I believe demand the Government's urgent attention. In particular, consideration needs to be given to reviewing the eligibility criteria, so that more people can benefit from the scheme. Also important is revision of the scheme's cost assumptions, so they are brought in line with current supply costs.

Before I bring my remarks to a close, I would like to add my support for clauses 272 and 273, which were added to the Bill in the other place. The current energy

and wider cost of living crisis brings into sharp focus the consequences of failing to transition away from fossil fuels. Action must be taken to accelerate the transition. In that regard, community energy projects have a crucial role to play. By establishing an export guarantee scheme for smaller-scale sites that generate low-carbon electricity, and by requiring larger suppliers to work with community schemes, the clauses could unlock the potential of community energy schemes across the United Kingdom, which the campaign group Power for People estimates could grow by between 12 and 20 times by 2030, powering up to 2.2 million homes. This is an important set of clauses that I very much hope the Government will see fit to retain in the Bill.

8.58 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on hydrogen, most of my comments will focus on the hydrogen part of the Bill.

The past winter has epitomised the uncertainty felt across the country about our energy future. However, the Bill will restore certainty and help to deliver energy security and net zero targets, because it will help to unleash our hydrogen potential. Part of the uncertainty for our constituents is a concern about everyday essentials, such as, "How do I clean my home?", "Do I need a heat pump?" and, even, "What is a heat pump?" Green hydrogen blending uses the same pipe and boiler system already in our homes and is by far the simplest way of cutting our carbon emissions from heat, which currently run at nearly a quarter of our carbon dioxide output. I am convinced that green hydrogen can play a part in decarbonising heating, but I know, as we have heard today, that many across the House and the country are not so certain. That is why the trials that the Bill supports are so important. The point is to allow Government, businesses and, most of all, our constituents, to decide if it is a viable path to decarbonising heating. It is essential that the Bill pushes forward those aspects.

Businesses, too, need certainty that hydrogen will not fall by the wayside. The UK has been a world leader in hydrogen. The hydrogen strategy and last year's update clearly envision us regaining that title. But policies such as the Inflation Reduction Act and the Net-Zero Industrial Act mean that the US and the EU have become more fertile ground for hydrogen innovation than the UK. Businesses need certainty to invest in hydrogen, knowing that there will be a thriving hydrogen economy for production, storage, transport and use. That is why I am delighted that the Bill will unlock billions in private investment through contracts and business models, not only securing our energy future but bringing jobs and wealth across the country. Although there are concerns about the cost of the schemes, I know that every pound spent on hydrogen today means two pounds or more off energy bills tomorrow. That is surely an easy calculation to support. The provisions in the Bill will boost the UK's hydrogen economy, and I am glad the Government are, at last, being proactive in this space.

Although the Bill goes a long way, we must go further on hydrogen. It will be the glue that binds our green energy future together. It is a Polyfilla energy, helping to fill the cracks between other sources and plug the holes left by carbon-based energy. It will prove an invaluable tool for tomorrow's energy mixture. The more we encourage

it today, the better. For that reason, I urge the Government to push further and legislate to become the torchbearer for global hydrogen. For a start, although I am glad that community electricity producers will now have the certainty and support that they need to flourish, the provisions in the Bill exclude small-scale hydrogen production, which can be used as storage or directly as an energy source. Will the Minister look at widening those clauses to include all low-carbon energy suppliers?

We can do more to ready ourselves for hydrogen heating. We can require new boilers to be hydrogen-ready by 2026, which will bring down prices to normal levels, provide certainty to manufacturers and smooth the transition towards blended heating systems. What better way of preparing ourselves for clean heat. I call on the Minister to re-examine the case for hydrogen-ready boilers. That will be a shot in the arm for UK manufacturers. Furthermore, although the Government's dedication to hydrogen is welcomed by all, or by most anyway, there must be enough green hydrogen. Current estimates forecast that we will need about 10 times the hydrogen that we currently produce to reach net zero by 2050. The Government have already kickstarted UK hydrogen by doubling our production target. Will they do that again? Will there be certainty for all the hydrogen that we need? We need to increase and support hydrogen production.

Finally, and most importantly, we must be certain that the hydrogen we use is not damaging our planet, despite its clean reputation. Many of the objections to hydrogen in heating come from uncertainty about the true emissions of producing it. Blue hydrogen in heating is often claimed to emit more carbon than natural gas. We need certainty that the hydrogen we use is not going to be worse than the carbon we are leaving behind. The Government's current definition of low-carbon hydrogen, at 20 grams of CO₂ equivalent per megajoule of hydrogen, is a good start but we must look at lowering it in line with the overall emissions of the grid. Specifically, it must come down to closer to 5 grams to ensure truly environmentally friendly hydrogen. That is the only way to give investors and our constituents the certainty that low-carbon hydrogen is indeed low carbon. I appreciate that blue hydrogen and others are clearly transitional to get to green hydrogen.

It will be obvious to the House that I am certain that there is no green future without hydrogen, but thanks to the Bill and the certainty that it provides to our constituents, businesses and investors, I believe that the Government agree. I know work will be planned to incorporate some of the suggestions I put forward today, but the Bill goes a long way to creating the certainty in hydrogen that we need. However, we must go faster. We used to be the world leader in hydrogen production and manufacturing, whether from buses such as Wrightbus or diggers such as JCB. All across the sector, we need to go further and faster with hydrogen. It is not the silver bullet to all our net zero needs but it is the Polyfilla that will make sure that, when other areas fail, hydrogen will step in.

9.4 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Let me begin by drawing attention to my roles as chair of both the chemical industry all-party parliamentary group and the all-party parliamentary group on carbon capture, utilisation and storage.

I welcome the Bill's progress. It is long overdue and essential, although I feel that it lacks the necessary ambition to deliver all the Government's stated aims of making the energy system fit for the future, ensuring the safety, security and resilience of the UK's energy system, and leveraging private investment in clean technologies.

Ministers have said that there is no way for us to achieve net zero without carbon capture and storage. The target set by the Government is to capture and store 20 to 30 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide a year—including removals—by 2030, but while that is welcome, I personally believe that there could be an even higher target to benefit our country. The Carbon Capture and Storage Association says that the UK's CCUS project pipeline would be able to store some 70 million tonnes of CO₂. The industry is ready to deliver, and we need to let the industry get on with it.

I have been banging the drum for CCUS deployment for quite some time now. Support from the Government has been shaky in the past, with several false dawns—funding whisked away, or not provided at all—so I am pleased to see what looks like real progress, although today's delay in planning permission for our Teesside project is a worry. Teesside is a vital area for the net zero agenda. Its proximity to offshore wind sources and its cluster of energy-intensive industries that require decarbonisation make it a good location for hydrogen production and carbon capture. I was certainly pleased when the Department selected a handful of carbon capture projects on Teesside to progress to the next stage of development, but I was very disappointed that of the 40 longlisted projects only eight are going forward, and that many in the east coast cluster, including one in the Humber, are missing out. What, I ask the Minister, will happen to them next? That said, I welcome the Government's statement that the Bill

“will introduce state of the art business models for carbon capture usage and storage...and hydrogen”.

Now they must prove it, and prove it quick.

I know from speaking to industry representatives, especially those in the Teesside cluster, that investors see the timely passage of this legislation as critical to maintaining confidence and momentum in the sector after a decade of those false dawns and U-turns. Representatives of the Chemical Industries Association tell me that their sector also wants the Bill to be passed, pointing out that, while it is imperfect, it contains some fundamental provisions. They say that it will give the sector certainty, including the provisions relating to hydrogen and CCS business models, network charges and Ofgem's remit to include net zero, and they like it. Essentially, however, they are asking for a net zero energy transition at the lowest possible cost, creating competition in the energy market to minimise the risk of domestic and non-domestic consumers' picking up the cost. How, I ask the Minister, will that be delivered?

Of course, the quickest, cheapest and best answer for our national energy security is a clean energy sprint. New renewables are nine times cheaper than gas. They would not only fight the climate crisis but increase our energy security and sovereignty, bring down bills, and create jobs. However, at this crucial moment for our country and our planet, the Bill does not provide the clean energy sprint that we need, so perhaps the Minister could tell us why the ban on onshore wind—the cheapest, cleanest, quickest energy available—remains. Furthermore,

[Alex Cunningham]

the Bill does not deliver the “green plumbing” measures that are necessary to accelerate the deployment of low-carbon power and grid management, failing to solve the grid connection problems, leaving our planning system unreformed, and failing to add a net zero duty to relevant regulators such as Ofgem. It is certainly not the complete answer to all our needs.

We do not just need renewables; we need renewables done well, and, as the Campaign to Protect Rural England suggests, that can be achieved by empowering communities to decide what is appropriate for their local area, and guaranteeing that they benefit from these schemes. The Countryside Charity has long highlighted community energy projects as the gold standard for renewables done well.

The Bill provides a real opportunity to put financial structures and a programme in place to secure for the 19 million homes in our country that are below EPC band C the upgrades that they need. That is what Labour would do, but there is no plan in the Bill to insulate the homes that need it, which is costing each of those households up to £1,000 a year. Disappointingly, there is no plan to remove the windfall tax loophole or de-link electricity and gas prices so that the cheap power promised by renewables can be passed on to families and businesses rather than being paid out in windfall profits. We should be providing public support to develop our hydrogen industry, but the Government’s preference is to load the cost of subsidy on to household bills.

A number of amendments to the Bill were introduced by the Lords: moving the hydrogen levy away from customer bills; establishing a net zero duty for Ofgem; banning new coalmines; introducing a local electricity Bill; and mandating reporting on EPC standards for homes. I trust the Government will welcome those amendments. I will also support further changes, such as ending the onshore wind ban, banning fracking, expanding targets on the energy efficiency of homes and dealing with grid connection delays.

It is exam season and the Government are facing big tests—I would give them about six out of 10 for now. The Bill has come some way, but we know that in its current state it does not go far enough. Our industry and people depend on us getting this right.

9.10 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I welcome many of measures contained in the Bill, not least the clear step forward in embracing nuclear. Indeed, I consider it an act of national vandalism and a huge part of our difficulties on energy cost and supply since Putin’s invasion of Ukraine that previous Governments failed so badly on nuclear.

First, I wish to focus my remarks on community energy. It is an absurdity that the community energy sector has seen minimal growth in recent years, accounting for less than 0.5% of total UK electricity generation capacity, not because of the cost of technological development or even deployment, but because of energy market and licensing rules. That should be easily fixable, so I add my voice of support for clauses 272 and 273 to enable community schemes to sell the electricity they generate locally.

These seem to be straightforward, pro-competition, pro-consumer reforms, and my central ask is that they should be adopted as part of the Bill. If my hon. Friend the Minister is minded not to support them, what will he propose to open up the huge community energy sector opportunity that the Environmental Audit Committee’s 2021 report identified could grow by 12 to 20 times by 2030, powering 2.2 million homes?

I turn to the challenges facing rural off-grid households. According to the latest census, 15% of my constituents—and, for transparency, this applies to my house too—use oil-fired boilers for central heating, compared with 3% nationally, and a further 4% use tanked or bottled gas, compared with 1% nationally. As it stands, such households are looking down the barrels of massive expenditure when their boilers need replacing. A troubling direction of travel means that, as soon as 2026, these oil-burning boilers will be banned and groupthink will be directing us to worship at the altar of the heat pump.

Not only are these things horrendously expensive, but for many rural homes they just will not, and never will, work. The Government’s own data shows that some 20% of off-grid households simply cannot use them. Many rural or older homes, built out of stone, cob or “Whychert”, which is unique to the Vale of Aylesbury, are less energy efficient, more expensive, more difficult and, in some cases, impossible to insulate. It is essential that the Government drop ambitions to ban people from using systems that actually work for their homes. Instead, they should ensure there is the best variety of choices available to households to choose how to decarbonise in a way that will not leave them broke, indebted and cold.

The best way of moving forward would be to adopt the provisions in the Renewable Liquid Heating Fuel Bill, introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), into this Bill. That would enable people to transfer to the use of hydrotreated vegetable oil at a fraction of the cost of a heat pump and associated works—we are talking hundreds of pounds to convert, rather than tens of thousands of pounds for the alternative.

That leads me to a wider ask on the future of fuel. It is hugely welcome that, with this Bill, the Government are seeking to recognise recycled carbon fuels in legislation by extending the eligible fuel types under the renewable transport fuel obligation orders to include two new low-carbon fuels. As it is inconceivable that the future of aviation and maritime will ever be without the need for a liquid hydrocarbon, the challenge is what that liquid hydrocarbon looks like. My central argument is that, by using drop-in biofuels, which are more easily and financially scalable, in the short term and fully synthetic fuels in the medium to long term, the choice extended to aviation and maritime can equally be enjoyed, with much wider access, across other heavy-duty applications, such as agriculture and construction machinery, road haulage, rail, motorsport and, linking back to my second theme, the very fuel we use to heat rural and off-grid homes in a manner that does not leave people poorer and colder.

This is about developing new fuels for what we already have, not spending billions of pounds on reinventing the wheel, or at least that which makes the wheels and propellers turn. Perhaps such fuels will even be the saviour

of the road car as we know it, as even the European Commission is proposing to allow e-fuels in combustion engines after its zero emission cut-off date in 2035.

Petrosynthesis, as Paddy Lowe, the pioneer of one synthetic manufacturer, Zero, calls it, creates a balanced, circular and sustainable future of indefinite timescale—the industrial version of the natural carbon cycle. This Energy Bill should be the vehicle to embrace this evolution right here in the United Kingdom. Across transport and domestic energy, synthetics offer so much. We just need to get fully behind them.

9.16 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I welcome you to your place, Madam Deputy Speaker.

This Bill is welcome, and it can play a key role in delivering a cheaper, cleaner energy system, promoting investment in clean technologies and enhancing our energy security by deploying more home-grown power. The UK has been a global leader in promoting renewables such as offshore wind, but we cannot rest on our laurels. If we do nothing, we will be left behind in the race to attract global investment, which is very much footloose.

The US Inflation Reduction Act and the EU green deal industrial plan throw down the gauntlet, to which we must respond, not necessarily with like for like but by ensuring that we have a regulatory and policy framework that gives investors confidence and certainty. At the same time, we must not forget the demand side. We should be doing better, and we are still searching for the catalyst that will unleash a retrofitting revolution.

I will briefly go through some of the initiatives that are needed to provide the clarity and certainty everyone seeks. First, a duty is needed for Ofgem to consider net zero. It is vital that we keep costs as low as possible for consumers, but expanding Ofgem's remit to include net zero would unlock more anticipatory investment, which would enable grid reinforcement. This is currently particularly important in East Anglia.

Secondly, introducing a competitive market for major onshore electricity transmission networks is welcome and can deliver real consumer benefits by driving both innovation and downward pressure on costs. Thirdly, the establishment of an independent system operator and planner with responsibility for whole energy system strategic planning is a positive and welcome step towards an improved governance framework.

Fourthly, we need to remove the obstacles that currently block community energy schemes from realising their full potential, and I thus urge the Government to give full consideration to retaining clauses 272 and 273, which were introduced by amendments in the Lords. One of the great challenges of transforming our energy system is that so many people and communities feel as if something is being done to them—as if a burden is being imposed. Community energy schemes enable local people to be part of the solution by participating in the benefits, thereby showing that we are all in it together. As we have heard, hydrogen will be crucial to achieving net zero, and locally, in East Anglia, it has a key role to play. It is very much the new kid on the block. We do not yet know the precise role it will play and, as we have heard, there is a dispute as to who will pay the hydrogen levy. Different views are being expressed on that and it is necessary to consider carefully how best to proceed.

It is also important to send a strong signal to investors by introducing a sunset clause on the powers assigned by the Secretary of State in the Energy Prices Act 2022, which have had an impact on investor confidence, with companies falling out and leaving the sector. The Bill provides an opportunity to amend that Act so as to enable the Government to respond quickly in the short term without unnecessarily impacting on investor confidence in the long term.

My final point comes back to demand-side measures and the need to address the challenge presented by our leaky buildings. Clause 204 is the result of an amendment in the Lords and gives the Secretary of State six months to publish a comprehensive plan to improve UK buildings' energy efficiency. I urge the Government to commit to doing that and providing firm policies to incentivise improvements across all domestic and commercial buildings.

In conclusion, there are many issues the Government need to clarify, but it is vital, as Energy UK points out, that this Bill is passed with the utmost haste. The pressing need for reasonably priced electricity, for enhanced energy security and to meeting the challenge of climate change head on, together with the opportunity to create exciting and sustainable new jobs in coastal communities such as the one I represent, means that there is no time for delay.

9.21 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): The Bill is a crucial piece of legislation for delivering a cheaper, cleaner energy system and increasing investment in clean energies. As the new Department is named the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, one hopes it will deliver on both. I do not need to rehearse the challenges we face in respect of how being overly reliant on imported gas has created higher energy prices. Much more needs to be rapidly done to improve our energy security. If we create the right legislative framework, and invest in renewable and sustainable energy supplies, we should ensure that we also achieve the goal of moving towards net zero.

There is much to welcome in the amendments from the other place. In particular, I wish to speak to clauses 272 and 273, formerly in the Local Electricity Bill, which are backed by 318 MPs, including 125 Conservatives. These measures seek to enable community groups to sell electricity to local customers. It is still bewildering to me, as someone who lives somewhere sunny, windy and with a huge tide, why this has not progressed sooner. Clause 272 sets up a community and smaller-scale electricity export guarantee scheme to provide a guaranteed income for the electricity from small-scale renewable energy generators with a capacity below 5 MW. Surely, with dramatically rising energy prices and a system still reliant on fossil fuel imports, new local, secure, low-carbon generation must be desirable.

Clause 273 sets up a community and smaller-scale electricity suppliers services scheme, which would enable them to sell the electricity generated to the local community if they wish to do so. That would facilitate a community energy tariff that can be offered to consumers local to the site. Locally generated electricity would reduce our dependence on imported energy and increase the resilience of our domestic energy supply. It could help cut bills and save emissions. There is huge support for these clauses across this House, and I hope that Ministers will

[Selaine Saxby]

ensure they remain in this Bill. Ministers have previously opposed them on the basis that they amount to a subsidy. However, that would be the case only if the guaranteed price were many times the prices of other sources, but that is not what these clauses mean, with a suggested rate of about 5p to 10p per unit.

Bizarrely, these same Ministers are still happy to subsidise the burning of trees for woody biomass, creating one of the biggest emitters of carbon dioxide in the country. We are subsidising that to the tune of £1.7 million per day. Even advisors to the provider of this plant have detailed that it should

“reassess its criteria for determining carbon neutrality”.

We are seemingly keen to subsidise this polluting form of energy at a time when I am sure we are working towards net zero, yet there seems to be far less subsidy for some of the genuine renewables that we could make use of, for instance right here in the Celtic sea—I declare an interest as chair of the Celtic sea all-party group. But this year’s contracts for difference auction is expected to deliver less than half the renewable capacity we need to hit our 2030 offshore wind target, all due to an administrative strike price not keeping pace with rising supply chain and financing costs and a Department that said that it did not believe the industry’s figures.

As the Crown Estate gets ready to launch its next leasing round in the Celtic sea, aiming to catch 4 GW of floating offshore wind, I hope that we will be able to help get these floating offshore wind turbines out to sea rather than subsidise the burning of trees to secure our future energy supply. It is inconsistencies such as this that make me support new clause 271, which would place a duty on Ofgem to consider net zero. Investment and subsidy decisions would hopefully then ensure that the true environmental impacts of the energy produced were considered.

Clause 204, on improving energy efficiency standards in our homes, is hard to argue with. However, the practicalities of the issue have already seen long-term landlords change to short-term holiday lets in locations such as my beautiful North Devon constituency. We need to ensure that any move to improve energy efficiency applies to short-term holiday lets as well long-term rentals—we still use energy and emit CO₂ when we are on holiday.

However, I have concerns about a blanket imposition. In rural and coastal Britain, our housing stock is older and draughtier, and it is harder to bring up to the standards of newer homes given planning restrictions. We need to better understand rurality. I will support any amendments that my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) tables, as it seems bewildering to me that we are requiring all off-grid properties to adopt air source or ground source heat pumps when we could enable those with oil boilers to convert to hydrogenated vegetable oil at a fraction of the cost. The cost of such fuels is currently prohibitively expensive, but given that the Government have long recognised the value of renewable fuels, such as hydrotreated vegetable oil in the transport sector through the renewable transport fuel obligation, surely it is possible to devise a similar incentive mechanism, extended to the use of renewable fuels in domestic boilers for off gas grid properties. This could be achieved by some tweaks to clause 10, in part 3 of the Bill.

We should be able to support community energy generation given the abundance of renewable energy sources, particularly in the rural south-west. We must focus scarce subsidies on fuels that are truly renewable and work to harness the wind in the Celtic sea, which, in turn, will support the UK’s longer-term energy security strategy.

There is much to commend in the Bill, but I hope that Ministers will look favourably at these amendments and recognise that, while energy security is vital, we also need to work towards net zero. Frankly, though, some of the current subsidies risk delivering the opposite outcome.

9.27 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I wanted to speak in this debate for three reasons. First, like every Member of this House, I am sure, I would like to see an energy system such as the Government are seeking to create—one that is more resilient, keeps cost down and keeps us on track for our net zero aim. The Government have spent a huge amount of money paying the equivalent of half the average household’s energy bill, which has been very welcome given what Putin has done to weaponise energy supply, but it is clearly an unsustainable position for the country to be in. Although we have made great strides in cutting emissions—cutting them by more than 40% and cutting them faster than any other country in the G20—we have more to do on our energy system.

The second reason is that my constituency is home to Harwell science and innovation campus, which was hidden from ordnance maps in the late ‘30s and early ‘40s, but was where atomic energy was developed. Harwell campus is now the home to £3 billion of science infrastructure, including an energy tech cluster, which, alone, has 80 companies in it. My constituency is also home to Milton Park, which has 270 companies predominantly working in science and tech. They include Tokamak Energy, which will be key to our fusion future. What the Bill seeks to do in supporting the Government’s aims on carbon capture and storage, on hydrogen and on fusion is important not just for the country as a whole, but for businesses in my constituency.

The third reason I wanted to speak in this debate is that I am the lead sponsor of the Local Electricity Bill, which various hon. Member have commented on. It has the support of 318 MPs—125 of them Conservatives—113 councils, nearly 90 national organisations and four of the six distribution network operators, not to mention countless members of the public who have written to many of us to endorse it.

We have not made enough of community energy and its potential. The Environmental Audit Committee found in 2021 that it could power 2.2 million homes by 2030. Instead, we have gone from 249 MW to 331 MW over a five-year period, from 2017 to 2022. We could be doing much more than that. We have not seen a single community energy supplier get to market through the Licence Lite scheme, which it was hoped might enable them.

The truth is that the set-up costs are too high: they are estimated to be £1 million or more, which for a small-scale generator of community energy is far too much. I pay tribute to the driving force behind the Bill, Power for People, and in particular Steve Shaw, whom many of us have worked with on this. Power for People is very flexible and adaptable and, as the Minister knows,

the Bill has moved a considerable way, from seeking to make the costs of joining the network for community energy suppliers proportional to their size to proposing that we let them team up with larger suppliers so that they can sell their energy at a fair price and access the metering and maintenance capabilities of those larger suppliers.

I understand that is still not a position that the Government support, but I say to the Minister, “Work with me and the other supporters of this Bill as it progresses, to get to a position that the Government are comfortable with.” Community energy is hugely popular. People often disagree on nuclear, on which renewable source we should put more money into and on how long we will need to use fossil fuels, but almost everybody supports community energy. Indeed, the Government have consistently said that they support the development of community energy. I urge the Minister to work with us to try to find the right mechanism to get some money behind it, because it is high time we found the right mechanism to enable it to flourish.

9.32 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): When Russia invaded Ukraine and the energy crisis started, nobody would have thought that a small village called Bacton on the rural North Norfolk coast would play a central role. North Norfolk is home to Bacton gas terminal, a hydrocarbon gas processing plant supplying up to one third of the UK’s gas supply. As well as importing and exporting gas from Europe, Bacton acts as an important interconnector between Belgium and the UK.

Since the start of the war, Bacton has shot to prominence and has been working overtime. I mention it this evening to place on record its importance to the UK energy revolution, and to the hydrogen sector in particular. Bacton’s potential is absolutely enormous. It plays and it will continue to play a very significant role in the future of our energy security, specifically in the future of blue and green hydrogen production.

Already there are plans to launch a £1.3 billion project by Hydrogen East to transform Bacton into a hydrogen hub of the future. That hub in that little village in my constituency has the potential to power London and all of the south-east into the future. That is how significant it is. As the Secretary of State and the Minister know, they are warmly invited to see for themselves why leaders in the sector are looking seriously at this project and the potential it offers.

We know that the Energy Bill will make provision to secure our energy production and regulation, instead of subjecting the UK to volatile international markets, but a transition to hydrogen is also estimated to deliver 12.9 million tonnes of CO₂ reduction. Not only will that provide us with 25% of what is needed to reach net zero, but the economic situation must not be overlooked. Importantly, it will generate up to £11 billion in private investment and more than 12,000 new jobs by 2030.

As many have said, hydrogen production will be the backbone of our transition away from fossil fuels, and it is vital that we accelerate our move towards those greener alternatives. Bacton and its £1.3 billion project could, as a terminal into the hydrogen energy of the future, heat up to 20 million homes for decades to come, with long-lasting impacts. So what is the problem? Well,

all we need now is for the Government to sit up, take notice and give us the momentum, the investment and the support. By repurposing the existing infrastructure, we could, according to many of the projections, see hydrogen production in Bacton fully up and running by 2030, putting the UK on a world-leading path.

My coast already provides some of the highest concentration of wind farms in the world. It is not too far out of the question to say that North Norfolk has the ability to do that again, and—with Bacton set for the hydrogen energy revolution—it could be one of our country’s capitals of the secure energy future. We just need the Minister to help us with that. Bacton gives us our own secure energy production facility, long-lasting security and a greener future, and it certainly enables the UK to be a main player in this market.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister.

9.36 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We have had a good, calm and well-informed Second Reading debate. Indeed, we have heard contributions from across the House emphasising the point that the Bill is necessary but not necessarily sufficient.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) asked who will pay the changed levies as far as heating is concerned, and spoke about the need to undertake that properly for customers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) pointed us towards the rise of state-controlled companies’ investment in new energy arrangements, and was adamant about the Bill lifting of the ban on onshore wind.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) made a strong contribution on the role of hydrogen in heating and, in particular, on the hydrogen trials that he has experienced. Perhaps we can assure him that we will certainly pursue an amendment to the Bill along the lines that he suggested.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) spoke strongly about carbon capture and storage, about the importance of CCS in the Teesside industrial cluster, and about the importance of ensuring that the industrial clusters can play their role in CCS as they develop further.

In the spirit of general cross-party support for the Bill, I think it also worth mentioning selected contributions from hon. Members who are not on the Labour side. Unfortunately, if everyone stuck to the contributions from their own side, those of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) would not be mentioned by anybody, but she made a strong contribution about the future of coal, about the need to support the amendment on coal tabled in the other place, and about the ludicrousness of continuing to maximise the economic production of oil, echoing many of the sentiments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband).

The right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), who chairs the Environmental Audit Committee, spoke strongly about the need for security of investment in this market, and the length of arrangement that would secure those investments and confidence in markets for the future.

[Dr Alan Whitehead]

Finally, the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), author of the net zero report, spoke enormous sense about delays being the biggest threat to net zero in future. He supported the retention of Lords amendments to the Bill, as did many other hon. Members, on community energy changes and other things that are part of the Bill that we are debating in the Commons.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman think that it is important that we do something about methane flaring and venting, which I raised in my contribution?

Dr Whitehead: Yes, I am happy to acknowledge that that is an important issue in the transition to net zero for the oil and gas industry, and that it is ripe for further legislation to outlaw it in the not-too-distant future.

It is fair to say that hon. Members across the House went along with the theme that we have tried to establish on the Bill: it contains a great deal to support, and it is a Bill that is necessary to introduce things that are essential to the development of a low-carbon economy, to the achievement of the many targets on low-carbon energy and renewable deployment, and to the new forms of energy management that the Government have already put in place and on which they are seeking to succeed.

The Bill establishes mechanisms and business arrangements for carbon capture and storage, and for the manufacture and deployment of hydrogen as a low-carbon fuel for the future. It starts to delineate how energy systems are going to be governed and managed for the future, with the establishment of the independent system operator. For the first time, it introduces a proper system of heat network regulation, and it takes the planning and development of heat networks further. It heralds some of the essential elements of energy market reform. In short, it undertakes a great deal of what I would call necessary “green plumbing”, which has to be done now if our low-carbon energy system of the future is to work effectively.

The Opposition have some serious differences with the Government about how to go about those changes, but we acknowledge and support the generality of those “green plumbing” measures, not least because their establishment will undoubtedly help the new Labour Government greatly as we embark on our far more ambitious programme of energy decarbonisation and energy efficiency from 2024 onwards. Indeed, one of our substantial criticisms of the Bill is how long it has taken for us to get to the point of establishing the legislation that will guide the next stages of our energy decarbonisation.

As we have heard, the Bill has been with us for 10 months in its almost finalised form. Yes, the Government have sought to add amendments to the Bill in another place, and there will be further amendments in the Commons, but the measure could have been on the statute book many months ago—and time is of the essence in getting going with the next stages of decarbonisation. Instead, last autumn we were treated to the spectacle of the then Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy pulling the Energy Bill from its established progress after just two sessions of debate, and sitting on it for over three months for no apparent reason while the legislative process stalled completely.

That led to the remarkable situation of the Opposition writing to the new Minister during that period of stasis demanding that the Bill be recommenced as soon as possible. I know about that because I was the person who wrote the letter. [Interruption.] Indeed, I did a very good job there.

Yes, this Bill is necessary, but many Members have asked whether it is sufficient, and we think it is certainly not. There are many missed opportunities to legislate for many aspects of the green transition that are or will become necessary shortly. There are many instances where the green plumbing in the Bill looks, frankly, fairly faulty and could do with beefing up. For example, the Bill fails completely to lift onshore wind back into place as a key element of our low-carbon energy armoury. The Bill fails to redefine Ofgem’s remit to start from a low-carbon imperative. The Bill fails to address another key part of that armoury—community energy—in any sort of meaningful and enabling way.

The Bill fails to address the very real changes in regulatory machinery that will need to accompany the transition from oil and gas to a predominantly low-carbon energy environment. The Bill continues to propose soaking customers for the support of future infrastructure when we require entirely new forms of support that recognise both the breadth of the work that has to be done and the institutions that we will need to support investment and development.

There are many areas where we can say, “Yes, but” to this Bill and put forward the measures that will enable it to rise to the challenge of decarbonisation in a comprehensive way. That is why we will embark on that task as the Bill goes into Committee by tabling the amendments that will make the Bill so much more robust for the challenge of the future, and we hope the Government will be receptive to those proposals. That process has been started, with a number of very well-thought-out additions made to the Bill in the other place on Ofgem, hydrogen, coal, community energy and home retrofitting. We will seek to defend those changes in this place, and we hope the Government will see the wisdom of them and not seek to overthrow them.

This is a necessary but not sufficient Bill that we want to get on the statute book, preferably with the added heft of our proposed changes to it in Committee, so that it becomes more on the sufficient end and less just necessary. We will not seek to divide the House on Second Reading but instead will give conditional support and assistance as far as we can with an early emplacement on the statute book.

Labour has an ambitious low-carbon energy programme for government, with a fully decarbonised power system by 2030, including a doubling of present onshore wind deployment; a grid that is fit for enabling and delivering a low-carbon economy; Great British Energy, an investment company that can do so much to speed the energy transition along; a massive programme to retrofit 19 million homes over 10 years to reach our energy efficiency targets; and serious planning of the energy transition, so that it is a just transition both in the North Sea and elsewhere. All these plans will benefit from many of the measures that are in the Bill, but they could be so much more supportive, and that is why we want to see an extended and more robust version of the Bill on the statute book as soon as possible.

9.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): I begin by thanking Members for their considered contributions to the debate. It has been encouraging to hear broad support for the Bill—I hope it sets a precedent—and that reflects the meetings I have had with Members of this House and the other place and with the devolved Administrations over the past few months. I will try to address as many of the questions and issues raised as possible.

Let me remind the House why the Bill matters: it is a critical part of securing the clean, inexpensive energy that Britain needs to prosper. It will do that by leveraging investment in new technologies and by securing clean home-grown industries that can reduce our exposure to volatile gas prices in the long term. We are already world leaders. We have reduced emissions more than any other country in the G7, but this Bill will allow us to go further. It will enable reform of our energy system. It will protect consumers from unfair pricing, and it will make Britain an energy-secure net zero nation.

I turn to the points raised in the debate. Several Members asked how the Government are increasing investment in the grid and supporting grid capacity. I will make no bones about it—this is one of the biggest challenges our country faces. I get it; we get it. That is why, following the British energy security strategy, the Government worked with Ofgem on its work to accelerate strategic transmission investment. Following Ofgem's decision on that in December, approximately £20 billion of investment across Britain has been accelerated by regulatory efficiencies. On grid capacity, increasing competition in networks is expected to encourage greater inward investment into those networks, ensuring sufficient network capacity for demand needs in Great Britain. Further work on that issue is ongoing as we speak.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) and others raised issues about the independent system operator, or the future system operator. To be clear, the independent system operator and planner will be an expert, impartial body with responsibilities across both the electricity and gas systems to drive progress towards net zero while maintaining energy security and minimising costs for consumers. We are confident that we have struck the right balance on that issue.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) raised the issue of the hydrogen village trials—I was pleased to meet with him recently to discuss those trials. The Government have always been clear that the gas network delivering the trial must engage with residents to develop an attractive consumer offer for everyone in the trial area. This must include alternative options for consumers who do not wish to connect to hydrogen or cannot do so, such as for electric cookers and heating systems. We will not go ahead with a trial without demonstrable, strong, local support.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who I am sorry to see is not in his place just now, raised the issue of forced disconnections. All consumers will have the right to refuse trialling hydrogen. The powers of entry cannot be used to forcibly change the meter type for a consumer. Gas distribution networks will only ever use their extended powers of entry as a last resort—to ensure consumer safety, for example.

The right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) raised issues surrounding onshore wind. The UK already has almost 15 GW of onshore wind, the most of any renewable technology, with a strong pipeline of future projects incoming. The Government have consulted on making changes to the national policy planning framework in England so that local authorities can better respond to their communities when they wish to host onshore wind infrastructure. The Government will, of course, respond in due course.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) raised the issue of renewable liquid heating fuel. Decarbonising off-gas-grid properties is a key priority for this Government. I was pleased to meet with my right hon. Friend recently to discuss this issue, and I look forward to working with him and others on ways to ensure that the transition to clean heat will be fair and affordable for all. As we must acknowledge, however, sustainable biomass is a limited resource. Policy decisions on the role of biomass in heat will need to reflect the outcomes of the forthcoming biomass strategy, which is due to launch later in 2023.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), as well as touching on the role of fusion—which will be critical in the decades ahead, and we are leading the world in that technology—raised concerns surrounding the planning, health and safety, and environmental issues involved in the development of lithium-ion battery storage. I was pleased to meet with her recently, along with colleagues from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and would like to reassure her that the Government are committed to working with her, the fire services and ministerial colleagues towards a suitable way forward on this important issue, which I know many people are concerned about.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) raised the issue of sustainable aviation fuel. In October 2022, the Department for Transport commissioned Philip New to lead an independent evaluation to identify the conditions necessary to create a successful UK SAF industry. Last month, we published that report, alongside a Government response setting out what actions are already being taken to address many of the report's recommendations. We are keen to continue making progress, and I would be delighted to meet with my right hon. Friend on that point as we move forward.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): May I have an assurance that the five sustainable aviation fuel plants that our right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) previously announced will be going ahead in time for 2025? It is critical that the UK is in the forefront and leading in the SAF industry, because otherwise, we face being left behind by Europe and the United States.

Andrew Bowie: I will write to my hon. Friend on that specific issue immediately following the debate, once I have the answer from both the Department for Transport and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. However, we are committed to implementing the recommendations in the report. It is a policy of the Department for Transport, but I will discuss the matter with officials in that Department.

[Andrew Bowie]

A number of Members raised the issue of the hydrogen levy. The purpose of the hydrogen levy is to provide long-term funding for the hydrogen production business model. I reiterate that the provisions in this Bill will not immediately introduce a levy. We will consult on the detailed levy design, and the decision to introduce a levy will take into account the affordability of energy bills.

Many Members raised community energy schemes, which I strongly agree have a role to play in tackling climate change. While it would not be appropriate to mandate suppliers to offer local tariffs, and this should not be a commercial decision for suppliers, I reassure the House that my officials are actively looking into what further support we can offer the sector. I have already met, and I am sure will meet again, my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) to discuss how we can work together to move that forward.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Bowie: I will not give way, due to time. Members expressed concerns about coal. I reassure Members that we are committed to ensuring that coal has no part to play in our future power generation, which is why we are planning on phasing it out of our electricity production by 2024. We are leading the world on this, and can be proud of the action we have taken on coal. On fracking, the Government have confirmed that we are adopting a presumption against issuing any further hydraulic fracturing consents.

On offshore wind, again where we are leading the world, the offshore wind environmental improvement package in the Bill will support accelerated offshore wind deployment and reduce consenting time while protecting the marine environment. A number of Members made broadly supportive comments on the UK's nuclear sector, although, as is to be expected, not those on the SNP Benches. New nuclear has an important role to play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero in 2050, but we have always been clear that any technology must provide value for money for consumers and taxpayers. Great British Nuclear will address constraints in the nuclear market and support our new nuclear builds as the Government work to deliver our net zero commitments.

I could not finish without referring to my constituency neighbour but one, my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid). I agree with him on many issues, and he is absolutely right in his comments on oil and gas. The transition to non-fossil forms of energy cannot happen overnight, as recognised by the independent Climate Change Committee. While we are working to drive down demand for fossil fuels, there will continue to be UK demand for oil and gas, and we will be net importers of both.

I thank Members from all parts of the House who have contributed to today's debate. I have tried to address all the points, and I apologise that I have not addressed every point. I will write and offer meetings to those to whom I have not responded. I am encouraged by the broad support for this Bill and look forward to continuing my engagement with Members in our many Committee sittings and beyond. The measures that this Bill contains will not only determine our future energy

security, but will shape our environmental security, consumer security and economic security. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) said at the beginning, we cannot ever be at the mercy of autocrats. That is why we now have a dedicated Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. It is why we will deliver the reliable, affordable and clean energy that are needed to power energy's future under the next Conservative Government and beyond. I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

ENERGY BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Energy Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 29 June 2023.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—*(Julie Marson.)*

Question agreed to.

ENERGY BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Energy Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(a) any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State by virtue of the Act,

(b) any expenditure incurred by the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority by virtue of the Act,

(c) any expenditure incurred by the Competition and Markets Authority by virtue of the Act, and

(d) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—*(Julie Marson.)*

Question agreed to.

ENERGY BILL [LORDS] (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Energy Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise:

(1) provisions by virtue of which persons may be required—

(a) to make payments, or to provide financial collateral, to an administrator;

(b) as holders of licences issued under the Gas Act 1986 or the Electricity Act 1989, to make payments of sums relating to costs associated with heat networks;

(2) the imposition, by virtue of the Act, of charges under licences issued to T&S companies (as defined in Chapter 4 of Part 1 of the Bill);

(3) the imposition, by virtue of the Act, of charges for or in connection with the carrying out by the Secretary of State of functions under Part 4 of the Petroleum Act 1998; and

(4) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(*Julie Marson.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Female judges and prosecutors in Afghanistan

9.58 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Liberal Democrats stand in solidarity with women facing persecution in Afghanistan. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), my hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and Baroness Burt of Solihull for signing this petition to help evacuate and resettle female Afghan judges. I also thank the more than 56,000 people who have signed the Change.org petition. We have a duty to the people of Afghanistan. It is our responsibility to ensure that these women who have stood up for the rule of law have not done so at the expense of their life. The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to immediately help evacuate and resettle female judges and prosecutors, and their families from Afghanistan by providing the emergency visas urgently.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that female judges and prosecutors in Afghanistan, who have stood for the rule of law and a more inclusive and equal Afghanistan, are now deeply concerned for their own safety; further that they live with daily death threats and in constant fear of violent reprisals; and further that female judges and prosecutors, their children and their families are at continued risk of violent attacks.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to immediately help evacuate and resettle female judges and prosecutors, and their families from Afghanistan by providing emergency visas urgently.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002830]

Epidermolysis Bullosa: Drug Repurposing Trials

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

10 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): Epidermolysis bullosa is dreadful. It is often referred to as butterfly skin. It is a little known and rare genetic skin blistering condition, which causes skin to blister and tear at the slightest touch. BE—I will be kind to myself and refer to it in the rest of my speech as BE—causes excruciating, lifelong pain, and can have a devastating impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of patients. It can also greatly affect patients' families because of the constant treatment needed. In many cases, this means several hours of bandaging and unbandaging the most affected parts of the body daily. In its most severe form, EB also affects internal organs and eyes, causes severe problems when it comes to eating and drinking, and requires extensive healthcare—and there is no cure. It is believed that EB affects around 5,000 people in the UK, although there is limited information available from the NHS. Although that is a relatively small number, the severity of the condition is such that it has a deep impact.

I was asked to secure this Adjournment debate by some of my constituents, DEBRA, which is a UK-wide charity supporting people with EB and their care givers, healthcare professionals and researchers who work with EB. The charity exists to improve quality of life for people living with EB, and to fund pioneering research to find effective treatments. The charity works in partnership with the NHS to deliver EB healthcare services. There are four centres of excellence delivering specialist care in the UK, along with additional hospital care and clinics at other locations. The charity has a proud record of funding EB research in the UK and internationally, funding the first clinical trials in gene therapy. Its current focus is on fulfilling its mission to help people with EB live a life free of pain, a point I will return to later in my speech.

Many colleagues may be familiar with DEBRA from some of its network of more than 100 charity shops, which are the main source of the charity's income. I was able to visit one of the DEBRA shops, located in Locksbottom in my Orpington constituency, a few months ago, and I met not only the volunteers there, but a local constituent called Wendy, who suffers with EB. This particular lady has been suffering from EB since birth, and she told me of her experience and the experience of others who have an even more severe type of the condition.

As a child and even as a young lady, Wendy did not know that she had EB because doctors had not diagnosed the condition, which, particularly in the early years, is difficult to spot. She did, however, suffer constantly from blisters on her feet and her legs. Wendy told me about how, while she was growing up in constant pain, she would try to hide her wounds from friends and classmates, and would avoid wearing skirts to avoid causing unpleasant reactions from others. Yet as terrible as this sounds, Wendy told me her case was not uncommon and not as severe as it was for other patients.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. He raises an issue that affects not only his constituents, but

[Jim Shannon]

mine and those of others across Northern Ireland, so I commend him. Does he not agree that this dreadful disease, which is named the butterfly disease because it is unusual, has the capacity to limit life and the quality of life, and that the funding for the treatments he refers to, which can provide relief to constituents in all of our constituencies—in his, mine and those of others in this House—is vital? Would he urge the Minister, who is a very compassionate man and understands the issue very well, to give even the smallest bit of funding towards research to try to find a cure for the disease and to help the lives of those who have it?

Gareth Bacon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and the way he expressed them, and I agree entirely with those sentiments. Without giving out too many spoilers at this stage, there will be a request for a small amount of funding towards the end of my speech.

What I learned during the visit I referred to was truly moving, and I am particularly grateful to have met Wendy. I also thank DEBRA's director of research, Dr Sagair Hussain, and the excellent staff at the charity shop in my constituency, for inviting me to visit them and learn more about how they help individuals who live with this painful condition. In the spirit of thanking people, I also thank the Minister for his interest in this subject and for being here this evening to respond to the debate, and the Minister for Social Care for recently answering a written parliamentary question that I tabled about EB.

I stress that we cannot merely wait for a cure for this condition. We need to make a difference for patients who are suffering today and those who will be living with the condition for the foreseeable future. All EB patients are crying out for better therapeutic treatments, which have the potential vastly to improve their lives. DEBRA has set an objective of securing two to three treatments from drugs that are already licensed for other conditions, to radically improve the quality of life experienced by people with EB. In reply to my recent written question, the Minister for Social Care said that medicines that are potential candidates for repurposing in this way should be put forward for consideration for support from the Medicines Repurposing Programme. I am grateful for her guidance, and officials from the MRP have been in touch with DEBRA since to talk about the programme's work. That is excellent news.

In addition, I was delighted to hear that some innovative treatments for EB are either in trials or are being considered by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Specifically, NHS England is working with NICE on the evaluation of two products for EB: birch bark extract for skin wounds, and a gene therapy with a name that I find particularly difficult to pronounce, although I will give it a shot—beremagene geperpavec. I have almost certainly mispronounced that, but it is still encouraging news. However, my understanding is that those two treatments will be available only to a fraction of the total number of people suffering from EB. That is why the repurposing process for more mainstream therapeutics is so important.

DEBRA has identified six anti-inflammatory drugs that could help with EB. Several of those are already available for people with more common skin conditions

such as eczema and psoriasis, but for people with EB they could be nothing short of life-changing. They have the potential to transform thousands of lives by improving wound healing, reducing pain, and lowering the burden on the family members and carers of those with EB.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the problem with skin conditions, particularly rare conditions, is that people are also embarrassed and want to hide them, which adds insult to injury?

Gareth Bacon: I agree with the hon. Lady. That was very much the story for Wendy, the lady I met in the shop, and she was not alone in that. It is particularly true when people are young and have EB but doctors are unable to diagnose it at that stage. They do not know why they have open and weeping sores. These things sometimes attract a smell as well, and as a result people are ashamed of their condition. It has a bad social stigma and is bad for their sense of morale.

The drugs would also have a significant economic benefit. For example, research by an expert dermatology professor at King's College London found that, when used for EB, one of the drugs has been reported to reduce daily bandaging time from three hours to one by reducing the severity of the wounds, and to reduce skin itch by 60%. That in turn would save time and money for the NHS, and reduce stress on the family unit supporting the patient. Studies by the London School of Economics in 2016 and 2022 reported that EB has a wider economic impact, as parents and family members are currently obliged to reduce labour market participation due to the informal care of their loved one. The same study also revealed a higher prevalence of psychological and psychiatric symptoms among those with EB—that refers back to the point made by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse)—indicating a further tranche of support costs that could be reduced if treatments were improved. The most recent LSE study, published in September 2022, said that the annual cost per patient with dystrophic EB—the most severe form of the condition—is about £45,800, depending on the level of disability. That takes into account direct and indirect costs for patients and care givers. So the benefits are hugely significant, but, to enter the MRP process, the treatments in question will need to go through research trials to prove their efficacy in treating EB. To pay for that, DEBRA is seeking just £10 million from the Department of Health and Social Care, the NHS and the devolved Administrations to go with a further £5 million from its own fundraising campaign. That relatively small amount of money would do so much to address the misery caused by this awful condition.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I know a bit about EB. The headquarters of DEBRA are in Bracknell, and I have visited them on a number of occasions. DEBRA's work is incredible; I am full of admiration for what it does. Having come across people suffering from EB, which is a terrible, dreadful, debilitating disease, I can say with complete authority that the money we are asking for today is an absolute drop in the ocean in terms of the UK's overall health budget. Actually, we need to be throwing the kitchen sink at this and doing what we can to repurpose these drugs to give the patients and sufferers—these fantastic people—a better quality of life. I urge the Minister please to do whatever he can

to ensure that £10 million is just the start. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to do everything possible for these sufferers?

Gareth Bacon: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention and for hosting a reception for EB and for DEBRA here in June, I believe.

James Sunderland: It is on 19 June.

Gareth Bacon: You heard it here first—19 June. I will attend, and I very much hope that hon. Members will join us in the Terrace Pavilion.

As I conclude my remarks, I have three requests of the Minister. First, will he agree in principle to the Government supporting this request for funding? Secondly, I understand that the MRP process tends to focus on generic drugs, but most of the treatments identified as candidates by DEBRA are not generics. Will he therefore confirm that the MRP will consider non-generic drugs for potential use to treat EB? I have a list for him, in case he needs to see it. Finally, will he agree to meet me and representatives of DEBRA to discuss these proposals for drug repurposing and the many other ways in which we can support patients with EB and alleviate their often devastating symptoms?

10.12 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) on securing this important debate, which has been helpful to highlight this serious condition and the efforts to find treatments. I thank him for sharing the experience of his constituent, Wendy.

I very much recognise the challenges faced by people and families affected by epidermolysis bullosa, which as he rightly pointed out is a rare disease. It is estimated to be diagnosed in one in 17,000 babies born in the UK. Rare diseases are defined as those affecting fewer than one in 2,000 people and, although they are individually rare, sadly, these conditions are collectively all too common. One in 17 people will be affected by a rare disease at some point in their lifetime. In the UK, that amounts to more than 3.5 million people. It is therefore vital that these people have access to the right care, the right treatments and the right support.

I turn to the rare disease strategy. The “UK Rare Diseases Framework”, published in 2021, embodies our commitment to securing a better future for all people living with rare diseases. It sets out our vision on how to improve the lives of people with rare diseases through four vital priorities. They are helping patients to get a final diagnosis faster; increasing awareness among healthcare professionals; better co-ordination of care; and improving access to specialist care, treatments and drugs. To deliver on the Government’s ambition, all four nations have published rare diseases action plans, which set out our tailored approaches to deliver the aims of the framework in ways that are most effective for each nation’s populations and healthcare systems. In England, we published the second rare diseases action plan on 28 February, in which we set out 13 new actions to drive improvements across the health system.

My hon. Friend rightly pointed to research funding. The UK is internationally recognised for our leadership in research, the excellence of our scientific institutions and our fantastic healthcare system. We must continue

to utilise those resources to benefit those affected by rare conditions. The Government are committed to increase spending on research to £22 billion by 2026-27, moving towards our target of investing 2.4% of GDP in research and development by 2027. Alongside industry and medical research charities, the Government primarily fund research into rare conditions such as EB via UK Research and Innovation and the National Institute for Health and Care Research.

Through the NIHR, the Department of Health and Social Care invests over £1 billion a year to fund, enable and deliver world-leading health and social care research. Pioneering research is a cross-cutting theme of the rare diseases framework. We recently announced significant new funding of over £12 million via the Medical Research Council and NIHR for a rare disease research platform. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly referred to the importance of Government-backed research funding. Since 2019, the NIHR has funded three studies specifically into EB, with a total award value of over £4 million, and we have supported the delivery of more than 25 studies.

Research is vital—that has been well articulated today—but treatment is, too. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) that therapeutic treatments are also a part of the solution and are absolutely key to improving the quality of life for EB patients. As my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington said, unfortunately there is no cure for EB. However, as he also rightly pointed out and I am very pleased to say, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is currently evaluating two treatments: birch bark extract, as he pointed out, for treating skin wounds; and the gene therapy—I am afraid I am will not make a much better job of pronouncing this than him—beremagene geperpavec. I apologise to all medics and research professionals for that pronunciation; I am not a medic. If either of those treatments is given a positive recommendation by NICE, NHS England will ensure that service provision is in place to deliver it into the hands of those affected by EB.

My hon. Friend also rightly pointed out the drug repurposing process, which could be absolutely life-changing for people with EB. There is substantial interest in repurposing existing medicines to treat rare diseases, as repurposing is often quicker and less costly than developing new medicines. Our medicines repurposing programme identifies and progresses opportunities to use existing medicines in new ways that are not included in the current licence, with the aim of improving clinical outcomes, patient experience and, also importantly, value for money. As one approach to identifying candidate medicines for repurposing—my hon. Friend touched on this—the NIHR has an innovation observatory, which searches for suitable clinical trials nearing completion. That routine scanning has identified a French trial investigating the use of—I again apologise for my pronunciation, Madam Deputy Speaker—ixekizumab, a licenced treatment for other conditions such as psoriasis, for simplex generalised severe EB. The medicines repurposing programme is monitoring the study and will use the results when available to assess whether the drug is a suitable candidate for the programme.

My hon. Friend mentioned the MRP and evidence of efficacy. I want to clarify that for a medicine to enter the MRP programme there has to be some evidence of

[Will Quince]

efficacy and safety, but—this is the important point—conclusive proof of efficacy and safety is not required. Projects that need a further clinical trial are potentially eligible to enter the programme, at which point we would liaise with the NIHR about trial funding.

My hon. Friend's first specific ask was on funding. This is always the difficult bit, because it would be easy to say yes. He makes a compelling case, but I do not think he would expect me—nor would it be appropriate—to commit to funding at the Dispatch Box, though his point was very well made. I will look into it carefully and discuss it with officials, and I will be happy to meet him.

I re-emphasise that the Government very much encourage healthcare professionals, voluntary sector organisations—some of which my hon. Friend mentioned—and companies to propose candidate medicines for the medicines repurposing programme. The details and eligibility criteria are available on the NHS England website. As I said, I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further, which was his second request. Further to that, my understanding is that the medicines repurposing programme has invited the EB charities DEBRA and Cure EB to meetings to discuss specifically the repurposing of medicines for EB. The timing of this debate could not be more spot on, as I believe the DEBRA meeting is scheduled for tomorrow. Those meetings are happening, and I would happy to meet my hon. Friend. He certainly has his finger on the pulse.

James Sunderland: Since the Minister is clearly on a roll, if he is available will he commit to come to the DEBRA reception here on 19 June?

Will Quince: If I am available I would be happy to do that. I thank my hon. Friend for his support for that charity, which is based in his constituency but works

nationwide. The support that constituency Members of Parliament provide to charities through this place should not be underestimated. If I am able to attend, I will.

Jim Shannon: When we spoke earlier, I was quite sure that the Minister is truly a compassionate man. He has given us the answers that we wish to hear, and I thank him for that. He talks about the possible cures for EB. Will that information be shared with all devolved Administrations? I think he said that it would be, but I wanted to check.

Will Quince: Absolutely. We work on clinical and medical research across our United Kingdom, and rightly so. We work very closely across all four nations.

I am conscious of time, and I want to pick up on the final question from my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington about generic versus branded medicine and the MRP. Branded medicines are potentially eligible for the medicines repurposing programme. I understand that the eligibility criteria state that the programme can support generic, biosimilar and branded medicine. I would be happy to look at my hon. Friend's list.

In closing, I give my thanks again to my hon. Friend for securing today's important debate, and to all Members who have contributed. I also pay tribute to the whole EB community and charities such as DEBRA and Cure EB, which I know work tirelessly to improve the lives of people affected by the condition. They are fortunate to have my hon. Friend in this place as their champion.

Question put and agreed to.

10.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 9 May 2023

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Ukraine: Special Tribunal

11.30 am

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I call Richard Foord; it is a happy coincidence that I am wearing this blue and yellow tie.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a special tribunal on Ukraine.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies.

It has become a cliché for politicians across the House to refer to “Putin’s illegal invasion of Ukraine”. Today we should unpick that phrase a little so that we can consider how states such as the UK might respond to the full-scale invasion, aside from our ongoing provision of materiel to Ukraine. I would like to spend a few minutes talking about the crime of aggression, and I intend to set out why accountability for that crime should be sought by way of a special tribunal.

Last September, along with a few other Members of the House, some of whom are here today, I attended the Yalta European Strategy conference in Kyiv; I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. The Yalta European Strategy conference brings together politicians, academics and others from across Europe to discuss Ukrainian and European security—we also remembered a time, back in 2013, when the same conference was held in Yalta, Crimea. But talk to historians about Yalta and they are more likely to think of the conference that took place between the UK, the US and the Soviet Union in February 1945, which President Roosevelt approached with an aide-mémoire on the punishment of Nazi war criminals. The Yalta memorandum urged the use of the judicial method against the Nazi leaders because

“Condemnation of these criminals after a trial...would command maximum public support in our own times and receive the respect of history.”

The first international military tribunal at Nuremberg opened in November 1945. Major-General Nikitchenko from the Soviet Union was the presiding judge. He came from a small village about 50 miles from the border between Russia and Luhansk, and was reported to have said in the days before the opening of the trial:

“If the judge is supposed to be impartial, it would only lead to unnecessary delays.”

Thankfully, other parties to the international military tribunal disagreed with him and due process was followed. The London charter of the international military tribunal set the laws and procedures for the conduct of the Nuremberg trials, and they defined three categories of crime: war crimes, crimes against humanity and—the closest to aggression—crimes against peace.

A special tribunal for alleged aggression against Ukraine would be the first aggression-focused tribunal since Nuremberg and Tokyo, which prosecuted the leaders of axis powers after world war two for crimes against peace. These days, there are courts and tribunals that have jurisdiction over war crimes, crimes against humanity and allegations of genocide, and they include the International Criminal Court. However, there is no international body before which individuals may be tried for the crime of aggression, because the ICC cannot exercise jurisdiction over the crime of aggression unless both the victim state and the aggressor state have ratified and accepted the ICC’s jurisdiction over aggression. That is not the case for Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. Russia is not a party to the ICC, and referrals to the ICC by the UN Security Council would be vetoed by Russia.

On 17 March 2023, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin for the war crime of illegal deportation of children from Ukraine to Russia. Although that was very welcome, it starts a process that can run in parallel with the initiative to create a special tribunal. It does not change the fact that there is currently no international body before which those responsible for the crime of aggression can be brought from Russia or Belarus. Various acts of aggression can be traced back to the February 2022 full-scale invasion. If proven in court, those acts of aggression could constitute what the Nuremberg trials termed the “supreme international crime”.

A crime of aggression consists of

“the planning, preparation, initiation or execution by a person in a position effectively to exercise control over or to direct the political or military action of a State, of an act of an aggression.”

That can include manifestly illegal acts of aggression such as invasion, attack or occupation. It is the crime of aggression from which other international crimes flow, including war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

Bluntly, the videos circulating on social media in recent weeks of the apparent beheading, allegedly by Russians, of a Ukrainian soldier who was still alive show an atrocious act that was unlikely to have happened in the absence of the original aggression. A special tribunal would be the surest route by which to try the Russian leaders for international crimes. Trying senior leaders for war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide is difficult. It is difficult to link the crimes committed by soldiers on the ground, who might be ill disciplined, to senior military or political figures, who are often well aware of the risk of having crimes attributed to them. No, a special tribunal would focus on the single crime with respect to a narrow clique of perpetrators.

Russia’s use of force against a sovereign state constitutes an illegal act of aggression. It was not authorised by the UN Security Council. It was not an act of self-defence. Aggression is considered a leadership crime. Those exercising control over or directing political or military action with respect to the acts commit the crime of aggression.

Russia is not ignorant of the UN definition of aggression. At a meeting of the UN Security Council in March 1999, during the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia, Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, quoted the 1974 UN General Assembly resolution that defined aggression. Mr Lavrov said:

[Richard Foord]

“No consideration of whatever nature, whether political, economic, military or otherwise, may serve as a justification for aggression.”

The UK Government announced in January that they are joining a core group of partners to shape thinking on how to ensure criminal accountability for Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Three primary models for a special tribunal have emerged, and I will outline those briefly. The first option is a tribunal that would be based on a multilateral treaty involving Ukraine and those states willing to support it; that is how the international military tribunal at Nuremberg was set up. It would be a strictly international tribunal—these days set up, perhaps, on the recommendation of the European Union or the Council of Europe through a treaty with Ukraine.

The second option is establishing a free-standing tribunal that would be based on an agreement between Ukraine and the UN. We could pursue endorsement through a resolution of the UN General Assembly. Precedents include tribunals established by agreements between the UN and Sierra Leone.

The third option is creating a special hybrid tribunal that would be based on Ukrainian domestic law, but which would incorporate international elements. The UK Government appear to have supported that third option. Yes, such a tribunal could be created without an international agreement and without statute, without applying strictly international law, and without using significant international prosecutors or judges. However, a tribunal based on Ukrainian domestic law would face various problems. It would be difficult to overcome immunities for key senior leaders in Russia and in Belarus. Ukrainians argue that establishing such a tribunal would not be possible given the domestic constitutional changes required of the Ukrainian Parliament. However, to my mind the main objection to a hybrid tribunal is that other states might feel emboldened to create their own hybrid tribunals in the future, which would have little or no significant international support. The hybrid model is too easy to replicate, unlike a strictly international tribunal.

We also know that Ukraine itself does not support the so-called hybrid model. Last week, President Zelensky called for the creation of a special tribunal in The Hague. Let me quote Zelensky’s Netherlands speech of 4 May:

“Not hybrid promises instead of human rights, but real freedom. Not hybrid impunity and symbolic formalities, but full-scale justice. Not hybrid peace and constant flashes of violence on the frontline, but reliable peace.”

The international nature of a special tribunal would serve to flag a degree of impartiality for the special tribunal. It would more easily overcome issues relating to immunity for serving Heads of State and Governments.

Setting up a special tribunal is alleged by some to risk sending a message that the west’s goal is regime change in Moscow. I do not accept that the call for a special tribunal is somehow tantamount to signalling an interest in regime change. At no point have Ukraine’s allies suggested that we are seeking regime change in Moscow. Kremlin propagandists are already depicting NATO as seeking to threaten Russia’s existence, to tie in with Russia’s victory day today, 9 May—the commemorations of the Soviet Union’s contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany. The Kremlin is already considering that its

options are to win, or to lose power and then face prosecution. I do not accept that the model that the UK proposes for the special tribunal will affect Russia’s suggestion that we seek regime change. We do not.

How to go about creating a special tribunal? The Foreign Ministers of the G7 said in a statement in April, just a few weeks ago:

“We support exploring the creation of an internationalized tribunal based in Ukraine’s judicial system to prosecute the crime of aggression”.

Solidarity across the countries allied with Ukraine is absolutely crucial at this time. Just as the UK has firmed up opinion among Ukraine’s partners in relation to providing equipment to Ukraine, it would be good to see the UK championing the special tribunal cause, which should be as international in character as possible. A special tribunal would signal the disregard in which aggressor states are held. Support for the special tribunal could give aggressors pause for thought in the future.

The late Paddy Ashdown visited Slobodan Milošević several weeks before NATO military action against Belgrade in 1999. Ashdown commented that Milošević “seemed more frightened by the threat of indictment by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, than ... of NATO bombing”.

Writing in a more idealistic era, he wrote:

“these new courts and tribunals which the world has established in recent years...have the potential to become instruments not only for justice, but also for prevention, since they can represent a ... warning to belligerent or tyrannical leaders.”

Thank you, Mr Davies.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I remind Members that if they want to participate, they will need to bob.

11.42 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to speak in the debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) for setting the scene so well. I was happy that he asked the Backbench Business Committee for the debate, and to support him in that, and it is good that we are having it today. What will be more important is if this debate leads to the action that the hon. Gentleman has referred to. I hope that it will.

I join all hon. Members in the Chamber in stating our ongoing and unwavering support for the Ukrainian people at this time. The attendance of Olena Zelenska at the coronation was a timely reminder that, while it was right and proper that we celebrate the passing of the Crown in this way, the problems of the world continue and so do our responsibilities to address them where we can. I believe that one of those responsibilities is to hold Russia to account for its aggression.

For too many years, Russia has pushed the boundaries and, in the desire for peace, little has been said or done to remind it that there is a line that should not be crossed. That line was crossed last March when Russia invaded Ukraine. It was crossed whenever Russia invaded Crimea. I am always reminded of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant)—he is not here today, but he was one of the outspoken Members at that time who highlighted the importance of what was happening in Ukraine. I agreed with him that we should have taken action to support Ukraine. We did not, but certainly the

United Kingdom Government, NATO, the United States and everyone else has now come in and supported Ukraine, and that is really good news.

We continue to see the boundary being pushed further, as Russia's media machine, ably assisted by its allies in North Korea, Belarus, Eritrea and Syria, seeks to spin the war as a noble endeavour and the rape and destruction of Ukraine as a simple casualty of war. It is more than that. That is not the truth at all. The truth is that this war is a violation of peace and should be internationally recognised as such; the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton set that point out very well. For that reason, and because each time I see on TV women and children standing by as their homes and future are decimated due to the greed of Russia, my resolve hardens. I was watching that on TV this morning. The hon. Gentleman referred to the missile attack on Kyiv and across all of Ukraine. It is obvious that Russia is, again, hitting civilian targets, and that really grieves me.

Another thing that grieves me greatly is the indiscriminate attacks by Russian soldiers on innocent civilians and the sexual abuse and rape of women and girls. The evidential base is there in some quantity, regarding girls as young as four and women as old as 83. How can that be the world that we live in, where there is no respect for women and young girls? That grieves me.

I would love to see Russia being made accountable in the courts, wherever that may be. The hon. Gentleman asks for that; I ask for that. As a Christian, I am also minded that, while the perpetrators might escape justice in this world, they certainly will not escape justice in the next. They will burn in the fires of hell. I would like to see that happening sooner than it is happening at the present time.

I was delighted to see our Government acknowledging that a special tribunal is a possibility; I would like to see it become more than a possibility. However, for it to become reality, the idea must be driven by all the nations, including ourselves, and not simply be bandied about as a matter of words.

I was very happy to see our UK Government announcing their membership of the core group of states seeking to achieve criminal accountability in this situation. However, that acknowledgement must be followed by action. The Minister is a good Minister, and he always responds in a very positive way; when he responds today, I am hoping he will reinforce our requests to have the words become action. That is certainly what I and others wish to see.

The crime of aggression is, first and foremost, a violation of international law's prohibition of the use of force. Article 2 of the UN charter proscribes the use of force, subject to narrow exceptions. The UN General Assembly definition of aggression, in article 5, states:

"A war of aggression is a crime against international peace. Aggression gives rise to international responsibility."

We all know that Russia has been guilty of a crime against international peace and against the innocent peoples of Ukraine. The UN General Assembly definition further states:

"No territorial acquisition or special advantage resulting from aggression is or shall be recognised as lawful."

It is very clear what the words say. If those words say that, our Government need to make sure that we have the law in place to make those people accountable, and to make Russia accountable.

The prohibition is given teeth by imposing criminal liability on individuals responsible for significant breaches of it. There have been many. It is very pleasing to see Ukraine, President Zelensky and others gathering evidence that will convict people when the opportunity arises. It is clear that the definition is absolutely applicable to the action taken by Russia against Ukraine.

Although I recognise the Government's position that any new tribunal would also need sufficient international support and must not undermine existing accountability mechanisms, some available options do allow for that. I urge that we make our position clear and, further, that we begin the actions of making this a reality.

The United Kingdom cannot do this on our own—our Government cannot do this on their own. They can do it with the help of the EU states and the fellow members of NATO, of the United States of America and those countries from other parts of the world who have also lent their support to Ukraine. There is a united body that wants to see the accountability process in place. There is a body of countries who want to see a special tribunal for Ukraine in place for the actions of those in Russia who have carried out despicable crimes.

I gently say to the Minister that the upshot of today's debate should not be simply another resounding message of support for Ukraine. It should be the taking of the action spoken about by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton and this crime of aggression being processed as such. The world must quickly recognise that these actions will not be ignored and that the perpetrators will be held accountable—that includes President Putin, the generals and every soldier who carried out the acts.

In conclusion, the support that we lend Ukraine through weapons and aid is essential. We do it well. I commend previous Prime Ministers, the present Prime Minister and our Government for what they have done in galvanising support across the world to help Ukraine. We need to stand up against evil actions in law, and today's debate should be the first step. I very much support what the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton has said.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I invite John Howell to speak next—my colleague at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which does so much on human rights and the rule of law. In fact, he is the leader of our delegation.

11.51 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. This is an interesting subject, and an appropriate time to raise it. In just under two weeks' time, a summit of the Council of Europe takes place in Reykjavík. It is only the fourth summit in the history of the Council. High on the agenda is Ukraine.

We have two issues. The first is how we can deal with crimes against humanity. As we have heard, that is already taken care of; there is an established precedent for that. The second is how we can deal with crimes of aggression. We heard some examples of how crimes of aggression can be dealt with, but the problem is that none of those precedents can be transposed on to the situation in Ukraine. It is legitimate to point out that there are substantial differences between the situation

[John Howell]

at hand and those precedents. Much caution is required even in drawing analogies between how those tribunals ran and how they can be set up now.

One organisation above all—this will gladden your heart, Mr Davies—is able to take this role. It is not the UN, from which it is almost impossible to believe that there will be an agreement to take this forward. It is the Council of Europe. The Council has already committed to going for a tribunal of aggression, both at the level of the Parliamentary Assembly and at the level of the Committee of Ministers, which is the equivalent of a second Chamber to the Assembly.

It is perfectly legitimate to point out that national defence does not fall within the normal scope of the Council of Europe, which has long stated that it is not a defence organisation. However, the Council has on a number of occasions expressed itself on Ukraine, and has said that it wants to help the situation there. With your permission, Mr Davies, I will reaffirm a number of those statements. First, the Council of Europe has reaffirmed the need for a strong and unequivocal international legal response to the aggression against Ukraine. It has already said that aggression is a crime, and we need to deal with it. It permits no place for impunity for serious violations of international law. Secondly, the Council has stressed the urgent need to ensure a comprehensive system of accountability for serious violations of international law arising out of the Russian aggression. I will come back to that and give a suggestion on it.

The Council has noted with great interest the Ukrainian proposals to establish an ad hoc special tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine, subject to what will be decided at the Reykjavík summit. Thirdly, the Council welcomed ongoing efforts, in co-operation with Ukraine, to secure accountability for the crime of aggression against Ukraine, and to secure full reparations for the damage, loss or injury caused by Russia's violations of international law in Ukraine. Those ideas of accountability and full reparations are crucial to what the Council summit will be able to decide.

The Council of Europe is looking to set up a register of goods and buildings destroyed by the Russians during their war of aggression. One may think, "Why is a register necessary?" It is necessary, first of all, so that we can work out the scale of reparations. We cannot pluck a figure for reparations out of the air; it must be based on actual evidence. The Council of Europe stresses very much the need for accountability, which is why it thinks that a tribunal is a good idea.

The summit will be attended by a very senior member of the Government. Representatives of leading countries are going, including President Macron and the President of Germany; the President and Prime Minister of Iceland will be there as well. The summit will cover setting up that register, the ability to deal with reparations, and the accountability of Putin. I read a legal treatise that says that the Council of Europe is perfectly legitimately set up to deal with matters within the prism of accountability for the commission of an international crime, and with the crime of aggression. That is not outside the Council of Europe's scope. That means that the Council would not be acting *ultra vires* in concluding an agreement with Ukraine for the creation of such a tribunal. That is an important note on which to finish my comments.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Thank you so much, John Howell, in particular for the reference to the upcoming Reykjavík Council of Europe summit.

11.58 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) for securing this debate on an issue of vital importance, not only to achieving natural justice for the people of Ukraine, but to ensuring that crimes of aggression, such as those committed by Vladimir Putin and his regime, are not without consequences. Regardless of what we think of any sort of international order or universal values, that sort of barbarism is not to be tolerated. I am glad to say that I think that feeling is shared by Members from across the House, by people across the islands of the north Atlantic, and certainly by my colleagues in the Scottish National party. Our members unanimously passed a resolution at our conference last year calling for exactly that sort of action to be taken against this aggressor, who has caused so much pain and suffering to people with whom he has claimed fraternity.

We have heard all too often, including this morning, that there is one obvious stumbling block to establishing a tribunal: the lack of a suitable venue. To be blunt, with the United Nations and even the International Criminal Court unlikely to accept the case for what some would call crushingly cynical political reasons, it would be a test of judicial dexterity to ensure accountability.

I was glad to hear the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and for Henley (John Howell), mention the Council of Europe as a venue. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton mentioned the requirement for more dexterity in the legal process. I am mindful of the agreement between the UK and the former Libyan regime, which allowed a sitting of the High Court of Justiciary in the Netherlands. It had special jurisdiction over other territories; that was based on Security Council resolution 1192. That agreement allowed what was then the highest court of Scotland to sit in another country to bring about the conviction of the Libyan bomber. The difficulty of going through the UN in this case is that the Russian Federation would veto that.

It is important and appropriate to acknowledge the work of the investigators on the ground in recording the crimes perpetrated by the Russian Federation, whether they are domestic or international law-and-order units or ordinary Ukrainian people. Their ability to carry out such an exacting job in the face of demonstrable and abject horror needs to be commended. Any international tribunal will rely on their work, and they know that. I imagine that, in any circumstances, that is what keeps them going.

Those of us who grew up with those who remembered the horrors of the second world war did not think we would ever be in such a position again. I grew up with a father who was a first-hand witness to one of the largest Nazi atrocities imposed on a civilian population during the second world war, namely the Clydebank blitz. The idea that, in an age of smart munitions, civilians would continue to be targeted so indiscriminately is unfathomable, yet there is a litany of reports, often accompanied by heartbreaking images, of targeting of residential areas

of no military value. It could be no clearer that these atrocities are happening nearly daily. There can be no question but that my party and I welcome the Foreign Secretary's commitment to joining the core group set up to further investigate avenues. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on that point, and any other commitments that the Government can give. It is important that we challenge ourselves.

I appreciate the possibility of creating a precedent for the further investigation of possible war crimes committed by other countries, even the UK. Many would note that that would probably include places such as Iraq. I marched against that conflict for many reasons, and the precedent it set was clear to me at the time. No one in this place should shy away from ensuring that justice is done, whenever and wherever. I hope that when colleagues sum up, they will echo my sentiments.

There are those who say that in laying the foundations for such a tribunal, we close off the potential for a negotiated settlement in Ukraine, because Putin will not agree to terms that see him come before this tribunal. I understand that rationale, but I simply cannot see any alternative in the face of such evil-doing. The idea has not stopped him planning to travel abroad, whether to occupied Mariupol or even South Africa. After the failure to take Kyiv within 72 hours, I do not think he was in any doubt that there would be no return to the status quo ante. Either Putin will be removed by an internal opponent, of which there are increasing numbers, or he will face justice for his crimes in Ukraine. I hope he faces justice.

I finish by reiterating my party's unwavering support for the establishment of an international tribunal that will ensure accountability for the litany of crimes committed by the Russian Federation in Ukraine. I hope to see not only the liberation of all regions of Ukraine under occupation, but justice for those who have suffered.

12.4 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Davies. You are wearing an excellent tie; there are a number of good ties on display. I thank the hon. and gallant Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) for securing this critical debate, and thank all colleagues for their valuable and insightful contributions. I also declare an interest: I travelled on the same trip to Ukraine as him. It gave us a huge insight into the reality of the devastation of Putin's brutal actions against the civilians and people of Ukraine.

Over the weekend, we came together in this country to celebrate the coronation of His Majesty King Charles III, and to look forward to the future. It was a time of celebration, hope and optimism. In Ukraine, tragically, this weekend could not have been more different. Ukraine had to withstand yet another series of barrages against civilian areas. Yesterday morning alone, Russia launched 16 missile strikes on cities and regions, including Kharkiv, Kherson, Mykolaiv and Odesa, as well as 61 other airstrikes—barbarous actions that are feared to have killed even more civilians.

As we have seen throughout the conflict, Russia's brutality truly knows no limits. Such damage has been done to the people and the country of Ukraine. Families have been torn apart, lives have been lost, injuries have been caused, and devastation has been inflicted on

cities, towns and villages. There is also the impact on the economy. At the root of that is the flagrant disregard that Russia has shown towards Ukrainian sovereignty. Its actions are those of a tyrant who continues to believe that he and his regime are outside any legal or moral standard—outside the parameters of accountability. We need to show him and the Russian regime that that is not the case. That is why today's debate is so integral to our efforts, and those of our allies and partners, to hold him to account for the atrocities being committed in his name.

As you will know, Mr Davies, the Opposition have been clear since the war began that the Government would enjoy our full support if they strengthened the UK's position on the conflict in Ukraine, and the response to Russia's actions. There is a great deal of unity across the House, whether on sanctions; tackling illicit finance; providing military, technical and humanitarian support to Ukraine; or expanding and emboldening our diplomatic coalition. The first lady of Ukraine will have heard that again when she attended the coronation at the weekend.

I have a series of questions for the Minister on the issue of a special tribunal. As far back as March last year, days after the latest phase of this brutal invasion, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) joined others in calling for the creation of a special tribunal to prosecute President Putin and others in the Kremlin regime for the crime of aggression. We welcome other ongoing efforts, which have already been discussed. That includes individual war crimes investigations and prosecutions in Ukraine domestically. The International Criminal Court has taken the welcome step of issuing an arrest warrant for the utterly brutal alleged crime of the illegal deportation of children. We have to accept that we can pursue distinct, potentially complementary, legal routes to ensure that Ukraine and its people receive justice.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said at the start of the conflict that the establishment of a special tribunal would be critical to holding Putin to account for the original sin—the crime of aggression. We and others have listened, and have added our voice to the growing international chorus that backs that practical and necessary step. I was going through the Library briefing on the issue. There have been a lot of questions and debates on this issue in the House, but we have yet to hear the Government's thinking on a special tribunal. As has been mentioned, the Government have joined this core group, but the commitment appears to concern a hybrid model. It is important to note, and we have said all along, that we want to be led by Ukrainians—what Ukrainians want and what the Ukrainian Government want. President Zelensky has been very reluctant to have a hybrid model. Indeed, he recently said:

“only one institution is capable of responding to the original crime—the crime of aggression. A Tribunal! Not something hybrid that can formally close the topic...Not some compromise that will allow politicians to say that the case is allegedly done...But a true, full-fledged Tribunal. True and full justice.”

Throughout, we have listened to and been led by the wishes of Ukraine's leaders and its people, and that needs to happen on this issue as well.

In February, the President of the EU Commission also announced that he would establish the International Centre for Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression

[Stephen Doughty]

against Ukraine, which will be headquartered in The Hague. We have heard about the excellent work going on in the Council of Europe and other international examples, some of which I will come to later, but we have yet to hear a clear position from the Government on this. It is very important that we do, because we have heard about the potential weaknesses and limitations in some of the other models. The ICC alone does not have jurisdiction over the crime of aggression unless both the victim and aggressor have ratified and accepted the Court's jurisdiction over a specific crime, so another way forward must be devised if we are to hold the regime to account.

It is beyond any reasonable doubt that Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its ongoing use of force against Ukrainian sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence is an act of aggression amounting to a violation of article 2(4) of the UN charter. Russia has irrefutably breached the threshold amounting to the legally defined crime of aggression under article 8 of the Rome statute of the ICC, which relates to the

"planning, preparation, initiation or execution, by a person in a position effectively to exercise control over or to direct the political or military action of a State".

Similar questions can be raised about others who have been involved. Will the Minister comment on the situation with regard to Belarus and its aiding and abetting of the Russian regime, particularly as we saw in the early stages of the war and the attempts to capture Kyiv?

The United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution on 2 March last year, which:

"Deplores in the strongest terms the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in violation of Article 2 (4) of the Charter".

The Minister knows that that carried the support of 141 states and was a clear, incontrovertible and significant decision by the United Nations General Assembly.

John Howell: The hon. Gentleman speaks of other states being involved. Is he aware that a big impetus for the tribunal comes from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania? That is partly to support Ukraine, but it is also seen as a defensive measure should Russia invade those countries.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. Indeed, he tempts me further forward, but let me refer to some of the other international support. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania made a joint statement on October 16 last year. I have mentioned the European Union, and the President of the European Commission made a statement on 20 November 2022, as did France. Indeed, there has been a growing chorus of other Governments, academics, legal experts and those who have been involved in similar processes in the past.

We can look at other tribunals that have been created, such as the special tribunals that were created for the former Yugoslavia and for crimes in Sierra Leone and Liberia. There are distinct differences, but we can learn important lessons from them. Indeed, the House of Commons Library refers to the Dutch Government's willingness to hold a special tribunal. Although that is distinct from the ICC and its position in The Hague, the seat of international justice, the Dutch Government have indicated their willingness.

We have heard about the different options during this debate. That includes, first, amending the ICC's Rome statute, although there are serious workability issues around that; secondly, a so-called hybrid model, but, as we have heard, President Zelensky does not feel that that is the right way forward; and thirdly, an international court established by the UN General Assembly with the agreement of Ukraine. We could also have a treaty between interested states, creating a special tribunal, and we have heard of a fifth option, which is the model that the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) referred to in relation to the Council of Europe.

There are two critical issues that we would need to address in any model. First, there is the issue of immunities. There are questions in some of the options about whether immunity would come into play. Secondly, there is the question of selectivity, but I do not think that those need to necessarily stand in the way of the model. As has been said, a number of international legal experts and countries believe that those can be overcome by the special tribunal model.

Let me be clear that the brutality—the sheer wickedness—of what we have seen in Ukraine requires some very creative, robust and ambitious thinking. That is why Labour Members, and many hon. Members across the House, have supported the Ukrainian proposal for a special tribunal. These are some of the worst crimes that we have seen and the most incontrovertible case of aggression. Also, establishing a special tribunal and finding against Putin and Russia, as I very much hope it would, would lead us to a place where we can potentially take further action to give practical help to the people of Ukraine—for example, on the sequestration of Russian state assets. If we can establish and prosecute that original sin—that original crime of aggression—it could help to underpin the international legal basis for other actions that could lead to direct support for the Ukrainian people, as well as achieving the fundamental aim of justice for the country and its people for the crimes they have suffered.

I will end by quoting President Zelensky. In recent days, he said:

"But we know that the lasting peace after victory is achieved by nothing else but the strength of values. First of all, it's the strength of freedom and of law, which must work to the full to ensure justice. Not hybrid promises instead of human rights, but real freedom. Not hybrid impunity and symbolic formalities, but full-scale justice. Not hybrid peace and constant flashes of violence on the frontline, but reliable peace. When one respects values—true freedom, true justice, true peace is respected"

and that is

"exactly what we need now."

We should show the same ambition and the same passion for justice, the rule of law and a lasting settlement for the people of Ukraine, after the brutality that they have faced. I am very interested to hear what the Minister has to say about the processes leading towards setting up a special tribunal.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Last but not least, I call the Minister.

12.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair once again,

Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. and gallant Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) on securing this important debate and on the considered views he set out, as well as other hon. Members. I will do everything I can to respond to the points that have been raised.

Across the House, we are all horrified by the horrific acts, war crimes and atrocities being committed in Ukraine. It is great to continue to see that level of cross-party support in calling out and condemning these acts of aggression. The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) talked about the experiences of his family during the second world war. My mother grew up as a little girl in occupied Denmark. We need to condemn these acts; we should learn lessons from the wars that have taken place. There is a lot more that we need to do to call out these indiscriminate attacks on civilians, widespread sexual violence, torture and execution.

We are appalled by Russia's continuing strikes against Ukraine, including missile attacks on Kyiv in the early hours of this morning and over the weekend, as the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) highlighted. We will continue to do all that we can to support Ukraine in the face of this assault on its sovereignty and territory. The United Kingdom stands with the people of Ukraine in their desire to see justice done. President Putin, the Russian leadership and the forces committing these barbaric acts must be held to account. Responding to that challenge requires a co-ordinated international approach on several fronts. That is why, over the past year, the British Government have been a leader on accountability. Working with our international partners, we have taken action on several fronts. I will set out some of the steps that we have taken.

First, we are supporting the Ukrainian justice system. It is clear that the majority of allegations of atrocity crimes committed will be investigated and, where there is a case to be made, prosecuted in the courts of Ukraine. Ukraine's prosecutor general recently announced that Ukraine has already registered close to 80,000 cases of war crimes. Sadly, that number will increase. It is important that the Ukrainian justice system is able to rise to that considerable challenge. That is why we established the Atrocity Crimes Advisory Group with the EU and US and provided a £2.5 million UK support package. By co-ordinating among the partners, we are better able to ensure the effective and expedient deployment of resources and skilled personnel in response to the needs of the war crimes units of the office of the prosecutor general.

Through our support, more than 100 Ukrainian judges have been trained in war crimes prosecution and management and nearly 80 members of the national police of Ukraine have been trained on the forensic response, which must not be forgotten. Our package has also supported 14 mobile justice team field visits within Ukraine, including at Kherson, thereby helping to gather and protect evidence that may be used in Ukraine's investigations. We have assisted civil society organisations to deliver psychological and legal assistance to survivors of horrific sexual violence in conflict.

We are also supporting international justice mechanisms. In March last year, within weeks of Russia's invasion, the UK led efforts to refer the situation in Ukraine to the International Criminal Court. That referral has now secured the support of 42 other countries, and it enabled

the ICC prosecutor to proceed straight to investigation without the need for judicial approval. With the ICC investigations under way, we have intensified our support for the Court, including by organising meetings for international Justice Ministers, to encourage and co-ordinate offers of support.

The UK has led from the front. Last year, we made a £1 million voluntary contribution, on top of our £10.5 million of annual funding. That funding increased the ICC's capacity to collect evidence and provided enhanced psychosocial support to witnesses and survivors of traumatic atrocities. In March this year, a conference in London hosted by the former Deputy Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), generated more than £4 million in voluntary contributions and new offers of practical support for the Court and its independent investigation. That included a £1 million contribution from the United Kingdom.

The ICC is an independent judicial institution and it is for the ICC prosecutor to determine the nature and focus of the Court's investigations. Those investigations are now well under way and it is clear that they are making progress. The ICC arrest warrants for the unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children that were issued for Putin and his children's commissioner in March demonstrate that the international justice system is working and moving forward.

Let me turn to the issue of how to ensure accountability for the crime of aggression, about which many contributors to this important debate have talked. Ukraine wants accountability for the illegal, unprovoked invasion from which the war crimes stem. We share that goal and recognise the challenges in achieving it. The ICC does not have jurisdiction over the crime of aggression that has allegedly been committed in and against Ukraine. Under other circumstances, I believe the UN Security Council would have referred this act of aggression to the International Criminal Court to give it that jurisdiction. Russia's position as a veto-holding permanent member of the Security Council means that that will not happen, which is why we are exploring other options.

In January, the UK accepted Ukraine's invitation to join a core group that it created to shape thinking on criminal accountability for Russia. I am pleased that there is cross-party support for the Government's engagement in that respect. The work of the group includes exploring whether a special tribunal on the crime of aggression against Ukraine might be feasible. The hon. Members for Tiverton and Honiton and for Cardiff South and Penarth indicated that the Government might have formed a definitive view. I should explain to colleagues that the Government have not declared their support for one particular option. We joined the core group to discuss how best to hold Russia to account for the crime of aggression, and the group will consider all options. These are of course complex issues of international law.

Stephen Doughty: I accept that complexity is inherent and that serious work needs to be done, but will the Minister assure Members that he has listened to what President Zelensky and, indeed, others, including the prosecutor general and Justice Minister of Ukraine, have said very clearly on this issue and the question of a hybrid model?

David Rutley: The hon. Member makes an important point, as always. We have listened to the President, to other people who have made important points on the options and, of course, to hon. Members here about their thoughts on these matters. We are playing an important role in the core group, which Ukraine has said is the main platform for exploring the legal and technical issues involved in creating a tribunal. UK legal experts are working with their opposite numbers from other states to help to shape the proposals.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has called for action. He always does, in many debates, and we are grateful for that. I can tell him and others that as we speak today, an online summit of leaders of members of the core group is taking place, with my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary among those to send a message of support. With Ukraine and our partners in the core group, we share the goal of exploring ways to ensure effective accountability for this crime. As has been said, there are significant challenges, including complex issues of international law, which must be resolved if any new mechanism is to be successful. The core group is the right body to address those issues; the details will matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) has discussed with me on a number of occasions his very important work at the Council of Europe. We recognise that the Council of Europe is among those advocating for a tribunal and is keen to be involved. Clearly, at the moment, its role has not been agreed; there is more work to be done to shape thinking and develop options, as I have said. It is important that any new mechanism complements the ICC investigation and that the UK and Ukraine's other partners maintain our support for the existing international judicial system.

Let me reflect for a few minutes on the wider situation on the ground and the UK's support for Ukraine. Putin's army is on the defensive. Ukraine's heroic armed forces have recaptured thousands of square miles. We are working with our allies to ensure that Ukraine has the support that it needs to win this war and to secure a lasting peace. The hon. Member for Strangford made important comments in highlighting that.

We have committed £6.5 billion in military, humanitarian and economic aid since the start of the invasion. We have also made available £1.7 billion in fiscal support to Ukraine, including £1.6 billion through four World Bank loan guarantees. We have been leading work on humanitarian assistance, and helping to build an international coalition to call out Putin's invasion and in support of Ukraine. I was privileged in January to speak at the UN Security Council in favour of the UN charter and of the rule of law, which we all hold dear in our hearts. We need to ensure that other international actors show their respect for those important institutions and laws. Of course, we have also put in place an important and unprecedented set of sanctions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley talked about the importance of recovery. We are pleased to see broad support—the UK gave its support at the UN General Assembly on 14 November—for the establishment of a register of damages. That will be vital to work on recovery mechanisms to help the people of Ukraine after the conflict. Of course, we look forward to co-hosting the next Ukraine recovery conference in London next month.

Stephen Doughty: It is welcome that the recovery and reconstruction conference is taking place here, but of course one of the crucial issues at the conference will be the finance for the huge amount of reconstruction needed. One reason why we support an international special tribunal and other legal mechanisms is that they can provide a firm foundation for action to sequester and seize Russian state assets, rather than just freezing them. Can the Minister update us on the Government's thinking about the legal process for that? We have had a lot of stalling and flummery and there has not been a clear position on the issue, which will be critical for the conference.

David Rutley: I understand the point that the hon. Member makes. Clearly, the asset seizures have been important. We need to work out how they could be used in the recovery. He knows—he is very astute on these matters—that there are complex issues, but we are working away on this, just as we are on the other issues that we have talked about during the debate.

The hon. Member also talked about Belarus. We are taking every opportunity to remind the Belarusian regime that there will be serious consequences if it becomes more directly involved in Russia's war.

The UK is determined to hold Russia to account for its illegal and barbaric actions in Ukraine, and to ensure that justice prevails. That includes providing support for the Ukrainian and international justice systems, and working with the core group established by Ukraine to consider accountability, including the possibility of a special tribunal. Meanwhile, we will continue to supply aid to help the fightback and crack down on supporters of the war through sanctions, all while remaining at the centre of diplomatic efforts to secure the strongest possible support for Ukraine across the international community. We share Ukraine's determination that Putin's illegal invasion must fail and that justice must be done. As President Zelensky said last week in The Hague, "there can be no peace without justice".

12.30 pm

Richard Foord: I am grateful to hon. Members for their contributions to this interesting debate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) reflected on the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and suggested that we should have been much more active in thinking about justice at that point, rather than waiting until the full-scale invasion in 2022. Perhaps the difference between those invasions is that in 2014 Russia denied the presence of its troops in Ukraine; what makes the invasion in 2022 so outrageous is that Russia did not seek to hide the enormous military presence it had put into Ukraine.

I agree with the hon. Member that we should not simply bandy about the term "special tribunal"; we should really drive it forward and seek action. I also very much liked the fact that he referred to the UN charter and to article 2(4) on the prohibition of the use of force and the importance of territorial integrity.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) for his contributions about the Council of Europe. He pointed out that Ukraine will be high on the agenda at the Council of Europe summit meeting in two weeks' time. He mentioned that there can be difficulty in getting agreement at the UN General Assembly. I accept that it can be difficult to get a majority or a

super-majority in that body, but we proved last March, when 141 states came out and condemned aggression, that achieving these things is not impossible. I appreciate the Council of Europe's reaffirming the need for strong accountability.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) for pointing out that we have to think about how aggression can set a precedent. We have to think about how, if we leave this particular aggression to go unchecked or unaccounted for, it could encourage other states to perpetrate aggression in the future. The hon. Member will correct me if I have misunderstood him, but I think he cautioned against timidity for fear that future leaders in the UK and elsewhere might be subject to prosecution. I agree that we must not be timid in that respect. Of course, both his party and mine have opposed some invasions that this country has been involved in during the last 20 years, and one in particular.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) spoke about the original sin. I very much liked the way he put that. He quoted President Zelensky on some of the shortcomings of the hybrid model. I liked the way that the hon. Member talked about "true and full justice", and I agree that that is what is required.

The Minister talked about the Atrocity Crimes Advisory Group. It is very welcome that the UK is taking initiatives in support of prosecuting war crimes and crimes against humanity. I am also grateful to the Minister for reminding us of the additional £1 million contribution by the UK to the ICC for such things as psychosocial support for victims. That is all very noble, but I was pleased that he turned to the crime of aggression. I was particularly pleased to hear him say that the UK Government have not declared support for a particular option for a tribunal. That is welcome.

Back in January, the Foreign Secretary talked about supporting a special hybrid court so long as it did not duplicate the work of the International Criminal Court. I think that we have demonstrated today, as others have elsewhere, that there is no duplication here, and that a special tribunal will be complementary to the work of the ICC. With that in mind, I look forward to the UK Government being a strong voice in support of a special tribunal that will be as international in character as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a special tribunal on Ukraine.

12.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

A46 at Tewkesbury

12.55 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered proposed changes to the A46 at Tewkesbury.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrusb Davies.

I thank the Minister for attending. He will be relieved to know that, unusually, this is not a debate during which I will ask the Government to fund a road scheme—at least, not yet. The main point of my debate is to ask the Minister to reject a business case that has been presented to him by Gloucestershire County Council.

I am told that my constituency, or at least the borough in which it falls, is without doubt the fastest growing in the country in terms of housing. Infrastructure is therefore needed to ensure that we have balanced and sustainable growth. In the southern part of my constituency, the Government are providing about half a billion pounds to fund a solution to the so-called "missing link" problem. That involves implementing a major road scheme along the A417, which will bring an end to the huge daily congestion and to the number of tragic deaths and accidents that, for far too long, have occurred on that stretch of road.

The Government have also agreed the improvements to junction 10 of the M5 in the middle of my constituency, as well as to the A4019, which serves it and goes from there into Cheltenham; that will serve the increased housing planned for the area and the proposed cyber park. That project involves, among other things, upgrading junction 10 from a two-way junction to a four-way junction, an improvement that provides some important context for the points that I wish to make about the A46.

That is happening in the south and middle of my constituency, but what about the north, with the A46 through Ashchurch and into Tewkesbury? I mentioned that my area is the fastest growing in the country, and much of that growth is taking place around junction 9 of the M5, which is served by the A46. Those roads are already very busy, with traffic queues to leave the motorway and often long and slow queues along the A46. A lot of housing lies alongside and close to that road, with much more to come. There are also some major industrial sites along the road and near the junction—companies such as Moog, L3Harris and DHL, to name just three, but there are many more—employing a great many people. In the past few months, a company called Dobbies has opened a garden centre right next to junction 9, and it has already started to build a retail outlet on the same site. It is a great development that will attract thousands of people to the area, but obviously it generates a great many vehicle journeys to and from the area.

I welcome such growth and activity. It is a tribute to local people and businesses that so many industries and people want to work and live in the area, but as I say, infrastructure is needed to support development—infrastructure that includes not only schools, flood prevention schemes, drainage systems and water service schemes, but roads infrastructure.

Some time ago, Tewkesbury Borough Council made an application for a garden town project and that was granted. It will involve the building of a further

[Mr Laurence Robertson]

10,000 houses in the area, which will of course increase road usage. When I spoke to the council at the time, some five years ago, I made my position clear: I would support the project, but with two provisos. First, because my area is subject to flooding, as the House will remember, no garden town proposals should make flood risk any worse; and secondly, improvements should be made to the already congested A46.

Since then, I have waited for the improvements to the A46 to be proposed. Covid slowed everything down, but work proceeded at the county council level. Tewkesbury Borough Council obtained about £3 million from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and passed that money on to the county to develop a scheme for improving the A46. However, although the county then proceeded to spend not only that £3 million but a further £6 million on developing the proposals, a very poor business case has been presented to the Government. My main reason for securing this debate is to ask the Government to reject that business case and to explain why.

The business case contained four options—the blue option, the orange option, the pink option and, rather troublingly, the grey option or grey route. The first three options—blue, orange and pink—are basically bypass options. The business case contains no proposal to increase the capacity of the A46 itself. Furthermore, the grey option unbelievably proposes reducing junction 9 to a two-way junction. Even with the current level of traffic, that is ridiculous and completely unnecessary; with the future extra traffic that I have discussed, it is beyond belief. Yet, for some reason, that seems to be the favoured option. I wish to explore why.

As I said, a garden centre has been built right next to the junction, and an outlet centre is to be built on the site next to it. If we add the extra businesses that are expanding on that route and the proposed 10,000-plus extra houses, the proposal to half-close the junction really is extraordinary. In addition to half-closing the junction, the proposal suggests a link road to a further half-junction just south of junction 9. The link road would be built on land that floods badly; it would run alongside two schools, including a special school, that have almost 2,000 pupils; and pylons would have to be moved. All that, and for what purpose?

The theory behind all the options is that some traffic comes from the Stratford area along the A46 to join the M5 at junction 9 and then goes south, and building a bypass would relieve the A46 of some of that traffic. The evidence for that theory has not yet been provided to me, despite all my requests over a couple of years. To accommodate the bypass, farmland would have to be built over, villages would be blighted and a railway line would need to be crossed. It is necessary to produce the evidence that such a bypass is needed, before I could support such a scheme.

I am not against the bypass in principle, if the evidence is there to support it, but even in those circumstances there is no need to half-close junction 9. There is a £220 million scheme turning junction 10 from two-way to four-way just a few miles south of junction 9. What is the logic in doing the opposite at junction 9?

Furthermore, a bypass would not solve the problems being created by local traffic—the point that those who are proposing the scheme appear to be missing. Even if

drivers wanted to access such a bypass, they would have to use the already inadequate roads to do so. As I said, local traffic already queues to get in and out of Tewkesbury; that situation will worsen significantly, for the reasons I have given. That is why a proposal to increase the capacity of the A46 itself is needed, but despite having spent £9 million on the proposals, that option is not being considered.

Who exactly are proposing this scheme? I am told that the county council is responsible for making the proposals to Government, but is that the entire story? I have seen evidence that National Highways is very much in favour of promoting the grey option. Extraordinarily, the leader of the county council, Councillor Mark Hawthorne, has told me that he does not support the inclusion of the grey route in the considerations—he gave me permission to say that publicly. Will the Minister confirm that, at this stage, National Highways is not involved at all in designing the proposals and has no interest in promoting one route above another?

Last year, the county council proposed putting the four options out to a non-statutory consultation. It withdrew the proposal to consult on that basis, presumably after protests from me. Let me restate that there was no option of increasing the capacity of the A46 in the proposed consultation. It is important to make that point, because a number of people and parish councils were understandably disappointed that the consultation did not go ahead; they thought it would be a better consultation than it was. I was surprised to find out a few weeks ago that the county council intended to put the same options forward in another non-statutory consultation in June. That prompted me to secure today's debate. Perhaps because the debate is taking place, that plan has—for now—been halted.

Let me clearly state my position: there must be a scheme to increase the capacity of the A46 as it goes through Ashchurch to Tewkesbury, to deal with the local traffic. In addition—not instead of, but in addition—a bypass could be considered, provided that there is evidence that the traffic indeed comes from the north-east of Tewkesbury and that it could not be redirected along the M42. The grey route—the proposal to half-close junction 9—should be taken off the table completely. To ensure that a better business case is produced, the existing business case, which is with the Government, should be rejected.

The county council is reluctant to withdraw the business case because it has spent so much money to get to this point, but that business case is deeply flawed and there is no point throwing even away more taxpayers' money in pursuit of it. If the county will not withdraw the business case, I ask the Government to reject it and to instruct the county council to go back to the drawing board to develop proposals to increase the capacity of the A46. I would be the first to accept that increasing the capacity of the A46 would not be without its challenges, but far too little consideration has been given to the possibilities and the potential to upgrade that road.

I shall end where I started: in areas of development, particularly those with high growth, infrastructure must be in place alongside the development—not years later, but as areas are developed. We need improvements to the A46 at Tewkesbury and Ashchurch, but those improvements need to be made to that road. We need more evidence before we commit ourselves to a bypass, and we must reject any thoughts of half-closing junction 9.

News of this proposal will come as a great surprise to many people living in the area, and they will be greatly worried by it, so let us act now to remove those fears. I can only support that growth, including the garden town, if the right infrastructure is in place. That has been my consistent line all along. I ask the Minister to reject the business plan and ask the county council to take a fresh look at a scheme for the area. Such a scheme will need to be in place to accommodate growth of the kind that the Government themselves wish to see.

1.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for introducing the debate on the proposed changes to the A46 in his constituency, and for his very clear speech. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

My hon. Friend seems to have been incredibly successful in getting extra Government funding for major schemes in his constituency. Not long ago, he and I were talking with our right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) about junction 10 and the A4019, and my hon. Friend has already mentioned the missing link and the funding, which will be of huge benefit not just for his constituents, but across the country.

I welcome the opportunity to talk about this important road project involving the A46 and the proposals being developed for it. My hon. Friend has a keen interest in the proposals for the A46 in his constituency, but I should say at the outset that the proposals, as his comments reflected, are very much led by Gloucestershire County Council. There is an important principle that we have to follow, which is that it is for the council to make decisions on its objectives, options and consultation plans.

My hon. Friend asked what role National Highways has played to date. I want to make it clear to him that, at DfT's direction—because of the size of the scheme—National Highways has been advising extensively and supporting the council, as the scheme impacts broadly on the strategic road network and the M5. National Highways has been feeding into the council, but I need to emphasise that the route options being put forward are the responsibility of Gloucestershire County Council, not National Highways. I also need to emphasise that the Department's processes to assess the business case for the scheme put to us by the council, and to decide whether to approve it, are not yet complete. We are not at that stage, but my hon. Friend can certainly consider me and my officials lobbied about his clear steer on that. I can therefore talk more about the process through which the scheme is progressing than about the merits of the scheme itself, but I want to be clear about some aspects of that.

One of the things I want to be clear about is that I have looked into this issue, particularly the grey route. If the council wants to remove or change the grey route, that is absolutely fine by the Department for Transport. We will happily consider that, and it does not need to be included in the options that we look at as part of the business case. That can still happen, and I am sure the council will have heard my hon. Friend's comments today. Given that a large new garden town with 10,000

houses is being built to the east of Tewkesbury, this is clearly an important scheme and he is absolutely right to want to get questions around infrastructure answered before other developments go ahead.

I recognise the important role that the A46 plays both strategically and locally, and the challenges it faces. The A46 runs for over 150 miles, from its junction with the M5 in my hon. Friend's constituency all the way through to Grimsby in Lincolnshire. It performs many important functions, including providing access to both the Port of Bristol and the Humber ports, and to important connections between the M1 and A1 in the west of the country. It is therefore unsurprising that the A46 is part of England's strategic road network, which comprises most of our motorways and larger strategic A roads, as my hon. Friend will know. As part of the role that National Highways fulfils in maintaining the network, it is soon to complete electrical works at the A46 Teddington Hands junction that will provide new and renewed light-emitting diode lighting, and has previously undertaken some resurfacing work on the A46 between the junction and the M5 in my hon. Friend's constituency. National Highways knows how important the road is.

Approaching Tewkesbury, the A46 not only plays a vital role in facilitating long-distance journeys but, as my hon. Friend said, acts as a major local road for the communities in Ashchurch and Tewkesbury. The business case for the council's current proposals for the road, which are under assessment by my Department, reports that there are concerns about how the road performs: delays can be experienced on the A46 between the Teddington Hands roundabout and junction 9 of the M5, and there can be poor journey time reliability on the approach to and from junction 9. As my hon. Friend knows, this is also an area with significant growth plans, which he reflected extensively in his speech. Some of the developments have already gained consent but, as he said, the further large-scale plans are still going through that process at the moment.

It is in that context that the council has been developing its business case around junction 9 of the M5 and the A46 Ashchurch scheme for consideration as part of the Department's major road network and large local majors programme. Through the programme, I am pleased to say that the Department provides substantial funding to local authority-led highway schemes right across England. Such schemes can help alleviate issues such as congestion, improve road networks and provide important infrastructure improvements, particularly for public transport, which we hope will include better integrating active travel options such as walking and cycling into our broader road network wherever possible.

In September 2022, the council submitted the strategic outline business case for the scheme—the first stage of business case development—to the Department for approval. As my hon. Friend is aware, it puts forwards a shortlist of route options that would be considered further if the scheme were to progress. That is now going through the Department's rigorous consideration process, including to assess its compliance with the Green Book, value for money and strategic fit. But as I said to my hon. Friend, it can still be adjusted.

Mr Robertson: I am grateful to the Minister for his response and how he is addressing the issue. He mentions that bits could be taken out of the business case—one

[Mr Robertson]

of my big points was that the grey route should be taken out—but can things be added at this stage? What is missing is any proposal to upgrade the capacity of the A46 itself.

Mr Holden: I would be very happy for my departmental officials to meet further with my hon. Friend, and I am sure we can look at other options. This is at SOBC stage, so it is very much about the strategic case for the road and outline proposals for schemes. At this stage, I am sure we can look at such questions, particularly if, as my hon. Friend says, the leader of the GCC is happy to consider different options and the proposal comes from the council, which is, in the end, the lead authority. I cannot force the council to do it, but I will ensure that my officials do everything possible to work with my hon. Friend to provide as many of the right options as possible so that they can be considered by the Department. All the options also need to provide value for money for taxpayers. We will then decide on whether to agree to the scheme going further, and the necessary Treasury approval will be sought down the line. I expect that the process will be completed this year.

As I have already noted, this is the council's scheme. It is for the council to decide on the options it wishes to propose for consideration in its business case, while having regard for the Department's guidance, and I suggest that my hon. Friend should keep pushing the council in that direction. Similarly, decisions on the timing of public consultation on the scheme are for the council. The Department's role is to assist the council with the large local schemes that have an impact on our strategic road network and to consider the business case down the line as the council has asked us to do.

Given that any scheme would mostly affect the strategic road network, the expectation is that in the long term the scheme's detailed design and construction would

later be led by National Highways, after being led in the early stages by the council, which would of course be subject to satisfactory business case development. As I said, National Highways has been extensively advising and supporting the council on these developments, focusing on providing advice and assurance for the project, but I must be clear that the options shortlisted to date are the council's options. I also understand that at this early stage options have been shortlisted for further, more detailed appraisal. I wish to reassure my hon. Friend that no decisions have yet been made on a preferred option. I am sure that the council will want to take note of the other points he raised, particularly on flooding and broader impacts on the A46, as it progresses further with this scheme.

If the scheme progresses, it will be considered for inclusion as part of the next road investment strategy, alongside other schemes in the area. On 9 March, the Secretary of State for Transport laid before Parliament a written ministerial statement announcing that overall affordability issues mean that although schemes originally being considered as part of the RIS3 programme pipeline will continue to be developed, we will be looking at RIS4 timescales for their construction. That announcement applies to the scheme, as the council has already been made aware.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend for providing an opportunity to discuss these important proposals for what is clearly a key road in his constituency. I hope that I have provided some assistance in how he can best engage and work with the council on behalf of his constituents, as he always does, to ensure that the plans reflect local needs and desires. I hope I have also provided some reassurance as to what we have in place for possible delivery in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

1.19 pm

Sitting suspended.

School and College Funding: The Midlands

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered school and college funding in the Midlands.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am pleased to have secured this important debate and grateful to the House authorities for granting it. I welcome to Westminster schoolteachers from across the midlands who have come down to listen to the debate and to hear what the Government have to say about how they will fix the crisis in our schools and colleges. I hope their journey will not have been wasted.

Before I go on, I put on record my huge admiration for our teachers, teaching assistants, lecturers and everyone who dedicates themselves to education in our schools and colleges in the midlands and beyond. They deserve so much better than their treatment by successive Conservative Governments. I also put on record my absolute support for and solidarity with the teachers and education staff in the National Education Union as they fight for fair pay and for the future of our schools and colleges. Teachers do not take action lightly; they take it as a last resort, and only because they have been pushed to breaking point while watching their pupils be failed by Ministers. They are taking action because of their commitment to education, not in spite of it. Polling shows that the public know this too—the majority back striking teachers.

I sought this debate because I want to address a simple fact: our schools and colleges are in crisis. The reason why they are in this state is no mystery. Between 2010 and 2020, school spending per pupil in England fell by 9% in real terms, funding per student aged 16 to 18 in further education and sixth-form colleges fell by 14%, and funding per school student in sixth forms fell by a whopping 28%. The consequences are all too clear: secondary school class sizes are the highest they have been in over 40 years, and primary class sizes are the highest in Europe. At the same time as pay was cut, year on year, teachers have worked more unpaid overtime than any other profession in the UK.

The impact on students and staff is hard to overstate. Teachers who went into the profession because they love education and teaching are finding it harder and harder to go on. One teacher from the west midlands told me

“the expectations are huge...the pressure unmanageable...and the rewards diminishing in every sense.

It is becoming harder and harder to find the positive every day.” Another told me of the vicious cycle that develops: underfunding results in bigger classes and less support for students with special needs, which leads to more pressure on teachers and more staff absence.

The demands on teachers go way beyond what we should expect. While teachers’ pay has been cut, Government underfunding means that teachers increasingly have to dip into their own pockets to buy supplies. One in five are now estimated to buy everything from books and pens to rulers and glue sticks, and nearly half even buy food, clothes and soap for poorer pupils—stepping in where the state has catastrophically failed.

All of that has a predictable result. Staff recruitment and retention is in crisis and set to get worse: a quarter of all teachers and school leaders say they are considering leaving the profession for reasons other than retirement. That is backed up by the Government’s own statistics, which show that retention rates have declined since 2011 and that fewer than 60% of teachers are still in the profession after 10 years. Recruitment is in dire straits, too. The Government are now reaching less than 60% of their own target for secondary recruitment, and for some subjects the figures are even worse—just 36% for modern foreign languages, 30% for computing and an astonishing 17% for physics. That impacts learning, with a rising proportion of lessons being taught by teachers who do not have a relevant qualification. The problem has got so bad that one Coventry teacher told me of a student who by Wednesday had 10 out of their 15 lessons taught by cover staff. Perhaps nowhere in Coventry is the crisis in staff recruitment and retention felt more severely than at Coventry College.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. She is making an incredibly important point about recruitment. We recently saw the Prime Minister out with his strategy for getting more maths taught, but the Government are already failing to hit their own targets for maths teachers. Does it not say everything about this Government that we have, on the one hand, a big announcement about what is going to happen in schools and, on the other, abject failure to recruit maths teachers?

Zarah Sultana: I completely agree. It is a slogan without substance, and the Government have had to accept that those targets will not be met.

Coventry College recently announced that it would cease offering apprenticeship provision from August, citing the extreme difficulty in recruiting and retaining teaching staff. This will have a severe impact on young people in the city, depriving them of opportunities, and it runs contrary to the Government’s own skills mission as set out in the levelling-up policy agenda.

Again, there is no mystery about what is happening with recruitment and retention: educators are voting with their feet after working harder and harder for less and less. Alongside rising workloads, teachers have seen their pay cut year after year—by around 13% in real terms since 2010. The Government’s pay offer would only make things worse. In September, they offered a “pay rise” of 5%, when inflation was, of course, running at 12.6%—that so-called pay rise was really a 7% pay cut. The Government’s latest offer of an additional one-off cash payment of £1,000 would not even be consolidated into pay next year, and is dwarfed by the average energy bill alone. What makes it even worse is that, according to NEU calculations, these proposals are not even fully funded; instead, they would require most schools to make further cuts to pay for them.

It is therefore little wonder that the latest pay offer was rejected by a staggering 98% of voting NEU members. This decisive rejection must surely make the Government come back to the negotiating table with an above-inflation pay rise. That would only start to undo the damage of a decade of falling pay, as the Government must also restore pay for further education teachers and help to address the severe challenges faced by colleges across the country, including Coventry College.

[Zarah Sultana]

It is not just staff recruitment and retention that have been impacted by Government underfunding. Just last month, a Conservative Member secured a debate in this very Chamber to highlight that inadequate school funding had resulted in a severe decline in the quality and quantity of free school meals, impacting children's health and education. The Member cited a school in his constituency that pays £2.80 a meal, but receives just £2.41 a meal in funding. I am an active campaigner for free school meals to be extended to all children, guaranteeing every child a hot, healthy meal each day. However, those meals must be just that—healthy and nutritious—and that requires funding. Just like funding our schools and colleges more broadly, this is an investment from which we all benefit, with studies showing that healthy free school meals improve children's learning and health, helping with concentration and behaviour.

Just as the meals that children eat at school are affected by underfunding, so too are the buildings in which they are supposed to learn. The latest annual report published by the Department for Education says:

“There is a risk of collapse of one or more blocks in some schools”,

with the Department escalating the risk of incident from “critical—likely” to “critical—very likely”. Again, there is no mystery as to why this is happening. The House of Commons Library calculates that, between 2010 and 2022, overall capital spending in schools declined by half in real terms. There have been reports of minor collapses in recent years, but it surely should not take a more serious incident, injuring staff and children—or worse—before action is finally taken.

Staff, students, parents and the public deserve so much better than crumbling school buildings and paltry school lunches. They deserve so much better than their dedicated teachers working overtime but barely making ends meet. They deserve better than record class sizes and dwindling opportunities. That means having a Government who show they care about education by putting their money where their mouth is and investing in the future of our young people and the professionals who dedicate themselves to their education. I look forward to hearing the Minister's plans on how to address those fundamental challenges.

4.39 pm

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) on securing today's important debate.

As MP for Stafford in the west midlands, I am delighted to speak on school and college funding in the midlands. I strongly welcome today's debate, especially as fairer funding for schools and colleges has been one of my top five pledges as MP for Stafford. I am delighted that the Government recently announced that Stafford College would secure £28 million of new funding. That is for our new skills and innovation centre, which I recently visited and which will officially open later this year. That brand-new centre will develop construction and engineering workshops and hybrid vehicle technology facilities. It also has a 300-seat auditorium. I am confident that those new, state-of-the-art facilities will do much to foster and encourage digital and manufacturing skills across the midlands.

I am particularly grateful that Stafford College was chosen out of 16 colleges in England to receive that funding as part of the Government's £1.5 billion further education capital transformation fund, which was launched to rebuild and transform colleges into fit-for-purpose spaces that meet the needs of today and the future. I was delighted that the Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), visited me in my constituency a few weeks ago to see this fantastic site and the progress it has been making over the past few months.

The Secretary of State told me that nothing demonstrates the Government's commitment more than equipping young people with the skills they need by investing in this new building. I would also like to thank Craig Hodgson, the principal of the college, for hosting us and Councillor Jeremy Pert from Stafford Borough Council for all the work he has done to support me on this project.

During her visit, the Secretary of State took time to speak to a group of students who are studying for apprenticeships, A-levels and T-levels. She spoke about her experiences of studying for an apprenticeship course, which inspired my local students. She listened to what they had to say about what they wanted the Government to invest in, the courses they were studying, the skills they hope to gain and their plans for the future. I thank her for her visit to my constituency, which was a fantastic example of the Government listening to what residents have asked for—investment in our further education.

In addition to supporting Stafford College, I have invested a lot of time over the past three years as MP for Stafford in visiting local schools, including Barnfields, St Patrick's, St Pauls, Flash Ley, Marshlands and, just a few weeks ago, Wolgarston High School in Penkridge. There I met the headteacher to discuss funding needs for the school and to understand the struggles she faces when teachers go on strike without notice. I also spoke to the school's mental health and wellbeing officer, who provides important support to the students. I am a long-term advocate for mental health in Stafford, and I call on the Government for more support in schools for mental health. It is not mandatory in every school. Wolgarston is a fantastic example of a headteacher taking the issue very seriously and choosing to invest time and money. I hope the Government roll that out in other schools. I also met very ambitious A-level politics students, whose questions were more aggressive than those on “Question Time”, and I enjoyed being kept on my toes by those local students.

Lastly, I want to touch on another area of education that I strongly support: special educational needs and disabilities. I welcome the Government's SEND and alternative provision improvement plan published in March. I recently met the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), who understands the importance to families of knowing the level of support they can expect for their child.

We discussed some of the casework on autism and mental health that has come up in my recent surgeries. The improvement plan will provide more consistent provision across the country. We know that some students do best in mainstream schools, but the Government have now recognised that some need that additional support, and I welcome the thousands of extra specialist school places. The Government have also announced a

plan to invest in 400 educational psychologists to speed up assessments, and I am pleased that that plan is backed by real funding.

We all know that education is critical, and I thank the Government for investing in Stafford and taking seriously the needs of my constituents.

4.45 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) on securing this important debate. I, too, echo her words and thank all the fantastic teachers, support staff, lecturers and many others who work in the education profession, from nursery through primary and secondary school to college and university, across the great city of Stoke-on-Trent and wider north Staffordshire, including Kidsgrove, Talke and Newchapel. It is an absolutely fantastic profession, and one that I was proud to spend nearly nine years in on the frontline, working day in, day out with our fantastic young people, who we were looking to make sure excelled into the future.

I am therefore proud to declare my interest as a paid-up member of the NASUWT and as someone whose partner works as an employee of Teach First, a fantastic teacher training organisation. She was also a secondary school teacher at a number of schools in Birmingham and London. I hope all those declarations are now on the books.

The reality is that school funding has increased by 44% per pupil since 2010-11, to £7,460 per pupil. The educational budget in 2023-24 is £57.3 billion, up 64% on 2010-11. In the 2021 spending review, it was a remarkable achievement of the Department for Education to secure £7 billion in additional spending. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor then came in to add another £4 billion on top of that over the next two years—2023-24 and 2024-25—which even the Institute for Fiscal Studies says is an 8% increase in real terms for England and Wales. The IFS also noted that spending in England kept pace with the 13% rise in pupil numbers between 2010 and 2023.

Mr Perkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for quoting the IFS, because that same IFS report said that the loss of funding in the further education sector was the biggest of any education sector, and that even the extra funding in 2020 and 2021 had been eroded by the rapid growth in student numbers. He needs to provide a much fuller description of that IFS report if he wants to refer to it, as I shall be doing when I make my contribution.

Jonathan Gullis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me the opportunity to repeat the fact from the IFS that, in England, spending kept pace with the 13% rise in pupil numbers between 2010 and 2023. That is in answer to his specific question. It is positive that we are in a place where the IFS has recognised the investment that has gone into the education sector.

Ultimately, for levelling up to be achieved fully and to be delivered in places such as Mansfield or Stoke-on-Trent, we must create young people with the knowledge and skills they need to access the higher-skilled and high-wage jobs that we are so proudly bringing to our local area,

such as the 9,000 jobs created since 2015 under Conservative rule of both the city council and the Government, including 2,000 linked to the Ceramic Valley enterprise zone and 500 thanks to brand-new Home Office jobs. We are tapping into the talent pool through colleges, local jobcentres and our university to ensure that we have local people in local jobs, which will be fantastic for our local area. That is exactly what we want to see.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD) *rose*—

Jonathan Gullis: In fact, we had a 5.1% increase in per-pupil funding at Kidsgrove Primary School. That is an astonishing increase. It will make a massive difference to the school, which absolutely needs that support.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jonathan Gullis: I give way to my hon. Friend and then I will happily come on to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan).

Jane Hunt: In my hon. Friend's wonderful speech, will he talk about T-levels, for example, and how we are putting some fantastic skills into local communities, as we are doing at Loughborough College?

Jonathan Gullis: At the Conservative party conference last year, I sat next to my hon. Friend, who is a fantastic champion of the T-level programme. The Minister—I served on the Education Committee when he was in the Chair—was also a fantastic advocate. T-levels such as the digital T-level offered by the City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College will truly transform people's lives with that access to on-the-job training as well as the in-classroom opportunity. It is a fantastic scheme. I fully support the Department in all its efforts and success to date in rolling this out. As I promised, I give way to the hon. Member for North Shropshire.

Helen Morgan: The hon. Gentleman is making a passionate speech. I have met the headteachers of all my secondary schools in North Shropshire, and they tell me that last year's pay rise was unfunded and that they are really struggling to recruit teachers in the key areas of languages, maths and science. Does he find that the teachers in his area are reporting the same kinds of difficulties and concerns about educating their young people going forward?

Jonathan Gullis: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her fantastic intervention. Of course, her area faces challenges different from those faced by the city of Stoke-on-Trent, given that hers is a much more rural constituency with, I assume, higher rents and house prices in some areas than the average of Stoke-on-Trent.

When I was at the Department for Education, albeit for only 51 days under a certain former Prime Minister, I was delighted that one of the briefs was the recruitment and retention of teachers. In my very brief time there, I signed off on the 5% pay increase, as put forward by the independent pay body review, which was accepted in full—the highest increase in teacher salaries in 30 years—as well as on the manifesto commitment to deliver a £30,000-a-year starting salary, which is so important if we are to drive recruitment.

[Jonathan Gullis]

Of course, recruitment and retention have been an issue for many years, particularly in science, maths and certain other subjects. One of the challenges is that, rather than getting into the game of “Who’s going to give more grants, and to which subjects?”, we need to have a frank and honest conversation.

Ultimately, the Labour party says that it has a plan to recruit and retain more teachers. I would be delighted if Labour Members could reveal the specific details. They have told me where they will get the money from: they are going to remove the non-dom status—that is fine; that is their entitlement. What they have not said is what they will do differently. Are they going to increase salaries, including starting salaries? Are they going to increase the grants? Are they going to give more grants to more subjects? Are they going to nick talent from around the world by paying people to come here from other countries? That is their prerogative if they so wish, but the detail has yet to be supplied, despite the fact that I have repeatedly asked for it on the Floor of the House and been given some brush-off answers designed to get some Twitter clip—I seem to trend on Twitter quite successfully, almost as successfully as the hon. Member for Coventry South.

The devil is always in the detail, and I look forward to hearing from the shadow Minister about what the non-dom-status money is specifically going to do. If that money drops year on year, how will the funding be covered by any loss incurred by people moving outside the country? These are harsh realities that we have to address and accept.

I go back to the issue of the midlands area. It sometimes feels as if Stoke-on-Trent is rather unfairly treated as the ugly duckling of the west midlands, but we are the gatekeepers to the northern powerhouse, based on where we are located geographically. In the midlands, £6 billion has been allocated for in-forecast schools with higher needs funding—a 7.4% increase from 2022-23. There has been a 5.7% per pupil increase in the west midlands, but the city of Stoke-on-Trent is getting 6.8%, so we are getting 1.1 percentage points more than other parts of the region. That is great news for our schools and, most importantly, for our pupils, because local authorities will have the teachers and resources they need to invest in their local communities and schools, and to deliver the world-class education that, ultimately, is so important.

Of course, it is important to remember that there is a £5 billion education recovery fund, which includes £400 million for teacher training, £1.5 billion for tutoring and, thanks to the Education Endowment Foundation, £2 billion for evidence-based interventions that we know make a difference on the ground. The tutoring was indeed a problem. When I was on the Education Committee, I was as critical as anyone else about the fact that the Government needed to introduce reform and give the money directly to headteachers, who could either bring in their own tutors or pay teachers additional money to work beyond their normal hours.

When I was the Minister for School Standards and spoke to teachers on the ground in Sandwell, Wolverhampton, London and elsewhere about why they had put themselves forward, I heard that it was because they knew the pupils, their background and the support needed. They

felt that they were able to deliver the best. The Government legacy has to be a long-term plan for tutoring. If we do not get that right, the gap between advantage and disadvantage will, sadly, continue to grow after all the hard work that the Government did between 2010 and 2019, when the attainment gap narrowed drastically. That is something I was certainly proud of when I was in the classroom and working day in, day out on the frontline.

It is also important to remember that we have to look at teacher numbers. We know that there are 465,500 full-time teachers in the workforce—up 24,200 since 2010. That is more teachers in the classroom, which is a good thing for us all. As I say, there are all the grants that we are handing out, including around £28,000 for some science-based subjects, in order to bring in more people. There is also the new starting salary and, in education investment areas, the levelling-up premium: an additional, tax-free, bonus salary given to the subject areas where we struggle most, so that someone in Stoke-on-Trent and possibly Mansfield—I am guessing that Mansfield is an education investment area.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con) *indicated assent.*

Jonathan Gullis: It is—fantastic! I am glad to know I got the right place. Those are the types of areas that can offer something unique—something to put on the job advert that says to people why they should come to our area.

Of course, there is also the PE and sport premium for primary schools. I keep referring to my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield because I enjoyed watching him from 2017 being a doughty champion for education when I was in the classroom. That £600 million, two-year funding settlement means that more primary schools can better plan for what they are going to do to invest in young people. I thank the Lionesses and Baroness Sue Campbell for their incredible diligence in leading that campaign. I thank the fantastic local companies in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, such as Bee Active, which delivers the high-quality PE lessons that young people truly deserve—not just in Stoke-on-Trent, but across Staffordshire. That is fantastic, and it again shows that the further investment going into our schools is creating healthier bodies and minds.

There is also the holiday activity food programme, which has been excellently led by the Hubb Foundation. Former Port Vale football player, Adam Yates, has been leading the charge, ensuring that nearly a million meals have been provided across the city to those who need them. In nearly every single school holiday, that programme has been providing thousands of opportunities for young people, working with local schools to target the pupil premium and the free-school-meal students who most deserve those opportunities. That is education at its finest, which is why we should be using the school building more. We should use the building when it is holiday time. We should see the building used to its full potential.

Zarah Sultana: The hon. Member made a point about free school meals. Scotland, Wales and even London have a policy of extending those to all primary school pupils. Can I count on the hon. Member’s support for my campaign to extend that provision to all primary school pupils in England?

Jonathan Gullis: It is important to remember that there are far fewer young people in those areas than there are in England. I do not support the hon. Lady's campaign, and I will say clearly why. Ultimately, why should my children, who are currently aged one and two—it is not long before they could be receiving infant free school meals—get a free school meal given that their father is earning around £85,000 a year and their mother is earning around half that? Why should they be entitled to a free school meal?

I would rather my money went to getting a free school breakfast and a free school meal to people legitimately in need. By targeting the support to those who need it most, we can help the most. Blanket giving people something does not help those most in need; it helps the middle and upper classes, ultimately. That is where it is wrong. I want to see those on lower incomes get the help and support that they need.

One of the things we need to do in our schools is tackle the fact that we have corner shops all too ready to sell big bags of Doritos and Pringles, massive chocolate bars and 1.5 litre bottles of pop to young people. I used to confiscate them by the boatload. I was able to throw parties at the end of every term for year groups because of the amount of confiscated stuff. Corner shops are profiteering from unhealthy junk food targeted at those young people; parents are working hard to give children their hard-earned cash, but those young people are not putting that cash on to their fingerprints, which is how people pay for their meal in most schools now. That is not right; that is wrong.

I want young people to get the support and help they need—those who truly deserve and need it. The vast majority of my constituents will absolutely deserve a free school meal in most cases. Sadly, the average wage is still well below where it should be in Stoke-on-Trent, despite the fact that it increased by 11.8% between 2015 and 2018—outperforming the west midlands and UK averages. I am working hard to bring in those high-skilled jobs. Of course, someone like me has absolutely no right to have their child get a free school meal. I would be embarrassed for a school to give its hard-earned money to my children, when I can afford to put food on their plates. If I cannot, I have failed as a father, frankly, in the position I am fortunate enough to be in and with the money that I earn.

Helen Morgan: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that universal free school meals help to remove the stigma for those pupils who need to receive them?

Jonathan Gullis: I must tell the hon. Lady that in all my time in the teaching profession—and I was a head of year, so I dealt with behaviour and attendance—I never once had an incident where a pupil came to me to say that they had been singled out because they were on free school meals. Ultimately, that was never publicised. Unless the pupil shared that information, other pupils in the classroom were unaware of it. The pupil went up to the till, put their fingerprint on, and no one else knew what was going on; there was money in the account as far as the other students were aware. There was no stigma attached, and there should be no stigma attached.

Everyone needs help and support in their lives at some stage. During the covid pandemic, my own father had to rely for the very first time on the welfare state to

prop him up; he had been working as a music teacher contracted out to teach individuals and could not do face-to-face teaching. As he is caring for my stepmother as we speak—she has had quite serious surgery—the welfare state is propping him up after the years he has paid into it. Those are appropriate moments to use the welfare state, and the welfare state should support those most in need, but of course I accept the importance of ensuring that a child has food in their belly in the morning. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind about that.

The Education Endowment Foundation fully backs up what the hon. Member for Coventry South, the hon. Member for North Shropshire and I want to achieve. If students have food in their stomachs, their concentration levels, attendance, behaviour and ability to achieve are better. As I say, free school meals should not be given to those who can afford to put food on their children's tables. That money should be used to provide breakfast and lunch for those most in need, because those children deserve it.

Mr Perkins: Does the hon. Gentleman not see a contradiction between his saying, "I would be embarrassed as a parent if my children needed free school meals," and on the other hand saying, "There is no stigma attached to having free school meals"? The reality is that there are many parents who do not apply for free school meals and might not consider that they are in poverty but who may well be eligible for them. Do the hon. Gentleman's comments not rather miss the point?

Jonathan Gullis: I am sure that the hon. Member would never want to mislead this Chamber, and I accept that there was probably a mistake there. I think that I was perfectly clear when I said that, with the money that I earn, I would be embarrassed if I was unable to put food on my children's table, day in, day out. I think that that was perfectly clear and the transcript will show it. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will reflect on his words. If I were to see my words misconstrued in any way, I would have to contact Mr Speaker's office to get remediation, because it would be wrong to politically twist what was said abundantly clearly. *Hansard* will pick up my words. I would be embarrassed, personally, if I was unable to put food on the table, based on the salary that I earn. That would be taking a meal out of the mouth of a child in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, who rightfully would deserve that meal. That is why I would be embarrassed: it would mean that those who need it most would not get the level of help that they truly deserve.

My mother was on a council estate in London, and she got off it thanks to grammar school—something that the hon. Member for Coventry South herself will know well about, having been such a beneficiary of that world-class education, which I hope to bring to Stoke-on-Trent. My father, who failed his O-levels, went back to being a cleaner at his school during the day and did night school in the evening. He went all the way through to becoming a council worker while doing night school for his A-levels, and then he went to the Open University and became the first ever in my family to get a degree.

My grandfather spent 93 hours a week driving lorries, my grandmother worked in hotels, my other grandmother was a teaching assistant, and my other grandfather, sadly, passed away when my mother was 17 years old.

[Jonathan Gullis]

That is exactly why I am proud of my legacy—of what my family have done to give me every advantage that I have had in life. I am aware of the privilege that I have had, and I want to ensure that the pupils I am proud to represent in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke get everything that they deserve.

I want Stoke-on-Trent to be great. It is a small but mighty city, and levelling up will be achieved only by getting the education in our sector right. That is why I am so damning of the “Not Education Union” spending its time convincing teachers to walk on picket lines rather than being in classrooms and helping pupils to recover from the pandemic. We have accepted that the gravest mistake was that pupils were not in the classroom during the pandemic. Face-to-face learning is so critical, and the quality of provision was a postcode lottery for some pupils—whether they were given virtual lessons immediately or months down the line. That was no fault of the hard-working teachers. Sadly, it was the fault of Ministers who decided not to let pupils and teachers into the classroom together. I hope that we will never again see a day when face-to-face teaching is brought into disrepute.

I hope that Kevin Courtney and Mary Boustead can put their bias and political game-playing to one side. They are living out their socialist utopian fantasy that they are so desperate for—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that the scope of this debate is quite narrow? I am sure that he would like to pursue what he is discussing, but I am afraid that today is not the time. We need to stay within the scope of the motion. I am sure that he wants to get back to funding for his midlands constituency.

Jonathan Gullis: Thank you very much, Mr Pritchard; yes, I am happy to go back to the funding that has been so important to our local area. We are lucky that the schools in Stoke-on-Trent are quite new, so we are not in the desperate situation that, I accept, other areas are in. I believe that £1.8 billion of additional funding is now going into improving the school estate, which is important to improving our local areas. In Stoke-on-Trent, I want that funding to look at the challenge of the day, which is workload.

Money is going into schools. We now know that there has been an increase, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies itself has said, of above 8% in real terms. We know that that is keeping pace with a 13% rise in pupil numbers. Stoke-on-Trent has seen a 6.8% increase. The money is in the system. Now I want to see that money go where it is needed most. Schools obviously got support through the energy bill relief scheme; up to potentially 40% per month in the case of some schools was the saving from the cap on energy costs, which was a huge intervention. The total figure was about £500 million, if I remember correctly.

I want the money now to be used to think about workload. How can we drive down workload to free up teacher time—to ensure that teachers are spending more time in the classroom and more time doing interventions, rather than getting caught up in unnecessary, bureaucratic meetings? This is where I challenge the Minister to go to

the DFE, print off every single piece of guidance issued and have a challenge to halve it. I asked the Department to do that when I was there. People laughed and said that it would fill up my office. It is a concern if schools have to deal with that level of guidance. That means that they cannot spend their time or money focusing on what really matters, which is why we need to ensure that we get the guidance halved.

Of course, there is also the issue of behaviour. Investing in behaviour hubs and behaviour specialisms is massively important to improving outcomes, because it is what is driving teachers out of the classroom and preventing people from coming into the profession. Sadly, they hear too often from Opposition Members how bad teaching is, how terrible teaching is. Talk about a negative advert for the teaching profession—talk about an advert to say why people should not go into teaching! When you are telling everyone how bad it is, do not be shocked that no one wants to go into it. What we need to do is to invest in behaviour hubs, so that we can ensure that young people have good law and order in their classroom, the teacher feels safe and secure and, ultimately, every single pupil has a right to learn, rather than one pupil having a right to disrupt and disregard the ambitions of everyone else.

Thank you, Mr Pritchard, for my time.

5.6 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) on securing this really important debate. It is a pleasure also to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), whose constituency includes Kidsgrove and Talke—we have to ensure we get all of them in or he tells us off. His passion for this subject is visible for us all to see. I thank him for his kind words about my advocacy around education. You will be pleased to hear, though, Mr Pritchard, that I will be significantly briefer than he was. He managed to talk for 20 minutes, and still I agree with every single thing that he said, so I am grateful that he did.

The first thing for me to say is that I never intended to be in this place. If anyone has ever listened to any after-dinner speech that I have given, they will know that I never wanted to be an MP. I always wanted to be a teacher—that was my intention all the way from primary school, in fact. It is only by pure accident that I have ended up in this place instead. Therefore it is absolutely clear to me that education should be the biggest priority of any Government. I have always said that if I had just £1, I would put it into schools; that would be my first priority. I had the privilege of serving on the Education Committee when it was under the chairmanship of the Minister and I know his passion for education, too.

I have been in this Chamber many times advocating around teacher recruitment and retention in particular. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North is absolutely right when he says that teacher workload is so important and often overlooked. We always talk about pay, but actually most of the teachers I speak to recognise that we have some of the shortest school days in Europe but some of the longest teacher working hours. That cannot be right. There must be something that we can do to reduce that workload and

give teachers back autonomy and the ability to be in the classroom and to teach, instead of dealing with paperwork and data. That must be an absolute priority for the Minister.

I want to highlight some of the positive progress in my constituency, because there has been positive progress. There has been a particularly positive trajectory in the number of schools that are rated good. Certainly we could count the number of those secondary schools on one hand prior to my election in 2017, but we have made good progress. We have had a Government agenda on education that benefits constituencies such as mine—not least the shift towards technical and vocational qualifications and towards what I often call cultural capital, as opposed to just the academic. It will take time to embed it in our schools and our education systems, but so often it is the most disadvantaged children who just do not have that life experience to be able to achieve more, to be ambitious and to understand all their options and opportunities in life. I am grateful that Ofsted has started to shift slowly in that direction as well.

I am grateful also for the early years funding budget, which was increased in the Budget earlier this year, because our education system is not just schools and colleges; it starts right from day one of a child's life. Thinking of some of the most disadvantaged estates in my Mansfield constituency, I know that our early years provision in particular is the key to ensuring that children have a fair shot in life.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer confirmed in the autumn statement that schools will receive an extra £2 billion over the next two years. School budgets will rise by £3.5 billion next year, which is absolutely massive. That is why this Labour rhetoric around school cuts winds me up. The language of “school cuts, school cuts”, the websites with misleading figures, and all the rest of it suggest that somebody in Government has taken a decision and said, “No, we're not going to give money to schools anymore,” but that could not be further from the truth. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North listed the figures: since 2010 education budgets have been increased by about 60%. There has never been more money in our education system.

It is not fair to suggest that Ministers have decided to cut schools. Saying, “We can't keep up with 12% inflation when our public services are massively squeezed,” is not a school cut. Ministers have not decided to take money away from schools. Highlighting that difference in intention is really important to our public conversation. It is just not true to suggest that Conservative Ministers are not willing to invest in our schools.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, Ashfield and Mansfield are education investment areas. The aim is to improve outcomes in parts of the country where, unfortunately, literacy and numeracy are poor. Eleven local authorities in the midlands are part of that programme. More local funding is good, but I say to the Minister—I want to drive the Government to do this—is that it is always best when there is local autonomy in how funding is spent. In my constituency, some of the funding has been spent on structures, supporting the governance of academy trusts and things such as that, but I would love it go to classrooms. I would love it to be given to schools so that teachers and heads can use it at their own discretion, as that is the most effective way to spend schools funding.

I am pleased, therefore, that there is local autonomy when it comes to the new budget uplifts. Mansfield is getting just over £3 million in extra funding for schools in the next academic year, as part of the £2 billion uplift. I think the first payments are landing this week, which is excellent news. Schools will have the freedom to choose whether to spend the money on extra staff, better pay or whatever else they decide. It has always been my view that it should be for schools to decide.

In my part of the world, there has also been significant capital investment in school buildings and facilities. Over £13 billion has been invested since 2015, but we are always playing catch-up, because the schools estate in much of the country is very old. I have always found it very frustrating that when I take some of the most difficult examples to the DFE, I am told, “You think that's bad? Go have a look at X down the road. There are so many examples.” That is frustrating, but there has been significant capital investment in the schools estate around the country.

I was delighted when, in December, three Mansfield schools—the Meden School, the Garibaldi School and All Saints' Catholic Academy—were selected to be among the 239 to be rebuilt or substantially refurbished. That was brilliant news, but I urge the Government and the DFE to help us accelerate that programme, because the sooner that investment is visible on the ground, the better. I have spoken to the schools about their plans and they are good to go; they are ready. They are applying for planning permission, and as soon as they get the word from the DFE, they will start to build.

That programme is so important for students and communities, not just because of the state of school buildings and because they will get new classrooms, but because of the feeling it generates that somebody is investing in the community, particularly in areas of significant disadvantage. There are levelling-up outcomes when people can say, “Somebody has put millions of pounds into my community, and invested in my children's futures.” That is so meaningful and powerful for communities. It demonstrates a commitment to Mansfield and communities like it.

In the recent local elections, I spoke to a lot of people on the doorstep who said, “Look, there are lots of conversations about this stuff and I hear about the figures, but show me the buildings and the outcomes.” That is what we need to achieve by the next election. We need to grow our communities' confidence so that they support us for another term. Let us get those schools built.

Across Nottinghamshire, two new primary schools are opening in September, and new extensions and secondary places in existing schools have been funded in no small part by central Government. I am also grateful for the energy price support provided to help us to face this difficult economic challenge: £500 million has been shared out for energy efficiency measures.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North mentioned facilities, and in particular sports facilities. I am a huge advocate of opening up school facilities to our communities. Our schools are not just education providers; they are hubs of our communities. That is particularly true of primary schools. Engaging parents in education when their children are of primary age is so important. For many estates in my constituency, the school and school fields are the only sports provision

[Ben Bradley]

and community buildings, so let us get them open for as many hours as possible. Let us get partners, councils, community groups in there, delivering more on evenings and weekends. Let us use those taxpayer-funded facilities to their maximum. I am grateful for the additional funding for that.

I mentioned the direction of travel on skills and technical and vocational education. I am a massive believer in work-based learning. For many people, technical and vocational qualifications—apprenticeships and similar such qualifications—will provide far better outcomes and life opportunities than university. The key thing for many students in my constituency is choice and having the right information to help them get the best outcome. The Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 has started to drive things in the right direction, getting more careers advice and third-party organisations into schools. That is hugely important.

I want to highlight the good work of West Nottinghamshire College in Mansfield. When I became a Member of Parliament six years ago, the college was in financial trouble and was really struggling. Under new leadership it has grown and developed into an incredible asset for our community. It is important to recognise the good work of the principal, Andrew Cropley, who has turned a failing college into a huge asset by opening the facilities for the community. It is not just about our young people, their learning and what can they deliver; it is about wider investment and regeneration work. Andrew leads the place board, delivering on levelling-up fund and towns fund outcomes.

The college has become a centre for growth and change in our community. It has also become a university campus, which is game changing for the young people in my constituency. These figures are a few years out of date now—they are pre-covid—but used to be that only 11% of people in Mansfield went to university, and typically they went to university somewhere else and never returned to Mansfield. That is hugely damaging to our economy, our culture and our fabric, and has massive, wide-reaching implications. I lead the council, so I know this means that there is nobody to look after older people, which is hugely problematic.

We are providing education locally, not by setting up a “University of North West Mansfield” and delivering junk qualifications that will not get people anywhere, but by working with the award-winning Nottingham Trent University via a local campus, where people can earn and learn and get on with their higher education while staying in Mansfield. We are building pathways from school through college into higher education, so people can get their qualifications and then go to work at the hospital next door. These opportunities are amazing and game changing for young people in my community. Both Andrew Cropley and Edward Peck at Nottingham Trent University deserve a lot of credit for their commitment and investment in Mansfield. It is hugely important.

The colleges get significant capital investment as well as the NTU presence, which means better access to higher education. We are delivering new centres for advanced manufacturing and automation and training for aerospace roles in Newark, just down the road. There is a Mansfield knowledge exchange, which provides training opportunities for science, technology, engineering

and maths and innovation through the levelling-up and towns funds. It is not just Department for Education funding that is going towards these outcomes; there is a wider range of Government support through the levelling-up agenda.

I have not even had a chance to talk about lifelong learning, the change it will deliver for many people in Mansfield and the opportunities it will bring for jobs and growth. There is also the STEP fusion energy programme, which is a £20 billion investment in creating jobs in clean energy in my constituency. Those kinds of jobs and opportunities have not existed for decades—since the pits shut, quite frankly. It means that I am confident that young people in primary school in Mansfield now will have better opportunities than their parents and their grandparents. That is hugely important in the wider levelling-up agenda.

We all recognise that there are significant economic challenges right now. I am sure everybody in this room would agree that our pounds should be put into schools and our young people. They are the future, and we need to deliver opportunities for them. It is not always easy. We have to balance all the other services we deliver. I am a local authority leader, and I see that we are trying to deliver children’s services, which is my passion and the area I want to work on and deliver in, as well as adult social care and trying to sort out the roads and everything else. These are not easy equations to balance, but it is clear from the figures that the Government have sought to support and invest in schools.

I hope I have highlighted some examples of positive things going on in my constituency. I know the Minister agrees that education and schools and colleges should be a huge priority for the Government. I look forward to working with him to deliver on that. For some of these projects, capital builds in particular, the money has been announced and we have 18 months or so to get things built in our constituency. I hope the DFE will drive forward those outcomes and help to accelerate things like the school rebuilding fund, not put barriers in the way of schools delivering. That will be hugely important as we get into the second half of this Government’s Administration.

5.19 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) for securing this really important debate. She has neatly separated out the views from across the House on the issues facing our schools and the funding they receive. I respond to the debate in not only as the shadow Minister for further education and skills, but as the Member of Parliament for Chesterfield in the east midlands. Funding for schools and colleges in the midlands is an issue I feel passionately about and am very much aware of.

I will reflect first on some of the contributions made by hon. Members. My hon. Friend spoke about a number of issues that together show the scale of the challenge facing our schools. She spoke about the 9% reduction in school spending per pupil, the 14% fall in college spending per pupil and the even bigger spending cut of 28% in our sixth-form colleges. She reflected on the reality facing many of our teachers: one in five routinely buy

equipment for their pupils. We all see that when we go into our schools and speak to teachers or they come to our surgeries. We see the extent to which people who were originally trained as educationalists are increasingly taking on that social work function and are expected to be the last line of resort for pupils in poverty. Pupils turn up unable to study because they are hungry or because of the social issues they face. Her speech was powerful in that regard.

My hon. Friend spoke about teachers being on strike, and there were differing views. There is a strange contradiction I hear from Conservative Members between their lauding of teachers when they are teaching pupils and their sense that these same hugely impressive people are somehow being persuaded by trade union leaders to rush out and strike with no idea of what they are doing, despite their education and their knowledge of the schools. The Government think school teachers are so weak as to rush out to strike because a trade union tells them, but what we are actually seeing is a powerful balance.

My hon. Friend hit the nail on the head on this and it was something I read recently in a letter from one of my constituents. If the pay offer was fully funded and teachers were not being told, “Your pay offer will be based on us taking money being used to educate children out of the school,” that would be an entirely different thing, but they can see every day that their school is struggling to get by, being told that it will have even less money because the pay offer will come out of the money that would previously have been spent on equipment, teaching assistants, special needs or other aspects. The offer is unacceptable in the extreme and teachers are turning it down because they recognise the impact it will have on schools. That reflects their commitment to their students.

Jonathan Gullis: The hon. Gentleman referred to the teaching unions and to teachers. Does he agree it was wrong of the leadership of the National Education Union to instruct teachers not to assess or mark work during the pandemic?

Mr Perkins *rose—*

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. I apologise to the shadow Minister. I know he was replying to the intervention by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), but I called him to order because the intervention was outside the scope of the debate. It is incumbent on all Members to reflect on their contributions. They should be in the context of the motion drawn up by the mover who applied to the Speaker for the debate. The debate is about funding for schools and colleges in the midlands. I encourage everybody to focus on that out of respect to the shadow Minister.

Mr Perkins: I understand your point entirely, Mr Pritchard, and I will of course stick to your strictures.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South also spoke about Coventry College being in a position where it can no longer offer apprenticeships. That is so powerful and so damaging. We recognise the incredible importance of apprenticeships. We also recognise that in many areas there are huge difficulties in accessing apprenticeships, particularly for small businesses. Often it is the colleges that are best at getting those small businesses—the non-levy payers—in to do apprenticeships. [*Interruption.*]

I am sure I am not the only Member with a post-election cold, so please excuse me. My hon. Friend's point on Coventry College ceasing to provide apprenticeships was incredibly powerful.

Moving on to the contribution of the hon. Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke), I was delighted to hear about the new facilities at Stafford College. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that new facilities make a huge difference, so it is good to hear about the progress being made on new capital spending at that college. I thought the comment she attributed to the Secretary of State for Education—that nothing demonstrates the Government's commitment to young people like the amount they spend on capital equipment for colleges—was incredibly powerful. For precisely that reason, it is appalling that we have had a massive reduction in capital equipment spend on both our schools and our colleges under this Government. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) referred to the IFS report in November 2021, according to which funding for students aged 16-18 saw the biggest fall of any sector, and the increases only reversed a fraction of the cuts we have had. The hon. Member for Stafford is absolutely right; I will join her in holding this Government to account on their capital spending and use that to demonstrate the extent to which they have let a generation of young people down.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North gave a memorable speech. It was, frankly, most misleading of him to suggest that schools are being generously funded. Schoolteachers in his area will have listened to his contribution aghast at his argument that there has been generous funding under this Government. It is one thing for the Government to say it was an economic decision to introduce austerity and that they had to do it; it is quite another to actually suggest that all these schoolteachers are going on strike and leaving the profession at a time that the sector is being generously funded.

The hon. Gentleman asked about additional funding for schoolteachers. Removing the tax perk on private schools would actually fund an extra 6,500 schoolteachers. Look at the record of the last Labour Government: the reality is that we did not see losses in the sector on the scale we have seen under this Government. There has been a massive reduction in the number of teaching assistants and pressure is increasing on schoolteachers. All that has an impact. Look at the massive expansion in social problems in our schools—again, that creates pressure on schools. The idea that this is simply about providing a little bit more money and then schoolteachers' lives will be better is just missing the point entirely.

Jonathan Gullis: The hon. Gentleman has outlined, fairly so, that if Labour was in government, it would recruit an extra 6,500 teachers, having put VAT on private school fees. I mentioned non-doms earlier; I apologise for the mistake in the policy idea. Can the hon. Gentleman say what specifically Labour would do with the money it raised that is not already being done?

Mr Perkins: I was in the process of answering precisely that question. As I was saying, it is not that if there were simply a little bit more money and we had these extra teachers, everything would be resolved. The entire approach that this Government have taken to schools has led to a massive decrease in morale that has meant lots of

[Mr Perkins]

teachers leaving the profession and has led to a reduction in the number of teaching assistants, while the Government's social policies have led to far more children turning up hungry than there were 13 years ago. All those additional pressures end up diminishing the morale and experience of schoolteachers—they all add to the problem. Frankly, if the hon. Member does not mind my saying so, the very transactional approach that he suggests misses the point about this Government's failure on schools.

It is a great pleasure, however, to say that there was something I agreed with in the hon. Member's contribution, which was about the use of buildings in school time—a really important point. In the all-academy world that we largely inhabit in terms of secondary schools, there are pressures that make that different when they are run by local government. None the less, he made that point well.

I will return to the point on which we had a debate. The hon. Member rather missed the point with the tone of his rhetoric on free school meals. I checked again what he said: he said that he would be “embarrassed” if he could not put food on the table with his salary, then created the straw man that his family receiving a free school meal would take it out of the mouth of another child. That is not what universal free school meals do at all. The hon. Member needs to reflect on his language if he genuinely does not want parents and children to feel that free school meals are something to be embarrassed about.

The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) spoke about teachers he had met who recognised that they had short days and long holidays. It almost beggars belief to suggest that the reason that lots of teachers leave the profession is that they think they do not work hard enough and their holidays are too long. That does not bear any relationship to the schoolteachers I have met, who suggest that the huge workload outside their teaching time is one of the reasons that they are leaving the profession.

Ben Bradley *rose*—

Mr Perkins: I am very happy for the hon. Gentleman to correct my understanding of what he said.

Ben Bradley: I will seek to correct the hon. Gentleman on what I said. I do not wish to chastise the hon. Gentleman, who I like very much, but in a similar way to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, I am afraid that he has inadvertently misrepresented what I said. I said that it was a travesty that schools in our country have the shortest days while teachers work the longest hours in Europe, that that is not right, and that we should seek to reduce that bureaucratic burden on teachers to allow them to spend more time in the classroom with our children. I do not know many teachers who would disagree with that point, but it is not what the hon. Gentleman said my comments were.

Mr Perkins: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman was able to set the record straight on that.

There can be no doubt that 13 years of Tory Government have left England's school and college buildings crumbling, left many teachers and their support staff demoralised

and left our schools robbed of the funding needed to support the opportunities that all our children deserve. I see that in the facilities every time I attend a school in my constituency. One of the very first things I recall from when I came to this place as a new MP in 2010 is the chaotic announcement from the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) about the cancellation of the Building Schools for the Future projects.

Every single month at Education questions, it seems that there is another Conservative MP coming to their feet to reflect on how appalling the school building is in one of their schools, and saying, “If only the Minister could take the time to address that,” without recognising that it is the entire system of capital funding, not the individual case, that is a failure under this Government. There is a stark difference between the facilities that children have at Outwood Academy Newbold and Springwell Community College in my constituency, with brand-new buildings secured under the last Labour Government, and the 13 years without a single new secondary school building in my constituency, which have meant schools such as Brookfield Community School and Parkside Community School soldiering on in inadequate facilities despite the best efforts of their staff.

It is not just school buildings that have been left to rot. The Conservatives also cut off the fledgling Building Colleges for the Future programme on their arrival in government. Both statistically and anecdotally, the failure under this Government is there for all to see. The attainment gap between disadvantaged secondary school pupils and their better-off peers has widened to its largest level in years. Under the Conservatives, teacher vacancies have risen by 246%, with the Government missing their teacher recruitment target again this year, recruiting just 59% of their target for secondary schools.

In late 2021, research published by the headteachers' union, the National Association of Head Teachers, found that schools across the west midlands have been forced to cut staff or activities because of a lack of funding. One in three schools said that they had made cuts to balance their budget, while 38% expected to make cuts in the following year. Last November, similarly, a Unison report revealed that councils across the east midlands faced a collective funding gap of £181 million in the next financial year, forcing them to cut essential services including early education. The extent to which schools have felt totally unsupported with the increase in energy prices is just one example.

Inasmuch as there has been any recovery in funding in recent years, it does not begin to address the shortfall over which the Government presided in the previous 11 years, and it comes in the context of huge cost of living crisis pressures, which mean that it has been swallowed up. Only last week, the Sutton Trust found that essential school staff and activities are being cut as a result of funding pressures inflicted by central Government. Such measures can only have a detrimental effect on our children's futures. The IFS analysis to which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North referred showed that schools in England still face a significant budget squeeze.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to sit to finish the remainder of his speech, he may do so, because his cold is severe. It is entirely up to him.

Mr Perkins: You are very generous, Mr Pritchard. I am not sure that sitting down will make it much better, but we are approaching the end, you will be glad to know.

What would a future Labour Government do? An incoming Labour Government will end tax breaks for private schools and invest that money in more teachers and excellent state education for all. We are committed to recruiting more than 6,500 new teachers to fill vacancies and skills gaps across the profession; to ongoing training for school staff, including in support for children with special educational needs; and, as I say, to an entirely different approach to schools, which we hope will support teacher morale and mean fewer teachers leaving the profession, as that has been one of the major issues over the past 13 years. In addition, we will recruit more than 1,000 careers advisers to give every young person in our schools and colleges professional careers advice, as well as two weeks of work experience. We will give every child access to a qualified mental health counsellor at school. Labour wants every parent to feel confident that they can send their child to a great local state school where they are supported to achieve and to thrive.

As last week's election results demonstrated, 13 years of Conservative mismanagement have taken our schools to the brink. Only a change of Government will bring about the improvement in education that the Midlands and many schools across our country so desperately need.

5.37 pm

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): It is an honour to serve under you today, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) on her impassioned speech, and I look forward to responding to her debate.

I will go through the details of what is going on, but it is important to talk not only about funding, but about how educational standards are improving. As of December last year, 88% of schools were rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, which is up from 68% in 2010. In the west Midlands, 86% of schools are now rated good or outstanding, up from 60% in 2010. I am delighted to report that in Coventry, 86% of schools are rated good or outstanding, up from 55% in 2010. The hon. Lady will know Hereward College, which is not in her constituency but is in the Coventry local authority area and is rated good.

I was surprised that the hon. Lady did not mention that Coventry was an education investment area. She talked about encouraging more teachers, and 36 secondary schools in Coventry benefit from the levelling-up premium, which is available in maths, physics, chemistry and computing to teachers in the first five years of their career. Payments are worth up to £3,000 tax-free each year from academic year 2022-23 right up to 2025. Connect the Classroom has 17 schools upgrading their wi-fi access, and the trust capacity fund is helping trusts to develop their capacity to grow. Furthermore, the Thrive Education Partnership was awarded funding of more than £290,000 for Corley Academy.

The hon. Lady also mentioned Coventry College. Sadly, as she knows, it received an inadequate grade for apprenticeships, which is why it is no longer offering that provision. Apprentices accounted for 4% of its overall provision, and learners have been transferred to

other local colleges and providers. I should, however, congratulate the principal and CEO, Carol Thomas, who has overseen the improvement of finances at her college from an inadequate health grade in July 2020 to a good health grade in July 2022. The college was also nominated by Barclays bank for a financial turnaround award, which is important news.

I will respond to the hon. Member for Coventry South further, but I just want to respond to some of the other hon. Members who spoke. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) made an impassioned speech. She is a champion for schools and education in her constituency—she is well known for it across the House. She mentioned the £28 million for Stafford College that she personally lobbied for. The Secretary of State recently visited the new site following her invitation, which is a credit to what she has achieved for her constituency. My hon. Friend will also know about the additional capital funding for schools in her constituency of over £800,000.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) made an impassioned speech. I absolutely agree with him that free school meals need to go to those who most need them. The hon. Member for Coventry South mentioned free school meals, and I understand her campaign, but we are spending over £1.6 billion on free school meals, and 1.9 million pupils, or 22.5%, are claiming them, which is more than in 2021. We introduced free school meals under the universal infant free school meals policy. That happened under a Conservative Government. When I was a Back Bencher in the last Parliament, I personally campaigned for free school meals for disadvantaged FE college pupils, which we introduced as a Conservative coalition Government. It is also important to mention the multimillion-pound package for breakfast clubs, especially in disadvantaged areas. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North is right about workload—I am absolutely convinced that my colleague the Minister for Schools will be getting a printer in his office to print out all the examples of bureaucracy that he talked about. I congratulate him on his speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) knows that he and I agree—I think there is a card separating us—about skills and FE. He knows that I am an honorary professor of Nottingham Trent University, and I am particularly impressed with its brilliant work with Mansfield College. He talked about West Notts College, which has also done impressive work in offering T-levels in business, construction, digital education, engineering and manufacturing. He made some wise points about schools and skills, and I thank him for his speech.

To return to the hon. Member for Coventry South, she will know that in the autumn statement we announced £2 billion of additional investment for schools in 2023-24 and 2024-25, over and above the increases already announced for schools at the 2021 review. That means that total funding across mainstream schools and high needs will be £3.5 billion higher in 2023-24 than in 2022-23, and that is on top of the £4 billion year-on-year increase provided in 2022-23. Together, that is an increase of £7.5 billion, or over 15%, in just two years, and school funding will increase further next year, so that by 2024-25, funding per pupil will be higher than ever in real terms. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has been

[Robert Halfon]

quoted, but its independent analysis shows that total school funding is growing faster than costs for schools nationally this year and next.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way; I recognise that he speaks on this topic with a great deal of experience. I also particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) for securing this important debate. In the midlands, four in five schools are set to have to cut their education provision to cover costs this coming year. In 2020 in Nottingham, secondary school teachers left schools at a rate of 33%, which was one of the highest in England. Does the Minister accept that the situation is completely unsustainable and is damaging children's education? Will he look again at funding for schools and teachers' pay?

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Lady, who has listened very carefully to the debate. I will be setting out the extra funding going into the midlands. She will know that schools in Nottingham East are attracting over £69.7 million through the schools national funding formula. On top of that, schools will see £2.3 million through the grant. Also, 90% of schools are rated good or outstanding, up from 77% in 2010. I should add that I was pleased to work with the hon. Lady as a Back Bencher on green skills in school, which I know she cares about deeply.

We are levelling up school funding and delivering resources where they are needed most. Nationally, per-pupil funding for mainstream schools is increasing by 5.6% in 2023-24 compared with last year, and the east midlands and west midlands are both attracting above-average increases of 5.7% per pupil. Alongside those increases to revenue funding, we are investing significantly in schools' capital. We provide funding to support local authorities with their responsibility to provide enough school places in their area. We have announced £2 billion for the creation of places needed in the next four academic years. The east and west midlands regions are receiving over £500 million of that funding.

We are also investing £2.6 billion between 2022 and 2025 to support the delivery of new and improved high needs provision for children and young people with special educational needs. We have allocated over £15 billion since 2015, including £1.8 billion committed for financial year 2023-24, to improve the condition of the school estate. As part of that investment, Coventry City Council has been provisionally allocated £3.5 million for financial year 2023-24 to invest across its maintained schools. We expect to publish final allocations shortly.

The school rebuilding programme is transforming buildings at 500 schools, prioritising those in poor condition and with potential safety issues. We have announced 400 schools to date, including Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School in Coventry South, which is one of 91 schools in the programme across the east and west midlands. We also allocated £500 million of additional capital funding for schools and FE colleges to help improve buildings and facilities and so to help them with energy costs. Schools in Coventry South were allocated over £900,000 of that funding.

On post-16 education, the further education capital transformation programme is delivering the Government's £1.5 billion commitment to upgrade and transform the FE college estate. The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) obviously knows that his college in Chesterfield has had £18 million, which I am sure he is delighted with. The FE reclassification and energy efficiency allocations have committed over £200 million in new capital funding to the sector. That has meant a £2 million capital investment in the FE college estate in Coventry, with Coventry College and Hereward College benefiting from that investment.

We also want to ensure that every young person has access to an excellent post-16 education. The 2021 spending review made available an extra £1.6 billion for 16-to-19 education in 2024-25 compared with 2021-22. That is the biggest increase in a decade, and we have made significant increases in funding rates. The national funding rate, which was £4,000 in 2019-20, will rise to £4,642 in academic year 2023-24. Over £1.3 billion has been allocated for 16-to-19 education in the midlands area for the current academic year, and £43 million of that has been allocated to institutions in Coventry.

The hon. Member for Coventry South rightly always champions social justice. In 2023-24, we have targeted a greater proportion of the schools national funding formula towards deprived pupils than ever before: 9.8%—over £4 billion—of the formula has been allocated according to deprivation. That means that over the coming year of 2023-24, schools with the highest level of deprivation have, on average, attracted the largest per-pupil funding increases. That is not even including the pupil premium funding, which has increased by 5% in 2023-24, a £180 million increase that takes total pupil premium funding to £2.9 billion. High needs funding for children with special educational needs and disabilities is rising to £10.1 billion nationally in this financial year, an increase of over 50% from the 2019-20 allocations. This year, Coventry is receiving an 11.5% per-head increase in its high needs funding compared with 2022-23.

Nadia Whittome: The Minister is being very generous with his time. On SEN funding, local authorities in England are facing a £2.4 billion black hole in special educational needs. I had the pleasure of visiting a SEN school recently, Rosehill School in my constituency, which had the same story to tell. What will the Minister do to improve that situation?

Robert Halfon: As the hon. Lady knows, we are spending many millions more on special educational needs funding. She will have heard the statement by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho); that will help significantly in dealing with special educational needs.

In 16-to-19 funding, we include factors in the funding formula to help institutions recruit, retain and support disadvantaged students. That includes an uplift for those from disadvantaged localities and those with low prior attainment. The 16-to-19 bursary fund targets financial support at disadvantaged young people. In the academic year 2022-23, £152 million in bursary funding was allocated to institutions. That includes £33 million for the east and west midlands, of which just under £1 million has been allocated to institutions in Coventry. The amount has been further increased for the academic

year 2023-24, with a 10% rise in the rates per instance of travel, disadvantage and industry placements compared to the 2022-23 academic year, to help with rising costs.

We briefly discussed T-levels. We are currently working with the FE sector and others to roll out T-levels. There are 42 colleges, schools and independent training providers across the west midlands that are planning to deliver T-levels in the next academic year. Coventry College will offer T-levels in digital and education, and the WMG Academy for Young Engineers will offer T-levels in engineering and manufacturing. I also mention Mansfield College for my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield.

We have invested over £500,000 for providers in Coventry South to purchase industry-standard equipment for teaching T-levels. We have also funded nine T-level projects in the west midlands to help create state-of-the-art buildings and facilities. Overall, T-levels are backed by revenue funding of up to £500 million a year, and we have also announced a 10% uplift in T-level funding rates over the coming year to support providers as they scale up delivery.

We are backing institutes of technology, with over £300 million in capital funding going to 21 institutes across the country, including £9 million to the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Institute of Technology and £18 million on the Black Country & Marches Institute of Technology. We plan to spend £13 million on the East Midlands Institute of Technology.

We talked about apprenticeships. It is brilliant to see that there have been 9,000 apprenticeship starts in Coventry South since 2010, and over 1 million starts in the east and west midlands in that time. We want to support even more apprentices and employers to benefit from high-quality apprenticeships, which is why we are increasing funding for apprenticeships to £2.7 billion by 2024-25.

We have also removed the limit on the number of apprenticeships that small and medium-sized enterprises and small businesses can take on, making it easier for them to grow their businesses with skilled apprentices. That will benefit the small businesses and apprentices in Coventry South. We continue to provide a £1,000 payment to employers when they take on apprentices aged 16 to 18, and we are increasing the care leavers' bursary from £1,000 to £3,000, so that they have the chance to do an apprenticeship.

I am enormously grateful for the opportunity to discuss these important issues. Despite the narrative set out by the hon. Member for Coventry South, we are investing huge sums of money in her constituency and

across the midlands for school funding, which will be at its highest ever level by 2024-25. Funding for 16 to 19-year-olds will see the biggest increase for a decade, and we are investing in capital funding for schools and colleges. I have carefully highlighted the huge investment we are making in the hon. Member's constituency and across the midlands so that we have high-quality places, and I believe that the investment we are putting into schools and skills will have a transformative effect for children and young people in the hon. Lady's constituency, the midlands and across the country.

5.55 pm

Zarah Sultana: I will keep it brief. I thank you, Mr Pritchard, for chairing this debate, and colleagues who took part. I began my speech by saying that I hope the teachers who came down from the midlands would find hope, and I appreciate the tone of the Minister's remarks, which provided a contrast to some of the other contributions we have heard. The Minister listed several funding arrangements, and the Government boast that real-terms education funding will match 2010 levels by 2025, but I do not think that 13 years of decline and wasted potential is much of a boast. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) said, our schools are struggling and teachers have felt abandoned by the Government. At the heart of this, our young people's potential and opportunities are being stifled.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome), who is a tireless champion of her constituents. She highlighted the unsustainable situation around teacher retention and investing in SEN for the most vulnerable in our constituencies.

I hope that the Minister will hear the calls of teachers and parents; acknowledge what has happened over the past 13 years, where underfunding in real terms has affected educators and children alike, selling them short; and commit not just to investing in our education, but to putting learning and teachers at the heart of everything the Government do. Hopefully, when a Labour Government come into power, that will be our aim too.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Before we conclude, I am sure that hon. Members will join me in wishing the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) a speedy recovery. It was a great performance—bless you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered school and college funding in the Midlands.

Victims' and Offenders' Rights

5.58 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That the House has considered victims' and offenders' rights in the criminal justice system.

It is a pleasure to serve with you as Chair, Mr Pritchard, and to open this debate. I thank Mr Speaker for granting it.

Mr Pritchard, I am sure you will know that every once in a while a case comes along that captures the reason we go into politics: to right a wrong that grabs our sense of justice—that makes us want to strive with all our might and use every single tool we have to ensure that justice is done. It might start with a case, but that case can go to the heart of the misapplication of Government policy, flawed decision making and the possible misapplication of the Human Rights Act, which in this case has left the victim/survivor with fewer rights and in a worse position than the offender. Highlighting case studies is always useful because policies can be changed as a result, and I hope there will be a review not just of the case I will discuss but of how Government policy is applied.

I will briefly set out the background. It was 26 June 2014. A young BAME woman who worked in a public-facing role in the public sector was trying to help a person get into work. It was the second time she had seen the person. She called him over, and as soon as he came to her desk he pulled her by the hair and stabbed her with an eight-inch knife. She said,

“I was covered in blood, hysterical losing consciousness until the police and ambulance were called; started to lose my sight and hearing; I thought I was dying.”

She was then taken to hospital, where she was in theatre for over two hours. She had 22 stitches in her neck and was told the wounds were 2 mm from her main artery. She also had three operations on her hand.

Added to the situation, there was a delay in the criminal justice system. It was reported that the police used to pick up the offender for being drunk and disorderly because he wanted food and shelter, which he would get from the police or in the cells. When he first came to this country, he had a septic abscess removed from his stomach, but later wanted to sue the hospital because he thought staff had removed his kidney; they had not, but he engaged solicitors to make a claim against the hospital.

The criminal justice system held the first hearing in the woman's case on 2 October 2014. The offender did not enter a plea and wanted a medical assessment. On 14 November, the same thing happened: a psychiatrist asked for more time. On 12 December, no plea was entered and the hearing was adjourned until 6 February 2015. That date was moved to 20 January, when he entered a plea of not guilty. The trial was set for April, but the judge was so incensed by the delay that he brought it forward to the end of January, and there was a three-day hearing in which the victim gave evidence. The offender entered a plea of not guilty, but after a very short time the jury found him guilty of attempted murder. He showed no remorse and was sentenced to an indefinite hospital order, but despite the fact that the judge made an order on 15 May 2015 authorising the offender's detention in hospital and restricting his discharge without limit of time, he was conditionally discharged

by the mental health tribunal; worse—he would not be recalled even if he broke the conditions, because he had not come from prison.

I will briefly set out the offender's immigration status. In 2004, he claimed asylum. It was refused. The appeal was allowed and he was recognised as a refugee in 2008. In April 2013, he was granted indefinite leave to remain. I have raised this case on a number of occasions with a series of Ministers, who have reaffirmed the Government's policy that it is a stated objective to protect the public by removing foreign nationals who have committed criminal offences. In a letter to me, one Minister said that

“all restricted patients who are also foreign nationals must be considered for deportation before their restrictions are lifted.”

In 2018, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes)—the then Minister, who I thank for all her help—met me, the survivor and the survivor's family. She took proactive steps to look at ways to deport the offender, and wrote to us saying that he was being considered for deportation.

According to gov.uk,

“Government policy is to pursue deportation on grounds of criminality where the person...has been convicted in the UK or overseas of an offence which has caused serious harm”

I am sure you will agree, Mr Pritchard, that attempted murder is a serious harm. There is a *prima facie* case for deportation, so it is not clear why the letter of the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North has not been followed. Remember—the victim was born and raised here and worked in the public sector, helping people—no matter who they were. One would have thought that she, too, has rights. But the trial was delayed, and, as the victim said, the offender was given access to a psychiatrist, benefits and a place to stay, while she had post-traumatic stress disorder and struggled to access support. In fact, she said that she had to pay for that support herself.

The latest letter from the Immigration Minister rubs salt in the wounds, as he says that the offender has rights under article 3 of the Human Rights Act, on the prohibition of torture or inhuman or degrading treatment—and that human rights here will affect human rights in other countries. I am sure there is case law in this regard, but we obviously do not have time to go into it. The letter set out no reasons, so it is difficult to see how the Minister came to that conclusion, which would mean that under Government policy no one can ever be deported anywhere, even to a third country. Is that the Government's policy? In the case that I have mentioned, the offender cannot be deported to his original country because it is in flux, but the Home Office has never answered the question of whether we are the third country. So far this case has not followed Government policy. The offender has more rights than the victim under the Human Rights Act. Can the Minister tell us whether she has rights under article 2—the right to life, which is also an absolute right? The former Minister, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North, said that she would speak to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees so as to remove the offender's status.

Effectively, the Government are saying that the offender, who has tried to remove someone's right to life under article 2, will gain article 3 rights. Do the Government have a policy for foreign national offenders who have committed a serious offence such as attempted murder?

Can they be deported under current Government policy? Are an offender's rights under article 3 greater than those of a victim under article 2? Is the threshold for engaging article 3 so low that no other decision, under any other legislation or Government policy, can be given in this case? I hope, in the interests of justice, that there are grounds for review or, indeed, for ministerial discretion.

We have an offender who is free to move around and a victim who lives in fear. The offender currently has more rights than the victim. I know that ministerial responses can vary, but I consider the latest decision to be flawed. Will the Minister look at this case and at the implications of Government policy and of competing rights under articles 2 and 3? The Government may have to review their policy and say that no one can ever be deported because they have article 3 rights, even if those rights have not been engaged and alternative approaches could be taken. For instance, someone who has committed an offence could be deported to the first or second country.

There must be a way for justice to prevail in this case. The courts have decided on the case, but why do the Government consider the victim and her rights to be secondary to those of the offender? The victim—a survivor of attempted murder—is crying out for justice.

6.7 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) for securing this debate and for flagging some of the key issues yesterday. Although many of the issues she raises fall within Home Office policy areas and are not matters on which I have any authority, I will endeavour to answer as much as I can. If I am unable to do so, I undertake to ensure that the relevant Home Office Minister is given a copy of the transcript of the debate, with the right hon. Lady's comments on the latest response she has received from the Immigration Minister highlighted, and asked to address any outstanding points in correspondence with her. I will, however, endeavour to address as many of her points as possible.

Let me begin by saying that, as the right hon. Lady has alluded to, behind every crime is a real person who has suffered harm, a real person picking up the pieces and living with the trauma of having survived that crime. We must always keep that in mind in our response to victims of crime. To quote the strategy that I brought forward as a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice in 2018:

"The message from victims is clear: they want to be treated fairly, properly and with dignity. They want clear, timely and accurate information. They want the opportunity and the support to make their voice heard"

and their rights upheld. That is reflected in what the right hon. Lady has said about her constituent.

I believe that this Government have a strong track record on victims' rights. The Government have fulfilled their commitment to introduce the Victims and Prisoners Bill. I do not wish to tempt fate, but I suspect that the right hon. Lady may well take advantage of the opportunities to debate it. If she is not on the Bill Committee, I suspect that she may well raise her points on Second Reading and Report. The Bill will enshrine the principles

of the victims code in law, and require key criminal justice agencies to promote awareness of the code. That will send a clear signal about what victims can, and should, expect from the criminal justice system.

The right hon. Lady raised an important set of points centring on the specific, horrific and deeply saddening case of one of her constituents. I am grateful to her for sharing some of the background, and I offer my deepest sympathies. Although I cannot comment on the detail of that specific case, I will try to address some of her broader underlying points. As I said, I commit to ensuring that Home Office Ministers respond to any points to which I am unable to respond.

I will try to set out in broad terms the Government's stance on foreign national offenders, the protection of human rights and mental health considerations to set the context for how some of these decisions are made. As the right hon. Lady said, the British public rightly expect that we put the rights of law-abiding citizens who are victims of crime above those of criminals. We are clear that foreign criminals should be deported from the UK wherever it is legal and possible to do so. As such, the removal of FNOs—if she will allow me to use the acronym—is a Government priority, with 13,000 deported between 2019 and 2022. My Department continues to work closely with the Home Office to increase that number.

Any foreign national who is convicted of a crime and given a prison sentence is considered for deportation at the earliest opportunity. FNOs can be removed from the UK via three main routes before the end of their prison sentence. Prisoner transfer agreements enable prisoners to be repatriated during their prison sentence, and they continue to serve that sentence in their home country. We have over 80 agreements in place with other countries. They also operate to bring British national offenders back to the UK. The early removal scheme and the tariff-expired removal scheme allow for FNOs to be removed before the end of their sentence, subject to a minimum time served. They are subsequently barred from re-entering the UK, and we are clear that any illicit entry will see them returned to prison.

Ideally, we would look to negotiate PTAs with all countries to allow all FNOs to serve their sentences in their home country. However, both the negotiation of new agreements and individual transfers require the agreement of the receiving country, and, as such, an appropriate and functioning Government with which to engage. That means it is not possible in all circumstances.

We are prioritising countries with the highest volume of FNOs. Our new PTA with Albania entered into force in May 2022, and we are working closely with the Albanian Government to speed up the removal of Albanian offenders, freeing up space in our prisons and reducing costs to the British taxpayer. In addition, we are looking to negotiate new prisoner transfer agreements with key EU member states and wider-world countries. We signed a new protocol to the Council of Europe convention on the transfer of sentenced persons in October 2021 to widen the scope of transferring prisoners without their consent.

We are now going further to ensure that FNOs cannot frustrate their removal process. Last year, under the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, we expanded the early removal scheme to allow foreign national offenders to be removed up to 12 months before the earliest

[*Edward Argar*]

release point of their sentence, instead of 9 months. Their sentences will be paused following their removal and reactivated if they ever return. We also introduced the priority removal notice, giving those liable a cut-off date by which they must inform the Home Office of any additional grounds for their protection and human rights claims to remain in the UK, with evidence. The Act also allows for disqualification from the receipt of a recovery and reflection period available to victims of modern slavery, for any FNO who receives a custodial sentence of 12 months or more.

We are using the Home Office's Illegal Migration Bill, which is currently passing through the House of Lords, to take further action. The Bill proposes that the disqualification from protection for modern slavery victims applies to all FNOs who receive a custodial sentence of any length, and it requires the Home Secretary to declare as inadmissible asylum or human rights claims from countries designated as safe states. From what the right hon. Lady has said, I understand that many of those factors would not apply in the case of her constituent, but it is important to set out the context. My understanding is that the Home Office's policy of transferring asylum seekers to Rwanda—a designated third country—is not applicable to FNOs in this context.

I will turn to some of the human rights considerations that the right hon. Lady alluded to. The Government are committed to protecting and respecting human rights and the rule of law at home and abroad. The UK is a state party to the European convention on human rights, and is responsible for securing for everyone within its jurisdiction the rights set out in it. I will turn to articles 2 and 3, as far as I can, in moment. However, the deportation policy is subject to several exceptions, including where it would be deemed a breach of a person's rights under the ECHR or the UK's international obligations under the refugee convention. Individuals can be returned to their country of origin only when the Home Office and, where applicable, the court deem it safe to do so. When someone is removed from the UK, although certain rights, such as article 8, are qualified and can be balanced against the rights of others in the public interest, such as the rights of the victims, some rights are absolute under the ECHR and the HRA, which sits behind it, and cannot be limited or balanced in such a way.

In line with our international obligations, under article 3 of the ECHR, which is an absolute right, the UK Government cannot legally remove any person to a country where they are found to be at serious risk of torture or inhumane or degrading treatment. The right hon. Lady will have to forgive me for not being able to give her a definitive answer to what constitutes a third country or a third party in that context. I will ask that Ministers in the Home Office respond to that detailed legal point, and I hope that they will do so expeditiously.

Articles 2 and 3 rights are absolute rights that, in this case, can be deemed to be potentially contradictory. My understanding is that the victim—the right hon. Lady's constituent—has article 2 rights, as we all do, in this context. In the deportation case, the question would have been focused on the article 3 rights of the FNO because the deportation case relates to the foreign national offender. Legally, that is what would have had to be

considered. As I said, the article 3 right is an absolute right, and because that individual was the focus of the deportation, and therefore the party to the deportation, that right in that case becomes the absolute right. It is not the victim who is the subject of the deportation proceedings; it is the FNO. If I recall correctly, the right hon. Lady has a legal background, so she will understand the complexities of that. It may—how shall I put it?—sit uncomfortably with her, but in that case, legally it would have to be matters relevant to the FNO that are relevant to the decision.

The right hon. Lady touched on mental health issues and how the Mental Health Act 1983 works in this context. It is important to note what must be taken into consideration when a person is detained in hospital, rather than prison. I understand from what she said that that is directly relevant to this very unfortunate case. Under the Mental Health Act, a court can make a hospital order as an alternative to a prison sentence if it considers that it is necessary to do so to protect the public from serious harm. The decision to discharge will be made only after the consideration of detailed evidence from clinicians, social supervisors, the MOJ, nursing staff and any other parties that will have a direct interest in the management of the patient in the future, and only if it is believed that the patient no longer requires treatment in hospital for their mental condition, and that they do not pose a risk to the public that cannot safely be managed in the community.

Although those protections are of course necessary for any decent country, we remain committed to protecting the rights of victims of crime. The Human Rights Act 1998, which was a significant achievement of the previous Labour Government—I am always willing to acknowledge where these things have been done—incorporates into UK law rights drawn from the ECHR that protect the rights of victims of crime in the UK.

The victims code—a statutory code of practice—includes an entitlement to be referred to services that support victims. Although it is not appropriate to deal with that on the Floor of this Chamber, that is within the MOJ's responsibilities, so if the right hon. Lady wants to speak or write to me about her constituent's experience of not getting the support they needed, I am happy to look that separately. The MOJ provides police and crime commissioners with annual grant funding to commission local practical, emotional and therapeutic support services for victims of all crime types.

The issues discussed today are of incredible import, and we have a strong focus on and proven record of putting victims at the heart of the criminal justice system. We do, however, remain bound by international law, where some of those rights and absolute rights may appear contradictory or in conflict with one another. There will always be complex and difficult cases where those two commitments meet.

In respect of the services that the constituent of the right hon. Member for Walsall did or did not receive, I am happy to pick that up with her separately to understand what happened. I appreciate that it does not change what happened, but it will enable me to look into it and hopefully to address some of those concerns. In respect of her point about a third country and the UK's status in that context, that will be for the Home Office but I will ask that it addresses the point specifically, rather than generally, if it is able to. As I say, I have set

out the broad context for the article 2 versus article 3 rights and why it would be the article 3 right that was applicable, because it was the FNO who was the subject of the deportation order. If she would like further detail on how that works in a letter from the relevant Minister at the Home Office, I am equally happy—she may nod assent or not at this point, given her legal background—to ask for that. *[Interruption.]* She is nodding assent, so I will ask again that that is included in more detail. Given her legal background, as I say, she may wish to interrogate that further, and I suspect she will.

I hope the right hon. Member will also convey my sympathies to her constituent for what was, on the basis of what she has been able to say, a horrific attack on someone doing their job—doing a job where they were seeking to help members of the public to improve their lives and get them the support they need. No one in any context should be subject to such a horrific attack. I hope the individual is recovering, in so far as she is able, from the trauma of being a survivor of such a crime, but where it crosses into Ministry of Justice policy I am happy to engage with the right hon. Lady and see if I am able to assist in any way.

Question put and agreed to.

6.22 pm

Sitting suspended.

Yemen: Humanitarian Situation and Children's Rights

6.30 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in Yemen and children's rights.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. Labelled the world's "forgotten humanitarian crisis" by the World Health Organisation, the catastrophe in Yemen is often overlooked in foreign policy discussions at both domestic and international levels. Many people, indeed, would struggle to point to Yemen on a map. But eight years of intense conflict, economic collapse and a crumbling social support system have brought about unimaginable suffering for Yemeni civilians, and children are paying the heaviest price. The gravity of this humanitarian situation and the necessity for rapid action cannot be overstated, and it is for that reason that I tabled the motion.

Since 2015, Yemen has been ravaged by intense fighting between the Houthis—a militant group assisted by Iran—and the internationally recognised Government, which is backed by the Saudi-led coalition and supported through arms sales by this UK Government. Yemen is divided: the Houthis control the north-west and a combination of Government forces and the Southern Transitional Council, which is backed by the United Arab Emirates, control the south and east. Since October last year, Oman has been facilitating peace talks, and last month's events, which included constructive discussions between the Houthis and the Saudi delegation in Sanaa, as well as notable prisoner exchanges, are cause for cautious optimism. The focus of this debate, however, is not the military course of the war, nor the complex political negotiations, but the human aspect—Yemen's children, whose lives have been upended and who are in desperate need of urgent and direct humanitarian assistance.

Currently, there are more than 2 million malnourished children in Yemen—as many children as live in London. Of those, 540,000 are under the age of five and are suffering from such severe hunger that, according to the WHO, they face a direct risk of death. Because of the country's crumbling infrastructure, millions of Yemeni children lack access to basic healthcare, clean water and sanitation. Indeed, nearly half the health facilities across the country are either completely out of service or only partially functioning.

Children's education has also been severely disrupted. Some 2,500 schools have been damaged, and according to UNICEF around 2.5 million children are not at school. It is no surprise to many Members here that girls are particularly impacted. When girls cannot access education, they become much more vulnerable to child marriage.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate; it concerns a great subject, and there are lots of things to sort out. Last year, a human rights watchdog, SAM for Rights and Liberties, recorded over 30,000 violations of children's rights in Yemen, including killing, forced recruitment, kidnapping, arbitrary detention, and lack of access to education and healthcare. Does she agree that the situation has only deteriorated in the last 12 months, and that we now need a massive movement from the international community to help those children in Yemen?

Carol Monaghan: The hon. Gentleman highlights the very nub of the debate. It is not just that the money is not going in; one of the big issues is that non-governmental organisations on the ground are struggling to be in Yemen. We need proper international dialogue to get aid in and reverse some of the aspects that he has highlighted.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Liverpool, Riverside has a long-established Yemeni community, and Habibti has been funding a children's hospital in Sanaa for many years. Given that Britain has earned eight times more from arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition than it has spent on aid to help civilians—particularly children—caught up in the conflict, does the hon. Member agree that the UK's role in this war is a dark stain on our foreign policy?

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. I will come on to the arms trade with Saudi Arabia and Britain's role in that, but we cannot just be seen as a benevolent overseer here. The UK actually has its fingers in the pie in Yemen, and it is certainly not helping to broker peace while it is still arming the Saudi-led coalition.

Coming back to the subject of girl brides, according to Girls Not Brides, many girls in Yemen have been married off as a source of income during the conflict as families are driven deeper into poverty and desperation. There have also been reports of girls being trafficked through so-called tourist marriages with wealthy men from the Arab Gulf region for the purpose of sexual exploitation. These people are desperate, and it is unfortunately the most vulnerable who will suffer. Currently, 9% of Yemeni girls are married by the age of 15, and nearly a third are married by their 18th birthday.

However, the war does not just affect girls; it casts its lethal shadow over the entire nation. Landmines and unexploded ordnance have killed and continue to kill hundreds of children, and instability has resulted in the internal displacement of 3.2 million people. According to UNICEF, one child in Yemen dies from preventable causes every 10 minutes; during the course of this debate, another six children in Yemen will have died needlessly.

The situation on the ground is devastating. Children's rights to life, food, security and basic healthcare are under threat. Against this backdrop, the UK Government stand by their decision to cut official development assistance funding from 0.7% of GNI to 0.5%—in doing so, slashing aid to the most vulnerable. In 2020, the UK pledged £214 million in aid to Yemen; this year, that figure is only £88 million. In 2020, when the ODA cut was initially enacted, many colleagues across the House—a number of them are here in the Chamber—deemed it inhumane and hoped the policy would be short-lived. It certainly seems inconsistent with this Government's eagerness to project a global Britain that defends universal human rights, supports conflict resolution and tackles extreme deprivation. Three years on, this unethical aid cut remains, and global Britain seems no more than empty rhetoric. I am aware that, alongside the US and Germany, the UK is one of the major contributors of aid to Yemen—I will say that—but we are providing far less than we did previously. The longer the shortfall is maintained, the slower and more limited

our humanitarian reach in Yemen will be. According to the former UN emergency relief co-ordinator, Sir Mark Lowcock, “there is no question” but that the decision to cut ODA has increased civilian loss of life in the country.

The UK's desire to be a force for good must be underwritten by concrete action, and it demands that we do more. If inadequate humanitarian funding is one moral failing, the Government's decision to arm the Saudi-led coalition is another. Air strikes by the coalition have hit hundreds of civilian targets. The Saudi air campaign alone has killed around 9,000 civilians, including hundreds of children, which has elicited strong condemnation from the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Is the hon. Lady aware that United Nations resolution 2216 actually demanded the withdrawal of the Houthis and gave recognition to the coalition under President Hadi to restore the legitimate Government to Yemen? It was actually a UN resolution in the first place that brought in Saudi and the Gulf states.

Carol Monaghan: It is useful to have that background; I thank the hon. Lady for that. To be honest, I am not here to point fingers at other states—apart from the ones we are arming and involving in this conflict. There is a very complex situation in Yemen; there are lots of different factions involved, and its history is very coloured. We need to look at how we can help to resolve the situation, rather than throwing petrol on the fire.

There is overwhelming evidence of repeated breaches of international humanitarian law, but the UK Government continue to supply the coalition with weaponry. The published value of arms licensed for export to the Saudi coalition since bombardment began is £9.4 billion, but according to estimates from the Campaign Against Arms Trade, the real value is nearly triple that figure. The Government are prioritising economic advantage over children's futures. This Government rightly condemned Moscow's aggressive bombing of a Ukrainian maternity hospital, but where was the condemnation of Saudi Arabia when Yemen's civilian infrastructure was targeted?

The recent calls for a ceasefire are welcome, but the necessity of ending arms sales is no less urgent. I hope that the recent progress and talks between the warring parties bring about new peace and prosperity so that lives can be pieced back together.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is again expressing her compassion for the people in a very significant way. The UN has said that the agreement of a truce between the Saudi-led military coalition and the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels last April is the first and best chance to try to find peace. Does she agree that there is a real risk that the talks that the UN are putting together will break down, and that we need to do everything in our power to avoid a repeat of what has happened in Sudan over the last few years?

Carol Monaghan: All of us here are optimistic about where this might go. Even if peace is brought about by the coalition and starts tomorrow—the UK is the UN penholder for Yemen, we have a role—it will take many years to rebuild all the infrastructure, get children back into school, start supporting families and ensure that these children have a better future than they do currently.

Writing in *The Times* just over a week ago of his harrowing visit to the malnutrition wards in Sadaa in Yemen, the Minister for international development, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), argued that the Government “remain committed” to the human rights-based UN development goals, stating:

“It is frankly obscene, that in the 21st century and in our world of plenty, children are facing famine.”

I could not agree more. Surely the Government recognise the contradiction in their position. How can they talk about eradicating famine while continuing to enact devastating aid cuts? How can they affirm their commitment to human rights while arming a state that continues to undermine them?

What discussions has the Minister had with the Chancellor about reinstating ODA to 0.7% of GNI? What impact assessment has been made of the effect of the cut in ODA on the children of Yemen? What plans does he have to get emergency aid to NGOs working on the ground to deliver vital supplies? What discussions has he had with his counterparts in Saudi Arabia regarding its targeting of Yemeni civilians? How effective does he feel the licensing criteria for arms sales are, given the repeated breaching of international humanitarian law by Saudi Arabia?

Children in Yemen are starving; they are losing out on an education; and they are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. Surely any profits from arms sales are rendered worthless when the cost is Yemeni children's lives.

6.44 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, I think for the first time. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for securing the debate.

As the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) and I were born in Yemen, we have taken part in many debates on Yemen over the years. It is good to see that there has been some progress: there has been no return to major fighting since the ceasefire formally ended, although localised fighting, score-settling and crime are still contributing to the suffering of millions of Yemenis. Major seizures of weapon shipments to Ansar Allah indicate that the conflict has potentially been paused rather than ended, which I hope is not the case, but we have seen the recent tragedy in Sanaa, in which 78 people died in a crush at an event where aid was being distributed. Many of those people were from the very poorest part of Yemeni society: the Muhamasheen. That something so tragic should happen at a charitable event is horrifying. My thoughts are with the victims and their families.

I am pleased that our Government have been a leader at the UN in promoting a settlement. I also thank the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office for its work on the international women and girls strategy and its recognition of the appalling situation for women and girls in Yemen—it has finally been included on the list. The way in which the conflict has entrenched gender inequality is absolutely horrendous, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North West mentioned. The position of women and girls in Yemen was dire before the civil war began in 2013: 35% of women were illiterate and only 670,000 girls were in education, out of a school-age population of around 9.5 million children. It is education that I want to concentrate on first.

A quarter of Yemeni schools have been damaged or destroyed. Access to education is now so poor that more than 2 million, out of 10 million, are out of school. Some 33% of the whole population is barely literate or has only primary school education. Teachers have been paid only occasionally, and the salaries given do not sustain a family above poverty level. About 70% of Yemen's children live in areas controlled by Ansar Allah, which has rewritten the school syllabus to focus on its own ideology—in particular, that fighting and dying for the Houthis cause is a direct route to heaven. Children are encouraged to join summer camps, where they are given physical and military training, and many older children drop out of school completely and have ended up joining the conflict.

We know that children elsewhere in Yemen are at risk of indoctrination, especially in schools in the south, which promotes its own secessionist ideology. Payment is now required in many places for a child to go to school, and the cost of providing essential textbooks and stationery also falls on families. Like everything else, they have nearly doubled in price over the last year, so I hope that we focus our aid on funding teachers, schools and equipment. Above all, education is absolutely crucial if Yemen is to build its way to being a successful, modern and 21st-century economy based on quality employment in modern businesses. We need to do whatever it takes to make that happen. Some of the neighbouring countries have achieved great things. Let us hope that we can do the same in Yemen.

Moving on to humanitarian issues, Yemen is suffering from spikes in the prices of essential goods. In some places, flour can now cost up to three times as much as it did before the invasion of Ukraine, and diesel costs between two and three times as much as it did this time last year. There has been no growth in wages or household income since the start of the ceasefire, and Yemeni families have no insurance against rising prices. Although it is good news that the blockade of the Red sea ports has lifted, the Houthis have now banned the movement of many goods by road from Aden and Mukalla, in order to guarantee Ansar Allah's revenue stream from the port at Hodeida.

However, there are some signs of progress. The recent prisoner exchange has freed over 900 people on both sides of the conflict, many of whom were political prisoners or simply hostages. There remain several thousand people in jails and camps across Yemen, and the accounts of human rights violations from those released in the exchange are still a cause for concern. We must make sure that those who perpetrated atrocities are brought to justice. Politically, we need continued progress in the negotiations between the Houthis, the Presidential Leadership Council and Saudi Government in key areas, including re-establishing a unified central bank and currency, without which the Yemeni economy will remain crippled. We need to help when required.

I would like to close by returning to the incredibly dangerous situation with the oil tanker FSO Safer in the Red sea off Hodeida. I have brought this up many a time with Ministers. The UK has been a leader at the UN in raising funds to empty the oil from that ship into a secure tanker and dispose of the Safer. The replacement tank is on its way and has been exempted from canal tolls by the Egyptian Government. However, there is still a shortfall of around \$20 million for the required work.

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

Will the Minister ensure that we keep up the pressure at the UN? The last thing Yemen needs when we are still a long way from the end of the civil war is a major ecological disaster.

6.50 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship Mr Pritchard. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) not only for securing this debate but for making an eloquent and touching speech. I endorse everything that she said. The situation is tragic and ongoing.

I wish to start by putting on record a press report. I have a cutting that says:

“Gross violations of international law. Missiles raining down on houses. Kleptocrats laundering their ill-gotten gains through London and buying political influence. Aggressive, powerful states attacking a poorer neighbour; backing separatist rebels; illegally occupying its land; dropping cluster bombs and conducting crippling cyber-attacks.”

The article asks if that sounds familiar. But that is not Putin; it is not Bakhmut. It was a year ago and written with regard to the war in Yemen. We see support and the flags flying, even here, for Ukraine. We have hosted President Zelensky. We have condemned President Putin unreservedly, and rightly so. Yet everything that is going on in Bakhmut is being replicated in Yemen, and little is being done.

The comment has been made that it takes two to have a fight, and I am not here to support one side or other, but, as other hon. Members have mentioned, the bulk of the danger is being created by the weaponry, especially of the Saudi Arabians and the United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi and Dubai are principally supported by the British military, and that is something that we have to address. We are providing aid to Yemen and commenting on the ongoing horror, yet as other hon. Members—especially the hon. Member for Glasgow North West—have said, we are fuelling and funding that situation by providing the weaponry that is wreaking the horror there.

Mrs Drummond: I mentioned earlier that the situation in Yemen is completely incomparable to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This was very much under UN resolution 2216. The hon. Gentleman has not mentioned the fact that Iran has also contributed weapons to the Houthis.

Kenny MacAskill: I condemn Iran for its role, as I condemn it for its drones that have been causing horror in Ukraine. But we all bleed the same. A Houthi or a Yemeni bleeds the same as a Ukrainian or a Russian, and we have to recognise that. We cannot exculpate ourselves by saying that they are slightly different.

I wish to put on record the importance of recognising the role that the UK and, indeed, Scotland, is playing. The UK is the principal arms supplier for Saudi Arabia, which is why we turned a blind eye when Khashoggi was murdered: “Who cares? Let us look away and invite Mohammed bin Salman or whatever—it does not matter so long as we continue to sell.” The hon. Member for Glasgow North West and others have rightly put that on record. The tragedy is that Scotland has a role in this. As the report I quoted goes on to say, we are aware

that missiles provided by Raytheon are causing death and misery in Yemen, indiscriminately killing children from whatever side. The fact of the matter is that the laser guidance systems for Raytheon’s missiles are made at Glenrothes, in Scotland.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I was born in Aden and lived the first 10 years of my life there. I want to thank hon. Members who, throughout the time that I have been here, have raised the issue of Yemen, which does fall off the agenda. Hon. Members have done a good job—whether the Government or the Opposition or even Back Benchers, we have put it on the map. We are getting to a position now—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees—where people are talking, and it is much better that they talk than they fight.

I have not been allowed to go back to Yemen, but the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) and I and the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson are possibly going on a trip, and that would be an incredible thing for all of us because we have not been back there. I hope that the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) accepts that it is becoming a safer place—it will never be completely safe until everyone is around the table and accepts the rule of law—but at the heart of this debate is the fact that there are children suffering and people starving. We see pictures of babies who are skeletons. It is quite horrifying. I just gently remind the hon. Member that all hon. Members are aware of the suffering that is occurring. It is why we are having this debate today. I thank him for allowing me such a long intervention.

Kenny MacAskill: I am happy to accept that intervention and, indeed, to put on record that I welcome progress being made. The right hon. Member obviously knows much more about this than I do. Any progress is to be welcomed. I am also aware that the deaths and misery being inflicted on children come more often not from weaponry but from disease and all the disasters as a result of the fragmentation and breakdown of society. But the UK does have a role, both in funding and providing support and in diplomacy. I just wish that in other conflicts we would listen more to Pope Francis, and perhaps seek to take his guidance.

We have to put on record, as has been done, that the UK has a role in arming Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It is also important to put on record that Scotland has a role due to the provision of laser-guided missiles from Glenrothes by Raytheon. I was in the Scottish Government when Raytheon was there, and I have to confess that my hands are implicated in this, but times have moved on. I was a Minister from 2007 to 2014; we are now in 2023. I recall some seven years ago, when I was not in politics at all, writing in defence of the Scottish Government that it is very easy to be condemnatory, but one has to accept that there are quality, skilled jobs that cannot be easily replaced in Glenrothes, where there will be high unemployment. I wrote that there were people working hard there and we had to provide protection.

However, there must come a time when we say that this cannot go on. We have been funding Raytheon; we have been giving it grants to come to Scotland and stay there. There has to come a time when we say, “No, we won’t.” We cannot simply say that it is wrong that the

United Kingdom provides armaments to Saudi Arabia, but that it is okay that we in Scotland are prepared to fund Raytheon to provide the laser guidance for the missiles that will be fired. I have to put that on the record. Do I expect Raytheon to up and move out of Glenrothes? No, that would be an economic disaster for the area, but we have to say that we are not going to fund it any more, and that we will try to encourage it to find a better use for the site.

There has to come a time when Scotland recognises that it is not enough simply to say that the role of the United Kingdom is wrong. Scotland must say that it also has a role, albeit smaller and far less serious. The kids who die do not care where the missiles came from. They just want them stopped. That is what I want to put on record. I fully accept the comments that have been made by hon. Members, and I fully endorse the points made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West.

6.58 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for bringing forward this important debate. It feels like it has been too long since we had a debate about Yemen.

The conflict tracks fairly evenly the time that my hon. Friend and I have been in Parliament. Over the past eight years, the crisis in Yemen has been constantly on my radar. It came to my attention because a constituent came to my surgery to tell me that the Home Office had refused his status and wanted to send him back to a war zone. Things were just breaking out at that point. I think often about him and his family, as well as the many families in Yemen whose lives, livelihoods and adulthoods have been marked by this conflict. These have been a very long and hard eight years in Yemen. While other conflicts have come and gone and moved on during that period, Yemen's has persisted.

As hon. Members have pointed out, the UK has a special role as the penholder for Yemen at the United Nations and as a supplier of arms to parties to the conflict. We have an important role in rebuilding and providing aid, and in doing what we can for the future of Yemen.

I want to pick up on a few points that have been made. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West was right to point out the vulnerability of children in the conflict. Children's futures have been hampered, and in many cases destroyed, by the lack of access to education, medical care and ordinary things such as vaccinations, which are more difficult to get. During the conflict it has been difficult to get things across Yemen; the parties to the conflict have put in place roadblocks and barriers, preventing movement of food and goods that would have been helpful to young people.

In the absence of those things, 2.7 million children have been left out of school, education facilities have been bombed, and mines have been left in many parts of the country. In a helpful briefing, Save the Children states that casualties from mines increased from one every five days in 2018 to one every two days in 2022. There has rightly been a lot of focus recently on the impact of landmines in Ukraine, but we also need to invest in de-mining capacity in Yemen. Without that, people cannot live safely and go back to the lives they once had.

The key to this issue is funding. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West talked about the reduction in official development assistance, and the cruel way in which UK aid funding has been diverted to pay for the asylum backlog rather than to help those in Yemen stay there and live their lives—robbing Peter to pay Paul. The cut in the budget from £214 million in 2020 to £88 million in 2023—a period in which the need in Yemen has increased—is particularly cruel.

In its most recent briefing, the World Food Programme states that its needs-based plan is just 20% funded for the next six months, from May to October 2023. It needs significant funds. I appreciate that the UK Government do give money to it, but, as the penholder, the UK should be trying harder to get more people to provide money so that food can get to those who need it.

Save the Children points out that only 6.8% of child protection needs in the humanitarian response plan were funded last year, which makes it all the more difficult to rebuild the lives of children and young people in Yemen. As my hon. Friend mentioned, that affects girls particularly, because they get married off at a younger and younger age and are unable to get the education they need and to progress as they want, but it also severely impact boys, who are recruited as child soldiers.

I pay tribute to Mwatana for Human Rights, which has done a huge amount to document human rights abuses by those on all sides of the conflict in Yemen. It has documented numerous incidents of child recruitment by different parties to the conflict, who have used children in security, logistical or combat roles as part of military operations. Between March 2015 and March 2023, it documented a total of 2,615 incidents, involving the recruitment and use of 3,402 children, including girls. The Houthis recruited at least 2,556 children, and the Saudi coalition forces recruited and used 284 children. There are also 552 children apparently recruited by forces of Yemen's internationally recognised Government. All sides in this conflict are causing harm to children and young people in Yemen. The harms caused include abuses against women and against people right across the board.

The hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) talked about the arbitrary detention and some of the prisoner swaps that have been happening. That is incredibly important, because it builds trust and faith that people can be released from prison and get their lives back. It can also help to rebuild the family unit in cases where the main breadwinner has been taken out of the unit and arbitrarily detained; in many cases, the family do not know whether they are dead or alive. Allowing those breadwinners to come back to their families and to support the women of the family to feed the children is very important. I hope that we will see more of that facilitated by the International Red Crescent and others; without families being brought back together, it will be very hard for Yemen to move forward.

Furthermore, there needs to be accountability for the war crimes carried out in Yemen by all sides. Important to that—I seek an answer from the Minister—is reinstatement of the group of eminent experts on Yemen, which was an important part of accountability, ensuring that things were investigated properly and that people were held to account for what they had done in the conflict. Again, without the accountability and that

[*Alison Thewliss*]

judicial system, it will be difficult for people to rebuild their lives. I ask the Minister for an update on whether that is possible.

Also on accountability, the Committees on Arms Export Controls have asked that they be a stand-alone Committee, so that they can interrogate how the UK Government are using and selling their weapons, and whether they are doing so properly. I hope that the Government will support that in some way.

I want to mention briefly the important situation of the Safer, which the hon. Member for Meon Valley mentioned. I understand that there were meetings last week in London, so it would be useful to get an update from the Minister. This is not just about a boatful of oil threatening to leak out all over that part of Yemen, but about people's livelihoods. Many people on the coast are dependent on fishing for their livelihoods and incomes, and if the oil tanker were breached, as has been threatened for some time, a whole swathe of people would be prevented from earning a living, which will be important in moving forward.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West for securing the debate. I also thank the hon. Members for Meon Valley and for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill)—he mentioned important aspects of the arms debate—and the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), who has done so much for this cause, along with her brother the former Member for Leicester East, who chaired the all-party group for Yemen and kept it on the agenda. It is for all of us to keep pushing the Government, because a lot more needs to be done.

The UK Government have important responsibilities as the penholder at the United Nations, which means that they ought to be an honest broker, rather than a supplier of arms to one side. I urge the Minister to do more, even in the face of the other challenges for the Government with international conflict, to ensure that Yemen does not slip off the international agenda.

7.6 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for securing this important debate and for her thoughtful and probing speech. I also thank Save the Children and UNICEF for their briefings in advance of the debate.

It has been just over a year since the truce was signed in Yemen. While it only lasted officially for six months, many of its components continue. Thankfully, there has been no return to large-scale conflict. The prisoner exchange involving about 900 detainees, ongoing truce negotiations and the re-establishment of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran bring hope for a more durable ceasefire. However, more than two thirds of the population of Yemen require urgent humanitarian assistance and more than 350 children were killed last year alone. Children continue to face acute malnutrition, displacement and disease with the near collapse of the health system in Yemen, and we should not forget that a generation of children has grown up in a brutal war that has caused deep psychological wounds.

The conflict in Yemen has been marked by unprecedented violations of children's rights by all parties. Those violations have included killing and maiming, the recruitment and use of children in war, the attacking of schools and hospitals, and the denial of humanitarian access. Save the Children estimates that the conflict has resulted in more than 11,000 verified cases of killing and maiming of children and that 11 million children are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. We all share a responsibility to address that dreadful situation.

It is important to emphasise that the UK has a unique role to play in Yemen due to its membership of the Quad—together with the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—and its roles as penholder for Yemen on the UN Security Council and as a leading member of the Human Rights Council. It is important to consider all that in our discussions about Yemen and the actions that the UK can take.

I will first draw attention to areas of key concern, starting by setting out the situation with regard to nutrition. Widespread acute food insecurity plagues Yemen. According to Save the Children, 2.2 million out of the 3.4 million children under the age of five are suffering from acute malnutrition. The food crisis has both immediate and long-term consequences, as malnutrition during childhood can lead to stunted growth and cognitive impairments and can increase vulnerability to illnesses.

That brings me to the health crisis faced by children in Yemen. The UN has reported that, as of April this year, 46% of health facilities across Yemen are either only partially functioning or completely out of service due to shortages of staff, funds, electricity or medicines. It has also reported that disease outbreaks of measles, diphtheria, dengue, cholera and polio are accelerating Yemen's deepening health crisis. The disease outbreaks are being worsened by mass displacements of people, the overburdening of health facilities, ongoing disruptions of water and sanitation networks, and low immunisation coverage. We know that malnourishment also has an impact on immunisation. The lack of immunisation for children increases the risk of outbreaks of preventable diseases.

Access to education for school-age children has been impeded by years of conflict and the near collapse of the economy in Yemen, a point well made by the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond). I know how much she and my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) care about what is going on in Yemen, particularly to children. The education system is also on the verge of collapse. According to Save the Children, more than 2.7 million children are out of school and 1.5 million are internally displaced. Many have had their education disrupted multiple times, and 40% of displaced children do not attend school.

The UN stated that more than 2,700 schools have been destroyed, damaged or used for non-educational purposes, affecting the learning of about 1.5 million school-age children. One in five schools can no longer be used as a direct result of the conflict. Meanwhile, functional schools suffer from classroom overcrowding: in some areas, there are more than 80 pupils per classroom. The irregular payment of teachers' salaries also continues to affect education. Save the Children estimates that 61% of teachers have been irregularly paid since 2016; many have opted to leave to pursue other activities.

Adults' abuse of children by recruiting them into war is without a doubt one of the most upsetting human rights abuses in Yemen. Save the Children has reported that child soldiers are used for various tasks and are often subjected to brutal training and indoctrination and exposed to violence. Although the Houthis and the internationally recognised Government of Yemen have signed action plans for children in armed conflict, both parties continue to recruit children into their ranks. Between October and February, Save the Children documented more than 50 cases of child recruitment in the south. It seems that child recruitment is even more rampant in the north, where children who have died while fighting are celebrated as martyrs.

The recruitment of children into armed groups exposes them to severe risks and causes harm to their physical and mental wellbeing. History has taught us how cycles of abuse and brutalisation tend to repeat themselves. For there to be any sort of enduring peace in Yemen, the abuse of children recruited into war must be addressed.

Another extremely distressing result of the war and the humanitarian crisis is the sexual violence faced by children in Yemen. As a result of the war, children face an increased risk of sexual violence, including rape, early forced marriage, sexual abuse and torture. Last year, Save the Children provided support to a 15-year-old girl who was displaced due to the conflict. She was raped and subsequently gave birth to her attacker's child. While in hospital, security reported her to authorities as an unmarried girl with a child, after which she was taken, along with her newborn baby, and imprisoned. Such disturbing cases are likely to be under-reported and are of extreme concern.

Another key concern is landmines and unexploded ordnance. Last year, Save the Children found that unexploded ordnance was responsible for more than half of all child casualties in Yemen. The physical and emotional impact of such injuries is devastating.

There is so much more I could say about the dire violation of children's rights in Yemen, but in the interest of time I will move on to the political context. Despite the violations I have outlined, Yemen is one of the only conflicts in the world without some form of independent international accountability mechanism—a point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). For comparison, Ukraine has nine accountability mechanisms. It is a year and a half since the Human Rights Council failed to renew the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, which effectively leaves violators of international human rights and humanitarian law free to continue their actions with impunity, perpetuating the cycle of violence and abuse.

I therefore conclude by asking the Minister the following questions. As a leading member of the Human Rights Council, will the UK hold the perpetrators of violations of international law, international humanitarian law and international human rights law to account? Will the Government support the re-establishment of an international, independent and impartial accountability mechanism? We cannot sit back and allow a generation of children in Yemen to have their childhoods stolen. Will the Minister therefore also commit to the UK Government taking all actions to encourage a lasting peace in Yemen? I look forward to the Minister's responses.

7.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):

It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair once again, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) on securing this important debate. I pay tribute to her for her commitment in highlighting the challenges in Yemen and the rights of children there and for her powerful and moving speech. I am also grateful for the contributions of other Members in the Chamber, and I will seek to respond to the points raised. I also express my gratitude to Parliamentary Private Secretaries, who do not often get praised for the work that they do, and to civil servants for their sterling work and support—and to their parents, who might be listening. I leave that thought with hon. Members.

We have had other debates about Yemen in the fairly recent past. A debate on 3 November, which I had the privilege to be involved in, allowed me to find out more about an area that I do not always cover in my ministerial responsibilities. We talked about the issues. As has been said by some Members, notably the dynamic duo—the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) and my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond)—some progress is being made. We do not want to get carried away with it, but some progress is being made. From a personal perspective, I very much hope that, at some point in the near future, they will fulfil their ambition of visiting this great country again.

It has been over a year since the UN successfully brokered a truce between the warring parties. The truce has delivered many tangible benefits. It allowed many Yemenis to live more securely and to travel more freely than at any time since the war began. The reopening of Sana'a airport enabled commercial flights to resume, which allowed Yemenis to reunite with loved ones and seek urgent medical treatment abroad. Those are important things. The reopening of Hudaydah port has enabled oil to flow into the country, allowing public services to restart and bringing down the towering oil prices that were unaffordable for most people. The cross-border attacks, such as those on the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have also ceased.

It was therefore disappointing that the Houthis refused to agree an extension to the truce last October. In the November debate, we were concerned about that. The refusal jeopardised progress and threatened to dismantle what had been built over the previous 13 months. However, it is encouraging that the parties have not returned to full conflict and that truce-like conditions have continued. Saudi-Houthi talks are showing positive signs, including the recent large-scale prisoner exchange, which has been referred to, and the door to a formal ceasefire and progress towards a lasting peace settlement remains open. We are cautiously optimistic of a transition to a series of intra-Yemeni talks under UN auspices and, ultimately, to a negotiated political settlement. That is the only credible route to a sustainable solution to the conflict, and we urge the parties not to squander the opportunity.

Political progress is essential for alleviating the immense humanitarian suffering of the Yemeni people. UN appeals for Yemen have been some of the largest in the world. This year's appeal for £4.3 billion is second only to the appeal for Afghanistan. However, at the annual Yemen

[David Rutley]

pledging conference in February, only £1.1 billion, or approximately 27% of the total, was committed. We continue to investigate new aid partnerships, including with countries in the Gulf with which we can pool resources and expertise to have the maximum impact. That was an issue that was raised during the debate.

As a result of the war, Yemen is now one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world. More than 21 million people need humanitarian assistance and protection—two thirds of the population.

Food insecurity has been highlighted by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West and the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), among others, and malnutrition remains severe with 17 million people experiencing acute food insecurity. There is a clear risk that the country could tip into famine. The requirement under mahram law for women and girls to be accompanied by a male guardian has been increasingly enforced in Houthi-controlled governorates. That violates the rights of women and girls, preventing them from moving freely, working and accessing healthcare. It has particularly harmed the humanitarian effort, hampering aid delivery, particularly to women and girls.

Amid the dire humanitarian circumstances, Yemeni children are among the worst affected. While the de facto truce is a cause for hope, Yemen remains one of the most dangerous locations in the world to be a child. Last year, at an event hosted by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, we heard from a 13-year-old Yemeni boy, who stressed the importance of peace, saying his

“childhood has been missing for seven years”.

All he wanted was for the war to stop so that all Yemeni children can have a childhood and enjoy an education.

In areas of conflict, children are nearly 20 times more likely to die from diarrhoeal disease than from conflict itself, and Yemen is no exception. Facilities and services have been ravaged by eight years of war. Yemen has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, as has been highlighted today. Child brides are at a greater risk of partner violence, and pregnancy at an early age is a key driver of maternal mortality. A UN panel of experts reported that over 1,200 children were recruited and trained as child soldiers by the Houthis between July 2021 and August 2022. Yemeni children have suffered tremendously after eight years of destructive conflict. Many will live with injuries for the rest of their lives and others will suffer the psychological impacts of abduction and sexual violence. They have also been denied access to education, which was rightly highlighted by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley. The children of Yemen need the long-term support of the international community.

With your permission, Mr Pritchard, I will pick up on a couple of points raised during the debate. I know there are some concerns about the level of ODA targets. However, we continue to be a leading donor in the world. This year, our allocation to Yemen remains the same as it was in 2022-23. It will help provide food for at least 100,000 Yemenis every month and treat 22,000 severely malnourished children.

Carol Monaghan: The Minister is comparing last year's figures with this year's. In my speech, I highlighted that the current figures are actually a third of what they were in 2020, so we have had a real significant cut to ODA funding. Against the backdrop of everything he has heard today, and indeed his own comments, what is he doing to push Yemen's case for additional funding?

David Rutley: As I said previously, we have maintained our expenditure in a difficult fiscal situation. We are working hard to encourage other countries to get involved with vital partnerships to help provide the humanitarian support that is required in Yemen. As has been said, the real way forward is to ensure that we secure a long-term and sustainable peace. That is what will really deliver the benefits that all of us want and will tackle the terrible tragedies that young people, children and even adults are experiencing.

We take very seriously all the allegations of violations of international humanitarian law, including those involving children as referenced by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West. We have a robust decision-making process that takes those allegations into account, incorporating a wide range of information from the UN, NGOs and partner Governments. Several points were made about the importance of accountability mechanisms, and the mandate of the group of eminent experts on Yemen, which was sadly not renewed. The UK voted in favour, and spoke in support of the resolution during the voting, as the group played a crucial role in providing ongoing reporting on the actions of parties.

We continue to urge the parties involved to investigate allegations that arise, and to take action to promote and protect human rights. The UN panel of experts plays an important role in identifying those allegations. The UK is grateful to the panel for its essential role in ensuring accountability in Yemen. We strongly advocated for the renewal of that panel's mandate in February, and were pleased to see that that resolution was passed.

We also heard some questions about the Safer oil tanker, which I know is of particular concern to my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central. The UK is not only keeping up the pressure on the UN but leading international efforts to fully fund the salvage operation. Last week, the UK co-hosted a fundraising event with the Netherlands, which raised almost £8 million of additional funding and allows the UN emergency operation to salvage the tanker to now start. Clearly, more needs to be done, but the good news is that the work is progressing.

All of that shows that Yemen is a humanitarian priority for the UK. We have supported millions of vulnerable Yemenis with food, clean water and healthcare, and our aid spending this year will provide food for at least 100,000 Yemenis every month. Our flagship food security programme provides lifesaving cash assistance to those most in need, and builds resilience against famine.

Our Yemen women and children programme tackles the greatest causes of excess mortality and suffering among women and children, including malnutrition, disease and gender-based violence. It supports over 1 million Yemenis a year. We have also supported the UN's programme to end child marriage in Yemen since 2016, helping to reach more than 20,000 adolescent girls and provide them with education and life skills that reduce their vulnerability to child marriage.

We have worked with the specialist NGO, War Child, to tackle the use of child soldiers and provide safe spaces and psychosocial support for recruited children in Taiz, Yemen's third-largest city. That programme has provided support to more than 4,500 children.

We have also seen some progress since the advent of the truce, with the Houthis signing an action plan with the UN to end the use of children in conflict. The latest expert UN report suggests some signs of buy-in from the Houthis. Those are encouraging signs.

We will continue to use all our diplomatic channels to press all parties to cease the abhorrent practice of recruiting children into their armed forces and to halt grave violations against children. Children cannot—and should not—continue to be victims of brutality in this conflict.

I conclude by reiterating our calls for all parties to continue to engage meaningfully in efforts towards a negotiated political solution to the conflict. The de facto truce shows how things could improve for the people in Yemen if peace could be placed on a solid footing. Some Yemeni children are experiencing relative peace for the first time in their lives. That offers hope, and a reminder to all sides of why this opportunity must not be squandered.

7.28 pm

Carol Monaghan: I want to start by thanking all Members who have contributed today to ensure that this so-called forgotten conflict remains high up the political agenda. That is the first thing, which is very important.

I thank the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) and the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) for their specific expertise and for talking from their own experiences. That was very helpful. I also thank the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) for his passionate speech about how we must consider what we do with arms. Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who has done so much work on Yemen since we were elected in 2015. I urge the Minister to use his position to ensure that the UK is a force for good in Yemen.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in Yemen and children's rights.

7.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 9 May 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

UK-Australia and UK-New Zealand Free Trade Agreements

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston): I am pleased to report to the House that the Government expect the UK-Australia and UK-New Zealand free trade agreements to enter into force on 31 May 2023. This was agreed by the Prime Minister, with the Prime Minister of Australia Anthony Albanese and the Prime Minister of New Zealand Chris Hipkins during their respective visits to the United Kingdom.

Our groundbreaking deals are tailored to the UK's strengths. They can grow the UK economy, benefiting all parts of the United Kingdom. From the date of entry into force, business will be able to access the benefits of the deals, with guidance available on gov.uk.

The agreements remove tariffs on 100% of UK goods exports, slash red tape, guarantee access for UK services and digital trade and will make it easier for UK professionals to live and work in Australia and New Zealand. They are uncompromising in their maintenance of the UK's high environmental, animal welfare and food safety standards.

There are robust protections for British farmers in both deals, including staging tariff liberalisation for sensitive goods over time. Protecting the NHS is also a fundamental principle of our trade policy, and these deals deliver on the Government's commitment to that principle. The NHS, the price it pays for medicines, and its services have remained off the table throughout negotiations.

With our strong commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region, also demonstrated through our conclusion of negotiations to accede to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership (CPTPP), these deals are instrumental in focusing our efforts and putting our engagement on a long term, strategic footing. They represent a deepening of our

relationship with close allies, who share our beliefs in fairness, free enterprise, high standards and the rule of law.

The final statutory instruments to implement the agreements have now been laid.

I would like to thank the House for its support and engagement in the ratification of these free trade agreements.

[HCWS762]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): This statement concerns an application, made under the Planning Act 2008 by Net Zero Teesside Power Ltd and Net Zero North Sea Storage Ltd, for development consent for a full-chain carbon capture, usage and storage project that includes a new gas-fired electricity generating station with post-combustion carbon capture plant, gas, electricity and water connections and a CO₂ pipeline network, located on Teesside.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report, unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it. The current statutory deadline for the decision on the Net Zero Teesside project is 10 May 2023.

The Secretary of State has decided to set a new deadline of no later than 14 September 2023 for deciding this application, to enable the Department to seek further information from interested parties and to ensure that there is sufficient time to allow for consideration of this information.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decisions on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS761]

Petitions

Tuesday 9 May 2023

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

Children centres

The petition of the residents of the constituency of Dover and Deal,

Declares that children's centres have a vital role in the community and that the provision of children and family hub services should continue to be provided in Deal and Walkmer and further that Blossom's Children's Centre should be retained in recognition of its post-natal and breastfeeding support as well as its sensory room.

The petitioners therefore urge the Government to encourage Kent County Council to ensure the vital importance of Blossom's Children Centre is recognised and the provision of Children's services in Deal and Walmer continues to be fully supported.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mrs Natalie Elphicke, *Official Report*, 29 March 2023; Vol. 730, c. 1111.]

[P002820]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho):

The Government are investing around £300 million to enable 75 local authorities, including Kent, to create family hubs, and to improve vital services to give every baby the best start in life, including support for parenting, perinatal mental health, parent-infant relationships, and infant feeding:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/family-hubs-and-start-for-life-programme>.

Access to high quality infant feeding, perinatal mental health, and parent-infant relationship services in the post-natal period are pivotal in supporting new parents and families to thrive, and part of the funding that Kent will receive through the Family hubs and Start for Life programme will be to enhance these services in their locality. Across the Kent County Council family hub network, plans to support and help women to breastfeed include targeting provision of maternity wear and infant feeding resources, such as breast pumps, to those most in need.

An additional £28 million has also been made available to these 75 local authorities to improve early language development, by supporting parents to help their children learn at home.

This new investment builds on previous investment to champion family hubs—including a £12 million transformation fund to open family hubs in a further 12 local authorities in England.

Family hubs are 'one stop shops' that make it easier for families to get the support they need. The hub approach means professionals and partners working

together more effectively, with a focus on supporting and strengthening the family relationships that carry us all through life.

The family hub model builds on what we have learned from children's centres. Family hubs bring together services for children of all ages and so respond to the needs of the whole family.

Decisions on how best to meet the needs of the local population have always been for the council concerned. Sure Start children's centres can form part of a family hub network. Our National Centre for Family Hubs will work to ensure that councils understand how they can best be incorporated where it is appropriate.

Statutory guidance makes it clear where councils decide to close a children's centre site they should demonstrate that children and families, particularly the most disadvantaged, will not be adversely affected.

TREASURY

Tax wealth

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares a fair tax system would ensure that those with the broadest shoulders pay the most; further declares that income from wealth is taxed at lower rates than regular income; further notes that simply equalising Capital Gains Tax rates with income tax rates would raise £17 billion per year that could easily fund an inflation-matching pay rise for the nurses, teachers, ambulance drivers and all public sector workers.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to scrap this tax advantage for the wealthy and to instead tax wealth fairly therefore allowing for pay rises for public sector workers through the reallocation of funds.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Richard Burgon, *Official Report*, 14 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 803.]

[P002813]

Observations from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins):

The Government thank the hon. Member for Leeds East, Richard Burgon MP, for submitting the petition.

The UK tax system is designed to ensure among other things that the richest in our society pay their fair share on their wealth and assets, with the tax system taxing wealth across many different economic activities, including acquisition, holding, transfer and disposal of assets and income derived from assets.

The Government have recently gone further to make the tax system fairer and more efficient. As announced at autumn statement 2022, the dividend allowance has been reduced from £2,000 to £1,000 and will fall to £500 from April 2024. Similarly, the capital gains tax (CGT) annual exempt amount has been lowered from £12,300 to £6,000 and will be reduced to £3,000 next year. These reforms support strong public finances and make the system fairer and more progressive by bringing the treatment of investment income and capital gains closer into line with that of employment income, while also maintaining simplicity and removing administrative burdens by ensuring

that those with low levels of dividend income and capital gains are kept out of paying tax for small amounts.

On top of this, the income tax system is already highly progressive. The top 1% are projected to pay over 28% of all income tax in 2022-23. The Government have also taken steps to ensure those with the highest incomes contribute a greater share, strengthening the public finances in a fair way. The income tax additional rate threshold has been reduced from £150,000 to £125,140, meaning the top 2% of taxpayers will pay more in tax. The vast majority of the revenue raised from decreasing the threshold, over 80%, comes from those earning over £150,000.

Pay for most frontline workforces—including nurses, teachers, armed forces and police officers—is set through an independent pay review body (PRB) process. These independent bodies consider a range of evidence when forming their recommendations. The Government accepted the pay recommendations of the independent PRBs for the NHS, teachers, police and the armed forces for 2022-23. These gave the highest uplifts in nearly 20 years, reflecting the vital contributions public sector workers make to our country and the cost of living pressures facing households. The 2023-24 awards for most frontline workforces will also be informed by recommendations from these PRBs.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 9 May 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	183	TREASURY—continued	
Energy Costs: Support for Businesses	186	Investment Zones	183
Financial Services Sector: Regulatory Framework .	185	People on Lower Incomes: Financial Support.....	191
Hair and Beauty Sector: Disguised Employment		Public Spending: Value for Money	196
Practices.....	189	School Meals: Impact of Inflation	185
Inflation	187	Tax System: Fairness.....	192
Inflation and Economic Growth Forecasts:		Topical Questions	198
G7 Countries	194	Withdrawal from the EU: Economic Impact.....	194

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 9 May 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	13WS	ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	14WS
UK-Australia and UK-New Zealand		Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects	14WS
Free Trade Agreements	13WS		

PETITIONS

Tuesday 9 May 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	11P	TREASURY	12P
Children centres	11P	Tax wealth.....	12P

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 9 May 2023

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 183] [see index inside back page]
Chancellor of the Exchequer

Coronation: Policing of Protests [Col. 203]
Answer to urgent question—(Chris Philp)

Recovering Access to Primary Care [Col. 218]
Statement—(Steve Barclay)

Cladding Remediation Works (Code of Practice) [Col. 238]
Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Tom Hunt)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Energy Bill [Lords] [Col. 241]
Motion for Second Reading—(Grant Shapps)—agreed to
Read a Second Reading
Programme motion agreed to

Petition [Col. 311]

Epidermolysis Bullosa: Drug Repurposing Trials [Col. 312]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Ukraine: Special Tribunal [Col. 103WH]
Backbench Business debate
A46 at Tewkesbury [Col. 120WH]
School and College Funding: The Midlands [Col. 127WH]
Victims' and Offenders' Rights [Col. 153WH]
Yemen: Humanitarian Situation and Children's Rights [Col. 160WH]
General debates

Written Statements [Col. 13WS]

Petitions [Col. 11P]
Observations
