

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

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 11 May 2023

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Jamie Wallis for the first question. Not here.

Ministerial Code: Civil Service

2. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Whether he has held recent discussions with the Prime Minister on the observance of the ministerial code as it relates to the civil service. [904850]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): The Prime Minister has made it absolutely clear that Ministers are expected to maintain the highest standards of behaviour at all times in accordance with the ministerial code. Working relationships, including with civil servants, should be professional and appropriate.

Munira Wilson: Civil servants living in my constituency and across the country feel utterly dismayed that their professionalism and integrity are constantly being undermined by statements from serving and former Ministers, repeated attacks on them and, indeed, the Prime Minister's failure to condemn what was exposed as bullying and intimidatory behaviour. Does the Minister agree that, given the importance of civil service and ministerial relationships and his role in upholding the ministerial code, phrases such as "activist blob" or a "blizzard of snowflakes" are not in keeping with that code, and what will he do about it?

Jeremy Quin: I rather dispute the premise of the hon. Lady's question. There is and always should be a professional relationship between civil servants and the Government. We should all ensure that we maintain the impartiality, objectivity and integrity of the civil service. We should support civil servants in doing the important job that they do, which includes upholding the impartiality of the civil service, about which the Opposition have a few things to learn.

Civil Service: External Consultants

3. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the use of external consultants by the civil service. [904851]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): My focus is on ensuring that the civil service has enhanced skills to provide all forms of advice where appropriate. However, there is also a role, as there is for other Governments and the private sector, for specialist expertise. Where this represents good value for money in delivering for the taxpayer, we will use it.

Mary Glendon: But with thousands of civil servants—hard-working, experienced civil servants—in the Public and Commercial Services Union having to strike for a fair pay deal themselves, how can the Minister justify hiring expensive consultants instead of using the in-house expertise that there evidently is across our wonderful civil service?

Jeremy Quin: We do make use of that expertise. I am keen to see civil servants providing advice across the full remit of their capabilities. Embedded in civil service learning are modules about consultancy, and we ensure that we use civil servants where appropriate in that area. However, there is a role for specialist consultants and specialist expertise. That can add value for the taxpayer. I used to be the Minister for Defence Procurement, and we would not have ship designers employed in the civil service when there are real specialists out there who are up to date and effective. There will always be a role for expertise that comes from outside Government, as well as using the brilliant expertise of our civil servants themselves.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I agree with the Minister that there is a role for consultants, but the spending on consultants is spiralling out of control. After the scandal of spending waste on personal protective equipment the Government have not taken the action needed. Consultants cost twice as much as a civil servant, yet spending on consultants has been spiralling. The Paymaster General lifted controls on private contracts and on reporting them in February. The Cabinet Office itself is one of the worst offenders for spending on consultants, and Ministers are not enforcing public reporting of departmental spending so that we can find out how much is being spent on consultants, with the Treasury itself being one of the worst examples. Will the Minister commit to cutting the millions spent on consultants where they are not needed and where we can use civil servants instead, and to getting a grip on wasteful Government spending?

Jeremy Quin: I will always endeavour to ensure that no consultant is ever employed where they are "not needed", to quote the hon. Lady. We always ensure that we use the propositions that represent best value for money—that has to be the basis on which we operate, and we will continue to do so. I remind the hon. Lady that we managed to secure £3.4 billion of efficiency savings across Government last year. We did that by focusing on costs and making certain that we drove them down. We will continue to do so, and we are committed to ensuring that we get best value for the taxpayer.

National Resilience

4. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What progress his Department has made on strengthening national resilience. [904852]

7. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What progress his Department has made on strengthening national resilience. [904857]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State (Oliver Dowden): One of my priorities at the Cabinet Office is strengthening our national resilience across Government. Last month we tested successfully the emergency alert system, a vital new tool to help us to communicate quickly with the public during life-threatening situations, and we will soon publish an updated national risk register to support partners with their resilience plans.

Marco Longhi: The covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine have brought into sharp focus the risks of over-reliance on global supply chains. What steps are the Government taking to secure minimum safe systems for the UK's food, water, energy and defence sectors?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is right to highlight this issue. We committed in the integrated review to publish a supply chains and import strategy so that we can strengthen our resilience in critical sectors. We have already developed several sector-specific supply chain resilience strategies and a supply chain resilience framework for the public and private sectors.

Andrew Selous: Our ability to pay for everything we care about as a nation depends on a strong economy. Nowhere is that more important than in our leading industries, such as semiconductors, quantum computing and artificial intelligence, where we have world-leading advantages. What more do we need to do to make sure that we keep that world-class technology and capability safe here in the UK and can pay for everything we care about?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is right that economic security is an emerging challenge in the United Kingdom and across the world; that is why it was so prominent in the integrated review refresh. It is a big area of focus for me, which is why the Prime Minister asked me to chair a new national security committee on economic security to step up our efforts. That committee met last week.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Off the back of reports that Russia is content for its ships to sabotage northern European energy infrastructure, it is more concerning than ever that, despite taking up the majority of UK coastal waters, Scotland does not have a single armoured ship permanently based in its waters. Let us be clear: in an independent Scotland, Scotland's defence force would recognise and fill those gaps in security. However, in the meantime, what is the Minister's Department doing across Whitehall to invest in the maritime security of Scotland and Scottish territorial waters?

Oliver Dowden: Of course the maritime security of the United Kingdom is the utmost priority for this Government. We ensure that Royal Naval vessels are available to patrol waters at all times. I would gently say to the hon. Lady that that kind of defence strength would simply not be available—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who has been here much longer than most, should know not to walk in front of a Member when the Minister is giving them an answer.

Oliver Dowden: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was just going to say that the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) should know that that kind of defence strength would simply not be possible in an independent Scotland.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): In response to the National Infrastructure Commission and the Climate Change Committee stating that the Government must take steps to ensure our key infrastructure is resilient to the effects of climate change, what steps is the Minister taking with Cabinet colleagues to fast-track national adaptation planning?

Oliver Dowden: Our efforts in that area are led by relevant Government Departments. Through the Cabinet Office, I chair the Cabinet Committee on net zero and energy security, which is designed specifically to co-ordinate all the different areas of Government to deliver on our national and international commitments.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): There are increasing concerns about the pace of growth of artificial intelligence, with its potential to penetrate so many areas of our lives and dehumanise our world. It is difficult to see how bad actors will not exploit AI to do bad things, and it is already influencing the character of conflict. Given that there is a lag between the arrival of new technical developments and subsequent regulations passed by this place, will the Deputy Prime Minister consider creating a new role in the Government, a Minister for artificial intelligence, so that Government and Parliament can stay on the front foot in this fast-moving world?

Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. There are two elements: the first is ensuring that we are ahead of the game with artificial intelligence and exploiting its opportunities, and that responsibility sits with the new Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. There are also, as he says, major resilience challenges, which fall within my remit as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, ensuring that the United Kingdom is prepared for any threats that may emerge in that area. That is something I take seriously, and we are doing a lot of work on it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can the Minister further outline what steps are being taken to develop a measure for social vulnerability as an indicator of socioeconomic resilience and of how risks impact on communities and vulnerable groups, to further guide and inform decision making, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland, whose isolation leaves us more vulnerable than our mainland counterparts?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. This is a whole United Kingdom effort. As an example of that, a couple of weeks ago we held in Belfast a major cyber-security conference, bringing together partners from around the world and built on the strength of cyber-security not just in the United Kingdom but in Northern Ireland specifically. It is just one area where we are stronger working together as a United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): The National Infrastructure Commission and the Committee on Climate Change have made it clear that there is a significant resilience gap in Britain's key infrastructure. As we approach the summer, and water shortages loom once again in the face of intensifying climate change across the country, how many of the action points laid out in the resilience framework that the Government published in December have been achieved?

Oliver Dowden: As the hon. Lady will know, we continue to make considerable progress on all the actions set out in that framework. She is right to highlight the challenges that we face in some resilience areas, particularly in relation to cyber-resilience. That is why I am conducting a programme to step up our cyber-resilience, for example by creating a new agency to ensure that we are across the cyber-resilience of all Government Departments and annually appraise them of it.

Speakers at Government Events: Social Media History

5. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): How many people his Department has identified as unsuitable for speaking at Government events based on their social media history. [904855]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): The Cabinet Office has drawn up guidance to help protect civil service values. Taxpayers' money should not unwittingly be used to pay for speakers linked to abhorrent organisations or individuals who promote hate or discriminatory beliefs, which could bring the civil service into disrepute. We do not hold a central record of speakers identified as unsuitable, but as the guidance has been described to me as "codified common sense", I trust that the number will be very few.

Justin Madders: Well, if the guidance is common sense, the Minister will have no problem with publishing it, will he? At the moment, there is Government guidance to ban people from speaking at Government events, but we have not seen it. We do not know who is on that list, and we do not even know if the people on the list have been told that they appear on it. That is more like North Korea, is it not?

Jeremy Quin: I have nothing to hide. If the hon. Gentleman would like it published, I will publish it. It is internal guidance, and it therefore tends to be internal, but I will lay a copy in the Library. He is a sensible person and will appreciate that there are certain abhorrent organisations that we should not pay or give a platform to and cause embarrassment to our civil service or our country. But I will publish the guidance.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On 25 April, I put in a written parliamentary question asking the Minister to publish the guidance. He did not publish it in response to my question. I came here today convinced that I would have to make a freedom of information request to get that guidance. Why, having refused to publish the guidance in his answer to me on 3 May, is the Minister now saying that he will publish it? What is happening here? Why was he unwilling to publish the guidance in response to the normal parliamentary method of putting in a written question?

Jeremy Quin: It may shock the hon. Lady, and I apologise, but I cannot recall her exact parliamentary question. I recall the parliamentary question of the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), in which I believe he asked if it was my intention to publish the guidance. It was not our intention to publish it, but I have nothing to hide and am very happy to publish it. It is internal guidance; it will be adapted by different Departments. It is sensible to have guidance to ensure that civil servants know what they should be doing when invitations are issued to people who will be paid and given a platform in, and could cause embarrassment to, the civil service.

Kirsty Blackman: In the response to my written question last week, I was told that the due diligence and impartiality guidelines

"avoid invitations being issued to individuals and/or organisations that have provided adverse commentary on government policy, political decisions, approaches or individuals in government",

in order to "retain impartiality" in the civil service. That is the opposite of what the Government are asking universities to do in the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill. Why is there one rule for the Government and another rule for universities? How is it impartial to only allow civil servants to hear speakers who agree with the Government?

Jeremy Quin: I appreciate that the hon. Lady has not had the opportunity to do so, and I look forward to her having that opportunity, but if she were to read on from the phrase that she quoted, which I assume appeared in the press, it refers to "adverse commentary" on Government policy

"that could undermine the Civil Service's position on impartiality and create reputational damage."

The guidance goes on to say that it is entirely possible for contrarian views—views critical of Government policy—to be shared with those who are at the point of policy formation. I want my civil servants to be fully informed of the arguments against Government policy. What is not appropriate is to have individuals paid and given a platform to create embarrassment for the civil service and potentially for the UK as a whole.

National Emergency Test

6. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the national emergency test on 23 April 2023. [904856]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State (Oliver Dowden): Last month's UK-wide emergency alert was the largest simultaneous public message in British history. We reached 93% of eligible phones in the country within three minutes of the test alert being sent from Cobra. The system is now fully operable in the event of a real emergency and is a vital tool in our toolkit to keep people safe.

Dr Evans: I congratulate the Department on conducting a test. What will happen with the 7% who were not reached? Will there be a follow-up test? My right hon. Friend says that the system is fully functional. What kind of things will these tests be used for in the future? Will it be regional, national or local emergencies?

Oliver Dowden: The whole point of having a test is to expose where there are challenges. Subsequent to the test, I met with the chief executive of Three, on which network the principal challenges lay, and I am confident that they have pretty much taken the actions needed to ensure that we will get the fuller coverage that is required. It was a one-off test. I do not see any need for a further such test in the foreseeable future. We will target the system as locally as possible—we can do so at the level of even a mast. It will be used in circumstances where people's lives are at risk; it is a very high bar for usage.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): During a national emergency, it is the most vulnerable who are likely to be the most in need, but they are also the most likely to be digitally excluded. In the absence of a digital inclusion strategy or even target from the Government since 2014, we do not know where those people are. In response to the test, what steps will the right hon. Gentleman take to ensure that those who are digitally excluded will be better included and reached in a national emergency?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Lady raises an important point. Even under the existing test, we reached 93% of people, so the vast majority of people in the United Kingdom did receive that alert, and by the time we have dealt with the Three issues, it will be a much larger number. We continue to engage with relevant charities and other organisations to ensure that people who still do not have access to mobile phone technology are able to receive appropriate alerts. This sits alongside many other measures that we take to inform people of risks.

Resignation Honours Lists

8. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the impact of the publication of the resignation honours lists of the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk and the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip on public trust in (a) politicians and (b) political institutions. [904858]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): It is a long-standing convention present under successive Governments that outgoing Prime Ministers can draw up a resignation list. Any names proposed are subject to the usual propriety checks.

Gavin Newlands: An Electoral Reform Society poll found that just 7% of people supported stuffing more peers into the Lords in the former former Prime Minister's resignation honours list, after he had already bloated the Lords with his brother, a Russian oligarch, cash-for-peerages Tory treasurers and now his father. After just seven weeks in office, the former Prime Minister is seeking to anoint her Tufton Street supporters in the Institute of Economic Affairs and the TaxPayers Alliance as life peers. In a cost of living crisis, will the Government listen to the public and block both the Prime Minister's predecessors' resignation honours lists?

Jeremy Quin: As I say, this is a long-standing convention that has gone on under successive Administrations. It continues to be a convention. It is typical, according to convention, that the Prime Minister forwards lists on

having received them from former Prime Ministers, but only after they have gone through the necessary and relevant checks; that does take place. As the question is about trust in political institutions, may I take the opportunity to congratulate the SNP on finding an auditor that is prepared to work with it and wish the auditors the best of luck in the challenges ahead?

Civil Service Impartiality

9. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect civil service impartiality; and if he will make a statement. [904859]

10. Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that the civil service code and complaints procedure are effective. [904860]

17. Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure impartiality and neutrality are maintained in relevant areas of public life. [904871]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): All civil servants are required to follow the civil service code, which sets out the four core values, including impartiality. All members of the senior civil service are in the "politically restricted" category, which places additional restrictions on political activity. In addition, there is a requirement that contacts between senior civil servants and leading members of Opposition parties should be cleared with Ministers. The impartiality and perceived impartiality of the civil service is constitutionally vital for the conduct of Government. I believe it is the responsibility of everyone in this House to preserve and support the impartiality of the civil service.

Michael Fabricant: Impartiality must not only be done; it must also be seen to be done. What reputational damage does the Minister think has happened since Sue Gray was in negotiations with the Leader of the Opposition?

Jeremy Quin: It is, I believe, wholly unprecedented. It is particularly important that permanent secretaries, of all people, should conduct themselves in a way such that the impartiality of the civil service cannot be called into question. We should all support them in doing so. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) updated the House through a written ministerial statement, and I can assure my hon. Friend that consideration of this issue continues.

Elliot Colburn: The principle of civil service impartiality is important to my constituents in Carshalton and Wallington, and indeed to many other Members' constituents. I was therefore surprised to receive a set of trolling emails from someone using their civil service email address. Could the Minister outline whether that is acceptable, and—following up on the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant)—what reputational damage does he believe has been done by the actions of the Labour party?

Jeremy Quin: The rules, which I have already set out, along with the fundamental principle that civil servants do not take actions that could lead to their impartiality

being questioned by an incumbent Administration—or any future Administration, for that matter—are well known to current permanent secretaries, I am certain. I am sure that is also the case for ex-permanent secretaries, which of course includes the Leader of the Opposition. As I have said, in this House we all have a role in protecting the impartiality and perceived impartiality of the civil service. On my hon. Friend's specific point, if he shares more details with me, I will happily look into it. It is very important that the impartiality of the civil service is maintained at every level.

Duncan Baker: Although, of course, impartiality and neutrality are important and conflicts of interests must be avoided from a national perspective, we do not talk enough about the situation in local government. Does the Minister agree that local government and local officers must also remain impartial and neutral, and how do we ensure that happens across the country?

Jeremy Quin: I do not want to comment on the specifics raised, because I am unfamiliar with them, but I would say that, in carrying out procurements under public contract regulations, contracting authorities in both central and local government are required to take appropriate measures to effectively prevent, identify and remedy conflicts of interest arising, so as to avoid any distortion of competition and ensure equal treatment of all economic operators.

Mr Speaker: I call Pete Wishart.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) *rose*—

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State for Scotland recently—

Mr Speaker: Sorry, let us take Clive Efford, who has already started. I will come to you, Mr Wishart.

Clive Efford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Does the Minister feel that civil service impartiality was compromised in any way by having to deal with the fast track for covid contracts, or by the way in which the Government responded to the accusations of lockdown parties in No. 10 Downing Street?

Jeremy Quin: As to the former, I do not believe so; my understanding is that all the rules were followed in that regard and it was done appropriately. In relation to the latter, that is subject to an ongoing investigation by the Privileges Committee, and therefore I would not seek to comment on it.

Pete Wishart: Mr Speaker, I've started, so I'll finish.

The Secretary of State for Scotland recently wrote to the head of the civil service to say that no UK civil servant should work for the newly appointed Minister for Independence in the Scottish Parliament, even though we have a pro-independence majority in the Scottish Parliament and up to 50% of the people now support independence. Will the Paymaster General ensure that impartiality is introduced by making sure that no civil servant is engaged in any work defending and promoting the Union in the UK Government?

Jeremy Quin: I will not be doing that. I am not familiar with the letter mentioned. We have a Government of the United Kingdom who are proud of the Union we

serve. The Government are convinced that we are better together as a country, and I believe that is the view of the overwhelming majority of the people of Scotland, as was the case in the referendum, which I seem to recall was a once-in-a-generation opportunity.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Our civil servants are impartial, committed and hard-working professionals. They deserve our respect for keeping this country going during the pandemic. Instead, what we are getting from Ministers is unacceptable workplace behaviour and accusations of being responsible for Government failure. It is not civil servants who have put us through the Tory psychodrama and the disastrous Budget, so will the Minister take responsibility for the backlogs that constituents are facing up and down the country and stop shifting the blame on to hard-working civil servants?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Lady will not find me criticising civil servants who are hard-working, who do their job, who are committed and who continue to provide tremendous expertise to our country, but I take issue with her earlier points. We take any allegations of bullying seriously, and we need to ensure that they are all followed up. I do not know if the same can be said of the Labour party—people in glass houses should not throw stones. I think there were more allegations even today about activity inside the Labour party. There was five years of antisemitism that was not addressed, and I do think the Labour party should sort out its own issues before trying to sort out the Government's.

UK Genomics Databases

11. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology on the potential merits of designating UK genomics databases as critical national infrastructure. [904861]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State (Oliver Dowden): The UK's genomics databases are not designated as critical national infrastructure. However, through our recently published resilience framework, we have set out how we will work in partnership across all sectors to ensure that they are individually resilient while also fully contributing to national resilience.

Mr Carmichael: I recommend that the Minister reads the speech that Secretary of State Blinken made on Tuesday, in which he outlined the threat that the abuse of genomics databases poses not just to security, but to democracy as a whole. Contrast that with the situation in this country, where we now have a Chinese genomics giant opening a new lab. When are the Government going to wake up to the threat here?

Oliver Dowden: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we take these threats seriously. The point about critical national infrastructure is that we designate it in relation to things that are important to the safe and secure day-to-day running of the United Kingdom—literally keeping the lights on. That does not mean that we do not take very seriously the threats he outlines. It is

something that I am raising with the Department of Health and Social Care, which is the lead Department for genomics.

Public Contracts: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

12. **Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support small and medium-sized enterprises bidding for public contracts. [904862]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): This Government are supporting small and medium-sized enterprises in a variety of ways, from transparently publishing contract pipelines to simplifying bidding procedures. The Procurement Bill, which is making its way through Parliament and will be on Report soon, will create a simpler and more transparent procurement regime that will further open up public procurement to SMEs. The Bill includes a new duty on contracting authorities to have regard to the particular barriers facing SMEs.

Karin Smyth: I am pleased to hear about the Procurement Bill, because small and medium-sized businesses are fundamental to the economy of Bristol South and for jobs. What steps will the Minister be taking to address gaps in the Procurement Bill to enforce payment deadlines and to make sure that filters down through the supply chain to help small businesses in my constituency?

Alex Burghart: I am glad to hear the hon. Lady refer to that, because the principles behind the Procurement Bill for SMEs were given to us by SMEs. We want transparency, simplicity and fairness. On that third point, we are keen to see people pay their bills promptly, so that SMEs throughout the supply chain can get their money when they need it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Government may offer warm words on SMEs, but small businesses need those opportunities to thrive. Let us look at the evidence to see whether those warm words are backed up. In Brentwood, SMEs missed out on £3 in every £4 of viable suitable Government contracts in 2022. In Hertsmere, they missed out on 79%. In Horsham, SMEs got less than 5% of suitable public money. That amounts to £8.6 million. The Tories may talk about being a party of small businesses, but this Government have had 13 years to help small businesses—why have they not?

Alex Burghart: I am very pleased that the hon. Lady has been paying attention in the Committee stage of the Procurement Bill, where she has heard that we have done a great deal of work to overhaul the archaic regime that the EU left us with. It is precisely because of that Bill that small businesses will get contract pipelines, a single digital platform, prompt payments and a single regime that reduces bureaucracy and administrative burdens. With transparency, simplicity and fairness, this Government are delivering for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Mr Speaker: Bob Blackman is not here—he is struck in traffic—but in order for the other two Members to ask their questions, would the Minister answer as though he was here?

Industrial Action: Support for Public Services

13. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support public services during industrial action. [904864]

14. **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support public services during industrial action. [904866]

16. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support public services during industrial action. [904870]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State (Oliver Dowden): The Cabinet Office's Cobra unit has supported Departments with developing their contingency plans. We have co-ordinated preparedness activity across Government to minimise the impacts of industrial action on public services, but the only way we can truly avoid disruption is for union leaders to return to the negotiating table and work constructively in order to reach a fair and reasonable deal.

Simon Jupp: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Militant strike action causes misery for many people in East Devon, who just want to get on with their daily lives. Does my right hon. Friend agree that minimum safety levels are absolutely necessary to mitigate the impact of industrial action?

Oliver Dowden: As ever, my hon. Friend is totally right. It is completely unacceptable that the people of East Devon can have their lives totally upended by strikes led by militant unions. We of course respect the right to strike, but we have a duty to protect the lives and livelihoods of the British people. That is exactly what this legislation does, and it is a pity that the Labour party will not support it.

Selaine Saxby: My North Devon constituents would also like to get on with their daily lives. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be welcome if the Opposition also called on union leaders to get back around the table and work constructively to resolve these disputes?

Oliver Dowden: I have great sympathy with my hon. Friend's constituents. It really is incumbent on Labour Members, given their close relationship with the trade union movement, to encourage union leaders to come back to the table, and to support the minimum service legislation to protect our constituents, rather than kowtowing to their militant union paymasters?

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): When I spoke to Public and Commercial Services Union workers on the picket line in front of the UK Government building in my Glasgow Central constituency, they told me that they are striking precisely because they want to protect the public services they work in from erosion; to ensure that their colleagues do not see the erosion in pay and conditions that they have seen over many years; and to ensure that they have fair pay and fair wages that they can live on. What is the Minister doing to ensure that they do not have to go out on strike and they can get the fair wage that they deserve?

Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General has just published the affordability for settlements for civil servants. Remember that this is devolved to each individual Government Department. Of course, I do not dispute for a moment the challenges that people face as a result of the war in Ukraine pushing up inflation around the world, and that is why we have taken action across the board. However, I would say that we cannot allow inflation-busting pay rises, the only effect of which will be to make it harder to meet our target of halving inflation and to make every single person in this country—public and private sector—poorer.

Public Procurement: Value for Money

15. **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure value for money in public procurement spending. [904868]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): It is Government policy to award contracts on value-for-money terms, as is set out in “Managing Public Money”. We always look for the optimum combination of cost and quality over the lifetime of any project. The Procurement Bill will drive value for money by providing greater flexibility to contracting authorities to design efficient, commercial and market-focused competitions, and it removes overly prescriptive rules contained in existing regulations that we would have been bound to if, as the Opposition wanted, we had stayed in the European Union.

Ian Levy: I am fiercely supportive of the project to build a gigafactory on the Blyth estuary, which would provide much-needed jobs for my constituents. However, I also believe in due diligence when spending public money. Would my hon. Friend agree with me that it was a wise decision for the Government to withhold the release of a £100 million grant for this project? The Labour party wanted to release this large sum of public money without ensuring the financial stability of the business, once again spending other people’s money.

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: taxpayer money must always be used responsibly. Unfortunately, the conditions of the grant were not met and therefore no funds from the automotive transformation fund were paid out. We are pleased that Britishvolt has successfully been acquired and we will continue to work closely with the local authority to ensure the best outcome for this sale.

Public Procurement: Net Zero

19. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the role of public procurement policy in helping the Government meet their net zero targets. [904873]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): It is very nice to take another question from Bristol. Under our rules, Government suppliers are required to report their emissions and commit to the UK’s net zero target when bidding for contracts valued above £5 million per annum. If they fail to do so, they risk being excluded from procurement.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Minister for that response. Around £5 billion a year is spent on public sector food and catering services, and the national food strategy—Henry Dimbleby’s version—said that public food procurement is dominated by a quasi-monopoly, so very big companies are involved. How does that fit in with the policy note on carbon reductions, and are the Government looking to food suppliers through those contracts to reduce their carbon emissions?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Lady asks an important question. It is true that net zero is a big principle for Government and feeds through into all our work, including the public procurement contract. We have had some important debates around this during the passage of the Procurement Bill.

Topical Questions

T1. [904875] **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State (Oliver Dowden): I want to begin by congratulating Their Majesties the King and Queen on a wonderful coronation weekend. The Government worked hand in hand with the royal household in planning for this historic event, conducting over 20 multi-agency exercises in preparation and hosting the unprecedentedly high number of 95 heads of state over the weekend. It really was a triumph of pomp, pageantry and pride in Britain. In addition, through Cobra we have co-ordinated the longest and largest evacuation of any western nation from war-torn Sudan. As with the coronation, this feat would not have been possible without our public servants, both the armed forces and our civil servants, who worked tirelessly to make both operations a success. I am sure the whole House will join me in thanking them.

Marco Longhi: I of course echo my right hon. Friend’s comments about the coronation and thank the dedicated servicemen, police officers and public servants who made it such a success. Does he agree with me and many of my Dudley constituents that we should never be shy about being proud of our country’s fantastic traditions and institutions?

Oliver Dowden: I align myself entirely with the sentiments of my hon. Friend and the people of Dudley, and indeed the people of the whole United Kingdom. We witnessed the biggest military parade since the coronation of Her late Majesty, and it was a spectacular tribute to the values we all hold so dear. It is as true today as it was in 1953: only this country can bring so many people from so many different backgrounds together in celebration and such a shared uplifting experience.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): First, may I offer my congratulations to the right hon. Gentleman, who is proving that being ginger is no barrier to becoming Deputy Prime Minister? I hope to take his example with me very soon one day, and in the meantime I look forward to facing him at Deputy PMQs to a bigger crowd in the future. I also want to offer my heartfelt commiserations to the right hon. Gentleman, who lost

his local Conservative council this week. Those privet hedges of freedom were not quite as secure as he once boasted. Does he think that result is a reflection of the failure of his own local Tory party councillors or the failure of his Government and their Ministers?

Oliver Dowden: The right hon. Lady started off so nicely—you never know, one day the Labour party might even allow a woman to lead it. In Hertsmere and nationally it is the same picture: while we in the Conservative party are focusing on delivering for the British people, Labour is working out grubby, dodgy deals with other parties. We are focused on the British people; they are focused on their own political interests.

Angela Rayner: The only grubbiness that I have seen over the last few years has been about dodgy personal protective equipment contracts. I hope the Deputy Prime Minister will start to get a grip of that, because the local elections last Thursday revealed a lot about not only the British public's rejection of the mess created by the Conservatives over the last 13 years, but the impact of the Government's new voter ID regulations, which caused chaos and confusion at polling stations.

Oona Preece, a 93-year-old cancer sufferer, was excluded from voting in the local elections last week. She first voted in 1950 and had voted in every local and general election since. Given that not a single person—not one—was prosecuted for voter personation last year, was the Deputy Prime Minister's policy worth denying people like Oona her say?

Oliver Dowden: Of course, I will look into Oona's case, but I am not quite sure where the right hon. Lady and Labour Members have been, because I did not find any of the scenes that she describes in my constituency and nor did colleagues across the country. It was competently done, and actually it has aligned us with many other countries around the world such as Canada. It is a perfectly sensible reform.

As for the other invective thrown this way, I say to the right hon. Lady that she should perhaps take the log out of her own eye so that she can see more clearly to criticise us. Until the Labour party publishes the list of meetings that took place between it and Sue Gray, we will take absolutely no lectures whatsoever from it.

T5. [904880] **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): May I first associate myself with the Secretary of State's remarks about the coronation? I think we can all agree that it was a fantastic event. I add my thanks to the security personnel and armed forces who kept us safe on the day. What steps is the Department taking to improve access to public sector procurement for small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly in Scotland?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): My hon. Friend knows the answer to this question all too well, having been on the Procurement Bill Committee. We are creating access to public procurement for small and medium-sized enterprises as never before. Alas, the Bill will not apply to Scotland because the Scottish Government refused to take part in it. That is a great shame, because it means that small and medium-sized enterprises in Scotland will be deprived of the opportunities that those south of the border will get.

T2. [904876] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): I was heartened earlier by the Secretary of State's comments about resilience. As he knows, this is part of an international wake-up call, especially in the EU and the United States. Unfortunately, that was slightly undermined by the comments of his Minister, who was straight back to the old, tired dogma.

Does the Minister recognise that local and national Government have a crucial role as a customer for firms that need regular orders and work flow? When will our Government catch up with other countries all round the world and give priority to British industry, British agriculture and British workers?

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): One of the things that depressed me about leaving the Ministry of Defence was the fact that I would no longer be across the Dispatch Box from the right hon. Gentleman and his worthy campaign to make certain that, in defence in particular, orders go to UK companies. He is right, and the Government absolutely accept that many areas of our national life must, for defence and security reasons, be provided by UK companies. However, there are huge advantages to working internationally as well, including in the sphere of defence. He knows the answer: from Typhoon and F-35 to Type 31 orders, we can do both.

T7. [904883] **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Government agencies such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, the Passport Office, Natural England and the Environment Agency among many more take major decisions that affect the lives of our constituents and businesses based in our constituencies. Delays and inefficiency are causing no end of problems. Will the Minister outline what actions are being taken to improve the efficiency and accountability of Government agencies?

Jeremy Quin: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We constantly have efficiency reviews, and those will continue, and we work closely with the Treasury to make certain that the customer on the ground gets the right service and that that happens as cost-effectively as is humanly possible. That is how we managed to get £3.4 billion of savings through the system last year. We will continue to work at it. It is a huge task, but we are absolutely committed to driving those savings and good service for the customer.

T4. [904879] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Let me put on the record my thanks to Ministers for backing my campaign to ensure that police authorities across the country can sell disused police stations such as Teddington in my constituency below market value for community benefit. I hope that they agree that the same principle should apply to Government Departments. Can Ministers please advise me on when the Office of Government Property will finally reissue its updated guidance on the disposal of public assets, so that bids for community benefit such as affordable housing and GP surgeries can be prioritised?

Alex Burghart: I am happy to look into the hon. Lady's suggestion, and I am delighted that she sees our support for local communities and value for money.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I would like to highlight the hard work of local civil servants at East Sussex County Council, Rother District Council and Hastings Borough Council. I do not know their politics, and they have always worked with me in a positive way. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking them for their work locally to deliver services, especially during the local elections last week?

Jeremy Quin *rose*—

Oliver Dowden *rose*—

Alex Burghart *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Come on!

Jeremy Quin: We are all struggling over the opportunity to endorse what my hon. Friend says, because it is absolutely right and we do not say it enough. A huge amount of hard work is done by civil servants at local and national level. We appreciate the work undertaken by them and I very much welcome her bringing it to the Chamber today.

T6. [904881] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Paymaster General and I have been having a parliamentary tussle to get some basic factual information about the steps the Government are taking following the recommendations in Sir Brian Langstaff's second interim report. Five hundred people have died since the inquiry was set up. On average, one person dies every four days. This group of people have very little trust in the system, which has let them down for so many decades. I know that the Paymaster General is a decent and compassionate man, so I ask him to step away from the Government non-speak and to provide the basic factual information that has been requested to that group of people, who are waiting desperately for the Government to act quickly.

Jeremy Quin: I take enormously seriously what the right hon. Lady says on this issue, on which she has campaigned long and hard and very successfully. We are now in the final stages, as she knows. We have received the second interim report on compensation, which we did not anticipate until February, but it has arrived and I am delighted that it has. It is real stuff to get our teeth into while we wait for the final report. We are doing a lot of work at pace.

To reassure the right hon. Lady, I chaired a meeting with Ministers from across Government last week. I have a bilateral meeting next week and I anticipate having more ministerial meetings, which I will chair, the week after. She has asked me to set out every single internal meeting I have on this subject, which is not normal in the formulation of policy. I do not intend to list every single meeting that I have internally or with other Ministers, but I assure her that we are working at pace to come up with a constructive response to the report.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I join the Deputy Prime Minister in congratulating all those who participated in the magnificent coronation, not least the armed forces, who enjoyed a few rehearsals to get it right and absolutely did so. Will the Minister for Veterans' Affairs kindly update the House on our manifesto commitment to support veterans who served in Northern Ireland?

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): I pay tribute to all those who were on duty last weekend. When it comes to looking after those who served in Northern Ireland, this Government are committed to fulfilling our manifesto commitment to them. The Government are working hard to ensure that legacy is dealt with in a way that has victims at the centre. The Bill has its last day in Committee in the House of Lords today. We made commitments to our veterans in respect of Northern Ireland and we are determined to see them through.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): A month ago, the Minister came to the House and told us that he was dealing with the contaminated blood report "at pace". A month later, he has just repeated that phrase. Can he say what "at pace" means and when he will tell us the timescale?

Jeremy Quin: I came promptly to the House to make a statement after receiving the second interim report, and I said then that the Government have always been focused on ensuring a comprehensive response at the conclusion of the inquiry. I also said that that did not preclude steps being taken earlier, if possible. I cannot illuminate that any further, but work is continuing. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that five years of work has been done by an extremely eminent individual, who has produced an extremely good and interesting report. It is for us to work through that, but it does need to be worked through and considered, as is the case with all reports presented to Government. We need to make certain that it is given the attention it requires.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I think it was about 10 years ago that I said to the Government that we ought to have an emergency test and an emergency system, so I am very pleased that we got it up and running and that 93% of people managed to get a signal, albeit that some of us got it one minute in advance of 3 o'clock, which I thought was particularly good. The Minister identified, quite rightly, that there was a problem with the Three network, which is being resolved. Will there be another test to show that at least 99% of alerts are getting through?

Oliver Dowden: I am very happy to grant this to my hon. Friend as his legacy project. I do not believe that we need to have another test, for the simple reason that following my meeting with the chief executive, I am confident that the network has taken the necessary steps to resolve the issue.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent, Brian, lost his mother in 2020. His family is one of far too many who have struggled for years as a result of the contaminated blood scandal. Those families want to see action now, not "in due course", and "working at pace" does not cut it when it is the pace of a snail. I ask the Paymaster General, when will compensation be paid to all those infected or affected by the scandal?

Jeremy Quin: I sympathise hugely with the hon. Lady's constituent. That is one of many, many—far too many—tragic incidences that we are aware of in the House. That does not alter the fact that the compensation scheme needs to be done properly and effectively. We need to come back with a solution and an answer to the report, and to make certain that it is done appropriately.

As the hon. Lady knows, those who were infected were paid interim compensation last year of £100,000 per person. We still need to work through what the report envisages.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): In response to an earlier question about the emergency test, conversations with the Three network were mentioned. What reassurance can be given to constituents in remote rural areas, including some of my constituents who never received their alert and who are not with Three? I declare an interest: I am a Vodafone customer and my alert went off the next morning, as I was coming up the M5.

Oliver Dowden: All these things point to the reason why we needed to have the test in the first place, which was to iron out these issues. In more rural areas, there are problems with signal, particularly with signal penetrating older houses. The answer is to extend the roll-out of mobile technology further, and the Government have very good plans for that.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Data from 2022 has identified that serving military personnel and military veterans have a high prevalence of mental health disorders, with depression and alcohol misuse among the most prevalent. What steps are Ministers taking to ensure that those personnel have access to the tailored mental health support they require?

Johnny Mercer: The data tells us that people are less likely to have a mental health condition if they served in the military, but of course we take every case seriously. Mental health provision for both those who are serving and veterans has completely changed in this country. Op Courage is the UK's first dedicated mental health care pathway for veterans, with £22 million a year and 19,000 referrals in its first year, which shows the huge unmet need that the Government are now meeting. The message is always the same: "Come forward, help is available, people do care and you can get better."

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Has the Secretary of State made any assessment or has he any estimates of the number of people who were turned away from the local elections last week? Does he have a number in mind that would suggest that the

policy needs to be looked at again or to be abolished and scrapped, because people did not get the opportunity to vote?

Alex Burghart: This is a matter for the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I know that his Department and the Government will be looking at the after-effects of this major change. What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that in my constituency, and in the constituencies of many hon. Members, there were absolutely no problems at the polling booths, despite all the woeful predictions of people like himself.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): May I return to my earlier question? It seems to me that the Cabinet Office is not taking enough interest in food procurement. I urge Ministers to speak to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, because we are still awaiting a response to the consultation that closed on 4 September. Part of that consultation was about how we can ensure that the Government procure more food locally and sustainably. Will the Minister assure me that he will talk to DEFRA and try to ensure that that is the trajectory of public food procurement?

Alex Burghart: I am always talking to DEFRA colleagues and always delighted to do so. I am pleased to tell the hon. Lady that the Crown Commercial Service is looking specifically at how we can involve small and medium-sized enterprises in public food procurement.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Secretary of State referred earlier to cyber-security. Bearing in mind the fact that Belfast is now known as the cyber capital of the world, will the Cabinet Office and the Secretary of State build on that strong foundation, invest in the existing industry, and allocate the funding to create more jobs and use the highly skilled based that is already there?

Oliver Dowden: At the conference we had a few weeks ago, I was enormously impressed by the strength and depth of the cyber-security industry in Northern Ireland and particularly in Belfast. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Government remain fully committed not only to the cyber industry but to Northern Ireland in particular. I am sure that further investment will be forthcoming.

Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill

Mr Speaker: Before we begin the urgent question, I note that it is highly regrettable that the Government decided not to offer an oral statement on this matter yesterday, given the importance of the announcement. On such matters, full engagement with Parliament and its Committees is essential. Before I call the Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee, I remind the Government that we are elected to hear it first, not to hear it in *The Telegraph*, and a written ministerial statement is certainly not satisfactory for such an important matter.

10.31 am

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if she will make a statement on her failure to come to the House before she made the written ministerial statement on the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill and the article today in *The Telegraph*?

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): I am very sorry, Mr Speaker, that the sequencing that we chose was not to your satisfaction. I was—

Mr Speaker: Order. That is totally not acceptable—

Kemi Badenoch: It was not the right procedure.

Mr Speaker: Who do you think you are speaking to, Secretary of State? I think we need to understand each other. I am the defender of this House and these Benches on both sides. I am not going to be spoken to by a Secretary of State who is absolutely not accepting my ruling. Take it with good grace and accept it that Members should hear it first, not through a WMS or what you decide. These Members have been elected by their constituents and they have the right to hear it first. It is time this Government recognised that we are all elected—we are all Members of Parliament—and used the correct manners.

Kemi Badenoch: Mr Speaker, I apologise. What I was trying to say was that I am very sorry that I did not meet the standards that you expect of Secretaries of State. Forgive my language. I have been trying to make sure that I provide as much clarity as possible, so I am actually very pleased to have come to the House to speak on this issue.

I have published a written ministerial statement to explain that yesterday we tabled an amendment to the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill that amends the operation of the sunset in clause 1. It is a technical change that introduces to the Bill a schedule of retained EU law that will be revoked on 31 December 2023. The schedule includes around 600 pieces of legislation provided by nearly all Departments, and spans a huge number policy areas. We tabled the amendment in response to concerns raised in this House, and it will provide the legal clarity and certainty that has been called for.

I reassure my hon. Friend the Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee that the 600 pieces of legislation in the schedule are not the limit of our ambition—neither the beginning nor the end—but over the past year, as Whitehall Departments have been working hard to

identify retained EU law to preserve, reform or revoke, it has become clear that time constraints have led to the programme becoming more about preserving EU laws than prioritising meaningful reform. That is why we are proposing a new approach. Had I known the intense excitement that the House would feel about this issue, I would have come running to make sure that the technical details could be investigated by all and sundry.

As I have said, we are proposing a new approach, one that will ensure that Ministers and officials are enabled to focus more on reforming retained EU law and doing so faster. I am pleased to say that the Government have already reformed or revoked more than 1,000 pieces of REUL. In addition to the list of about 600 revocations in the schedule to the retained EU law Bill, about 500 further pieces of REUL will be repealed by the Financial Services and Markets Bill and the Procurement Bill, which means that we will have repealed not 600 but more than 2,000 pieces of REUL by the end of the year.

We are committed to lightening the regulatory burden on businesses and helping to spur economic growth, and our Edinburgh reforms of UK financial services include more than 30 regulatory reforms to unlock investment and boost growth in towns and cities across the UK. Our regulatory reform announcement yesterday set out a long-term plan to improve UK regulation over the coming months. As a down-payment on that commitment, we announced changes that will reduce disproportionate EU-derived reporting requirements and could save businesses about £1 billion a year. That is just the first in a series of announcements that the Government will be making on reforming regulations to drive growth, and in addition to the schedule the powers in the Bill will still enable us to revoke, replace and reform any outdated EU laws that remain on our statute book by 2026. This new approach will provide space for longer-term and more ambitious reforms. Members will no doubt be pleased to hear that it will also mean that fewer statutory instruments will be required to preserve EU laws that are deemed appropriate to be maintained.

I want to reassure my hon. Friend that we will still fully take back control of our laws and end the supremacy and the special status of retained EU law by the end of 2023. That will ensure that we are ending the shadow statute book and the inappropriate entrenchment of EU law concepts in domestic statute.

Sir William Cash: Under the Standing Orders of this House, the European Scrutiny Committee is specifically charged with examining the legal and political consequences of EU legislation. The Committee reported on 21 July 2022 after a five-month inquiry in support of the Bill, which was passed unamended by a large majority in this elected House and by the Public Bill Committee, all of which endorsed the Government's policy on the Bill.

Since February, the Secretary of State has been asked three times, formally and personally, to appear before the European Scrutiny Committee. Why has she failed to do so? The amendments published today are not accompanied by any explanation to the House—apart from her very short written ministerial statement yesterday and her article in the press today—despite the utter reversal in vital respects of the Bill as passed by this elected House. Why not? The amendments have not been subjected to any analysis or questioning by this House, which is now essential given the fundamental

[Sir William Cash]

change in Government policy. The House is being treated in a manner that is plainly inconsistent with clear promises already made.

Will my right hon. Friend specifically seek and make arrangements for the immediate deferral of the Bill's Report stage in the unelected House of Lords, which is due to take place on the 15th and 17th of this month, so that she can come to the European Scrutiny Committee next week and answer our questions—as provided for by Standing Orders—and produce a Command Paper before that Report stage to explain the reasons for these fundamental questions of constitutional importance, which affect all our constituents, all our voters, and the coherence of our statute book and our legal system?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend has asked many questions, and I will endeavour to answer them. I think he knows that he has heard the answers before, but I am nevertheless happy to respond on the Floor of the House.

My hon. Friend and I have had many private conversations in which we have discussed retained EU law. He wrote to me about attending the European Scrutiny Committee, and I replied that until the policy was settled I could not attend the Committee but instead could have engagement with colleagues, which is what I have done. I should, of course, be delighted to attend the European Scrutiny Committee. I attend numerous Select Committees in my role not just as Secretary of State for Business and Trade but as Minister for Women and Equalities, and I should be very happy to speak to the Committee, but—no doubt you will sympathise with this, Mr Speaker—there is no point having to talk about policy on the Floor of the House before we know exactly what is settled.

My hon. Friend claims that this is a change of policy, but it is a change of approach. The policy is still the same: we are ending EU supremacy, and we are ending interpretive effects. What we are changing is the way in which we are doing that. We could have ended up with a programme of 450 statutory instruments to preserve EU law. What I have done is respond to businesses in particular, but also to the parliamentarians—including many of those who are chuntering on the Opposition Benches—who have raised concerns with me about how we can have clarity and some transparency. I have shown exactly what we are doing. I have listed all the laws that we are removing. There is a key point to make here. We left the European Union not just to delete EU law from the statute book, but to make our economy better. To do that, we have to reform the laws. If we delete the laws from the statute book, we will be starting from scratch in bringing in the reforming primary legislation. This is a better approach. It was my suggestion to the Prime Minister. I am very pleased that he accepted it. I am very proud to be standing at the Dispatch Box showing that those of us who are Brexiteers can be pragmatic and do what is right for the British people. That is why I am very pleased to be explaining this change on the Floor of the House today.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What an absolute shambles. I think that the Secretary of State is the sixth different Government representative

at the Dispatch Box on this Bill, and unfortunately for her she is the one who will have to hear from us the words that no Government Minister wants to hear: we told you so. We did, repeatedly, as did the Institute of Directors, the TUC, the Bar Council and a host of other organisations.

It has to be asked: why did not the Government listen to those experts in the first place? It was completely unrealistic, reckless and frankly arrogant to think that they could strike 4,000 laws from the statute book in the timescale set out in the Bill. It is no use blaming the blob, the anti-growth coalition or the BBC. This humiliating U-turn is completely down to Government hubris that has found them crashing up against reality, so will the Secretary of State apologise to the entire House, and to all the trade unions and business, legal and environmental groups that were told by the Government that they were wrong?

Will the Secretary of State also apologise for announcing this policy change not to the House but to her friends—or should I say now her former friends—in the European Research Group and to the press? Can she tell us at what point the Government decided on this change of course and on what basis they have chosen the 600 regulations to be removed—or is it 2,000 now, because she mentioned that in her statement as well?

Although we welcome the humiliating climbdown that sees the cliff edge go, the Bill still gives enormous powers to Ministers and at last the cat is out of the bag about what they want to do with them. We are concerned that, although the mode of delivery has changed, the destination has remained the same. That is revealed in the “Smarter regulation to grow the economy” paper released yesterday, which contains a clear plan to water down TUPE and working time rights. We have warned time and again of the threat to workers' rights in the Bill and in response the Minister said:

“The Government have no intention of abandoning our strong record on workers' rights, having raised domestic standards over recent years to make them some of the highest in the world.”—[*Official Report, Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Public Bill Committee*, 22 November 2022; c. 144.]

Well, we can strike that from the record, as we can strike the Secretary of State's leadership hopes. How can a Government elected on a manifesto promise to

“build on existing employment law”

justify an approach that will water down workers' protections? It just goes to show that you cannot trust the Tories with workers' rights.

Kemi Badenoch: One of the things that I have found most illuminating about this process is how little those on the Opposition Front Bench understand what we are doing. They simply stand up and repeat their usual talking lines. We have made repeated commitments that we are not watering down workers' rights in this House. If the hon. Gentleman actually read and understood what we have written, he would understand that we are maintaining workers' rights but reducing the bureaucracy. That would save £1 billion and is something that both workers and employers want. I know that it is really tough and there are lots of words in it, but the truth is, I say to those on the Opposition Benches, that I can explain it but I cannot understand it for them.

This is a very simple change in approach. We are having the exact same effect that we were always going to have. We are removing more than 2,000 pieces of EU legislation. It is delightful to see those on the Labour

Front Bench and the ERG on the same side for once, as they claim to be. If I am upsetting people on both sides, I am probably taking the pragmatic middle ground and I am pleased to be doing so.

There is so much opportunity we can take on EU law reform and that is what this programme is about.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): May I say to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that I am not upset? Her description of this change of approach is useful, and it meets many of the criticisms of the unamended Bill. I hope it is successful, and I hope people on both sides of the House and in industry make sure we keep the right bits and drop the bits that are useless.

Kemi Badenoch: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We are taking an approach that works for everybody, not just for a particular group. We have to do what is right for business, we have to do what is right for consumers and we have to do what is right for the entire country. I voted to leave, and this is exactly the sort of reform I thought we would make when we left the European Union. I am very pleased to be able to take this through the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I confess to being a wee bit conflicted this morning. I led for the SNP during our consideration of the Bill, and my key phrase was, “If you must do this damn silly thing, don’t do it in this damn silly way.” I am at least glad to see that we are doing this in a less damn silly way than we were, although I still disagree with it.

I share the anger that we have heard from Conservative Members. I respect their principle, even though I disagree with it. I do not like what the Bill is trying to do. I voted to remain, I enthusiastically committed to Scotland’s path back into the European Union and I want to see the UK have a close relationship with the EU, but I accept the majority view of this House. The Prime Minister made this commitment and he has questions to answer, because to describe this as a change of direction and a minor technical thing is to miss the point. This is a gross betrayal of the promises made to secure his election, and it is a key part of his personal manifesto. I do not think that betrayal should pass without consequence.

I am glad to see the end of sunseting, which is a pragmatic change about which I should be glad, but I still do not like the Bill. It can still overrule the Holyrood Parliament on retained EU law, which is democratically offensive. We should also consider the costs of this exercise. What assessment have the Government made of the direct cost to the taxpayer of the work done thus far and now abandoned? I will be tabling parliamentary questions on this, but what wider assessment has been made of the costs to organisations such as the National Farmers Union of Scotland and others in dealing with this uncertainty?

Kemi Badenoch: Again, I think Opposition Members are very confused about what this change is trying to do. *[Interruption.]* They are confused. The hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) talks about certainty, and this is the certainty for which people asked. He talks about a

change and a betrayal, and I do not understand where that emotional language is coming from. No work has been wasted. It is the efforts of civil servants that have identified which bits of law need to be repealed and which need to be reformed. There is not enough parliamentary time, given that we have only one full Session, to carry out all the reforms we would like to carry out. If we are to do that, we need to truncate the process to make it about repeal and reform, not about preservation. The Bill, which was meant to be about reform, has turned into a preservation exercise. *[Interruption.]* I can see the hon. Member for Stirling squinting and looking confused, so I am happy to give him a private briefing. This process is technical and complex. I picked up this task in February, and I buried myself in the detail. This will deliver on the Prime Minister’s promises and make sure that we generate the benefits of Brexit.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Well said earlier, Mr Speaker.

I have checked *Hansard*, and the Bill passed Second Reading in the Commons on 25 October 2022 with a Government majority of 56, and with not a single Tory MP voting against it.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Four of us did not vote for it.

Mr Francois: No one voted against it, Bob. Not even you.

On 18 January 2023, the Bill passed Third Reading with a Government majority of 59, and again not a single Tory MP voted against it. The Bill unified the Conservative parliamentary party on an admittedly controversial issue. It left this House without a single Tory MP opposing it. Why, after it has gone to the House of Lords, have the Government performed a massive climbdown on their own Bill, despite having such strong support from their own Back Benchers? Secretary of State, what on earth are you playing at?

Kemi Badenoch: I have already explained the reasons why we have changed the approach and I am happy to repeat them for my right hon. Friend. He should know that I am not somebody who gets pushed around lightly. The fact is that I went in, looked at the detail and decided that this was the best way to deliver this. I stress again that this was not the Prime Minister’s decision. As a Secretary of State, I have to be responsible and look at what we can make sure is deliverable. This is the best way to get my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) what he wants. It may be different from what was put on the Floor of the House, but if he wants what I want, which is ending EU interpretative effects by the end of this year, ending the supremacy of EU law by the end of this year—*[Interruption.]* He is not in the room. He is very welcome to send me the list of things that he wants repealed, but this is the way to get it done.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The biggest problem with this Bill is not the haste and chaos that has come with it, the failure to be able to identify what is EU retained regulation or the fact that it risks the Windsor agreement; it is that even with the changes the Secretary of State is now proposing, the Government are giving themselves power over 4,000 areas of public policy and taking back control from MPs over what

[Stella Creasy]

happens next on them—that has not changed. The Secretary of State says that she is across the detail. Given the attitude that she has expressed today towards this Chamber, the process and the role of MPs, if she is serious about scrutiny and democracy, will she accept the amendment standing in the names of Lord Hope, Lord Anderson, Lord Hamilton, who is a strong Brexiteer, and Lord Hodgson, also a Brexiteer, that will give this place the ability to have the final say, whether laws are being revoked, rewritten or reformed? Will the Secretary of State accept that amendment—yes or no?

Kemi Badenoch: We can always discuss amendments. The ones I am supporting are the Government amendments, which provide the certainty and clarity that Members in both Houses have asked for. What I am doing is a more transparent process that provides a lot more clarity. The fact that everyone can now see all the laws on the dashboards and the things that we are removing shows that we are coming to this process in good faith. I would appreciate Opposition Members doing the same.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): This is very bracing for a Thursday morning, and there is nothing I enjoy more than a good bunfight with a Secretary of State. I say gently that although many of us would have a great deal of sympathy with what the Secretary of State has outlined, it is important to make the point that the manner, tone and approach taken not just by her at the Dispatch Box now, but generally, is much improved, and the House tends to be much more receptive to it, when proper processes are followed and invitations to attend Select Committee are readily accepted. I urge that gently as a lesson that might be drawn from this. If she was at all concerned by the volume of statutory instruments that might be descending upon us, the attendance this morning proves that there are plenty of willing volunteers for such Committees.

Kemi Badenoch: I do not disagree with that, but the statutory instruments that I would want us to be focused on in this House should be the ones that are repealing EU law; all those hundreds of statutory instruments that would have come through were for retaining and preserving EU law. That is not what we said we were going to do, which is why this approach is better. It is faster and it accelerates us towards reform. I do not think anyone in this House can accuse me of shying away from Select Committees, questions or the Dispatch Box. I am always happy, no matter how difficult the questions are, to take the questions here.

Mr Speaker: In fairness, I have had to put the urgent question on.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Despite this screeching U-turn, the Bill still includes a power grab over environmental protections. Living in a nature-depleted country, it really concerns me that the Secretary of State can still change thousands of environmental laws at will, through secondary legislation, without scrutiny. Many of those laws relate to sewage that can be dumped into our rivers and chalk streams and on to our beaches.

Will she make a firm commitment at the Dispatch Box today that the Government will not repeal or change any environmental law without due scrutiny by this House?

Kemi Badenoch: Again, these questions worry me, because they show that the process we are changing is not fully understood by the House. [Interruption.] It is certainly not understood by the hon. Lady. I can tell that many others do understand this. The regulations that are being repealed are going on the schedule. If she has a specific one on that schedule that she thinks is environmental and should not be repealed, she should say so. Instead, she is speaking in hypotheticals. She should look at the amendments and what they are doing, and if there are specific things she has concerns about, she can write to me. Claiming that things are being removed without looking at the schedule shows that she does not understand what we are doing.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend explain whether this abdication to the House of Lords has come about because of civil service idleness or a lack of ministerial drive?

Kemi Badenoch: No, I do not think that it has come out of any idleness. If anything, I would say that the civil servants have been working feverishly on this, and what they have been doing is preserving, not repealing and certainly not getting the reforms that we want. This approach means that they can now do that. I know that it is disappointing, because it is not what my right hon. Friend had wanted; it was not his approach. I have spoken to him about it and explained my reasoning. I do not think that we will come to an agreement on this, but I would like him to understand that I am doing this because I genuinely think that this is the best way to deliver what those of us on the Conservative Benches voted for.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Secretary of State seems to say that we have intense excitement about being here today and she is surprised. Our law is the basis of our democracy, and the flippant and ill-prepared way in which this has been brought forward is a disgrace; it is not worthy of our Parliament or, indeed, of our country. In the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, we are currently looking at international treaties. It is clear that our system for reviewing and monitoring international treaties per se is not up to scratch, and I hope that the Secretary of State will engage with that process. [Interruption.] She says that there is no time. She is in control of the time in this place as a member of the Government. It is not for me to speak for those on the Labour Front Bench, but I am sure that if there were discussions about giving the decision more time and perhaps to bringing it back, given the changes that are being made, that would be met favourably by Members on the Labour Benches. What lessons is she learning about the involvement of this place in the scrutiny of these treaties?

Kemi Badenoch: It is very surprising to hear the hon. Lady criticise the scrutiny process given that it was brought in by a Labour Government under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. The CRaG process on international treaties, which is what she is talking about, was brought in, as I have said, not by a Conservative Government, but by a Labour Government. We are

carrying out this process using parliamentary procedure and Government amendments in the House of Lords; we are doing things on the Floor of the House. We are making sure that Parliamentarians have transparency. That is the right way to do it and I will not apologise for that.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) for his question and the Secretary of State for her response. I recognise the balance that she is trying to strike within the timeframe. There is a very large number of EU regulations at the Ministry of Justice, and yet we managed to identify more than 60% that could be either repealed or substantially revised within the timeframe. May I gently suggest to her that it would help the House with its scrutiny if a Department-by-Department analysis of what has been identified so far is published? May I also gently suggest that she resist the resistance in Whitehall that suggests it cannot be done. If it can be done at the MOJ, I am pretty confident that it can be done elsewhere.

Kemi Badenoch: That is right. I have published the dashboard that shows all of the laws that have been identified. Some are still, even as we speak, being identified now. The MOJ has done a good job in identifying those that are likely to be on the schedule—the ones that my right hon. Friend is referring to specifically. This is a pragmatic and balanced approach. I urge Members across the House to look for the opportunities for reform. We can hear those on the Labour Front Bench chuntering, but they do not have any ideas. They do not know what they want to do. All they want to do is sit down and complain about what we are doing. They are completely bereft of imagination and any sort of direction or approach. We are the only ones who have a way of delivering for this country, and we will continue to do so.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What a guddle! This Government amendment does absolutely nothing to address the powers in the Bill for UK Ministers to act in areas that are devolved to Scottish Ministers without consent or scrutiny by the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament has made its views clear on the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. It has already voted in favour of a motion calling on the UK Government to withdraw it. That is the only way to deal with all of the risks that this damaging, anti-democratic legislation poses. Does the Secretary of State see that, and does she see why it is ever clearer that an independent Scotland in the EU is the only way to secure the best future for Scotland?

Kemi Badenoch: I am trying really hard not to laugh at what the hon. Lady has said. She is in a party that cannot even decide who paid for a caravan and is falling into a complete shambles. How will it in any way be able to do the sort of technical work we are doing? I am working with—*[Interruption.]* The SNP makes a lot of noise, but the way it is running Scotland shows that Bills such as this are best left in the hands of UK Government Ministers to stop the SNP making a shambles of everything.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The advantage of a sunset is that it provides a sense of urgency. Now there is not one, is there?

Kemi Badenoch: There is still a sunset, and it will end the interpretive effects of the supremacy of EU law. The same number of measures that we were likely to revoke by the sunset will be in the schedule. As I said, the process had turned from one where we were reforming, to one where we were retaining—I know that is what the Bill literally says, but its purpose had been subverted because of the approach originally taken, which these amendments should address.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): There is only one reason the Secretary of State is here: because she was brought here by an urgent question. The idea she is open to scrutiny is for the birds. There is also only one reason she tried to avoid it: because her Back Benchers are so angry. She has managed to divide her party again over the issue of Europe. This change is not taking back sovereignty to this Parliament, which those in favour of Brexit spoke about; it is a power grab by the Executive, allowing them to make decisions on 4,000 pieces of legislation. What will she do to ensure that her proposal has proper scrutiny through Committees and on the Floor of the House?

Kemi Badenoch: The point that the laws that we are not having on the schedule will either be kept or reformed—the reform process will be scrutinised in the House—is one that I have explained before. I am happy to make it again a thousand times if necessary for Opposition Members who clearly had scripted questions, which they have not been able to adapt to the comments made on the Floor of the House. This is a pragmatic approach that brings together people not just across the House but across the country; it delivers on the promises that we made, and I stand by them.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) has pointed out, the Secretary of State has been invited on three separate occasions to appear before the European Scrutiny Committee, but for whatever reason has failed to do so. Given the seriousness of the volte-face she has now performed, will she accept the invitation of the Chairman, made this morning, and appear before the Committee next week? If not, why not?

Kemi Badenoch: Because I am in Switzerland next week and in the middle east the week after. As I said to the Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee, I am happy to appear in front of the Committee, and now that we have a settled policy I will do so.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said, this Bill is a shambles and it is felt to be so by my constituents in Putney, for whom this is having real-world effects. Businesses in Putney have seen rising costs and less investment because of the threat of the sunset clause and still not knowing what will be in it. The Government have left businesses across the country high and dry and the Bill is far from oven ready. Can the Secretary of State explain how the £1 billion figure for business savings has been estimated—or is that more pie in the sky?

Kemi Badenoch: You can see a classic example of what I am talking about, Mr Speaker. The hon. Lady complains that the sunset would not allow her constituents to know what is being repealed, but the whole purpose of the amendment is for people to be able to see what is

[*Kemi Badenoch*]

being repealed in the schedule. I ask Opposition Members to please read the amendment and wait until the schedule arrives. On what we want to do and reform, the £1 billion savings have been calculated not just by the Department for Business and Trade, but by multiple external organisations that have raised with the Department how the working time regulations could be improved. Those are the benefits we can get from Brexit to make things better, and we will continue to do so.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Replacing retained EU law is both inevitable and necessary now that we have left the European Union, but does my right hon. Friend accept that it is critical that we do so in a way that preserves legal clarity and certainty, which are vital for business confidence? Does she accept that some of us deliberately did not vote for the Second Reading of the Bill because of a flaw in its drafting that did not identify that which was to be revoked, and would have created precisely that uncertainty? Does she accept that some of us are better placed to support the Bill now that that gap is being sensibly and pragmatically filled in—if I may say—a very Conservative and pro-business fashion?

Kemi Badenoch: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right: the Bill provides business certainty and legal certainty and removes interpretive effects and the supremacy of EU law, and it will do so by the sunset. Most importantly, it gives us the space to focus on the reform programme, which we announced yesterday and which will deliver the benefits of Brexit.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Secretary of State has explained that the issue is not her U-turn, but that silly MPs on both sides of the Chamber have not properly understood the legislation. Can she explain to this silly MP, in her wonderfully patronising manner, which she has used many times this morning, what would prevent her from making a U-turn on workers' rights, including holiday and maternity pay?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Lady calls herself a silly MP; it is not my place to disagree. She asks about the changes to holiday pay. We are just making the bureaucracy easier; we are not taking away any workers' rights—we have repeatedly committed on the Floor of the House to not doing so. What Opposition Members are afraid of is reform and any sort of change. They cannot envision a world in which anything could possibly be better than the status quo. We are different; we believe in the aspirational approach and ambition for this country. They just want to stay the same and ossify. I will not stand at the Dispatch Box and allow that to happen. We are making changes that will benefit the British economy, British businesses and British workers.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I am less concerned with process, and I am quite for pragmatism, but my right hon. Friend has shown a tin ear if she thought for one moment that these changes would not arouse interest in the House of Commons. It needed a UQ to bring her here this morning. Nevertheless, my key question is this: is she convinced that, by this new methodology, the same number of laws will be repealed in the same time as if the pragmatic change had not been made?

Kemi Badenoch: The answer is yes. I wrote back to and engaged with all the Members who wrote to me about this issue as soon as I became Business Secretary. The response had been so quiet that it felt to me very much like a technical change, which is what it is. I am very happy to explain as much as possible on the Floor of the House. But I emphasise that this was my decision; it was not that of the Prime Minister or civil servants. It was me looking at the detail and deciding that this was the best approach because it is how we will get to that number but create more time for reform. It is about accelerating the process. I do not think anyone in this House can claim that I am not a Brexiteer. I stood here less than a month ago talking about how we had successfully negotiated the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, the biggest trade deal that we have ever done in this country since we left the EU. That is a benefit of Brexit. I am very proud to continue to do that. This is the best way for us to deliver more benefit over and over again rather than spend our time on parliamentary procedure, which does not mean much to people on the doorstep.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on working at height, I have been trying to get clarity for some time on the very specific Work at Height Regulations 2005. Can the Secretary of State tell me whether those regulations will be included or protected? The assurances that I have had so far have not provided the clarity that the sector needs.

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Lady will know that I was not privy to those conversations. If she writes to me with the specifics, I should be able to provide an answer. What we have talked about changing is the bureaucracy around reporting, and that does not sound like what she raised.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): As a committed Brexiteer, and having voted in the 1975 referendum to leave the European Economic Community, as it then was, I want to see the benefits of Brexit delivered as soon as possible. But I do recognise the concerns that have been expressed to me by businesses in my constituency, and I think the approach being taken by the Secretary of State is the best one. Could she give an assurance that if I or any Member bring forward recommendations for measures to include in the list, she will make those changes as quickly as can be arranged?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. That is exactly what this approach is trying to generate. We need to find the things that we know are holding Britain back, rather than just delete things because no one has found a reason to keep them. I think that if he speaks to businesses in his constituency, he will have many suggestions for measures that may require not complete revocation but reform, and if they are going to be reformed, we need to first keep them and then reform them, rather than first delete them then try to reform them. That is what this approach does.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The right hon. Lady is doing herself no favours at all this morning with her patronising and arrogant manner, not just to Opposition Members but also to her hon. Friends. I am all for upsetting her hon. Friends, and it

looks like in the eternal struggle between the blob and the Mogg, the blob has prevailed. Is it not the case that, in their haste to create this hard Brexit utopia, reality has finally caught up with them? Does it not look like the Conservative party—this fragile Brexit coalition—is now starting to fragment into its constituent parts?

Kemi Badenoch: No, that is complete nonsense. The hon. Gentleman is talking about what he hopes and wishes would happen, rather than the reality.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I respectfully disagree with my right hon. Friend that this is a technical change, given the different status that retained EU law has in our system, but I look forward to discussing that further with her when she appears before us at the European Scrutiny Committee. In the meantime, can she give the House an assurance that not one jot of the concessions given in the House of Lords over this Bill are anything to do with upholding any commitment made in the negotiation of the Windsor framework?

Kemi Badenoch: I am very happy to say that. I was not involved in negotiations on the Windsor framework, and I have said repeatedly that this is my plan. It is not the Prime Minister's plan, and it is not the civil servants' plan—it is my plan. This is me going into the detail and deciding that this is the best way to deliver it. What my hon. Friend says about the special status of EU law is right. That is one of the things that is not changing; that is still ending. The sunset is still there for interpretive effects—for the supremacy of EU law—by the end of this year, which is the big thing we are trying to deliver, rather than lots of redundant regulations, many of which we have already got rid of. I re-emphasise that we will get rid of about 2,000 pieces of legislation in total by the end of this year. The schedule is just the final 600, and another 200 commencement regulations go with them. I think he will be very pleased with the result.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): May I respectfully say to the Secretary of State that I do understand the amendment, and I believe colleagues on both sides of the House understand it? We simply do not agree, and it is an important component of democracy that we respect one another's right to disagree. If there is any confusion and uncertainty today, it has been caused by the chaotic manner in which this has been done and the fact that the House feels the Secretary of State has had to be dragged here to explain it to us. Does she agree that a situation where the House feels that there will not be an opportunity to debate something as important as this and scrutinise it properly is unacceptable?

Kemi Badenoch: I disagree, because we have debated it. The only change is the use of a schedule. The hon. Lady claims that she disagrees with the Bill. The Bill passed through the House. All that is changing is how we are listing the regulations. The intent has not changed. Of course, I respect her right to disagree, but she is still claiming that the amendment does something it does not, which is why I keep emphasising that I am not sure Opposition Members understand it.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I had the privilege of PPS-ing the Bill when it was in Committee, so I have seen the complexities, the ideologies on both sides of

the argument, and the difficulties inherent in trying to get the Bill through. What my constituents and people up and down the country—the vast majority of whom did vote for Brexit—want to know is what the message is for them, as they now have concerns that this could be reneged on.

Kemi Badenoch: I have a very strong message for them. My hon. Friend can tell his constituents that the Prime Minister is a committed Brexiteer, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade is a committed Brexiteer, and we are making sure that we can deliver this on time but actually show the benefits of Brexit, not just parliamentary procedure and legislative activity. That is not the outcome that is going to be delivered for the country, it is the process. This urgent question has shown that quite often, we spend too much time on process and not enough on outcomes. This is an outcomes-focused Government, and that is why I have made this change and why I will deliver for my hon. Friend's constituents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It would seem that there can be movement regarding decisions on EU laws when this Government see fit. Can the Secretary of State outline whether this symbolises a change in policy that will enable the final work on getting the protocol solutions finalised, in order to enable business and trade and allow everyone in Northern Ireland—Unionists as well as nationalists—to operate on an equal footing with those on the UK mainland?

Kemi Badenoch: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that this is not a change in policy: it is a change in approach, using a schedule to list exactly what we are removing. The purpose of the Bill was to remove EU law, and as the process was changing to one of preservation, we have just changed the approach slightly to make sure that we can conclude when we want to conclude, which is at the end of this year, and focus on reform. We are very pragmatic; we continue to listen to voices across the House and across the country. Many of the questions that the hon. Gentleman has raised are for my colleague the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, but he will know that if he comes to me with a problem, I will always endeavour to solve it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Between 2016 and 2019, the Procedure Committee heard regularly about the thousands of statutory instruments that either had to be translated into UK law, repealed, or reformed in some way. The problem that the Secretary of State now has is that by taking the pressure off that timetable, there will be a concern among Members on all Benches as to what happens, after the sunset clause kicks in, to the statutory instruments and other laws that we would like to see repealed or amended. What is the timetable, and how will it work?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that this change in approach actually helps with that. It allows us to continue beyond the end of this year, whereas the Bill as originally drafted meant that if we had not found things, they would just end up in UK statute with no mechanism to change that. I have now created a mechanism for us to continue, but I have also made sure that the time we spend in this House is

[Kemi Badenoch]

about reforming and improving, not preservation, because that would just have swallowed up so much time and not delivered for our constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for responding to questions for over 45 minutes.

Business of the House

11.17 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 15 May will include:

MONDAY 15 MAY—Second Reading of the Victims and Prisoners Bill.

TUESDAY 16 MAY—Opposition day (15th allotted day). Debate in the name of the Scottish National party—subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 17 MAY—Second Reading of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill.

THURSDAY 18 MAY—General debate on public access to nature, followed by a debate on a motion on access to psilocybin treatments. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 19 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 22 May includes:

MONDAY 22 MAY—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Non-Domestic Rating Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. Before I go any further, it is good to see the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), back in her place.

The Leader of the House did previously describe her resting face as

“that of a bulldog chewing a wasp”—[*Official Report*, 13 October 2022; Vol. 720, c. 260.]

But can I reassure her royal meme-ness that she looked nothing of the sort at the coronation? She was a symbol of solemnity and the first woman to have ever presented the Jewelled Sword of Offering to a British monarch. Her elegant outfit had nods to tradition, maternity and, as I understand it, her constituency. She diligently carried out her duty with grace and poise. She was a credit to this House as our representative. I wanted to start by making sure that was on the record, but now we will now get back to the jabs.

It was an even bigger achievement given how long the Leader of the House must have been awake the previous night counting all those Tory losses. She must have been worn out, with more than 1,000 Tory councillors gone. It was a clear rejection of the Conservatives and this Prime Minister and his complete failure to focus on what really matters to voters. I am afraid it is time to resume the normal jab, thrust and parrying—a little swordplay thing, there—of business questions, as this Government have a lot to answer for.

One whole year on from the Queen’s Speech, what do the Government have to show for it? People do not have to follow every twist and turn of the Government’s chaotic mishandling of legislation to know that the answer is next to nothing. The Hansard Society, which does detailed, independent research on the workings of Parliament, has said exactly which Bills are lurking down the back of Downing Street’s ever-expanding legislative sofa. Perhaps the Leader of the House could

use her new-found swordsmanship to reach down the back of that sofa and hook some of that missing legislation out for us.

Of the 51 Bills that the Hansard Society reminded us have been presented to Parliament this Session, the Tories have so far failed to pass a staggering 29. Only a measly eight from the Queen's Speech have got through. The Prime Minister has been caught out overpromising and massively under-delivering. He is too busy playing whack-a-mole with the increasing pop-up rebellions from his own Back Benchers, as we just saw in the past half-hour, rather than using the Government's valuable time in Parliament to address the issues that matter to working people. No wonder they have told the Tories they are a Government with no answers, led by a Prime Minister so out of touch with working people that he is choosing to protect oil and gas profits and non-doms over working people.

Let us take a closer look at the Tories' legislative logjam, which does not appear in the business statement, but perhaps should have. The Leader of the House could have announced the renters reform Bill that the Government have been promising for more than four years. When I was shadow Housing Secretary—a while ago now—I pushed for it, as well as for ensuring greater protections for tenants during the covid crisis at the time. Labour has long called for particular measures to be included in the Bill, including the banning of no-fault evictions. That is important to people we represent, including those I represent in Bristol West, where renters are paying more for less. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is letting them down. He said the Bill would be finally published this week. Where is it? Is it missing in action? We now hear that it has been delayed for weeks due to "procedural issues". What does that mean? Is the Housing Secretary about to U-turn again? Is it the Prime Minister about to roll over to his Back Benchers again? Renters deserve better. The next Labour Government will bring in a powerful new renters' charter to make renting fairer, more secure and more affordable, and that is the difference between Labour and the Tories.

It is not just on housing that the Tories are breaking their promise to voters. They have failed to introduce the transport Bill. They have left the mental health Bill in limbo somewhere, and they have abandoned the Schools Bill altogether. Even their flagship Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill is in absolute chaos. Would the Leader of the House like to have a go and tell us what it is about transport, mental health, schools and levelling up that is working so well? Can she tell us which Bills they will get through this Session?

The Tories are out of touch and out of ideas to fix the problems they have created. Where they can be bothered, they are stealing Labour's plans, but unfortunately watering them down and trying to pass them off as their own. This is no way to run a Government. Last week, Labour gained more than 500 councillors and 22 councils, and we are now the largest party in local government. It is time for a fresh start with a Labour national Government and a new King's Speech for a new era: a coherent, bold programme of legislation, driven by Labour's five missions that will make a real difference to people's lives. That is Labour's plan.

Penny Mordaunt: Can I start by thanking the hon. Lady for her compliments? I very much wanted to be a Pen the king could rely on at the coronation, but I think

congratulations should go to all of us across the nation, and huge thanks to all who took part and all who enabled it to be so successful and safe, including many staff of this House. The whole weekend was a celebration of service, duty and love, and the Big Help Out on Monday saw 6 million people volunteering at more than 55,000 events. I hope they had a wonderful day and will continue to volunteer for their community. I am very proud to have played my part alongside everyone else, and I know the whole House would want to send their good wishes to Their Majesties.

Can I reciprocate and congratulate the hon. Lady, as I understand that her band, the Statutory Instruments, has topped a Twitter poll on musical parliamentarians? I have suggested to the Culture Secretary that this might be a back-up plan if Mae and her team are unable to perform at the Eurovision final.

The hon. Lady mentioned our legislative programme. Last week, the Public Order Bill received Royal Assent, taking us to 19 Bills receiving Royal Assent so far in this Session, with 40 Bills introduced so far. The rented homes Bill is not delayed, and I look forward to the Opposition's support. It will deliver the Government's commitment to a fairer private rented sector for responsible tenants and good-faith landlords. The Bill will legislate to abolish section 21 no-fault evictions, among many other measures. I hope that all Members of this House will support it when it arrives, which will not be very long or far away.

The hon. Lady spoke about local election statistics, and I have some of my own for Labour's performance: mid-term and mid-recovery, zero change to vote share since 2019; zero gains in battleground seats; and, it appears, zero principles upon which to base a manifesto. Labour's leader has flip-flopped 32 times, broken all of his leadership pledges and had to have 12—and counting—relaunch speeches. To borrow from Eurovision legends Bucks Fizz, he will soon find out that there comes a time for "Making Your Mind Up".

In contrast, we are focused on delivering for the people of this country on the things that matter to them. On healthcare, for example, against the immense challenges stemming from the pandemic, we have reduced waiting lists of people waiting 18 months or more by 90%. General practice is delivering 10% more appointments a month than pre-pandemic levels. We are on track to deliver our manifesto commitment of 50 million more GP appointments, and we have more staff than ever before. Numbers are up by a quarter since 2019. We have increased pharmacy provision, and this week we are transforming how those services can be used, freeing up even more GP appointments.

What does Labour do for healthcare when it is in power in Wales? Some 40,000 people are waiting more than two years for treatment, waiting lists are four times worse than in England and it is the only place in the UK to have had the NHS budget cut. The gap between Labour's rhetoric and its record is nearly as wide as the gap between its revenue and its spending plans, currently standing at £90 billion.

Further business will be announced in the usual way.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Did my right hon. Friend note that the Secretary of State for Business and Trade has just told the House, in answer to my urgent

[*Sir William Cash*]

question, that despite the very serious constitutional implications that I explained—they were endorsed by many others after I asked the question—she will not be able to come to the European Scrutiny Committee because she will be in Switzerland? What this in effect means, according to the current timetable in the House of Lords, is that she will not be able to explain the implications I set out in my question before the Report stage of the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill actually takes place. Would my right hon. Friend be good enough to approach her opposite number in the House of Lords, and indeed the appropriate authorities there, to defer the Report stage, which is scheduled for 15 and 17 May? That Report stage will have momentous consequences if it results in changes to this Bill, which was passed by this House by a substantial majority, which would then be being dealt with by the unelected House of Lords.

Penny Mordaunt: I do understand my hon. Friend's concerns. The Secretary of State wants to take a pragmatic approach, but I know that he will also have concerns about sovereignty and other such issues. I will certainly speak to business managers and the Secretary of State to ensure that there can be proper scrutiny of these matters, and I assure my hon. Friend that although there are differences on how we should approach these matters, the Secretary of State shares his aim that we should do this well and not miss the opportunities, having left the EU, to modernise our statute book and make sensible reforms. But I undertake to do as he has asked.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): May I add my congratulations to the Leader of the House on her role at the coronation? There was tremendous upper body strength on show there, and with the added strain of having to remain silent virtually all afternoon—so well done, her. Maybe it was a “speak softly and carry a big sword” moment, because it appears that carrying a lethal weapon and wearing an imperial-style outfit now makes her favourite to be the next Tory leader—was it the sword of Damocles she was clutching? I am reminded of that old “Monty Python” skit, though—something about strange women distributing swords being no basis for a system of government.

Did the Leader of the House's somewhat authoritarian look on Saturday reflect the new and unnerving “Braverman law”, which apparently allows people to be arrested for even thinking about protesting? May we therefore have a debate on the thought police, and on whether guidance for that hastily delivered Act might be tightened up after those recent unfortunate arrests?

Speaking of horrible Bills, I see that Labour, despite the urging of the Archbishop of Canterbury, continues to cleave to this Government's nasty “hostile environment” policies. Is it any wonder that even after 13 years of perhaps the most incompetent and chaotic series of Tory Governments there has ever been, Labour seemingly still cannot win an outright majority? Yet Labour claims it will not entertain the idea of co-operation agreements with the SNP, despite the fact that we will speak to anyone progressive in order to lock the Tories out of No. 10.

If we had a fair electoral system, parties would often have to work in partnership with each other, as they do in many other grown-up democracies across the world.

So may we have a debate on proportional representation and fair voting, so that we can ask why the Tory and Labour parties support the antiquated first-past-the-post system, which prolongs the establishment duopoly we see year after dreary year in this place? Oops, I believe I have answered my own question there.

That is probably just as well, because although we all enjoyed—really—the Leader of the House's starring role at the weekend, I would once again gently remind her that her day job is to answer for the conduct of her own Government, not simply give her views on the Governments of other countries for use on social media. If she could stick to the day job in this, I would be very grateful.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her compliments, and it is good to see her back in her place. I am very aware that my most successful role in my career to date has been when I have been silent. That has not been lost on me.

The hon. Lady raises the issue of protests. I say to all Members of this House that we make the laws in this place, and we have brought in new measures because we felt that the public need protection from particularly disruptive and dangerous protests, as we have seen in recent events and developments. But the police are operationally independent; they need to use their judgment, and sometimes they will make mistakes, and when they do, as we have seen, they apologise for them. I think all of that is incredibly reassuring, and I would like to place on record my thanks to the police for the difficult jobs they have done in recent weeks, particularly those who were standing for a considerably longer period than 51 minutes—I met a police officer involved in the coronation who was on their feet throughout a 13-hour shift. They do a tremendous job and we owe them a huge debt of thanks.

It is no surprise at all that the hon. Lady should take exception to the result of another referendum we had, on voting systems. But I am genuinely delighted that the SNP has found some auditors. With nearly 2,000 accountancy and auditing firms in Scotland, I was interested to know who it would pick to do the job. Perhaps it would be someone from her constituency, given that Edinburgh is Europe's second-largest financial centre, second only to the City of London. Yet the SNP had to go to Manchester to find someone willing to take on the task. Presumably she would view that as offshoring.

Perhaps the SNP can now turn its attention to its dire mishandling of Scottish finances and the recommendations of Audit Scotland. I remind the House that the SNP has been forced to raise income tax after a £100 million budget overspend despite this year cutting public expenditure by £1.2 billion. The Scottish people deserve better than that. I know that the hon. Lady and her colleagues did not necessarily celebrate the coronation, but they can learn a lesson from it. Nothing can be achieved with division and hate; the only way forward is service, duty and love.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I am sure that the whole House will wish to congratulate my right hon. Friend on her role in the coronation. She is an emblem of dignity, poise and girl power. Her bluey-green coronation dress is a worldwide sensation. King Charles III is revered around the world for his work on the environment,

and the UK is a world leader on environmental issues—since 2010, we have cut carbon emissions by more than any other G7 country—so will she make space for a debate in Government time on what we have achieved on the environment and what work is in progress, so that people across the country know that while Conservatives may wear blue rosettes, we also deliver on green?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this matter. She will know that the next questions to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero are on 23 May. We were the first major economy to commit to a legally binding target on achieving net zero by 2050 and we fully stand behind that. We have cut emissions by 48% since 1990, decarbonising faster than any other G7 country while also growing our economy by 65%. In 2022, renewable electricity accounted for nearly 42% of our total generation, which is a fourfold increase since 2011. We will continue to make progress on this matter.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business and the Backbench Business debates for next Thursday. One thing we learned at the weekend is that we should not be easily drawn into literally crossing swords with her.

The Backbench Business Committee is soon to celebrate its 13th birthday. I remind Members across the House that we are open for business. We receive, on average, 3.8 applications for Backbench Business debates per week, but over time we have developed into having five debating slots per week, so 3.8 applications is not enough. We therefore welcome more applications from Back Benchers across the House on a weekly basis.

I am grateful that this week we had a bumper bundle of eight applications, so we exceeded the average. Upcoming Backbench Business debates are on: the cost of living for those with disabilities, which will be in Westminster Hall next Tuesday; reducing plastic pollution in our oceans, also in Westminster Hall, next Thursday; and shortcomings of planning in respect to short-term holiday lets, on Tuesday 23 May. We get a variety of applications, but we always welcome more.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the advertisement for future debates. I remind all Members of the House that this is an incredibly valuable tool that we have now been using for 13 years, and I hope that he will organise some suitable celebrations for that landmark birthday. There are many ways in which we can make change and improve things for our constituents. A lot can be done in business questions, but a lot can also be done in such debates when the will of the House is shown and there is cross-party concern and support for particular campaigns and issues. I encourage all Members to make use of this welcome innovation.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend on her performance at the coronation. The wait for the renters reform Bill seems never-ending. It is important that we get the Bill right, but we are running out of time in the Session, particularly given the queue of legislation in the House of Lords. The other eagerly awaited legislation is the leasehold reform Bill, which has been pressed for in this House for a long time. Could the Leader of the House give us an update on when that Bill will come before us?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. Although I will announce business in the usual way, he will not have long to wait for the renters reform Bill. This is an important issue, as are many of the issues covered by the leasehold reform work that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has been undertaking.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Recent media reports inform us that Vodafone UK and Three are in advanced talks about a merger, but my trade union, Unite, is campaigning against it on two major grounds. First, it could pose a national security risk by giving a company whose controlling family collaborates with the Chinese state an even more influential role at the heart of our sensitive telecoms infrastructure. Secondly, the merger would fatally undermine competition by reducing the number of major providers in the British telecoms market, resulting in substantially higher prices for British consumers. As such, will the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on the merger, as it will impact people in each and every constituency across the UK?

Penny Mordaunt: The next opportunity for the hon. Gentleman to raise this issue with the Department for Business and Trade will be on 18 May, but I know that it will be a matter of concern to two other Departments, so I will write to all of three on his behalf and ask them to contact his office.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I echo the congratulations to the Leader of the House. We will remember where we were during the coronation, but we will also remember where the Leader of the House was, as she proved herself to be the King's most reliable Pen.

May we have a debate on parking on yellow lines? Someone who parks around Westminster is charged £65, going up to £130. If they park in Bournemouth, it is capped at £35, going up to £70. We do not have the crane lorries to remove cars, and tourists—who are most welcome—have realised that paying £35 on a sunny day's visit is worthwhile. That is affecting emergency services getting around and is raising concerns from residents. May we therefore have a debate or a statement on gaining parity so that Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council can raise its fines for parking on yellow lines?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind remarks. I am sorry to hear about the situation in his constituency. Those fines are not to raise revenue but to ensure that thoroughfares are clear for emergency vehicles, as he points out, or for safety reasons to avoid accidents. I will make sure that the Secretaries of State for Levelling Up and for Transport have heard his concerns. He will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities concluded its consultation on reform of the national planning policy framework on 2 March. While the Government work out what they want to do, there are speculative developments in front of planning authorities and the Planning Inspectorate, which now have to interpret a planning

[Daisy Cooper]

system in limbo. Could the Leader of the House set out the Government's timetable for responding to that consultation and making any changes? Could she confirm whether the Government intend to allow Members of the House to debate those changes?

Penny Mordaunt: I completely understand the hon. Lady's point. I know that the chief planning officer and the team at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities are always available to advise individual local authorities on such matters. I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard her concerns and will ask the Department to contact her to set out clarity on the timetable.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I add my warm thanks and congratulations to my right hon. Friend, the Lord President of the Council, not only for her starring performance in Westminster Abbey last Saturday but more particularly for the very modest way in which she sought to deflect the thanks and praise away from herself, and towards the thousands of other people who made the day possible, which was a very noble thing to do. As she rightly says, the 7,500 armed forces personnel who took part in the day did a great job, as did the many hundreds of people behind them, as I witnessed in Knightsbridge and Wellington barracks and elsewhere. Does she not think, therefore, that it is time for the House to reintroduce the six set day debates we always used to have to celebrate the work of our armed forces? The job of allocating such debates has now been delegated to the Backbench Business Committee and, although the Committee does a brilliant job, the net result is that there are extraordinarily few debates on the armed forces in this House. Let us get back to the days when the Government gave us Government debates, in Government time, on our magnificent armed services.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. I have been looking at this matter. I know that there are key set dates on this issue, including Armed Forces Day, and on other issues, such as International Women's Day. Of course we want to have such debates every single year, and yet it requires particular Committees to organise them. There are good reasons why we established the procedures that we have and why we lean heavily on the Backbench Business Committee, but I have been making inquiries on this front and I appreciate my hon. Friend's suggestion.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Homeowners in my constituency have been conned and defrauded by rogue builders. They have lost thousands of pounds and their homes have been left in ruins. The police say it is a civil matter and trading standards is powerless, so their only option is to incur more costs in court. Will the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on why the new fraud strategy does nothing to tackle this type of fraud?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about the situation in the hon. Lady's constituency. Will she share some more information with my office? The Home Office may not be the Department that is best placed to help her; it may well be the Department for Levelling

Up, Housing and Communities, which is responsible for some of the new powers that we have introduced to protect homeowners and those in the rented sector with regard to poor landlords. I will be happy to assist the hon. Lady, and I hope we can help her get this matter resolved for her constituents.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend for her magnificence at the coronation. I am disappointed that she has not been asked to reprieve her role on the Eurovision stage, or at least read out the votes of the UK jury.

A less welcome guest at the coronation was the vice-president of China. This week, we hear that a British Trade Minister is feting the Chinese in Hong Kong and the Foreign Secretary is looking forward to a visit to China, as if the Chinese genocide were not still continuing, the Chinese Government were not continuing to flout international law and five Members of the House, including me, were not still sanctioned by the Chinese Communist party Government. May we have a debate on exactly what our relationship is with China going forward, and about making sure that every opportunity for meetings is prefaced by our calling out China's continued abuses? We need a progress report on what is being done to lift the sanctions on five Members of the House, which is an insult to this House.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks regarding myself. He will know that the Foreign Secretary has recently set out his approach on China, and he knows how to apply for a debate on such a matter. I know the issue is of immense concern to Members from all parts of the House. While we know why we need to have that relationship and why it is incredibly important, given the size of the economy and our supply chains, it is important that we raise the ongoing breaches and abuses of human rights, as well as the matter he raises that concerns him directly. Foreign Office questions are a little way off, so I will make sure that the Foreign Secretary has heard what he has said today.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I put on the record my admiration for the role that the right hon. Lady played during the King's coronation? She was magnificent and represented us beautifully.

Many of my constituents have written to me with concerns about unsuitable living conditions in properties owned and run by Sanctuary. My casework team has written to Sanctuary many times and I wrote to the chief executive six weeks ago, but there has been no response. I know that many other MPs and councils have raised concerns about the unresponsiveness of that organisation. Can we have a debate about the responsiveness of social housing providers, who do, after all, provide a very important public service?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks. The moral of the story is that when the chief execs of such social housing providers receive letters from Members of Parliament, they would do well to reply to them in good time, otherwise Members of Parliament will come to the Floor of the House and name the social housing provider, and the Leader of the House of Commons will be forced to write to the

Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to make sure that they have heard Members' concerns. I wish the hon. Lady well and we stand ready to assist her in getting the matter resolved for her constituents.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): May I start by passing on the many messages of congratulations and thanks from Southend residents to my right hon. Friend on her absolutely outstanding contribution to the coronation?

While I am talking about outstanding contributions, the mayor of Southend city, Councillor Kevin Robinson, steps down this afternoon after an exemplary year in which he welcomed the King and city status, bade farewell to our Queen, and raised £26,000 for charity—while all the time working full time as a dementia nurse. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Mayor Robinson for his outstanding service? Will she also thank the 500 Essex police officers who worked behind the scenes at Stansted airport to make sure that the very many foreign dignitaries from all around the world got into and out of our country safely? Perhaps we could have a debate on the important contribution that mayors and other civic leaders make to our communities.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend and the residents of Southend for their very kind remarks about me. As I am sure all Members would, I of course join her in saying thank you, well done and good luck for the next chapter to Mayor Robinson. I thank him for all the work he has done. I also thank my hon. Friend for giving us another example of the many hundreds of people who contributed towards making the weekend such a success, in particular by enabling 95 Heads of State to visit and celebrate such a special moment. We send them all our thanks.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is shocking that the Government have yet again made an outrageous U-turn by deciding to scrap plans to abolish the feudal leasehold system. We all know that the current system is not fit for purpose and often traps homeowners, including many of my constituents in Battersea. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities agreed with me and said that he would bring forward reforms, so will the Leader of the House let us know the timeline for when we will see a Bill on leaseholder reform?

Penny Mordaunt: The next questions to the Secretary of State are on 5 June. Several Members have raised these matters. As I have said, the House will not have long to wait for the introduction of the renters reform Bill, but I shall ask the Secretary of State to contact the offices of the hon. Lady and the other Members who have raised this matter, particularly in respect of leasehold reform, and update them.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I add my congratulations to the Lord President of the Council for her role at the coronation. I have had messages from many friends around the world who were impressed with her performance. She has won friends not only across my constituency but around the globe.

The Government have delivered fantastic policies and new legislation on animal welfare, but it is now 18 months since the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was in Committee in this House. May we have an update on

when the Bill might come back to us and pass on to the other place, so that we can continue this Government's remarkable animal welfare achievements?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend not only for his remarks about me, but for his commitment to this agenda. We in the Government are grateful to him for his work on the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill, a private Member's Bill that we were pleased to support. We, too, are committed to this agenda, as is clear from the many other measures that we have taken to improve animal welfare, including the banning of conventional battery cages for laying hens, the introduction of CCTV in slaughterhouses, the mandatory microchipping of dogs, Finn's law and Lucy's law. I can reassure the House that we are still very much hoping to implement our manifesto commitments and the measures in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on myalgic encephalomyelitis, may I draw the Leader of the House's attention to the fact that tomorrow is World ME Day? ME affects more than a quarter of a million people here in the UK, and many others are living with similar symptoms as a result of long covid. The Department of Health and Social Care has been developing a much-needed and much-anticipated ME delivery plan. May we have a Government statement on both the impact of ME on individuals and the delivery plan?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue and reminding us that tomorrow is World ME Day. Indeed, next week is ME Awareness Week, which will give all Members a good opportunity to discuss ME and the care that sufferers need. This would be an excellent question to ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and, of course, Members can apply for a debate in the usual way if they wish to do so.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Derelict buildings can have a significant impact on communities, both as eyesores and, in areas such as my constituency where there is a lack of affordable housing, as a lost opportunity. Can my right hon. Friend tell me what powers councils have in this regard and how they can be encouraged to use them? May we have a debate in Government time on how to bring these buildings back into use and breathe life into communities by providing affordable housing for local families?

Penny Mordaunt: I think that this is an excellent topic for a debate, and my hon. Friend will know how to apply for one. She will be aware that since 2017, local planning authorities in England have been required to maintain and publish brownfield land registers, and they should all be doing that, as well as updating and reviewing the registers at least once a year. They also have compulsory purchase order powers that they can use to acquire empty properties or properties that are eyesores when they can demonstrate that there is a compelling case for such an acquisition to proceed in the public interest.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): This week, the news broke that the Government had changed the UK's policy on animal testing. Despite a 25-year ban, it will now be possible for some make-up ingredients to be

[Alex Davies-Jones]

tested on animals again. That is a huge step backwards, and it is even more frustrating that the Government failed to update the House on their intentions. Once again, they have U-turned on a policy and it was the media that found out first. Will the Leader of the House please support me by arranging a debate on this important issue in Government time? No animal should suffer to satisfy cosmetic vanity.

Penny Mordaunt: I shall ensure that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is aware of the hon. Lady's concern and her request for further information. I can tell her that the next session of questions to the Secretary of State will be on 25 May.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): May I, too, congratulate our very own Amphitrite?

Westfield Parish Council has worked very hard to deliver the Westfield parish community fibre project, which is now at the second stage of validation and is on track to deliver the largest community fibre scheme in East Sussex. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the council on this fantastic achievement, and may I ask her for a debate on how its success could be replicated in other rural communities?

Penny Mordaunt: Well done, Westfield Parish Council! That is incredibly important progress, and it illustrates the reasons for our determination to level up digital connectivity throughout the UK and end the digital divide between rural, suburban and urban areas. We are investing £5 billion in that important mission. I think that this is an excellent topic for debate, and my hon. Friend will know how to apply for one.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On Friday morning, Stockton Conservatives cheered the election of their candidate Shakeel Hussain, despite his published statement that Israelis were Zionist murderers. The same Mr Hussain joined the Conservatives a few weeks ago, after being rejected by the Labour party for his antisemitic views, and he appears to have conned them. Why is Mr Hussain still a Tory party member and what is the Government advice to Tory leader Tony Riordan who, when offered sight of the evidence well before the election, declined to look because he did not have his spectacles with him?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that this is not a matter for the Leader of the House, but it would be a matter for the party chairman. I would suggest that he raises any concerns he has about the conduct of any individual with the party chairman. He will know that we have a proper process to look at all these matters. I do not think that he has done that. He may wish to do so. That is the best advice I can offer him as Leader of the House of Commons.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Tritax Symmetry has formally applied for the Hinckley rail freight interchange and now there is a formal and legal chance for everyone to register their interest and have their say. So I am urging all my constituents and residents, particularly those in Burbage, Barwell, Earl Shilton and Hinckley to do exactly that. I have been working with my hon.

Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and neither he nor I have the power to stop this. I know that the process is quasi-judicial so I cannot ask the Leader of the House to comment specifically on that case, but can we have a debate on creating a national strategy for railway freight interchanges to ensure they are joined up in places such as the midlands, where they can be so problematic?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. The national networks national policy statement provides developers with a clear statement of Government policy on the development of strategic rail freight interchanges and that statement is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport. I would be happy to make sure that the Department is aware of my hon. Friend's focus on the matter and we stand ready to assist him. I thank him for making sure that all the interested parties who wish to have their say are aware of the pre-examination process that is being advertised.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. Each week, I use this opportunity to highlight somewhere in the world where religious persecution has taken place. I am very saddened to bring to the House's attention the fact that since Monday there have been at least five separate attacks against Christian communities in Nigeria's Benue state, resulting in 10 deaths, seven towns being abandoned and thousands of people being displaced. Since we returned from the Easter recess, more than 100 people have been killed in that state alone. Violence against Nigeria's Christians and Shi'as and those from traditional African religions has reached endemic levels in northern and central states, despite interventions from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and our allies. The Leader of the House always responds in a very positive fashion and I thank her for that in advance. Will she join me in condemning the latest attacks and provide advice on any steps His Majesty's Government could take to protect all those communities in Nigeria?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising these important matters again. They are extremely concerning. I know that further individuals are missing and this is very distressing. He will know that Ministers and our envoy raise these matters and are keeping a close eye on what is going on. I will make sure that the Foreign Secretary, in particular, has heard what he said.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): This week, the 10 MPs representing Humber constituencies wrote on a cross-party basis to the director-general of the BBC expressing our opposition to the plans to cut local radio services and the disgraceful way in which local members of radio staff in Humberside have been treated. The director-general, as we all know, is ultimately responsible for the plans and has the power to change them. Last autumn, when Hull MPs wrote and asked to meet him, we were fobbed off with offers of meeting those further down the management chain. I know the Leader of the House has excellent relations with Downing Street and Buckingham Palace. Does she think that helping MPs of all parties to gain access to the BBC director-general could be her next great triumph?

Penny Mordaunt: The right hon. Lady raises an important matter. Local radio is not just a vital link that keeps people in touch with what is happening in their community; it is vital for democracy and scrutiny in holding people to account, too. I will make sure the director-general has heard what she said, and I would be grateful if she kept us updated on her progress.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): In October 2020, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency awarded a contract worth £1.5 million to Genpact to use artificial intelligence to analyse yellow card adverse event reports associated with covid-19 injections. There is no evidence of any tendering process, and it appears that Genpact was the only supplier considered. Even cursory due diligence shows a huge conflict of interest, with Genpact having massive long-term contracts with AstraZeneca and Pfizer. Can we therefore have an urgent debate on the failings of the MHRA both in its regulation of the experimental covid-19 injections, as detailed in the fantastic Perseus report, and in awarding yellow card oversight to a deeply conflicted company in Genpact?

Penny Mordaunt: As the hon. Gentleman knows, this is probably a question to ask the Department of Health and Social Care, and as a point of information for him the next questions to the Department are on 6 June. He can directly ask Ministers about this and any other matter. He can also apply for a Backbench Business debate, a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate. He knows that he will be called to speak: anyone can look at *Hansard* and see that he is regularly called to speak in debates and at questions, as he has been today, by whoever is in the Chair. He can table questions and early-day motions and he is, of course, free to tour media studios, to speak to the press and to put out his views on social media. How he chooses to use these opportunities is up to him.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): At the 2022 elections, there was one caution and one prosecution for electoral fraud. In 2021, one conviction and one caution. In 2020, none. In 2019, four convictions and two cautions. That is a total of 10 cases over four years. Despite this, there were countless reports of people being turned away from polling stations last week for not having the correct photo ID. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in parliamentary time on voter ID and how we must review and learn lessons from the local elections?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady has just missed Cabinet Office questions, at which she could have raised that matter. There will be a full review of the local elections and we need to be led by the data that has been gathered.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Kemptown is now a Conservative and Green-free constituency. One of the reasons we managed to win the election is because of our strong pledge on rental reform and changing the broken housing market, which is affecting all people and all demographics. When can we expect this important Bill to be introduced? Can the Leader of the House confirm there will be no more dither and delay?

Penny Mordaunt: I will announce business in the usual way, but the hon. Gentleman will not have very long to wait. I sincerely hope he will support our reforms.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am sorely tempted to ask for a debate on the power of dancing, following the success of Renfrew's Jazzle Dazzle mini and senior teams in Orlando, winning three golds and one silver at the Allstar world championships. For the record, the senior team includes my daughters Emma and Eilidh.

However, proud dad or not, I have pressing, long-delayed Home Office matters, including an EU settled status application that has been awaiting a decision since October 2021 and a family reunification visa application submitted more than a year ago. Can we have a Home Office statement on these delays?

Penny Mordaunt: I think the whole House would want to congratulate the hon. Gentleman's daughters and everyone else in that team on all their dancing achievements.

The hon. Gentleman may know that the Home Office now has surgeries to assist colleagues in getting answers on outstanding matters such as he raises. My office can be in touch with his office to make sure they have all the information, but those surgeries can be virtual, they will be specific to the cases he wishes to raise and can be organised quickly.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Labour is now the largest party in local government and I am pleased that Luton held on to a strong Labour council. Importantly, just like the parliamentary Labour party, Luton now has a majority of Labour women as councillors. Can we have a debate, though, on tackling the barriers that many women and young people from diverse and working-class backgrounds face in trying to serve their communities in local government?

Penny Mordaunt: Those are important issues and I know the Local Government Association is focused on ensuring that any barriers that exist are removed, tackled and addressed. I would say, because we often hear about the negatives of serving in elected roles, whether in this place or in local government, that the good far outweighs the bad. If people feel that they want to step up and serve their community, the chances are that they are going to be good at it and we should all encourage them.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): The Leader of the House has been generous several times in talking about the problems with leasing. Section 24 allows no-fault evictions. Is it not shameful that since the Government first committed to dealing with this issue 40,000 families have been evicted through no fault of their own, some in my constituency? Some have even been evicted via text, saying, "Get out of this house because we want it for something else." That is not acceptable. A constituent put it to me this morning that 50 Members on the Government Front Bench are landlords. The best way to reassure people in the country that they are not having an effect on this is for the Leader of the House finally to say when this legislation is coming and whether that loophole will finally be sealed off completely.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Bill will legislate to abolish no-fault evictions and he will not have very long to wait at all before that Bill is in front of him.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Yesterday, it was reported that the Metropolitan police have apologised following the discovery of documents relating to the Daniel Morgan murder in a locked cabinet. The independent inquiry released its report almost two years ago and the Independent Office for Police Conduct found that the former commissioner of the Metropolitan police and others had deliberately delayed the disclosure of documentation in relation to that inquiry. Given that we have had previous statements on this issue, can we have a ministerial statement on what is a completely unacceptable situation?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important matter. She will not have long to wait for Home Office questions, which are on 22 May, but I will make sure that the Home Secretary has heard her concerns today.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We have had a couple of questions already, from Members on both sides of the House, on Government proposals on leasehold reform, but we have not had an answer yet. There were newspaper reports overnight that the Government were going to U-turn on some of the plans, particularly the one to abolish leasehold altogether, which is a firm Government commitment. If there is a U-turn on that, it will represent a massive betrayal for the millions of leaseholders up and down the country. We have already had one Secretary of State dragged here today to explain U-turns in Government policy. Can we please have the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities here at the next opportunity to explain what their position is on leasehold reform?

Penny Mordaunt: I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. As for any rumours about the renters reform Bill, that legislation will, as I say, be brought forward very shortly.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Let me start by congratulating the right hon. Lady on carrying out her role in the coronation at the weekend so elegantly.

Social enterprise Hey Girls has launched the Pads 4 Dads campaign to educate fathers about periods and give them the tools and confidence required to support their children with this. May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of ending the stigma around periods and why menstrual education should be normalised across all demographics in the UK?

Penny Mordaunt: That sounds like a very worthwhile initiative and I congratulate those behind it. It is incredibly important that we give people the tools they need to support their children through the changes they will go through. I will certainly make sure that the relevant Department has heard about this scheme and see what else can be done to support it and scale it.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I have raised this issue before with the Leader of the House, but at yesterday's Prime Minister's questions, when confronted with the dubious dealings at Teesworks by my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), the Prime Minister said:

"Contracts at the site will be a commercial matter for the companies involved."—[*Official Report*, 10 May 2023; Vol. 732, c. 334.]

Could the Leader convey to the Prime Minister that the people of Teesside are extremely angry and, even if he does not, they think that how £350 million of public money has ended up so massively benefiting a few preferred developers is very much a matter for them? The Chief Secretary to the Treasury has agreed to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) to discuss the issue, so I have written to him to ask him to extend that invitation to me. Could I prevail upon her to ask the Chief Secretary to do that and to include my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) as well?

Penny Mordaunt: I will certainly make sure that the Chief Secretary has heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. He will know that, on the spending and delivery for that site, the Tees Valley Combined Authority has judged that that is on track and the transfer presented value for money. These matters are independently audited and those who are doing that have not raised any concerns about the judgment that South Tees Development Corporation has made or the management of the organisation. These are important matters. They are a concern to the hon. Gentleman and I shall act on his request, but it is also important that those facts are out there. I am sure he would not want to stifle investment in the area; I know that that is not his intention. We must be careful of that.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): People in Wirral West are extremely anxious about a series of planning appeals by Leverhulme Estate relating to building on the green belt that will be heard at a public inquiry that starts next week. The outcomes will particularly impact on people in Barnston, Irby and Pensby, and also have implications for those in Greasby. Leverhulme Estate's plans are not wanted by local people and are contrary to what Wirral Council has set out in the local plan, which is that the borough's housing needs can be met on brownfield sites and land in urban areas. So may we have a debate in Government time on how a resolution can be found in such cases where there are clear conflicts between what local people and the local council wants, and what developers want? Will such a debate cover considerations of ways in which we can give the green belt the stronger protections it clearly needs?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank and congratulate the hon. Lady on raising this matter and advertising it to her constituents and other interested parties, who will want to participate in that process. That subject is often raised in this House by many Members and I am sure that if she were to apply for a debate, it would be well supported.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the Leader of the House on the assured way in which she carried out her role as Lord President of the Council during the coronation service. I hope she was as struck as I was by the excellence of the music we heard, and I congratulate the musicians, choirs, conductors and composers involved. However, classical music is under threat from proposed job cuts in the BBC orchestras, the funding cuts already made by the Arts Council to opera companies and orchestras, and the dramatic falls in the provision of music education in state schools. So may we have a debate in Government time on what is

needed to protect the future of classical music in this country? We need to ensure that the music at future important events is just as excellent.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for affording us all the opportunity to say thank you to those many people involved in such amazing music, not only for the celebration, but at other events associated with it—of course, I should not forget the music that would be being enjoyed in every church in the land on the following day. Our choral traditions are unique in this country and are enshrined in the background and pipeline of people who come forward to organisations such as the BBC Singers. I am sure that this is a topic of concern to many and if she were to apply for a debate, it would be well attended.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Next week is Christian Aid Week. This year, the focus of the week is on women farmers in Malawi and the challenges they are facing because of climate change and the consequent impact on the cost of living. Since 1957, Christian Aid has worked with thousands of churches and individuals including in East Renfrewshire, my constituency, which was in the top 10% of areas supporting Christian Aid Week last year. Can we have a debate in Government time on the value of the work that Christian Aid and all its volunteers do in countries across the world where there is such need and on how Government can support that need by acting to make sure that the most vulnerable in the world are properly supported?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for reminding us all about Christian Aid Week and for highlighting the many good works that the charity does with those donations. She will know that there are initiatives at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office that allow tax breaks for donations, and also initiatives such as Aid Match and others that maximise and incentivise people to donate on these occasions. I thank her for reminding the House of this important week coming up.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Ind): The Southwark-based firm, MPE, applied for specialist engineering visas in March, but has had no reply from the Home Office despite those jobs being on the Government's skilled worker shortage list and despite costs of £15,000 to MPE. Its German office accesses equivalent visas at no cost to the company and in a fraction of the time. Will the Leader of the House use the sword that she wielded so well at the coronation to help slice through and slash the costs that her Government impose on businesses by allowing time to debate how Home Office policy harms UK competitiveness?

Penny Mordaunt: If people are paying for a service, they should actually get that service. At the risk of repeating myself, I will advertise to the hon. Gentleman the service that the Home Office is providing for Members of Parliament. If he has had any difficulty in accessing those surgeries, I shall be very happy to assist him in doing so.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I know that I upset the Leader of the House the last time I was here by bringing up her embarrassing belly flop at that daft diving contest that she was a part of, but even

I was impressed by her sword-wielding at the coronation. Somebody who can carry a sword and stay mute while advertising Poundland deserves my admiration. But may I say to her that it serves absolutely no one for her to criticise a political party for hate and division, particularly when it is her Government who have brought forward that hateful Illegal Migration Bill and divided the nation with their extreme hard Brexit.

Penny Mordaunt: The manner in which the hon. Gentleman has asked his question prompts the exact response that I shall give. I am afraid that he has just provided us with a prime example of why the SNP has no credibility on these matters, why it always stokes division and why, even though there was a slight degree of humour creeping into his question, it was still rather obnoxious.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Earlier, the Leader of the House rightly commended the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill of the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) and the Government's support for it. That Bill was carried by this House on 17 March, and had its First Reading in the House of Lords on 20 March, but has made no further progress since then, giving rise, I am afraid, to concerns that it is perhaps being delayed and undermined by Tory backwoodsmen down the corridor. Through the usual channels, can she get this welcome and much anticipated Bill moving forward and becoming law?

Penny Mordaunt: I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that the Bill is continuing to make progress. A lot of work has been going on in the other place on any outstanding concerns that people have. The Bill will make progress.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Thirteen-year-old Robert Hattersley drowned in the River Tyne at Ovingham while playing with his friends in July last year. Robert was a popular and much-loved young man. His parents, Carl and Stella, who live in my constituency, will hold a meeting next week to set up a foundation to raise awareness of water safety among young people to prevent other such tragedies. Will the Leader of the House join me in sending them good wishes in their campaign, and, as we approach the summer, can we have a debate, in Government time, on the importance of water safety?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure the whole House will want to send our thanks and admiration to the hon. Lady's constituents who have, out of unbearable tragedy, done something so positive to help others. She is also right, particularly as we head towards the warmer weather, that we remind people of the importance of water safety. If she were to apply for a debate, I am sure it would be well-attended.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) *rose—*

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I did toss the coin, Mr Stephens, and you won.

Chris Stephens: Tails never fails, Mr Deputy Speaker.

[Chris Stephens]

The Leader of the House will be aware of the rocketing food price inflation, which is squeezing living standards across these islands. That includes, I am sad to say, many workers in the food industry itself, with a recent published survey of the Bakers Food & Allied Workers Union showing that 40% of workers in the food sector are skipping meals and that one in five are using food banks. Can we have a debate in Government time on how we can pay food workers fairly without price rises for consumers and rampant profiteering of some of the large supermarkets? Can she confirm whether trade union representatives of food workers will be invited to the Government's national food summit next week?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that matter. He will know that the next relevant questions will be on 25 May, and he may like to raise those matters there, but, given the timeliness of the event next week, I shall ask the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to get in touch with his office to answer his question about delegates.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Last, but definitely not least, I call Christine Jardine.

Christine Jardine: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, although I do find my concerns about gambling now reinforced.

May I add my congratulations to the Leader of the House on the manner in which she conducted her role in the coronation last weekend? I also welcome the reassurances that she gave earlier on the Government's commitment to animal welfare. However, the lack of progress of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill has provoked a lot of concern both from my constituents and the Dogs Trust, which was here just this week. I raised the timescale that we now face and this lack of progress in Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions back in February. Can the Leader of the House give us any reassurance today that the Bill will come back in time and be heard?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady knows that I will say that I will announce forthcoming business in the usual way, but I can reassure the House that the Government remain committed to those measures. They were in our manifesto and we have every intention of delivering them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Leader of the House for responding to questions for well over an hour.

I have been an MP for 31 years, and it is very rare to see such unanimity in the House of Commons. There are normally discordant voices, but none today in paying tribute to the Leader of the House for the role that she played on Saturday. I texted her straight away to say how proud I was of her. When I spoke to her, I said, "I could not even hold an umbrella up for an hour, and you held that sword for two hours." So Penny let me know that she had been doing some exercises to make sure that she was able to do it. When I told her that I could not hold the umbrella up, she said, "Nigel, if ever you want any furniture moving, just give me a call." Thank you very much. You did the country proud.

Ukraine

12.28 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will update the House on Russia's attacks on civilians and critical national infrastructure in Ukraine.

We are now on day 442 of the conflict. During this period, Moscow has, according to the United Nations, provoked the largest displacement of people in Europe since world war two, including almost 8 million refugees and almost 6 million internally forced from their homes.

We must not lose sight of those staggering statistics. Worse still, Russia's battlefield setbacks have led to its cynically targeting energy infrastructure, putting millions of people at risk of sickness and death in cold, unsanitary conditions. Take the besieged city of Bakhmut, where there are now fewer than 7,000 residents, one-tenth of the original population. For the last nine months they have been hiding in basements, without clean water, electricity or gas and with minimal connection to the outside world.

From the scale of Russian attacks, it is clear that they have not limited themselves to military targets. Their purpose is simply to terrorise the local population into submission. That is the only conclusion that can be drawn when we look at Russia's ever-expanding charge sheet of international humanitarian law violations. As of 2 April, there have been 788 attacks on healthcare facilities—hospitals, clinics and medical centres. There have been instances of damage to educational facilities—schools, day care centres and even nurseries.

Meanwhile, Russia has plundered crops and agricultural equipment on an industrial scale, destroying grain storage and handling facilities. According to estimates from the Kyiv School of Economics, Russia stole or destroyed 4.04 million tonnes of grain and oilseeds, valued at \$1.9bn, in Ukrainian territories during the 2022 season. Meanwhile, the Kremlin's continued intransigence is contributing to the current backlog of grain exports.

Besides that, Russia has bombed industrial facilities, including the Azot chemical plant, risking toxic industrial chemical release and environmental impact. It has attacked Ukraine's largest refinery at Kremenchuk on at least three occasions. It has bombed airfields, ports, roads and rail networks, preventing refugees from fleeing the danger. It has taken out communication networks, affecting banks, internet and cellphones, with residents in some areas now forced to barter for food. Kremlin strikes on substations, powerplants and powerlines have also impacted water treatment facilities, leaving cities such as Mariupol without water and reliant on delivery of bottled supplies.

At the same time, Russia has forcibly occupied and undermined the safe operation of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the largest in Europe. As Rafael Grossi, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, has said:

"Every single one of the IAEA's crucial seven indispensable pillars for ensuring nuclear safety and security in an armed conflict has been compromised".

He recently warned that the situation around the plant was "potentially dangerous".

Sadly, at least 23,000 Ukrainian civilians have been killed or wounded so far, although the actual figure is likely to be substantially higher. Thousands of citizens

have been sent to sinister “filtration” camps before being forcibly relocated to Russia. Some 6,000 children, ranging in ages from four months to 17 years, are now in “re-education camps” across Russia.

Both the United Nations and United States investigators have found that Russia has committed war crimes, with reported evidence of executions, torture and sexual violence in civilian areas. In early April President Zelensky said that more than 70,000 Russian war crimes had been recorded since Putin’s invasion. The names of Bucha and Izyum have become synonymous with mass murder. The world will not forget the bombing of the drama theatre in Mariupol, where 1,200 civilians sought shelter under a giant sign reading “children”. No matter how much Russia tries to hide and bulldoze over the scene, we will not forget.

Even in the territories that Russia has illegally annexed, citizens find themselves subjected to the worst excesses of totalitarianism. A Russian passport is increasingly essential to access vital services—a nightmare for those with new-born babies. Civilian infrastructure such as healthcare facilities is being seized and repurposed to treat wounded servicemen. Kill lists of civic leaders have been drawn up, citizens executed in cold blood and concerted attempts made to erase Ukrainian culture, history and identity.

We should be clear: the targeting of civilians and infrastructure essential to the civilian population of Ukraine has not happened by accident in the fog of war. Much of it was planned Russian policy. Russia has form, and we have seen its handiwork in Syria. In March, President Putin himself was indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes.

However, we should also be clear that, as numerous credible reports indicate, while Russia’s morally bankrupt approach might have been made in the Kremlin, it is often carried out willingly, not just by rogue units, but by the ordinary rank and file across the Russian armed forces. An even clearer picture of Russia’s barbaric approach emerges when we look at some of the weapons it is using against innocent civilians. I am not referring here to the extensive strikes against Ukraine’s electric power network from cruise and surface-to-surface missiles, the use of short-range ballistic missiles such as the Iskander, which infamously hit the train station in Kramatorsk, killing 60 and wounding more than 110, or even the two 500 kg bombs dropped by Russian fighter aircraft on that Mariupol theatre.

The fact is that Russia has used cluster munitions with wholesale disregard for human life and civilians. They have been dropped near a hospital in Vuhledar. A 9M79-series Tochka ballistic missile delivering a 9N123 cluster munition warhead killed four civilians and injured another 10, including six healthcare workers. Russia has used Smerch cluster munition rockets in three neighbourhoods in Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second largest city, resulting in reports of nine civilian deaths and 37 injuries, according to the United Nations.

Russia also relies on massed fires. Indiscriminate artillery bombardments of built-up areas account for the vast majority of civilian casualties—injured or killed. Moscow also makes extensive use of conventional anti-personnel mines and improvised booby-traps to indiscriminately harm civilians. Dead bodies, the homes and vehicles of Ukrainian civilians and even children’s toys have been rigged up as lethal devices. Russia has

laid mines remotely and mechanically, covering significant areas of farmland, with scant evidence that it has either marked minefields or warned civilians about their presence. Those minefields will leave a legacy long after the conflict ends.

Russia has used hundreds of Iranian-made Shahed drones to attack targets in Ukraine. Loitering munitions sent on numerous suicide missions have repeatedly taken their toll on civilians. Last week, those weapons struck a university campus in Odesa and civilians were once more in the crosshairs in Kyiv.

From the start I have been clear that our support for Ukraine is responsible, calibrated, co-ordinated and agile. Aligned and united with the international community, we are helping the Ukrainians to defend their homeland. Most importantly, our support is responsive to Russia’s own actions. None of this would have been necessary had Russia not invaded, but now it is about pushing back Russian forces and deterring them from committing yet more crimes, by holding the Russian military establishment to account for their actions.

In December, I wrote to Russian Defence Minister Shoigu, setting out the UK Government’s objection to the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure, and stating that further attacks—contrary to international humanitarian law, for example the principle of distinction codified in articles 48, 51 and 52 of additional protocol I to the Geneva conventions—would force me to consider donating more capable weapons to Ukraine so that the Ukrainians may better defend themselves within their territory.

Unfortunately, Russia has continued down that dark path. This year Russia’s leadership has continued to systematically target civilians and civilian infrastructure with bombs, missiles and drones. More medical facilities were targeted in January than in the previous six months combined. Russia has bombed power facilities in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Zaporizhzhia and Odesa oblasts. Incidents of civilian casualties have increased, especially in areas close to the frontline such as Kherson and Bakhmut.

In January a block of flats in Dnipro was wiped out by a 5.5 tonne Russian “Kitchen” missile that probably caused 124 casualties, including 45 fatalities. In March, a five-storey apartment block in Zaporizhzhia was attacked with an S-300 missile that completely destroyed the building. Between 27 April and 2 May, Russian forces conducted strikes against Ukraine using Kh-101 and Kh-555 long-range air-launched cruise missiles.

Despite the Kremlin’s claims that it is targeting Ukraine’s “military-industrial facilities”, one of the buildings struck was a nine-storey apartment building. The salvo left 23 dead and dozens more injured. Last week, Russian shelling struck residential buildings and on Monday Russia bombed a Red Cross warehouse full of humanitarian aid.

Drone footage from Bakhmut appears to show white phosphorus raining down on a city ablaze. The use of such incendiary weapons, which burn at 800°C, within concentrations of civilians is a contravention of protocol 3 of the convention on certain conventional weapons.

As I have said many times in the past, we simply will not stand by while Russia kills civilians. We have seen what Ukrainians can do when they have the right capabilities. In recent days, 30 Shahed drones have been shot down. The Ukrainian air force says that 23 out of

[Mr Ben Wallace]

25 cruise missiles fired from sea and land have been downed. We have also had confirmation from Lieutenant General Oleschuk, the Ukrainian air force commander, that even Russia's much-vaunted "Killjoy" air-launched hypersonic missile has been brought down. That is why the Prime Minister and I have now taken the decision to provide longer-range capabilities.

In December, I informed the House that I was developing options to respond to Russia's continued aggression in a calibrated and determined manner. Today I can confirm that the UK is donating Storm Shadow missiles to Ukraine. Storm Shadow is a long-range, conventional-only precision strike capability. It complements the long-range systems that have already been gifted, including the HIMARS and Harpoon missiles, as well as Ukraine's own Neptune cruise missile and longer-range missiles gifted elsewhere. The donation of those weapon systems gives Ukraine the best chance to defend itself against Russia's continued brutality, especially the deliberate targeting of Ukrainian civilian infrastructure against international law. Ukraine has a right to be able to defend itself against that.

The use of Storm Shadow will allow Ukraine to push back Russian forces based within Ukrainian sovereign territory. I am sure that the House will understand that I will not go into further detail on the capabilities, but although those weapons will give Ukraine new capability, Members should recognise that those systems are not even in the same league as the Russian AS-24 "Killjoy" hypersonic missile, Iranian Shahed one-way attack drones, or even the Kalibr cruise missile, which has a range of more than 2,000 km—roughly seven times that of a Storm Shadow missile. Russia must recognise that its actions alone have led to such systems being provided to Ukraine. It is my judgment as Defence Secretary that this is a calibrated and proportionate response to Russia's escalations.

When travelling through Ukraine, as I have done several times since the invasion, one sees the smashed buildings and piles of rubble, where there were once thriving businesses and homes full of life. They reveal the truth of Russia's invasion: needless destruction and gratuitous violence, and—despite warnings—Russia's continued violations of international law and deliberate targeting and killing of civilians. They are the visible and tragic symbols of the Kremlin's desperation.

Try as it might, the Kremlin cannot hide the fact that its invasion is already failing. The Russians can only occupy the rubble left by their destruction. All this week's "Victory Day" parade did was showcase that historic failure. It demonstrated Putin's efforts to twist the Soviet Union's sacrifice against the Nazis, and was an insult to their own immortal regiment. It was the façade of power, a distraction from the faltering invasion, an appeal to unity while even Russia's own leadership loses confidence, the hypocrisy of claiming victimhood while waging a war of their own choosing.

The reality is that this is a war of President Putin's own choosing at the expense of Ukraine's sovereignty and civilian lives. The UK stands for the values of freedom, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of civilians. We will stand side by side with the Ukrainians. We will continue to support them in defence of their sovereign country. I commend this statement to the House.

12.42 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): We are united in our determination to help in the defence of Ukraine and of our shared values. I welcome the Defence Secretary's statement—his first on Ukraine since January, and the first announcement of new weapons to Ukraine since February. We welcome the vital new military support as the Ukrainians prepare for their expected counter-offensive.

Speaking in The Hague last week, President Zelensky said:

"We are not attacking either Putin or Moscow; we are fighting on our own territory, defending our villages and towns".

Today's announcement of UK Storm Shadow missiles will strengthen Ukraine's fight to repel the Russian forces and defend against the brutal attacks that the Defence Secretary laid out in detail. What limitations are put on the use of those longer-range missiles? How have they been integrated with Ukrainian planes? Will other NATO allies now follow with similar support?

As the Defence Secretary said, it was six months ago that he told the House that he was open-minded about sending longer-range missiles. Three months ago, in February, the Prime Minister said:

"The UK will be the first country to provide Ukraine with longer-range weapons."

So, as I asked in my urgent question two weeks ago, why has this taken so long? Ukraine needs all military aid on the frontline now. President Zelensky said last night:

"Not everything has arrived yet... We are expecting armoured vehicles".

Have all 10 types of UK armoured vehicles pledged to Ukraine now been delivered to Ukraine?

The Defence Secretary is right that, although Putin proclaimed, "Here is to our victory!" in the Victory Day parade in Moscow this week, he cannot disguise or distract from his failure in Ukraine. Despite that, Russia is far from a spent military force. The next few weeks and months will be critical.

I am really proud of British military leadership on Ukraine over the last year. I want to be able to say the same in six months' time. We want the UK's momentum for Ukraine to be maintained and accelerated. So when will we see the 2023 action plan for Ukraine that the Defence Secretary promised last August? Why has no equipment bought by the UK-led international fund for Ukraine been delivered to Kyiv nine months after the scheme was set up? When will Ministers designate the Wager Group as a terrorist organisation, as Labour has argued for since February with support on both sides of the House? Why are the Government still refusing UK support for a special tribunal to prosecute Putin? Who in Government is responsible for leading, integrating and co-ordinating the UK's backing for Ukraine?

The Defence Secretary knows that the Government have had, and will continue to have, Labour's fullest support in providing military aid to Ukraine and in reinforcing NATO allies. NATO has overhauled its defences since Putin invaded Ukraine, and the Chief of the Defence Staff yesterday welcomed new NATO regional plans. Can the Defence Secretary confirm today that the UK will fulfil, in full, our obligations in those plans?

The British public are still strongly behind Ukraine. They want the UK to continue our support, to confront Russian aggression and to pursue Putin for his war crimes. We must, and we will, stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his and his party's support. He knows as well as anyone that we are all determined to see this through. I think that this has been an exemplary example of Parliament at its best over the 440 or 450 days of the Russian invasion. I will get straight to the point and try to answer as many of his questions as I can.

On limitations, obviously we will not talk in public about whether there are limitations. The key here is to give Ukraine that capability to defend itself. What I can say is that, throughout this process, we always make sure that we gift having first examined, minimising escalation and unnecessary provocation of the Russian state—that is not the business we are in; we are in the business of helping Ukraine to defend itself within its sovereign territory. Of course, it is easy to forget that none of this would be needed—no deep-strike capability would be needed—if Russia withdrew its forces to the other side of the border and back into Russia. Every Russian force would be safe after that. Of course, that is why we are seeking deep fire within Ukraine, for example: because Russia has invaded so far into another country.

On integration with the plane, Storm Shadow is an air-fired missile. The right hon. Gentleman is correct, of course, that it is not easy to take a British-French missile and incorporate it with a former Soviet or Russian aircraft. That is one of the reasons for the time taken: working out whether it was technically feasible. I pay tribute to our scientists and technicians, who have done an amazing job—and not just with this type of capability—as well as to other scientists across Europe who have managed to produce integration of western weapons into Russian equipment, and innovative capabilities, at speed. I often question why I cannot have that speed when I try to commission some of those capabilities domestically, so there are lessons there. That is one of the areas.

I am not sure that there are many other powers with similar weapons systems providing similar support. There is, however, a drive by many allies to deliver further deep capability. HIMARS is obviously 80 to 90 km, but another American system that was gifted a few months ago—forgive me; I cannot remember its name—has a longer range.

One of our requirements in the second round of the international fund is the ability to do deep fire—deep strike. This took a long time partly because of technical feasibility, since putting a fifth or fourth-generation weapons system on what is sometimes a second or third-generation aircraft is not easy. We will see. I am not going to comment on when we expect these to be used. They have yet to be tested, and we will find out in the next few weeks or months the extent to which that has worked, but it takes time.

As I have always reassured the House, I wanted to calibrate our response. We need to make sure that we do these things in a way that helps Ukraine further its capabilities. Gifting these earlier when we were unsure whether they would necessarily work, without any form of offensive on the horizon, may have made them vulnerable and may not have made the difference that we are all trying to achieve. All I can say is that, having technically cleared the hurdles, and as everyone talks about an expected counter-offence, now is the right time to gift these to Ukraine, and they are now going into or are in the country.

No one should doubt any of our momentum here. Yes, the media come and go and cover different aspects of the world, and Sudan comes along, but if we look at the Government's track record—Operation Interflex, which trained 9,000 last year and will train 20,000 this year around the United Kingdom, or the gifting of tanks at the beginning of the year—we see that our momentum continues.

On the right hon. Gentleman's question about what has gone into the country, I know that all our tanks have gone into the country, as well as many of our Spartans and armoured vehicles. I do not know whether every single one has, and I am happy to write to him, but the big ones such as the tanks are all in country. They have trained and exercised both here and in Ukraine, and I know that the Ukrainian forces using them so far have enjoyed them very much and talk very highly of the Challengers. That also goes for the AS 90s, which have not only been put in but used. They seem to get excellent availability on the AS 90, so there are lessons to be learned for our capability.

On the Wagner Group designation, proscribing an organisation is a matter for the Home Office, done via collective write-round. I cannot comment on when or how those things happen. We have heard the calls from both sides of the House to proscribe it. The Wagner Group is a thoroughly nasty organisation, from not only what we see in Ukraine but what we have seen in west Africa and Syria, and does pose a threat to the United Kingdom and her allies, either directly or indirectly. It is a group that needs dealing with, although Mr Prigozhin seems to be making himself deeply unpopular with the leadership in the Kremlin at the moment—if I was him, I would not stand near any open windows if I was dealing with Mr Putin. Nevertheless, Wagner is here and we have to deal with it.

On the regional plans, I am trying—they are over 3,000 pages long and are written in NATO-speak, which probably makes them the equivalent of 12,000 pages long when we try to decipher them. It is important that we try to make commitments that meet those plans and also support others if they do not have that capability, because the strength of NATO will be whether it can carry its political determination into a military plan that makes a difference and deters—that is what we are really about—Russia or any other aggressor. There are a few more weeks and months to go, but I am wading my way through the 3,000 pages, and after this statement I am heading off to the Army on Salisbury plain to discuss exactly that.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I very much welcome this statement. I recently returned from Ukraine, and there is massive appreciation for what Britain has been doing and continues to do—not just the lethal aid provided by the Government but the humanitarian support gifted from the British people. There is huge anticipation about the counter-attack that is likely to take place, but there is also a message, as I hope the Secretary of State will agree, that it may require a second, third, or fourth counter-offensive to take place. This is not going to end simply when the Ukrainians decide to push forward. We should expect Russia to go ugly and to use unconventional systems in response.

I welcome the announcement on Storm Shadow. Britain is yet again stepping forward. Are the Americans going to match with ATACMS—the army tactical missile

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

system? There is still a request for jets to be gifted as well. Finally, Trump last night refused to say that he wanted Ukraine to win. This is a material factor, because he could win the United States election next year, and that might be what Putin is banking on.

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend's characterisation of the counter-offensives is correct. I do not think it is a case of "One last thrust and everything will be over by Christmas." I think this is a matter of Ukraine quite rightly finding and exploiting, as any good general would, weaknesses and opportunities. We should always manage our expectations that it will all be over by Christmas. When we have a Russian army that does not mind sacrificing hundreds of thousands of its own people, we are not up against rational leadership that recognises, as anyone else would do, that the game is up already. Having lost 10,000 armoured vehicles, and with over 250,000 of its own soldiers dead or wounded, most people would have recognised that the game is up. That is one of the big challenges.

There are other weapons systems that Ukraine has asked for, and the ATACMS is a well-documented capability. We are pretty confident that Storm Shadow will plug some of that gap and definitely deliver the deeper range that HIMARS used to achieve when it was at 80 km. The Russians, after suffering significant losses to HIMARS, obviously worked out and moved beyond range ring, so we think Storm Shadow will absolutely help the Ukrainians make that difference.

The US President today is President Biden. I have a good relationship with him, as do the Government. They have stood firm, with \$87 billion of donations. They have put their money where their mouth is. A huge amount of effort has gone into their support. I lived in America for a few years, or my parents did, and I know that the decent and good people of America would recognise that their rights are just as important as those of the people of Ukraine. Their constitution upholds rights. I think that is what will unite them, and I am confident that whoever comes next as President will continue to support the battle to uphold human rights.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for this detailed statement and advance sight of it. I assure him that the SNP condemns, and will continue to condemn, Putin's unprovoked invasion of a peaceful, democratic neighbour in the strongest possible terms.

I join the Labour party in asking once again for the UK Government to formally proscribe the Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation. Could the Secretary of State tell his colleagues in other Departments that we would like to see a plan to support Ukrainian refugees to seek damages against the Wagner Group in the UK courts? He mentioned Iran. I would add that the Government should be considering proscribing as a terrorist organisation the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

President Zelensky has said that Ukraine is constrained by delays in the delivery of armoured vehicles. What action plan do the Government have, along with their allies, to ensure that those armoured vehicles are delivered to assist in those efforts? Finally, could the Secretary of

State comment on reports that India's imports of Russian oil rose tenfold in 2022? What do the Government plan to do alongside allies to ensure that oil products originating from Russia do not reap record profits?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful for the SNP's support on this. I think we all recognise what Ukraine is fighting for, and it appeals to our decency and the fact that we must all stand up for it. The hon. Gentleman's suggestion of a financial penalty or suing the Wagner Group in the courts is an interesting one. It reminds me, from my previous role as Security Minister, that proscription is an important tool, but it rarely unlocks any more than a brand or labelling of something. What I suspect will have a bigger impact on Wagner will be suing in the courts, given that mercenaries do not hang around if they do not get paid. Seeking damages through our amazing courts system, whether in Scotland or London, which is world-renowned for being fair and respected, has a long tentacle. I have listened to his suggestion. While I cannot advise victims of the Wagner Group, I think that hitting Wagner in the wallet will probably be a stronger method, even though I hear that proscription is also wanted.

I also listened to the call to proscribe the IRGC. Iran is absolutely supplying Russia with drones. It cannot hide it; it cannot pretend: it is supplying Russia with drones. Of course, in return, Russia is funding the Iranians and the IRGC to make those drones—it is funding that industry. That poses a wider threat to the region, whether to Yemen, Saudi Arabia, the Houthis or Iraq, where we see Iranian drones being used already. No good shall come of it, shall we say?

As far as delays go, one part of the assistance we provide is that we have people in Poland, Slovakia and Romania helping to co-ordinate delivery and helping the logistics of it. We stand by to help any other nation do that, and at our next meeting of colleagues—either NATO Defence Ministers or others—I will be very happy to find out who is having difficulty. We stand by, ready to help.

Some of the great work we have done in Ukraine that does not get written about is in things like logistics: flying aircraft to pick up people's donations and bring them back to the hubs. All of those people—the members of the RAF who fly those aeroplanes—are heroes to me. We do it often and, in a sense, not secretly; it is just that the media do not seem to want to write about it, but I know about it, and I think it is really good work. We will keep the momentum—we will keep the supplies coming in—but I think we should all recognise that, as any Members who have visited the Ukrainian training will know, there is a lot of hardship still to come.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I welcome the delivery of Storm Shadow, because we must do all we can to even the odds for our Ukrainian friends who face a well-armed terrorist state. However, I am concerned that at this point, we have not managed to suffocate Putin's war machine. Yes, we need to deliver military aid, but we also need to make sure that we suffocate the finances that allow Putin to continue to wage this war. As such, I urge my right hon. Friend to lobby the Chancellor to establish an economic Ramstein of G7 Treasury Ministers or those from allied nations who can come together and make sure that economically, we are

doing what is needed to stand up the phenomenal war effort being led by my right hon. Friend and all of our allies around Europe.

Mr Wallace: That is a good idea, and I will definitely pass it on to the Chancellor. Work has already been done through the G7 with the oil cap, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right that Russia needs funding—it needs to sell its oil and gas. Currently, there are reports that it sells it to China and India at huge discounts in order to get it there. The Foreign Office and the Treasury work tirelessly to close any loopholes that are brought to their attention, whether by Members or anyone else, including the law enforcement agencies. Russia has shown itself to be adept in using those loopholes, but we do see that the Russian industrial base is now struggling with the rearming of some of its equipment. So many of its subsystems seem to have come from the west that it is now definitely finding it hard to resupply itself.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The announcement about new munitions to Ukraine is very welcome, but we also need reassurance that the Secretary of State's Department will be able to restock. Can he tell us what the Department is doing to ramp up and sustain production capacity, including supply chains, not only to support Ukraine until the end of this conflict, but to ensure we restock our own armed forces?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman consistently asks about this matter, and he is right that we have to keep restocking ourselves. Some of the restocking has started, including the next-generation light anti-tank weapons, if Members remember the very first gifting—that restocking started a few months ago—and the low and high-velocity anti-aircraft missiles. I am hoping to be able to inform the House in June that we have placed a long and enduring contract in the UK to replace our 155 mm shells. One thing that this conflict exposes is that we need those types of fires available. Restocking is important, and in the autumn the Treasury gave me £560 million for some of that refurbishment, but there was also other funding in the latest Budget, which I will of course make sure is spent on keeping our forces refurbished.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): We have led western Europe in supplying kit to the Ukrainians—ably administered by MOD Defence Equipment and Support, it should be noted—but we have not yet sent jets, despite the fact that we have a squadron of tranche 1 Typhoons sitting in a hangar and despite the fact that in Westminster Hall recently, President Zelensky very publicly called for us to do so. The Secretary of State knows from his own experience that when the long-awaited counter-attack begins, those Ukrainian brigades must have local air superiority over the battlefield to succeed, and what is left of the Ukrainian air force is far too small for it to do that on its own. As such, can I ask him specifically what we are doing, first to send jets, and secondly to encourage other western allies to send MiG-29s, F-16s or even A-10s to Ukraine? It would be a tragedy, literally, if the counter-offensive ran out of momentum because it lacked air support.

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend is right to talk about how we maintain momentum and about the need for air support because, of course, while Russia's army

has been very badly decimated, a significant part of its air force remains in a good condition. Therefore, it is vital that that air attack potential is minimised.

On particular jets, we offered the Ukrainians training on Typhoons, as my right hon. Friend will know. I recently received a letter turning that off as a request and asking us for support on the F-16, which of course we do not hold. However, I would encourage anybody to gift F-16s to help the Ukrainians. In the meantime, we already use some of our funding and support to buy spares for the likes of the MiGs and everything else, if that is required, because the other challenge this year is going to be sustainability. A lot of equipment has been gifted and huge numbers of Russian tanks have been captured. If we can refurbish and sustain them, that is the best and quickest way for Ukraine to continue its fight, so we need to keep its air force flying. On the F-16s, I am very happy to encourage any of my colleagues to donate them, and if they do, we will happily move them.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I am very grateful both for advance sight of the statement and for its substance. Two days ago, the *Washington Post* reported that the UK

“now appears poised to send Kyiv the long-range missiles the Biden administration has long denied it.”

What is the United States Government's position on the UK's decision to supply that deep-strike capability?

Mr Wallace: The issue I take with *Washington Post* is that the US has not denied Ukraine longer-range missiles; it has put in the high mobility artillery rocket system and, indeed, some other western systems. The difference is that the army tactical missile system is a different type of munition. Storm Shadow has the capacity to hit below ground—it can go into a bunker—and the ATACMS is more of an area weapons system, so it is a different weapons system. The Americans have been clear on their donations, or not—at the moment, they are considering their donations. As far as the use, donation or gifting of Storm Shadow goes, the United States has been incredibly supportive of the United Kingdom's decision to do so.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his very sobering statement. The sheer scale of atrocities against civilians is horrific: it is heartbreaking that over 23,000 civilians have been wounded or killed. Last month, UNICEF told us that the number of children who have been killed is over 500, and we must not forget the thousands of children who have been kidnapped by the Russian child-catchers. Given the attacks on medical facilities and the level of casualties, can my right hon. Friend update us on what medical support the UK has been giving to Ukraine?

Mr Wallace: Yes. My right hon. Friend sitting next to me, the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families, who himself is a naval surgeon, has been incredibly proactive in co-ordinating and supporting that support. He has met a number of times with the Ukrainian surgeon general, and will do so again soon. We have provided healthcare training and equipment for medical purposes, including rehabilitation, and the Department of Health and Social Care has provided support alongside that. I am very happy to write to my right hon. Friend with the details of the purely civilian

[Mr Wallace]

medical help and assistance we have given—often, that is with things like generators, ambulances and other medical supplies.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): The Defence Secretary himself has said that the Conservatives have “hollowed out and underfunded” our armed forces, so why is he still pushing ahead with further cuts to the British Army of 10,000 troops and £2 billion real-terms cuts in day-to-day MOD spending, which will mean less money for forces pay, recruitment and families?

Mr Wallace: It would be good if the hon. Lady actually quoted me correctly. I did not say “the Conservatives”; I said that successive Governments, including her own party’s, have hollowed out the armed forces for the past 30 years, and that is why we need to rectify it. It is why we got £24 billion recently, and an extra £5 billion at the last Budget, not only to refurbish but to modernise our armed forces. Get the quote right next time.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Storm Shadow is a potent weapon, so I cautiously welcome the announcement today on the basis of what the Secretary of State has reported to the House. I am also reassured by the undertaking that Storm Shadow will be used only to prosecute targets inside Ukraine, because NATO’s aim has to be to eject Russia from Ukraine, not to wage war against Russia. My point is this: in the same way that Challenger 2 pre-empted the deployment of Abrams and Leopard 2, can we assume in this case that the deployment of Storm Shadow might pre-empt other medium and long-range weapons being deployed from other NATO nations? Also, can he give an answer specifically on what it will take for F-16s to be deployed?

Mr Wallace: There are other nations with similar but not exactly the same types of weapons system, and I have seen already that our next bidding round for the international fund will include deep-strike and long-range fires that we will procure through this international fund, which includes Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands and so on. There is more to come from both the market and from gifting, depending on what that is. What I would say is that the assessment is that the Storm Shadow we are so far planning to gift—for operational reasons, I will not say the exact number—is currently enough to satisfy Ukrainian demand for that capability. We will keep that under review to ensure we can make the difference.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, and I commend him on his strong and determined leadership. He reflects what we all want him to do and he does it well, and we thank him for that. President Zelensky has stated this morning that Ukraine needs much more time to prepare to launch the highly anticipated counter-offensive against Russia, as the military still needs the western aid it has been promised. The Secretary of State has indicated some of the things that are happening. To prevent further loss of life, what immediate steps will the Foreign Office take to deliver the much-needed and announced vehicles to assist Ukraine in pushing back Russia as it intensifies its attacks in Donetsk oblast?

Mr Wallace: None of us should underestimate the political weight on the shoulders of the President of Ukraine. It is easy for us in the safety of London, behind an alliance of 30 in NATO, to forget that he will have to make a decision at some stage this year to send men and women of their armed forces across minefields towards machine-gun posts to take back their sovereign territory. There is no easy way to predict when they will do that, and the President has to balance that with an economy deliberately destroyed by Russia. I wish them well in that. We will continue to support them to the end—that is what I believe and what we stand for. We will keep supporting them. If he delays because he is waiting for the equipment, I would understand that fully. We will do everything we can to make sure that everything gifted is in the right place at the right time, so that when he makes that decision, those men and women have the best chance of survival.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and announcement. He has set out a list of atrocities that surely shames Putin and Russia. I have seen for myself in Ukraine how evilly and deviously landmines and other booby-traps are contrived to cause maximum casualties and maximum danger to civilians. Can he confirm that the UK Government will continue to support the day-to-day work of the HALO Trust and the Mines Advisory Group in the removal of these mines, because they are the imminent threat on a day-to-day basis to so many civilians?

Mr Wallace: The HALO Trust is an amazing organisation, first founded under the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, I think. That is where its pedigree comes from. Recently, I met some people who had been working for the HALO Trust in Ukraine. The conflict is ongoing now, but long after it is over, I know those organisations will be there, and the Government will do everything we can to support them, whether through the Ministry of Defence or the Foreign Office and other Departments.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Before 2022, the Ukrainian army uniform had not been adapted for women’s bodies. Today, women form about 23% of the army in Ukraine, with roughly 7,000 fighting on the frontline. Does he agree that the bravery of those women should be recognised? What support have the Government provided to Ukraine to ensure that female soldiers have the equipment that they need?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Lady makes an important point. When my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) did her report about women in the armed forces, one of the main recommendations for our armed forces was to make sure that we are buying equipment for women and not just for all. We have started to do that and as such our industry has become one of the leaders in that area. As a result, some of the work and gifting to Ukraine reflect exactly that, to ensure that they get something specific that makes it easier to live in those trenches and survive. I thank her for prompting me because, when I go to Salisbury plain in about 25 minutes, I will make sure we get a catch-up on the training of Ukrainian personnel and find out whether Ukraine is still getting those uniforms.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the update he has given today and for all the work he is doing, which is tremendous. I spent a very short time—just a few days—in Ukraine earlier this year, and I saw the devastation coming from the illegal invasion. He touched on Operation Interflex. Can he say any more about how that work is progressing?

Mr Wallace: I took the First Lady of Ukraine to Interflex last week. We have nearly 700 foreign troops helping, from Australia, New Zealand, most of Scandinavia and the Netherlands, alongside some 750 British troops. We trained 9,000-plus last year and are on course to do 20,000 this year. We have now expanded at the request of the Ukrainians to do not just basic training, but training non-commissioned officers. Just last week, we started platoon commanders courses. We are starting in the development of the low-level leadership that a country needs to start rebuilding its armed forces. We expect to continue to get requests. We have had another request to expand the training. We are absolutely in the middle of it. I will be having a conversation about that this afternoon and I hope to have more to announce to the House later.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for Defence for his statement and for responding to questions for more than three quarters of an hour.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the King has signified his Royal Assent to the following Act:

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023.

Rail Services

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call the Secretary of State to make his statement on transport, Mr Speaker has given a statement that he has repeatedly made it clear that the House should be told first when the Government are making any important announcements, and he is extremely disappointed that there has been extensive press coverage this morning about these developments.

1.17 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Mr Deputy Speaker, that is a very helpful point for you to have made on behalf of Mr Speaker. As you know, I completely agree with that. *[Interruption.]* I can hear some chuntering from those on the Opposition Benches, but they should understand this. Once we notified FirstGroup of my decision, there was obviously market-sensitive information that it was obligated by law to disclose to the stock exchange as soon as the markets opened this morning and that meant the decision was in the public domain. We issued a press notice, but other than that no other information has been put into the public domain and I have therefore kept all of our remarks until the House was able to be updated. But in market-sensitive cases, I know that Mr Speaker will understand that certain things have to be disclosed to the outside world and cannot wait until they are notified to the House.

I start by thanking the entire transport industry and officials across Government for their professionalism and hard work over the last weekend. Tens of thousands of people travelled to Windsor and central London for the coronation of His Majesty King Charles III and Her Majesty Queen Camilla. Getting the public around efficiently and safely took months of planning and preparation, and special thanks must go to Great Western Railway for putting on additional services as well as Network Rail and South Western Railway, which facilitated the biggest movement of military personnel by the rail industry in more than 50 years for the coronation. It meant that people from across the UK and, indeed, around the world were able to unite in celebration during what was a truly historic moment.

In my most recent oral statement to the House, I made clear the Government's commitment to deliver a railway that works for passengers, businesses and the taxpayer. Where services are not up to scratch, we are holding operators to account, and where there are systemic weaknesses in the industry, we are pushing ahead with reform. So I wish to update the House today on our progress, starting with the future operator of the TransPennine Express contract.

Since I took office, I have been clear that First TransPennine Express's service levels have for too long been unacceptable. Passengers, including many hon. and right hon. Members across this House, have faced significant disruption, including regular cancellations and poor levels of communication. The underlying reasons behind this vary, but what is clear is that the twin challenges of covid and industrial action have left their mark. First TPE's driver training backlog now stretches to nearly 4,000 days, which means that, at any one time, it can only draw upon 80% of its total driver workforce. Add to that a breakdown in relations between the operator and the driver union ASLEF, all told, there

[Mr Mark Harper]

simply have not been enough drivers to run the planned timetable. Inevitably, passengers have borne the brunt, facing cancellation rates of up to 23% on Monday to Friday services and gaps in services on some routes of up to six hours. That clearly is not good enough, a point I have made directly with FirstGroup, which owns First TPE, and which the Rail Minister—the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman)—has made in weekly meetings with the Rail North Partnership, where Transport for the North jointly manages First TPE's contract with the Department for Transport.

We will always hold operators to account for matters within their control. We will give them a chance to put things right, but despite a recovery plan put in place since February, there remain significant challenges underpinned by ASLEF's distinct lack of co-operation. To achieve the performance levels I expect, passengers deserve and the northern economy needs, it is clear that both the contract and the underlying relationships must be reset. I have therefore decided not to renew or extend First TPE's contract when it ends on 28 May. Instead, I am exercising my operator of last resort duties and directly awarding a new TPE contract to a public sector operator that will manage it on my behalf.

As Transport Secretary, my obligation, first and foremost, is to secure passenger rail services on which TPE passengers can rely. That requires a new approach, and one that the OLR is best placed to deliver in these circumstances. Most significantly, it provides an opportunity to reset relations between management and all stakeholders—from passengers to trade unions. I have also asked my officials to review services in the north to help drive efficiency and find better ways to deliver for passengers across the region, and I will ask all interested parties, including the northern Mayors and Transport for the North, to engage with the Government on this work.

While today's decision will be welcomed by many and while it shows a Government alive to the concerns of passengers, as my hon. Friend the Rail Minister and I have made clear, it would be misguided for anyone to think this is an instant solution. The problems First TPE faced will not disappear overnight. Any operator facing industrial action and a union co-ordinated ban on overtime working will struggle to run a reliable service. So I invite those who have long called for today's decision, including unions, northern Mayors and colleagues across the House, to work constructively with me and the Rail Minister to fix the underlying problems and help return the service levels to where they should be. The OLR is just the next stop on the line—it is not the terminus station—and once market conditions allow, we intend to subject this and indeed all contracts, both private sector and those under the OLR, to competitive tendering.

There will be some, unfortunately, who use today's decision to further their ideological ends, and to argue that this justifies all rail contracts being brought under public control. That would be a mistake. The majority of taxpayers do not use the railways regularly, but they could be saddled with the huge costs of nationalisation, only to inherit the industry's problems with no plan to fix them. Nationalisation is a soundbite, not a solution, and this Government will always be guided by the evidence to help make the best decisions for passengers.

That is why, earlier this year, having seen the noticeable improvements on Avanti West Coast, I resisted calls to bring the franchise into public ownership. I extended Avanti's contract by six months—a decision vindicated, with Avanti-caused cancellation rates at the end of March falling to 1.4% from 13.2% in January, and continuing to improve, despite ongoing challenges.

Let me now turn to industrial action. For months, the Rail Minister and I have worked hard to change the tone of the dispute, and help facilitate fair and reasonable pay offers for workers. In negotiations with train operating companies, the RMT and ASLEF are refusing to even put those pay offers to a vote of their members, despite RMT members who work for Network Rail voting overwhelmingly to accept a similar deal earlier this year. Instead, the RMT has balloted for yet more industrial action and, along with ASLEF, it has cynically called strikes that will cripple the network during the Eurovision song contest this week. We are hosting Eurovision because last year's winner, Ukraine, cannot. It will be an event attended by displaced Ukrainians who have fled Putin's war, and the House has just been hearing about that threat, so it beggars belief that unions have chosen to disrupt such an internationally symbolic event—one that not only presents a united front against Russia's aggression, but shows solidarity with Ukraine's resistance. So my message on behalf of fed-up passengers is to say to the union leaders, "Call off your strikes, put the fair and reasonable pay offers to a vote and give your members a say on their future."

With or without the unions' support, the industry must modernise to avoid permanent decline, and we are building unstoppable momentum towards rail reform, as I set out in my Bradshaw address in February. I have announced that Derby will be the location for Great British Railways' new headquarters, and today I can report progress against the commitment I made to extend single leg pricing to the rest of the London North Eastern Railway network. Tickets will go on sale from 14 May for travel from 11 June, and it means LNER passengers will benefit from simpler, more flexible and better-value ticketing, removing the frustration that a single ticket can cost almost as much as a return.

In conclusion, since becoming Transport Secretary, my approach has been to listen to the experts, weigh up the evidence and make decisions in the interests of the travelling public. Today's announcements show a Government tuned in to the concerns of passengers in the north, unafraid to take tough decisions to deliver better services and relentlessly focused on modernising our railways while protecting passengers from the effects of industrial action. That is what the British people deserve, it is what we are delivering and I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.27 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

After years of comprehensive failure, after tens of millions in taxpayer cash has been handed to an operator so clearly not fit for purpose, after needless damage has been wrought on the northern economy and more than six months after Labour demanded it, the Tories have

finally accepted that they can no longer defend the indefensible. They have seen the writing on the wall, and the only question passengers will be asking today is: what stopped the Secretary of State taking action sooner? How on earth did it take this long?

Let us just be clear about the failure that, until now, has been allowed to go on unchecked. This operator has broken records for cancellations. Almost one in five services last year did not run and fewer than half the services were on time. It has been an issue not just for the last few months, as Ministers claim, but for years. Seven years ago—well before covid—TransPennine Express had exactly the same staff shortages it suffers from today. It failed to address the issues that passengers are still experiencing. That it managed to keep this contract for so long, and to be told only months ago that it was in line for an eight-year extension, is extraordinary.

The difficult truth for the Secretary of State today is this: his decision shines an unforgiving light on the fractured railways his party is responsible for. This endless cycle of private operators having to be taken over shows the rail system is fundamentally broken. The comprehensive failure of TransPennine Express is not a bug in the system; it is a feature of it. Since the Conservatives came to office, the east coast franchise has collapsed and been taken over, Northern Rail followed, and then London and Southeastern. For the Conservatives to have nationalised one railway may be regarded as misfortune; to have nationalised four demonstrates something much more fundamental. The privatised model they have rigidly lauded in the face of all evidence is collapsing. Passengers see services get visibly, demonstrably worse while hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money is handed to shareholders without the faintest hint of competition. How much longer will people be asked to rely on a system that so routinely fails?

The Secretary of State's decision today must just be the start. He now needs to show the leadership that has been so sorely lacking: the Government must stop casting around and blaming everyone but themselves. Will he set out to the House the immediate plan to address the long-standing issues of recruitment, training and rest day working? What steps is he taking to end the industrial dispute that has now been ongoing for over a year? Can he confirm when he last held talks with the employers and the unions to bring the dispute to an end? Strike action is imminent but he still has an opportunity to avoid it. Can it really be the case that he has not met the unions and the employers for more than five months? If that is correct it is a truly shocking dereliction of duty.

The Secretary of State's decision today must be the start of something more fundamental. He can choose to continue with this charade, to entrench the fragmentation that his proposed reforms will deliver, or he can accept that he has been wrong and bring the remaining operators into public ownership. He can end this broken system that is failing passengers, bring track and train together, speed up fare reform and deliver a simpler, unified railway.

Today's decision makes that case more obvious than ever. Services have never been worse, and for too long the Tories' solution has been more of the same. The entire country should not have to put up with this for a second longer. It is time for fundamental change, and it is time to deliver the rail service that Britain deserves.

Mr Harper: First, the hon. Lady's point about the timing is straightforward. The TPE contract expires on 28 May, and I noticed this morning that the hon. Lady, in another flip-flopping of Labour's policy, knows that the contract expiry is a sensible point at which to take decisions because that is point at which she is going to nationalise rail services—she will wait for the contracts to expire. So that is a faux complaint.

Let me turn to the hon. Lady's more substantive points. I will set out my position on industrial action very clearly. When I took this job, I changed the tone of the debate: I met the rail union leaders and ensured that the employers were facilitated to make fair and reasonable offers. On Network Rail, a fair and reasonable offer was made of pay and reform—importantly reform, which is how these offers are being funded. That was put to the RMT members who work for Network Rail and they voted overwhelmingly to accept. Those are not my words; they are the RMT's own words—there was a 90% turnout and 76% were in favour. Fair and reasonable offers have been made by the train operating companies, under their umbrella group, the Rail Delivery Group, to RMT members working for the train operating companies: broadly comparable offers in value, also with reform. The RMT, for reasons I really do not understand, has refused to put those offers to its members. So offers are on the table and are waiting to be put to members, and the unions will not put those offers to their members. ASLEF has an offer on the table which would take the average salary of a train driver from around £60,000 a year to £65,000. So I have been doing my job. Offers are on the table; they need to be put to the members of those unions so that they can make a decision.

The focus from the hon. Lady is not surprising, however, because the rail unions have donated a total of just over £1 million to the Labour party or Labour office holders over the last five years. The general secretary of ASLEF is chair of Labour Unions, the group of unions affiliated to the Labour party, and sits on Labour's national executive, and the hon. Lady said that she would be working hand in glove with ASLEF. She should suggest to ASLEF that it uses this opportunity to do rest day working—*[Interruption.]* I have made those points to the unions, but if the hon. Lady is working hand in glove with them, she should say that and tell them to call off their strike at the weekend. She should tell them to stop focusing on damaging the Eurovision contest that we are hosting for Ukraine and work in hand in glove with them on that. If she fails to do so, people will see she is all talk and no action.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that the TPE level of service has caused absolute havoc for my constituents—I have had people struggling to get to college or to work—so I congratulate him on his leadership and on this decision. I am really glad he has taken this step, and I know my mum will be as well as she was stranded by TPE a few months ago. I understand that this is not a silver bullet: it will take time, and of course he will have my support, but can he say a little more about when he expects the service to reach the levels my constituents in Scunthorpe deserve?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend who has over a long period raised these issues on behalf of her constituents, and I thank her for doing so. As I said in

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my statement, we are not going to see overnight change. This is an important decision to reset those relationships; how quickly we can improve services will depend on the response of others to those reset relationships and how the new management of the company uses that. I hope we will see early results, but I have been clear to the House, both when I made my previous statement on Avanti and today, that there is not a magic wand, but I hope this is an opportunity to reset those relationships and get things moving in the right direction.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Back in January I said to the rail Minister, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), that in the prior week TPE could not point to a single day when it ran the emergency timetable promised. The improvements have been glacial and the Government have finally taken the action so many of us called for some time ago. TPE blamed anyone but itself, including workers and the unions, for the chronically poor service. The truth is it remains the worst performer and action had to be taken.

It is good to see another England-based operator nationalised; slowly but surely the UK Government are following in Scotland's footsteps. The Secretary of State said that nationalisation is a "soundbite, not a solution"—despite it being the solution the Government have gone for. I would gently say to him that privatisation has been a bourach not a benefit.

We welcome the UK Government following the lead of the Scottish Government in nationalising an under-performing rail service and would note that this means this anti-nationalisation Tory party has now nationalised four rail services in five years. The Tories are as confused as the Leader of the Opposition, who pledged to nationalise the railways but then recently seemed to backtrack on that; it has at the very least hit signal failures.

Only 10% of people in the UK support private ownership of the railways, and even among Tory voters only 13% support privatised railways. The UK Government's privatisation obsession is out of step with both the wider public and their own voters' desires. Is it not time therefore for the Government to listen to the experts, the workers and the voters, and end the failed experiment of privatisation?

Disputes involving the unions and the Scottish Government were resolved very quickly, yet Scots passengers have faced disruption due to this Government's unwillingness and inability to resolve disputes. Why does the Secretary of State think that Scotland has managed to resolve strikes so much more efficiently than this Government?

Mr Harper: I think there were two substantive questions there and I will deal with both of them, but, first, I will accept the hon. Gentleman's welcome for my decision—I think there was a welcome there.

On industrial action, it does take two to reach a deal. From our side, fair and reasonable offers have been put on the table. They are broadly in line with the offers made to the RMT staff who work for Network Rail which, when put to the members of the union, were accepted overwhelmingly, with a 90% turnout and 76% in favour. Similar value offers with reform have been made to

RMT staff working for the train operating companies and have not been put to the members. So the clear outstanding issue is not a new offer but for the offers to be put to the members of the trade unions to enable them to make a decision. There is also an offer on the table for train drivers in the ASLEF union, which has not been put to members. As I said, that would take their average salaries to £65,000 a year. I think that offer is at least worth putting to them. That is the outstanding piece of work that needs to take place. We have done our bit of that job.

The reason why the Scottish Government reached conclusions was that they caved in. They have not delivered reform, and I think they have overpaid with taxpayers' money. There is a balance to strike in offers that are fair and reasonable to the workers in the industry and the passengers it serves, as well as to the taxpayer. That is a responsibility that I take very seriously.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I have repeatedly called out in the Chamber the appalling levels of service that my constituents at Lockerbie station have received over a long period from TransPennine Express and the failure of its management to address those issues. Therefore, I and my constituents very much welcome the decision, because they had no confidence that TransPennine would be able to turn the situation round. As the Secretary of State says, this is a reset, where all stakeholders, including those in Scotland, can come together so that passengers can have the level of service that they both need and expect. Will he expand a little on what he will be doing to ensure that that reset can produce results?

Mr Harper: Gladly. My right hon. Friend has indeed raised this issue on a number of occasions. First, my officials will be working with officials in the Scottish Government. This morning, I spoke to Kevin Stewart MSP, the Scottish Transport Minister, to explain the decision and how we will be working with the Scottish Government, looking at services currently under the operator of last resort, which cover the whole of the north of England, as well as cross-border services, which are important to my right hon. Friend. I also spoke to the elected Mayors in the North of England who cover those areas to explain the decision and confirm that we will be working closely with them on the best possible pattern of services going forward. I hope that that demonstrates the Government's intention to use this reset moment as constructively as possible. I hope that everyone else will respond in like manner.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a proud trade union member. It is interesting to hear the Secretary of State talk about renewal dates. In March, when the shambolic Avanti West Coast contract was renewed, 9.1% of its services were cancelled. In the same month, only 6.6% of TransPennine services were cancelled. Why is he punishing some operators for their failures and not others? Is it not time to fix the broken system once and for all and for him to put his own ideology aside and embrace Labour's plans to bring our railways into public ownership?

Mr Harper: I think that I answered that question in my statement, if the hon. Lady was listening. When I made my statement about Avanti, I resisted calls to

bring it into public ownership for very good reason: it was delivering on its recovery plan, and I said that I had confidence that it would continue to do so when I extended its contract by six months. Since I did that, its cancellation rate for cancellations it caused has fallen to 1.4% from 13.2% in January. It is continuing to improve, demonstrating that that was the correct decision and that I was right not to listen to calls from Labour to do the opposite.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The difficulties for people living in Grimsby and Cleethorpes in accessing London via Doncaster on TransPennine surely underlines, does it not, the importance of the campaign led by me and my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) to get a new service run by London North Eastern Railway direct to London from Grimsby and Cleethorpes through Market Rasen in my constituency and Lincoln? That is a much better route. We are delighted with the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman)—the Secretary of State's excellent rail Minister—who has been listening to us, but we want his boss to give him full support and get that service, not least because rural people demand a better service.

Mr Harper: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's question. I know that he and colleagues have met the rail Minister to talk about these services, and the rail Minister has been keeping me updated. I know that work will continue. We will of course do our best, as we always do, to try to keep my right hon. Friend happy.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will be aware that many constituents across the country do not have access to any rail services at all. That is the case for residents in the east of Cardiff, which is why I have been a long-term campaigner for a station to be built at St Mellons. Indeed, that would also benefit the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), who is in her place on the Front Bench. However, crucial works need to be done to make that a reality, including relief lines on that line. We also need the proposed connection between Cardiff Central and Cardiff Bay, which the Secretary of State visited, to improve services there. Will he meet me to discuss how we can move those projects along and get improved rail services for my constituents?

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman rightly speaks up for his constituents. I remember how, when we announced the levelling-up fund bid for the connection between Cardiff Central and Cardiff Bay, he welcomed that on behalf of his constituents and the city he represents. Either I or the rail Minister will be pleased to meet him to discuss what more we can do to deliver services. I am keen that we deliver improved rail services across the whole of the United Kingdom, and we will do what we can to help.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's decision. To have renewed the franchise would have been to reward failure. Over the last 18 months, the TransPennine service between Cleethorpes and Manchester could be said on a good day to be unreliable and, on a bad day, totally appalling. I very much agree with him that now is the time for the unions to step forward. Let us get round the table and reach agreement

on rest-day working so that my constituents can have a proper hourly service between Cleethorpes and Manchester, which is what TransPennine should have been providing for the last 18 months.

Mr Harper: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. Again, he is a colleague who has been raising these issues on a regular basis. It is important to recognise that this is an opportunity for people to respond accordingly. He referred to the opportunity for the unions to agree a new rest-day working contract. What is disappointing is the cynical way in which they behaved. ASLEF agreed that rest-day working contract and then immediately said it would take action short of a strike and withdrew any co-operation at all. I hope that they will respond to the decision in the right way. It is an opportunity to reset those relationships and do what we are all supposed to do, which is to deliver a better railway for the passengers who use it. I hope that they take that opportunity. If they do, they will find a willing partner in me.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Rail companies across the country are failing rail customers with fare hikes, cancellations and delays. Great Western Railway, whose line I use between Bath and London, is no better. Between July and October 2022, it saw an increase of 179% in delay compensation claims compared with the previous year. The Government have promised to fix the system and create Great British Railways in law. When will they?

Mr Harper: I am familiar with the GWR service as I use it frequently. There have been a number of problems on the western route, which, to be fair, are often caused not by GWR but by Network Rail. However, I accept that that inconveniences passengers just the same. That is partly why we are bringing track and train together under GBR. I will continue having that focus on performance. In fact, I am seeing Network Rail's leadership team this afternoon, and one thing we will be talking about is its performance on the western route. I will raise the hon. Lady's specific concerns with it.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I have spoken to the rail Minister about my concerns about the service provided by Avanti and Arriva Trains Wales on many occasions. When many services are cancelled, we are informed that it is due to staff illness or sickness and people not turning up to work. Why are there such extraordinarily high levels of sickness in the sector? What is the Secretary of State doing to work with trade unions and the bosses of the train companies to understand and deal with that?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend raises some good points on behalf of his constituents. He recently had an update by way of a written answer about services being withdrawn by Transport for Wales and some of the infrastructure issues. I hope that was helpful. On his specific question about workforce, I have made it clear that I want a thriving, successful railway with increasing patronage and revenue coming in through the farebox. I want high-quality, well-paid jobs. We will not see those things if we do not drive up patronage, and we will not see that if there is continued industrial action. I repeat what I said: let the unions put the pay deal to their members, to see what they think. The sooner we can settle these

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disputes and have the rail service be successful in attracting new passengers, the better for everyone—those working in it and those using it.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that the Government evaluate the evidence to do best for our railways, yet TransPennine Express is now the fourth operator in five years to have its contract cancelled for failing passengers. When will he accept that the evidence shows the only way to fix the broken system is Labour's plan to bring our railways into public ownership?

Mr Harper: I am glad the hon. Lady talked about the evidence. She is not right that other services were brought into the operator of last resort because of failures in passenger services; it was largely because of financial issues. This is the first one to be brought into the OLR for failing to deliver appropriate passenger services. As I said, I do not take decisions for ideological reasons. I look at the evidence, and I will always be motivated by making the right decisions for passengers. That is what these services are designed to deliver, and that is what I will always put first.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): I welcome the announcement, but the operator of last resort should have been brought in months ago. As a regular user of the Avanti west coast main line, I find that services have improved but they are still really bad. How many more second chances does Avanti deserve? When will the Secretary of State say that enough is enough and take the contract away from it?

Mr Harper: I do not think the hon. Gentleman is right on Avanti. The services have improved. They are not completely where they need to be, but they are now up with the rest of the industry and they need to continue to improve. I made that clear when I extended the contract; I said that it had made progress and needed to continue that. I will have to make a decision later this year about what we do when it comes up for renewal again. That will depend, as it did last time, on its performance. I hope Avanti will continue to keep increasing its performance and demonstrating that it can deliver for passengers. That will be important when I make that decision.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Secretary of State mentioned Avanti in his statement and the improvements that it is apparently making, but my constituent Zoe contacted me to say that she has been trying to book an advance standard premium ticket from London Euston to Glasgow for weeks. She needs it for the end of this month, and although she can book her ticket to London she cannot come home again because the tickets have not been released yet. What kind of a service is that, if people cannot predict how to get home? How can that possibly build confidence in the service and get people travelling?

Mr Harper: I obviously do not know what has happened in the hon. Lady's specific example, but if she gives the details to my hon. Friend the rail Minister, we will look into that. If we look at Avanti's performance overall, we see that it has made considerable progress both earlier this year and since I extended the contract. As I said in

answer to the previous question, I want that performance to continue to improve for constituents such as the hon. Lady's.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Many of my constituents in south Manchester will breathe a sigh of relief that there is finally light at the end of the tunnel for trans-Pennine services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) set out so well earlier, TransPennine Express is not the only company failing passengers. The Secretary of State says that he does not think that public ownership is the answer, so what is the answer for those failing operators? When will the Government come forward with a proper plan for the fundamental reform and improvement of the operators that we need?

Mr Harper: I set out a clear plan in my George Bradshaw address earlier this year, which was published in the White Paper, on bringing together track and train in GBR so that there is a guiding mind to look at the overall structure of the industry. I announced that the headquarters of GBR will be in Derby, which was welcomed. We will continue making progress to deliver on that plan, which is the right plan to have a successful thriving rail industry both for passenger customers and, importantly, for freight customers. We will set a target later this year to move a certain amount of freight off our roads and on to our railways, which is good both for railways and for our environment.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Across the Humber we welcome today's announcement, but many fed-up passengers will say, "After years of terrible service, why has it taken so long?" Could the Secretary of State confirm that it will mean that TPE's penny pinching and mismanagement of our beautiful Victorian Paragon station in Hull, and the five-year saga of the substandard toilets it installed, will be over? Will the Secretary of State agree to meet Humber MPs and businesses to discuss the rail electrification that is still missing from the integrated rail review, and projects such as the reinstallation of the line between Hull and York?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for welcoming today's decision. It is a moment to reset relationships to improve services for her constituents. On the specific question of the toilets at the station, I do not have the details to hand, but on that and her specific request to meet MPs from the Humber area, I will make sure that the rail Minister responds accordingly and sets up that meeting, at which she can discuss that issue and other colleagues can discuss appropriate issues for their areas.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Privatisation has led to the break-up of not just track and train but infrastructure, such as at Luton station. I am thankful that the rail Minister visited and has seen it for himself. He knows that I am very passionate about standing up for my constituents, and we will soon get our lifts installed. The leaks in the roof have impacted a small local business—the café—and commuters cannot get their cup of tea in the morning. Despite that, the small business moved back in, with the leaking roof, in order to survive. Will the Secretary of State please press upon Network Rail to at least fix the leaks in the roof at the station, if nothing else?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend the rail Minister visited that station and that very café. As the hon. Lady knows, we are keen to make sure that we fix the roof while the sun is shining. I will talk to the rail Minister and see if we can make progress to ensure that the station is in an appropriate state for her and her constituents.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): My constituents in Yorkshire are brassed off with the fact that public transport is so badly damaged that it is not unavailable. There are 20,000-odd people in my area with no access to a private car, but only 3,000 use public transport. That is because the Government have an ideological drive to privatisation, even though every time those private companies get into trouble the state comes in to support them. It is also because the Government have a pathological hatred of the trade unions. Is it not time that the Government stood aside and made way for a different, better system that serves the public rather than the interests of a particular ideological group in the Tory party?

Mr Harper: That question is so far removed from reality I do not know where to start. On the first point, the response to what has happened is that the contract has not been extended. The service has been taken into the operator of last resort because I think it is necessary to reset those relationships.

The hon. Gentleman's second point about trade unions is fundamentally wrong. When I took this job I decided that it was important to change the tone of the debate. I met all the rail union leaders. I have a perfectly constructive relationship with them. I facilitated fair and reasonable pay offers, which settled the dispute on Network Rail and which was overwhelmingly accepted by members of the RMT. There are fair and reasonable offers on the table for RMT workers working for the train operating companies and the train drivers. All I hope is that those offers get put to the members of the trade unions—those whom the general secretaries are supposed to work for—to allow them to make a decision on what I believe are fair and reasonable pay offers.

Point of Order

1.59 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice on how I and my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) might go about securing a response from the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) to correspondence we jointly sent to her over 10 weeks ago.

My hon. Friend and I are seeking an urgent meeting with the Minister to discuss plans by Thames Water to abstract water from the River Thames near Teddington and Ham in our constituencies, and to replace it with treated effluent. As you can imagine, Mr Deputy Speaker, thousands of our constituents have voiced their concern about the scheme and are eager to hear the position of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which has a pivotal role in Thames Water's plans progressing. Having already chased the Minister's private office, how can my hon. Friend and I secure a response to our letter?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank the hon. Lady for giving notice to the Chair of this point of order about the unsatisfactory state of affairs that she has described. Letters from hon. Members to Ministers should be dealt with promptly. The hon. Member has put her and her hon. Friend's concerns on the record, and they will have been heard by those on the Government Front Bench. I trust that this will lead to a satisfactory conclusion in the very near future, but if it does not, there are a number of avenues open to her. She can table questions and, potentially, she can also seek an Adjournment debate. The Table Office will be able to advise her on how to go about that.

Backbench Business

Overseas Territories

[Relevant documents: oral evidence taken before the European Scrutiny Committee on 24 November 2021, on Negotiations with the European Union in respect of Gibraltar, HC 703; and oral evidence taken before the European Scrutiny Committee on 19 October 2022, on The UK's EU representation: what has changed and how is it working?, HC 123.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Before we start, in order to accommodate this debate and the subsequent debate, I am placing a five-minute limit on speeches after the Front Benchers have spoken.

2.1 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House is committed to upholding the interests of British Overseas Territories and their citizens; recognises the special historical, cultural, and social bonds that bind the United Kingdom and Overseas Territories; and calls upon the Government to ensure that British Overseas Territories citizens' rights as British citizens are upheld, to defend the sovereignty and borders of Overseas Territories from foreign powers, and to consider the unique circumstances of each Territory when formulating policies which affect them.

I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Turks and Caicos Islands. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate on the day of the Joint Ministerial Council, the annual summit of British overseas territories here in London. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), who is a great friend of the overseas territories and whose application for this debate I inherited, and all those who have come to the Chamber today to speak about the great British overseas territories.

I invite the whole House to join me in welcoming representatives, civil servants and elected representatives from seven overseas territories, who have come to the House today to observe the debate from the Public Gallery. It is a joy to have them with us.

Over the last week, we have witnessed our global British family at its very best. The coronation of His Majesty the King was a special moment, and to see the leaders of British overseas territories at the coronation, representing their communities with great pride, was a historic moment. While Westminster Abbey may be only a short distance from this place, it is a mighty long way away for someone who has come from Tristan da Cunha or the Pitcairn Islands. The long voyages undertaken by the leaders of every overseas territory demonstrate the bonds that unite our global family.

As I mentioned, the JMC, where the leaders of overseas territories come together, is taking place today. Last year, the JMC was cancelled at extremely short notice, when some leaders had already begun their journey to London, because that journey can take over two weeks for some of them, so I am keen that today's JMC is a particular success.

British overseas territories span Europe, the Caribbean, the Pacific and the Atlantic. They vary in size, population, culture, climate, food, tradition, challenges and opportunities. The British global family is diverse and

requires policy that recognises this diversity. That is what we will debate today. I hope the Government will adopt an ethos that recognises the unique circumstances of each territory and that makes sure they feel heard, valued and supported.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the bedrock of the 16 British overseas territories is the concept of the right of self-determination, and yet in the case of the British Indian Ocean Territory, this Government are ignoring the views of the Chagossian people and negotiating directly with a third-party country, Mauritius, against the interests of the indigenous people?

Alicia Kearns: I am sure a number of colleagues plan to talk about that in their speeches, so I will make progress with my own points so that colleagues will not have their speeches cut short.

Our debate today is one not of a paternalistic House of Commons, but of a body of representatives that recognises that within families there are responsibilities but also great opportunities. Today, I will set out specific requests but also commonalities that need to be raised within our family. In response to the point made by my hon. Friend, it is worth reiterating that all British overseas territories enjoy the right to self-determination, as set out in article 1 of the UN charter. They decide their own Government and their own constitutional relationship with the United Kingdom. The fact that they have decided to maintain a constitutional link with us does not diminish this most sacred of rights. I am sure the whole House will join me in reiterating our wholehearted and unwavering commitment to defending that principle, in spirit and in law.

While we believe that there is no question or debate over the right to self-determination, some members of our family face those seeking to undermine that fundamental right. At the G20 talks in March this year, Argentina unilaterally ended the 2016 pact on the Falkland Islands. That was wrong. The Government must continue to reject any demands from Argentina to revisit the issue of the sovereignty of the Falklands. We must be clear that the right to determine the future of the Falkland Islands is the sole prerogative of its islanders. In 2013, 99.8% of all Falklanders who voted chose to remain British. There is no debate over the right to self-determination.

I draw the House's attention to another area where the Falklanders require our support. Under the United Nations Committee of 24, the Falkland Islands is currently classified as a non-self-governing territory, but we know that is factually incorrect, both under the first Falklands constitution, signed in 1985, and under the new constitution, signed into law by Her Majesty the Queen in 2009. The Falkland Islands is self-governing but willing to refer its foreign and defence policy to the United Kingdom. The Government should help the Falklands to correct that misclassification, so that the Falkland Islands will be recognised at the UN as the proud, self-governing territory that it is.

On the subject of sovereignty, I turn to Gibraltar and its right to remain a UK overseas territory. Under the double lock guarantee, the UK has given a solemn assurance that it will never enter into any negotiation on Gibraltar's sovereignty in which Gibraltar is not content. The post-Brexit negotiations are not yet concluded

and we must ensure they are guided by the double lock principle. I am sure the House would condemn any future compromise on that. If, for whatever reason, Gibraltar is left with no negotiated outcome, I would urge the Government to provide the support needed to deal with any economic uncertainty and ensure the continued success of the Rock.

While overseas territories choose to remain part of our global family, that does not mean we should blindly accept the status quo. We should challenge ourselves to provide the best possible support for their individual hopes and needs, and try to support them to achieve those. We should embed engagement across Government directly with overseas territories, rather than relying on all manner of priorities to be dealt with through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office as some sort of arbiter.

There is widespread frustration about just how difficult it is to engage in even basic dialogue with Government Departments. Surely, given our belief in self-determination, it is only right that overseas territories make their own case to Government Departments, rather than relying on the Foreign Office to act as messenger. They make their own case best when their voices are heard. That will also help to tackle any lingering belief in paternalistic governance.

The Foreign Affairs Committee made that recommendation in 2019, because neither the territories nor their citizens are foreign. Therefore, it is fundamentally at odds to have them supported through the Foreign Office. I urge the Government to drastically change how OTs are treated. That starts with beefing up the powers of the overseas territories directorate so that it is not seen as some sort of backwater—I apologise to civil servants observing the Chamber today—and ensuring it has the powers that are needed and that Ministers give it sufficient focus. I also urge the Minister to have all Government Departments update their strategies on the OTs, because not one of them is less than a decade old. That cannot be right; we need to update the individual strategies.

The UK's relationship with OTs is characterised by obligations and opportunities on both sides. We face problems, including in protecting our oceans. The British maritime estate is the fifth largest in the world. It offers sanctuary to a plethora of wildlife from the south Atlantic to the Indian and Pacific oceans. Some 94% of unique British wildlife can be found in the territories, from breeding turtles in Ascension, coral reefs in Pitcairn and great whales in the Falklands to the many species that call the tropical forests of St Helena and Montserrat home. In addition, I encourage all wildlife lovers to make sure they follow the long-awaited hatching of osprey eggs in Rutland, which is expected in the coming days.

Britain plays a leading role in global conservation, thanks to the partnership of our territories and two key initiatives: the Blue Belt and Darwin Plus programmes. Without our global family, this would not be the case. It is safe to say that our overseas territory communities contribute more to protecting the ocean, per head of population, than anywhere else on earth, so we should be grateful for their contribution as part of the global British family.

Environmental initiatives demonstrate the power of partnership, but there are other areas in which the UK can do more as a partner. One such area is education.

All overseas territory citizens are British citizens, yet they were finally granted access to tuition loans when studying in the UK only in 2022. The process for applying for a tuition loan remains far too complicated for those from OTs, not least because they have to send in their applications by post, which may be convenient for people who live in Rutland or lovely Melton Mowbray, of pork pie fame, but is slightly more difficult for those who live in St Helena, which is nearly 5,000 miles from the UK.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Lady not think it is a great shame that the newly established University of Gibraltar is not entitled to accept British students on home fees or to access the UCAS system? It works one way but it is not reciprocal, and that needs to change if we are a true family.

Alicia Kearns: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. We may not always agree, but on that we absolutely do. I am sure that if Mr Speaker was in the Chair, he would be entirely in support of the hon. Gentleman's point, because he is the Chancellor of the University of Gibraltar—I am sure he will reward the hon. Gentleman later this afternoon.

Education is key, and another issue is that should OT citizens come here to study, they cannot access maintenance loans to support them. University life is already too expensive and we can better support those who come to the UK. It is a matter of fairness.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Does that not demonstrate the importance of Government Departments taking the overseas territories really seriously in terms of the policies they develop and their implementation, and why it is so important that the overseas territories have a strong voice in each Department?

Alicia Kearns: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend, who was of course formerly the Minister with responsibility for the overseas territories. I know that during her tenure, the overseas territories felt incredibly respected and, crucially, heard. They do not want to be listened to; they want to be heard. I thank my right hon. Friend for all she did in her time in that role.

Although it is difficult to finance university life, funding a Government is more so. As a leading global economy, the UK can borrow money at beneficial rates, but this option is not available to our overseas territories. During the pandemic, we allowed Gibraltar to borrow £500 million under a sovereign guarantee, thereby protecting the Rock's economy at a time of economic instability. When we can, we should use our economic clout to support our overseas territories to develop sustainably, to grow their opportunity and prosperity, and to invest in infrastructure. This will also help to avoid the debt traps faced by many developing economies and the interference of loan sharks such as the Chinese Communist party. I therefore hope that the Government will consider the expansion of sovereign rate loans to more overseas territories.

Although direct funding is important, I wish to make it clear that most overseas territories are financially independent and economically self-sufficient, and proud of that, but they do rely on us to represent them globally and make their case. There are of course caveats

[Alicia Kearns]

to this relationship, and I believe that the UK was right to sign up to the EU code of conduct on business taxation in 2013. The code was designed to ensure that companies could not avoid taxation. However, our departure from the EU has left many OTs feeling that they are governed by a code they can no longer influence, so I urge the Minister to consider engaging with them directly on that matter.

A commitment was given to implement public registers of beneficial ownership by 2023; will the Minister update us on that? The issue is important because registers provide greater public access to information about beneficial ownership, improve private sector compliance with sanctions, and can help to pre-empt sanctions evasion and improve transparency in respect of designated individuals. In the Cayman Islands, for example, the central register has a 24-hour response time to information requests from law enforcement, and \$8.8 billion dollars of Russian assets were frozen following the illegal renewed invasion of Ukraine. We know how important such information is to support sanctions against not just Russia but all terrorist and autocratic actors.

I wish to highlight accessibility as a common issue that requires urgent attention. Many overseas territories are extremely remote. I recently met the Chief Islander of Tristan da Cunha and understand that the Foreign Office is undertaking a review of the possibility of subsidising a boat for the Tristan Government. Currently, a boat visits the island just 10 times a year from Cape Town. It would not be an expensive measure and would massively help islanders, particularly during health emergencies. My heart goes out to the individual who recently lost their life after a stroke, and who was unable to be removed from the island in time to receive the healthcare that would have saved their life. That is unacceptable, as too are the quotas for how many residents from each OT can receive NHS treatment.

A Tristan-owned vessel would also allow eco-tourism to continue and develop more tourism revenue over time to pay for its upkeep. Tourism is key to our overseas territories in the Caribbean. However, if the industry is to continue to thrive, investment in airports and portage is needed. The Turks and Caicos Islands have an airport business development plan ready, but it is sat waiting for UK sign-off. Equally, Anguilla and the British Virgin Islands are seeking support with the expansion and improvement of their airports. We must support, not hinder, such projects across the territories. More than that, I encourage the Government to see OT-led infrastructure projects as an opportunity for British investment and British businesses. It is not enough for us to think of action on the OTs only when they are in trouble; we should be enabling prosperity and growth. No one is asking for a handout; they are asking for a hand-up. Let us ensure accessibility, be it by sea or by air.

In today's day and age, accessibility is particularly key online. I urge the Minister to reconsider the decision to close down the digital support team for overseas territories. I was shocked to find out that it had been closed without MPs having been made aware. It is vital that we help OTs to digitise the services that they provide to their citizens.

Before I wrap up, I wish briefly to touch on the situation in Haiti, because it is severely impacting on Turks and Caicos. Haiti is a humanitarian catastrophe

and a state on the brink of failure. There is not one democratically elected representative; cholera is rife; and political and economic corruption supported by more than 200 armed gangs that use Haiti as a drugs and firearms haven is suffocating everyday life for individuals there. The result is tens of thousands of Haitians fleeing across dangerous stretches of water, which often leads them to Turks and Caicos, which cannot cope. We urgently need to work with the Caribbean Community, the Organisation of American States and France to restore security and stability.

We should also provide TCI with radar surveillance assistance, because that is exactly what the US has done for the Bahamas, and co-ordinate a stronger naval presence in the region. Last year, we saw a leaked diplomatic telegram from the then governor of TCI, who made it clear that the UK had delayed in providing important security support to overseas territories, and particularly to Turks and Caicos when it was suffering the highest murder rate in the world because of drug lords transiting through the country. Then, we were too slow. It took a threat to remove Turks and Caicos from our global family for the Government to take action. When we took action, it was incredibly effective, and those responsible for the vast majority of murders are now behind bars and awaiting justice. Now that our family are asking for help once more, let us make sure that we are not found wanting.

I wish briefly to mention a call for all overseas territories to fully support their LGBTQ+ communities. We need to legalise same-sex marriage and we need the UK Government to do more than simply support it in principle. In families there are arguments and disputes—not least across the Christmas table—but we know that we can talk to our friends and family more honestly than we can talk to any other, so it is crucial that we have the conversation.

I started by saying that we are blessed to be part of a truly global family. I pay tribute to the Speaker and to the Deputy Speaker, the right hon. Member for Ribbles Valley (Mr Evans), for all they have done to raise the voice of our overseas territories in this place. Together, we represent the best of global Britain. Our partnerships are ensuring the survival of the world's rarest creatures and protecting millions of miles of oceans; we act as a beacon of stability in a rapidly changing world; and our bonds of history and friendship remain steadfast, as seen at the coronation of His Majesty the King. Therefore, it is in the tradition of this friendship and in a spirit of optimism for the future of British overseas territories that I commend the motion to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. The Opposition and Government Front Benchers and the SNP spokesman will wind up at the end of the debate, so we now move to a five-minute limit on speeches.

2.18 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I commend almost everything that the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) just said. I shall focus on a number of areas, one of which is the UN committee that looks at the decolonisation of territories. Currently, all our overseas territories are listed as non-self-governing territories; in fact, we hold most of the

non-self-governing territories on that list. There are four ways to be removed from that list and becoming normalised in international relations.

I recently visited Gibraltar, where the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has just launched an inquiry on the current status of the overseas territories. One of the deputy premier's top priorities for Gibraltar was to be removed from that list. I had similar conversations in the Falkland Islands, where there is the same determined wish to be removed from it.

There are only four ways to be removed from the list. The first three are to become a sovereign state, to gain free association—a number of states have done so with New Zealand—or to be fully integrated into Britain. We should remind ourselves that that is the model that Malta voted for and asked for and that this place blocked it, which I think was wrong. I believe it must now be stated very clearly that that is always an option for any territory. I should love to hear the Minister say that, if a territory wants to be integrated—that is, to be able to send MPs to this place—it will be welcome to do so.

There is also the possibility of a bespoke option. The problem is that the UN committee consists of China, Cuba, Iran, Russia, Syria and Venezuela. While the first three options involve “yes or no” questions, the fourth requires a vote in the committee, and there is clearly no chance—no hope in this world—that its members are ever going to vote for a bespoke option for a British overseas territory. We must therefore find a clever solution that fulfils the aim of one of the other three—a solution that involves a binary choice, does not require a vote in the committee and involves a “yes or no” question—to allow those territories to be normalised in international law.

That is important to the overseas territories because it gives them access to certain elements of the United Nations, and allows them to stand proud on the international stage. However, it also requires Britain to make it clear that these territories are self-governing and that they decide their future. I was pleased to hear what was said earlier about the British Indian Ocean Territory. We must make it clear that people who were displaced through no fault of their own should have the right to engage in discussions about the sovereignty of the piece of land concerned. We should, of course, also offer a decent remuneration package, whatever the outcome. Earlier Governments, both those led by my party and those led by the Conservatives, have been on the wrong side of history in this regard, and we must make amends.

Currently, the Crown dependencies and the overseas territories are treated differently by different Departments, namely the Ministry of Justice and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I do not think that that is right today. In my view, we should have a Department that looks after the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies, with a Secretary of State. That might sound like a big ask, but we have Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, although those nations and regions of the United Kingdom effectively govern themselves and perform their own tasks. The Secretaries of State are there to ensure that the wheels are oiled in their negotiations and deliberations with the British Government. I believe that the overseas territories and Crown dependencies deserve nothing less and that is what we should offer them.

It seems wrong to me, in this modern world, that when we are negotiating international treaties there is no representation for the OTs. Britain intervened on Bermuda to stop its laws on the declassification of cannabis. I think it was right for it to do that. It was wrong for Britain to intervene on the basis of international treaties on which Bermuda had had no say in this place. I hope that we can resolve that issue as well.

2.23 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on securing the debate and on covering so many topics. I should also declare an interest, as chair of the St Helena all-party parliamentary group.

Dotted across the globe, in some of the most remote and hard-to-reach locations, are our overseas territories. They are some of the most beautiful places in the world, but they are not just beautiful. They lie in strategically important locations, giving the UK a global footprint, but above all, they are part of the British family. That is something that the Government must always remember, respect and reflect in our support for them.

I had the privilege of being the Minister responsible for the overseas territories last year, and I want to turn back the clock to the autumn of 2021. Countries across the world were still in lockdown, facing travel restrictions and grappling with how to deal with covid, and the overseas territories were no different. However, when I hosted the Joint Ministerial Council in November 2021, there was a universal “thank you” to the British Government for the supply of vaccines to every overseas territory in the world—and that was no mean feat. As I have said, these are some of the most remote locations in the world. Getting supplies to them is difficult at the best of times, let alone at a time when travel was even more difficult, but the FCDO team did a remarkable job in facilitating that supply, and I want to place my thanks to them on record. I will never forget being at the airport in the Cayman Islands when the British Airways flight landed in early 2022 with booster vaccines on board. That was a very good example of our support for the British family.

I am sure that many Members will join me in welcoming the new OT strategy, and I should be interested to learn from the Minister this afternoon what plans there are for its development and publication. This seems to me to be an ideal week for the voices of the overseas territories to be heard in the development of the strategy, given that the JMC will meet today and tomorrow and a conference was held here yesterday. An important suggestion made yesterday was that the strategy should be developed collaboratively between the Government and the territories themselves.

I should like the FCDO to address the way in which we work across Government on matters relating to the overseas territories. When I was a Minister, I often found myself convening and cajoling Departments in relation to such matters. I was pleased to hear that the Foreign Secretary recently confirmed that each Department does have a Minister dedicated to the overseas territories, but that cannot be seen to be a token gesture. Those Ministers must take their responsibilities for the OTs seriously.

I am conscious of the time, but I want to touch on the question of how Departments can help the OTs to become more resilient. Resilience has been the watchword

[Amanda Milling]

of the last few years and that is no less true today. All Departments should give more support to the overseas territories to help them prepare for unexpected shocks, be they a global health crisis, global inflation, or the risks of climate change. We have all seen global energy prices increase, and the overseas territories are particularly vulnerable in that regard. I know that there is a real enthusiasm and desire to transition to renewables, so I should be interested to hear from the Minister what further support can be given to the OTs in achieving that.

Climate change could be a debate in itself, and we had a panel session devoted to it at yesterday's conference, but I want to make a point about the Caribbean Islands and their vulnerability to hurricanes. I should like to hear from the Minister what preparations have been made with the Ministry of Defence to prepare for the hurricane season. Hurricane Irma was devastating for many Caribbean OTs, and we are still rebuilding critical infrastructure today, as I saw at first hand in Anguilla last year. We have already heard today about the importance of infrastructure and connectivity. There is no limit to the overseas territories' aspirations and ambitions, but they are often hampered by poor infrastructure.

Alicia Kearns: My right hon. Friend has referred to Anguilla. I failed to mention this earlier, but 80% of its water is lost because the infrastructure is so old. Surely it should be a priority for the Government to ensure that the water infrastructure is rebuilt to prevent the appalling amount that is lost while water is being transported around the islands.

Amanda Milling: That is a very good example of the need for us to provide infrastructure support. My hon. Friend talked about ports and airports—about transport as well as digital connectivity. Many are seeking support, whether they are directly funded and supported by the UK or looking to attract investment and, in some cases, capacity building and technical expertise. Unfortunately, I cannot possibly cover every single project this afternoon, or every subject that we might want to discuss—although as I say, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton did a sterling job of covering so many.

I want to wrap up by making one point, and this is where I started. The overseas territories are part of the British family and we need to redouble our efforts to strengthen our relationship.

2.30 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Given the responsibilities the UK holds for the inhabited territories, it is important that we take the time to recognise the close relationships we have with them. The ever-evolving geopolitical landscape will naturally influence our relationships with the overseas territories, so the Government's approach to them must evolve, too. It cannot remain static.

Much like Scotland in the 2016 EU referendum, Gibraltar overwhelmingly opposed leaving the EU, with nearly 96% of voters casting their vote for remain. We all know the complications that have arisen for UK citizens resident in Gibraltar as a result. Gibraltar is also very patriotic. The people want to remain a part of the UK and we saw that in 2002 when a referendum on joint British-Spanish sovereignty was held. Despite their

great affection for the Spanish, the people of Gibraltar are often described as “more British than the British”. That sentiment of wishing to remain one of the British overseas territories should be respected and protected. To do that, the UK Government need to ensure that they strengthen that relationship, provide a voice for Gibraltarians and fight their corner. For example, the UK Government could support the case for Gibraltar's inclusion in the UK healthcare procurement model, which would allow Gibraltar to buy medication at the same price as the NHS. To once again draw a comparison between Gibraltar and Scotland, there is a wish for the UK Government to replace grant funding lost as a result of our withdrawal from the European Union. Post-Brexit negotiations continue and issues with the border are significant. Thousands cross it daily and, to allow the economy in Gibraltar to thrive, those crossings need to be as painless and easy as possible. I hope that that is something ongoing talks can achieve.

Another territory that has seen its sovereignty challenged, of course, is the Falkland Islands. Although the Falklands were once at the very forefront of parliamentarians' minds—thinking particularly back to the '80s—they are perhaps a little overlooked in recent times. The Falkland Islands Government held a referendum on their status as a British overseas territory more than a decade later than Gibraltar, in 2013, with a 92% turnout. More than 99% of voters were in favour of remaining an OT. It is important to remember that the result came at a time when the Falklands were growing from reliance on the UK to becoming more of a partner to it. As the geographical region within which the islands sit becomes more important, the Government should recognise the benefits of a British presence there.

Argentina recently rowed back on the 2016 communiqué and called on the UK Government to renegotiate the islands' sovereignty against the wishes of the vast majority of islanders. Islanders know that they cannot take the right to self-determination for granted in the face of that. That is incredibly sad. Without that right, so much of the wonderful progress that they have made in developing their society would not have happened.

Finally, I want to touch on Bermuda, where the people voted to remain an overseas territory in 1995. Polling earlier this year showed that 80% of residents continue to oppose independence. I am sure I am not alone in recognising that we should not take the allegiance of this, the oldest British overseas territory, lightly. In fact, we should continue to support and uplift that beautiful island nation. For example, Bermuda's economy continues to enjoy growth in the international business sector, with that industry providing 4,642 jobs in 2022. As one of Bermuda's key trading partners, it is imperative that we play our part in supporting the nation as it takes steps to further strengthen its position as a hotspot for international business.

In closing, it is important to reflect on and celebrate those important relationships with the overseas territories and the progress that both they and we have made, as well as to encourage continued close working in the future. Although many of those countries cherish their status as overseas territories, the ties are maintained through consent. The Government must ensure that the British overseas territories are not merely an afterthought—an extra appendage to the UK—but recognised as partners. I look forward to hearing the Minister set out how the Government intend to do just that.

2.35 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I am privileged to be called so early in the debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for picking up the baton of the debate. I refer members to my registration of interests.

As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the British overseas territories, as well as the chair of a number of individual overseas territory groups, my personal interest in the subject goes back a long way. I am perhaps one of the few members to have served in Cyprus, in Gibraltar, the Falklands, Ascension, South Georgia and Diego Garcia. I am very lucky to have done so.

The overseas territories are a vital part of our UK family. They are strategically essential in terms of footprint basing and geography, but they are also essential to the projection of UK soft power around the world. They have a common language and culture, they have similar hopes and aspirations and we must not underestimate or take for granted their value to the UK. If I have to make one point today, and one point only, it is that our overseas territories need more love. In this era of global competition, the hunt for resources and strategic basing, and instability across the world, our foes are circling and we need to cement what we have as a nation.

To admire the problem, if I may, for a moment, Brexit was not kind to the overseas territories. What we must do now is lock the overseas territories into free trade deals with us and all our partners and think more broadly, to the Commonwealth. How fantastic would it be for global Britain to have such a network of trade arrangements, particularly with the Commonwealth? Just think of what that might be worth to the UK. Think of the potential. The 2019 UK White Paper has gone nowhere, so where is it, please, Minister?

Of course any work that we do—I welcome the point about the new strategy—has to be done with the overseas territories, not for them. Last year's ill-fated Joint Ministerial Council has at least been put to bed now, with an excellent session this week. Of course, the Minister is in the Chamber today, which is entirely appropriate, but ministerial visits need to be a lot longer. Does it need a Minister in the House of Commons? Perhaps.

We need to station civil servants in the overseas territories for longer too, and delegations from the overseas territories to the UK visiting the FCDO need more than 30 minutes at a time. We must roll out the red carpet for these very important people and listen to their concerns. We also need a clear and regular bilateral dialogue to fix specific issues because, of course, the OTs are very different. One size does not fit all.

Daniel Kawczynski: My hon. Friend and I recently visited the Falkland Islands together to celebrate the 40th anniversary of their liberation from Argentina. We were told at the time of our visit that we needed to do more to support the Falkland Islands in their negotiations with the European Union over tariffs on their squid exports to the EU. Does he agree that we need to be more robust and supportive of the overseas territories when they are negotiating with the European Union?

James Sunderland: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I need to be careful about what I say, for obvious reasons, but I entirely agree that that needs to be the

case. For example, the Falklands are suffering from tariffs on fish right now. We need to do that very quickly indeed. Why not also create a specific department in the FCDO for the overseas territories and the Commonwealth? We could have longer JMCs, perhaps, and a new strategy. There is lots that we need to do.

What about the specifics? I cannot hope in five minutes to cover the totality of the subject, but we need a new trade arrangement with the overseas territories to reflect the changes in the arrangements with the European Union and with other countries. The British Virgin Islands, in particular, wants its prescriptive court order lifted. It has a new Government and a superb new Prime Minister, so it is time for the BVI to fulfil its potential and move forward.

Tristan da Cunha needs a boat, as we heard, for obvious strategic and medical reasons. And we cannot concede sovereignty of the Chagos islands until we fully factor in the Chagossians. The archipelago is also militarily important. South Georgia's fisheries could be brought under the governance of the Falkland islands.

The residents of all the OTs must benefit from their potential, and all the overseas territories need support on infrastructure, utilities and climate change. The UK's relationship with the overseas territories has recently been referred to as "benign neglect". I do not subscribe to that powerful phrase, but it is a wake-up call for us in this place. We need to do more to cement our relationship with the overseas territories. They should not be seen as somehow subordinate to the UK. They simply want to be partners, and self-determination must therefore be perceived as well as real.

One size does not fit all, and this must be reflected with each overseas territory being given more red carpet and more bilateral arrangements. The OTs are very special, and they are very proud to carry the UK flag. The UK must therefore seek to get more from them while offering more back, as true partners for mutual benefit. Nothing is broken, far from it. This is a fantastic opportunity that the UK and its partners in the overseas territories must embrace.

2.41 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I had the great privilege and honour of visiting the British Indian Ocean Territory in 2019 when, at the invitation of the Foreign Office, we had the opportunity to inspect the extraordinary naval facilities that we share with the Americans on those islands. The right of self-determination is a bedrock of all the British overseas territories, yet, in the case of the British Indian Ocean Territory, the right of self-determination is being trashed and completely ignored by this Government.

I rise to express my dissatisfaction with this Government and their handling of the situation. The Chagossians, those beautiful people, were expelled from their islands in 1968 to make way for an American military base, and they were treated appallingly by Mauritius. Some Chagossians came to the United Kingdom and some went to the Seychelles, but others went to Mauritius, and the Mauritians treated them as second-class citizens. Mauritius spent the money it was given to look after them on other things.

The Chagos islands are 2,000 km from Mauritius and have never been part of that country. When we gave Mauritius her independence in 1965, it was made

[*Daniel Kawczynski*]

abundantly clear that these islands were to be portioned off and would remain under British control. Moreover, we gave Mauritius more than £3 million of British taxpayers' money as final settlement for the islands. Think for a moment just how much £3 million was worth in 1965, yet now, more than 50 years on, Mauritius is determined to overturn this agreement and seize the islands from Britain. We have lost rulings on this issue in the International Court of Justice, where Mauritius has taken us for arbitration. The right of self-determination should be at the forefront of our conduct. The negotiations with Mauritius must stop, and the Chagossians, of whom there are about 4,000, must be allowed to return. There must be a referendum of the Chagossians in the British Indian Ocean Territory on whether they want independence or to remain British. I know from all my conversations with the Chagossians that they are proud Brits, and they want to remain part of the British family.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The total territory of the Chagos islands is 10 times the landmass of Gibraltar, which we also use as a naval and military base. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a thriving community could be created in those islands alongside and supporting the military? The binary option being pushed by the Government is detrimental to all sides.

Daniel Kawczynski: I completely concur with the hon. Gentleman's sentiments. The Chagossians are descendants of slaves from Africa and Madagascar. They have their own language, their own food, their own music and their own traditions. Their 58 islands are a paradise in the middle of the Indian ocean, and to hand their territory to a foreign country is colonialism on steroids. It would be an absolute disgrace if that were to happen.

Let me say how disappointed I am with other British overseas territories—some of them are with us in the Gallery today—who are eloquent in demanding their rights, including the right of self-determination. Gibraltar, in particular, is always effective in lobbying us. However, a key term of emotional intelligence, which is a subject I have recently been studying, is interdependence. The overseas territories are letting themselves down by not putting enough pressure on the British Government over the rights of the Chagossians. If the Chagossians' rights are ignored today, it will be the rights of the other overseas territories that are ignored in the future.

We are re-entering the Indian and Pacific oceans. As you will remember, Mr Deputy Speaker, Lee Kuan Yew remonstrated with us in 1971 for leaving our bases in Singapore. We were going through a period of malaise at that time, lacking in confidence. The AUKUS naval agreement we have signed with the Americans and the Australians to re-enter the Indian and Pacific oceans is essential, particularly as we see growing Chinese expansion in the South China sea, stealing hundreds of atolls from the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and other territories, pouring concrete to turn them into giant military installations.

I asked the then Foreign Secretary about this seven years ago, and the response was, "We don't have an opinion about the disputed uninhabited atolls in the middle of the Indian ocean." We are turning a blind eye

to Chinese expansionism in the South China sea while bending over backwards to accommodate Mauritius's spurious claim to our islands. This year we are entering CPTPP, the world's fastest-growing trading bloc, so this area will become increasingly important to the United Kingdom.

I feel so passionately about this issue because it goes to the nub of how our relationship with the British overseas territories will develop and be protected for the future. Please let us combine to challenge the Government on their outrageous, nefarious and immoral conduct over the British Indian Ocean Territory.

2.47 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for securing it.

It has been a fantastic week of visibility for the variety of the British overseas territories: first, with their participation in the coronation of King Charles III last Saturday; with the always wonderful display of their flags and those of the Crown dependencies in Parliament Square; and with the Joint Ministerial Council going ahead this week. Yesterday, it was good to see the UK Overseas Territories Association conference take place in Portcullis House, where we heard powerful contributions about their sheer variety and the contribution made by the British overseas territories, from the Antarctic, to Europe, the Caribbean, and the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans, to this country and to the world. Mr Speaker was very generous in hosting many representatives of the British overseas territories in Speaker's House just the other day, where we had the unveiling of a beautiful window at the entrance that displays all the emblems of the British overseas territories and Crown dependencies.

At yesterday's UKOTA conference, we heard again about the significant environmental contribution that the overseas territories provide, not only to protecting and enhancing biodiversity for the British family of nations, but to the globe, by protecting and enhancing our environment. Some 2.5 million square miles of ocean are protected through the Blue Belt and Darwin initiatives, which is a positive contribution indeed.

In the short time remaining, I briefly wish to mention a few issues that have already been touched on by other right hon. and hon. Members. The crisis that is occurring in Haiti is causing intolerable immigration pressure on the Turks and Caicos Islands and is resulting in serious criminality. I ask the Government to continue fully engaging on that. On Gibraltar it is important that its pragmatism and patriotism are recognised and supported by the UK Government as it continues its negotiations with the EU.

Following on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) said, I must, of course, mention the British Indian Ocean Territory. As I have said many times in this House, the Chagos islanders have been appallingly treated over more than half a century, from being exiled from their homeland to being dumped in other countries that have treated them badly, to having their citizenship rights denied. I am glad that last year an amendment that I tabled to the Nationality and Borders Bill righted that final injustice on citizenship, but now yet another injustice

is being visited on them: they are being completely disregarded by the UK Government when it comes to being consulted and to their right of determination over the future sovereignty of the Chagos islands and the BIOT. That is appalling and, as my hon. Friend has said, it is a security risk for us and the democratic world; where we step back, China will step in.

Finally, the British overseas territories and our Crown dependencies are not properly represented here in London. They should have a separate Department and a Secretary of State; they are neither foreign, nor Commonwealth, which must be recognised and respected. We also need representation here in this UK Parliament—

Alicia Kearns: One thing I did miss out earlier was that in 2019 our Foreign Affairs Committee said that there should be an overseas territories Committee of the House of Commons, made up of members of the Select Committee chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), and of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Defence Committee, and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee; it should involve all those Committees that best care about the issues that matter to the overseas territories. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) agree that it is deeply concerning that four years on the Government have given no consideration to the need for such cross-party, cross-Select-Committee working?

Henry Smith: I should perhaps declare an interest, as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and of many all-party groups on the overseas territories. We need far greater recognition here, both in how Parliament scrutinises policy towards the overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and how they are represented here. Could there be some sort of representation in the other place? Alternatively, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) was saying, if they chose to be a part of this country, could there be representation here in this Chamber as well? We need to do far better on this.

Our overseas territories are not backwaters. They are the very frontier of protecting our environment, providing defence for the world and enterprise. It is about time the UK Government properly paid them respect.

2.54 pm

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I declare my interest as chair of the UK Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on calling this debate, thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it, and welcome those members and colleagues who have joined us in the Gallery for this important debate. I also thank Mr Speaker and others for their incredible support of the overseas territories, making sure that they are not forgotten and, I hope, not seen as a backwater.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) was right in what she said. The 14 overseas territories are part of us. They are with us at every event, whether it be the loss of our Queen or the coronation of our King. They are not foreigners, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) has just said, and they are not the Commonwealth. They should be dealt with, supported and embraced as part of our nation.

Self-determination is crucial to the overseas territories, but, by virtue of the fact that the Crown, through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, has quite large powers to legislate and direct, we have a responsibility to our overseas territories here in Parliament to ensure that those powers of Government are exercised carefully and fairly, and this debate is part of that today.

We have already had one example of when things go wrong. Last year's Joint Ministerial Council, for example, was cancelled at late notice. There are infrequent opportunities for individuals to come here from the overseas territories and get decisions that may be long overdue. Overseas territories should not lose out because of things that are going on in our Government; they should be put above that. If representatives from the overseas territories require more help, more ministerial resources, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister—I do mean friend because he is a friend of mine—whether he would consider making sure that they are made available to them.

We know that the challenges faced in the overseas territories are as unique as the territories themselves—St Helena, the Ascension Island, Tristan da Cunha and Pitcairn. I have to say that when my right hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase was talking, I was grasping my badge from the Falkland Islands. When I was there it was May 2020. I think I was there for just a few days—I missed out on being there a lot longer because of the pandemic—but we had a wonderful welcome none the less. The territories are all very different and all very vulnerable in their own ways. They are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters. I remember talking to some colleagues from Montserrat about the continuing impact of the volcanic eruption that was many decades ago now but still continues to be felt locally. As our Government continue to focus on protecting the environment and setting ambitious net zero targets, perhaps the Minister could say a little about what more support we could give our overseas territories in this effect as well.

As chair of the UK CPA, Mr Deputy Speaker, you would expect me to turn most of my comments to the role of our organisation in helping support governance in the overseas territories. It is the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association that does the most extraordinary amount of work to support the UK overseas territories project. Work done by the UK CPA supports the UK Government in discharging their constitutional responsibility to ensure good governance in the overseas territories. The project began in 2016 and works with each territory alongside the National Audit Office and the Government Internal Audit Agency to enhance good governance and oversight of public finances. These things are vital to ensure the flourishing of the territories, and the CPA runs many bilateral and multilateral meetings on top of that.

At the end of last year, parliamentarians visited Westminster for the Fifth Overseas Territories Forum on the oversight of public finances and good governance. The Speaker of St Helena visited last year, and the CPA facilitated a Clerk secondment to the Anguilla House of Assembly last July. There was the Westminster seminar in March and other meetings. The CPA does a huge amount to fill some of the gaps left by the Government's approach to the overseas territories, and we are very grateful to the Government for allowing us to have that opportunity. At a time when our budgets are under pressure, I hope the Minister might also take the opportunity at the Dispatch Box today to reconfirm the

[*Dame Maria Miller*]

Government's commitment to the CPA's role in this and commit to ensuring that we have budgets available to do so in the future.

If time allowed, I would also have spoken about Girl Guiding UK, but I will have to leave that for another day. The withdrawal of girl guiding in the overseas territories is something that I will be exploring with them directly.

2.59 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for securing this debate. I wish to make a brief intervention in my capacity as the Chair of the House of Commons Procedure Committee. It has struck me, in the work we are carrying out, that in this place we often fail to recognise the impact of what we do here on those very important parts of our family, the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies.

I was struck by that most when I visited Gibraltar last year as a delegate of the BIMR—British Islands and Mediterranean region—meeting of the women's part of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. There are a lot of acronyms. Our delegation was very ably led by your colleague, Mr Deputy Speaker, my right hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Dame Eleanor Laing).

As parliamentarians do when we get together, we talked about how often we meet, what the hours are and what the facilities are like. We were shocked to discover that in Gibraltar, the Parliament had not met for about five months. In fact, last year the Parliament in Gibraltar met on only six occasions. It has already met on eight occasions this year. The reason we were given for the meetings of Parliament not happening was that there simply was not capacity in the system to have Parliament meeting while Gibraltar, which is on the frontline of the land border with the European Union, was absorbing the impact of the UK leaving the EU.

I pass no judgement on the decision to leave the European Union; this is not a comment on that. The comment I want to make is that I do not think we, in this place, thought about that. I have a horrible suspicion that, when we were debating that decision, the impact on places like Gibraltar and other overseas territories simply was not discussed. I do not disagree that these issues are talked about at a ministerial level, and I know the Joint Ministerial Council discusses them, but where in our procedures do we have the ability to give a voice to our friends, our family, in the overseas territories and Crown dependencies?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The right hon. Lady makes an important point. My view, as I have expressed, is that we should have MPs here with voting rights. Other areas do it differently. In the US, for example, there are representatives without voting rights, but with full participation rights. We must find a solution along those lines, otherwise we are all negligent. They are the best people to make their own voices heard.

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the best people to listen to on these matters are those from the overseas territories—and, I must say, the Crown dependencies, which are also impacted by what we do.

Our inter-parliamentary relations are incredibly important. The CPA, the British Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which I chair, and the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which I am honoured to co-chair, are important forums in which we can have dialogue and discuss these matters, but we simply do not allow them to be heard in the legislative process.

The Procedure Committee, which I chair—my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) is a fellow member—has been discussing, as part of an inquiry we have been carrying out for some time on the territorial constitution, how we might work better as the UK Parliament in Westminster to appreciate the impact of what we do on the devolved nations, the Crown dependencies and the overseas territories. As Chair of the Committee, I intend to ensure that we think about real changes to procedure that we could recommend and that this House could adopt.

I sense from what has been said in the Chamber that there is an appetite to build into our processes and procedures the ability for those voices to be heard. As we have heard, the overseas territories matter so much to us in Parliament, for many reasons—I will not repeat them. They matter to our constituents and to the whole of the United Kingdom, and we must make sure that when we make decisions in this place, they do not have unintended consequences that adversely affect our friends, because that would be tragic.

3.3 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on securing this important debate, in which we celebrate the diversity of the global family that is formed by the British overseas territories.

On a personal level, this debate is a timely one for me. With the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) and other members of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, I visited Gibraltar just two weeks ago. I am very pleased to see Dominique Searle, the special representative of the Chief Minister, in the Gallery. I would like to thank him for the excellent way he looked after us. During the visit, we met leaders from across Gibraltarian civil society, including the Governor, the Chief Minister and the vice-chancellor of the excellent new University of Gibraltar, whose chancellor is, of course, Mr Speaker.

As we have heard, PACAC has recently opened an inquiry into the status of the overseas territories in the 21st century—another reason why this debate is so timely. The motion quite properly calls on the Government to ensure that the rights of the citizens of the territories, as British citizens, are upheld. To be fair to the Government, and indeed to their predecessors, I believe that that is what they have been doing progressively over recent years, particularly as a consequence of the British Overseas Territories Act 2002, under which the people of the overseas territories automatically became British citizens. That, I found, was particularly welcome in Gibraltar, where previously Gibraltarians had simply had the right to apply for British citizenship. That Britishness is a source of great pride to the people of Gibraltar and, I have no doubt, to the citizens of the other overseas territories.

Each territory is, of course, unique, as we have heard and as the motion acknowledges. The Cayman Islands and Bermuda have populations in excess of 60,000 and

Gibraltar has a population of some 34,000, while Pitcairn has a population of only 40 to 50. The Government have a responsibility to take each territory's individual circumstances into account when deciding on its future arrangements, and that is what I believe they do.

The Government must also—as the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown pointed out—consider the stance of the United Nations, whose special committee on decolonisation has judged that all 10 permanently inhabited overseas territories have not yet attained a measure of self-government. I would question that. Gibraltar, for example, enjoys a huge degree of self-government: it has an elected Parliament of 18 Members, with a Chief Minister and four other Ministers responsible for domestic issues, including taxation. Indeed, it is almost entirely self-governing, save in respect of external affairs, defence and internal security, which are reserved to the United Kingdom.

Constitutionally, the UK may legislate for the overseas territories. That plays into the narrative that appears to have been adopted by the special committee: that the territories continue in reality to be colonies. In the case of Gibraltar at least, I have no doubt that the Gibraltarians are entirely happy with the current position. They certainly would not regard themselves as colonials.

However, this issue has to be addressed constitutionally, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown pointed out. I believe that an important function of the inquiry that PACAC has launched will be to discuss and consider the options available to each individual overseas territory. I think that there is a strong argument for saying that, in the case of at least some of the territories, integration should be pursued and those territories should send a Member to this Parliament. That is what the French have done, for example, and there are very few arguments that the French overseas territories continue to be colonies.

Alicia Kearns: I appreciate that many right hon. and hon. Members are making the point that we should have Members of Parliament for the overseas territories in this place, but it is important to reiterate that that should happen only if it is the wish of the overseas territories. When the Foreign Affairs Committee spoke to them, many said that they would not want that. I am not dismissing the argument, but I am saying that, crucially, that should happen only if the overseas territories see it as the best way for their voices to be heard in this place.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course, the Government's position is that the individual overseas territory should enjoy self-determination. I spoke to a number of Gibraltarians who were very keen on the idea of integration, and I am sure that that would be the case in a number of other overseas territories, too. PACAC will consider that in the context of its inquiry.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Was it not surprising that everyone we spoke to in Gibraltar and a number of people I have been contacted by from other overseas territories said, "I support it, but I'm sure someone else will be against it, and I don't want to make waves." There might well be overwhelming support, but it has never been properly tested by the populations of those areas.

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. I do not think I met a single Gibraltarian who was averse to the idea of integration with the United Kingdom. This is something that we need to consider carefully.

It is clearly the case that many Gibraltarians now—particularly younger ones—regard a trip to the United Kingdom essentially as a bus trip; they use the easyJet and British Airways services quite routinely. They regard themselves already as *de facto* integrated with the United Kingdom, so the constitutional status of the overseas territories in that regard must be considered. To repeat, this will have to be carefully considered in the PACAC inquiry.

To conclude, the British overseas territories are important elements of the global British family and, as is clear from this debate, are highly valued by Members on both sides of the House. The Government and the House should be careful to ensure that their interests are reflected and protected, and those issues will be carefully considered by PACAC in the course of its inquiry.

3.10 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I am delighted to be called to speak in this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on securing it. Much of what I will say in the next few minutes will reflect what I heard yesterday at the parliamentary conference on the OTs, because, in the absence of any formal representation of the OTs in this House, of which we have heard much, I believe that today is an opportunity for them to have their voices heard through the medium of right hon. and hon. Members. On a personal level, I have long supported the OTs, as is evidenced by my membership or vice-chairmanship of several of the relevant APPGs and, equally, by the tie from the Falkland Islands that I was gifted when I was there in February.

The word that has resonated loudest this week in the various events for the OTs has been "family". The OTs are members of the British family, and, as in any family, each member has its own characteristics, its own strengths and weaknesses, its own identity and its own uniqueness. It was put far more eloquently than I can put it yesterday by Gibraltar's Environment Minister, who said simply: "there is superpower in our diversity".

Like any family, each member will need support at different times of their life. As one Minister suggested yesterday, there has been a feeling that the OTs have sometimes been victims of a situation where others try to define their problems and find solutions to them, whereas they need and want to do it for themselves, with support offered and available but not imposed.

For many of the overseas territories, there are shared challenges and threats, while others are individual. We have heard a good deal about the shared threat from climate change, which, in some cases, is existential. However, not all challenges are common, and I have been particularly struck this week by the experience of two territories—Turks and Caicos Islands and Pitcairn—for very different reasons. As the Premier of Turks and Caicos put it, his people live perilously close to the failed state that is Haiti. Illegal immigration into Turks and Caicos is rife, and that is exacerbated by drug running and gun running. The authorities there are working extremely hard to protect their islands from the waves of uncontrolled numbers of people flooding their homeland, but I hope that the Government here will offer help that can be taken up if that is so desired.

The risks to Pitcairn are entirely different but just as severe. With a current population of only 36 people, there are serious questions about the long-term viability

[*Rob Butler*]

of the islands. Sadly, the school has just closed because there are no young children left on Pitcairn. There are very few people of working age, and the population is ageing. Pitcairn's Mayor talked to me of the recognition of the need to adapt to survive. His hope and that of other islanders is that more people will see the opportunity of a life in Pitcairn. It struck me when he remarked yesterday that, as one person from Pitcairn who was in the United Kingdom, more than 2.5% of the population was here—that is how small the population is.

In talking about challenges, I recognise that we must be careful not to imply in any way that the OTs are helpless dependants. The truth is very different, as they are all rightly keen to point out. To take just one example that was made to me yesterday, according to analysis by Capital Economics, the British Virgin Islands supports jobs, prosperity and Government revenues worldwide, especially as a result of its role as a centre for financial and professional service firms.

Having covered a considerable amount of the globe in the last couple of minutes, I would like to say a little bit about the Falkland Islands. It was absolutely right that Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister sent a taskforce to liberate the islands in 1982, just as it remains absolutely right today that we maintain a strong military presence to defend the right of islanders to self-determination. During the trip with the armed forces parliamentary scheme in February, we saw how all three services of our armed forces play crucial roles, both separately and working together.

There are now new threats to the Falkland Islands, though. Fisheries account for approximately 40% of the islands' GDP, but are under threat, particularly from illegal fishing by Chinese supertrawlers just outside Falklands territorial waters, so it is important that the Falkland Islands' economy diversifies. One potential solution is the extraction of oil. Of course, that must be done extremely carefully, given our commitment to net zero, but I very much hope that the Treasury will give the proposals that are currently in front of it—known as Project Sea Lion—extremely serious consideration.

Alicia Kearns: Does my hon. Friend share my concerns that the Argentinian Government's current rhetoric regarding the Falklands, funnily enough, falls in an election year, and is it not utterly abhorrent that a politician would use individuals' right to determine their own futures for their own political gain?

Rob Butler: As with pretty much everything else she has said this afternoon, my hon. Friend is absolutely on the money. She is completely correct, and the way that the Argentinians have behaved in what is—as she rightly points out—an election year is truly outrageous and incredibly offensive to the people of the Falkland Islands. I know from talking to their representative over the past couple of days that the Falkland islanders are very grateful that we have recognised that in this place in recent weeks.

To conclude, the OTs afford us a tremendous global footprint of strategic and economic significance. Gibraltar's Minister rightly remarked that through, and thanks to, the OTs, we have already had global Britain for many years. Let us not forget that there are plenty of hostile

nations that are looking for new friends, especially in strategic locations, so we should not take our traditional allies for granted. Let us be clear that, as the premier of the BVI pointed out, even in smallness, there is opportunity. The mayor of the smallest OT, Pitcairn, summed it up perfectly: the overseas territories matter because they are British, because they are part of our family.

3.17 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This has been a most welcome and important debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on securing it. We have talked about the value of all the overseas territories as part of the British family. I want to concentrate on one part of that family, Gibraltar. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, having had the honour to chair the all-party parliamentary group on Gibraltar for a number of years now, and the pleasure and privilege of being a regular visitor to the Rock over that time. I, too, have benefited from the advice and assistance that many Members have had from the Gibraltar Government's representative office in London, headed up by Dominique Searle, who is in the Gallery.

Gibraltar is absolutely clear in its determination to remain solely British in its sovereignty. That has been reaffirmed by 99% of its electorate at two successive referendums. It is important, therefore, that we reject the notion that it should be classified as a non-governing territory, as with the others. However, I gently say to some of my hon. Friends that it is entirely for the people of the overseas territories to determine their relationship in terms of representation here. Any inquiry may be interesting and useful, but it would be presumptuous of any of us to suggest to any overseas territory what form its representation and relationship should take—actually, it would run slightly contrary to the suggestion of self-determination. It is for them to initiate; it is for us, as their friends and family, to support them in all the choices they make.

One of the choices that Gibraltar made was to be British, and to accept a referendum result that it had voted overwhelmingly against. Gibraltar's relationship with the European Union, because of a land border, is inevitably different, and 96% of the voters of Gibraltar would have preferred that we had remained in the European Union. However, the Gibraltarians, as part of the British family, went with the democratic vote of the British family, and we owe them in consequence of that. The most important thing that we owe them, which must be delivered by the Foreign Office, is a proper UK-EU treaty on Gibraltar that reflects the particular needs that Gibraltar has.

Gibraltar has transformed itself magnificently over the past few decades, from a traditional garrison-come-dockyard economy into a diverse and thriving economy with tourism, internet businesses and, in particular, a very successful financial services sector. To fuel and make that economy work, some 15,000 people a day cross the land border with Spain at La Línea. Keeping that land border free-flowing is an essential prerequisite of any deal, which must be achieved in a way that respects Gibraltar's sovereignty and integrity. That should not be impossible to do. It should be the top priority of the Foreign Office in resolving the remaining EU-UK issues. I assure the House it is the top priority of the Spanish Foreign Office; it ought to be a high priority for

us, too. The deal should work for both sides, because the economic prosperity that Gibraltar generates greatly assists those regions of Spain adjoining it in the Campo de Gibraltar. It would be in everyone's interests, so we must get the deal done. Should we fail, heaven forbid, we would have a moral obligation to pick up the economic costs that would fall upon Gibraltar in consequence. The best thing to do is to make sure that never happens and that we get a deal.

The second thing is the practical support we can give to Gibraltar in various specific ways. The success of the University of Gibraltar has already been referenced. It is right that we should treat those students as home students for the purpose of access to UK loans. They should also surely have access to research funds, such as the successor to the Horizon programme. They lost that when we lost the EU, and we should ensure that is included in a deal. Gibraltar University has a successful midwifery course and programme. Bizarrely, Gibraltar midwifery qualifications are not recognised by the UK Nursing and Midwifery Council. I hope the Department of Health and Social Care will put that right. The most important thing beyond that is the position of Gibraltar's health service, which cannot procure NHS supplies at the same price as the rest of the UK. That cannot be logical. Those are practical things. We talk about them being family and we should treat them as family.

Henry Smith: On the issue of Gibraltar airport, does my hon. Friend believe that it is incumbent on the British Government to seek to help the Rock as far as possible with solutions that could be extremely beneficial to Gibraltarians?

Sir Robert Neill: That is absolutely right. The airport was designed in a way that, had relations between Britain and the EU been different, could have been extremely beneficial to both sides of the border. That may yet still be possible. There is good will, and no one has worked harder than Gibraltar Ministers and their officials to try to get a deal on this. Absolute maturity and good faith have been demonstrated by Gibraltar, and it is important that we support it. It is also important that we talk to the MOD about the operation of the airport, because I was rather shocked to see that the airport had to close the other day because the Met Office could not send somebody to make sure that the weather forecasts were available. We have to get that right and treat Gibraltar on a proper basis. Those are basics that we ought to get right.

Alicia Kearns: My hon. Friend touched on the officials. May I put something on the record and ask his advice, as a learned friend? Recently, there was a controversy where a senior civil servant of the Foreign Office was lambasted and publicly named in the media as having undermined British sovereignty in Gibraltar. Does he share my unease that individuals in this House, or perhaps those associated with them, chose to brief against a Foreign Office civil servant who has no right of reply? They cannot contact the media, correct the record or speak up on their own behalf. I am gravely concerned about reputation and the standard that sets. Does he agree we should be considerate in the way we speak about civil servants, who cannot respond?

Sir Robert Neill: I entirely agree. I am glad to say that the Chief Minister of Gibraltar made a clear statement after that unfortunate comment was made, making it

clear that there was no question of concern for the Government of Gibraltar as to the competence or probity of the official's conduct. Fortunately, nothing was done to prejudice negotiations, but the raising of that did not help at that time, and it was a needless distraction. I hope therefore that we will show the same maturity as Gibraltarians have throughout the whole process.

The final thing I was going to touch on was the whole question of sovereign rate borrowing, which has already been referred to. Because of the pandemic, Gibraltar had to borrow significantly. We were grateful for the support it was given. It wants to continue to be able to borrow money at UK sovereign rates, because the sovereign rate guarantee means it can get a much more attractive rate. Given that we are already charging it more than the rest of the UK would pay for its NHS supplies—much of that went to keep its health service and economy going—surely we owe it the decency of a guarantee of 25 years' repayment at sovereign rates on the money that was borrowed to assist it during the pandemic.

Gibraltar is a brilliant place. I hope many Members will join the all-party group, and I hope they will be at the national day again this year, joining the people of Gibraltar in reaffirming their British identity, but we need to give them practical support in the interim now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the SNP spokesperson.

3.25 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a genuine pleasure to wind up for the SNP in this genuinely very interesting debate. I pay tribute to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), for bringing this important subject forward.

I think it is safe to say that the SNP's world view on this stuff is different from many of the views we have heard from colleagues today. Global Britain is not our project. For the SNP, our vision for Scotland's future—Scotland's best future—is as an independent state going back into the European Union, acceding to NATO and, indeed, acceding to the Commonwealth in our own right. We recognise that the UK is the successor state for a lot of the relationships we have been talking about today, and our primary interaction with the overseas territories would be via the Commonwealth frameworks and, indeed, our close friendly relationship with the UK post independence.

I say that global Britain is not our project, but it is worth stressing to colleagues that I do not wish it harm. The overseas territories are important partners and the UK is going to be an important partner for an independent Scotland, so even if our world view comes to pass—I accept that many colleagues do not want that to happen—we want to see the overseas territories do well, and we want to see a deep and flourishing partnership between the UK and those overseas territories.

Self-determination is part of the SNP's DNA and we would go further even than the United Nations. We believe that the right of people to choose their Government and choose their constitutional arrangements is absolutely fundamental to democracy. We recognise that the right to self-determination under the UN charter is limited to cases of oppression, a post-colonial setting and, indeed,

[*Alyn Smith*]

invasion, but we would go further than that. So we would utterly agree with colleagues who have expressed support for the overseas territories' right to self-determination.

I recognise that, where that right to self-determination is a right to independence, it is also a right to decide to be a British overseas territory and to have whatever representation it wants to have within this framework. I think there are a number of ways that could be ameliorated and improved, but I deeply respect the choice of overseas territories to have whatever status they want and whatever representation they want as part of the British family, and I hope Members would accept my good faith when I say that.

However, with that right comes responsibilities. It is important that we take stock of the relationship with the overseas territories and the coronation of the new King is a good opportunity to do that. That stocktaking exercise is taking place across a number of the overseas territories themselves. We also need to take proper note of the choices that our decisions make on them. I could not agree more with the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), who said that Brexit has not been kind to the overseas territories. We fundamentally agree on that point.

However, leaving the EU in the way that we did has upset the constitutional balance within the devolved settlement for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and, indeed, London. All parts of the constitutional furniture within the UK were predicated on all of us being in the customs union, the single market and, indeed, the EU. That has been changed and it has also been changed for the overseas territories. We have heard much mention of Gibraltar. I had a number of talks with the Gibraltar Government when I was a Member of the European Parliament trying to find some solutions for them. Likewise, fisheries quotas for the Falkland Islands and lots of other things besides have not had the degree of attention that they deserve from this place, and I think there is a job for all of us to improve on that.

I agree with the point the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee made that, if the overseas territories are not foreign, dealing with them via the Foreign Office apparatus seems to be missing something of a trick. I suggest that Denmark and France particularly have ways of interacting with their overseas territories that would bear quite a bit of analysis from the FCDO and, indeed, the UK Government more widely, in finding new ways of doing this, but always accepting that it is up to the overseas territory to decide the interaction that it wants and it deserves. It is not for anyone to tell it what it should be.

Policy impact and policy coherence are deeply important. Friends can speak honestly to friends, and a number of the overseas territories are globally recognised industrial tax evasion centres. There are implications for us in that, especially in terms of the consequences of the stepping up of the Russian invasion; there is a role in sanctions busting there as well. Policy coherence is important, therefore. We are sanctioning Russian oligarchs and organisations and seizing dirty money, and the overseas territories have a very important role in that as well. I ask the Minister to pick up on comments about the need for a register of beneficial interests. That is deeply important for transparency both at home and abroad.

Daniel Kawczynski: The hon. Gentleman is making the very serious allegation that some British overseas territories are tax havens or being used in some nefarious way for funds. Which ones is he referring to and what evidence does he have for that?

Alyn Smith: I was going to be more polite and say some are and indeed some are not, but if the hon. Gentleman wants some statistics, in February 2022 Transparency International linked £830 million-worth of property in the overseas territories and Crown dependencies to individuals close to Russian President Vladimir Putin. In 2018 Global Witness said £34 billion was currently invested by Russians with links to the Russian Government in overseas territories. The Global Witness report of 2018 also said that £68.5 billion in foreign direct investment from Russian residents had been directed towards the overseas territories from 2007 to 2016. I acknowledge progress has been made by some of the overseas territories, but we also must speak frankly to our friends and there is an issue that needs to be dealt with.

Alicia Kearns: I touched briefly on this in my speech, but I want to make it clear that every overseas territory has fully complied with the sanctions that this House has placed as a result of the renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine—every single one—so while I agree that there is progress to be made in other areas, in this area we should give them full credit: they have stood behind us on that.

Alyn Smith: I agree, and I have pressed in a number of previous debates in this place for complementarity of the sanctions regime across the overseas territories and a number have done very well, but we must maintain vigilant on this. In the same way that London is a centre of dirty money, the overseas territories play a part in that network as well and we must be vigilant on that point.

On other obligations, reciprocity must go in both directions and I warmly recognise the role the overseas territories play in the fight to mitigate climate change and protect biodiversity. More can be done to support them in those efforts. So, it is right that we reassess our relationship with the overseas territories. They are an important partner in what we all want to see—the protection of biodiversity and the protection of people from climate change—and the UK can do more to recognise and support their efforts. The SNP wishes the Minister well in that endeavour.

3.32 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I also thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), for securing this crucial debate and ensuring the concerns and priorities of the overseas territories remain within the focus of this House and for the Government to hear. As shadow Minister in that capacity, I draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, in particular my visits to Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands as a guest of their Governments in the last year.

I also thank the members of all the overseas territories and their representatives who are here today in the Gallery to watch the debate and who have been at many

events this week. It was a pleasure to speak at the United Kingdom Overseas Territory Association conference yesterday and to meet many of the chief Ministers and representatives over the last few days. I particularly thank the presidency of UKOTA for the work they have done this year around the coronation of His Majesty and Her Majesty. It was a pleasure to see representatives of the overseas territories marching in that parade, as well as the flags and all the other things we have seen. I also want to thank the Speaker for his leadership and work on this issue and his generosity in hosting us all this week in Speaker's House.

The UK's overseas territories are indeed an integral and cherished part of the global British family, and it has been a profound honour for me in my role as Labour's shadow Minister to have now met, I believe, all of the democratically elected leaders of the overseas territories. I have also been able to visit four of the overseas territories: I have seen at first hand the warmth, innovation, diversity and distinctiveness of the people and environments in each. I have swum with penguins in the south Atlantic in the Falklands; and indeed I have taken tea at the Rock Hotel in Gibraltar.

Daniel Kawczynski: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Doughty: I will not as I know what the hon. Gentleman wants to say; he is very kind, but we do not have a lot of time.

On that more humorous note, I also want to be really serious, candid and honest. Far too frequently, debate and discourse on this issue have been based on glib generalisations and a lack of understanding that fails to take account of the uniqueness of each overseas territory, be that constitutional, environmental or economic.

Daniel Kawczynski: Will the hon. Member give way now?

Stephen Doughty: I will, briefly.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am grateful. The hon. Member rightly refers to the overseas territories as being cherished. I rather doubt that I will get a commitment from the Minister for a referendum for Chagossians and the British Indian Ocean Territory, so will he and the Labour party, in the spirit of what the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) said, at least give a commitment that a future Labour Government would give those people the right to a referendum on self-determination?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member knows my views on the Chagos Islands; indeed, I set them out clearly in Westminster Hall in a debate he initiated a few months ago. I will come to that later in my speech.

Despite some extremely committed individual officials and Ministers in the FCDO and those who work alongside the Administrations, we have seen far too little consistency, understanding, engagement and, crucially, listening. A future Labour Government would set out five key principles to guide our relationships with the overseas territories. First, we believe in devolution and democratic autonomy, and establishing clear consistency on constitutional principles of partnership and engagement. Secondly, we believe in listening. I firmly believe in the principle of "nothing about you without you." Thirdly, we believe in

partnership. A future strong and stable relationship between the UK and each of the overseas territories must be built on mutual respect and inclusion; indeed, that involves all Government Departments, not just the FCDO. We also believe that rights come with responsibilities. In our British family, we share common values, obligations and principles including a robust commitment to democracy, the rule of law and liberty, and the protection of human rights, including, as rightly mentioned, those rights of LGBT+ people, women and girls, and people living with disabilities. We also believe in the advancement of good governance and, of course, ensuring proper democratic accountability and regulation.

Finally, let me be clear that for as long as the people of the overseas territories wish to remain part of this British family, we will robustly defend their security, autonomy and rights. As has been rightly pointed out, that is not least in the case of the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar, where a firm commitment to self-determination has been expressed by their peoples. That is Labour's commitment, and I know that it is shared by many across the House. We would also move away from the notion that one size fits all. It does not when it comes to the overseas territories.

We need to ensure that our constitutional relations are diverse and nuanced in law and practice. On sanctions, I agree with the point made that in many circumstances we saw the overseas territories and crown dependencies move faster than the UK Government in implementing robust sanctions regimes. We have also heard that, in many decisions, whether on our relationship with Europe, trade negotiations or climate negotiations, the overseas territories have not been heard, respected or engaged in processes at the heart of Government.

We also want to see transparency in how the territories are administered. I believe that many overseas territories have called for a code of conduct for governors and for robust processes and consistency in how they operate.

James Sunderland: I had the unique experience of sharing an apartment with the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski)—it was an interesting dynamic for that week. It is true: I saw the hon. Member swimming with penguins. However, the point is a serious one. Having got to know him, I know that he is a clever guy and that he gets it. Will he please assure the House that Labour's policy is to respect the military capabilities, military basing and military strategic imperative that we have in some of our overseas territories?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely assure the hon. Member of that. Indeed, I will come to that specifically.

I want briefly to reference the issues that have come out of the debate in relation to people. We heard many examples, many of which I discussed with representatives from the overseas territories yesterday. There is the impact for citizens when things are not done right, whether in relation to travel, healthcare or education. We heard how Tristanians cannot open accounts with UK retail banks and how students who hold British overseas territories passports require student visas in some cases, but they do not get priority, so the processing time means that they often have to defer positions at higher education institutions. We heard about the issues

[Stephen Doughty]

that Bermuda faced with its passport codes and issues that impacted on travel opportunities. I share the concerns raised about girl guiding suddenly being withdrawn from overseas territories.

There have also been direct impacts from the poorly executed Brexit deal, not least in the Falklands and Anguilla. The Falklands fisheries now have to pay €17 million in tariffs on those crucial squid. I raised that issue in debates during that period. Perplexingly, a British overseas territories citizen is not eligible to use the passport e-gates at UK airports, despite having biometric passports, often produced in the same way as ours. However, people from the European economic area can use those gates. That seems an absurd situation. The Minister is listening and I hope that he takes that into consideration.

We have heard about the issues of infrastructure and access, particularly to the remote territories such as Tristan. Anguilla is looking to expand its runway and faces issues with water and infrastructure. Departments need to work together. It cannot just be the Foreign Office; it has to be the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Transport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and others.

We have heard a lot, rightly, about the environment. Our overseas territories play a crucial role, whether that be the marine protected area in the Pitcairn Islands, the national climate change policy of the Turks and Caicos Islands, St Helena's blue green agenda, Montserrat wanting to invest in renewable energy and dealing with the legacy of the volcanic eruption, or the Cayman Islands' conservation efforts. They play a crucial role not only in contributing to our climate change agenda and biodiversity but dealing first hand with the impact of climate change.

In my final minute I want to refer to security. We have a duty to protect and defend our citizens and our overseas territories, which the Opposition is resolutely committed to. We also have strategically important military bases and territories. In the face of geopolitical threats, whether from China, Russia or elsewhere, we must work closely with our overseas territories not only to defend their citizens but to recognise the strategic import of places such as Diego Garcia, Ascension, the Falklands and Gibraltar —places where the hon. and gallant Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) served. The Opposition are resolutely committed to that. We need to support them in their internal security. St Helena has not had Home Office support in checking watch lists and sanction lists. I hope that the Home Office can assist with that.

On Chagos there is a complex and nuanced set of issues. There is an historic injustice that I have rightly referred to in the past. We must balance national security, our compliance with international law and obligations, and the rights and wishes of the Chagos people, who have long suffered. I have heard their voices clearly. There are also environmental and biodiversity concerns, which I set out a few months ago.

The overseas territories are a crucial and indispensable part of our global British family. We must have a modern, respectful and engaged partnership with them all, and Labour will stand with them as part of that global British family.

3.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): I congratulate the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), on securing this debate. I welcome the opportunity to recognise the UK's long-standing and deep partnership with our overseas territories. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's commitment to all our British family, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) for his service, which needs to be recognised.

I would like to put on record the Government's appreciation for the Speaker's commitment to overseas territories and for the fantastic event that he hosted on Tuesday night. We appreciate all his work to support overseas territories, and their leaders and representatives, to progress discussions with key stakeholders over recent days. I join him in championing our British family.

The Minister for Overseas Territories, Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park, would have been delighted to take part in this debate. Since he sits in the other House, it is my honour to respond on behalf of the Government. I welcome the opportunity to recognise the UK's special relationship with our overseas territories. I acknowledge the representatives here with us in the Gallery today and the leaders who are actively involved in the Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council, which is literally in full swing, being hosted by Lord Goldsmith and attended by the Foreign Secretary. Together, UK Ministers and elected leaders of the overseas territories are discussing actions to support our shared goals, find solutions and work out how to tackle shared challenges. The Joint Ministerial Council presents an important opportunity to strengthen the UK's unique partnership with the territories and to celebrate our rich cultural and historical ties. Above all, it is a platform for this Government to reaffirm and demonstrate their first and overriding priority towards the overseas territories: to protect and promote the interests of British people.

The Government are committed to upholding our constitutional responsibilities and interests in the overseas territories. As was made clear in the 2023 integrated review refresh, we remain committed to protecting the United Kingdom's core national interests, ensuring the security and prosperity of the British people across the UK, Crown dependencies and the overseas territories.

The Prime Minister has recently asked each relevant Cabinet Minister to nominate a lead Minister responsible for the overseas territories within their Department. Lord Goldsmith, who is the Minister for the overseas territories, will convene a regular meeting of those Ministers as a ministerial group, to ensure that the UK meets its constitutional responsibilities. Indeed, several Ministers from the UK Government are meeting with JMC attendees today.

The Prime Minister has also agreed that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office should lead on a new cross-Government strategy for the overseas territories, working closely, in partnership, with our overseas territories, a point that was made by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), among many others. At this point, I am not able to say what the strategy will look like, but I am clear that the commitments in the 2012 White Paper remain relevant and that it will be developed in partnership

with—I stress the word “with”—the overseas territories. The timing of when that will be developed is being discussed in the JMC right now. I hope that helps to answer some of the questions raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), especially given her distinguished service working with the Minister responsible for the overseas territories.

We believe that this is the way forward, rather than setting up a new Department. Others have suggested that there should be MPs or some form of representation for the overseas territories in this House. So far, we have not had any formal representations from any territory on that matter. We recognise the important role of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the work it has done to share our love, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) said, and to support our OT family, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) set out. We have given important support to the work of the CPA.

I recognise the important work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), my parliamentary neighbour, in recognising that the work done in Parliament can have an impact on OTs. We look forward to seeing her work on procedure.

We also recognise the new inquiry on OTs that has been launched by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. We are pleased to see that. We often look forward to hearing views not just from politicians but from academia and other states. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) has said, which was echoed across the Chamber, only the people of each overseas territory can decide their own future and what relationship they want with the UK.

The UK is working in close partnership with each territory. The overseas territories have first call on the UK aid budget and there is an uplift in support for ODA-eligible territories. The UK has provided £85 million of official development assistance to support St Helena, Montserrat, Tristan da Cunha and the Pitcairn Islands. That is an increase of £1.2 million from the previous year.

Alicia Kearns: He mentions Montserrat. There is currently no working ambulance on the whole of Montserrat, as the only ambulance on the island is currently broken down. Could my right hon. Friend say how we can get an ambulance out there, using the ODA budget or by some other means? Alternatively, perhaps colleagues could reach out to local organisations to see if anyone has an ambulance they could donate. This is an urgent issue.

David Rutley: I understand my hon. Friend's point. A lot of detailed questions have been asked in the debate; I will pick them up and make sure that the relevant Departments follow up on them.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: I will, but then I need to make progress because Madam Deputy Speaker is giving me an eye, and we know what that means.

Dame Meg Hillier: I thank the Minister for giving way. I was recently in conversation with my opposite number, the chair of the public accounts committee in

Montserrat. That committee has concerns about some expenditure from the governor general's office but has been told by the British Government, as have I, that it is not possible for the committee to have sight of it. I recognise that there are challenges in a small jurisdiction, but I would be grateful if I could talk to the relevant Minister about the matter, because I am quite concerned.

David Rutley: I will gladly arrange that meeting.

We are supporting the overseas territories with funding dedicated to constitutional and international obligations on the environment and climate, and exciting work has been taking place in that respect.

I highlight the work that we are doing in preparation for this year's hurricane season. From 1 June, HMS Dauntless—which, importantly, has a helicopter on board—will provide persistent maritime presence in the Caribbean to offer humanitarian assistance and disaster response.

Many Members talked about the importance of providing security support. We have done that and will do more of that, particularly in respect of the challenges faced by the Turks and Caicos Islands. As the Minister for the Americas and Caribbean, I am well sighted as to the situation in Haiti. We continue to work with international interlocutors in like-minded states to see how we can provide support for that situation. We are providing electronic border systems for the Turks and Caicos Islands, along with maritime surveillance aircraft, which will be a real help.

Members made many points and I am afraid I will not be able to answer them all. We continue to work with the Falklands to mitigate the impact of tariffs on fisheries and we are open to all opportunities to do so.

We are making progress, and will continue to ask for progress to be made, on registers of beneficial ownership. Sanctions apply and are being applied by overseas territories. Frozen Russian assets in the territories amount to more than 9 billion US dollars. The sanctions are biting and playing an important role.

Amanda Milling: Will my hon. Friend give way?

David Rutley: This is the last one; then I had better make progress.

Amanda Milling: Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the overseas territories for their implementation of sanctions? This time last year, the speed and volume of the sanctions coming through was enormous and it was a huge task to implement them. I really do think we should commend the overseas territories for that.

David Rutley: Hear, hear—absolutely. It is important work. We recognise, however, that further progress needs to be made on registers of beneficial ownership, and we will do all we can to provide support for that work over the weeks and months ahead.

Points were made about Gibraltar. We are of course working hard with the Government of Gibraltar to make progress, and we remain confident that, with flexibility on all sides, a deal is possible. I understand the points about the University of Gibraltar; we will work with the Department for Education on that.

Important points were made about the British Indian Ocean Territory and the sovereignty-related issues there. Although the negotiations are clearly between the UK

[David Rutley]

and Mauritius, we recognise the diversity of views among Chagossians. We take those views seriously and have a further engagement event planned for the coming weeks.

I think I have probably taken as much time as you will allow, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to take more, but I conclude by reiterating the fact that the UK shares an important relationship with the overseas territories. We are all part of the British family, and that relationship is built on respect and trust. We will continue to work in close partnership to strengthen our relationship yet further in the years and decades ahead.

3.53 pm

Alicia Kearns: I thank all my right hon. and hon. Friends throughout the House for taking the time to contribute to today's debate. We too infrequently get to hear the views and wishes of our friends—our family—from the overseas territories. I hope that everyone in the Gallery today has felt heard and listened to, and that we have given voice to some of the issues—I definitely tried to cover an encyclopaedia of issues in my speech. I hope we have shown that we believe strongly in their self-determination, that we believe strongly in what they bring to our family, and how important they are to all of us in this place.

I have just suggested to my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), a fellow member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, that the Committee might invite the governors of all the overseas territories to give evidence to us over the next year, so that they can speak to us directly about the issues that matter most to the territories they represent.

Let me end by thanking all our visitors very much for coming here. I am aware that we got them into the Chamber an hour and a half before the debate started! I also thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the commitment of this Chair to our overseas family.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady, and add my own warm welcome to our friends from the overseas territories.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House is committed to upholding the interests of British Overseas Territories and their citizens; recognises the special historical, cultural, and social bonds that bind the United Kingdom and Overseas Territories; and calls upon the Government to ensure that British Overseas Territories citizens' rights as British citizens are upheld, to defend the sovereignty and borders of Overseas Territories from foreign powers, and to consider the unique circumstances of each Territory when formulating policies which affect them.

No Recourse to Public Funds

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I must just warn Members that because of the limited time for this debate, I will expect them to speak for about six minutes.

3.56 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of no recourse to public funds.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for enabling the debate to take place, and I thank the Members on both sides of the House who supported the application. The Register of Members' Financial Interests records my support from the Refugee, Asylum and Migrant Policy project. I also thank Praxis, Citizens UK, and the Refugee & Migrant Forum of Essex and London for helping me to prepare for the debate.

During the pandemic, hard-working, law-abiding families, working legally in the UK but subject to no recourse to public funds, were especially hard hit. Their wages stopped because their jobs stopped, and NRPF also prevented them from claiming benefits. They had to turn to food banks, as a huge number did in my constituency, where Bonny Downs Community Association, Newham Community Project and others did an amazing job. Before the pandemic, if people with no recourse to public funds lost their job they just got another one, but the pandemic made that impossible.

The complete absence of help came as a shock to, for one, the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). At the Liaison Committee in May 2020, two months into lockdown, I told him about a hard-working, law-abiding family in my constituency, including two British-born children, who were destitute because the father had lost his income. The transcript of the Committee meeting records the following:

"Hang on, Stephen. Why aren't they eligible for universal credit, employment and support allowance or any of the other benefits".

I said that it was because of no recourse to public funds. They had been here for years, but for 10 years, NRPF meant no help at all. The Prime Minister said:

"I am going to have to come back to you on that, Stephen. Clearly people who have worked hard for this country, who live and work here, should have support of one kind or another...I will find out how many there are in that position and we will see what we can do to help."

He was right to say that

"people who have worked hard for this country, who live and work here, should have support of one kind or another".

Unfortunately, however, the Prime Minister's opinion was not his Government's policy. He did not find out how many were in that position, because the Home Office does not know.

No recourse to public funds is a condition imposed on people with temporary visas. The current version dates from 2012, and bars access to social security benefits. According to the House of Commons Library, 1.6 million people have leave to remain with no recourse to public funds. The Migration Observatory at Oxford University estimates that the total includes 225,000 children. Typically, families are on the so-called 10-year track to indefinite leave, like the family that I mentioned

to the Prime Minister. That family were in the UK on student visas for several years, but after their two children were born, they started on the 10-year track. They renew their leave every two and a half years, paying at least £2,608 per adult in visa fees each time plus additional fees for their children. No recourse to public funds applies throughout. The Home Office has been taking 11 months, on average, to process these re-applications, so for months people cannot prove their status. Thousands who are still permitted to work while awaiting the determination have wrongly lost their jobs as a result. After 10 years, they can apply for indefinite leave and, when they secure that, NRPF no longer applies.

The Home Office does not know how many people in the UK have no recourse to public funds. That, I think, is understandable. Once people are given leave to remain, the Home Office does not know who departs. Parliamentary questions have shown, however, that the Home Office cannot even tell us how many people it gave leave to remain last year with the NRPF condition attached, apparently because of the inadequacy of its computer systems. Last November, I asked in written question 93420 when the new Atlas case working system would tell us the number of applicants who have no recourse to public funds attached to their leave to remain. The answer came back that,

“remaining areas will complete their transition to Atlas in 2023, after which time it will be possible to explore what further information can be produced using the new system.”

I wonder whether the Minister can update us when he winds up. By when does he now think the Home Office will at least know how many people it imposes NRPF on each year?

Citizens Advice estimates that 329,000 parents have had NRPF, many for 10 years, which is most of somebody's childhood, whereas 40% have been in the UK for more than five years and 10%, like the family I told the then Prime Minister about, have been here for more than a decade. Families with no recourse to public funds can make a change of circumstances application for exemption from NRPF if they are destitute or heading for destitution. Last year, 3,200 families applied and 60% were successful. I welcome regular publication of the data about that. Recent court decisions have required immigration rule changes to allow disability and child welfare to be considered, but those decisions do not yet seem to have been reflected in change of circumstances decisions. A lot of families do not know about the change in circumstances process.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend mentions recent court cases. It was particularly disgraceful that the Green-led administration in Brighton refused to support people with no recourse to public funds during the covid in-period. Shelter took the council to court—where the council spent huge amounts of public money to defend its actions—and won. Is it not the case that housing is a public health issue and, just like access to healthcare, which is excluded from no recourse to public funds, access to basic housing facilities should not require an exemption but should automatically be allowed?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I believe that his local council is no longer Green party controlled. He is absolutely right.

The change of circumstances process is cumbersome and difficult. With specialist help from an organisation such as the Unity Project or Praxis, people are likely to succeed, but lots of families do not know those organisations and cannot access the help. If someone is in Brighton, they cannot access a support organisation in Islington. It is very troubling that many families are missing out because applying is so hard.

The Select Committee on Work and Pensions unanimously recommended two specific changes. The first was that no family with children should have the condition for longer than five years, recognising that for many it is 10 years at the moment. The second was that where the children are British citizens, as is often the case, child benefit should be paid in relation to those children even when the parents have no recourse to public funds. When families have been here for five years, or when children are already British citizens, they are here for good. We should be supporting children to fulfil their potential future contribution to our society. We will all lose out by denying them that support. It makes no sense to impose destitution on the families of children who will be in Britain for the rest of their life. The Government rejected those modest cross-party recommendations, and I hope the Minister will think again. The current policy is contrary to the national interest.

The pandemic highlighted the perilous situation of people with no recourse to public funds, and the latest Trussell Trust data show that food bank demand is sharply up again. In the cost of living crisis, families with no recourse to public funds are being clobbered once more, which is the trigger for this debate. Low-income families with no recourse to public funds are ineligible for cost of living support because they are ineligible for the benefits that passport people to that support. They are not eligible for the £900 cost of living payment this year or the £600 cost of living payment last year, for the £300 pensioner payment, for the £150 disability payment or for the warm home discount.

Battling through the current crisis without the support everyone else receives is extraordinarily hard. The Select Committee took evidence from parents with no recourse to public funds, and a Conservative colleague on the Committee rightly described their evidence as “harrowing.” Having no recourse to public funds leaves families in desperate situations.

Praxis, which supports families in my constituency, calculates that a two-parent, two-child family with both parents working and earning the national living wage are entitled to just over £11,000 of support this financial year, including cost of living support, universal credit and child benefit. If the same family had no recourse to public funds, they would be entitled to £195—the saving from the energy price guarantee. No assessment has been made of the impact on children in low-income families with no recourse to public funds of the non-availability of the support being provided to other families in identical situations, but not much imagination is needed to work that out.

The household support fund is paid out through local authorities. When it was introduced, councils did not know whether they were allowed to support people with no recourse to public funds. The Government advice was that councils should take their own legal advice on whether or not they are allowed to use the household support fund for that purpose. At last, paragraph 45 of the Government guidance on the household support fund states that, from 1 April 2023:

[Sir Stephen Timms]

“Authorities can provide a basic safety net support to an individual, regardless of their immigration status, if there is a genuine care need that does not arise solely from destitution, for example if...they have serious health problems; there is a risk to a child’s wellbeing... Authorities must use their judgement to decide what legal powers and funding can be used to support individuals who are ineligible for public funds”.

The Government guidance remains somewhat unclear, but the first point is welcome and overdue.

On the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), Crisis reports that 6% of the people it supported last year had NRPF. St Mungo’s points out that rising food, energy and rent costs are increasing rough sleeping. More NRPF families will be on the street, and others will be stuck in insecure, overcrowded housing with long-term damaging impacts on children who will be here forever.

One parent told the Select Committee:

“My 5-year-old kept asking, ‘Mum, why are other children entitled and I am not?’ I struggled to answer.”

We should not be doing that to children who will spend their life in this country.

Maryam, a 23-year-old domestic violence survivor with two daughters, was referred to the Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women’s Organisation in north London by children’s social services. She had no recourse to public funds, so she was financially dependent on her husband. She had no choice but to stay in an abusive relationship for four years, as NRPF meant she had no way out.

Praxis has surveyed families with no recourse to public funds over the past month: two thirds are struggling to afford food; 59% have been forced into debt to pay for essentials, about three times the proportion of the population as a whole; and half are relying on charities and food banks for basic needs, compared with 3% of the population as a whole.

The Chancellor announced welcome improvements in the Budget, as recommended by the Select Committee, to support people who are claiming universal credit with their childcare costs. That support is not available to working families with no recourse to public funds who are faced with unaffordable childcare, like everybody else. We cannot justify having this large group in the labour market at such a massive disadvantage compared with everyone else. I welcome the extension of care for disadvantaged two-year-olds to NRPF families. Access for those families to free school meals is now permanent as well, which I am pleased about.

Five years is long enough for a family to contribute into our welfare state before receiving from it. After half a decade, a family with British-born children is here for good. Will the Minister commit to considering extending child benefit to all British children, irrespective of their parents’ status, and allowing parents access to public funds after five years? Those are not radical changes. They are affordable, sensible reforms that will be advocated in an op-ed in *The Times* tomorrow that is co-authored by me and the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds). They were proposed unanimously by a Select Committee with a Conservative majority and they would support thousands of families during the biggest fall in living standards on record.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I will put a six-minute time limit on speeches.

4.11 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), who set out the complicated nature of this problem that the Government face. I will not repeat all the statistics he gave, particularly in view of the time.

The Minister for Immigration, who is on the Front Bench today, will recall that during the pandemic, the Everyone In project brought everybody off the streets, regardless of whether or not they had no recourse to public funds. However, we did not capture the data on those who had no recourse to public funds who were supported. When the Select Committee on Levelling-up, Housing and Communities took evidence, the Minister at the time could not even tell us how many people being housed under that scheme had no recourse to public funds. Of course, that means that those people almost certainly ended up returning to the streets, which is precisely not what we want.

It is right that people who come to this country, make it their home, contribute to the economy, work, pay their taxes and settle here should not have recourse to public funds in normal circumstances. That gives rise to the view among the public that people are making a direct contribution to the UK. However, the circumstances of the pandemic have changed things and we should recognise that. People who have NRPF clearly have difficulty in finding another job and they can then end up being destitute, and if their family is destitute, that is a disaster.

In certain circumstances, local authorities can, rightly, provide support for those who genuinely need additional care—but that is where it does not stem from destitution, and that is the problem we face. I am delighted that in the London Borough of Harrow, the council provides vital care to those with NRPF where it is appropriate. The council has made such provision in cases where parents have NRPF but dependent children are involved. Harrow children’s services and the team work closely together to ensure that cases are dealt with appropriately in a timely, cost-effective and productive manner, making best use of the resources available. Clearly, that is being provided under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and a process has to be followed. I hope that all local authorities are following the process to ensure that teams are alerted when there is a problem so that there is no delay in accessing help, particularly where a family is involved. The teams then work together with legal services to fully understand the duties, as well as the limits of the support they can give using public funds. Clearly, the provision will be paid until such time as the children need no further support from the local authority.

In June 2022—I ask my right hon. Friend the Minister to update us on this—there were around 166,000 people in various stages of the asylum system and, of course, those people have no recourse to public funds. Broadly speaking, they are not eligible for asylum support. Fifty-four per cent. of those people are from London boroughs alone. This is not just a London problem—it is a nationwide problem—but obviously London has a specific problem here.

At the time of those figures, including my constituency, London boroughs were supporting 2,089 households with accommodation or financial support. That amounted to a staggering cost of £40.6 million. Of those households, 576 represented adults with care needs, at an annual cost of £11.41 million, and 513 were adults with children

or dependent care leavers, at an annual cost of £10.87 million. That is a huge cost to the public purse, but not being financed properly by the Government.

Therefore, I am delighted, obviously, that the Government are looking at this particular aspect. I commend the Work and Pensions Committee for recommending some measures that would help and support those vulnerable people. As we know, each case is unique and has to be properly assessed, but local authorities need guidance. The public purse must be protected, but, equally, we must make sure that vulnerable people are not forced to sleep rough on our streets through no fault of their own. Some people who have come to this country and provided their expertise and help for a long time, suddenly find themselves out of a job with no place to live, no ability to pay their rent and no ability to support themselves. Those people deserve our support and help and should not to be treated in an inhumane fashion.

I recognise that this is a complicated area of public policy. I hope that, when he replies, the Minister can say what the Government are going to do to assist those in this position. The position of those people who have come to this country as immigrants seeking to help this country is very different from those who have arrived illegally. We must consider those two aspects separately. I hope the Minister will be able to answer that during his summing up and that we can see real measures that will improve the plight of those very vulnerable people who currently have no recourse to public funds.

4.17 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I agreed with much of what he and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), who has been a tireless campaigner on this issue, said. When I was on the Work and Pensions Committee, we raised the issue repeatedly, particularly during the pandemic.

I want to raise the clear link between no recourse to public funds and food insecurity. That was made very clear to us last year. I chaired a webinar discussion run by the Independent Food Aid Network. There were more than 150 participants, including experts by experience, food bank managers and third sector workers. It is clear that, even before the pandemic, asylum seekers and refugees disproportionately represented food bank users—3% of food bank usage, against 0.1% of the population. No recourse to public funds has proven to lead to that food insecurity and destitution, with almost half of all children with foreign-born parents living in the UK in poverty. Children with foreign-born parents constitute 25% of all children in the UK living in poverty. The pandemic exacerbated that particular hardship, as the right hon. Member for East Ham outlined, because people were out of work. They had no other support because they had a no recourse to public funds condition. If someone with that condition is subject to immigration control and has no access to public funds, it prohibits access to the most mainstream social security benefits and support, and services that are conditional on certain benefits, including things such as housing support, free school meals, where that is not a universal provision, and healthy start vouchers.

Tandy Nicole, a volunteer peer food researcher and expert by experience from the Govan Community Project, gave evidence to the webinar discussion and gave testimony

on the lived experience of asylum seekers facing food insecurity. She explained how the experience of someone with no recourse to public funds in accessing support is very different from that of a citizen who is eligible for public funds.

We expect asylum seekers to live on an amount per week that is equivalent to what a youth trainee, or YT, was getting paid in 1990. How do I know that? Because I was a youth trainee in 1990, earning what asylum seekers are expected to live on now, when I started my employment with Strathclyde Regional Council. When someone is asked to live on that amount of money, they have competing needs: toiletries, cleaning products, over-the-counter medication, clothing and internet access and phone data, both of which were particularly crucial during the pandemic. Those are all essential items that I would argue are needed for an individual to get by.

In her evidence, Tandy also emphasised the importance of looking at a person's overall needs. It is important to pay attention to health-related dietary needs and intolerances, religious dietary restrictions and other cultural preferences. That is what we have had to do with the many food projects I am involved with in Glasgow South West. We are opening pantries and larders to try to alleviate food bank use and give people dignity and choice, and we have had to take into consideration people's dietary restrictions and cultural preferences.

I will suggest some policy changes. I think there should be the right to work across the board for asylum seekers. The Government are making some advance in allowing asylum seekers to work in jobs on a restricted list, but I would like to see the right to work across the board. People should have access to public funds, such as universal credit and unemployment support, and certainly child benefit, as others have argued, to reduce hardship and poverty. When people at risk of poverty because of the no recourse to public funds condition get work, they find themselves in insecure work, zero-hours contracts and low-income jobs, and when they lose that work, it can be very detrimental, as the pandemic showed. It is really time for a policy change there.

We also need to reduce the time it takes asylum seekers to receive a decision. The Govan Community Project gave an example in that webinar discussion of someone who waited nine years to get a decision. That is far too long for someone to be put in that position. I hope the Minister will tell us how the Home Office is looking at this issue and ensuring that people get decisions in a timely manner. We also need to close the disconnect between the amount of support that asylum seekers are being expected to live on, and the amount provided to those on social security benefits. There should be crisis grants for all.

In closing, the right to food should exist for everyone. That requires a comprehensive, rights-based approach to tackling food insecurity, with a human rights Bill that incorporates social and economic rights, including that right to food.

4.23 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for helping to secure this debate and for the work his Committee has done on this issue. I will not repeat the important points that he helpfully laid out for the House, but I wanted to turn to some cases in my own constituency.

[*Dame Meg Hillier*]

Just after the lockdown, I went out doing a roving surgery and I met a man who worked as a hospital porter in my local hospital, earning £1,400 a month. He was working but had no recourse to public funds. He had been renting two rooms in a private rented property for him and his daughter, at £400 a room. When the landlady—understandably hit by challenges due to the pandemic—put the rent up to £550 a room, he and his then 17-year-old daughter had to share a room because there was no other option.

My constituent could not qualify for housing benefit and there was no prospect of promotion at work as a hospital porter, yet he was working in our NHS. In many ways, that underlines one of the big problems here: these are people who are working hard, contributing to society and paying their taxes and their national insurance, but getting nothing back in return. It is perhaps sometimes painted that we want to ensure that people are paying their way. Well, those people are paying their way, but in an area as expensive as Hackney, housing is well out of reach because of the way in which housing benefit is structured, and of course, they cannot have access to that anyway. The 10-year route to citizenship is a big issue here as well. It is very expensive for those concerned, who are often in this bracket. They pay the fees every two and a half years. I will get to asks later, but it would be a great help if the Minister were to look at how that worked and reduce the fees and timeframe.

Let us look at the issue across London. According to London Council figures, London boroughs spent about £53 million on supporting an estimated 2,881 households with no recourse to public funds in 2016-17—that was some years ago. It is difficult to assess the figures precisely. The estimated average total annual expenditure was nearly £1.7 million per borough, at an estimated average annual cost of nearly £19,000 per household, so it is not cost free. Somewhere in the system, people have to be picked up and that burden is falling on local authorities. At that point in 2016-17, for which we have reasonably reliable figures, the average time spent supporting cases was nearly two years.

A lot of that support is spent on accommodation, for the reasons that I have highlighted. In my borough, you cannot get a family home under the housing benefit cap, which affects everybody, but particularly the group in question and, of course, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and those who require support under the Children Act 1989. That means that it is a big issue. As an estimate, 3,000 children may be in households with no recourse to public funds across London. Other colleagues have made points about the need to support those children, who will not be going to live anywhere else. They will stay in this country and become, hopefully, taxpaying, working adults who contribute to society. We need to welcome and support them, rather than hindering them at an early stage in their development.

I have some quick asks of the Minister—well, not so quick for him to deliver, perhaps, but easy for me to ask. I thank Praxis and the NRPF Network for some of these thoughts—I have worked with Praxis in particular. Could the Home Office conduct a one-off case resolution exercise systematically ensuring that people, particularly those without indefinite leave to remain at this point, are getting regularised support, and that, if they do not qualify to stay, they are being put on the route to leave the country? That would resolve the matter.

What we have is a lot of people dribbling around the system. As one of the top-six customers of Home Office Ministers on immigration cases over 18 years—so not just in one Government—I have seen the problem of people waiting a long time for resolution of their cases. Even when they have exhausted their appeal rights, sometimes they are still dribbling around the system. We need proper returns preparation support for them to leave. Many of us London MPs will have those conversations with our constituents, telling them that they have reached the end of the line and need support to leave. So it works both ways, but where people are allowed to stay, we can get through that quickly and give them the recourse to public funds that they need.

On that point, we should end the 10-year route or, at the very least, reduce the fees. I know that the Minister is committed to trying to speed up the backlog on immigration cases. Every 30 months, people have to pay and go through the system again; they are just clogging up the queue. Really, there is not much difference in someone's life usually, and unless they have committed a horrendous crime or something that will obviously change their case, most people—I would hazard a guess of well over 95%—will just go through the system every 30 months and have to pay a fee. That comes out of their often meagre wages—even on good wages, it is quite challenging—and causes them real problems.

My right hon. Friend touched on data. How many people are affected by that? We need to understand and assess the impact and cost on local authorities. As I have said, saying, “You have to exist without recourse to public funds,” is not a cost-free option. At the moment, the Home Office cannot even tell us how many people need biometric residence permits and that is a big issue in my constituency. I hope that, when Atlas comes forward, it will be a start towards better data, but it would be helpful if the Minister updated us on its progress. Not being able to get data has been a long-standing woe of the Home Office, so I do not lay it all at the Minister's door, he will be glad to know. I will give him as much support as I can in getting that system running so that we can get data and ensure that people are properly supported.

As I have said, this is not cost free. We need to lift the restrictions. The number of people who applied for restrictions to be lifted rose—unsurprisingly—from 900 in the first quarter of 2020 to 6,000 in the second quarter of 2020. Even last year, 3,200 people applied to have those restrictions lifted and 60% of those requests were granted. If the Minister looked at that issue, he could free up a lot of time in the Home Office for the civil service to deal with getting people through the immigration system, rather than having them go through a system that eventually brings benefit, but very slowly.

4.29 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for setting out such a great foundation on which to have this conversation. He brought such a lot of information to the table about the number of people, as far as we can tell, who are subject to no recourse to public funds and some of the issues they face.

I do an awful lot of work with the No Recourse North East Partnership in the north-east of Scotland, which was set up because all of us who deal with

casework and people with problems were seeing a massive increase in the number of those coming to us with no recourse to public funds. Unlike Glasgow, which has been a dispersal authority for a period, we did not have the legal or charitable support in place in our city to provide people with that level of legal immigration advice. We saw a massive increase in numbers in the last few years, and that is why the group began.

During that time, we have struggled so hard to find out how many individuals are subject to no recourse to public funds, so that we can make the case for there being more specialised support for people in our city. In Aberdeen we have the highest percentage of non-UK born citizens outside London. We have a significant amount of immigration in our city, and that is a good thing to be celebrated, but it brings with it the problem we are seeing of an increase in the level of destitution as a result of people having no recourse to public funds.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) mentioned the consistency in applying guidance under section 17 of the Children Act. I can tell him that it is not being applied consistently across councils. That is partly because the guidance from Government is not as good as it could be in directing local authorities as to what they can and cannot do and is leaving it up to them. If local authorities have legal departments that are particularly scared of litigation, for example, they might be less keen to support people. If individuals have “no recourse to public funds” stamped on their immigration documents, they might be less keen to seek support because they are terrified that it might impact their future immigration status. They are terrified that they might not eventually be able to apply for leave to remain if they claim something. That guidance is not as consistent as it could be.

The right hon. Member for East Ham mentioned domestic abuse. I tabled a ten-minute rule Bill a number of years ago about extending the destitution domestic violence concession. There is still a gap. We still see local women’s organisations up and down these islands struggling because they cannot apply for housing benefit for people who have no recourse to public funds unless they get the destitution domestic violence concession, which is not applicable across the board and is not a guarantee. We cannot see women’s aid organisations go under, but it means that individuals are in a situation where they might have to stay in abusive relationships or go back to abusive partners simply in order to feed their children. We should not be doing this. As has been made clear, in so many of these cases, these are children who were born here and will live here their entire lives, and they are being directly discriminated against by these policies just because of where their parents were born—not because of anything to do with the way they have lived their lives.

What are the other options for people who have no recourse for public funds? We have heard various arguments from Ministers in the past. They have said, “Well, people can just go back to the country they have come from.” Some people with no recourse to public funds are stateless. How can someone who is stateless go back to the country they came from? The country might not even exist anymore. Ministers have suggested, “That person could just go back to Nigeria,” but the person has never been to Nigeria in their entire life. We are asking them to go back to a country in which they have

no home and no support and that their family has shunned them from. They are living here and contributing to our economy.

Imagine if everybody with no recourse to public funds decided to go off to another country—we would have so few people working in the caring professions, on the frontline of our NHS and as hospital porters, in those jobs that we desperately need people to do. If the Government are so desperate to crack down on illegal migration, they need to make the legal migration routes slightly more pleasant at least, because at the moment they are deeply discriminatory.

We are seeing children being put into hunger and poverty as a result of this—children who are at no fault and are entirely innocent. If it were up to me, I would not have “no recourse to public funds” as a status at all. If we are looking for an interim measure, the measures on child benefit that have been put forward by the Work and Pensions Committee are incredibly positive. The Government also need to give serious consideration to the rules around housing benefit, particularly in cases that involve domestic abuse, because we cannot have women’s aid organisations struggling with this issue in a way that means they cannot support women, resulting in women having to stay in abusive relationships. We cannot see that happen.

Lastly, on the point about the 30 months payment that was mentioned by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), what are people getting for the money that they are putting in? They are certainly not getting a good service. I am aware that the Minister is doing his best to improve it, but the Home Office service is not great. People are being asked to pay that money for the pleasure of staying in a country where they cannot even afford to feed their children because of the lack of support. It is absolutely shameful, and it really needs to improve.

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

4.35 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) for bringing this debate before the House, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

No recourse to public funds is a critical issue in my constituency, as it is to many of the Members who have spoken this afternoon. To give some of the history, it has been a visa condition since 1980. Its origin more recently is in Labour’s Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, and to me, it feels like it is steeped in myths about people coming over here to claim our benefits. Given the paucity of such benefits and the lack of knowledge people moving to the UK have of the inner workings of the benefits system, that has always seemed particularly unlikely to me. What we have instead is an expensive immigration system—as hon. Members have pointed out—and people caught in a double whammy where they pay a huge amount of money to be here, they are not a burden to the taxpayer, and they get very little back out of the system. They are, in fact, paying in more than most of us.

What this status has caused is poverty, destitution and an increasing strain on individuals and families, including those children who have been born here.

[Alison Thewliss]

There is also an increasing strain on charities and public services. Praxis has documented that two thirds of people with no recourse to public funds are struggling to feed their children. Some 59% are forced into debt to pay for essentials, and 50% are turning to food banks and charities for support, all at a time when the cost of living is soaring. The right hon. Member for East Ham correctly pointed out that the Prime Minister did not know about no recourse to public funds, and only on Tuesday this week, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury still did not know what no recourse to public funds meant when I asked him in this House. I said, “What happens to people who cannot afford to pay for their heating?” and he said, “They should just claim through the system.” They cannot—that is the very nature of no recourse to public funds. Ministers should really catch themselves up on the impact that their policies are having.

Another part of the problem is that we do not know how many people are affected by this status, both as a whole and within our individual constituencies. There are estimated figures of around 1.6 million people, but if we do not know how many of the people in our constituencies have this status, we will not know what support they might need and how to respond to those needs. Quite often, as the hon. Members for Hackney South and Shoreditch and for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) mentioned, it falls to charities and local government to pick up the pieces when everything else breaks down. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West correctly identified that this is causing huge food insecurity. I have spoken to Audrey at the Glasgow South East food bank in my constituency, which is seeing increasing numbers of people on no recourse to public funds coming forward and looking for help.

As a constituency MP, my heart sinks when I see somebody's biometric residence permit stamped with “no public funds” in the back, because I know that that will limit my ability to help and support them, and there are people who desperately need that support. I have a constituent who has a disability and no recourse to public funds, so he could not get a disabled persons railcard because that is the gateway to getting that support. I had another gentleman who was medically unfit to work and on no recourse to public funds—what is he supposed to do in those circumstances? *The Ferret* reported recently on a family of five left homeless because of no recourse to public funds who were sleeping in a borrowed car in the streets of Glasgow. That is inhumane in our society.

Also, problems arise that people could not have anticipated or expected. I recently had a case where international students were being housed inappropriately in accommodation that was found to be unsafe, and all of a sudden, 40 families were put out with nowhere to live. The local authority stepped in and was able to help, but only on a limited basis, because those families could not claim benefits, housing support or anything else because of no recourse to public funds. The safety net has massive holes in it when it comes to these groups of people. The Minister closes his eyes to these real plights and circumstances that are caused by no recourse to public funds. When these crises happen and when there are those changes in circumstances, people are unable to get the support that they need.

The Scottish Government have done what they can. They have had the “Ending destitution together” strategy along with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. They are trying their best to try to plug these gaps and fill these holes, but without an understanding of the numbers involved or of how to reach those people—as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North mentioned, they may have good reasons for not wanting to identify themselves—it makes it difficult to provide the support that is required. We may have two households next door to each other in identical circumstances, working the same jobs with children the same age, but one household is not entitled to support, because they have no recourse to public funds status. That seems fundamentally unfair.

The Scottish Government are determined to build a country where everyone is treated with fairness and respect. No recourse to public funds prevents Scotland from doing so. I look forward to an independent Scotland where we can build a more equal and fair society and we can be rid of the Home Office and its cruel hostile environment once and for all.

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

4.40 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this important debate, and I pay particular tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), who has campaigned on this issue on behalf of his constituents and others across the country with such vigour and determination. I well remember his question to the Prime Minister in the Liaison Committee. It was a moment where he brought to the fore this often hidden issue. He made some important points across the board and reminded us of the particular problems that people with no recourse to public funds had during the pandemic.

I thank everyone for their contributions to what has been a calm and sensible debate on the issues at hand. The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) talked about the particular problem that London boroughs have. As a Croydon MP, I am, I think, in the top 10 for immigration cases in the Home Office, and I have dealt with many people with no recourse to public funds. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) talked about the increase in food bank usage and its disproportionate use. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) talked about that 10-year route to citizenship and the struggles that people have with that.

I should start by saying that we in the Labour party will always value the vital contribution played by migrants, including those here on a short-term visa, in keeping the wheels of our economy turning and the heart of our public services beating. We have a priority to ensure that Government and businesses are investing first and foremost in skilling up home-grown talent to fill job vacancies, but we recognise the vital contribution that migrant workers play in supporting Britain's economy to strengthen and our people to prosper. That is all part of the firm and fair well-managed system of migration that the Labour party is committed to delivering.

Unfortunately, the policies of the Conservative Government have hit those workers and their families extremely hard, like so many of us. The cost of living

crisis that we now face has been difficult for all of us, but it has been particularly challenging for those on low incomes and even more so for those with no recourse to public funds, such as those on short-term work visas who are on the pathway to British citizenship, as has been mentioned, their family members or those seeking asylum. They cannot access critical Government services such as the additional means-tested cost of living payment for poorer households, the additional cost of living payment for pensioners entitled to the winter fuel payment or the disability cost of living payment for people in receipt of disability-related benefits. That has consequences.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) talked about research by Praxis from April this year. It found that two thirds of parents surveyed had struggled to afford to feed their children because of the rising cost of living, with 59% having been forced into debt to afford the cost of basic essentials and 50% of those who cannot access public support relying on charities and food banks to meet their basic needs. These statistics are a damning indictment of the mismanagement of our economy over the past 13 years, and of the impact of the cost of living crisis on individuals with no recourse to public funds and their children.

The Labour party recognises that migrant workers and those on low pay often face other specific challenges. The Labour party is particularly concerned about working conditions and enforcement. Many of those affected by this policy are in low-paid work, in which their wages have failed to keep up with inflation, or they are forced into working underground in insecure jobs with precarious conditions.

In this context, it should be noted that there are particular vulnerabilities for people working on the minimum wage, given the lack of robust enforcement action from the Government. For instance, the number of complaints from workers received by HMRC's national minimum wage unit has more than doubled from 1,500 five or six years ago to 3,300 last year. At the same time, there have been only nine prosecutions for non-payment of the national minimum wage in the entire period since 2015. In a report published in 2021, Focus on Labour Exploitation found that the UK's overall ratio of inspectors to workers is approximately 0.4 inspectors per 10,000 workers. This is less than half the International Labour Organisation's recommended ratio of 1:10,000. In practice, this means that a UK employer can on average expect an inspection by the HMRC national minimum wage team just once every 500 years.

Part of the issue is that the Government's labour market enforcement agencies read like an alphabet soup, with the GLAA, or the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, the EASI, or the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate, and the HMRC's living wage enforcement team. Does the Minister acknowledge that the level of resources allocated to enforcing the minimum wage and other workplace rights is entirely inadequate to provide adequate protection against exploitation? Will he reaffirm the commitment made in the Conservatives' 2019 manifesto that his party will, before the next election, create a single labour market enforcement body to tackle exploitation and poor conditions?

Further to this, it is the Government's stated position, as set out in the Immigration Act 2014, that their no recourse to public funds policy is intended to ensure that people support themselves and achieve financial

independence. Does the Minister not agree that, unless they have genuine access to adequately paid work, such independence inevitably remains out of reach? Does the Minister accept that it is a shocking indictment of this Government's record that there is such a high and growing number of migrants facing in-work poverty?

Much has already been said at the start and throughout the debate about the lack of data and the Home Office not routinely collecting data on the overall number of people subject to NRPF restrictions. In December 2022, in a letter to the Work and Pensions Committee, the Immigration Minister wrote that the Department's transition to a new IT system, scheduled to be completed this year, would provide opportunities to capture more comprehensive data, but that until the transition was complete

"we are unable to make any commitment with regards to what further data we are able to publish".

Can he tell us what progress he has made on this front, and whether this will include information on the impact of these restrictions on families with children? The Work and Pensions Committee has recommended that the Government improve their guidance and practice on the social security entitlements that people with no recourse to public funds already have, so can the Minister tell us what progress he is making on that?

We of course recognise that the challenges surrounding no recourse to public funds are extremely difficult as these issues are wrapped up in the dire state of the economy under the Conservatives and the weak state of the public finances. When Labour gets into government, we will look very closely at the public finances, the data around no recourse to public funds and the cost of any policy changes. We are looking very carefully at the recommendations from the Select Committee, particularly the two that were highlighted at the start, and I look forward to reading the article in *The Times* tomorrow by its Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham.

We want to make sure that people with no recourse to public funds, like all others, are free to fulfil their potential in order to play a full and fruitful role in a thriving Britain as part of the firm, fair and well-managed migration system that the Labour party is committed to delivering.

4.49 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): I congratulate both the Backbench Business Committee and in particular the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) on securing the debate and his characteristically thoughtful and intelligent approach which raised some very important questions, and it is right that the Government and indeed the whole House carefully consider them. I thank Members from all parts of the House for their contributions and the tone and thoughtful nature of this discussion. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) noted, as a former Local Government Secretary I have been interested in this issue for some time and in fact took the decision not only to create the Everyone In programme but to ensure that, as the name suggested, it included those who had no recourse to public funds. I appreciate the difficulties some of those individuals have found themselves in, particularly during the unique circumstances of the pandemic, which put huge pressure

[Robert Jenrick]

on both them and, as the right hon. Member for East Ham reminded me before the debate, their families back home in their countries of origin, some of whom might have been sending them help in times of straitened circumstances but were not able to do so during that particularly difficult period.

The right hon. Gentleman and others across the House are clearly aware of the context of NRPF policy, which has evolved over decades, but it might be helpful to set that out again. It is a well-established principle that migrants coming to the UK should be able to maintain and support themselves and their families without posing a burden on the welfare system. Successive Governments have taken the view that access to benefits and other publicly funded services should in general reflect the strength of a migrant's connections to the UK and, in the main, only become available to migrants when they have become settled here with indefinite leave to remain.

We operate a comparatively permissive legal migration system in this country, enabling people to come here particularly for work and study purposes, and with respect to work at a relatively low salary threshold of approximately £26,000 per year plus other conditions. In order to maintain a relatively permissive legal migration system, it is important that we have regard for the taxpayer and encourage people to come who are able to look after themselves and their families. The alternative would be to tighten the legal migration system, and, for example, as some argue, to increase the salary threshold considerably. There are pros and cons to either approach, but I think there is broad consensus across the House that NRPF is required although we must manage it carefully to ensure that people who are in this country, particularly for a sustained period of time, can live appropriately and decently and we look after those in the most challenging situations. The position the Government therefore take is to ensure that those seeking to establish a life in the UK must do so on a basis that prevents burden on the taxpayer and promotes integration, and the vast majority of temporary migrants coming to visit, study or work here are subject to NRPF as a result.

It is recognised that some migrants will find themselves at risk of destitution, as I have said, and a response to that would be to say they can return home to their own country, but I appreciate that that is challenging in some circumstances and we do not want people to be in periods of sustained destitution in the United Kingdom. Appropriate safeguards have been introduced for circumstances whereby an individual is destitute or at risk of imminent destitution. Migrants with permission under the family or private life routes, permission outside the rules on the basis of article 8 of the European convention on human rights or the Hong Kong British national overseas route, can apply for free to have the NRPF condition lifted by making a "change of conditions" application. The latest data published in February, for quarter 4 of 2022, shows that 68% of the decisions taken on "change of conditions" applications were granted and that the Home Office and its associated organisations have now restored that process to pre-pandemic levels, which is the right thing to do. We have provided flexibility around the immediate impact on immigration status for accessing public funds. Families are no longer automatically moved from the five-year to the 10-year route to settlement

when their NRPF condition is lifted; their circumstances are reassessed when they next apply for permission to stay, and they can remain on the five-year route only if they continue to meet all the requirements.

To give proper effect to the Government's schemes in response to the cost of living crisis, the Home Office ensured that those with NRPF could access the measures as intended: for example, the energy bills support scheme, which has delivered £400 non-repayable Government discounts on electricity bills to help households in Great Britain, as well as the council tax rebate for those living in certain council tax bands. Subject to the relevant income thresholds, those with NRPF can access free school meals and early years education for two-year-olds. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman both for welcoming that and for having played a part in encouraging the Government to do so.

Statutory benefits including statutory sick pay, statutory maternity pay and contribution-based jobseeker's allowance are accessible to all those who have made sufficient tax contributions, including those with NRPF. Local authorities can provide basic safety-net support regardless of immigration status. I take the points made by a number of hon. Members about the variable application of that by local authorities and the guidance that the Home Office provides. We have a responsibility to improve those things.

Kirsty Blackman: May I check whether the Minister is making a commitment from the Dispatch Box to have a look at the guidance and ensure that it is as clear as it can be and applied consistently by local authorities?

Robert Jenrick: I am happy to do so, because that is a valid point that has been raised.

In the limited time that I have available, I would like to address the important question raised about the quality of data. As the right hon. Gentleman noted, data in this area will always be imprecise because, by its nature, it is hard for the Home Office to accurately assess the number of individuals in the UK in these circumstances, and particularly the cohort who have entered the UK illegally. However, it is right that we understand the number of people to whom we are granting leave in the UK who are part of the NRPF cohort.

In answer to the right hon. Gentleman, we have previously said that the right time to do that will be when we have completed the migration from the case information database to the new Atlas system, which is expected to be in the coming months. I am happy to commit to him today that, as soon as that is in place, we should publish statistics on the number of individuals subject to NRPF to whom the Home Office is granting leave. If I may, I will revert to him with a more precise date and our current estimate of when we will be able to do that. I hope that that is at least one useful outcome for him from his investigations and from the debate.

With that, I will bring my remarks to a close and thank him once again for organising the debate.

4.58 pm

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to everyone who has supported the debate and contributed to it, including those who have delayed their return to Scotland to do so. I am also grateful for the tone of the Minister's response. I welcome the point that he made at the end about giving us information about when, in the next few months, the data will be available.

Let me underline the two key recommendations from the Work and Pensions Committee, reflecting the reality that children in families who have been here for five years and children who are already British citizens are here for good. First, families with children should automatically be exempted from NRPF after, at most, five years. Secondly, where the children are British citizens, child benefit should be payable, notwithstanding their parents having no recourse to public funds. It cannot be right for families in otherwise identical circumstances doing the same jobs to be £11,000 a year worse off even after they have been here for years because of the impact of the NRPF condition. It is, as others have said, a straightforward question of fairness. I am encouraged by the tone of what the Minister said and I hope that we will see some significant changes in this area in the coming months. It would be in everybody's interests and in the national interest for that to happen.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of no recourse to public funds.

Economic Aid to Sri Lanka

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

5 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I am grateful to have secured this debate on the UK's economic aid to Sri Lanka. It is a great pleasure to see the Minister in his place.

My constituency is home to many members of the Sri Lankan diaspora, many of whom still have family in the country. Therefore, the economic and political circumstances of Sri Lanka are important to many of them and, indeed, to me. I thank all the constituents who regularly make contact to update me on the situation in the country. I have also been fortunate to be in contact with many sections of the Sri Lankan community and charities across the UK, such as the Sylvia Lanka Foundation, through my chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on Sri Lanka.

It goes without saying that the economic situation in Sri Lanka has been dire and remains so. The roots of the problem go beyond the global economic situation created as a result of the covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. For some years now, Sri Lanka has been undergoing severe macroeconomic stresses. Pre-existing conditions have simply been exacerbated by international circumstances. At points, the economy has been overvalued. Unnecessary populist reforms by the previous Government were mishandled, with significant tax cuts leading to a huge decrease in tax revenues, with an estimated loss at one point of over £1 billion. A severely misjudged ban on the import of chemical fertilisers led to a 30% annual drop in farming yields. Despite a reversal of the ban following protests, the damage was already done. In the throes of an economic crisis, the short-lived ban led to food shortages and heightened inflation.

A particularly important industry affected by the economic crisis has been tourism. Tourism to Sri Lanka once contributed 5% of the country's GDP, and it saw a peak of over 2.25 million visitors in 2018. However, in 2019 the dreadful Easter bombings claimed more than 250 lives, and tourism struggled as a result. Before the industry had an opportunity to recover covid-19 struck, and visitors have slumped to just over 700,000 this year. Estimates put its contribution to the economy as low as 0.8%. That has impacted hundreds of thousands of jobs. The UK is Sri Lanka's third largest source of tourists. I hope that UK tourism will increase, allowing a full return and boosting that vital sector.

All that, combined with congestion at ports in Colombo that has led to a lack of essential supplies such as pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, means that the situation in Sri Lanka is extremely worrying. Despite Sri Lanka taking great strides to reduce overall poverty over many years, the World Bank's latest report in April estimated that the economic situation has led to the worst poverty levels since 2009, with the lower-middle income poverty rate going from 11% in 2019 to 27% today.

Currently, there are few signs of economic recovery. The International Monetary Fund predicts that the Sri Lankan economy will contract by 3.1% this year, on top of an 8.7% decrease in GDP last year. The global response has been mixed. It is the view of many that the

[Dr Matthew Offord]

Sri Lankan Government should have approached the International Monetary Fund much sooner than it did. In May last year, Sri Lanka defaulted on its debts, failing to pay back £63 million in interest payments. After lengthy negotiations, and hard work by the international community and the Government of Sri Lanka, in March the IMF approved a £2.4 billion fund to restore stability to the Sri Lankan economy and assist in unlocking its growth potential.

So far, the UK's initial response has rightly been focused on humanitarian assistance. I am pleased that Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon announced a £3 million package of support at the UN General Assembly in September last year. I know the provision of pharmaceutical and medical supplies has been a great relief to many.

Beyond that, we are fortunate that the UK is already heavily involved in, and a large contributor to, many of the organisations assisting in Sri Lanka, such as the UN Central Emergency Response Fund and the World Bank. As a permanent member of the Paris Club, the UK will be heavily involved in the debt restructuring process. I hope the UK can support an early agreement on bilateral restructuring, which would release resources to revive the Sri Lankan economy. Will the Minister give an update on the UK's involvement on that front?

It is increasingly vital that the UK uses its global influence in these organisations to assist in securing the best possible economic support for Sri Lanka and to provide debt sustainability. The UK must play a constructive role on the executive board of the International Monetary Fund during the full implementation of the extended fund facility, particularly during the biannual reviews.

Such influence is vital to counter the sway of nations such as China. I, in common with many of my colleagues, am increasingly concerned about the economic influence of China, which is using investment as a means of control. As the country's biggest bilateral lender, China is owed some \$7 billion by Sri Lanka. Many of the projects that were invested in by China have yielded little return for the country. Despite that, investments in major ports, such as Hambantota, have allowed China to have increasing access to trade in the Indian ocean, and a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman has said that the priority for Chinese diplomacy

"lies in China's neighbouring countries".

That is the very definition of what has been called debt-trap diplomacy.

I believe that the UK could always do more with regard to economic support, whether directly or indirectly through organisations such as UNICEF. Would the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office consider setting up a disaster emergency fund to ease the immediate crisis and assist the World Bank in reinvigorating the Sri Lankan economy?

Indeed, our own economic support to Sri Lanka can go far beyond humanitarian and direct financial support. Free trade is a global force for good and countries such as Sri Lanka thrive on the ability to trade their many goods across the globe. Sri Lanka has signed free trade agreements with countries including India and Singapore and is in the process of negotiating such an agreement with China.

Total UK imports from Sri Lanka increased by about 17% last year, to around £1 billion. While that is a promising sign, there remains an untapped market which would be hugely beneficial to the people of the UK and Sri Lanka. Now that the UK has reformed its way in the world as a global trading nation and is seeking new trading opportunities, I gently suggest that we focus on old friends, particularly those in the Commonwealth.

I am aware that this is not necessarily a matter for the FCDO. However, I would be interested to hear what conversations the Minister may have had, if any, with his counterparts in the Department for Business and Trade about how the UK can operate an aid-for-trade system with Sri Lanka. By using our aid as a mechanism to bolster Sri Lanka's infrastructure, for example its ports, we can boost trade for the benefit of businesses, but also finance the ability to import essential supplies.

Beyond trade, Sri Lanka has an endless opportunity for the UK to invest. A long-standing and personal interest of mine is the environment and climate change, particularly investment in sustainable energy sources. I know from discussions with the former governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka that overall investment in climate-related projects in Sri Lanka is lacking, despite Sri Lanka having ambitious targets for transitioning to a green economy.

As a small island and a developing nation, Sri Lanka is acutely at risk when it comes to climate change and rising sea levels. There is a perfect opportunity for the United Kingdom to invest in something that is in the interest of us all: protecting the planet for future generations. Without the correct financial support, countries such as Sri Lanka will not be able to achieve the sustainable development goals set out in 2015. I know the Minister is passionately concerned about this area.

I am delighted that this Government have made a fantastic start on this. Through the UK's climate action for a resilient Asia initiative, the FCDO has partnered with the United Nations Development Programme and the Sri Lankan Ministry of Finance to implement the Climate Finance Network. The network will focus on climate change-aligned budgeting and increasing direct access to international climate change finance. Importantly, it will also focus on ensuring peace and reconciliation in the country, which I will touch on in a minute. Will the Minister update the House on the progress of the Climate Finance Network and on what discussions the Department has had with the high commission in Colombo on helping Sri Lanka secure its climate future?

I believe that more can be done in terms of direct investment, particularly in areas such as renewable energy. Some 98% of Sri Lankan households are dependent on an already unreliable national grid. The Ceylon Electricity Board is being unbundled into 14 units, and foreign support is required in the form of capital and technological knowledge.

I would also like to see UK action on maintaining and boosting biodiversity in the country. Sri Lanka's unique island biodiversity is facing decline through pollution, river diversion, habitat loss, and even man-made natural disasters such as the X-Press Pearl incident in 2021. I know the UK has taken great strides in helping developing countries to meet the 30 by 30 target, but I would be interested to hear what financial assistance the Government are providing to Sri Lanka to help to protect its habitats.

Finally, I wish to touch on the need for continued peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. I do not need to lecture the Minister—who knows better than many Members—on the intricacies of Sri Lanka's political history. However, it goes without saying that Sri Lanka lies in a delicate balance, which the economic and humanitarian situation in the country risks tipping. Food shortages can lead to conflict anywhere they occur in the world, so it is vital that the UK plays its part in assisting the country to achieve food security.

The situation in Sri Lanka is undoubtably complex. A complex financial history has been worsened by populist politics. An economic crisis has spiralled into a political crisis and is quickly creating a humanitarian one. Of course, all this is made even more complex by the remnants of a long-standing conflict still lingering in the country. Economic aid to Sri Lanka should of course focus primarily on alleviating the humanitarian situation out there, such as by providing medical supplies, as I mentioned on earlier. However, we must not doubt Sri Lanka's ability to stand on its own two feet, and the UK can play a role in helping our friends to achieve that.

The IMF deal is just the beginning of the journey for Sri Lanka. The challenge now is to help implement the IMF deal successfully, to assist Sri Lanka in restructuring its debt, to provide the right economic support to strengthen its national growth, and to ensure a peaceful and prosperous future for the island. The people of the island deserve that, as it is a member of the Commonwealth and has been a friend to us over many years. I leave the Minister with one final point: the UK Government should not, as V. V. Ganeshananthan writes in her new novel "Brotherless Night", leave in their wake

"peoples divided by colonial powers, ancestral angers, and bullheaded pride."

Minister, I am sure we can do more.

5.12 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) for securing this debate and for his well-informed and extremely interesting contribution. The Minister for the Indo-Pacific, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), would have been delighted to take part but is currently travelling on ministerial duties. It is therefore my pleasure to respond on the Government's behalf. I will try to respond to the points raised by my hon. Friend, but if I omit any, I will of course write to him.

The UK and Sri Lanka have a long shared history, as marked by the 75th anniversary of our diplomatic relations this year. We are bound by strong relationships between our institutions, businesses and, most importantly, our people. Many UK citizens and parliamentarians have close ties to Sri Lanka, and it is a relationship that matters very much to the United Kingdom. It has therefore been troubling to witness Sri Lanka's economic decline.

The fallout from the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, to which my hon. Friend referred, the covid pandemic, and the effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have all posed severe challenges to Sri Lanka's economy. Those events have been compounded by structural weaknesses, including long-term financial mismanagement. Sri Lanka defaulted on its debt obligations last May and entered a

severe economic crisis. Inflation peaked at 73%, one third of the population lacked access to affordable, nutritious food, and there were shortages of fuel, medicine and basic necessities. According to a recent assessment by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, the country faced a multifaceted disaster. While the situation has since improved, many are still struggling, and a large number of Sri Lankans have experienced a profound decline in living standards.

Recognising the deteriorating humanitarian situation, the British Government provided £3 million of targeted support for those most severely affected, as my hon. Friend acknowledged. While it is unusual to provide humanitarian assistance to a lower-middle-income country outside a disaster situation, that reflected the level of economic hardship and urgent need, as well as the very close and friendly relationship between our two countries. Delivered through our UN partners and the Red Cross, our support has provided food for schoolchildren, hygiene kits for girls, and multi-purpose cash grants for poor and vulnerable families to meet essential household needs, including food. That complements UK support provided through multilateral agencies, such as the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund. The UK is the largest donor to the fund, having contributed more than \$1.7 billion since its inception in 2006, and it has already provided \$5 million to Sri Lanka.

My hon. Friend asked specifically how we were helping Sri Lanka to tackle its economic situation. The Asian Development Bank and the World Bank are providing emergency assistance under a joint action plan to help to reduce the impact of the economic crisis. The UK is also working with international partners and the Sri Lankan Government to address the causes of the crisis, and to support debt sustainability and economic recovery. We welcome the International Monetary Fund's recent approval of a four-year programme worth \$3,000 million to support Sri Lanka's economic policies and reforms. That has now begun, with the first tranche of financing disbursed. We will continue to support Sri Lanka's debt restructuring process, and encourage all creditors to engage constructively in these negotiations.

We recognise Sri Lanka's commitment to the policy reforms that are required to keep its IMF programme on track, and we look forward to working with its Government on that agenda as well. Our conflict, stability and security fund programme is already supporting parliamentary Committees on the issue of public debt management. We look forward to working with the Sri Lankan Government on their proposed reform agenda, including their ambition to build back greener; that, too, was mentioned by my hon. Friend during his excellent speech.

On 18 April, the UK and Sri Lanka held an inaugural strategic dialogue, in which we discussed how we could further support the country's economic recovery. We will continue to explore ways in which we can help the Sri Lankan Government to advance their reform agenda. Furthermore, the new developing country trading scheme will enable Sri Lanka to benefit from duty-free exports to the UK in respect of more than 80% of products, and will remove tariffs from more than 150 additional products.

My hon. Friend asked me specifically about China, and I wish to respond to his question in some detail. China is an important source of aid, trade and investment for many developing countries. Chinese investment, including investment under a belt and road initiative

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

badge, can help to fill the global infrastructure gap, alongside other infrastructure initiatives, but we recognise the potential risks that this poses in relation to issues such as debt sustainability and China's economic and political influence. The nature of Sri Lanka's debt owed to China is complex and varied, and China's past reluctance to provide debt treatments is a cause for concern. It holds 13% of Sri Lanka's external debt stock, a level that is similar to the 12% held by the Paris Club and the 7% held by Japan, and lower than the private market borrowing level of 42%. We welcome the specific and credible financing assurances from Sri Lanka's major bilateral creditors, including China, to help the country to secure an IMF support package. As I mentioned, that was approved by the IMF's executive board on 20 March. We recognise the importance of all creditors, including China, engaging constructively in debt restructuring negotiations and policy reform, in Sri Lanka and in many other countries as well.

I turn now to the important issue of human rights. Some hon. Members from across the House have from time to time proposed conditions being placed on IMF assistance to Sri Lanka, but the fund is unable to impose those in relation to politics or human rights. We will closely follow Sri Lanka's reform agenda to ensure social safety net protections adequately support all communities. We will also support the fund's requirement for Sri Lanka to implement a comprehensive anti-corruption framework.

The UK, alongside our partners, has led international efforts to promote human rights for all communities in Sri Lanka, including through resolution 51/1 at the UN Human Rights Council. We urge the Sri Lankan Government to engage with key stakeholders, including victim communities, to ensure the success of those initiatives. As penholder on that resolution, we continue to call for progress on human rights, the rule of law and good governance.

We welcome Sri Lanka's positive engagement in the universal periodic review process. However, we have made clear our concerns over heavy-handed responses to peaceful protests and the importance of upholding the rule of law and safeguarding representative democracy. I can tell the House that the Minister for the Indo-Pacific met Foreign Minister Ali Sabry on 14 March, where they discussed Sri Lanka's plans for transitional justice mechanisms, along with many other matters.

We continue to be concerned by Sri Lanka's economic situation for many of the reasons my hon. Friend set out in his eloquent contribution. Throughout this difficult period, the UK has been engaged in helping those who are worst affected. We will continue to work with international partners to promote Sri Lanka's economic recovery and assist with its reform programme. We will also continue to play a committed role in supporting Sri Lanka towards an inclusive, democratic and a prosperous future.

Question put and agreed to.

5.22 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 11 May 2023

[RUSHANARA ALI in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Allergy Awareness Week

[Relevant documents: *e-petition 589716, Appoint an Allergy Tsar as a champion for people living with allergies; and e-petition 585304, 'Owen's Law'—Change the law around allergy labelling in UK restaurants.*]

1.30 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Allergy Awareness Week.

This afternoon I will raise a number of points about improving allergy services in the NHS, but first I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for the debate.

What we are talking about matters to an awful lot of people. Millions across the country suffer from at least one allergy. It is estimated that 44% of adults and some 50% of children in the UK have one or more allergic disorders. While allergies have increased globally in prevalence, complexity and severity over the last 60 years or so, the UK rates are among the highest in the world.

I pay tribute to the allergy community for its contribution throughout the year, which was showcased during the recent Allergy Awareness Week. I acknowledge the extraordinary work of charities, research bodies, academics and health practitioners, as well as numerous individuals and families, all fighting for support and help on food labelling, NHS services, awareness in schools and much more, given the extraordinary growth in allergic conditions over the last couple of decades.

It is worth being clear from the outset what we are talking about. An allergy is a hypersensitivity reaction, or an exaggerated sensitivity, to substances known as allergens, which are normally tolerated across most communities. Examples include peanuts, milk, shellfish, cats, medicine and grass pollens. These can trigger harmful antibodies and the release of inflammatory chemicals, causing symptoms such as sneezing, itches, rashes and falls in blood pressure, yet they may also cause narrowing of airways, shortness of breath and wheezing, and swelling that, if in the mouth, throat or airway, causes severe difficulty in breathing and can be life-threatening.

There is a modern-day epidemic in allergy, one that I would argue is neglected by the NHS. We are all aware of recent high-profile, tragic cases of fatal anaphylaxis brought on by issues such as food labelling, shortcomings in NHS service provision, and a lack of public understanding across the wider community. Those recent tragedies have brought all that into sharp focus, and they are occurring with a regularity that should worry us all.

The figures speak for themselves. One third of the population—some 20 million people in the UK—are living with an allergic condition, and 5 million have a

severe enough condition to require specialist care. Fatal and near-fatal reactions regularly occur due to foods, drugs and insect stings, and have been increasing in recent years. There has been a 615% increase in hospital admissions related to allergic disease in the last 20 years.

The percentages of children diagnosed with allergic rhinitis and with eczema have trebled over the last 30 years. More than 200,000 people now require the prescription of emergency adrenaline due to the severity of their allergic condition, and each year new births add some 43,000 cases of child allergy to the population in need. The figures are quite extraordinary. Despite all that, specialist services delivered by trained paediatric allergists are available to only a minority of those with severe disease.

What is so frustrating for so many is that over the last two decades a series of reports have consistently demonstrated the prevalence of allergic disease, the patient need and the lack of UK service provision. I will list some of the reports. There were two Royal College of Physicians reports, in 2003 and 2010, on allergy and the unmet need. The 2003 report was so disturbing and so scathing that in 2006 the Department of Health conducted its own review of allergy services. We also had a 2004 House of Commons Health Committee report on the provision of allergy services and a 2007 House of Lords Science and Technology Committee report on allergy. In autumn 2021, the all-party parliamentary group on allergy, alongside the National Allergy Strategy Group, published “Meeting the challenges of the National Allergy Crisis”.

All those reports consistently highlighted how allergy remains poorly managed across the NHS due to lack of training and expertise. All recommended significant improvement in specialist services, as well as improved knowledge and awareness in primary care. They all talked about the need for a national allergy action plan, and for a national lead person responsible for allergy services and provision at NHS England or the Department of Health and Social Care—often referred to in shorthand as an allergy tsar.

That is not to say that nothing has changed over the last 20 years. We have seen National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines on allergy and care pathways for children with allergic disease. Natasha's law came into force on 1 October 2021 to regulate labelling on pre-packaged food for direct sale. But the truth is that very little has changed over the last 20 years, apart from the increased prevalence of the conditions.

The economic case for prevention-orientated allergy services is strong. The estimated cost of allergy-related illness was calculated in 2004 as £1 billion a year. Since then, admissions to hospital with anaphylaxis have increased by 200% to 300%. Primary care visits for allergy have increased, now accounting for 8% of total GP consultations. Put simply, the complexity and severity of allergy has increased, as has the number of patients affected, placing huge strain on the system. Those are the basic facts and change is long overdue. Beyond the statistics, for the growing number of people living with allergic disease, their conditions can have a significant negative impact on the lives that they and their families live. It is frightening and restrictive to live with a condition that could cause a severe or life-threatening reaction literally at any time of the day.

[Jon Cruddas]

Each report I mentioned concludes that allergy has largely been ignored and is poorly managed across the NHS due to a lack of training and expertise. The core problem is the very small number of consultants in adult and paediatric allergy, and the fact that most GPs receive no training in allergy. That basic mismatch between the rising demand and the poor service needs correction. There are only 11 specialist allergy training posts for doctors in England and only two qualify each year, despite the 2004 report recommending some 20 years ago that 40 doctors a year should qualify. There are too few consultants, and only 40 adult allergists and a similar number of paediatric allergists working in a very small number of allergy centres.

The day-to-day reality is that NHS patients face a postcode lottery. They are hampered by wrong referrals and re-referrals, or they get no referral. They face denial of choice and of the benefits of the improvement in allergy care. In short, there is significant unmet need. Paradoxically, the UK is one of the world's leaders in allergy research.

The reports that I have referred to, which span some 20 years, offer an agenda for change. All four contain basic recommendations; there are themes that recur all the time. First, we need a national plan for allergy. We should make allergy a priority and invest in a national plan led by a designated Department of Health and Social Care civil servant or NHS lead with sufficient authority to implement change—a national clinical director for allergy.

Secondly, there is a need for specialist care. We should expand the specialist workforce as a priority and ensure that training programmes prioritise allergy so that specialists of the future are appropriately trained and can deliver safe care.

Thirdly, we need to ensure that all GPs and healthcare professionals in primary care have knowledge of allergic disease, that allergy is included in the GP curriculum and exit examination, and that allergy education is improved for already qualified GPs in ongoing professional appraisal. On a positive note, I should add that the Royal College of General Practitioners has recently added allergy to new GP exams, which is a welcome intervention.

Fourthly, we need to ensure that local commissioners understand the allergy needs of their populations. Commissioners should ensure access to adult and paediatric allergy consultants and allergy pathways.

Allergy remains a small specialism; not only do patients not know where to turn, but healthcare professionals themselves often do not know the best pathway to send their patients on. GPs receive so little training and the responsibility for managing adult allergy services remains unclear and ambiguous.

Every sufferer should have a right to receive quality care. To achieve that, Allergy UK has developed a patients' charter, in consultation with patients and clinicians, to deliver a gold standard of patient rights and care for those living with allergic disease. It calls for a healthcare system that recognises allergy as a chronic long-term condition and provides continuity of care and timely diagnoses. It should not be beyond our collective wit to provide that, yet recent NHS reforms may mean that we are heading in a very different direction.

Today, 42 statutory integrated care systems, each with an integrated care board and an integrated care partnership, are responsible for planning and funding NHS services. It was recently announced that allergy services would be commissioned by ICBs and not centralised. What does that mean for the postcode lottery in the system and for the development of a national plan?

Allergy UK reports that 93% of ICBs responsible for commissioning services to support the allergic community have not even the scantest picture of the potential needs of their populations in terms of allergy services. Not one ICB held data on whether there were any specialist allergy nurses or dietitians in its region.

As it is, specialist allergy services are very limited outside the south-east. Two hospitals in the south-east—Guy's and St Thomas's, and Southampton General—are accredited as World Allergy Organisation centres of excellence, but even those living in the south-east of England struggle to access decent care and the right care. The north and the west of England, along with Wales, are especially deprived of services. As I mentioned, there are only 40 adult allergy consultants in the UK and even fewer paediatric allergy specialists. That is equivalent to one adult allergy specialist per 1.3 million of the adult population. As far back as 2003, the Royal College of Physicians advised that 200 consultant adult allergists were required.

I do not want to sound too negative, so I will point to two important recent developments. The first is an example of what can be done on the ground. Allergy UK recently invested £500,000 in a research project with the University of Edinburgh to trial a new nurse-led allergy centre in primary care. Thirty-eight clinical practices were allowed to refer patients to two specialist allergy nurses, who held six clinical sessions each week.

The trial resulted in 426 patients being referred to the specialist allergy nurse clinics, of whom 53% were young people and adults with a history of anaphylaxis or suspected anaphylaxis. Three hundred and eighty-three of the patients seen in a clinic would otherwise have been referred on to secondary care. Only 5% of those had an onward referral to secondary care. Eighty-two per cent. said they had seen improvements in their allergic conditions since attending the clinic, which is a very positive result.

The trial demonstrated that a nurse-led, primary care-based allergy clinic can work for patients and take pressure off other NHS services. Allergy UK is now calling for each ICS to have a fully funded specialist allergy service with a specialist allergy nurse and one specialist dietician. That sounds to me like quite a practical intervention that could achieve a lot very quickly.

Secondly, I want to acknowledge some progress in the Department over the last year and a half. The previous Minister for care and mental health, the right hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), demonstrated real commitment in this area, and I put on the record our appreciation for what she did. Since autumn 2021, we have established a work programme and an ongoing dialogue between civil servants and representatives of the National Allergy Strategy Group.

The NASG has held several meetings with the long-term conditions team in the DHSC to discuss the need for a lead and expert advisers to support on development of a national plan for allergy. A proposal and terms of

reference have been drafted, and they are currently within the DHSC. The hope is that those discussions will continue and move forward so that an expert group can be established in the very near future. That could be one of the most significant outcomes of the last 20 years. I commend the Government for that, and look forward to the Minister—I hope—recommitting to that programme of work and partnership working this afternoon.

I could have discussed many other issues today, including labelling, allergies in schools, and the regulation of products in takeaways and restaurants. On Monday, we will have a chance to discuss some of that territory when we debate the two e-petitions relevant to this debate. The first, e-petition 589716, calls for the appointment of an allergy tsar as a champion for people living with allergies. Over 20,000 people have signed it to date. The second, e-petition 585304, relates to “Owen’s law,” a change in the law on allergy labelling in UK restaurants. I think over 13,000 people have signed that petition to date. I congratulate the organisers. Tens of thousands of people are mobilising and demanding change, and businesses are responding too: in March 2023, the bosses of 11 leading food businesses, including Tesco and Sainsbury’s, called for clearer rules on food labelling following recent tragic and preventable deaths.

Next year marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of the Health Committee’s landmark report, “The Provision of Allergy Services”. The report recommended implementing a “modern allergy service” with specialist allergy doctors and a focus on primary care. Simply put, the vast majority of those recommendations remain unmet. We have lost 20 years, and nothing has really changed. On behalf of the many millions of people suffering from allergy conditions, I urge the Government to acknowledge allergy as a public health priority. Lives, as well as the quality of life of many of our fellow citizens, depend on it.

1.46 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): It is great to see you in the Chair today, Ms Ali. It is a pleasure to speak in today’s important debate on allergy. I congratulate and thank the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) for securing it, and I echo many of the sentiments that he expressed. I thank all the excellent campaigners across the UK whose lives have been impacted by allergies, especially those families who have tragically lost loved ones and continue to campaign to raise public awareness and to lobby for policy changes. They are an inspiration to us all.

As the Member of Parliament for Old Bexley and Sidcup, let me also highlight the crucial and often lifesaving work of Allergy UK, which is based in Sidcup and supports individuals and families across the country via a range of allergy-related guidance and services. Those include a helpline and a dietician service to help the parents of young children who have symptoms of food allergy and have not yet been referred to a dietician. I had the privilege of visiting the hard-working team in Sidcup last year to see its work at first hand. I am very sorry that Carla will soon be leaving, and I thank her for her fantastic leadership and all her hard work for the all-party parliamentary group on allergy.

As we have heard already, an awareness among patients and in the NHS of how allergies can impact our health can be a matter of life and death. That is why I support Allergy UK’s mission for everyone in the UK to take

allergy seriously. I must admit that I never did so before I met the team and allergy experts from across the country. After I mentioned that I suffer with hay fever each year, they gave me more information on the various types of pollen than my brain could digest, and lots of great advice on how to manage my allergies. If they are watching today, I promise them that I did listen—I am sniffing a lot less than I would normally at this time of year.

Mine is just one relatively minor case, and hay fever is a common example of an allergy. Living with any kind of allergy is challenging and can impact the quality of a person’s life, but food allergies can trigger very severe reactions and, without emergency treatment, present a risk to life. Understanding that is vital, not just for patients but for medical professionals.

It is estimated that 41 million people in the UK live with allergic disease and that 50% of children are affected by one or more allergic disorders. However, there is a significant gap in both awareness and healthcare services for those affected by this disease of the immune system. That is why I signed the patient charter, and why I back Allergy UK’s campaigns to raise awareness, including in schools, and to introduce allergy nurse and dietician services in GP practices.

Regional integrated care boards have a clear role to play in the new NHS structure in helping to close that gap. I look forward to hearing more from my hon. Friend the Minister about how the Government can support that endeavour with the significant money being allocated to the NHS to help to improve health outcomes, and how the Government can address the estimated £1 billion annual cost of NHS prescriptions to help to manage allergy symptoms and the increase in hospital admissions highlighted by the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham.

The service specification sets out that providers should deliver a diagnostic package for the investigation of suspected allergic diseases, including initial consultation and follow-up in a dedicated allergy clinic and specialised allergy tests, but the evidence is clear that we need more specialists across the country to avoid a postcode lottery for individuals and families. There are resources available to support healthcare professionals in making referrals to specialist services, including guidance from the British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, but we must continue to promote them to medical professionals.

We have made progress in recent years. The most obvious example is Natasha’s law, which came into force on 1 October 2021. It requires all food retailers and operators to display full ingredient and allergen information on every food item they sell pre-packed for direct sale. That gives the millions throughout the UK who are living with food allergies and intolerances better protection and more confidence in the food they buy. I again thank all the campaigners across the country, including Natasha’s family and Allergy UK, as we continue to raise awareness and make vital calls, not just in Allergy Awareness Week but throughout the year.

1.51 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Ali, and to follow the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French).

[Alex Davies-Jones]

I hugely congratulate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) for securing this really important debate. I am pleased that this important issue has been given the attention in Parliament that it deserves. As my hon. Friend said, on Monday colleagues will be debating two widely signed petitions on food labelling and allergy healthcare. Given that Allergy Awareness Week was just a few weeks ago, it is right that colleagues come together this afternoon to mark its importance.

I put on the record my heartfelt thanks to the campaign groups and individuals who got in touch with me ahead of this debate, including Owen's Law, Allergy UK and the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation. It is thanks to their tireless hard work, often following tragic events, that we are to have this important series of debates over the coming days.

Marking Allergy Awareness Week gives us a timely opportunity to discuss an important issue that affects thousands upon thousands of people, if not millions, every year. Often, their difficulties go unnoticed. A shocking one in three people in the UK are living with some sort of allergic condition, and sadly that figure rises to one in two among children. I know that all too well because this issue is personal to me: when my son Sullivan was six months old, my husband and I made the terrifying discovery that he is severely allergic to peanuts. He had to be rushed to hospital, which would make any mother's stomach drop with fear. I am pleased to report that he is now a happy, healthy four-year-old, but we will forever need to pay extremely close attention to what he eats and comes into contact with. Hundreds of parents across the UK can speak of similar experiences.

I was shocked to learn that there has been a massive 600% increase in allergy-related hospital admissions in the past 20 years, but despite that massive influx there are just 40 adult allergy consultants across the whole UK. That equates to one allergy specialist per 1.3 million adults.

Ahead of today's debate, a constituent emailed me to share her experiences of caring for her son, who has severe allergies: he is allergic to milk, wheat, egg, soy and peanuts and to pollen and dust mites, among many other things. As I am sure hon. Members can imagine, her son's condition has massively affected his quality of life, as well as hers as a mother. Navigating daily life is a constant struggle for my constituent and her son in ways that those of us who do not live with debilitating allergies give little thought to. She told me that her son's ability to participate in activities that other children routinely enjoy has been completely hampered by his condition. It is a truly heartbreaking situation for all involved. One of the main barriers that my constituent and her son face is the complete lack of joined-up thinking across services, including education, healthcare and hospitality. She feels that there is a real lack of awareness and understanding of what her son requires in order to be given the basic opportunities that we take for granted. Among those everyday issues is food labelling in hospitality.

I am pleased that one of the petitions to be debated next week is on Owen's law, which would see stronger regulation on allergy labelling in restaurants. For colleagues who are not aware, Owen Carey tragically died of anaphylaxis in 2017 after eating chicken marinated in

buttermilk, to which he was severely allergic. On the menu at the restaurant he ate at, the chicken was erroneously listed as plain grilled. Owen's family have been tirelessly campaigning for a change in the law, and they have my full support.

I welcome the fact that the UK Government stated last year that the Food Standards Agency was considering how to improve food labelling, and I am pleased that Labour has acknowledged the importance of clearly labelled allergen information, but for many families, such as my constituent and her son, action is urgently needed now, not at some point down the line. The current regulations require hospitality businesses to provide consumers with information about 14 allergens, but, crucially, the format in which that information is to be conveyed is not specified in law and can vary greatly in certain restaurants.

Owen's law would ensure that accurate allergen information is put on the face of restaurant menus and that there is more stringent training for staff. Together, these simple measures would make an enormous difference and prevent any further tragic deaths like Owen's. The changes would also make a small but significant difference to the lives of those who are blighted by allergies and anaphylaxis. For my constituent and her son, clear and standardised allergen labelling would make navigating the otherwise extremely difficult experience of attending any restaurant just that little bit easier.

The Natasha Allergy Research Foundation secured a monumental victory in changing the law on pre-packaged food labelling following the tragic death of Natasha Ednan-Laperouse in 2016, but it is absolutely right to say that we have so much more work to do to prevent us from letting vulnerable people down any further. The foundation is now calling for the appointment of an allergy tsar at the heart of the NHS to champion people with allergies across the UK and ensure that they receive appropriate support. I would welcome that move.

I hope that the Minister is able to feed back to her colleagues in the Government on the proposals as far as NHS England is concerned. I also invite her to set out a timeline for when we can expect Owen's law to be implemented. Allergies can ruin lives, but often that is forgotten by so many. I sincerely hope that the Minister recognises the severity of this issue. I look forward to working with her and her Government to tackle the issue at its root, once and for all.

1.56 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): May I express my gratitude to the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) for securing today's debate and for the comprehensive manner in which he opened it? He said much that I can agree with. Indeed, there is not that much left to say, because it was a very comprehensive introduction.

I am grateful to the patient charity Allergy UK for its very informative briefing ahead of the debate and for its sterling work over more than three decades in raising awareness and supporting people living with allergies, who represent a significant proportion of the population across these islands. Allergy Awareness Week was held from 24 to 28 April and was initiated by Allergy UK, which is urging every NHS integrated care board in the UK to appoint at least one allergy nurse and dietician. Allergy UK believes that this measure would enhance

the standard and the promptness of the care, advice and support available to allergy sufferers. It is hard to disagree with that. We really must ensure that all people living with allergies can access the best possible care and support, and we must recognise that rising food prices are having a disproportionate impact on many of those with allergies. We must also acknowledge that climate change, which is extending the length of the pollen season, is having an adverse effect on many people.

Across the UK, 21 million people have an allergy. That is one of the highest rates in the world. We have seen an increase of 650% in hospital admissions for allergic conditions over the past 20 years, which is truly staggering. An allergy is the immune system's reaction to normally harmless substances such as pollen, food or house dust mites, which can trigger an adverse response in allergic individuals, ranging from localised itching to potentially fatal anaphylaxis. According to Allergy UK, the most common causes of allergic reactions are pollen from trees and grasses; proteins secreted from house dust mites; mould; food such as peanuts, tree nuts, milk and eggs; pets such as cats and dogs, and other furry or hairy animals; insects such as wasps and bees; and even medicines. It is quite a lengthy list.

I have been fortunate not to have any allergies. Looking back on my life, I do not recall allergies being on the same scale as they are now. When I was a young man, I was sent to school with peanuts as a treat on occasion. I thought that was great, but we would never dream of doing it now.

The world has changed quite dramatically, and not for the best. Allergies are very common in children; some go away as a child gets older, but not all do. We know that fewer pensioners have allergies and that incidence is significantly higher among under-35s. It has also been suggested that we may be paying the price for being too hygienic and insufficiently exposed to bacteria that would help to train the immune system. Sometimes in life it seems that you can never win.

In Scotland, most allergic conditions are treated through primary care. The Scottish Government are committed to ensuring that people living with an allergic condition receive the care they need when they need it. GPs in primary care are at the heart of the healthcare system. The Scottish Government are investing in multidisciplinary teams to increase the capacity in primary care, which will allow patients to be seen at the right time by the right person.

Asthma continues to be the most common allergic condition, accounting for 69% of the approximately 5,100 allergy-related hospital admissions each year in Scotland. The Scottish Government are providing guidance to education authorities, health boards and schools to fulfil their obligations to students and their healthcare requirements. In December 2017 they published guidance for supporting students' healthcare needs, including a section on allergic reactions and anaphylaxis. I think we would probably all benefit from knowing a bit more about what to do if someone is exposed to that situation. I would be lost if it happened in front of me in my office, so I think there is a lesson there for all of us. We need to know more and to be able to help when something goes wrong.

Food is a large factor. I welcome the new legislation, which has been referred to as Natasha's law, requiring food businesses in Scotland and throughout the rest of the UK to label all pre-packed food for direct sale with

a complete ingredient list. The law, which came into effect in October 2021, was implemented after the sad death of 15-year-old Natasha Ednan-Laperouse, who suffered a fatal allergic reaction to a pre-packed sandwich containing undeclared sesame seeds. It applies to products such as pre-wrapped sandwiches, fast food and daily items such as cheese and meat that are already wrapped for service. The Food Standards Scotland chief executive, Geoff Ogle, said:

"This is a huge step in helping improve the quality of life for around two million people living with food allergies in the UK—with 200,000 of those living here in Scotland."

I echo his comments. I also echo the calls from other Members to see more progress with Owen's law so that anyone can eat out safely.

Grocery prices are continuing to climb, and those with allergies or special dietary requirements are being disproportionately hit. I urge the UK Government to better support people with allergies during the cost of living crisis. Statistics from January this year show that households with specific dietary requirements can be paying up to 73% more for their food than those who do not need to buy "free from" products, according to analysis by the allergy team. Pea milk is £2 per litre, roughly 50% more expensive than cows' milk. Gluten-free penne pasta at Morrisons jumped by 125% in 12 months, from 60p in January 2022 to £1.35 this January. The cost of Sainsbury's Nurishh vegan cheddar-style cheese slices alternative increased by 67% from £1.50 to £2.50, while the cost of Alpro soya growing-up milk at Asda increased by 27% from £1.50 to £1.90. For a lot of people who have no alternative, that is simply not affordable.

In Scotland, people who have been clinically diagnosed with coeliac disease or dermatitis herpetiformis—I probably pronounced that as badly as I typed it last night—can receive a range of gluten-free food on prescription at no charge. Perhaps the UK should look at that. There is more that each of our nations need to do for the increasing numbers of people who are living with allergies. That does not just go for health treatments; we must also tackle the cost of living and climate change.

2.3 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Ali. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) for securing this debate and for his continued commitment to this issue. The petitions that are coming forward highlight the level of concern and interest in this area. It is right that we are debating it in this place.

We are witnessing a burgeoning rise in allergic disease in the UK. This country is in the top three in the world for the highest incidence of allergies. One third of the UK population are living with a condition and, perhaps more worryingly, 50% of children are affected by one or more allergic disorders. They are stressful and worrying conditions, with continual and often costly adjustments to guard against allergic reactions. In a few tragic cases, they can be fatal. Allergies can cause not only symptoms such as sneezing, itches, rashes and falls in blood pressure, but airway narrowing, shortness of breath, wheezing and swelling, which in the mouth area leads to severe difficulty in breathing and can be life-threatening.

As we have heard, allergies are most common in children. As my hon. Friend said, it is terrifying when people, particularly children, are rushed to A&E, sometimes

[Karin Smyth]

with tragic results. My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) highlighted her experience with her own child, and it is something that I too have witnessed with a family member.

We have heard about the too frequent fatalities, mostly of young people, including Natasha Ednan-Laperouse. It is thanks to her parents and others that full ingredient and allergen labelling on pre-packed food for sale was introduced in October 2021. We pay tribute to them and to all families who have raised awareness in such circumstances. It is not something that any parent would want to have to do.

We have also heard about the incredible rise in hospital admissions over the past 20 years. I agree with the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) that it was perhaps not recognised much when we were at school. The growth has been quite phenomenal. The hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) has found out what we have all found out: that the great privilege of coming to this place is learning so much from our constituents and campaigners about issues that we may not have been aware of, and being able to present them in this place.

We now know that there are only 40 allergy consultants in the UK, and even fewer in paediatrics—the equivalent of only one per 1.3 million of the adult population. As far back as 2003, the Royal College of Physicians advised that 200 consultant allergists were required. Despite further warnings and criticism over the past two decades, the provision is wholly inadequate. The first Health Committee report highlighting the inadequacy of service was in 2004. In 2006, there was a report so scathing that the then Labour Government's Department of Health conducted a review. In 2007, 2010 and 2021, we had further reports from the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, the Royal College of Pathologists and most recently the APPG, all of which further acknowledged the continued failures without much progress.

After 13 years, we look forward to the Minister giving us a bit of hope for the future. It is vital that there are allergy services across all integrated care systems, but as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham, more than half of ICBs have said that they do not hold that data and are not across the issues in their own populations. Last year, the then care Minister, the right hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), said that

“we will continue to support people living with allergies through NIHR research and exploring and investing in new treatments.”—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 134-135WH.]

We would welcome an update from today's Minister on what steps have been taken to ensure that allergy services are available in all ICS areas.

The NHS's capacity to tackle allergic disease has been lowered by the unprecedented pressures it is facing under this Conservative Government. More than 7 million people are waiting for NHS treatment, compared with more than 4 million before the pandemic. They are waiting in pain and discomfort, on record waiting lists, and there are staff vacancies of more than 100,000. Those awaiting treatment for allergies face long wait times as well as delayed diagnosis and treatment. That, in turn, increases the chance of more severe allergic reactions developing, which will often require admission to secondary care—

something that none of us should want to see. Again, that is increasing the pressure on services by taking up time in A&E and is resulting in more expensive treatments.

Will the Minister explain what her Government are doing to tackle the waiting times for diagnosis and treatment? Last year, the then Minister also stated:

“The FSA is currently undertaking a programme of work to improve the quality of life for people living with food hypersensitivity and provide support to make safe, informed food choices to effectively manage risk.”—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 134WH.]

Those are words that I am sure today's Minister recognises. Again, we would all welcome an update on where that work has got to.

There is hope for people living with an allergy. Given the right amount of research funding in the next couple of decades, treatments can be found that will potentially eradicate many allergies. I would be grateful if the Minister set out what action is being taken to support forward-looking research into potentially lifesaving treatments.

2.9 pm

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. I thank the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) for securing a debate on this important issue, and for his continued work advocating on behalf of those with allergies, particularly through chairing the all-party parliamentary group on allergy.

Millions of people, many of them children, are affected by allergy, so I am sure that the points raised by hon. Members will resonate with families across the country. My brother has asthma, which at times has had a severe impact on his life, and which can be very frightening. I also have a close cousin who has multiple food allergies; I remember that when we were children, those allergies could be worrying or even frightening. Members here and many people across the country have experience, whether directly or through close family and friends, of allergies that can make life really difficult and at times very scary.

Among other things, the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham spoke about the huge number of people affected by allergies, their increasing prevalence, and the resulting increasing need for healthcare and support. He also spoke about how frightening and restricted life can be for people living with a severe allergy, and the need for more specialist NHS staff and generalist allergy training. He acknowledged that the UK is a world leader in allergy research, and I heard his several clear asks for Government support for people affected by allergies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) is a hay fever sufferer, but he spoke today because his constituency hosts Allergy UK, which does very important work to raise awareness of allergies, and to support people with allergies and their families. He spoke of the importance of diagnostic services, the need for specialists, and the variation across the country in the services and support available. He also spoke about the progress we have made in recent years, which includes, very importantly, the introduction of Natasha's law, which has improved food labelling. I thank him for the work he is doing to raise awareness of allergies and their impact on people's lives.

The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) spoke about her personal experience with her son, and how she found out about his allergy. It must have been

extremely alarming to find out, when he was only six months old, how allergic he is to peanuts; I can imagine that that was just at the point when he might have been moving on to solid foods. Parents do not know what they will find out. I can imagine how alarming it must have been to rush to hospital with such a small child. Clearly, there are things that must make life difficult day to day for her son, but I am glad that it sounds as though he is doing well after that very frightening experience. She also talked about the hard work of campaign groups, including the amazingly effective campaigning of families who have tragically lost loved ones as a result of their allergies. She also spoke about the huge increase in hospital admissions in the last 20 years of people who have severe allergic reactions.

Like the hon. Lady and other hon. Members, I recognise the work of all the organisations that support people with allergies, including charities such as Allergy UK, Anaphylaxis UK and the National Allergy Strategy Group, which has been instrumental in ensuring that the voices of all those affected by allergy are heard across Government.

This debate has the heading “Allergy Awareness Week”, but it would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to mention, as other hon. Members have done, other allergy debates happening next Monday, involving the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), who has responsibility for primary care and public health. One debate that he will respond to next Monday will cover vital issues about food safety, which have been raised in this debate. I will refrain from talking at too much length about those issues, because I know that he will cover them substantially on Monday.

That being said, I pay tribute to the work being done to support better food labelling, which is being spearheaded by families who have been bereaved following the tragic deaths of their children from severe anaphylactic reactions. Their campaigning has already led to Natasha’s law, introduced by the Government in 2021. I hope that it will protect and reassure those living with allergy.

Allergy Awareness Week’s focus on allergy support from GPs and specialist staff makes a lot of sense. Most people can be treated through locally commissioned services, for which integrated care boards are responsible, and GPs clearly play a crucial role as the first point of contact for many people with allergies. We know the huge demand for primary care services and the pressures that GPs are under. That is why the Government are investing in and increasing the primary care workforce. In fact, we already have a quarter more staff in primary care than we did in 2019, and 2,000 more GPs.

Looking ahead, we have increased the number of GP training places. Last year, the highest ever number of doctors accepted a GP training place; there were over 4,000 trainees—up from around 2,500 in 2014. That means that there will be more GPs who can be the primary care point of contact for those with allergies. In recent years, there has also been a 100% fill rate for doctors in the two relevant specialist training pathways—allergy and immunology. Many hon. Members spoke about the importance of specialists in this area.

The number of people with allergies is set to increase even further, and NHS England takes into account future and current demand when considering the training needs of the workforce. Hon. Members will know that NHS England is soon to publish the long-term NHS

workplace plan, which will include projections for the number of doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals needed in five, 10 and 15 years’ time.

Specialist allergy services are provided for patients with severe allergic conditions, or those who have common allergic conditions but require specialist treatment. Those services are jointly commissioned by NHS England specialised commissioning and integrated care boards, in line with the published “Prescribed Specialised Services Manual”. Specialised services must comply with the relevant specification. For allergy, that includes the need for physicians, dieticians and nurses who are trained in allergy, and who keep up to date through continuing professional development on specialised allergy services. As Allergy UK’s patient charter outlines, it is crucial that people with allergies have access to quality care, underpinned by skilled healthcare professionals, and can access services wherever they live.

There have been calls over recent years—I have heard them echoed today—for stronger leadership on allergy. I am pleased to take this opportunity to outline the allergy leadership that we already have in place. In October 2022, Dr Claire Bethune was appointed national speciality adviser for specialised immunology and allergy. Dr Bethune chairs the NHS England clinical reference group that provides clinical advice and leadership on the specialised immunology services, and advises on how specialised services can best be delivered.

Clinical reference groups, through their patient and public voice members, rightly ensure that patients and the public are involved in any changes to the commissioning of special services. The specialised immunology and allergy services clinical reference group is commencing a review of the specialised allergy services specification. The outcome will be an updated specification that references up-to-date guidance and takes into account the latest evidence base. It will clearly define the standards of care for commissioned specialised services, and notably will cover the transition to adult services.

That work is not the only thing we are doing to support children and young people with allergy. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has produced a range of guidance to support the care of people with allergies, including specific guidance on food allergy in under-19s. The guidance covers assessing and managing food allergy in under-19s, including referral to secondary or specialist care as appropriate. It has recommendations on what information and support should be provided to the child or young person and their family. That includes signposting to the invaluable work done by organisations such as Allergy UK and Anaphylaxis UK, which have a wealth of information on how to live well with an allergy.

NICE also has more specific guidance available on diagnostics and specific treatments for allergies. That is not limited to food allergies. I urge all those who are involved in the care of people with allergies to familiarise themselves with the information available. The NICE guidance, alongside the service specification and training materials I mentioned, represent a comprehensive portfolio of resources that healthcare professionals and commissioners can draw on to ensure that people with allergies receive the right care to live healthy and independent lives.

I hope that hon. Members will be reassured by some of the measures that I have outlined. I assure them that the Government are committed to a high standard of

[Helen Whately]

ongoing care and support for the many people in this country living with allergies. Together with the Minister who has responsibility for primary care and public health, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, I will continue to look at what more we can do to address the needs of the huge and growing number of people affected by allergies, and at the asks of hon. Members. Finally, I thank all hon. Members here for their work in keeping the spotlight on this important issue, so that allergy awareness remains constantly in the public eye, not just in Allergy Awareness Week each year.

2.20 pm

Jon Cruddas: I thank the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) for their positive words, as well as others who contributed to the debate. It seems that across the political aisle there is common agreement about the escalating problem and the need for viable remedies, as well as a basic right to proper care for all our fellow citizens experiencing those problems. They should not have to wait any longer.

I will make one political point. There is an election coming, and if a party was to really grip this issue and prioritise it, they could achieve much, given the sense of an epidemic out there. I do a lot of work in this area, and as soon as I talk about it I am inundated with people's experiences. I have listened to colleagues in the Chamber, and am struck by the number of people with direct personal experience of the issue. It speaks to what is happening in the country. Any political party that could tap into that could gain much from it—but enough of the low politics.

In conclusion, I echo what colleagues have said and thank the allergy community. We were going to have this debate in Allergy Awareness Week, but it got bumped for reasons relating to the coronation. That is a pity, but I am glad that we have given an airing to some of the issues. I put on record the appreciation that we all have for the practitioners and healthcare professionals dealing with allergy; for Allergy UK; for members of the National Allergy Strategy Group; for Anaphylaxis UK; for the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation; for the researchers in the area seeking new remedies; and for the insights of all the families and campaigners fighting on behalf of those with allergic conditions. That will be echoed by many MPs from across the House on Monday. Those people do a fantastic job, but they need help—lives depend on it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Allergy Awareness Week.

2.23 pm

Sitting suspended.

High Street Bank Closures and Banking Hubs

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of high street bank closures and banking hubs.

I thank you for being in the Chair, Mr Davies, and Members from both sides of the House for joining us in this debate. The numbers may be low, but I think that is because it is a Thursday, and we have just had the coronation. I know that this is an important matter, as it has been raised across the House for some time.

Banks are an important part of the fabric of our high streets and communities, providing access to cash, a vast range of banking services and, importantly, advice. At a time when we are all concerned about cyber-security, scams and fraud, this is particularly relevant. I appreciate that, like many businesses and commercial entities, banks are understandably facing changes in customer transaction patterns, requirements and behaviour. Some of these started before the covid-19 pandemic, but much has changed since that time, when the pandemic necessitated us all to live our lives very differently, not least in terms of technology.

Despite that, banks still provide an essential service—one that I believe neither a call centre nor a phone app will ever be able to fully replicate for all customers. When I heard in March this year that NatWest in Aldridge was due to close at the end of July, I was quite alarmed and disappointed. That will leave not only Aldridge but the entire constituency with just one bank—the HSBC. Surely that cannot be right. The issue does not just affect the Aldridge-Brownhills constituency or the west midlands; we are seeing a worrying pattern and up and down the country. The stats for 2023 alone show that 114 HSBC branches, 95 Barclays branches, 52 NatWest branches and 23 Lloyds branches have closed or are scheduled to close. That is 352 closures altogether. I know there are other bank branches closing on top of that, including TSB and more.

This topic is of interest to colleagues on both sides of the House, as I have said. That is clear from the number of parliamentary questions about it that have been submitted to the Treasury, which I am sure the Minister is aware of. On the day I raised this matter in the Chamber with the Leader of the House and requested a debate, I was not alone. I maintain that MPs should be champions of their communities, which is why I am standing here today bringing this matter to the attention of Ministers. Why am I doing it? Because every time a bank closes, our constituents—often the most vulnerable in our communities, who need a little bit of extra help—lose a service.

Our high streets, the very streets we seek to regenerate, risk seeing a reduction in footfall. Our businesses, charities and local organisations find it all so much harder to do business and transactions. I want to share a couple of examples. A local charity explained to me at the weekend how they always had an informal arrangement with their local bank so that when they did major fundraising

collections in the village, they could go early to that branch and the staff would take the collection buckets and count out the change for them—hopefully there were some notes in there too, not just loose change. That is a service we cannot always expect a small local post office to offer.

A local business, Taylors Auto on Northgate, set the scene very well when on the closure of Lloyds last year they said that they have been running the business for 12 years, trading there for years and been customers for all that time. Without the bank in Aldridge they would have to go to Lichfield or Walsall. So many businesses in my constituency are family-run small and medium-sized enterprises. They are part of the community as well as the business network. My local residents are also affected. The number of elderly people in my constituency is above the national average: 26.7% of people are over 65 in the Aldridge Central ward, compared with the UK average of 18%. Although IT is familiar to many, it is by no means accessible to all. That can be because of a lack of tech skills, or a lack of access to a smartphone, a laptop, a computer or even the internet.

I will make two further points. First, if IT must be the only option, access to IT must be affordable and available. As many know, the cost of an internet connection has increased because of inflationary pressure. Secondly, personal independence must be maintained. Not everyone wants, or is able, to ask their children or their partner to help them every time they want to pay a bill. This is about dignity. Unless Members generate greater awareness of these issues, I fear that we will simply see these invaluable services continue to disappear quietly from our streets. When they are gone, they are gone.

Experts warn that in-person banking will not exist in a matter of years. While researching this topic, I discovered that 5,391 branches were lost between January 2015 and January 2023—an average of 54 branches a month. Do the maths: at that rate, there will no longer be in-person banking anywhere by 2027.

The recent announcement of the closure of NatWest's Aldridge branch, which came so soon after the closure of Barclays and Lloyds branches, will be our fourth loss in just three years. That highlights the speed of loss. In-person banking offers clarity on payments and trustworthy advice, as well as convenience and accessibility to people's own money. Surely that is a freedom that we should all have.

Alongside the end of in-person banking on the high street, we are also witnessing the decline of ATMs, especially those that are free to use. Before the pandemic, the magazine *Which?* produced a worrying report setting out that one in 10 free cashpoints across the country closed or switched to a fee-paying machine during a 17-month period. The rate in poorer communities was higher than in the least deprived areas of the country. Some 979 free-to-use machines in the poorest communities were lost. That will inevitably force those most reliant on cash, who can least afford to pay for withdrawals, facing charges or being forced to travel to access their money for free; surely, that cannot be right. By its very nature, cash is transactional. We must ensure that people and businesses of all sizes that depend on their ability to freely deposit and withdraw cash at a time of their convenience can continue to do so.

Businesses such as Pat Collins Funfairs, which is a long-standing family business from my constituency, have raised this issue of access to cash with me. It is by

no means the exception. In 2021, a Treasury consultation proposed ensuring “reasonable access” for withdrawal and deposit facilities for personal customers, and deposit facilities for small and medium-sized enterprise customers. I ask my good friend, the Minister—I know that he has not been in post long—whether that commitment remains. If so, how is it that we are allowing such a decline in access to cash and banking to happen?

It is time to incentivise and attract people back to the high street, so that we can continue to support local businesses and communities and ensure that our town centres survive and thrive throughout the 21st century. We hear that shared banking hubs and post offices must play a greater role. I agree, but we must put this into some sort of perspective and be proactive. Banking hubs offer a counter service where customers of all major banks and building societies can carry out regular transactions throughout the working week. The hubs also provide dedicated rooms where customers can see community bankers from their own banks to discuss more complicated banking issues. That seems like a sensible and straightforward approach.

However, according to Link, even with the closures in my constituency, which I have already addressed, Aldridge-Brownhills requires no additional services and certainly has not been recommended for a hub. In fact, the vast majority of Link's investigations when banks are due to close conclude with “no additional services recommended”. Will my hon. Friend the Minister tell us why we have to wait until a community has lost everything before we take action? Surely that is too late and we need to get ahead of the game. I think that NatWest is still part of the Royal Bank of Scotland, in which I think the Government may still have a stake. If they do, I gently urge the Government to take another look at the issue of hubs for communities.

I turn to the role of post offices. We have some good post offices across Aldridge-Brownhills. Banking framework 3, announced in February, is to be welcomed. It will allow the customers of 30 branches across the country to carry on making cash payments and withdrawals in a post office, and it will allow small businesses to deposit cash until 2026. But the question is, what happens then? Again, the framework relies on access to post offices. In Aldridge, the post office sits outwith the main shopping centre. It is not on the high street or in the precinct; it requires the crossing of a two-lane carriageway, and there is no dedicated car park. That is not a good enough alternative to the bank. Citizens Advice reports that we are losing two post offices a week on average—we lost one in Walsall Wood, in my constituency, just this year.

It is important that we support both post offices and banking hubs as part of the solution when discussing the future of in-person banking on the high street and access to banking services and cash. In his response to a written question earlier this year, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury stated:

“the government believes that everyone, wherever they live, should have appropriate access to banking services.”

I agree. Can we ensure that that happens? It is also important to recognise that what might be an appropriate situation or solution in one place is not necessarily the right solution everywhere. There needs to be a much more tailored and localised approach. Perhaps that is something that the Government can work on with local councils, but they must not just pass the burden on to local councils—they must give them the resource to do it.

[Wendy Morton]

I appreciate that decisions on opening and closing branches and the provision of in-person services are a commercial matter for banks and building societies—absolutely, I do. But I press the Minister to take a more holistic, future-proofing approach that acknowledges the bigger role that our banks have always played at the heart of our communities. It is time to work in particular with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which holds the policy pen on high streets and regeneration, and to look at the social and not just the economic impact of bank closures. Driving footfall into our town centres and local high streets is the key to the ongoing rejuvenation of commercial and retail areas and to the regeneration and success of thriving communities. As I said, we must also consider working with local authorities on where we can provide hub services.

I met with NatWest this morning, and I will continue to work with it. NatWest is reaching out to customers across Aldridge-Brownhills. I impress upon the bank the importance of the needs of my constituents, businesses, organisations and charities. We had an incredibly productive meeting, but the bank is still closing. I welcome the fact that NatWest is holding a community outreach event next week for local residents. The announcement of the closure of Aldridge NatWest within a matter of months highlights exactly why we need to look at the bigger picture now, before it is too late.

3.14 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing this important debate. Between 2012 and 2022, Yorkshire and the Humber saw a 43% decrease in the number of bank and building society branches. Earlier this month, the Barclays branch in Hoyland announced its closure, which is of great concern to many local people. It follows a string of other branch closures in Barnsley, such as Yorkshire Bank in Wombwell, and will leave my constituency of Barnsley East with no bank branches at all, four having closed in recent years.

Physical branch closures are often justified by the rise in online banking, which has undoubtedly been a great convenience for many. However, closures risk financially excluding communities, and it is regrettable that people are no longer able to choose whether to bank online or in person. More than 3 million people aged 55 and above have still never been online, with those aged 75 and over most likely to be excluded. Furthermore, Age UK found that four in 10 over-65s with bank accounts—amounting to more than 4 million people—do not manage their money online.

While there has been a shift towards online banking, connectivity should not be assumed across the country. Rural areas are less likely to have reliable digital infrastructure, which therefore impacts their ability to access online banking. Although Labour is calling for mandatory, well-advertised broadband social tariffs for those who need them, they have not yet come about. As the cost of living continues to rise, many people find using cash easier for budgeting purposes, but it is not just access to physical money that people are seeking. It has been found that more people report wanting to speak to a real person as they become increasingly worried about their stretched finances.

There is some provision in place to establish shared banking hubs, which will offer people access to cash services. These hubs have the potential to help many suffering with bank closures, but there are still some issues to be resolved with this system. A routine trip to the bank often turns into footfall for local businesses, helping them to keep their doors open and our struggling high streets to stay alive. I hope that banks will take local needs into consideration—particularly those in rural areas where public transport is not as frequent or reliable—before continuing with further closures, and recognise the impact that removing branches can have on different groups in the community.

3.17 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing today's debate and on an excellent opening speech, which set the scene as to why community banking is still so important. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock).

The matter we are discussing is indeed very important. A lot has been said about rurality and access in more rural areas, but even in suburban towns such as Carshalton and Wallington, just outside London, this is proving to be a difficult issue. The main high street in Carshalton no longer has any banking facilities left whatsoever. There is a post office, but all the high street banks have left; I think Barclays was the last to leave, and that was quite a few years ago. The high street in Wallington lost Halifax a few years ago, and it has just been announced that Barclays is closing its branch on the high street as well. Of course, people can vote with their feet and switch to another bank that has a high street presence; Wallington does still have a NatWest, a Nationwide, a TSB, an HSBC and a Santander. However, the worry is that the Barclays branch will not be the last closure, and that many if not all of them will eventually close. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said, at this rate of change, the next few years could see the end of high street banks altogether. We have seen it in other parts of the London Borough of Sutton, too: Cheam village, for example, has no high street banks left, having lost four over the course of the past decade.

In my short contribution today, the question I want to touch on is what is left behind when banks decide to close? Of course, the nature of banking is changing, and I respect that tough business decisions need to be made around the future model. However, as the hon. Member for Barnsley East mentioned, it is a huge issue that many people, for a number of reasons, are excluded from digital participation in online banking, and the same is true of those who rely on cash transactions, be they small businesses, charities or individuals. It is important that there is a left-behind service for them.

I thank Barclays for being very constructive in engaging with me since its decision to close. It has agreed to set up a Barclays van for customers, which will be in the car park of Dobbies Garden Centre—no relation to the house elf—twice a week every fortnight, on Tuesdays and Saturdays, I believe. It has also agreed to retain a single member of its staff so that it has a presence in another location on Wallington high street five days a week. That is very welcome news. I welcome the fact

that Barclays realises that it needs to leave something behind, but that is sadly not always the case when other banks decide to close. They simply point to ATMs or the post office in the area, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills pointed out, access to cash and ATMs—particularly free ATMs—is also in decline.

There is a big problem with an over-reliance on the Post Office, which is not without its own problems. The post office in Wallington often has massive queues stretching up the road, particularly on a Saturday, and its opening hours are a lot more restricted than those of a bank. Over-relying on the Post Office to provide a banking service to people once a branch decides to close is wrong; we need to take a more holistic view.

I absolutely support the idea of banking hubs. It is a great idea to have representatives from all major high street banks in one place. It is a way for the banks to save money on rent for buildings that are not being used as well as they could be, so it is a good deal for banks and customers. However, I worry that they are often considered only when everything is lost. They can take a long time to set up from scratch, so potentially absolutely nothing will be in place for years. Will the Minister outline whether the Treasury will consider using its convening power and its influence to persuade banks to work more collaboratively and holistically to look at community need and plan in advance for these things to happen? We should not wait for every high street bank to close and then try to set up something from scratch. That is probably the best way forward.

We all understand and appreciate that the nature of banking is changing, but for so many—not least those who are digitally excluded—having that in-person service is not only desirable but vital. I hope the Minister will outline what work the Treasury is doing and will continue to do to ensure banking remains fair and accessible for everyone.

3.22 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) set out the case very well for why bank closures are a problem and why they cause such concern in our constituencies. It feels like I have stood here innumerable times deploring the loss of another local bank in one of the towns in East Renfrewshire. I really related to the comments of the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock): bank closures are highly frustrating and cause such difficulties and challenges for people in our communities.

Sometimes, the way the banks deal with closures adds to the frustration. Some have reduced the number of hours they are open to provide a service, and they tell us in all seriousness that the reason they are closing is that fewer people are attending the bank. Well, of course fewer people are attending the bank if there are fewer hours available for them to do so. The reduction in the availability of service is a challenge and a self-perpetuating issue.

The hon. Lady's comments about rural areas were absolutely right. This is an issue for people in rural areas—some of my constituents feel that very strongly—but we also heard about issues in more suburban areas.

The suburban communities of East Renfrewshire are scunnered; they are fed up to the back teeth of banks disappearing from their high streets and leaving behind big gaps in the local shopping areas. That is particularly an issue for groups in our communities such as disabled people and the elderly, and for local businesses. Our local high streets face not only the challenge of bringing in customers but the additional challenge of the closure. A bank is a destination in and of itself, but people who go to banks may then visit local businesses—that will not happen if the banks are not there. Bank closures leave a gaping hole behind, which is unattractive, and the service that local businesses may also wish to avail themselves of is no longer available, so this is not just a one-dimensional issue for our high streets. I do not think that the banks are paying due care and attention to that.

Local residents are also aggravated by the correspondence they receive from banks that are going to close. Without asking in advance what they think about it, the closure is presented as a *fait accompli*—whether the community likes it or not, and regardless of its views, the local bank is closing, and people are unable to scrutinise the facts and figures. The bank also tells them not to worry because they can go to another bank that is 5 miles away. Well, it might be 5 miles away for a crow, but that is entirely irrelevant for a human being who has to catch two buses, with a half-hour wait between the two, to get from A to B, or if people do not have time to make the journey because they have other commitments. Such messaging from banks is profoundly unhelpful and insults the intelligence of their customers. The banks seem to be assuming that everybody is standing outside the closing bank, ready to make the journey, but some of the people affected may live in a town that has already lost its bank, which means that they will have to travel even further. It is understandable that people feel vexed.

The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills pointed out that when a bank is gone, it is gone—it is not coming back—and that is one of the reasons why people are so concerned. There are many other reasons why in-person banking is valuable, including the opportunity it gives people to have a conversation about their money. We all value such conversations, which can advise us on how to stop fraud attempts, particularly those targeted at elderly and vulnerable people. Obviously, if there is no bank branch, such discussions cannot take place.

The ability to access cash is a huge issue in my community and others. If there are fewer free-to-use ATMs and fewer banks, we are taking away the opportunity for people to choose how they transact things in their day-to-day lives. Again, that is a bigger problem for those who have the least cash and for those who are most marginalised in our communities.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) is right to worry that banks might just be disappearing from our high streets altogether. Technology is great—I absolutely accept that a lot of the banking technology is really helpful—but it is not always what is necessary. We need to appreciate that both approaches are necessary. Technology and the ability to access it are valuable, but face-to-face services also need to be made available, whether for reasons of accessibility or because the relevant technology is not available. Such services also help us put criminal elements in perspective. The

[Kirsten Oswald]

fewer the number of bank branches, the more opportunities for online and digital frauds. I have spent a lot of time recently looking at push payment frauds, and it seems to me that there would be fewer of them if people had access to someone they could speak to about their banking on a day-to-day basis.

Are banks doing what we need them to do? I am not sure that they are doing so. There is a very unfortunate assumption that communities will just cope with banks disappearing from their high streets. When I moved to the home I have now lived in for about 15 years, there were numerous bank branches on my local high street, but that is not the case any more. People in towns all over East Renfrewshire will feel the same way. The banks have just disappeared—they have walked off the pitch. The promises we heard about never closing the last bank in town are laughable. My constituents would think that that was ludicrous, which is a shame, because they and our town centres need bank services.

Our post offices do a brilliant job. I have stood here before and waxed lyrical about the brilliant post offices in East Renfrewshire. They are fantastic. I know it is a strange thing to suggest, but people should come to our local post offices. They are great, but they have their own job to do. They have a long and varied list of things they can do, but they are not banks, so although they are doing a great job, there are still gaps. The banking hub in Cambuslang is certainly a model to look at, and I am encouraged by others following that. But whatever the model, people on our local high streets and communities, particularly those who are most marginalised, must be able to access cash and banking services. I do not think that it is an unreasonable expectation that we should have that in our local communities, and I very much look forward to hearing what others have to say today.

This conversation will become all the more pressing in the next couple of years, as banks continue to close apace and people begin to really wonder what the banks are for, who they are providing a service to, and how we ensure that we have access to cash and banking facilities, which is what people need.

3.30 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I think that I am about to reiterate a lot of what has already been said, but I think it is worth saying again. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing this really important debate. Before I start, I should declare an interest: I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices. I do not think that I technically have to declare that, but I do know a fair bit about post offices as a result.

Scotland has been hit harder by bank closures than anywhere else in the UK. Scotland is geographically bigger than any region of England or any other nation in the UK, and consequently it has a very spread-out population. Because of that spread, bank closures can be more damaging to us, which is why it is shocking that last year's Scottish Affairs Committee report found that Scotland has also lost a greater share of bank branches than any other country in the UK. That is diminishing

the ability of people to access cash and other banking services. Since 2015, 53% of Scotland's bank branches have closed, which is the highest percentage loss of all the nations in the UK. In 2009, 56% of transactions were in cash, but today's cash payments represent only 17% of transactions. Despite that drop, cash remains the second most frequently used form of payment, second only to debit cards.

Wendy Morton: We talk a lot about services and access to cash. Does the hon. Lady agree that for people who are on a fixed budget and for whom managing money is difficult, having cash makes that very tricky job just that little bit easier? They can see what they have in their purse, wallet or pocket in front of them. That is why I think—and I hope she agrees—that that is another reason why the banking service and access to cash and advice, particularly at a time of cost of living challenges, are even more important.

Marion Fellows: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Member. If someone is poor, they cannot afford to run up bank charges. They cannot afford to be overdrawn. I am old enough to remember my mother having pots of money—some was used for this, and some was used for that, but if it was not there, we could not spend it. It is a better way to keep oneself in the black altogether.

Before 2021, about six branches a month were closing in Scotland, but since 2021 that has increased to about eight a month. Post offices are also now closing: between 2011 and 2021, we lost 112 post offices to closure in Scotland alone.

Kirsten Oswald: My hon. Friend is making a really important point about both banks and post offices potentially being lost to communities. Does she agree that when banks close and abdicate their responsibility, their suggestion that post offices will simply take over their services is unfortunate and unacceptable? It is as if the banks think they are not at all accountable. That is not how we should address this.

Marion Fellows: Absolutely. Banks are allowed to say, "Well, it is okay if we close, because there is a post office nearby." That will not always be the case, as more and more sub-postmasters struggle. I will come on to that later.

The head of policy at Age Concern Scotland has noted:

"These closures often hit older customers hardest, leaving them cut off from vital services and making it harder for them to manage their money...As we battle through this cost of living crisis it is more important than ever that older people can access their money as cash, for free, and use it whenever they need to."

The number of cash machines that are closing is disgraceful. For example, in my local area in Lanarkshire we have lost nearly 100 cash machines in four years. In July 2018, Lanarkshire had 650 cash machines but that had fallen to 561 by last February. And the really important point is that the number of free-to-use ATMs in my area had dropped by 555 to 426. That means that the only ATMs that people can access are ones that charge them for taking out their own money; they are paying a poverty premium. That is ludicrous and it is really affecting people on a daily basis.

As I have said, for years banks have said, “It’s okay if we close our local banks, because there will always be post offices nearby.” However, as I have also already said, post office closures have picked away at their number, too. What will the Department do to protect network and community services that are run through post offices, especially in relation to people who cannot get to banks?

Given the different ways of running post offices, it is really difficult to tell how many sub-postmasters who have taken on banking to a great degree are now struggling. I do not know whether folk here are aware of this, but 70% of the members of the National Federation of SubPostmasters are only earning the national minimum wage, despite the good work that they do in providing post office services and now banking services. That figure came out before the cost of living crisis, so the situation will be even worse now.

It is also very difficult for Post Office Ltd to encourage people to take on post offices or sub-post offices because of the Horizon scandal. The other thing is that the Post Office lozenge—the sign that we are all very familiar with—goes outside a building and says, “Post Office”, but inside that particular building there might only be a drop and collect service for parcels. So, people think that there is a post office where there is not one.

On banking transactions, many Members have already said that many local businesses now use local sub-post offices to pay in takings in cash. That is important, because it keeps money in the local area and it really keeps some high streets going. However, last year new regulations to combat money laundering were introduced by the Financial Conduct Authority—actually, I have found it difficult to find out if it was entirely the fault of the FCA or UK Finance. Recently, it has been very difficult for local businesses. There are no banks, so they take their money to the post office, but a limit was imposed on how much each business could deposit.

I am very pleased to say that last month the FCA noticed that a more tailored approach should be taken by banks for cash deposits by business customers, on the basis of expected business customer activity. However, that also links back to the problem that sub-postmasters have, because they were losing money as customers could not deposit all of their takings and many customers then had to travel many miles to be able to deposit their money safely. I am hopeful that, when this issue is properly sorted out, a tailored approach will allow local business owners to go back in and carry out their business the way they did before.

Real clarity is needed on banking hubs. I have visited the banking hub in Cambuslang, and one is to be opened quite near my constituency in Carlisle, hopefully reasonably soon. The building in Cambuslang was fantastic. The way it works is that each bank that has signed up sends a representative to the banking hub once a week to give business advice. As many Members have pointed out, people go to banks not just to take out money; they need advice, help with filling in forms, and other things like that. Those things were being done in the hub. I spoke to many customers that day, and they were very happy with the service given. It was a pilot programme, and it is still unclear what effect it had on the local post office branch, so we have to bear that in mind. The NFSP is concerned about the fact that there is no third-party oversight of the banking hub recruitment

process. It is not known how those who gained the right to run the banking hubs were selected. I have already written to LINK about that, and I am awaiting a response.

Consumers are able to access cash at a post office only if their bank has signed up to the banking framework agreement. Which? has raised concerns about the long-term viability of the agreement, as it is voluntary and there is a time limit on it—I think the last one to which banks signed up was for three years. Barclays bank originally did not sign up, which was quite a loss for its local customers. I am calling for access to cash at a post office to be placed on a firmer and more sustainable footing in areas where local cash needs are unmet. Can the Minister comment on that, and update us on where we are going?

Returning to the post office argument, if banking hubs have an impact on local post offices, then that is something that we have to be very careful about. Part of the difficulty is that the Treasury and the Department for Business and Trade are both involved, and there is not a great deal of communication between them. I know it is getting slightly better, but this Government have for many years almost had a silo mentality, in which one Department did not really know what the other was doing. That is to the detriment of people who have to use banks and post offices—if they are still there. I would really welcome the Minister’s comments on that.

I again thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills and all the other Members who have spoken. This is a real ongoing problem, and like my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), I have stood here to speak on the subject innumerable times. I have come at this problem from different angles, and have tried to say something different each time, but that is proving harder and harder. It is time that the Government got a real handle on the issue, and started to protect consumers more, as well as those who cannot use digital banking. That is not just older people, though many older people struggle with either bad broadband or the inability to handle new technology. We need a joined-up approach from the Government to ensure that people can still access banks, post offices and cash.

3.43 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing this debate, and for eloquently laying out the case for why bank branches are still important in many of our constituencies, whether rural or suburban. Too often the political discussion on bank branch closures focuses only on concerns around cash. While the issue of cash is important, and I will touch on it later, there is also the issue of the many other essential services that bank branches provide. They have been outlined in this debate.

Age UK and others have rightly highlighted the importance of the local bank branch to communities across the country. It provides vital in-person services that older people rely on, whether they are opening accounts, applying for a loan, making or receiving payments or need help with a standing order. It would, however, be wrong to assume that it is just older people who use bank branches. There will always be a significant part of the British population that needs the extra face-to-face support that hon. Members have mentioned.

[Tulip Siddiq]

Natalie Ceeney has been working on the issue for a long time. She is the chair of UK Finance's access to cash action group, and she has made it clear that there is a substantial overlap between the people who rely on access to cash—around 10 million adults across the UK—and those who depend on their local bank branch for financial advice and support. In her report of her research and engagement with local communities, which I encourage hon. Members to read, she found that it was often the most vulnerable—ethnic minorities, people whose first language was not English, and the poorest in society—who relied on cash and in-person help with their finances in their day-to-day life. That point was echoed by the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), who talked about what happened in her constituency, and noted that many people from hard-to-reach communities needed those services. That is why some of the figures that we heard in today's debate are so concerning.

Analysis published by Which? found that over half of the UK's bank and building society branches have closed since January 2015. That is a shocking rate of around 54 closures each month, and there have already been 158 closures in 2023, with another 274 branches expected to close by the end of this year. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) said that that is taking place in her constituency, and explained how it has cut off countless people in her area from the goods and services that they require. Unfortunately, last year, when the Government introduced provisions on access to cash in the Financial Services and Markets Bill, which I led on, they did not introduce protection for essential face-to-face banking services, which was a glaring omission. I wonder whether the Minister will comment on that. It risks leaving millions of people behind—not just those without the digital skills needed to bank online, but people in rural areas with poor internet connections, and the growing number of people who cannot afford data or wi-fi because of the cost of living crisis. That is another point made powerfully by my hon. Friend.

The Opposition recognise that it is inevitable that payment and banking systems will continue to innovate, which is a good thing. Online banking is a far more convenient way for people to manage their finances, but we have to ensure that the digital revolution does not further deepen financial exclusion in our country. That is why the Labour party wants to give the FCA the powers that it needs to protect essential in-person banking services. To be clear, I am not calling for banks to be prevented from closing branches if they are genuinely no longer needed—quite the opposite. I recognise that access to face-to-face services could and should increasingly be provided through banking hubs, whether those are delivered by the Post Office, as we have heard, or take the form of shared bank branches or other models of community provision. If a branch is genuinely not being used, it makes sense that it should not exist, but if it is well used, I do not see why we would close it.

I anticipate that the Minister will say that the Government support banking hubs. We have heard that time and again, but let us be honest: the roll-out of banking hubs has been pathetic. Communities have lost 5,605 bank branches since January 2015, while only four hubs have

been delivered so far. That is just not good enough. Figures from LINK reveal that only a further 52 are in the pipeline. The figures do not add up or make us feel very positive. People in our constituencies are telling us that it is not enough, and a lot more has to be done. On top of that, many of those planned banking hubs will not even provide essential in-person services. They must provide a more comprehensive service when they are built. That is why we must empower the FCA to review the community's need for access to essential in-person banking services, and get a clearer picture of what is needed in our constituencies.

That, of course, will not be enough on its own to tackle financial exclusion. Alongside that, we will need to put in place a proper strategy for digital inclusion. Banking hubs will have to play a role in that. The Post Office has called for banking hubs to have financial inclusion advisers, who can ensure that no one is left behind. That is a very interesting idea, and I hope that the Minister will comment on it. Labour believes that banking hubs have the potential to tackle digital exclusion—for instance, through dedicated staff, who could teach people how to bank online and provide internet access to those who need it. I would like to hear what the Minister has to say about those proposals, although I recognise that this is not his brief; perhaps he could comment on behalf of his colleagues.

We of course welcome the fact that the Financial Services and Markets Bill finally introduced some protection for access to cash, but it sadly falls short of what is truly needed. It does not make any commitment to protect free access to cash. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) talked a bit about free access to cash and the community need in his constituency, which I know well. I was born in St Helier Hospital, like him—many years earlier, I have to say. I think his point was important. It shows that it is not just rural areas that are affected; suburban constituencies in London still have that community need. We need free access to cash.

Data collected by Which? shows that there has been a rapid drop in provision of free-to-use ATMs in recent years. There must be something in legislation that protects free access to cash; otherwise, our constituents will be in trouble. We saw a decline of 30,000 free-to-use ATMs between August 2018 and February 2023. That is a stark 26.1% fall. It is a shocking statistic. It is forcing the poorest people in the UK to pay for access to their own money. That seems ludicrous. We know that a massive 3.8 million people are in financial difficulty, and 15 million people in total use cash for budgeting purposes. The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills made the point that more and more people are using cash to budget because of the cost of living crisis.

The need to protect cash services will only grow in importance as the cost of living crisis increases. The data collected by the Post Office that I looked at showed that the use of cash has actually risen in recent months. The cost of living crisis is deepening. The poorest in society are increasingly turning to cash to manage their budgets day to day, and week to week, and we should help them by providing free access to cash.

I hope the Minister will take on board the concerns that have been raised today. If his Government are serious about leaving no one behind, there are three fundamental questions he must address in his closing

remarks, or take back to the Minister who has this brief. Does he agree that the rate of bank branch closures is reaching an all-time high? This is the time to empower the FCA to protect in-person services. If not now, then when will that happen? Secondly, does he recognise that the Government must work with industry to accelerate the roll-out of banking hubs if the initiative is to have any impact at all, and that banking hubs must provide all the services that people need, not just a select few? Finally, how will he ensure that everyone—particularly the poorest in society, who rely on doing so—can access their own money, without it burning a hole in their pockets?

3.53 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies):

It is a particular pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies, because I know that if you were not in the Chair, you would be making an impassioned speech. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for bringing forward this debate. There is strong feeling on this subject across communities and constituencies, including mine. She spoke with great passion and knowledge on behalf of her constituents, whom she serves very well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) quite rightly said that banking is changing. In recent years, innovation has led to an increase in online banking, which many people find quicker and more convenient than banking in branch. We know this from our experience, as well as seeing it in the data. In 2021, the industry body, UK Finance, found that 86% of UK adults made contactless payments; 72% banked online; and 57% banked using their mobile phone. That is not just young people. The latest data shows that more than 70% of people aged over 65 use online banking.

As the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) pointed out, given the rise of online banking, we have to ensure that digital connectivity and mobile phone coverage are strong. In 2020, the Government announced a £1 billion deal with mobile operators to deliver the shared rural network, which will see operators collectively increase mobile phone coverage across our country. As for speed, in 2021 the Government launched Project Gigabit, which commits £5 billion to expanding gigabit coverage to 85% of households in the country.

The basic fact is that local bank branches receive fewer and fewer visitors because, frankly, many customers' needs can be met digitally through video calls, banking apps or on the phone. In that environment, banks and building societies have a decision to make about how to provide in-person services to those who need them in the communities in which they operate. Those decisions are nuanced, local and, most importantly, commercial. The Government rightly cannot and do not intervene in them.

That being said, we recognise the real concerns expressed more widely about losing access to bank branches, which, as has been said, are important to many communities. For a variety of reasons, some members of our communities, such as those who are vulnerable, may need to do their banking in person. All firms should follow the FCA's guidance to ensure that they carefully consider the impact of planned closures on their customers. That guidance sets the expectation that if a branch closes, firms will put in place reasonable alternatives in

order to meet customer needs. Where firms fall short of that expectation, the FCA has the power to ask for closures to be paused, or for other options to be put in place.

Wendy Morton: I am interested to know the number of occasions on which an intervention has been made after a closure. I hope the Minister agrees that this is important. Banks should not close a branch and then review the engagement and so on, because then it is too late. Too much is happening on the back foot.

Gareth Davies: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. I will have the Economic Secretary to the Treasury write to her with any figures that we have on the pauses that have taken place as a result of FCA guidance. LINK carries out reviews in order to suggest and recommend the services that can be put in place. If there are no bank branches left in a community, a banking hub can be suggested. However, if my right hon. Friend will allow me, I will ask my colleague to write to her with more detail on that point.

The industry is innovating and finding new ways to respond to customers who want and need to access in-person services. I am pleased that we have heard a lot of discussion today about post offices, because they play a vital part in this issue. It is right to point out the statistics, which I was quite shocked to learn when preparing for this debate. Some 99% of personal banking customers, and 95% of business banking customers, can do their everyday banking—can do such things as withdraw cash or check their balance—at one of 11,500 post office branches across the country. I was also shocked to learn that 93% of people in this country live within just 1 mile of a post office, so almost everyone can access their everyday banking services locally.

Kirsten Oswald: Does the Minister appreciate that that will be cold comfort to people who no longer have a post office, or who have an on-and-off post office, which is not a very reliable way of doing business, or who do not live in the heavily populated areas that presumably make up that 99%? That is probably an unhelpful comment, in their opinion.

Gareth Davies: I accept the challenge, of course. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) also asked me to comment on what support the Government are providing to post offices. I can respond to both points.

In the 2021 spending review, some £227 million was secured in Government investment between '22 and '25, including a subsidy of £50 million to protect access to post office services in commercially challenging locations. That later increased to £335 million, including a £150 million subsidy to those in commercially challenging locations. I therefore accept what the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) says, but the reality for the 93% who live within 1 mile of a post office cannot be ignored. For those who are not within that catchment area, the Government have stepped in with subsidy and significant funding to ensure access to a post office.

Tulip Siddiq: We are lucky in this place, with two post offices that hardly ever have queues, but in my constituency there are massive queues outside the post offices, in which people have to wait a long time. Also, some of the services that constituents want to use a bank for are just

[Tulip Siddiq]

not appropriate in a post office. Some post offices, certainly in my constituency, are based in WHSmith or another shop; it would not be appropriate to go in there to talk about personal banking services. Will the Minister comment on that?

Gareth Davies: What services banks provide is a commercial decision for them, but they provide a lot of different ways to interact with them these days, including several online options. As I pointed out right at the start, the majority of the British public access banking in those ways, whether online through a website, web chat or a mobile banking app, or via the telephone. Customers of commercial banks have a variety of ways to interact and get advice, and I would encourage them to do so. It is not the Government's place to intervene in the commercial decisions of banks on what services they provide and where.

In addition to what I have just laid out on the variety of online services, many banks and building societies have programmes in place involving community centres, libraries, mobile banking vans or semi-permanent banking pods. The pods are structures that provide a dedicated private space to support customers with banking services. They can be moved around to different locations, depending on demand—the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) may wish to engage the banks on those for her area. For people who need to speak to their bank face to face, such places can make a vital difference.

Alongside those programmes, there is the high-profile innovation of shared banking hubs, which many Members have referred to in the debate. The hubs provide a dedicated space where customers can meet community bankers, who support them with more complex services. The hubs also offer a range of everyday banking facilities, allowing customers to deposit cheques, check their balance, and withdraw and deposit cash. More than 50 shared banking hubs have been announced for communities across the country, as has been said. Four have opened their doors already and two more are expected in the coming weeks.

Wendy Morton: Does the Minister agree that 52 hubs are due to open, which is great, but only four have opened? What more can he or his Department do to encourage, or gently push or prod, the organisers of the hubs to get them in place? The point made by Members across the Chamber today comes down to banks closing and hubs not opening.

Gareth Davies: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. The Government recognise and share the frustrations that she has voiced about the pace of the roll-out of the hubs. Those are commercial arrangements and the industry is working to deliver the hubs quickly. We expect the delivery to accelerate over the coming months, but I share the frustration. The Government have laid out very clearly, as I have today, our expectation: we want the delivery to speed up. We welcome these initiatives, which clearly demonstrate how innovation is supporting access to banking in the longer term. We believe that the impact of branch closures should be mitigated where possible, so that all customers, wherever they live, continue to have access to appropriate banking services.

We are also taking strong steps to protect access to cash, as has been asked of me today. It is true that electronic payments are being used more and more, and cash less and less. Over the last decade, the use of cash to pay for goods and services has declined by almost three quarters. However, cash continues to be important for millions of people across the UK, including businesses and people who may be in vulnerable groups. There is, as ever, a balance to be struck. As more and more people and businesses embrace the benefits of new payment methods, the Government should not stand in the way, particularly when those innovations can make it easier to start and grow a business or to manage family finances, but we must offer reassurance and protection for those who do need cash.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills asked me to make a commitment on this, and I will say that the Financial Services and Markets Bill, which is going through Parliament right now, does just that. It will enshrine access to cash in legislation. In doing that, we are helping to ensure that everyone, whoever they are and wherever they live, is able to manage their finances in a way that works for them. I hope that that commitment has been heard today by not just my right hon. Friend but many of her constituents, who I know will be concerned about that.

Like many of the speakers in today's debate, the Government understand the challenges that these changes have brought, and the nervousness that can accompany any change, but supporting customers, communities, businesses and people across the country remains our key duty. Of course, we will always welcome innovation, especially in financial services, to support competition and grow our economy. We will continue to work with the sector, the public and all Members across the House to ensure that we have a modern, flexible banking system that caters to the needs of every person and business in our country.

4.7 pm

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to the Minister for his response and to all colleagues, from across the House, who have made contributions today. None of us here is anti-innovation at all, but what we are seeking from the Minister is continued reassurance that the Government are on the side of customers, be they residents, constituents, businesses, charities, organisations or the most vulnerable in our society. I think we will continue to watch this issue; I certainly will. It would be really helpful to have greater clarity on hubs. I appreciate that that is a commercial matter, but I will continue to look to the Government to see what they can do to ensure that the people whom we all seek to represent have access not just to banking, but to banking services, information, advice and, most importantly, cash. I am grateful to the Minister for his time and contribution this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of high street bank closures and banking hubs.

4.8 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 11 May 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

India Trade Negotiations

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): The eighth round UK-India free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations took place from 20-31 March. The ninth round took place shortly afterwards, from 24-28 April. As with previous rounds, these rounds were conducted in a hybrid fashion, a number of officials travelled to each other's nations for negotiations and others attended virtually. Detailed talks took place across a range of policy areas.

The UK-India trade relationship was worth £36 billion in 2022. A deal which respects the domestic sensitivities of both sides will strengthen the economic links between the UK and India, boosting the UK economy and bringing benefits to UK businesses, families and consumers.

In this negotiation, as with all our FTA negotiations, the NHS and the services it provides is not on the table. This Government will continue to work towards a high level of protection of the environment in new trade agreements.

We have provisionally closed 17 chapters across the FTA, and both sides continue to work towards a modern and comprehensive agreement. We will only sign a deal that is fair, balanced and ultimately in the best interests of the UK.

The 10th round of negotiations is due to take place in the coming months.

The Government will continue to keep Parliament updated as these negotiations progress.

[HCWS766]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery: Implementation

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill represents the Government's pledge to address the extremely complex and sensitive legacy of Northern Ireland's past. The Bill aims to deliver better outcomes for those most affected by the troubles, while at the same time putting in place mechanisms to encourage and promote reconciliation. In seeking to achieve this critical objective, the Bill establishes a new body, the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (the ICIR).

The Government believe that the success of the ICIR will rely on its ability to operate independently of Government. This is why it is being established as an arm's length body. It will not report to Ministers, but instead to a board of commissioners, and will be staffed by public servants and seconded police officers who will be accountable to the commissioners.

Last month Lord Caine, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, provided Parliament with information about the Government's proposed approach to appointing ICIR commissioners. This included criteria for each role and the selection processes which would inform the exercise of my power to make ICIR commissioner appointments. The Government outlined the importance of beginning the process of advertising and identifying candidates for commissioner roles, so they could begin work to design and set up the body as soon as the Bill completes its legislative process.

Following the process set out for the selection of the Chief Commissioner, having received advice from the judiciary, I have identified the right hon. Sir Declan Morgan to be appointed Chief Commissioner of the ICIR. His appointment will take place following Royal Assent and the establishment of the ICIR, taking account of any further considerations and final requirements of the Act.

Sir Declan brings a wealth of experience from his previous role as Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland from 2009 to 2021. A hallmark of his distinguished career has been his commitment to addressing Northern Ireland's past. I am confident that he will bring the highest level of experience, expertise and integrity to this post, which will help build public confidence in the ICIR.

Sir Declan will begin work from early next month to identify other commissioners and to design how the new commission will carry out its role. In particular, the Chief Commissioner will lead the process to recruit the commissioner for investigations and provide a recommended candidate to me. The broadest possible field of experienced candidates is sought to fill this important role. The role is currently advertised and is subject to fair and open competition, with appointment on merit.

In light of the announcement of the Chief Commissioner, the deadline will be extended until 1 June to allow him to lead the appointment process and form a panel.

The Government are committed to delivering the legislative framework to address the legacy of the Northern Ireland troubles and promote reconciliation, and to ensuring that, subject to parliamentary process, it is implemented swiftly, and in the best possible ways, so that it can serve the people of Northern Ireland.

[HCWS767]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Fraud and Error National Statistics

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove): The annual statistics for fraud and error in the benefit system for the financial year ending 2023 were published on Thursday 11 May 2023, at 9.30 am.

Today's figures confirm that fraud and error in 2022-23 fell to 3.6% of welfare expenditure. This includes a reduced rate of both fraudulent overpayments at 2.7% (£6.4 billion) and claimant error at 0.6% (£1.4 billion). The rate of official error has remained the same at 0.3% (£0.6 billion), whilst the rate of underpayments has increased by 0.2 percentage points to 1.4% (£3.3 billion).

This fall in the value of fraud and error shows that our plan for fighting fraud in the welfare system is working. This is a positive step in the right direction after an increase in fraud and error during the pandemic, but there is more to do.

Prior to the pandemic, fraud and error rates across the welfare system were falling. This was driven by our action to prevent fraud from entering the system and to detect and recover it when it does. At the outset of the pandemic, we took the right and necessary decisions to protect millions of people who suddenly required our support. This meant we eased some of our control measures to manage the surge in universal credit claims and pay people in need on time. While this allowed the Department to process millions of universal credit (UC) claims in the first weeks of the pandemic, unfortunately this was exploited by some.

Our fraud plan, “Fighting Fraud in the Welfare System”, which we published last year and is backed by £900 million of funding, sets out how we are stepping up our approach to drive out fraud and error from the welfare system.

We have already revisited and reinstated our normal checks and assurances that were eased over the pandemic. The return of our defences has had a positive impact in preventing fraudulent claims, and this is now starting to be reflected in the fraud and error statistics, as published today. We also continuously improve our systems to keep pace with fast-evolving criminal tactics. From our findings we are implementing policy and technological solutions, including enhanced verification and improved customer communications.

We have continued to build on our effective counter-fraud function. This focuses on individual and organised crime threats meaning we can disrupt attacks on the system by both individuals and organised gangs, stopping criminals taking from those who need this support.

As part of our plan, we will review millions of UC claims over the next five years by way of targeted case reviews. This will see the DWP review cases that are at risk of being incorrect, clearing the stock of fraud and

error that entered during the height of the pandemic and addressing any overpayments or underpayments, ensuring claimants receive the right amount.

Finally, as our fraud plan set out, when parliamentary time allows, we plan to introduce a new range of powers to strengthen our ability to tackle fraud and error in the benefits system. This includes: strengthening our penalty regime by introducing a new civil penalty for cases of fraud, which will help act as a deterrent; a requirement for organisations such as banks to share data securely on an increased scale to help us check levels of savings and whether claimants are living abroad; and to support us to tackle serious and organised crime, increase DWP officers’ powers to conduct searches, seize evidence and make arrests, giving fraudsters no place to hide.

Fraud is a major issue, but we are also taking further steps to minimise errors, ensuring the right people are paid the right amount at the right time. For personal independence payment, we ask all claimants in our key communications with them to inform us if their condition has changed for better or worse. We would encourage anyone who thinks their condition has changed to get in touch so that we can review their case and ensure we pay them the right amount. Details on how to get in touch are available at Personal Independence Payment (PIP): Change of circumstances - gov.uk (www.gov.uk).

For the state pension, our legal entitlements administrative practice (LEAP) exercise continues to identify and reimburse those people affected by historic underpayments. We also continue to work closely with HMRC, to understand more about the scale, potential causes, and options to correct historical errors relating to home responsibilities protection.

We will report more on both overpayments and underpayments by way of our annual report and accounts, which are due to be published early in July 2023.

[HCWS765]

Petition

Thursday 11 May 2023

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Dangerous driving

The petition of residents of Osmaston Road, Harborne, Birmingham,

Declares that there are serious concerns surrounding speeding on Osmaston Road; further declares that illegally modified motor cars, Quad Bikes, Motor Bikes and Commercial Vans travel on this road at a high speed, which is deeply frightening for residents of the road; notes that the petitioners have repeatedly attempted to engage with the Council on this issue and have not received a response.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Birmingham City Council Highways Department and West Midlands Police to address the concerns of the residents of Osmaston Road to prevent dangerous speeding.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Preet Kaur Gill, *Official Report*, 21 March 2023; Vol. 730, c. 304.]

[P002816]

Observations from the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

The Government recognise that any form of antisocial, dangerous or inconsiderate behaviour involving vehicles is a serious issue. We have ensured that the laws and resources are in place to tackle these issues.

First, the powers for the police to use are in place. It is an offence to exceed the speed limit, drive without due care and attention, or without reasonable consideration for other people. It is also an offence to drive an illegally modified vehicle under the construction and use regulations. The police also have the power under section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002 to seize vehicles being used in an antisocial manner.

In addition, the Government have provided the police, local authorities and other local agencies with a range of tools and powers that they can use to respond quickly and effectively to all forms of antisocial behaviour (ASB), including that involving vehicles, through the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014.

In terms of resources, the Government have provided significant financial resource to the west midlands and is increasing the number of officers available. We have confirmed a total police funding settlement of up to £17.2 billion in 2023-24, an increase of up to £313.8 million when compared to 2022-23. West Midlands Police will receive up to £719.2 million in 2023-24, an increase of £23.6 million when compared to 2022-23. As of December 2022, forces have recruited 16,753 additional officers as part of the police uplift, making up 84% of the target of 20,000 additional officers. As of 31 December 2022, West Midlands Police has recruited 1,048 additional uplift officers against a total three-year allocation of 1,218 officers.

How these powers and resources are deployed in the west midlands are rightly decisions for local leaders who are accountable for their use. Law enforcement, including on the roads, is an operational matter for the police. It is for the police to enforce road traffic legislation and investigate road traffic incidents using their professional judgement. Chief officers will decide how to deploy available resources in conjunction with local policing plans, taking into account the specific local problems and demands with which they are faced. They are best placed to understand how to meet the needs of local communities like the residents of Osmaston Road, Harborne, Birmingham.

Police and crime commissioners (PCCs) will identify local needs and in consultation with the chief constable draw up a five-year police and crime plan which sets out the local policing priorities.

Likewise, how local authorities, including Birmingham City Council, deal with local traffic management issues is for the local authority rather than being a matter for central Government.

We suggest that the petitioners raise their concerns about dangerous speeding on Osmaston Road, Harborne, Birmingham with their local PCC for the west midlands, Simon Foster.

We know that there is a link between excessive speed and the risk of collisions, and that it must be frightening for local residents. We fully support the police and local authorities in using the powers and resources they have available to protect their local residents and tackle antisocial behaviour.

The Government will continue to support the police to ensure they have the tools needed to enforce road traffic legislation and ASB powers.

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