

Thursday  
15 June 2023

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**  
(HANSARD)

Thursday 15 June 2023

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 15 June 2023*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

### CONTINGENCIES FUND ACCOUNT 2022-23

*Resolved,*

That there be laid before this House an Account of the Contingencies Fund 2022–23, showing:

1. A Statement of Financial Position
2. A Statement of Cash Flows and
3. Notes to the Accounts; together with the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—(*Mike Wood.*)

## Oral Answers to Questions

### CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Gambling Levy: Exclusion of Charity Lotteries

1. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): If her Department will make an assessment of the potential merits of excluding charity lotteries from the proposed gambling levy. [905420]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew):** We are introducing a levy on operators to fund research, education and treatment for gambling-related harm, and we will consult on the details this summer, including what different sectors pay. We recognise that society lotteries make an important contribution to funding good causes, and that will be taken into account in any final decision.

**Eddie Hughes:** I am kind of hopeful about what the Minister says, but I strongly urge him to consider exempting society lotteries from the compulsory levy given the excellent work that they do right across the country.

**Stuart Andrew:** In a previous life, I set up a society lottery for the hospice that I used to work at, so I understand the important contribution that they make to many charities up and down the country. The levy power applies in the original Gambling Act 2005 to all Gambling Commission licence holders, including society lotteries, but we will, of course, take into consideration the tremendous work that charities such as air ambulances, hospice lotteries, Age UK, the Royal British Legion and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home do, and their reliance on their own lotteries.

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): The gambling review White Paper committed to introducing a statutory levy paid by all operators and collected by the Gambling Commission. We on the Labour Benches fully support that. However, it appears that the national lottery, which makes up around 30% of regulated gambling, will not have to pay the levy. We all love the brand and the work of the national lottery, but the most at-risk gamblers use national lottery products on top of others, so why does it get a free pass when it comes to contributions?

**Stuart Andrew:** The national lottery is set up under separate legislation. However, there is a condition under the fourth licence that the donations that the lottery makes will go to exactly the same areas, including research treatment for people who are suffering gambling-related harm. That money will be going there, so the national lottery will, in effect, be paying.

#### Grassroots Sport: Children

2. **Mr Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Ind): What steps she is taking to encourage more children into grassroots sport. [905421]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer):** Every child and young person should have access to quality sport and physical activity opportunities no matter where they live. We want to ensure that all people get two hours of physical education at school—equal opportunities for boys and girls. We are providing £600 million to boost school sport. Further details of our plan will be set out in our sports strategy.

**Mr Roberts:** Thirty-odd years ago, in weather like this, my friends and I would spend eight hours a day every day of the school holidays, and every evening during term time, up at the cricket nets. Now, they are mostly unused, except on practice nights. My old hockey club, Northop Hall, used to run seven teams on a Saturday, but now it just about manages to scrape three together. I commend the work that James, Matt, Emily, Chris and others do in coaching the next generation of youngsters. What more can the Government do to encourage participation, remove barriers to entry and get more kids out from in front of the screen and into team sports, which bring amazing benefits to mental and physical health?

**Lucy Frazer:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: all children should have the chance to play sport and experience the benefits of being physically active. He is right to talk about facilities, which are important. We have supported more than 80 sites in Wales since 2021. Getting children more active in those facilities will be a central part of our upcoming sports strategy, in which we will set out our ambition to embed physical activity in every child's life by driving up standards and making sport more accessible and more inclusive.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): About 47% of parents say that the cost of living crisis is making it difficult for their children to participate in sport. The levels of participation among the poorest social groups is down on six years ago. What will the Secretary of State do in her plan to drive up participation in sport in those communities?

**Lucy Frazer:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the importance of sport. A significant proportion of the £300 million that is going into sports facilities across the country will go to disadvantaged areas. As I mentioned, we are bringing forward a sports strategy that will set out how we ensure that everybody around the country can take part in sport and that it is inclusive for everybody.

**Mr Speaker:** Obviously, if we beat the Australians in the tests, that would be even better for young people. Let us go to Chris Elmore, a big cricketer.

### Draft Media Bill

3. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What her planned timetable is for the draft Media Bill. [905422]

**The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Sir John Whittingdale):** The Government published the Bill in draft at the end of March to allow for engagement on provisions within it. The measures are complex, and it is right that we take time to ensure they deliver for audiences and listeners. I look forward to receiving the recommendations from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee following its inquiry. The Government remain committed to the measures in the Bill and will introduce it when parliamentary time allows.

**Chris Elmore:** I appreciate that the Minister is back in post temporarily but he is an experienced former Secretary of State. The initial Bill was introduced in 2022. We have had three Secretaries of State, several U-turns and non-privatisation of Channel 4. The reality is that this Bill is hugely important for the media and television industry. Can the Minister guarantee that the Bill will pass all stages in this House and the other place before the general election? The industry cannot afford to have another Parliament where there is no Media Bill.

**Sir John Whittingdale:** The hon. Gentleman is right that policy has evolved, as indeed have the Ministers responsible for it over the last few years. I agree with him: this is a very important Bill for the media. It contains measures that were in the manifesto at the last election. We have published it in draft as a demonstration of our commitment to get it on to the statute book, and I hope we will do that as soon as possible.

### Gambling White Paper: Horse-racing Sector

4. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of the gambling White Paper on the horse-racing sector. [905423]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew):** The Government recognise the significant contribution that racing makes to British sporting culture and, crucially, the economy. The review did not look at the horserace betting levy, but we are aware of the close relationship between racing and betting. Our assessment was set out in the White Paper—the impact on racing will be minimal in the context of its overall income—but we are reviewing the levy to ensure that racing continues to be appropriately funded.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** I declare an interest, in that the wonderful Market Rasen racecourse is in my constituency. Does the Minister accept that there is an inextricable link between horse-racing and betting? Both give enormous pleasure to millions. Does the Minister agree that the sweeping blanket checks envisaged in the White Paper are neither advisable nor appropriate, and the nanny state is just harming the harmless punter taking a little flutter?

**Stuart Andrew:** We took careful consideration of precisely that matter when we developed the White Paper. The financial risk checks outlined in that White Paper will be designed so that they are frictionless. The majority of people who enjoy a flutter and for whom it causes no harm whatsoever will not notice any difference, but hopefully this will identify much earlier on those who are getting into an area where this is causing harm, so that we can act fast. The racing industry can be assured that the Government are on its side.

**Mr Speaker:** Let's have a tip from Jim Shannon.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): If you take my tip, I am afraid you will be in trouble, Mr Speaker. I am not a gambler, but I do have a very active and vibrant horse sector in my constituency. There is racing at Maze and at Downpatrick. The sector is so important. Gambling, which sits alongside that, is also important for the horse-racing sector. Can the Minister assure me that whatever happens in relation to the gambling review, the horse sector will benefit, which will be to the benefit of my constituents in Strangford?

**Stuart Andrew:** I am happy to say that we are mindful of the great contribution that horse-racing makes to this country's economy, and it is followed throughout the world. We are doing the review into the levy. We are speaking to the industry and asking for its evidence, so that we can make a considered decision.

### Local Radio Services: Discussions with BBC

5. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the BBC on the proposed changes to local radio services. [905424]

17. **Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): What discussions she has had with the BBC director general on planned changes to local radio services. [905437]

**The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Sir John Whittingdale):** I remain disappointed that the BBC is planning to reduce part of its local radio output. This is a matter for the BBC. Ministers met the BBC chair and director general towards the end of last year to express our concerns about their plans, as did I in a previous capacity in this House. I will raise the issue again when I meet the BBC director general soon.

**Liz Twist:** Local radio services are vital to our local communities, especially for those with visual impairments or older people who may not make the shift to online. This will really disadvantage them, and there does not seem to have been any equality impact assessment done. Will the Minister join me in asking the BBC to scrap

these plans or, at the very least, pause them, so that such an assessment can be done and there can be further discussions?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** The BBC is under a duty under the charter to serve local communities. Obviously, how it delivers that is a matter for the BBC, but it is also subject to the oversight of Ofcom. I understand exactly the point that the hon. Lady makes, and I encourage her to continue to put it to the BBC.

**Richard Foord:** The former Culture Secretary, the right hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), froze the licence fee until 2024. A constituent from Tiverton wrote to me recently about a blind friend who is likely to be left isolated and depressed by changes to local radio, where we are seeing the merger of some programming. The constituent wrote,

“Devon and Cornwall are not the same.”

Could the Minister explain to his right hon. Friend what effect the BBC income freeze is likely to have on her afternoon appearances on Three Counties Radio?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** Again, that is a matter for the BBC. I would say that the decision to freeze the licence fee was to reflect the significant pressures on the cost of living for many people—it would have been wrong to expect them to pay a significant increase at that time. That period is, of course, coming to an end shortly, but nevertheless the licence fee delivers a very large amount of money to the BBC. How it spends it is a matter for the BBC, but in my view, local radio remains an important part of the BBC’s output.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Would the Minister be kind enough to ask the BBC to actually consult local people on what they think about the BBC’s proposed changes to radio services? “BBC Three Counties” is a very popular programme, and my constituents tell me they want it to carry on as before, so perhaps the BBC could ask the people it is broadcasting to, rather than just taking its own decisions.

**Sir John Whittingdale:** I recall the debate that has already taken place in this House on this matter, which was very widely attended. We heard from across the Chamber how much local radio is supported in each of the various areas represented by Members who spoke. The BBC does do a lot of consultation, but I agree that it is very important that local people should be able to make their views known on that proposal.

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

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is one of the BBC’s public purposes to reflect, represent and serve diverse communities of all of the UK’s nations and regions, yet when deciding to change local radio programmes so that they are regional after 2 pm—further to the question asked by the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous)—the BBC did not offer the communities affected any form of public consultation. Does the Minister agree that losing local radio as we know it would inevitably weaken the BBC’s ability to fulfil its purposes, and that it is not too late for the BBC to think again?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** The BBC is not proposing to scrap local radio. However, the changes proposed will mean that, for parts of the day and at weekends, areas of the country will be part of a much bigger area for broadcast than previously. That is what is causing concern. I know that the BBC has met hon. Members in this House recently, but I encourage hon. Members to continue to reflect the views of their constituents directly to the BBC.

**Mr Speaker:** We want Radio Lancashire for Lancashire—that is the answer, Minister.

### Swimming Pools, Leisure Centres and Sports Grounds

**6. Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Whether her Department is taking steps to support the sustainability of local (a) swimming pools, (b) leisure centres and (c) sports grounds. [905425]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew):** Local authorities are responsible for providing access to public leisure centres and sports grounds, but the Government continue to encourage them to invest in those really important community spaces. That is why we are delivering £60 million through the swimming pool support fund to address the cost pressures facing many public swimming pools and to invest in energy efficiency measures to reduce their future operating costs.

**Chi Onwurah:** Elswick swimming pool is a wonderful enabler of physical and mental health, serving communities who have some of the highest levels of deprivation and health inequalities in the country. It could do more if social prescribing were enabled, but instead, it faces an absolute crisis because of rising energy costs and the cost of living crisis hitting income. The Minister says that money is available, but it has received none. Can he tell me what he is doing to ensure that Elswick swimming pool survives and thrives?

**Stuart Andrew:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the importance of the work of many swimming pools and leisure centres up and down the country. It is precisely because of the messages I heard from them that we were successful in getting that £60 million in the Budget. £20 million of that will help with initial costs, and the other £40 million will help to make those swimming pools and leisure centres more resilient in the future. The criteria will be released very shortly so that the hon. Lady’s particular pool can apply for that money at that time.

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

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It has now been three months since the £60 million swimming pool support fund was announced, and still nobody has received any money. As the Minister has said, £23 million is revenue funding, which according to the Local Government Association works out at only £25,000 per pool, and that will not arrive until September. The rest is capital, which will be allocated by a yet to be determined bidding process and will not happen until December. Why is it taking so long to get even this level of support out when our swimming pools are at risk of closure?



**Stuart Andrew:** We have been working incredibly hard on this, making sure that the money goes to the right places, because the evidence shows that this is not a blanket problem all over the country. There are specific issues that need addressing. It is right that we use the money wisely. It is right that we target those that need it, and I make no apology for making sure that we get the system right.

#### **Passenger Railway: 200th Anniversary**

7. **Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): Whether she is taking steps with the Secretary of State for Transport to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the passenger railway. [905426]

**The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Sir John Whittingdale):** Mr Speaker, 2025 will be a truly momentous year for Britain's railways, marking 200 years since the first public railway in the world was opened in my hon. Friend's constituency. The anniversary provides a unique opportunity for us to reflect as a nation on our rich rail heritage, as well as to look to the future of the railway industry. My Department is working with the Department for Transport to support bicentenary celebrations, including through our arm's length bodies.

**Peter Gibson:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer highlighting Darlington's contribution to the world. Darlington is indeed the birthplace of the passenger railway, and the bicentenary of the Stockton and Darlington railway in 2025 is of huge importance to my constituents, celebrating Darlington's gift to the world. Can he outline who will be taking responsibility nationally for the delivery of the bicentenary celebrations? Will he commit to providing some seed funding, so that we can pull together a delivery body for the three local authorities that serve the original route of the S&DR?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion of his constituency and in particular its railway heritage. A number of different initiatives are planned. My noble Friend the Minister for arts has been talking to Network Rail about its plans to celebrate the 200th anniversary, and the Department for Transport is championing the bicentenary celebrations across Government. I encourage my hon. Friend to talk to the Department for Transport and Network Rail and to please come back to me or my colleagues in the Department if we can be of further assistance.

**Mr Speaker:** Florence Eshalomi is not here.

#### **Musicians Touring in Europe**

9. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What progress she has made with Cabinet colleagues on supporting musicians planning to tour in Europe. [905428]

**The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Sir John Whittingdale):** We are working across Government and with the sector to support touring musicians. Nearly all EU member states offer visa and work permit-free routes, and I welcome the Greek Government's announcement last week of a new route for UK musicians. We continue to raise touring at the highest level of the trade and co-operation agreement structure and to engage

bilaterally with member states. Yesterday, the Secretary of State announced that we will triple funding for the music exports growth scheme over the next two years. That will enable touring artists to break into new international markets.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It seems that piecemeal progress is being made, and the Musicians' Union and others in the industry are trying to get clarity on such things as whether portable instruments and associated equipment can come in. There have been some developments on that front. Is it the Government's intention to negotiate an EU-wide cultural exemption? If so, how are those negotiations going? If that is not their intention, can they explain why?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** We have reached a position where nearly all member states—24 out of 27—offer visa and work permit-free routes for musicians and creative performers, and we will continue to engage with the three remaining. We will also engage on this with the EU in our more general discussions. On the specific issue that the hon. Lady raises about portable instruments, while ATA carnets are new for touring in the EU, arrangements are more workable than has sometimes been reported. We have confirmed that portable musical instruments carried in or on a vehicle can be transported cost free and should not require ATA carnets.

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

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): This year, there will be a third fewer British performers playing at festivals across Europe than before Brexit. Whatever the Minister says, I have heard from orchestra leaders that promoters in Europe are now less willing to book UK musicians. The difficulties of touring now include impractical cabotage rules, the steep cost of carnets, and the bureaucratic nightmare of A1 forms and CITES—convention on international trade in endangered species—certificates. How can we be a truly global Britain when the Government are not acting to remove these barriers to international touring for musicians?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** We are fortunate in this country to have some of the finest performers in the world, and I am keen to ensure that as many people across the world are able to enjoy their performances, so we will continue to work on this. As I said to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), we have already made significant progress in obtaining visa agreements so that musicians no longer have to obtain visas, and we will continue to work with the Musicians' Union and others to make it easier in the future.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**John Nicolson** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): This is all of course very much worse than the situation that existed before Brexit. Paul Smith, the chief executive officer of the VOCES8 Foundation, a UK touring group with a music education programme, has described Brexit as a "bl— nightmare" for musicians looking to tour in the European Union, and has said:

"Our industry is on its knees and we have to fight more than ever".

Talented Scottish singer Iona Fyfe has said that in Europe

“many promoters, festivals and organisers are simply choosing not to book emerging acts from the UK to avoid the bureaucratic headache.”

We have seen the loss of 50,000 jobs in the UK music sector since Brexit—a shocking waste of talent. How many more will it take before UK Ministers address their responsibilities to the sector and stick up for musicians?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has failed to recognise the announcements yesterday, which will grow the creative industries sector by an additional 1 million jobs, with £50 billion of growth. In particular, the music exports growth scheme has already proved very successful, and we are tripling its funding to £3.2 million. I hope he will draw that to the attention of his constituents, who I am sure will welcome it.

### Artificial Intelligence: Creative Industries

10. **Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): What discussions she has had with representatives of the creative industries on the impact of artificial intelligence on that sector. [905429]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer):** AI has enormous potential to deliver better public services, and high-quality jobs and opportunities, but it is really important that, while we recognise its benefits, we also manage the risks. There are particular risks to our creative industries, as in the domain of copyright. I recently met my colleague from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Viscount Camrose, and the Intellectual Property Office on this very issue. I have also met stakeholders across the media and creative industries, including UK Music, Universal, the Alliance for Intellectual Property, the British Phonographic Industry and the News Media Association, among others.

**Pete Wishart:** All these engagements are always important and valuable, and I thank the Secretary of State for that. She will know that the creative sector is always at the forefront of technical innovation, but it has always somehow managed to lose out, and the potential for this happening with AI is profound. AI firms are already saying that they do not need permission or licences from rights holders to ingest their content, so can I ask her a very direct question: does she believe that the ingestion of content without permission is copyright infringement and is therefore illegal?

**Lucy Frazer:** The hon. Member is absolutely right to recognise how the creative industries are at the forefront of some of our industries, and I hope he welcomes the sector vision that we announced yesterday, with an additional £77 million to support them to continue to grow. As he will know, the IPO is talking to industry and to AI firms. I know that the first working group meetings were held last week and that it is considering this very issue.

### Youth Investment Fund

11. **Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the potential impact of the youth investment fund on youth facilities and services. [905430]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer):** The youth investment fund will build or refurbish up to 300 youth facilities, supporting 45,000 additional young people each year. In March we announced the first tranche of awards, with 43 youth centres receiving over £90 million. We will be undertaking an evaluation of this fund.

**Simon Fell:** The Walney Community Trust is a fantastic charity operating out of my constituency. It helps people of all ages but particularly focuses on young people from deprived areas. Unfortunately, when it applied for funding through the youth investment fund, it was turned down due to the postcode of the hall it operates from. As you well know, Mr Speaker, Barrow is not a big place, and it is particularly unjust that it has not been deemed eligible because of where that centre is, rather than the people it serves. Would my right hon. and learned Friend be able to look at this?

**Lucy Frazer:** I know that my hon. Friend is a huge champion for his area. He will be aware that the youth investment fund is a targeted programme, and eligible areas were ranked by a combination of youth need and low provision. The methodology underpinning the selection of areas is publicly available on gov.uk. It is unfortunate that the youth club in Walney falls outside those eligible areas, and my right hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew) has offered to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this particular case a bit further. I draw his attention to the national youth guarantee. Walney will be eligible for a number of different Government-funded programmes, and we would like to provide him with further details of that, as well as any other Members in the same position.

### Topical Questions

T1. [905438] **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer):** Since our last oral questions, my Department has delivered a gambling White Paper to bring our gambling regulations into the smartphone age, the historic coronation of King Charles III, and an unforgettable Eurovision final in Liverpool. As Members of the House will know, our creative industries are genuinely world class. Yesterday, the Chancellor and I set out a new vision for those industries that will extend their excellence into the future, building a pipeline of talent, adding £50 billion to our economy and creating an extra 1 million jobs by 2030.

**Marco Longhi:** Will my right hon. and learned Friend join me in congratulating Dudley Town football club, which has recently been promoted to the midlands premier league for the first time in 38 years? Will she also do what she can to support me and Mayor Andy Street in our joint campaign with Dudley Town football club to return it to its rightful grounds within Dudley borough?

**Lucy Frazer:** I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Dudley Town football club on its tremendous season, its league title and its promotion. I understand

the importance to fans of where football is played, and fans want to watch their teams play in Dudley town. I wish the club well in its aspirations to return there.

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

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): On that note, perhaps the Secretary of State will also join me in congratulating my constituents and my club, Manchester City, on its historic treble-winning season. As yet another Premier League AGM passes, and Wigan Athletic faces a winding up order, why has the Secretary of State not personally done more to bring about a fair financial settlement with the English Football League and the Football Association, to address the problems set out in her own White Paper and press the Premier League to do more? Does she share my strong view that the football regulator must be given all the powers it needs to resolve this matter?

**Lucy Frazer:** Of course I congratulate Manchester City on its tremendous achievement. It is really important that football sorts out the finances within football. That is why we have consistently encouraged the Premier League and the EFL to come to some resolution, and I seriously hope they do. The hon. Lady will know that that is one of the reasons why we brought forward the White Paper, and why we are bringing forward regulation. I hope that football resolves this issue itself.

**Mr Speaker:** The Clerk of the House is in tears; he's a Manchester United fan.

T2. [905439] **Mr Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Ind): In 2020, 30,126 complaints were made to the Independent Press Standards Organisation. Only 496 were investigated, and only 79 out of more than 30,000 complaints were upheld. When are we going to stop talking about the freedom of the press, and recognise that with that freedom comes responsibility? We cannot let them keep marking their own homework and giving themselves a clean bill of health.

**The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Sir John Whittingdale):** The Government remain committed to press freedom, which is a cornerstone of our democracy. For the Government to intervene in the regulation of the press would run counter to that. However, I recognise what my hon. Friend says. There is a duty on newspapers to behave responsibly, and the vast majority are members of an independent regulator, the most recent review of which found it to be both independent and effective.

T3. [905441] **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent discussions has the Minister had with the BBC regarding its plan to reduce the high proportion of women being prosecuted for licence fee evasion, which the BBC set out last month?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have had several studies on decriminalisation, and those looked specifically at the reasons why more women are prosecuted. There are a variety of reasons, but the BBC has made it plain that it intends to try to address that. I agree with him—it is a concerning figure—but there are complicated explanations for it. I hope that the number will fall in due course.

T6. [905445] **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): This Saturday, the Wallington music festival will be happening in my constituency. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that these events are fantastic for our local communities. Will he please outline what guidance I can give about Government support that might be available to allow such events to continue to be put on?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on his advocacy for his constituency. I am only sorry that I shall miss the Wallington music festival this weekend; I am sure that it will be a terrific occasion. Festivals play a vital part in the British cultural and music landscape and are key to the talent pipeline. Organisers, including festivals, are eligible to apply for Arts Council England's national lottery project grants to support projects that help bring live music to the public. I encourage him to draw that to his constituents' attention.

T4. [905443] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The issues of high energy prices and swimming pools were raised earlier. I am advised by operators in Cambridge that they face really hard decisions soon. The Minister said that he would make an announcement shortly, but businesses have to plan. How many of them does he think are at risk if he does not make that announcement soon?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew):** That is precisely why we are working at pace to try to get exactly that information. The evidence that we have been receiving shows a mixed picture, so rather than just giving everybody a bit, I would rather ensure that we target those areas that need it most. I assure the hon. Member that I am as keen as he is to get that money out of the door as quickly as possible.

**Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), 18% of all female criminal prosecutions in 2021 were for the non-possession of a television licence, which seems completely unreasonable. Will my right hon. and learned Friend meet me and my constituent Josiane to discuss that further and receive a 250,000-signature petition asking for decriminalisation?

**Lucy Frazer:** Like my hon. Friend, I am concerned that criminal sanction for TV licence evasion is increasingly disproportionate and unfair in a modern public service broadcasting system. Our review of the BBC funding model will consider whether a mandatory licence fee with criminal penalties is still appropriate. As the Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries mentioned, the BBC has recently published the findings of its gender disparity review and set out a 10-point plan of action, which we will be monitoring.

T5. [905444] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Clause 1 of the draft Media Bill's redefinition of public service broadcasting deletes music, comedy and drama. It removes all requirement to have cultural output. Why, oh why?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** I look forward to discussing this matter further with the hon. Lady when I appear before the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in due



course. The Media Bill is published in draft, with part of the reason being so that we can have a debate about the precise definitions contained in it. I am happy to look at that, but we remain committed to the prominence obligations that the Bill will put in place.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), does the Secretary of State believe that people should be forced by the criminal law to buy a Sky TV package even if they do not want one? If not, why should they be forced to buy a BBC licence fee if they do not want one? Does she not agree that both positions are equally absurd?

**Lucy Frazer**: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He will know that the Department is considering all possible future funding options to ensure the BBC's long-term sustainability, because the digital world is indeed changing.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The amount of money that companies spend on formula milk advertising seems to increase every year, but every penny they spend on advertising goes on to the price of a tub of formula at the till. What conversations has the Secretary of State had on that advertising spend, which is having an impact on public health?

**Lucy Frazer**: I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that issue further.

**Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): Omaze is a for-profit fundraising company that raises millions and millions of pounds for charities. It spoke to me recently about its concerns over the potential limits on prize draws in the gambling White Paper. Does the Minister agree that prize draws can be a very useful tool for charity fundraising, which are relatively low risk to consumers? Will he keep that in mind when looking at further regulation of the sector?

**Stuart Andrew**: My hon. Friend is right to point out that prize draws and competitions provide great opportunities for charities. They do not fall within the definition of gambling in the Gambling Act 2005 and are exempt from regulation, which means it is very difficult for us to get evidence on what the contribution to charity is and on potential harm. That is why we are looking at whether there is a need for research in this area and whether any action is needed.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

### Church Choirs: Engagement with Local Schools

1. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to encourage church choirs to engage with local schools. [905370]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous)**: The Church of England has enthusiastically supported the Government's Sing Up programme, encouraging local music hubs to partner with churches, and enabling

the use of skills and knowledge that schools would otherwise have to buy in. I am sure that my right hon. Friend, as a strong supporter of singing in church, will very much approve.

**Sir Desmond Swayne**: When will they be singing up in the New Forest?

**Andrew Selous**: I am very pleased to be able to tell my right hon. Friend that the new co-director of music at St Mary's church in Fordingbridge, Hazel Ricketts, is running a singing club, working with 53 children in local schools every week. Her expertise in church music will enable that work to expand next term to include all four local schools, both primary and secondary. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will want to go to enjoy this wonderful singing for himself.

**Mr Speaker**: Talking of singers, I call Jim Shannon.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I am afraid that, as it says in the Bible, I make a joyful noise—it is never melodious, but it is always joyful and always noisy. I am very keen to encourage school choirs and church choirs to sing together. We have a tradition of that in my constituency. What can the hon. Gentleman do to ensure that Strangford can be a part of the project he is talking about?

**Andrew Selous**: As the hon. Gentleman knows, sadly the Church of England does not have any jurisdiction in Northern Ireland, but we are a generous-hearted church and we will share everything we are doing across England with churches in Northern Ireland. I am sure the scheme could easily be copied there.

### Diocese of Exeter: Additional Ordained Ministers

2. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What recent assessment the Church of England has made of the potential merits of recruiting additional ordained ministers into parish ministry in the diocese of Exeter. [905371]

**Andrew Selous**: I am delighted to tell my hon. Friend that, with financial assistance from the Church Commissioners, the Diocese of Exeter has increased the number of new curates to tell more people the good news about Jesus. On 1 July it will ordain 18 new ministers, 11 of whom are stipendiary and seven are self-supporting.

**Kevin Foster**: My hon. Friend will be aware that some of the diocese of Exeter's most challenged parishes are in the Torbay deanery, where an ordained minister can not only bring people into Christ's flock but be a lynchpin for wider community work. Has the Church of England looked at the situation of deprived communities in Torquay and Paignton to see where an additional ordained minister may be able to bring real value to those communities?

**Andrew Selous**: I am very pleased to be able to tell my hon. Friend that Ordinand Kenny Wickens is soon to be the curate at Our Lady and All Saints, Torquay. I would also like to pass on my thanks to two inspirational priests in my hon. Friend's constituency, the Reverend Sam Leach from Saint Mags church in Torquay and the Reverend Matt Bray from the Bay Church in Paignton,

for the work they do in running the Living Room café, and groups for children and young people across the Torbay constituency.

## ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

*The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—*

### Election Finance from Overseas: Transparency

3. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions the Committee has had with the Electoral Commission on the transparency of election finance from overseas. [905372]

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The Committee has not had recent discussions with the Commission on the matters raised. The Commission has highlighted vulnerabilities in the political finance system that could allow unlawful foreign money to enter UK politics. It is recommended that parties should be required to conduct risk assessments of donations and “know your donor” checks. Parties should not be permitted to accept donations from companies that exceed their profits made in the UK.

**Alan Brown:** In the past five years, unincorporated associations have donated more than £14 million to political parties without declaring where the funding comes from. Given that the Tories have not exactly been shy about taking money from Russia-linked businesspeople, does the Commission share the concerns of the chair of the independent Committee on Standards in Public Life that robust transparency rules are required to prevent foreign donations being made that way? Frankly, it cannot be left to the parties, especially on the day that Boris Johnson is confirmed to be a self-serving liar.

**Cat Smith:** The Commission has highlighted weaknesses in the transparency requirements for political donations by unincorporated associations, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, which could allow donations from otherwise unlawful sources. The Commission is not required to ensure that those who donate are permissible donors. There are no transparency requirements in law for unincorporated associations that donate to candidates rather than to political parties or campaigners. The Commission will continue to recommend to Government that changes be made to ensure that voters can have greater confidence in political finance in the UK.

### Voter ID

4. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions the Committee has had with the Electoral Commission on the implementation of voter ID in (a) Scotland, (b) Wales and (c) England ahead of national elections. [905374]

6. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What recent discussions the Committee has had with the Electoral Commission on the implementation of voter ID in (a) Scotland, (b) Wales and (c) England ahead of national elections. [905376]

10. **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): What recent discussions the Committee has had with the Electoral Commission on the implementation of voter ID in (a) Scotland, (b) Wales and (c) England ahead of national elections. [905380]

**Cat Smith:** The Committee discussed the Commission's work to support the implementation of voter ID at its recent public evidence session in March. A transcript of the session is available on the Committee's website. The Commission supported voters, campaigners and the electoral administrators ahead of the implementation of voter ID at local elections in England in May. Its research shows that public awareness of the requirement increased from 22% in December 2022 to 87% in April 2023. Voter ID will now be required for police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales, UK parliamentary by-elections, recall petitions and general elections from October.

**Patricia Gibson:** The introduction of new rules to require identity checks for postal and proxy voting in UK general elections via a statutory instrument means that they will not be voted on in the Commons. Age UK director Caroline Abrahams has described them as using

“a sledgehammer to crack a nut”,

amid concerns that new barriers will be erected for older people trying to vote. What concerns and ongoing discussions does the Electoral Commission have with the UK Government on the proposals, alongside any consultations with stakeholders?

**Cat Smith:** The Commission has continued to do research to identify key groups who are likely to need additional support to navigate the ID requirements, including the over-85s. Ahead of the May elections, the Commission worked with civil society organisations and local authorities to produce tailored resources to reach each group. However, the matter that the hon. Lady raised is for Government policymaking rather than the Commission, which supports electoral administrators.

**Kirsten Oswald:** A former Cabinet Minister has said:

“Parties that try and gerrymander end up finding their clever schemes come back to bite them, as...we found when insisting on voter ID”.

That claim appears accurate, as a snapshot of voting in the English council elections in the east of England found that thousands of people were turned away for not having the correct ID, resulting in them not voting. What steps are being taken to ensure that voters are not disenfranchised by the Tory party's gerrymandering?

**Cat Smith:** On the comments to which the hon. Lady refers, the introduction of the voter ID requirement was debated and passed by Parliament. Policy decisions are rightly a matter for Parliament and not the Electoral Commission. It is for the Government to comment on the intentions of their policy.

**Richard Thomson:** The Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), said that the evaluation of anecdotal feedback shows that the roll-out

of voter ID has been successful. The Electoral Commission warned that the introduction of voter ID should be delayed until after the English local elections in May—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Gentleman is meant to be speaking through the Chair. The advantage of doing it this way is that we do not personalise things.

**Richard Thomson:** My apologies, Mr Speaker.

Does the Electoral Commission now share similar views to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities that the roll-out of voter ID has been a success?

**Cat Smith:** The Electoral Commission will be publishing its responses and findings from the roll-out of voter ID at local elections in England that took place in May. A report on the ID aspect will be published very shortly and a full protocol report will be published in September, which will look at the evidence that has been found in information provided by returning officers across England.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

### Support for Parish Life: Small Rural Communities

5. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support parish life in small, rural communities. [905375]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous):** Parish ministry is at the heart of the mission of the Church and, per head of population, there is a higher proportion of ministers in rural areas than in urban ones, although I fully recognise how great the loss is to rural areas when they lose their minister. Between 2023 and 2025, the Church Commissioners will distribute £1.2 billion to support the Church's mission and ministry, which is a 30% increase on the current three-year period, and a significant share of that funding will go towards revitalising parish ministry.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** Rural Lincolnshire has arguably the finest collection of medieval churches in the country and it is a joy to visit them. Many are open through the open churches event organised as part of the West Lindsey Churches Festival. Does my hon. Friend agree that the glory of the Church of England is the parish structure? Does he agree with many of the points made by the Save the Parish campaign, which prioritises keeping our parish churches open and functioning through worship, despite increasing diocesan bureaucracy?

**Andrew Selous:** I completely understand where my right hon. Friend is coming from. His concerns are shared by many colleagues across the House, because they care so much about the great work done in local parishes. If any of the communities in his constituency have candidates for non-stipendiary ministry—or self-supporting ministry, as we call it these days—that might be a way to provide

a focal minister at slightly less cost; the Caleb stream might be one way to provide that. The Church of England's lead bishop for rural affairs, the Bishop of Exeter, has also recently published "How Village Churches Thrive: a practical guide", which might be helpful to my right hon. Friend's local churches.

### Family Relationships, Parenting and Marriage

7. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support family relationships, parenting and marriage following the report of the Archbishops' commission on families and households. [905377]

**Andrew Selous:** The commissioners made 36 recommendations to the Church of England and 29 to the Government, and now the focus must turn to implementation. Recommendations include supporting a consistent and universal roll-out of family hubs, requiring registrars to signpost high-quality marriage preparation, and a call to the Church to build relational capability at all life stages, not just for couples preparing for marriage.

**Tim Loughton:** I declare an interest as the son of a former Church of England rector.

In 2011, there were 51,000 weddings in Church of England churches; by 2019, pre-covid, that figure had dropped to 29,000; and since the current Archbishop of Canterbury came to office in 2013, as he readily admitted last week, the average congregational attendance has dropped by 15%. How can the Church of England influence the population on family relationships and marriage matters, when too many of the congregations are voting with their feet?

**Andrew Selous:** That is a good challenge from my hon. Friend, who I know cares about these things. The work the commissioners are doing to fund the Church to try new types of ministry is proving successful in different parts of the country. I know he will join me in supporting the objectives of the Church Commissioners to try to strengthen family life, which was the subject of his question. In particular, I think he will agree with me about the role that registrars have to play, but he makes a fair point that we need people in the churches. That is central to what the Church of England is doing.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): There might be more weddings in church were the Church of England to allow same-sex couples to get married in church. In that context, does he welcome the commissioners' conclusion, as I do, that

"'family' does not necessitate a certain type of relationship or a specific family form. What matters is the depth of the connections and the support which can always be relied upon"?

Is that not completely inconsistent with the Church's continued rejection of families where the couple happens to be of the same sex, and its refusal to solemnise their committed relationships?

**Andrew Selous:** I know that the right hon. Gentleman follows these issues closely. This was an independent report to the archbishops, which has been welcomed by the Church. It is based on deep evidence collecting over a two-year period, which involved talking to, in particular,



young people up and down the country. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that it contains some sensible suggestions, and the matters to which he refers are on the agenda of the General Synod of the Church of England, which will take place in York early next month.

## HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

*The hon. Member for Broxbourne, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—*

### Work of Members: Help through Technology

8. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps the Commission is taking to help facilitate the work of Members through technology. [905378]

**Sir Charles Walker** (Broxbourne): The Commission, through the Parliamentary Digital Service, constantly assesses and reviews new and emerging technologies that could be of use to Members. There are issues related to licensing, deployment and security that must always be considered.

**Chi Onwurah:** The single greatest increase in my productivity as a Member of Parliament is probably due to the introduction of the Android tablet that I am holding. It enables me to share messages and casework instantly with my office, and I thank the Parliamentary Digital Service for providing it.

Far from replacing us, technology can help us. Artificial intelligence could, for example, identify requests from constituents in an inbox flooded with PR emails, or automatically monitor the length of time the Home Office takes to respond to us so that I can raise it with you, Mr Speaker. Will the hon. Gentleman work with service providers such as Microsoft and Mimecast, and open-source providers, to ensure that we are always benefiting from the progress in technology?

**Sir Charles Walker:** The House is very much open to the idea of artificial intelligence. I have prepared a long written answer for the hon. Lady, which I shall send her and a copy of which I shall place in the Library. I ask her please to be assured that we are looking at artificial intelligence, but there are real security issues in this place: there are a lot of really bad people out there who want to access the information that we hold about each other but also about our constituents, so these things can take a little time.

## ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

*The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—*

### Elections Bill: Government's Equality Impact Assessment

11. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): To ask the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, whether the Committee has had discussions with the (a) Government and (b) Electoral Commission on the Government's equality impact assessment of the Elections Bill. [905381]

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The Committee has not had recent discussions with the Government or the commission on that subject. It is for the Government to comment on the equality impact assessments that they produce to accompany their legislation.

**Christine Jardine:** Given the disproportionate consequences of the Government's voter identity mandate and the effect on the ethnic minority population, it is concerning that there has been no impact assessment. Democracy Volunteers, which deployed observers in about half the English authority areas where local elections were being held, noted that half the people they observed being turned away from polling stations were non-white. I appreciate that this is anecdotal evidence, but it is nevertheless concerning, given that that represents about three times the balance that would be expected in the population. Would the commission consider pressing the Government for an impact assessment?

**Cat Smith:** The Electoral Commission will shortly be publishing its report on the local government elections in May. It will include data collected by returning officers, but also public polling to catch the people who did not get as far as the polling station. The issue of equality impact assessments is a matter for the Government, and I would encourage the hon. Lady to raise it during the upcoming questions to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

**Mr Speaker:** I must now suspend the House for two minutes.

10.28 am

*Sitting suspended.*



## Abortion: Offences against the Person Act

10.30 am

**Mr Speaker:** Before we come to the urgent question, I must tell the House that it is very possible that an appeal against the sentence will be made. While I am content for the House to discuss the general issues, Members should avoid commenting on the specific sentence in this case. They can, of course, discuss the changes they would like to see made to the law. I also remind Members that they must not criticise judges in particular cases.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on section 58 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861.

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar):** Section 58 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861 is the offence of administering drugs or using instruments to procure abortion. I recognise that abortion is a highly emotive issue across the House, and I understand the strength of feeling on both sides of this debate.

The Government are committed to ensuring access to safe, legal abortion, and ensuring that all women in England and Wales have access to regulated abortion services on the NHS. I also want to be absolutely clear at the outset that, as you have alluded to, Mr Speaker, I am unable to comment on any decisions made by a court in specific cases. Decisions made by a court are based on the facts and evidence before the court, and are a matter for the court and the judiciary. Access to abortion in England and Wales has been settled in law by Parliament, and we do not intend to change this. It takes nothing away from our commitment to ensuring access to safe, regulated abortion.

Let me briefly set out the law as it stands. The Abortion Act 1967 allows for safe and lawful abortion in England and Wales. It defines the criteria under which abortions or terminations can legally take place. In effect, lawful abortions can be carried out in the first 24 weeks of pregnancy, where two doctors agree that the abortion is necessary and that it falls within one or more of four grounds. In practice, this means that access to an abortion is available to those who need and want it. Abortions beyond 24 weeks are also possible in more limited circumstances.

Abortions outside of these provisions are a criminal offence in England and Wales, while the criminal law in Scotland and Northern Ireland is a matter for the devolved Administrations. In England and Wales, the criminal law provisions in the Offences against the Person Act 1861 and the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929 have to be seen in conjunction with the provisions in the Abortion Act 1967, which provides exemptions to the criminal offences. The Government have a duty to see that the provisions of these Acts are properly applied, until and unless Parliament chooses to further amend the law. We believe that abortion continues to be a matter of conscience, and any changes to the criminal offences relating to abortion or to the Abortion Act 1967 would normally be subject to a free vote and a matter for Parliament, rather than a matter for His Majesty's Government.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing an urgent question on this important matter of public policy. As we know, earlier this week a mother of three children was sentenced to a period of imprisonment for ending her pregnancy and was prosecuted under section 58 of the Offences against the Person Act, a piece of legislation dating from 1861 that carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

This case was desperately sad, and thankfully rare. It has been debated widely in the media and throws up important questions that merit an open debate in a healthy democracy. Crucially, though, it throws a spotlight on our antiquated abortion laws. Government and Parliament must look at this outdated legislation and make it fit for the 21st century. Can I therefore ask the Minister the following questions?

How do the Government reconcile the fact that women in Northern Ireland have already been removed from the criminal justice system by a vote in Parliament on 9 July 2019? The provisions of the Offences against the Person Act no longer apply in Northern Ireland, and there is a moratorium on abortion-related criminal prosecutions, so women in one part of the United Kingdom are treated differently from women in other parts of the United Kingdom in relation to the criminal law, which cannot be right.

Secondly, what is the Government's view on the statement from leading medical bodies, including the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Royal College of Midwives, raising concerns about the chilling effect of the current legal position and of the custodial sentence in this case, which they say

"may signal to other women who access telemedical abortion services, or who experience later gestation deliveries, that they risk imprisonment if they seek medical care"?

Finally, as we know, decriminalisation does not mean deregulation, and time limits would still apply. Have the Government undertaken any review of the necessary regulation that would be required if the criminal law were removed from this area of healthcare law in England and Wales? And have they engaged with the royal colleges and Professor Dame Lesley Regan, the women's health ambassador, on establishing a new regulatory regime for abortion that does not involve putting women in prison?

**Edward Argar:** As this is my first opportunity at the Dispatch Box this week, and as an east midlands Member of Parliament, I put on record that my thoughts are with the families and all those affected by the terrible incident in Nottingham. Our thoughts go out to that great city and all those involved.

It is important to remind the House that the right hon. Lady has taken a principled and passionate interest in this issue for many years. I will not comment on the specifics of the case. The House has heard her very carefully worded references and, if she will forgive me, I do not propose to add to them because there is still the possibility of further legal proceedings in that case and I do not want to pre-empt anything in that space.

The long-standing position remains that it is for this House to seek to make changes, if it so wishes, but not for the Government. As I said, any such vote would be, in normal process, a free vote and would be brought before the House in the context of a private Member's

[Edward Argar]

Bill or perhaps through the tabling of a dextrous amendment, which I know some Opposition Members are not averse to doing, and with success.

The position in Northern Ireland is due to a decision made by the House, cognisant of the fact that there would be different regimes in Northern Ireland and in England and Wales. Again, we respect the will of the House in that respect.

Sentences are a matter for the courts. As the right hon. Lady said, Parliament set the maximum sentence at life imprisonment, and it is open to Parliament to change that if it so wishes, but the courts have to apply the law as set by this Parliament, or by a previous Parliament many, many decades ago.

I accept the right hon. Lady's final point that any change would not be about deregulation, and I heard her make that point very clearly on the radio a few days ago, seeking to frame it in a public health or health context, rather than a criminal context. Again, that is a matter for the House, not for the Government.

I am not aware of any specific conversations between the Government and the royal colleges and others on regulation. Were Parliament to show its will and seek to change the law, the Government would, of course, work to implement the will of Parliament effectively and efficiently.

**Sir Robert Goodwill** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Given advances in care for babies born prematurely, might this be a good time for the Government to facilitate a debate in Government time, followed by a free vote, to get at least an indicative feeling of where the House now stands, given the current situation?

**Edward Argar:** What debates are scheduled in Government time is a matter for the Leader of the House, who is in her place and will have heard my right hon. Friend's representation, on which I am sure she will reflect.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Opposition spokesperson.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for this vital urgent question, where she has highlighted the current problems clearly.

On behalf of colleagues, let me say that this is a shocking, tragic and complex case. Three children have been left without a mother. Women should be able to get access to safe, legal abortion. We are worried that this judgment will deter women from seeking urgent medical and healthcare support that they need—that is paramount. Of course, there need to be safeguards and time limits in place, to prevent late-term abortion, which does mean there needs to be some kind of legal framework. However, we do not want to see vulnerable women serving prison sentences or being prosecuted when it is not in the public interest to do so.

I ask the Government to work with us to look at options to prevent an awful case such as this from happening again. More immediately, I ask that the Sentencing Council looks at this case to stop this sort of circumstance, with this sort of sentence. It needs to do that because no guidelines are in place for this section of

the 1861 Act and it needs to produce up-to-date guidance. We should not have vulnerable women sent to prison like this.

The Director of Public Prosecutions must also review the guidance on public interest prosecutions. Will the Government review the legal framework to see how best to ensure that women are not deterred from seeking medical and healthcare advice, while keeping proper safeguards in place? We will, of course, work with the Government, on a bipartisan basis.

The Minister has said that this a matter of conscience and for a free vote in the House, so I know that there will be Ministers who have been absent or opposed action to improve access to abortion. In the wake of this awful case, I hope that the Government will be in a position to take action, at least on sentencing guidelines. This is too important an issue to play politics on. Labour is willing to work with the Government. We ask them to note that the legal framework currently has two legal frameworks: one for Northern Ireland and one for the rest of the UK. [Interruption.] And I thank the Speaker for his indulgence. [Laughter.]

**Edward Argar:** May I say that that was dextrously done by the shadow Leader of the House? She makes valid points in her typically reasonable and measured tone. She is right to highlight that this was an extremely complex and emotive case. Again, I hope she will forgive me for not straying into commenting on the judgment or the decision taken in this case. There is a legal framework for safe abortions, which is set out in the Abortion Act 1967. It set out the conditions under which abortion is legal and is available.

On the hon. Lady's comments about the CPS, I gently say that in considering any decision it has to look at both the evidential test and the public interest test. However, the CPS is independent and it makes those decisions; again, it would not be appropriate for a Minister to comment on CPS charging decisions. Similarly, the Sentencing Council is independent, and it determines what to review and how to review it. I suspect that it will have heard her comments, but, again, it would be inappropriate for me to seek to direct the Sentencing Council, given its independent function.

Like the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North, the hon. Lady mentioned that there is a difference in the frameworks in Northern Ireland and in England and Wales. The House was cognisant of that difference when it chose to make that decision, and that decision must be respected. As for any future decisions made by this House, I simply reiterate that were the House to seek to change the law and come up with a different framework, the Government would of course work to implement the will of the House.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): When the House debated whether it should be possible to receive an abortion pill through the post, we warned that there might be a tragic case such as this. Some people in the abortion industry are now using this tragic case to argue for some sort of legal right to abortion up to birth. Given that many babies are surviving at 24 weeks, that is an obscene and cruel proposal. Surely the solution, given that it is difficult to determine gestation without an in-person appointment, is to return to the system of in-person appointments, so that women can receive safe, legal abortions if they wish.

**Edward Argar:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend; his remarks highlight that there are strongly and sincerely held views on both sides of this debate, and it is right that those views are respected and able to be aired in Parliament. In noting that, all I would say on his final point is that although I respect his view, the House did debate that matter, and it expressed its view and voted accordingly.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has stated its belief

“that prosecuting a woman for ending their pregnancy will never be in the public interest.”

Even though the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 is England and Wales legislation, constituents of mine, and I know of other MPs in Scotland, have been in touch concerned about this shocking case and the precedent that it sets in a worldwide context of erosion of women’s bodily autonomy. Abortion is a devolved matter and the SNP remains committed to protecting the legal right to essential healthcare, which is what abortion services are, safely and free from stigma. I hope to see more progress in Scotland on this area. I welcome that today sees the lodging of the final proposal for MSP Gillian Mackay’s private Member’s Bill on buffer zones in Scotland and I wish her all the best with that.

Is the Minister concerned that this judgment may create a chilling effect on women accessing healthcare services and, given the outrage that the judgment has caused, would he support decriminalisation to prevent this from ever happening again?

**Edward Argar:** The hon. Lady highlighted a number of points there. As she rightly highlighted, this matter is devolved in Scotland. I know the Holyrood Parliament will be considering it in due course and that is, of course, a matter for that Parliament.

On the hon. Lady’s comments about the public interest, that is one of the tests that the Criminal Prosecution Service applies in making a charging decision—whether there is sufficient evidence and whether it is in the public interest. It would be inappropriate for me as a Minister to second guess or comment on the decisions that it reaches in individual cases.

On the hon. Lady’s final two points, again, whether the law in this area should be changed is a matter for this House, not for the Government. This is a matter of conscience for Members of this House. This House is not shy about expressing its will, as we have seen on various matters, and I suspect that this may well be debated again.

In respect of the hon. Lady’s concerns about the impact the judgment may have, again, I will be cautious in not commenting on the judgment itself, save to say that I believe that, under all the provisions that impact in this space, there have been only two convictions in five years.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I always find it distressing, when these issues are debated, that so little concern is expressed for the welfare of the unborn child. Surely that should be an equal priority, alongside the mother’s health. Does the Minister agree that the least the Government could do in view of this case is review the regulation of the providers who send out these pills?

**Edward Argar:** Again, my hon. Friend’s contribution highlights to the House that there are genuine and sincerely held views on both sides of the debate, with colleagues concerned about the unborn child’s rights and, equally, colleagues concerned about the mother’s right to choose and the mother’s health. It is right that those points are aired. On his specific question, that would be a matter for colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care and I will ensure that they are aware of his question.

**Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): Following this shocking case, a constituent contacted me about her experience of seeking an abortion. Her partner is on medication, one side effect of which is that it can cause serious foetal abnormalities. For that reason, she was advised to seek an abortion, only to be told that it was not a legally valid reason, which seems ludicrous, and that she should make up another reason. Will the Minister commit to reviewing and updating the legally valid reasons for having an abortion?

**Edward Argar:** I hope the hon. Lady will appreciate that I cannot comment on a specific case. She may wish to write to me and I will see, depending on circumstances, whether there is anything I can write back to her with, but I do not want to set expectations because I will have to judge that when I receive the correspondence. However, she is welcome to do that. Again, her question is essentially relating to changes to the legal framework around abortion. As I have set out, that is a matter for this House—the will of the House—and individual parliamentarians in a free vote.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): This tragedy would not have occurred had there been a requirement for a face-to-face consultation and clinical administration of the drugs, would it?

**Edward Argar:** My right hon. Friend will appreciate that I am not going to comment directly on this case and the judgment involved, but I refer him to the answer I gave some moments ago in respect of that decision: this was debated and the House expressed its view.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I start by joining the Minister in expressing our condolences to the people of Nottingham. I had the honour of meeting Grace O’Malley-Kumar when she and her father were part of the vaccination effort in my local community. She was a wonderful young woman who clearly had a very bright future ahead of her.

The 67 prosecutions in the last 10 years under this legislation and the conviction that we have seen in England and Wales show that it is not a theoretical issue to consider whether women in England and Wales have a legal right to an abortion. They do not have a situation where they are exempted from prosecution. The situation is completely different in Northern Ireland, where this House voted to implement a human rights approach and give women in Northern Ireland a human right—something the Minister himself did not oppose when it came before this House. Has he had any legal advice on the inequality in the ability of women within the UK to exercise their human right to choose what happens to their bodies?



**Edward Argar:** I am pleased the hon. Lady's voice held up through her question. I suspect she possibly still knows some of those who are friends with Grace, so I hope that through her I can pass on my condolences to them.

The hon. Lady is a passionate campaigner on these issues and dexterous in her use of amendments and the procedures of this House to make progress on the campaigns that she cares about. On her point about Northern Ireland, I have not received legal advice on any impacts of the differential regimes, but I gently reiterate that the House made that decision knowing that it would create a different regime in Northern Ireland, and I respect the will of the House.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Regardless of one's views on abortion, surely it must be that those women seeking an abortion get proper medical advice so that their health and the health of the unborn child are protected?

**Edward Argar:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes an entirely sensible point. It is important that, when women make what is a very difficult decision, they have access to appropriate advice to assist them in making that decision. That advice is perhaps more a matter for colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care, but I will ensure that they are aware of this urgent question.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): Not only has a great deal of concern been expressed in this place about the case, but I am sure we have all received representations from constituents who are concerned and alarmed that this could happen. It has created uncertainty among women. What is the law? What are their rights? That is another reason why I ask the Minister to press for a debate in this place, so that we can address the law and reassure women about the situation.

**Edward Argar:** This House has debated these issues on a number of occasions, certainly during my time in the House and during the hon. Lady's time in the House. The Leader of the House is not in her place at the moment, but she will have heard the point that has been made. Any such decision on a debate would of course be a matter for the usual channels and the Leader of the House, but I will again ensure that she is aware of that request.

**Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): It appears to me that every time anyone comes to this place and speaks openly about the rights of the unborn baby, they tend to get shouted down and jeered at. I am pretty sure that this subject will come to this House again in the not-too-distant future, and I am pretty sure it will vote to relax these rules. But before it does that, I want this House and this country to think of those unborn babies. They are lives—after 6 weeks old, those babies are fully formed and it is just a case of them growing, as we continue to do when we are outside the womb. We should also do all we can to help people to have as few unwanted pregnancies as possible. I am sure no woman goes to an abortion clinic and has an abortion and does not hate that experience. I am sure it is something that no woman ever wants to do. Can we just think of those unborn babies and of the women having those abortions? Maybe, if they had used contraception or had looked at things in a different way, these babies would not have happened.

**Edward Argar:** My hon. Friend highlights again that there are sincere and genuinely held views on both sides of this debate. Respect for those divergent views must characterise how we debate what is an extremely sensitive issue. This place, the heart of our democracy, is the right place for such views to be debated and discussed.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): How is it possible that Roman Catholic Spain and Italy—home to the Vatican—have decriminalised abortion but we have not?

**Edward Argar:** The right hon. Gentleman will know that different approaches are taken across Europe—for example, the UK has a 24-week limit; in most European countries that is much lower, at 12, 13 or 14 weeks. There are differences of approach across European countries such as France. We are roughly in line with the Netherlands in terms of the time limit. I take his point, but there is genuinely a wide range of approaches across European countries on some of the specifics in this space.

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): In 2020, this House amended the law in Northern Ireland to remove the threat of criminal sanctions for any woman who attempted to end their own pregnancy. There is cross-party agreement in this place that more must be done to protect a woman's right to abortion. I have great respect for the Minister, I have heard what he has said, and I understand that Parliament knew this would be the case when we established the different framework, but may I implore him to extend the same protections elsewhere in the UK so that no more women in desperate circumstances are ever threatened with prison again?

**Edward Argar:** The hon. Lady knows that, as well as having a huge amount of respect for her, I consider her a friend. I listen very carefully to what she says. I reiterate that Parliament was cognisant of the divergence when it made this decision. Of course, it is open to Parliament—if it so wishes at some point in the future—to change in the usual manner the framework in England and Wales. But that is not a matter for the Government; it is a matter for this House and a matter of conscience.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister says that abortion is “a matter of conscience” for the House, but it is also a matter of women's mental and physical health. Surely Parliament has a duty to ensure that there is a consistent, humane and modern legislative framework that supports women's wellbeing. On that point, could he confirm whether women's personal data in relation to that medical treatment remains private and under their control?

**Edward Argar:** The hon. Lady makes a clear point about the divergence between the regimes of the two jurisdictions, and she rightly highlights the physical and mental health aspects of what is always going to be an incredibly difficult decision for any woman to take. It is, as I say, open to Parliament to make further changes through the usual routes—private Members' Bills and similar—if it so wishes. On her latter, technical question, I understand that to be the case, but will she allow me to write to her? I do not want to unwittingly mislead her in any way.



**Chi Onwurah** indicated assent.

**Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): I am hopeful that the Minister will soon bring forward something so that we can discuss this. As colleagues on all sides of the House have said, there is a need for a modern, fact-based discussion. Will he ask his Conservative colleagues to ensure that, when we have those discussions, male colleagues are not speculating about what might be in a woman's mind when she goes to seek treatment of that kind?

**Edward Argar:** The hon. Lady makes a couple of important points. Any legislation or changes to the legislative framework will, of course, be a matter for the House via the usual mechanisms in this space—private Members' Bills and so on. In respect of debating the matter in the House, I cannot prejudge that, but I know that the Leader of the House will have heard hon. Members' requests, and I am sure that she will, as she always does, reflect carefully on their views. In respect of the hon. Lady's final point, I go back to what I said a few moments ago: respect, and respect for different people's views and perspectives, as well as for what different people are thinking and feeling, must characterise debate of what is clearly a highly emotive and sensitive issue.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister seems to be saying that if something is deemed a matter of conscience and subject to a free vote, it is never a matter for Government legislation and bringing it forward is reliant on private Members' Bills or Back-Bench amendments, as we saw with the Northern Ireland situation. Surely that is a total abdication of responsibility. We used to see that with LGBT rights, when free votes were allowed across the House. Is it not up to the Government to show leadership on this issue—which is primarily a healthcare issue for women, whether it is physical or mental health—and bring forward legislation that we can discuss?

**Edward Argar:** The hon. Lady will know that on matters such as abortion and assisted dying, it has been a long-standing approach by Governments of both

parties—hers as well—that those are matters for the House and not for Government. In respect of what would happen were the House to legislate, I have already made clear that if the House did express its will through legislation, Government would of course respect that and work to implement whatever the House decided efficiently and effectively.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his balanced answers. If the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) thinks that section 58 should be replaced because it was made a long time ago, why is she not asking for repeal of the entire Offences against the Person Act? The whole Act is old. The age of legislation is irrelevant. What is important is what it does. Section 58 provides vital protection for not just the person but the most vulnerable person of all: the unborn child. Will the Minister commit to protecting the sanctity of life, as other developed European nations do, where the average limit is 14 weeks, and uphold section 58? Will he urgently review safeguards for the pills-by-post scheme, to ensure that such a case never happens again?

**Edward Argar:** I know that the hon. Gentleman has strong and sincerely held views on this subject. In respect of the broader provisions in the 1861 Act, I have to be honest that I do not know whether the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North would like to keep them, and I will not presume to know her mind. It is quite possible that she would like to see further changes, but the scope of this urgent question is this section 58 of the Act.

The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that there are strong views on both sides of this debate. We have heard from other Members about the rights of the unborn child, but we have also rightly heard about the health rights of mothers and a woman's right to choose. We have to recognise that this needs to be a balanced debate, with views listened to respectfully on both sides. On his final point, that will be a matter for colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care, but I will ensure they are aware of the point he makes.

## Business of the House

11.2 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 19 June will include:

**MONDAY 19 JUNE**—Motion relating to the fifth report from the Committee of Privileges, followed by a general debate on the UK tech industry following London Tech Week.

**TUESDAY 20 JUNE**—Remaining stages of the Finance (No. 2) Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 21 JUNE**—Consideration of Lords message to the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill; followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords message to the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill; followed by Opposition half day (17th allotted day, part one)—a debate in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

**THURSDAY 22 JUNE**—General debate on the infected blood inquiry, followed by a debate on a motion on the BBC's proposals for the future of local radio. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 23 JUNE**—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 26 June includes:

**MONDAY 26 JUNE**—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Financial Services and Markets Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords message to the National Security Bill.

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

Boris Johnson lied. He lied to MPs, he lied to the people of this country, and he lied to nurses, doctors, care workers, bus drivers—everyone who was putting their own life at risk during the pandemic. Why does this matter? Because people sacrificed so much, and they deserved a Prime Minister who values truth and honour and leads by example. It turns out that they did not have one. As I read the report this morning—and I have—I thought of all those people, including constituents of mine, who could not say goodbye as loved ones lay dying because they stuck to the rules. When they hear these headlines, they will be forced to relive their own hurt and anger.

I thank the members of the Privileges Committee for the thoughtful and considered work that they have carried out over a year, under constant intimidation from the former Prime Minister and his friends. They did as we asked, diligently, and we should all be grateful. I am disappointed to hear that the attacks on that Committee—a Committee with a Conservative majority; a cross-party Committee, properly constituted—continue today, led by Mr Johnson. His behaviour is shocking, but not surprising. I was shadow Leader of the House two years ago when he tried to rip up the rules to save his friend Paterson. Hundreds of Tory MPs voted with him—including the current Leader of the House, I am afraid to say. As we do not know what the motion on Monday will say, I ask her now: can she assure us that

there will be no similar attempt? Will she confirm that the Government will give the House the opportunity to approve and endorse the report in full?

This all brings into question the validity of Johnson's resignation honours list, and the Prime Minister's support for it. With a lawbreaker and a liar rewarding his cronies, will the Leader of the House call on the Prime Minister to show some leadership for once and cancel these dishonourable honours?

On the subject of the Prime Minister's incredibly poor judgment, is he so out of touch that he thought it was right that taxpayers' hard-earned money fund legal advice for Johnson's lies to the public—a shameful waste of money, especially during a Tory cost of living crisis? This was a mess of his making. Does the Leader of the House think that was a good use of public money? Will the Prime Minister now demand that Boris Johnson pays back every penny? We will return to this topic on Monday in full, when I will face the right hon. Lady again.

Turning to a related matter, a week really is a long time in politics, especially for the right hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries)—or is it the former Member? Who knows? She has had a busy week. Apparently barred from being a Baroness, she then declared her departure, then threw a tantrum on TalkTV, seemingly resiled on her resignation and launched a one-woman investigation into why she did not get a peerage. This could now drag on for months, like the guest who outstays their welcome when conversation has dried up. She has said she is off home, but she is taking forever to put on her coat, and you know what? She will stay for that last cup of tea after all. Is this really what people can expect from Tory MPs?

Could the Leader of the House please clarify whether her colleague is resigning or not? Does she agree that the good people of Mid Bedfordshire deserve proper representation from their MP, as do the people of Uxbridge and South Ruislip and of Selby and Ainsty, and people up and down the country who cannot stomach a moment more of this Tory soap opera, with a Prime Minister too busy failing to get a grip on the sleaze and scandal engulfing his own party to focus on the cost of living, crime, or NHS waiting lists? With so much to do, he cannot even fill a full parliamentary day. What is the point of him? He is out of touch, out of ideas and unable to govern. He is breaking his promises and letting people down. It is time that he showed some actual leadership and let the people have their say, and called a general election.

**Penny Mordaunt:** First, I associate myself with the remarks and the tributes paid in this House to the victims of the Nottingham attack and their brave families and friends, and also to all those who perished in the Grenfell fire six years ago and those who loved them. This week, we also commemorate the liberation of the Falkland Islands, which is of particular importance to many of the families that it is my privilege to represent.

The hon. Lady raises the issue of the hour. It is worth reminding the House that the Privileges Committee is there to defend this House, our rights and our privileges. The Committee and the investigation it carried out was set up unanimously by this House. We asked it to do this work. The membership of the Committee was established unanimously by this House and, as many Members have pointed out, it had a Conservative majority on it. I put on record my thanks to the Committee.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Conservatives doing their duty.

**Penny Mordaunt:** Yes, the members of that Committee were doing their duty. My advice to all hon. and right hon. Members, having had the Committee carry out the work we asked it to do, is to read the report. Members should make their own judgments about it and take the task that it is our privilege to do seriously and soberly. Members should use their own judgment on that. I can confirm that the motion before us will be votable and amendable, and it is House business, so I am expecting a free vote.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) reminds us of a previous case, and I know these are difficult matters for the House. We have to look at the evidence and the report, but we are talking about people who are friends and colleagues. The task we face on Monday will be a painful process and a sad process for all of us, but we all must do what we think is right, and others must leave us alone to do so. I concur with the hon. Lady.

The hon. Lady has understandably focused on wrongs and gongs, if I may say so, but she will know that this Government have not been distracted from our duties. She mentions the cost of living. I know how stressful, frightening and exhausting that living from hand to mouth can be, and we are determined to support families and businesses through these tough and volatile times. Global economic conditions have been made worse by the actions of those who would do us harm. The latest atrocity in Ukraine will have knock-on effects globally. As a country, we must, and we will, weather this storm. That is why we are supporting households on average to the tune of £3,300. It is why we have frozen fuel duty for the 13th consecutive year. It is why we have the triple lock and the largest ever increase to the national living wage. It is why we have doubled the personal allowance. It is why we are capping bus fares and why we have introduced tax-free childcare, supporting 2 million families, and are expanding that offer further still.

The public need a plan from their Government to grow the economy, to halve inflation and to reduce debt. Those are their priorities, and that is why they are our Prime Minister's priorities, too. The hon. Lady will know that we are a resilient nation. We have had the fastest cumulative growth in the G7 for the past two years. The International Monetary Fund has revised its forecasts up, and we have avoided a technical recession that many said was inescapable. This week, we learned that employment is higher than pre-pandemic levels. We have 4 million people into work, half of whom are women. The percentage of women in high-skilled jobs is up 38.5% since the hon. Lady's party was in power.

In tough times, this country does not need doom-mongers and hand-wringers; it needs fighters, grafters and hope-bringers. It needs a Government who will back families, workers and wealth creators and all who invest in every sense in our nation. That is what we are focused on, including, most notably during London Tech Week, the growth sector of artificial intelligence. In contrast, we know what Labour's AI policy is: anti-investment, anti-infrastructure, anti-innovation and anti-individuals.

In 13 years of Labour Government, they managed to electrify just 60 miles of rail track. Their top 10 worst IT failures cost half the schools budget. They had no

free childcare for under-threes, they gifted us the fuel duty escalator and they thought it an acceptable state of affairs that someone in a second job got to keep only 2p for every additional pound they earned. No Labour Government have ever left office with more people in work than when they came to power. AI is not a danger to jobs and wages, but a Labour Government certainly are.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I was pleased earlier this week to be re-elected as co-chairman of the all-party group on the holocaust memorial and education centre. I understand that the Standing Orders Committee has considered the progress of the Holocaust Memorial Bill, which will bring both the much-needed and expected education centre and the memorial to fruition. Can my right hon. Friend provide a progress report on that Bill, but also on the long-promised boycotts, divestment and sanctions Bill that the Government have promised to bring forward?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on his re-election to that important role. On the first Bill he mentions, he knows how important this is to the Government and to many people, and it is also important that we bring these things forward in a timely way. He will know that the next stage is for the House of Lords Standing Orders (Private Bills) Committee to meet on 19 June to consider the Standing Orders that apply, and I hope the Bill will continue to make good progress. The second Bill is also making good progress, alongside the Procurement Bill, as he will know, and I will announce further business in the usual way.

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

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): There is no shortage of things we can talk about this week. The UK still has the highest core inflation in the G7, with the continuing cost of living crisis and warnings of further rate rise misery for mortgage owners. There were some—putting it mildly—questionable choices on a former PM's honours list, a scathing report out yesterday from the Scottish Government demonstrating exactly how this UK Government are attempting to impose direct rule on Scotland by stealth and, indeed, an utterly damning Privileges Committee report, just released, with its conclusions on that former PM's behaviour, although we can of course expect that one to be very thoroughly debated on Monday. Our constituents, who suffered so much throughout the pandemic, deserve nothing less.

However, I want to focus on this occasion on something I am sure the Leader of the House will have been as horrified to hear about as I was. It is the report on Sky News that serving personnel at RAF bases in England are having to use food banks to feed their families. We all know that the Leader of the House has a real interest in defence matters—until her demotion by the previous Prime Minister, she was a Defence Minister herself—and next week is of course Armed Forces Week, with many events planned for this place, so it can only be a matter of profound shame for her that service personnel are having to go days without food to make sure their own children are fed. Living hand to mouth is frankly unimaginable at a time of war in Europe. How are her Government going to back those “grafters”, as she



[Deidre Brock]

would put it? The Tories claim to be the party of defence, but with the continuing scandal of substandard personnel accommodation, endless Tory defence cuts and the billions wasted on defence procurement fiascos—and now personnel being forced to use food banks—is it not more than time for a serious debate on the numerous Tory defence failures? Does she agree, and would she support that?

Once again, I ask the Leader of the House, with respect, not to reach for the inaccurate, out-of-date video script, written by her own army of special advisers, attacking the elected Government of Scotland. Business questions are about the conduct of her Government, and I would argue that this question is too serious for this now obvious avoidance technique. Would she be so helpful as to answer those questions?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Let me first say that I always answer the hon. Lady's questions. Indeed, I am going to lavish praise on the Scottish Government this week, because their First Minister has achieved a landmark achievement—credit where credit is due—in that he has the honour of being the first SNP First Minister in its entire history not to have been arrested, which is quite an achievement.

I shall not go over what I previously said to the shadow Leader of the House on the economy and on the Privileges Committee, but let me be specific about the points the hon. Lady raises. She is right that as Defence Secretary, I—in my 85 days in office—gave all of our armed forces a pay rise, and made sure that no one who ever serves in our armed forces will earn less than the national living wage. I think that is an important principle. The hon. Lady will know that we care deeply about the welfare of our armed forces, and indeed about their financial resilience. That is why this Government are compensating armed forces personnel in Scotland for the additional tax that they have to pay under the Scottish Government. We think that is an important point.

The hon. Lady, again—this is a regular theme—criticises the UK Government for our obligations under the law, our overreach on devolution, as she sees it, and our democratic obligations. I gently point out that she might have more credibility on such matters if the Scottish Government had not been found repeatedly to have been in breach of the Scotland Act 1998. Ministers have been touring the world, at Scottish taxpayers' expense, undermining our Union, undermining our armed forces and the nuclear deterrent, and undermining referendums and democracy. In doing so, they are undermining the Scottish Government's credibility, and the arguments they are trying to mount against us. I ask the hon. Lady to reflect on that.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Regretfully, the subject of dangerous dogs is salient again. Deep regrets born of the most tragic events; just last month a 37-year-old man was killed in Greater Manchester; 17-month-old Bella-Rae Birch was killed last year, and just before that, 10-year-old Jack Lis. They were all killed by so-called Bully dogs—the American XL Bully. We need an urgent statement from the Government, not to debate the matter, but simply to confirm that that bad breed, bred to kill, should be banned.

**Penny Mordaunt:** My right hon. Friend raises an incredibly important matter. Many people would be surprised to hear about the volume of such attacks that take place, and there has recently been a spate of them. That has been incredibly shocking, and is the result of owners not being able to control those animals. It is a serious matter, of which I know the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is aware. As the next questions to her Department are not until 6 July, I shall write on my right hon. Friend's behalf and ensure that the Secretary of State has heard him today.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for writing to the Secretary of State for Education last week, on my behalf and on behalf of deaf children. I am grateful for that. I also thank her for announcing the Backbench business for next Thursday. The House will be aware that estimates-day debates will take place in early July, and the closing date for applications for those debates is next Monday at the close of business. We will then receive personal applications from Members on Tuesday afternoon at the end of the ordinary Backbench Business Committee.

Due to my work on the Education Committee, matters of educational interest are often brought to my attention, and I want to raise a matter that is of both educational and employment interest. Some 256 security staff employed by Bidvest Noonan at University College London have been told to reapply for their jobs. Only 216 jobs will be available, and all of those will be with hugely reduced pay and conditions, and with loss of pension rights. Many of those staff are ex-service personnel, and the lack of action by the Government on fire and rehire brings into question their commitment to the armed forces covenant for such employees, by not clamping down on those shoddy employment practices. May we have a statement to update the House on what the Government will do about those immoral fire and rehire proposals?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his ongoing work. I think the House has particularly welcomed the fact that we will have a debate on the proposals for the BBC, which is an issue that several hon. Members across the House have raised.

Fire and rehire was a theme of last week's business questions. He will know that we have a code of conduct that is currently being consulted on. These matters are incredibly important, whether someone is a veteran or not, and we know what we expect good employer practice to look like. I am sorry to hear about the case in point and will bring it to the Secretary of State's attention.

**Laura Farris** (Newbury) (Con): For years, residents of Thatcham, a town in my constituency, have faced delays at a local level crossing, which frequently gives them waiting times of up to 45 minutes morning and evening. For a long time, they have asked for a bridge to be constructed over the level crossing, but, for various reasons, that has not yet got off the ground. Will my right hon. Friend support me by asking the Transport Secretary to consider the construction of such a bridge? Will she permit a debate in Government time to discuss infrastructure in the south-east so that I can set out in more detail the huge problems that the level crossing causes?



**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend and congratulate her on the vigour with which she is approaching her campaigning on this matter for her local residents. She will know that total public and private infrastructure investment is set to be about £600 billion over the next 5 years, and through the levelling-up fund we are investing just shy of a further £5 billion over the next four years, including on upgrades to local transport networks. The next Transport questions will not be until 13 July, so, although I encourage her to raise the matter there, I will also ensure that the Secretary of State for Transport and the Secretary of State for Levelling Up have heard her campaign today.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): Local councils work incredibly hard to support their communities. In the last decade, they have been under significant financial pressure, not least as we face the cost of living crisis. Will the Leader of the House therefore join me in congratulating everyone at Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, including the leader, Sir Steve Houghton, the chief executive, Sarah Norman, and all the staff and councillors for their great achievement in being awarded council of the year by the *Local Government Chronicle* last week?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sure that the whole House will want to join the hon. Lady in that. Local government is the frontline of services to our communities. That is why, in addition to central Government funding that we provide directly through schemes, we give discretionary funding to local authorities through the household support fund, and of course many schemes were active during the pandemic. That is because local people are best placed to make decisions about where money should be directed and to pick up families who are falling through the cracks of national schemes. In addition to her council, we should thank all the people who work in local government day in, day out for all our communities.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): People in Leighton Buzzard and Dunstable are absolutely fed up with groups of mainly youngsters who are riding on motorbikes or bicycles and stealing and intimidating, often late at night. On 1 June, a 14-year-old boy lost his life at 1.30 am riding a motorcycle. Children are now asking their parents why the police allow it to happen. What can we do to give the police more effective powers to prevent and deter these young people, and apprehend them while they are riding and cycling around?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about that situation, which will have a chilling effect on my hon. Friend's community. I can very much see why that would be such an intimidating thing for many of his local residents. He will know that, in addition to the resources that we are giving the police, and the Prime Minister's recent push on antisocial behaviour in particular, we are investing £560 million to ensure that every young person has access to regular clubs and activities as well as opportunities to take part in volunteer schemes and other things. Those constructive activities are part of the solution. However, I am sorry to hear about the difficulties that he is having. I shall ensure that the Home Secretary knows about his campaign and ask her to assist him.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): When I was a teenager, my best friend had spina bifida, one of the congenital neural tube defects that cause serious lifelong disability, as well as resulting in babies lost to miscarriage, stillbirth and termination. The majority of those can be prevented by folic acid, but as the neural tube forms in the first four weeks when most women do not even know they are pregnant, food supplementation is vital. Some 80% of neural tube defects could be prevented with effective amounts of folic acid added to a broad range of foods, so why are the Government planning such a low dose and such a limited scheme that it will prevent only 20% of these tragic cases?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important point. She will know that I am neither the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, nor the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and it is to those Departments that she needs to direct that question. Health questions are on 11 July and Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions are on 6 July, but I will certainly make sure that the Departments have heard her remarks today. I think that is how I can best serve her as Leader of the House.

**Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): The Arts Council England national average spend per head of population is £7.89, yet only £1.82 per head in Doncaster. That means Doncaster gets less than 25% of the national average. That funding imbalance is holding Doncaster back and depriving my constituents of their history and culture. May we have a debate on levelling up Arts Council funding for everyone, not just the big cities?

**Penny Mordaunt:** My hon. Friend's request for a debate on this matter—a very good suggestion—is timely, because this week I had a meeting with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who is mapping where Arts Council England and other organisations in receipt of public funds are actually putting that money. It is incredibly important to everyone's lives. It raises aspiration, improves quality of life, develops people and, of course, it is a very important part of our economy. I can assure him that the Secretary of State is looking at that and he will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): The Government have been promising for five years now to ban the abusive psychological practice sometimes known as conversion therapy. As the human face of the Government and as a supporter of such legislation, can the Leader of the House tell us when the Government will fulfil their pledge to publish the legislation in draft in this Session and subject it to pre-legislative scrutiny?

**Penny Mordaunt:** These are appalling practices and they need to be dealt with. The right hon. Gentleman will know that the Bill is due to be published very shortly. He will forgive me if I save the date for a future business announcement. We expect it to go to pre-legislative scrutiny to be ready for the fourth Session.

**Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): The Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill has been discussed in Committee, where I tabled a probing amendment to help data transfer between the police and the Crown

[Jane Hunt]

Prosecution Service, hopefully saving thousands of hours of time and effort by police officers that is very often wasted. Will the Leader of the House please advise me on when the Bill is likely to come back to this House on Report, when I may again push forward this issue?

**Penny Mordaunt:** May I start by thanking my hon. Friend for all the work she did on the Public Bill Committee, which completed its consideration of the Bill on 23 May? The Government are looking at how we can quickly achieve the objective she is focused on. She is right that we need to reduce any unnecessary burdens, while also maintaining both victim and witness confidence in the process. I will announce future business in the usual way.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** Will the Leader of the House join me in expressing our deepest condolences to the family and friends of the 16-year-old boy who was fatally stabbed in Bath last weekend? He is the second young victim in Bath of this awful crime within six weeks. Will she confirm that here in Parliament we will do our utmost to get to the root causes of why young people are carrying knives, and that we will be working in our communities with all stakeholders and police forces across the country to erase this blight on our communities?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sure that I speak for the whole House in saying that we all send our condolences. Such an appalling attack is an absolute tragedy. The hon. Lady will know that this issue has been a focus of the Home Secretary. I thank all Members of the House who have been campaigning on it—most recently, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) raised the matter of how people can get the particularly brutal and unpleasant knives. This is an important matter for us all in this place, although that will be no comfort to the families who have had to endure these appalling tragedies.

**Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con):** In Barton-upon-Humber in the north of my constituency, the planning inspectors just overturned the local authority's decision to develop a housing estate with 390 new homes. Although the development includes contributions for school places and leisure facilities, health services are most under pressure when we develop new housing estates. Could the Leader of the House find time for a debate to discuss the links between the provision of public services and the decisions of the Planning Inspectorate?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important point. He is absolutely right that although there may be provision for one aspect of new infrastructure or public services, that is no comfort if there is no provision for others. He will know that the Health Secretary is looking at using data in a more effective way to ensure that local commissioners are delivering on the needs of their existing communities, as well as planning properly for their future communities. I will make sure he has heard my hon. Friend's remarks.

**Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** I commend the Leader of the House for what she said about the Committee of Privileges. Frankly, every single member deserves a medal, not least because of the intimidation. I took

what she said to mean that there will be a motion on Monday to endorse the report, which she will move and therefore will vote in favour of. Could she clarify that?

What I really want is a debate on Conservative Members' understanding of the concept of time, because the right hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) said that she was resigning with immediate effect, and the Government said last October that they would publish the legislation on conversion therapy by the spring. It certainly feels like summer out there to me.

Finally, can the Leader of the House tell us why Boris Johnson is entitled to £115,000 a year for life?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his multiple questions—he is getting value out of business questions. I can confirm that, as he would expect, a motion will ask the House to approve the fifth report of the Committee of Privileges. I stress again, let us approach this with the dignity and sobriety that the public would expect on a serious matter, and let us be considerate of how difficult such considerations will be, with regard to personal relationships between colleagues in this place. If we approach Monday's debate with both those things in mind, we will have done our duty well in this place.

Spring is springy. It is important that, particularly on difficult Bills that deal with pioneering issues such as tackling conversion practices, we bring forward legislation that is in a good state as it goes into pre-legislative scrutiny. I follow the progress of all legislation carefully, and I hope to have some news on that Bill soon, which I will announce in the usual way.

**Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con):** Shopkeepers and consumers alike were given a reprieve when the Government paused the bonkers ban on “buy one, get one free” deals last year, but there is speculation that such a ban may yet come to be. That would be a victory for the nanny state and catastrophic for people's food bills at a time of high food inflation. At the same time, the Government's own data shows that it would only save children from consuming 3 to 4 calories a day. Can my right hon. Friend arrange for the relevant Minister to make a statement to the House, so that we can scrutinise what is actually going on with the policy?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I point to the remarks made by the Prime Minister at the Dispatch Box yesterday, when he said that no final decisions have been made on the policy and that he is very much listening to the concerns raised by my hon. Friend and others. Because families are facing issues with the cost of living, it is right that we consider these matters carefully.

**Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** The Leader of the House has announced time, if necessary, for further debate on Lords messages on the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. However, on Monday only one hour was available for debate on Lords amendments to the Bill, and many Members who had wanted to speak could not be called. My constituents are still very concerned about the Executive power grab that the Bill represents, and the risk it poses to 40 years of accumulated workers' and environmental rights. If she really believes in parliamentary sovereignty and taking back control, can she ensure that, at the very least, there is adequate time to debate the Bill?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Gentleman will know that this Government have given undertakings with regard to both workers' and environmental protections; those matters are both important to us. I am always keen that Members should have time to debate matters properly. The changes that the Secretary of State for Business and Trade has made in her approach to EU retained law provides everyone with greater clarity about the issues that will be of interest to them.

**Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): Earlier this week, I held my regular roundtable meeting with headteachers of schools in Darlington. One of the biggest challenges they face is with school attendance, which has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Schools are facing increasing difficulties and are having to divert resources from teaching into getting kids out of bed and into the classroom. We know that education is the key to social mobility, so this Social Mobility Day, can my right hon. Friend find time for us to urgently debate school attendance? Finally, I join the voices calling for pre-legislative scrutiny of the conversion therapy ban, which is an issue that I am sure will come up in this afternoon's debate about Pride Month.

**Penny Mordaunt:** On his latter point, I hope my hon. Friend will have heard my reassurances to the House in earlier answers.

School truancy and children missing from school after the pandemic have been a great focus for this Government. When we came into office, we had to tackle truancy rates that had gone up by 44% under the last Labour Government. We have worked hard to reduce that and school attendance was improving dramatically pre-pandemic, but the covid years have brought additional challenges. My hon. Friend knows that the Education Committee is undertaking an inquiry into persistent absence and the Schools Minister will be providing oral evidence to that Committee on 27 June.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Leader of the House was in the Chamber for my urgent question and I know she was listening very carefully, so will we be able to have a debate in Government time to look at a new regulatory framework for abortion healthcare?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I was in the Chamber for the urgent question. I know the issue has been a concern for many Members over a long period of time, not just because of the recent case, which will have brought the matter to the fore again. We have just had an urgent question, but I can assure the right hon. Lady that my door is always open to discuss the things that are within my gift. I am talking to colleagues about what we can do to alleviate concerns. At the moment, there is little opportunity for Members to bring forward private Members' Bills, but I am aware of what the possibilities are and I will continue to talk to colleagues to enable them to carry out what they wish.

**Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Residents of Canon Court in Wallington have been fighting for many years with the block's developer, Weston Homes, which has now reneged on its promise to replace the dangerous cladding on the building and is failing to engage with the leaseholders. May we have a debate in Government time about the rights of leaseholders to hold such developers to account and to have access to remediation that they were promised?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very sorry to hear about the ongoing issue in my hon. Friend's constituency. I understand that the company to which he refers has signed the developer remediation contract. I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has heard what my hon. Friend has said, and will ask his officials to advise my hon. Friend on the best course of action so that he can achieve what he wishes for those residents.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Tomorrow is Wear Yellow Day, although some of us are a day early. It is a very important day, on which people will wear yellow to raise awareness of cystic fibrosis and raise funds for research on life-changing treatments that can work for everyone with CF. I have reason to be grateful to the Cystic Fibrosis Trust, and to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and NHS Lanarkshire and their CF specialist teams, for their care for my granddaughter, Saoirse Grace Fellows. She is very fortunate to be able to be treated with Trikafta, which involves taking one pill a day, but many other CF sufferers are not so lucky, and their condition limits the way in which they live from day to day. I pay tribute to them and their carers for this CF week, and for Wear Yellow Day tomorrow.

**Penny Mordaunt:** On behalf of all Members, I thank the hon. Lady for reminding us of the important week that is coming up, and for encouraging us all to play our part in raising awareness and also learning more about emerging treatments and people's access to them—and let us all say hello to her granddaughter. I echo her sentiments about all those who are living with this condition.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Last week Skipton Building Society announced that it was closing its Neston branch, which means that Neston will no longer have any banks or building societies. As Members will know, this is a trend. It has already happened in Ellesmere Port, and throughout the country banks and building societies are leaving the high streets. I know that there have been attempts to set up banking clubs, but to my knowledge only four have been created in the whole country, and I think that the threshold for their creation is far too high. May we have a debate on what more we can do to ensure that these important facilities are not lost for good?

**Penny Mordaunt:** These facilities and services are vital to residents and businesses alike. I will ensure that those in the relevant Department know about the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised, and will ask that officials get in touch with his office to see what they can do to help.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): This week I received an email from my constituent Chris, from Clydebank. Chris, like 25,000 other people in Scotland and many others across these islands, is what has come to be called a "mortgage prisoner": someone who took out a mortgage with a lender that subsequently went bust, making it difficult to obtain a better deal elsewhere. Despite having owned his house for 20 years, Chris is no closer to paying off his mortgage, and despite his not missing any repayments, the principal rose by an additional £10,000 after his loan was then resold to a private equity company by the name of Heliodor in 2019. As Chris said this morning, on his



[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

terms of borrowing he would get a better deal from a loan shark than from Heliodor. May we have a debate in Government time—because this happened under the aegis of this Government—on the issue of mortgage prisoners?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very sorry to hear about the hon. Member's constituency case. He is right that this situation affects a large number of people. He will know how to apply for a debate, and I would encourage him to do so, but I shall also ensure that the relevant Departments have heard the case that he has raised today.

**Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): This week I was delighted to be reselected as the chair of sickle cell and thalassaemia all-party parliamentary group. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Thank you. This Monday is World Sickle Cell Awareness Day, yet people who suffer from the disease continue to feel ignored and let down. Will the Leader of the House speak with her colleague the Health Secretary to see what can be done to improve the situation for people who suffer from sickle cell disease? Free prescriptions would be a very good start indeed.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I congratulate the hon. Lady on her re-election to that post. She will know that the next Health questions are on 11 July. I encourage her to raise the issue there, but I shall also make sure that the Secretary of State for Health has heard her asks today.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): A constituent of mine, a mother of two, has been forced to bring up her children during their teenage years without maintenance payments from their father. He, meanwhile, set up home with a new partner and set up a company that claimed that it employed him on the minimum wage. Meanwhile, they both drive around in Tesla cars and have gone on to set up three more companies. This individual—this monster who left his children absolutely destitute throughout this period—has used the Child Maintenance Service's appeals process several times to avoid making payments. May we have a statement from the relevant Minister on this matter, so that we can raise our concerns about the Child Maintenance Service's backlog and discuss how these individuals can be stopped from being able to avoid making payments in future?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about that very sad case. The best thing that I can advise the hon. Gentleman to do is to raise this with the relevant Department—I think the relevant questions will be next week—but I shall also ensure that the Department has heard what he has said. He will know that we are very focused on getting all parents to grip their responsibilities, and if there is something we can do to assist, I am sure it will be done.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Reading for pleasure is one of life's great joys. In recognition of the transformative importance of reading, physical and digital books are exempt from VAT. However, many people are simply unable to read paper or digital books because of a disability or other challenges, and rely on audiobooks, which are more expensive because they are subject to VAT. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out her support for removing

VAT from audiobooks and ending this discrimination against those living with a disability, which impedes their ability to access books in the only way they can and therefore interferes with one of life's great pleasures?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Lady makes a very good point about what is a recurring theme at business questions. Another Member raised the issue of sunscreen being seen as a luxury item and hence subject to VAT, even though it is important for people to wear. The hon. Lady sets out a good case to be made to the Treasury. Of course, we can do these things only because we are now in control of our whole fiscal policy. I think this is a great campaign, and I encourage her to raise it with the relevant Secretary of State.

**Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): In Monday's debate on risk-based exclusions, one hon. Member said they were uncomfortable supporting the Commission's proposals on safeguarding due to the fact that the Representation of the People Act 1981 has never explicitly precluded someone on the sex offenders register from standing for office. As utterly bizarre as I found the logic underpinning that argument, the problem struck me as being very easy to remedy. On that basis, will the Leader of the House please advise when she will bring forward a statutory instrument to amend the Representation of the People Act in order to disbar people who we already know are sex offenders from entering this place, and to ensure that those put on the register during their time in Parliament are ineligible to stay and cannot seek to return at subsequent elections?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Lady raises an interesting point. It was a very good debate, and Members clearly have different views on these matters, but I am very pleased that we seemed to identify the areas in which the Commission still has work to do. I hope we will be able to come back to the House in short order.

The hon. Lady will know that what she asks me to do is not in my lane as Leader of the House, but she and other hon. Members can secure a debate on the matter. I encourage her to raise her point with the relevant Secretary of State.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Can we have a debate on the treatment of football fans at matches, and specifically on how UEFA can be called to account for, once again, organising the Champions League final without respecting the needs and welfare of supporters? I was in Istanbul on Saturday and, although it was glorious to see City lift the trophy, it was marred by desperately inadequate transport arrangements, which led to fans standing in hot, crowded buses for hours; fans being unable to buy food or even water without queuing for well over an hour, having had water confiscated on the way in; and total chaos in the alleged car parks after the game, which resulted in fans walking back along the motorway, trying desperately to find a ride back to the city. I could go on but, once again, UEFA seemingly put the needs of supporters last. That needs to change.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very sorry to hear about the ordeal that the hon. Gentleman and many fans experienced. He should flag this issue with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, whose next questions are on 20 July.



**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I recently held a cost of living surgery at the Larkfield centre in Govanhill, with more than 160 attendees queuing around the building to seek assistance in this Tory cost of greed crisis. Many of those constituents are struggling to claim prepayment energy support vouchers. Can we have a statement from the Government on extending the 30 June deadline so there is a better chance of the 12,060 unclaimed vouchers in Glasgow Central being taken up? Will the Government also consider extending the voucher scheme, because so many other constituents are still struggling with the cost of energy?

**Penny Mordaunt**: The hon. Lady raises a very good point. She will know that the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero has been doing much more, including through reminders at prepayment meter top-up points that people need to claim the money that is owed to them and to which they are entitled. He is very focused on ensuring that everyone can benefit from the vouchers. The hon. Lady will know the Secretary of State has established a surgery so that Members can directly and quickly raise particular cases and issues, but I will make sure he has heard her suggestion.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): I want to put on record my deep disappointment that there is no commitment to a debate on Grenfell. I wrote to the Leader of the House on 10 May asking for the Government to ensure there is a debate to mark the anniversary of Grenfell, in line with what the Government said during last year's Backbench Business debate on the Grenfell anniversary, which I led. After chasing the letter, I received a reply only this week, just before the Grenfell anniversary, stating simply that I will soon get a full response.

It is simply not good enough that no debate has been agreed and organised this year, so will the Leader of the House commit today to preventing this from happening again next year and, in line with what was said last year, commit to a debate in Government time in the week of the Grenfell anniversary to mark the Grenfell Tower fire?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this point. We have always held a debate on Grenfell. I have not been directly involved in the discussion but, as he will know, the debates are attended by the families of the victims of that tragedy. On making inquiries, my understanding is it was felt by several people and organisations that not holding the debate on the anniversary, or on surrounding days, was appreciated because people understandably wanted to attend other events. We have always held a Grenfell debate, and I have no expectation of that being any different, but we will do so in consultation with others who may wish to be present for the debate.

I know the hon. Gentleman cares about this very deeply, and I hope what I have said today has reassured him that we are on the same page.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Right hon. and hon. Members will know that I always use a business question on a Thursday to bring to the House's attention human rights issues, religious persecution and criminal acts across the world. Ever mindful of that, I note that those of the Baha'i faith are at the forefront of suffering discrimination and abuse. The Leader of the House always responds positively, and I thank her for that, but will she join me in condemning the arrest and disappearance of 17 Baha'is by Houthi gunmen in Yemen on 25 May, and call for their immediate release? Those individuals have been charged with apostasy and with being spies for Israel. All of that is untrue, but those charges could carry a death penalty under Yemeni law.

**Penny Mordaunt**: Although it is always good to hear from the hon. Gentleman, he, sadly, raises distressing cases. I am sure that all Members would want to express the sentiments that he has, and I thank him again for shining a spotlight on these individuals. It is appalling that people face these human rights abuses—that is what they are—and I hope that we have all been able to send a clear message that we are watching what happens to these individuals.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)**: I thank the Leader of the House for answering the business question.

## Point of Order

12.1 pm

**David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In yesterday's Scottish National party Opposition day debate, I referred in my speech to the long list of support provided by this Government to help people with the cost of living crisis—you may recall that, as you were in the Chair—including the maintenance of the triple lock on pensions. I inadvertently used the wrong numbers and instead of giving the new figures, I reported the old ones. I gave a figure of £141.85 for the basic state pension and £185.15 for the new state pension, but I should have said £156.20 and £203.85 respectively. Will you assure me that my having stated that today is sufficient to correct the record?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. Clearly, he has corrected the record, at the earliest opportunity, so I thank him for that.

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I am slightly anxious that we need to move on. Is this relevant to the statement that we have just heard?

**Richard Drax** No, it is not. I will sit down.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I wonder whether it would be appropriate for us to take it after the next statement, because I think colleagues are anxious to move on to that.

## Armoured Cavalry Programme: Sheldon Review

12.3 pm

**The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge):** With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement to update the House on the review conducted by Clive Sheldon KC on the lessons to be learned from the armoured cavalry programme, which is the Army programme centred on the Ajax vehicles. The Defence Secretary has previously acknowledged that the programme was a troubled programme. Albeit that he has more recently announced that it has turned a corner, it is against the backdrop of concerns he had about the programme, and those of this House about what was known at the time of publishing the integrated review, that he commissioned an independent review by a senior legal figure to investigate the circumstances.

In May last year, Clive Sheldon KC was appointed to lead a lessons learned review into the armoured cavalry programme. The review's terms of reference were to "identify lessons and make recommendations to help Ministry of Defence (MOD) deliver major programmes more effectively in future, with a particular focus on how MOD shares and elevates issues across the Department."

An earlier Ministry of Defence report, by David King, specifically relating to the health and safety concerns about noise and vibration, was published in December 2021. We continue to make good progress on implementing the recommendations from that report, some of which are echoed in Mr Sheldon's review.

Mr Sheldon submitted his report to Ministers on 19 May, and I am today publishing that report, unredacted, on gov.uk, and placing a copy in the Library of the House. I wish to formally thank Mr Sheldon and his team for the painstaking work that they have undertaken to enable us to better understand how the MOD can improve the governance, culture and leadership of our major programmes. They interviewed some 70 people and considered tens of thousands of pages of evidence.

The resulting report makes for difficult reading, highlighting a number of systemic, cultural and institutional problems across several areas of the Department. These problems include: fragmented relationships and the conflicting priorities of the senior responsible owner role. It also points to a reticence to raise, and occasionally by seniors to listen to, genuine problems in a timely, evidenced manner.

We accept these findings and most of Mr Sheldon's 24 formal recommendations, with 15 accepted and nine accepted in principle. Crucially, the review did not find that either Ministers or Parliament were misled. Equally, the review team did not see any evidence of misconduct by any individual, let alone gross misconduct, and nothing that would justify disciplinary action. It is, though, true that many of the behaviours highlighted in the report are far from ideal, but in many cases they have already been recognised and acted on, both specifically on the armoured cavalry programme as well as across the Department.

Where work is not already under way to implement a recommendation, we commit to making the necessary changes at pace. In the interest of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will address the recommendations in the themes set out by Mr Sheldon in his executive summary, rather than going through each of the recommendations.

A number of recommendations relate to MOD's internal relationships, including with the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory. Considerable effort has already been made to address these issues within and beyond the Ajax programme. This has resulted in much improved working and reporting arrangements, in particular with the Defence Equipment & Support organisation and also the newly established acquisition safety cell that advises the Investment Approvals Committee on equipment safety matters. Escalation routes also exist for DSTL through the chief science officer where concerns are not acted on.

Another area of focus is SROs. I know that many colleagues are interested in this point. We fully agree with the need to improve how senior responsible owners are supported and much work has gone into upskilling and supporting SROs, ensuring that they have the time and space to focus on delivering their programmes and can build skills through the Major Projects Leadership Academy.

Today, four in every five of our major project SROs are committing at least half their time to leading their programmes—half the Army's 19 SROs dedicate 100% of their time. We also agree in principle with Mr Sheldon's presumption for a minimum tenure, subject to compatibility with employment law.

Finally, the report comments extensively on a culture that led to issues not being escalated and makes recommendations to improve that and the flow of information. Transparency has improved since the period of this report. For Ajax, there are detailed updates through the SRO to Ministers that ensure the potential issues are exposed early should they arise in the future. Processes will be further strengthened through the defence acquisition operating model and guidance. Work is also under way to implement a project delivery data strategy to strengthen the use of data to both support performance reporting and assist in early identification of issues. Of course, the main aim of commissioning this review was to learn lessons to improve procurement—not just on Ajax, but across the MOD's programmes.

Ultimately, the core of our intent is to ensure that the equipment we procure for the British armed forces is of the highest possible standard and, furthermore, that our service personnel have faith in the system and the taxpayer has faith in our spending of money from the public purse. Quite simply, we need to deliver change across the Department, turning widespread desire for acquisition reform into tangible reality, in particular driving increased pace and agility into acquisition, so that we can keep pace with technology and maintain our competitive edge.

Although I recognise the many challenges in this programme to date and the need to learn lessons, I would stress that there is already intense work under way in the Department—especially at DE&S—to improve performance, with encouraging signs. For example, between December 2020 to December 2022 we saw a reduction from 6.1 years to 5.1 years in the time that it takes to go from outline business case to delivering equipment into the hands of our armed forces.

In further positive news, I hope the House will welcome the significant progress made to recover the Ajax programme. I can confirm that, as of Tuesday afternoon, the Household Cavalry has been undergoing standard Army field training on Salisbury plain in a range of

Ajax vehicles. Focused on individual and crew training, this step marks the restarting of British Army training on these sophisticated vehicles, and I hope underlines that this project really has turned the corner. Indeed, last Friday I had the great privilege of visiting Bovington to experience the Ajax vehicle at first hand.

I am pleased to report that the soldiers I met described the vehicle and its capabilities as “night and day”—a phrase used repeatedly—compared with their current equipment. In describing Ajax's strengths, the soldiers I spoke to emphasised the platform's high mobility, increased firepower from the new cannon and a highly sophisticated sensor suite that really helps them do their job, representing in totality a very real and positive step change in capability—all packaged in a vehicle with high levels of crew protection and survivability. As training increases across other field Army units on the 44 vehicles already delivered, in parallel General Dynamics's personnel in Wales continue to run their production lines to build the operationally deployable vehicles, with the end goal of 589 fully operational vehicles by 2029.

To conclude, I reiterate my gratitude to Mr Sheldon and his team for their considerable efforts and for distilling his findings into clear lessons and recommendations for the future. Our focus now is on understanding and applying those lessons, ensuring that they are implemented in the armoured cavalry and other major defence programmes, as well as ensuring that we deliver the game-changing capability that Ajax will provide to the British Army as quickly as possible. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.10 pm

**Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op):** Before I start, if you will allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to pay tribute to Glenda Jackson, our former colleague, given the sad news that she recently passed away. She was a doughty champion for social justice and was the greatest actor of this or any other generation. I am sure further tributes will be paid in the coming days.

What the Sheldon review has shown without a shadow of a doubt is that Ajax is the biggest procurement failure for a decade. The review is beyond damning. For a report to state,

“Reporting was at times lacking, or unclear, or overly optimistic. That led to senior personnel and Ministers being surprised to discover in late 2020 and early 2021 that the programme was at much greater risk than they had appreciated”,  
is frankly embarrassing.

There is no place to hide any longer. The failure to manage this contract was on this Conservative Government's watch. It was they who allowed the relationship with General Dynamics to break down to such an extent that every time Ajax was mentioned, here or in the press, there was fevered speculation that the contract was about to be cancelled. That has caused anxiety for the Army and above all for the workers in General Dynamics in both Merthyr Tydfil and Oakdale in my own Islwyn constituency. Even the threat of losing 400 jobs would be devastating for the south Wales economy.

This programme has cost £5.5 billion and has been running for 13 years, but has yet to deliver one deployable vehicle. If this was the private sector, heads would roll,



[Chris Evans]

so I ask the Minister this: has any action been taken against anyone responsible for this mess? What new procedures have already been put in place on other major programmes to stop similar mistakes happening? Ministers must ensure that our NATO obligations are met in full, but, whether it is Ajax, delays to Wedgetail or a modern war-fighting division, NATO must have concerns. Have any been raised with the Government about Ajax?

I well remember the sense of excitement from workers at Oakdale when this contract was signed in 2010, just after I was elected. The Ajax contract was then labelled a game changer, not only for south Wales, but for the Army. It is truly sad that we have arrived at a point where Ajax has become a byword for waste and incompetence.

Workers at General Dynamics should have been listened to, but they were not. There was a

“lack of appreciation of diverse and contrary voices, especially from those working on the ‘shopfloor’. These voices were not fully included, and were too easily dismissed.”

Those are not my words, but the words of the report. Perhaps if workers had been listened to, we would not be standing here now.

As the Minister knows, Ajax is not an isolated case: 37 out of 39 defence equipment contracts being run by the Ministry of Defence are marked red or amber by the National Audit Office. That includes Morpheus, which is extremely important to our armed forces. Have the problems with that programme’s communications system been fixed, or are they unfixable? What contingency plans are being made for Morpheus?

For a contract as important as Ajax, with so much speculation around it, it is amazing that we have not had an oral statement on Ajax since December 2021. For too long, the Government have avoided scrutiny on this issue. On this and other future contracts, will the Minister commit to giving regular updates to the House? We are, after all, ensuring soldiers’ safety—the most important thing about the contract—and spending taxpayers’ money. I find myself in agreement with the Minister when he says that change has to come. It is not a moment too soon.

**James Cartlidge:** I begin by agreeing with the hon. Gentleman on Glenda Jackson; I do not think she was in the House when I was here, but she was an amazing actress and I join in his sentiments and echo them entirely.

I recognise that the hon. Gentleman is not just the shadow spokesman but has a clear constituency interest, and I respect that. He talks about fevered speculation and the impact on the workforce, and I totally understand that. We do not want to see that. He talks about coming to the House: I am here today to be absolutely clear with everyone about the latest position. In fact, my colleague the Paymaster General regularly updated the House on the position around Ajax when he was the Minister. My predecessor, now the Lord Chancellor, also issued a written statement earlier this year that was very detailed about the programme, so I think we have been consistent in updating the House.

On some of the hon. Gentleman’s specific questions, he asked about action on individuals. What we said when commissioning this review was that disciplinary action would be taken only if there was evidence of

gross misconduct, and Mr Sheldon found no evidence of misconduct, let alone gross misconduct. That is the clear reason why individual action has not been taken.

In terms of action across programmes, I point the hon. Gentleman to the very significant investment by the Army of £70 million over the next 10 years in Army procurement programmes, including in the past two years a doubling in the number of SROs and a doubling of the amount of time that SROs spend on their responsible major projects. Those are significant investments.

I also point out to the hon. Gentleman some of the improvements we have seen. I accept that we need to go further but, if I may draw a contrast, this is not the first review of acquisition. Bernard Gray issued an independent “Review of Acquisition for the Secretary of State for Defence” in 2009, which described a poorly performing procurement system. That review found that

“the average programme overruns by 80% or c.5 years from the time specified at initial approval through to in service dates”,

and that was under a previous Government.

These problems have been around for some time and it is disappointing. I have pointed to the improvements we have seen, but let me be absolutely clear: the ultimate reason we have this report is to learn lessons and the way we respond to it is to deliver a fundamentally better acquisition system. I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman on that and I hope we can all work together to that end.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I would like to just take this opportunity to add my thoughts about Glenda Jackson, as I can see there are colleagues in the Chamber who were here in the House at the same time as her. She was a wonderful colleague and a great Minister, and I think we all want to send our condolences to her family. I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

**Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con):** May I immediately associate myself with your kind words about Glenda Jackson, Madam Deputy Speaker?

We now have in the Chamber not one, but three current or former procurement Ministers who bear the scars of this project. I am pleased that we are able to discuss the matter so openly and I commend the recent work that the MOD has done to get on top of the issue.

Ajax is now a case study that the MOD and DNS should use on how not to do procurement. This is all about the British Army’s recce vehicle. The current one being used, the Scimitar, was introduced in 1971. It is good to hear that the soldiers the Minister met said that the replacement is better than the last—that is brilliant, because it was built in 1971. Ajax’s journey has been miserable. It started in 2010 and the delivery date was 2017, yet it is not expected to enter service until 2030. Something very serious has gone wrong.

I absolutely welcome Clive Sheldon’s report. The Committee will look into that in more detail and, rather fortuitously, a Sub-Committee study on procurement, by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), is currently under way. I am sure that he will have more words on how we will digest the report in more detail.

The Minister covered some of the issues. Concerns include the relationships between different entities within, or associated with, the MOD. The senior responsible

officer has been criticised for not being a single point of contact or owning the actual project itself but having to have a number of projects going concurrently. Concerns got stuck because of people taking a rigid view of their remit. It is not just with Ajax that there is a problem; there is also with the land warfare capability. We have similar problems with the main battle tank and the armoured fighting vehicle. I hope that those problems will be addressed when the defence Command Paper comes out.

**James Cartlidge:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Chairman of the Select Committee. Of course, we are absolutely committed to engaging with his Committee and, indeed, with the Sub-Committee, before which I will appear next week. I was born in 1974. He makes a striking point about the existing vehicle being from 1971—it is the same age as my elder brother. I take his point that one might therefore expect servicemen to say that it is night and day.

I put great store by meeting those on the frontline, and I will always continue to do that. It was a great privilege to go to Bovington. One of the soldiers I sat next to in the Ares version had been in a Challenger 2 when it was hit by an IED—I think it was in Iraq or Afghanistan; he did not say. He felt confidence in the protection. It is so important that we interact with the soldiers on the frontline. Ultimately, that is the point: we want to deliver a better acquisitions system for them and I look forward to working with my right hon. Friend's Committee to that end.

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

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Let me associate myself with the comments about the former Member for Hampstead and Kilburn—a great actor, but, I have to say to Labour colleagues, a great socialist, who will be deeply missed. I express my condolences to Labour group Members—a great loss to socialism.

I have sat on the Defence Select Committee for almost five years. I have sat through enough evidence sessions and seen enough gloss poured over the evident shortcomings of this programme by Ministers and officials alike to treat today's statement with much scepticism. Despite the fact that we are seeing various cheaper competitor platforms to Ajax tested in the theatre in Ukraine before our very eyes, we continue with what I think is an absolute classic 24-carat bespoke option straight out of Main Building's fevered imagination. Today's news is telling us that Ajax will not be ready until the end of the decade—the Minister may correct me if I am wrong—meaning that a full 20 years will have passed between concept and deployment. That is, frankly, unforgivable.

Yet so many of us across the Chamber would tell us today that it does not have to be like this. To give just one allied example, Norway has recently terminated its contract for the NH90 helicopters after problems were found, and will return all those helicopters while demanding a full refund. What is stopping the MOD from doing the same with Ajax and General Dynamics?

As we have talked about Ukraine, if we eventually ever see any of these vehicles deployed in the field, would the Minister be happy for the UK to supply them to a country fighting for its survival against a technically advanced adversary?

**James Cartlidge:** I did not have the pleasure of appearing before the hon. Gentleman in the Select Committee. Obviously, we bring forward this capability to ensure that it can add huge capability on the frontline when it really matters—that is what it is being tested for. That is why it is really good news that the Army is now training on that vehicle at Salisbury Plain. Of course, that has happened much later than we wanted. That is why we are here and have the Sheldon report. Ultimately, we want to improve our acquisitions system, but procurement can be complex, even for simple things such as ferries, as the Scottish Government have themselves discovered.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Ajax programme has been an absolute debacle, first initiated in 2010. Thirteen years and some £4 billion later, we still do not have a new armoured vehicle in frontline service. We will not have it until late 2025, and it will not be fully in service until 2030. This report starkly reveals in exquisite, agonising detail just how massively bureaucratic and broken the MOD's procurement really is. With war under way in Ukraine, will the Minister assure the House that he is now genuinely personally committed to root-and-branch reform of how we buy military equipment in this country? The taxpayer and our armed forces deserve no less.

**James Cartlidge:** It is no exaggeration to say that no one in this Chamber has greater passion on the subject of procurement and acquisition reform than my right hon. Friend. I look forward to appearing before his Sub-Committee next week to discuss the important role of Defence Equipment and Support, on which, of course, so much of the report is focused. He is absolutely right: we need fundamentally to improve acquisition. A key reason for that is technology. We have to have a system that is faster, leaner and more agile so that we can respond more quickly to evolving technology. It must be self-evident to us all from the theatre in Ukraine—the way that uncrewed systems, one-way attack drones and all the rest of it are being used—that war is changing rapidly and we need to respond to that. Our acquisitions system needs to be able to do so, too.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): May I first express concern that there was in the Minister's statement no estimate of the extra cost that will be incurred or of the capability gap? To echo the comments of others, the excellent workforce in Merthyr Tydfil are certainly not to blame in this debacle. Indeed, one of the issues highlighted in the report is that they were not listened to when they expressed concerns about the progress of the project. What I am unclear about is why, yet again, no one is to blame. It is probably because Ministers change so quickly that they can evade responsibility. Certainly, the system, and individuals' roles in it, are to blame.

Why did we need a KC and a year of examination to deal with the blindingly obvious failures in the procurement system, of which this programme is merely an extreme example? Why did Ministers not do a rapid assessment and get on with the job? Will the Minister actually get on with changing the system and not let the natural inertia within the civil service get back to business as usual, as we have seen so often before and as we are seeing again in health with the vaccines programme—this system is failing the British people and, in this case, the British armed forces—or will a successor stand up there and make the same lame excuses in a few months' time?

**James Cartlidge:** I have the greatest of respect for the right hon. Gentleman's experience as a former Defence Minister. There are three points to address. In relation to the cost, it was a fixed-price contract. The point about the workforce is extremely important. As I said in responding to the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), I am seized of that point. The defence sector is incredibly important to every single part of the United Kingdom, but particularly to Wales and in terms of General Dynamics UK.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asks why there was the need for all this time and a KC. If only there were such a simple answer. This is incredibly complex territory: 10,000 pages of evidence and 70 people interviewed on complex matters. It has taken time, but we now have the report in front of us and the key thing, as I have said, is to learn the lessons from it.

**James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): I welcome the sharp and cleansing light that the report will shine into the shambolic Ajax programme and, by extension, into the whole of the defence procurement programme, which has been a problem—we have been saying so for years. The report shines a light into it. I very much welcome the Minister's commitment to listening to the lessons learned from the report and to change things fundamentally in wider procurement. In that context, will he let us know when the defence Command Paper is due out—it will presumably reflect some of those lessons—and, in particular, whether a defence industrial strategy will be published separately or alongside the Command Paper, and whether it will genuinely reflect the changes that he intends to make?

**James Cartlidge:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We are hoping to publish the Command Paper imminently, and it is certainly my hope that it will contain important statements on the issue of acquisition reform. For me, it is an absolute priority; obviously, I would say that as the Minister for Defence Procurement.

My hon. Friend referred to the defence and security industrial strategy. The key point about that is that we see the defence industry as part of our military capability. That has never been more the case, because of the urgent strategy that we need to get replenishment under way due to the stocks we have gifted—for entirely the right reasons—to Ukraine. He makes a very good point.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I would like to build on the searching question from the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar). The Government announced in March that they would resume payments for Ajax towards the £5.5 billion cost. We had been expecting the CVR(T)—combat vehicle reconnaissance (tracked)—to be retired this year and for Warrior to be retired in 2025, but if Ajax is not to reach full operating capability until 2029 at the earliest, how will the capability gap be closed? If that is by extending Warrior, how much additional taxpayer's money will be spent on extending the life of Warrior?

**James Cartlidge:** The hon. Gentleman asks a very good question. Obviously, it is important that the Army is satisfied with the capability it has, so that it can fulfil its key operational requirements. I am assured that that is the case. Inevitably, if there is delay in one capability coming forward, there will be some impact. We estimate

that there is a cost of roughly £200 million to extend the life of Warrior and Challenger 2 in response to delay in this programme and the timescale in relation to Boxer coming forward.

**Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): At its height, the Ajax project supported 850 jobs across Oakdale and Merthyr and a further 22 Welsh small and medium-sized enterprises. That is considerable investment in Wales and a void we cannot easily fill. Paragraph 7.8 of the Sheldon review details a number of examples of personnel feeling that there was not a “psychologically safe” environment in the MOD to raise concerns, as it would be “career limiting”, despite Joint Service Publication 492. This meant that “optimism bias” towards the project succeeding ran riot. How is the Minister going to change the culture, because that is not procedural?

**James Cartlidge:** My hon. Friend, who speaks with the expertise of a former Army officer and someone who serves on the Defence Committee, has hit the nail on the head in terms of the issue of optimism bias. *[Interruption.]* Did I say “former Minister”? I correct the record if I said that, but she is certainly on the Defence Committee.

**Mr Ellwood:** No, she was a Minister!

**James Cartlidge:** I apologise; she is a former Minister. She knows what she is talking about—that is for certain. She made an extremely important point about optimism bias. It may be that I was a bit pessimistic in my answer.

This is a serious point, because Mr Sheldon talks about optimism bias at length. Obviously, the new initial operating capability and full operating capability are much later than we wanted them to be, but I think what happened is that DE&S sat down with General Dynamics and said, “This time we've got to be realistic. Let's have a programme we can actually deliver to.” I know it is disappointing, but that is the key thing; we want to actually get this equipment delivered.

My hon. Friend's point about having psychological confidence to speak up is incredibly important, and she is a champion on that. We conduct the pan-Defence people survey, and the last iteration of the survey asked questions in relation to psychological confidence—are people confident in coming forward and challenging the system? In the last survey, the Army was eight percentage points above the civil service benchmark, so there is improvement happening in this space.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. This report makes for hard reading, and yet the humility with which he has accepted the critique is to be admired in these days of blame-shift. Mistakes were made; that is clear. It is also clear that transparency and efficiency go hand in hand. Will he confirm that the application of these lessons and new procedures will be armed forces-wide and that every officer stationed in Northern Ireland and Wales, and from the top of Scotland to the tip of England, will be made fully aware of the dangers of doing what has been done before and will embrace these changes for the better?

**James Cartlidge:** It is always a pleasure to receive questions from the hon. Gentleman; we always keep the best until last on the Opposition Benches, in my view.



It is a matter of pride for me that I will be going to Northern Ireland to mark Armed Forces Week starting next Saturday, and I am looking forward to that immensely. I can confirm to him that I will not blame-shift; I will take responsibly. I am the Minister for Defence Procurement: I have the responsibility of delivering a better procurement system, and that must apply across the forces, as he rightly says.

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): Notwithstanding the technical and procurement difficulties that have been reported, and the Sheldon review, which I welcome, Ajax has probably had more TLC than any British-made platform in history. Members may feel free to accuse me of optimism bias, but does the Minister agree that when it is finally rolled off the production line, it will be an excellent platform and fit for export?

**James Cartlidge:** My hon. Friend speaks with huge experience as a former senior Army officer, and he is absolutely right. I referred to visiting Bovington last Friday. For the soldiers there, Ajax is a step change from the vehicle from 1971, but there is another very serious point. They talked about the extra lethality of the cannon, the manoeuvrability and the amazing sensors in that machine, which gives them such huge oversight of the battlefield. It has great capability.

On my hon. Friend's final point, as someone who is passionate about exportability and our defence sector exporting around the world, I would like to see it get to that phase, but the good news is that we have got it out there, and the Army is now training on it.

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): I commend the Minister—a conscientious Minister, if ever there was one—and his predecessor, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), to whom we have spoken on many occasions in the Defence Committee, on which I sit. I know that they are just as alarmed by this as we all are.

We have to learn the lesson about attention to detail. On our visit to General Dynamics, there were two sets of headphones on the table. One set was used by the civilian operators, and one was used by the military, for which the vehicle was being built. The civilian one had double protection, but the military one did not, so when the military used their headphones, it affected their hearing. That was 10 years after the vehicle had been built. As it took another while to drive this vehicle, as we can no longer afford to do so, it took another year before the fault was eventually found. It is attention to detail, quite apart from everything else, that we need, to ensure that this never happens again.

**James Cartlidge:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and reminds us about the background of the noise and vibration issues. It is my understanding that part of that was because this vehicle came forward in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan, and had what is called a rigid body design, which has its own characteristics of noise and vibration. He is right to highlight the issue of the headphones. We do not believe that the first headset that was used was responsible for those noise and vibration issues, but the good thing is that we worked with General Dynamics and brought in the second headset. That is the one I wore one on Friday. To put it crudely, there is a smaller black one that goes right into your ears—a bit like the sort of thing we are given when we go on a factory visit—and then there are the bigger external ones that sit on top of the helmet. It was very effective.

This has been a very difficult programme, and I have been completely open in acknowledging that to the House, but I believe that we can use this moment as an opportunity genuinely to improve our acquisition system.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Minister for his statement and for responding to questions for over half an hour.

## Points of Order

12.38 pm

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wonder if you could help me. As you may know, a barge is due to come to my constituency at the end of this month to house 506 migrants. The port—a private port—has been paid a considerable sum of money. In response to a written question to the Home Office, I had a written reply saying that it was commercially confidential and we could not know the sum. This is taxpayers' money. A deal has been done. I would have thought it is a right for my constituents and everybody else to know how much taxpayers' money is being given to a private port to accommodate this barge. Can you advise me on how I can get an answer to this question?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)**: I thank the hon. Member for his point of order and forward notice of it. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the point of order. In the first instance, I would recommend getting in contact with the Department concerned. If that does not work, I would recommend going to the Table Office to see what support and information it can give, but this seems prime territory for an Adjournment debate as well.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On gaining control of the council in Brighton and Hove, the Labour administration found that £3 million had been overspent by the Green administration, above and beyond what was legally set in the budget. That is a third of our operating reserves. Can you advise me on how I can hold to account councillors who have been chucked out by the electorate, but who have cost us millions of pounds?

**Mr Deputy Speaker**: I think the hon. Gentleman has done so, supremely well, by raising his point of order.

Before we come to the first debate, I just want to say—I know that Madam Deputy Speaker Dame Rosie Winterton mentioned this, but I want to put my tribute on the record as well—that Glenda Jackson was an incredible talent, not just within the world of theatre and the arts, but in the world of politics, where many of us got to know her over many years, particularly when she was a Minister. I have had more than a few hugs from her on the Terrace, I have to say. She was a personal friend.

When I last went to New York, I went to see her play “King Lear”. She commanded that stage for over three hours—I was shattered just watching her. I got in touch with her before I went, and she said, “Come back into the dressing room and have a chat.” When I went into the dressing room, I was expecting to see somebody who was shattered, quite frankly. Quite the reverse: she was sitting up, supreme. She looked at me and said, “Nigel! What’s going on with Brexit?” We had a good chat for well over an hour. She will be sorely missed.

I have already sent my condolences to her son, but I now extend them publicly to the rest of her family. I hope that the lights of the west end, Broadway, and theatres all over the world will be dimmed in tribute to her, indeed in deep contrast to the way she dazzled when she took to the stage. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

We now come to the Backbench Business debate on Pride Month. I call Elliot Colburn to move the motion.

## Backbench Business

### Pride Month

12.41 pm

**Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Pride Month.

Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I associate myself with the comments you have just made.

As one of the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) rights, very ably co-chaired by the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), I wish everyone a very happy Pride Month indeed. I have looked over some of the *Hansard* records of Pride debates we have had in this place over the course of the past few years, and I think it is always right and positive to start with the good news and the progress that we have made—not only in the UK but globally—towards further equality for LGBT+ people around the world. Last year and the year so far have been no exceptions, with new conversion therapy bans brought in around the world and more countries achieving decriminalisation.

However, sadly, we meet here against the backdrop of a very worrying and concerning backwards step in many parts of the world, where we are seeing attacks against LGBT+ people—not just where we might expect them, but here in the UK as well. I will touch on some of those attacks throughout the course of my speech. Having looked at *Hansard* records of Pride debates since the start of this Parliament—they have become an annual tradition—I note that a lot of the concerns that were raised in those debates are, sadly, still very much relevant today. We have not yet seen enough action on some of the points we have raised, and indeed, some points I want to raise today are new.

I will start with the global perspective. I reiterate the good news that we have seen new conversion therapy bans and decriminalisation. That is to be welcomed, but it has to be considered alongside the extremely serious and worrying backwards steps and the anti-human-rights agenda that we are seeing in many parts of the world. The best example we can give of that is the Anti-Homosexuality Bill that Uganda has shamefully just passed. I know full well that that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has expressed its deep concern and is having conversations, and I appreciate its efforts. Again, to touch on a positive, I have seen examples of British missions around the world doing incredible work, liaising with activists on the ground, sometimes in extremely difficult circumstances. Our ambassadors and the mission staff around the world are to be congratulated. However, I urge the Government to go further by ensuring that this is a foreign policy objective and an aid objective; that they are using every tool at their disposal to influence change and support activists in very difficult circumstances, and indeed to support those who will inevitably try to flee such discrimination.

The Bill in Uganda carries the death penalty. We know full well that people will be scared for their lives, and we need to make sure that we are there for them, not just in Uganda but in the many other places where we are seeing backward steps on LGBT+ rights. I hope

the Minister can give us some assurance that he is having conversations with the FCDO and that decriminalisation, stopping legislation of that kind, and tackling discrimination against LGBT+ people around the world remain foreign policy objectives for this Government. I commend the good work that I have seen missions do.

To bring the debate back to home, I want to repeat a lot of what has been said in previous Pride debates—we have to say it again, sadly, because we have not seen progress. The obvious thing to start with is conversion practices and conversion therapy. We have been raising this issue for years now and a Bill has been promised several times, but we are still waiting for the draft Bill to be published. The Government have cross-party support to get the Bill through the House, and to get it through quickly.

I remind the House and those watching that every single day in the UK, right now, people are being subjected to dehumanising torture—that is essentially what conversion practices amount to—but they are without recourse to justice because those practices are perfectly legal at the moment. It is urgent that we act with speed to bring forward that legislation as soon as possible, so I hope the Minister can give us an update. I know that we spoke about this during business questions, but I hope he will be able to tell us a little more about the timetable for the conversion practices Bill. I can guarantee him massive cross-party support to get it through this House.

Another issue that we have raised before but again needs focus is the increase in LGBT+ hate crime across the United Kingdom, and particularly the level of hate crime towards transgender people—I will touch on the toxicity around trans issues a bit later.

**Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and for making such a significant opening speech. Over 24% of young people experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ+. Does he agree that the Government need to do more to address this issue, and that one of the ways of doing so would be to improve the monitoring of gender identity and sexuality in housing and homelessness services?

**Elliot Colburn:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention, and I do think she is right. Perhaps the Minister could update us on the conversations he is having with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on the issue, because it is a fact that around a quarter of all young homeless people identify as LGBT+. We know full well what the reasons are: they are fleeing unsupportive households, but many do not know where to go for support, do not have the capacity to access support, or—for whatever reason—do not get that help and support. It is a massive cohort of people, so I hope the Minister can tell us a little more about the conversations that the Government Equalities Office and DLUHC are having to tackle that specific issue. I thank the hon. Lady for raising it.

I want to touch on something that has appeared on the horizon since our last Pride Month debate: the Government's recent announcement on their review into relationship and sex education in schools. I do have concerns, which I know are shared by many in the education sector and further afield—this also relates to the Department for Education's new trans guidance for

schools—that the RSE review will lead to a backwards step and will, potentially, bring back section 28 by the back door, which we do not want. Section 28 is something that our party had to apologise for, and we have come so far since that moment. We do not want to see it brought back. Many might say, “That could never happen,” but I ask colleagues to look to the United States, where several states have introduced section 28-style legislation. We cannot allow that to happen here in the United Kingdom.

I therefore urge the Minister to give us some assurance that the RSE review will not break our pledge to ensure that RSE is mandatory, because it is not just about LGBT+ people; it also teaches about consent, it teaches women and girls about healthy relationships and to avoid sexual violence where possible, and it teaches boys not to avoid dangerous behaviour. RSE is a great achievement that we should be proud of. We should not be shy about the fact that this Government introduced it. The House should send a strong message that we will not accept a watering down of those protections.

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): Last weekend, I popped into Bracknell for the inaugural Pride event. As a proud LGBTQ+ champion, it was great to see so many people there. What struck me, aside from the fantastic organisation from Luke, Brad, Bracknell Forest Council and many others, was that it was an excellent party. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should be celebrating inclusion and diversity?

**Elliot Colburn:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. [*Interruption.*] I heard from a sedentary position that gay parties are the best parties, and I absolutely have to agree. Pride is a celebration. We describe it in many different ways, but we come together and we celebrate, and we are proud of who we are, so I am grateful to him for attending that event in Bracknell and I completely agree.

I also hope that the Government will not be tempted by the calls from some to out trans kids to their parents. I benefited, as I know did so many people who went to school at the same time as me, or before or after, from the safe environment that schools provided to talk about these things without fear of it getting back to a household that may not necessarily be supportive. I was lucky; I was naive at the time when I came out, and I should have known that my parents would be absolutely supportive, which they were, but school provided that safe and non-judgmental environment for me to be able to talk about things, and I know that has been valued by so many others. I understand the need to make decisions about a child's welfare in correspondence with parents—I do not think anyone objects to that—but the idea of outing trans people to their parents is dangerous, because many families will not be understanding and supportive, sadly. We need to ensure that schools remain a safe place for LGBT+ pupils.

I will touch on the current toxicity around the trans debate—it would be churlish not to talk about it in some detail. Sadly, that toxicity is something that we have had to speak about in Pride debates, and I know that many other colleagues will want to talk about it today. I fear that we as a Parliament, and the institutions we represent, have completely lost control of the conversation, which is being imported from other parts of the world and which often has completely nonsensical



[*Elliot Colburn*]

and irrelevant arguments brought into it. At its heart is a very vulnerable group of people who are already marginalised and who are now being further demonised and pulled into a national discussion that they did not ask for.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Member makes an important point. Specifically on that toxic and damaging debate that we have seen in this country, particularly over the past year, does he agree that we have to somehow persuade everyone involved to dial down the rhetoric, to be more reasonable and to listen to one another? I have absolutely no problem personally with gender recognition reform or the legislation that was passed by the Scottish Parliament, but I also understand that there are people with genuine concerns. By not listening to them, we have inadvertently dialled up the toxicity, and the people suffering are the trans community.

**Elliot Colburn:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. If we do not dial down the rhetoric, calm that debate down and listen to each other, we will only ever hear those with the loudest voices and those who scream the loudest. The Women and Equalities Committee, of which I am proud to be a member, ran an inquiry on this space not that long ago. One of our conclusions, funnily enough, was that there was a huge amount of agreement, so we were perplexed, when drawing up our conclusions, as to why there should be such anger. It did not seem impossible to us that a way forward could be found, so I hope the Government can update us on what they plan to do to try to dial down the rhetoric in this space.

**Dame Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has been opening the debate with his usual common sense and insight, but has he thought that the toxicity of this debate is deliberately created by those who wish to cause fear and then use that to cause division? Then they can victimise already vulnerable people in a way that is designed to increase the toxicity and fear, rather than dial it down.

**Elliot Colburn:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who co-chairs the all-party parliamentary group, for that intervention. She is absolutely right. We see this issue being purposefully used, sadly.

That brings me to one of my final remarks in the debate. This issue is not just about trans people or the LGBT+ community more widely; there is a clear and concerted anti-human-rights agenda, and it will not stop at trans people alone. It will move on, as we have seen in the United States, to attacks on women's reproductive rights, and it will go on to the rest of the LGBT+ community and then other parts of the equality space as well. The idea that this is just a discussion on trans rights is nonsense; it already permeates a lot further and it will continue to do so. We need to be able to call that out for what it is.

That is not to say, however, that there are not, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) has just said, genuine concerns that people are absolutely right to express. It is our job as parliamentarians to help navigate those conversations and to come up with good legislation and good ways forward, but we need to be

setting the standard in this place, and we must not allow Parliament to further that agenda. I can see by looking around the room that we will not have that today, which is reassuring, but I hope that colleagues who are not in this debate will take note and recognise that we need to be responsible for what we say, for dialling down the rhetoric and for making sure we can find a way forward, because the current status quo is just going to crumble; it cannot sustain. It is just driving up hatred and anger, and the longer that continues, the more dangerous things can become.

Having said that, we have seen good progress being made not just in the past year, but in the decades that preceded it. I feel very lucky and grateful to be able to be an openly gay man serving in Parliament and living in the United Kingdom. I hope that we do not get tempted by some of those siren voices and slip backwards. I look forward to hearing other colleagues' contributions and an update from the Minister on the Government's work to ensure that Britain remains one of the best places in the world to be openly LGBT+.

12.58 pm

**Dame Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): As always on this occasion, it is a great pleasure to see you in the chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I add my tributes to Glenda Jackson, following today's sad news. I grew up watching her performing in "Elizabeth R". I then found myself sat next to her for seven hours in this place as we both attempted to make our maiden speeches. She got in just ahead of me, but in the end we both got in. I worked with her in government as a Minister, and I also had the privilege to see her in "King Lear"—at the Old Vic, rather than in New York—and I can attest to the stupendous nature of her performance in one of my favourite Shakespearean plays. We will all miss her. Of course, she was a Birkenhead girl—I just thought I would get that in before I continued. I am sure the whole House sends condolences to her son Dan, and to her wider circle of friends and family.

I would like to draw attention to early-day motion 1275, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) and signed on a cross-party basis, including by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis). I think our thoughts have been with the only transgender Member of this House at the moment given the toxicity of some of the debate, which the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) raised in his very able moving of the motion in this year's Pride debate.

In the UK, every June the LGBT community and our allies celebrate Pride Month, and I am grateful, as I think we all are, to the Backbench Business Committee for continuing to give us time to have this debate. The events that take place during Pride Month give us all a chance to celebrate our history, which is very important as it teaches us and gives us hints about what may lie ahead in the future if we do not keep our wits about us. It also gives us a chance to celebrate the remarkable progress we have made as an LGBT+ community, from LGBT+ people being criminalised to legal equality, visibility and much more widespread acceptance. That is quite a journey.

It is a remarkable change, and it has happened in my lifetime. I am older than I sometimes think myself to be, but I am not that old in the scheme of the social history

of this country, so that demonstrates the scale of the change I think most of us in the Chamber, although not all, have witnessed. Pride also gives us the chance to show solidarity with other LGBT+ people around the world who have yet to make the progress that we have enjoyed, and who in 66 countries still face legal bans on their existence and in some extreme cases face the death penalty.

**Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for allowing me to intervene, and I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this really important debate on Pride Month. This is very important to me and to constituents on Ynys Môn such as Bruce Hughes, and I look forward to the time when we can celebrate Pride Month right across Anglesey and really celebrate this solidarity and the remarkable progress we have made.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I agree, and I certainly hope that Pride in Anglesey is as enjoyable as Pride in London, and also as enjoyable as Pride in Liverpool, which this year will be hosting Ukraine Pride too. It will not be quite as glitzy as the recent party we had for Eurovision, but it will in its own way be just as glamorous.

I was talking about legal bans, and the situation in some other countries where people have not made the same progress as we have been fortunate enough to deliver in this country. Pride is about supporting their battles for human rights and dignity, and the all-party parliamentary group, which the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington and I are honoured to chair, does its best to bring those issues to the attention of the House and of Government agencies.

We use Pride Month to assess how we must plan to protect and advance the equal rights that we have fought for, and we march and we protest, but we do also party, as I think has perhaps been mentioned before—it seems to be a theme. We party, and we parade and march, because visibility is a part of the celebration that Pride represents. It is about our own pride in our authentic existence, because being out in the open is so much better than being afraid and in the shadows. We must bear that in mind as the debates that problematise particular parts of our community continue to rage around us.

Why do we do this? We do it because we have a collective memory of what it was like before we fought for change, and we do not want to go back to those dark days of prejudice, bigotry and oppression. What is the point of us carrying on doing it now that, apparently, we are accepted? It is because a diverse society is a stronger society. Everyone thrives better in an accepting society in which the norm is dignity and respect, rather than division and prejudice. I have a feeling that we are about to have to fight that battle all over again between those two visions of what a society should be like.

We want a society in which people are not discriminated against because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and we can celebrate remarkable progress at home and abroad in the battle for liberation for LGBT+ people. This year is the 20th anniversary of the repeal of section 28 in our country. It is also the 19th anniversary of the Civil Partnership Act 2004, which first gave legal recognition and protection to same-sex relationships, and 10 years since the equal marriage Act—the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013—which opened up that happy prospect to same-sex couples.

There has also been very welcome progress globally for LGBT+ people. Just in the last year, same-sex activity has been decriminalised in five more countries—Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Singapore, Barbados and the Cook Islands. However, as I said earlier, that still leaves 66 countries where it is illegal to be gay. Half of them are in the Commonwealth, where homophobic laws that were often imported during the colonial era still hold sway. We in the all-party group on global LGBT+ rights can celebrate some progress, but we know that the battles are far from over.

We also know that there has been bad news this year, as well as progress, as the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned in his opening speech. The odious anti-homosexuality law just enacted in Uganda and signed into being by President Museveni is especially extreme in mandating life imprisonment for homosexual conduct, and the death penalty in some instances. It outlaws any “promotion of homosexuality”, which is a familiar phrase to some of us who lived through the 1980s, including advocating for LGBT rights. People can now be jailed if they advocate for human rights in Uganda. There is also a 20-year jail sentence for providing financial support to LGBT+ people, which includes giving them somewhere to live.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is raising the very concerning situation in Uganda, a country I have visited many times. A number of embassies in Uganda offer space for the LGBT community to meet and organise for safety purposes because of the awful backlash. We should celebrate that, and continue to push for the British embassy to do likewise, as other European embassies have done, so that we protect our friends and colleagues who are fighting the good fight for human rights there.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** Well, certainly, and the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington and I met the International Development Minister just yesterday to talk about this very thing. We also talked about what other response there might be to what is happening in Uganda, particularly in trying to protect LGBT activists there, but also to make it certain that there is no impunity for those advocating these kinds of laws. We raised the prospect of visa bans, travel bans and other ways of making our displeasure known, and we wait to hear what the Government will say about that. This is the most extreme law that has been passed on to a statute book, but similar statutes are now appearing in other African states. Notably in Ghana, but in other African states as well, there are big pushes to enact similar laws.

Progressive momentum has also stalled in our own country. The UK Government cannot seem to decide whether they are going to maintain their acceptance of the gains made by LGBT people, or tee up an even more vicious culture war against trans people ahead of the next general election. Almost five years since the Government first announced their intention to ban conversion practices, there is still no sign of the oft-promised draft legislation that would achieve that very laudable aim, which would have widespread support across this House. We are still waiting to see that, yet every day of delay from this Government puts more vulnerable, usually young, people at risk from this highly damaging form of psychological abuse. As I think I said last year, I hope that the Minister might be able to confirm today that

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

the Bill will be published soon. We were hoping it would be a Bill last year, and now we are told it is a draft Bill, but we have still not had sight or sound of it. I am sure that behind the scenes he is absolutely on the right side of these arguments, and I do not want to embarrass him in public, but I suspect there may be others who are not. I wish him well with any battles that he is having, and I hope that the Bill will be published before the summer recess, so that we can check that it is trans-inclusive and that it is effective because it does not contain a gigantic “consent” loophole.

As the general election gets closer, the Prime Minister has decided to go along with an attempt to set up a response to what he referred to in his failed leadership bid last summer as the threat to “our women” from trans people. Daily screaming headlines in Tory-supporting tabloids have followed disgustingly, painting all trans women as potentially violent, predatory, and a threat to women and girls. That has created a climate of fear and hostility to all trans people, and seen levels of hate crimes against all LGBT+ people, and especially trans people, soar in the last year. There is a reason why Pride in London has decided to march in solidarity with trans people this year, and I hope that many of those who wish to see our society support everyone positively will join us on the Pride march on 1 July.

With this targeting, we must remember that there are only small numbers of trans people in this country. If we read the headlines, one would think that everything that goes wrong, and all violence against women, was somehow perpetrated by trans women. It is out of all proportion and doing enormous damage, and I wish it would stop. I wish the Government would take a stand against it, instead of standing back, letting it happen, and calculating whether there is any political gain for them in allowing it to go on.

I recognise a politically induced moral panic when I see one. I also recognise a discredited Government who are unleashing a culture war for their own political ends. All power to the elbows of those in the Conservative party who are trying to get this stopped: Labour is with you and we hope you will be successful. This kind of activity happened before in the 1980s, when the same tactics and tropes were used to demonise gay men. That led to section 28, which unleashed untold misery for a generation of LGBT+ young people, and for those who were perceived as “different”, whether they were gay or not. We cannot and must not let history repeat itself.

I am a feminist, I am a lesbian, and I am a trans ally. I do not believe that allowing trans men and women to live with dignity and respect threatens my rights or my wellbeing in the slightest. We all advance together, or not at all. Even at this late stage, the Government could do the decent thing and abandon their divisive tactics. Instead of endless prevarication, they could publish sensible and inclusive relationships and sex education guidance, which our schools have been waiting for since 2019. They could stop playing dangerous and divisive games with trans people by trying to set their rights against women’s rights.

All the anti-LGBT+ and anti-trans rhetoric is not spontaneously appearing out of nowhere. It is the result of carefully planned and well-funded efforts on a global scale. OpenDemocracy reports on a 2020 investigation

that found that more than 20 US fundamentalist religious groups fighting against LGBT+ rights and abortion rights had spent \$54 million in Africa pursuing those agendas—an investment that, shamefully, appears to be bearing some fruit.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** The situation in Uganda is very similar. Uganda was the first African country to hold the UN world AIDS conference, and there Museveni gave out condoms to every person that joined. That was 20 years ago. When I last went to Uganda with the International Development Committee and former MP Stephen Twigg, we sat in classrooms where children were told that the way to stop HIV and AIDS was to not sleep with other men and to have a good wash after themselves. That is not just dangerous on an LGBT scale but dangerous for global health. Right-wing money has transformed that country, which was progressive, into a deeply regressive country.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** There is increasing evidence of that kind of global network operating in a reactionary manner. The Global Philanthropy Project reports that the anti-gender movement outspent the LGBT+ rights movement by three to one between 2013 and 2017, deploying \$3.7 billion of resource, and creating an extensive network of organisations to push their divisive, pernicious agenda. Key funders were based in the USA and Europe, with Russian oligarchs playing a key role in Europe. We know that Putin talks about this a lot; we know that Orbán talks about it a lot. We know that in the Spanish election such anti-trans rhetoric is being used by the Opposition.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): There is an issue about how that money is financed: about the relationship between financing dark money and extreme right-wing propaganda and possibly the use of Scottish limited partnerships. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is time the Government got a grip on that?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** Speaking personally, and not as someone on the Treasury Bench—I have no idea what their view would be—I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Scottish limited partnerships are an obvious loophole that needs to be closed much sooner rather than later, and he is correct to point it out.

After all this, it is not a coincidence that the American Civil Liberties Union has revealed that by April this year—not the end of this year, but April—417 anti-LGBT+ Bills had been introduced in state legislatures across the United States, and 283 were education-related Bills. There are increasing numbers of so-called “don’t say gay” Bills that, section 28-like, seek to ban discussion of trans issues in schools. Some “force outings” by mandating that parents should always be informed of any pronoun change at school, or any discussion about it, because they somehow perpetrate the narrative that schools are secretly teaching children to be trans and not to tell their parents. Others ban drag performances; still others ban the pride flag being flown from any public building, and threaten to prosecute parents who allow their children to change pronouns and live in the gender that they wish to live in. Even if that is parental choice, they seek to legislate to go into people’s homes and stop that happening. These are not nice, benign Bills; they are



increasingly extreme. Almost all those proposals—not quite all of them—are now being suggested in the UK, with the current exception of the ban on drag, although there have been some far-right demonstrations against “drag story time” events in Britain.

We need to say from this Chamber that the way forward is empathy, not division; it is understanding different and diverse people, and what they need to thrive in society. It is about understanding, not fear, and respect for the right of everyone to live with dignity in an inclusive and diverse society. Pride is about that.

1.19 pm

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is a huge privilege to speak in the debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing it. It gives me great pride to represent a part of London that has such a profound LGBT+ history. I feel fortunate that my constituency includes Soho, one of the world’s best known gay districts, as well as places such as the west end and Piccadilly Circus, which all form part of London’s LGBTQ+ social and cultural fabric.

From hosting the first UK march in 1972, places such as Soho have developed at the centre of London’s gay community. Historically, it is of huge importance, and many of the conversations on gay rights started in the bars and spaces that still line the streets of Soho today. It was on those streets and in those spaces that people came to show their solidarity. They stood up not just for themselves but for the gay community everywhere. To that, I pay tribute. They made their case for reform despite visceral discrimination. They listened to those who opposed them and challenged them in open debate. Slowly but surely, they won the support not just of parliamentarians in this place but of wider society. I pay tribute to all those trailblazers. Because of those people, support in Britain for the LGBT+ community has been built on firm foundations. It is now embedded in our culture and supported by all mainstream political parties.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Member that we have had firm foundations in the UK. I think that we were ranked as No. 3 in the list of LGBTQI+ friendly countries, but we have fallen down that list quite considerably. Can she think of any possible reason why that might be?

**Nickie Aiken:** I have no reason to think why we would have fallen. It is important that we continue to have strong policy supporting the LGBT+ community, because it is the diversity of this great city of London and this great country of the United Kingdom that makes us strong. We must ensure that the rights of gay people and all people are at the forefront of our policymaking.

I recently spoke to activist and campaigner Philip Baldwin on an episode of my podcast about the challenges that the LGBT+ community has faced, from fighting for equal rights to breaking down stigmas. He told me that in 2003, at the age of 24, he was diagnosed with HIV; a week later, he was told that he also had hepatitis C. Because of medical advancements, his HIV status is no longer a life sentence and his hepatitis C has been cured. When he got his diagnosis, it was not the life sentence that, back in the ’80s and ’90s, my friends had to face,

because thanks to scientific and medical advancements and attitudes among scientists and doctors, people can now live with a diagnosis of HIV and have approximately the same life expectancy as everybody else. When I was a teenager, an HIV diagnosis was a death sentence.

This new era of treatment was made possible in part by researchers at St Mary’s Hospital in my constituency of Cities of London and Westminster. From the early 1980s, St Mary’s became the site of groundbreaking trials that would change the course of treatment and research for years to come. Those included a pioneering study of 400 gay men led by Professor Jonathan Weber, the current dean of the faculty of medicine who was a junior doctor back then.

When I was drafting my speech, I spent some time reflecting on how far LGBT rights have come in my lifetime. In fact, 2023 marks 20 years since the repeal of section 28: the law that, in dark days, banned the promotion of homosexuality in the UK. It gives me no pleasure to recognise that that law was brought in by a previous Conservative Administration.

I note what my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) said about the relationship and sex education review currently going on. As a mother of two—one of them has now left school—I believe it is vital we ensure that our children are talking about sexuality, consent, respect and everything else that is informed within relationship and sex education. There should no ban, including on education on homosexuality and trans. It must be age-appropriate.

We have talked about section 28 and how far we have come. Today, I am so proud that same-sex marriage is legal and that discrimination against the LGBT+ community is rightly outlawed. Conversion therapy is due to be banned, and I hope that it will be. The sooner that becomes law, the better.

Only the other day, I was having a conversation about how far we have come in Parliament itself. Twenty years ago, when the then Labour Government introduced a Bill to allow gay people to adopt—I am sure my Conservative colleagues will be as interested in this as I was—the Conservative parliamentary party was whipped to vote against it. However, there were three Conservative MPs who rebelled and defied the Whip: George Osborne, David Cameron and Boris Johnson. Whether hon. Members agree with their politics or not, that rebellion was the start of a new wave of Conservative thinking about gay rights. It was that new generation of Conservatives, led by David Cameron in government, who were responsible for passing the last major piece of LGBT equality legislation. With the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, gay people were finally treated as equals, and the last piece of legal discrimination aimed specifically at this group of British people was removed.

When David Cameron launched the Government’s gay marriage legislation—it was controversial in parts of our party at the time—I remember that he said:

“I don’t support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because I’m a Conservative.”

That resonates with everything I believe in. He was saying that the Conservative party is a home for everyone, so let us not forget how far Britain has come in welcoming LGBT people as valued and respected members of our society.

[Nickie Aiken]

We have made great progress towards LGBT+ equality in my lifetime, but the fight is far from over. As we have discussed, the world remains a dangerous place for many gay people. I was appalled to learn of the recent anti-gay Bill in Uganda. In the UK, we can still go further with gay rights, and we must ban conversion therapy. With that, I look forward with hope and with pride.

1.27 pm

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): As a number of hon. Members have said, we have come a long way, haven't we, since I was the first openly gay parliamentary candidate to be selected? My Conservative opponent at the time said that homosexuality was a "sterile, disease-ridden...occupation" and described me as a homosexual who rode a bicycle, spoke German and worked for the BBC and therefore was everything about our country that was wrong. He went on to warn in his election literature that, were I elected, Exeter's children would be in danger.

Do not forget, Mr Deputy Speaker, that that was the end of the era of the 1980s and early-90s, which was a hostile environment for lesbian and gay people in this country. That was partly because of the backlash against LGBT rights and partly because of the Government-sponsored section 28, but it was also because of a vicious media campaign. I remember a front-page splash in *The Sun* when Labour announced its policy of ending the ban on lesbians and gays in the military, which was "Poofs On Parade". I remember the front-page splash in the *Daily Mail* when we called for equalisation in the age of consent, which was "Gay MPs Want Sex At 16". It was nothing to do with gay MPs; the Bill was sponsored by a straight heterosexual female colleague in this House.

Thankfully, the Government, of which I was privileged and proud to be a member, swept away all that discriminatory legislation. We equalised the age of consent, protected LGBT people from discrimination in the workplace, lifted the ban on military service and repealed section 28. We introduced the Gender Recognition Act 2004, civil partnerships, adoption for same-sex couples, tougher sentences for homophobic hate crime, and IVF treatment for lesbian and bi women. We also ended discrimination in the provision of goods and services, introduced the Equality Act 2006 and saw the establishment of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. So there is a lot to celebrate—and there is still a lot to celebrate: it is heartening to see the acceptance and celebration of LGBT+ people increasingly becoming the norm among young people, who are able to be open among their peers in a way that would have been unimaginable for many people in my generation. Opinion polls consistently show that majorities in all age groups in the United Kingdom support LGBT rights and equality.

As the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) pointed out, to their credit, David Cameron and the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) continued Labour's political settlement. Until 2015, the UK was consistently ranked the most LGBTQ+ friendly country in Europe but, as a number of Members have noted, we have now dropped to 17th. Why? Since the now discredited former Member for Uxbridge ousted the right hon. Member for Maidenhead, progress has stalled and in some areas

begun to go very badly backwards, and, I am sorry to have to say this, the current Prime Minister, in my view, has the worst record of all three of the recent Conservative Prime Ministers. The Government have broken their promise to ban conversion therapy and reform the gender recognition process, have tried to block Scotland's democratically agreed gender recognition reforms, and are threatening to go backwards on LGBT-inclusive sex and relationship education.

Trans children and young people are not a threat to be contained. They should be celebrated and supported to thrive, both in education and beyond. And where on earth did the Prime Minister get the idea that forcing schools to out trans and non-binary students to their families was a good idea? The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children makes it absolutely clear that no young person should be outed against their will, except in circumstances where it is essential for safeguarding purposes. The Albert Kennedy Trust, a wonderful charity that supports homeless young LGBT people, has had a 58% increase in referrals in the last three years. These are young LGBT people driven out of their homes by hostile families. Are we seriously going to out people to those hostile families?

**Dawn Butler:** My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Yesterday, I hosted the Albert Kennedy Trust in Parliament. The trust recalled the tragic circumstance that 80% of people referred to it have been sleeping homeless and been kicked out since the Government started their culture war. Does he agree that things need to get better?

**Mr Bradshaw:** They do need to get better. A quarter of all homeless young people are LGBTQ+. Some 77% of those have suffered rejection or abuse from their families.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): As a patron of the Albert Kennedy Trust, I was shocked when I first heard the statistics on homelessness among LGBT+ people. Is it not time we celebrate the work of the Albert Kennedy Trust and praise it for bringing to light these terrible statistics and tragic stories?

**Mr Bradshaw:** Yes, indeed. In fact, perhaps I should have declared an interest as a long-time supporter of the Albert Kennedy Trust.

On crime, as other colleagues have noted, hate crimes against LGBT people and trans people in particular have risen dramatically. Now the Government plan to amend the Equality Act 2010 in a way that would make the exclusion of trans people the norm. Counselling and medical care for people with gender dysphoria and for young people in particular is practically non-existent. The south-west's only clinic for gender dysphoria, in Exeter, has an initial waiting time of seven years.

As other colleagues have said, we only have to look at America to see what happens when rational, evidence-based policy is replaced by hate, fundamentalist ideology and moral panic. In America this year, a record 520 pieces of anti-LGBT legislation have been introduced at state level, 220 of which focus specifically on trans and non-binary people. A record 70 anti-LGBT laws have already been enacted. Fifteen ban gender-affirming healthcare, seven require or allow students to be misgendered, four censor the school curriculum and there are many more.

We had the appalling spectacle this week of grandparents in Canada stopping a school sports contest to demand that a 9-year-old cis girl be physically examined to make sure she really was a girl. They thought that she was a boy who had an unfair advantage over their granddaughter. This is what happens when Governments and the press pursue a culture war. We have friends, a gay couple with a daughter, who live in Florida. They are leaving because they are frightened. Culture wars, as the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) said, will not restrict themselves to attacks on LGBTQ+ people. The whole of the equalities space will eventually come into their sights. An attack on trans people is an attack on all of us.

I am afraid that a number of politicians, right-wing think-tanks and powerful media supporters here in the UK seem to want us to go down the route of the Republican states in America. The deputy chairman of the Conservative party says he wants to run the next election campaign on these culture war issues and on trans issues in particular. I have a mild caution for him and the Prime Minister, from my experience 26 years ago. Then, the Conservative party thought that by running a virulently homophobic campaign against me they would hold Exeter and gain votes nationally. It suffered its worst swing to Labour in the south-west and its worst general election defeat in modern history. If it wants to continue to row back LGBT rights and equality, and to fight the next election on that terrain, I believe it will discover, as it did back then, that the British people are better than they think and a lot better than them.

1.36 pm

**Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair for this particular debate, Mr Deputy Speaker.

It is a joy and privilege to take part in this debate to mark Pride Month and to have the opportunity to discuss what Pride means to me. It is very fitting that we have this annual event here and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on moving the motion here in the gayest Parliament in the world.

Our LGBT community has come a long way—a very long way. As a gay man in a long-term relationship now recognised in law, it seems hard to believe just how much the landscape has changed here. This year, Gareth and I celebrate 15 years since our civil partnership. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] That is a milestone we would never have envisioned the ability to celebrate some 25 years ago when we moved in together. We have seen legal recognition of our relationships, equalisation of the age of consent and adoption rights. Legal reforms have been hard won and should be cherished, but cultural changes, too, have been brought about.

When I was growing up, LGBT people in politics were incredibly rare and certainly not openly so, leading many people to believe that we were simply not there. We now have a Parliament with many gay and lesbian MPs from all political parties and our first trans MP has come out, too. Everyone has a personal story of their journey. I know that their coming out will have helped someone else to know that there are other people just like them, and helped them to find the courage to live their lives openly and freely. More people are coming out in professional sports and the world of entertainment.

Each one helps others, but also helps the rest of society understand that our community is represented throughout society.

I was recently photographed by Fiona Freund from CorporateQueer. Last year, here in Parliament, Fiona put on an exhibition on LGBT professionals. It was a fantastic exhibition of a diverse group of people with the most diverse range of stories. Fiona’s exhibition is going on display at Guildhall Yard in London from 24 June and I encourage people to go and take a look. Fiona asked me to write a short piece to accompany my photograph. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will recite what I wrote:

“British Politics has come a long way since the very first MP came out in 1984. We now have the largest number of out gay MPs in any Parliament in the World”.

**Dame Angela Eagle** *rose*—

**Peter Gibson:** I would love to complete my recital if I may, but I will happily give way at the end. It continues:

“it is not that the actual number of us in Parliament that matters but that our sexuality doesn’t matter. As a teenager growing up in a small town in the North East, the prospect of ever fulfilling an ambition to one day serve in the Houses of Parliament seemed a long off fantasy, to do that as an out gay man seemed an impossibility. In just a few short years, albeit long fought for by the giants of the past on whose shoulders we now stand, age of consent, civil partnership, and equal marriage are milestones that have benefited our community but it is the societal attitudes that have made the most difference to people’s lives. I gloriously celebrated my civil partnership to Gareth in 2008, a life affirming, love affirming public display of commitment and celebration, which I could never have envisaged as a teenager. I know that those legal changes happened because of voices in the House of Commons, a privilege which I now have. As a community we cannot rest on our laurels about the progress we have made, as there will always be some who seek to tear us down or turn the clock back or worse still stigmatise and ostracise others in our queer community. In the short time I have been in Parliament I have used my voice to support our trans brothers and sisters, push for a ban on the abuse of conversion therapy and extend the successful opt out testing regime to ensure we meet our target on new HIV infections by 2030. No one wants to be known for one thing alone and that’s why I am proud to be, amongst many others, an MP who happens to be gay and not a Gay MP.”

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I add my congratulations to the hon. Gentleman and his, let’s just call him Gareth; his significant other. Would he recognise that the first out gay MP was actually Maureen Colquhoun in 1974? She was outed in 1975, the first out lesbian in the House of Commons, she lost her seat in the subsequent election, but she is a real pioneer and I just wanted to make sure that we remembered her on this occasion.

**Peter Gibson:** I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s intervention. I stand corrected and I thank her for clarifying and correcting that. I will pass on her congratulations to my partner Gareth, although to many of our friends, particularly in the Conservative party, he is known merely as the butcher.

I have been privileged to attend Pride events all over this country and abroad, and I look forward to Darlington’s Pride event this August. Every single event has been full of people smiling, walking hand in hand with the people they love and celebrating the freedoms they either have or have been campaigning for. It is the perfect opportunity to utter the immortal words of Gloria Gaynor:

“I am what I am”.



[Peter Gibson]

However, sadly, not everywhere is as enlightened as us. Although there has been a lot to celebrate this year, with a significant number of countries having decriminalised it, in 66 countries around the world, it remains illegal to be gay. In some countries it still carries the death penalty, simply because of who someone loves. Although in our country Pride is a celebration of how far we have come, it remains essential to show others around the world that we can embrace difference, celebrate diversity and live happily side by side with people of all sexualities and genders. There is more to do in our country, too, such as tackling homophobic bullying in schools and ensuring that access to healthcare and testing in our community reaches the right people in the right places. We still need to eliminate the horrors of abusive conversion practices for all in our community, whether they are L, G, B or T.

This year marks 20 years since section 28 was repealed in England and Wales. There is not a gay Conservative who has not had the shame of section 28 thrown at them in debate. While we cannot forget this party's past, I am still proud of how far we have come. Section 28 and its impact on our community might be in the past in this country, but we should be mindful of the steps being taken in Hungary that, sadly, reflect very similar provisions. I was at secondary school in the late 1980s and suffered elements of homophobic bullying. Although the spectre of section 28 might have hung over them, I have nothing but praise for the supportive pastoral care given to me by fantastic, amazing teachers such as Dorothy Granville.

I mentioned that this year I will celebrate 15 years since my own civil partnership—an important milestone in my life and a day upon which my partner and I fondly reflect. For many, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill), just a short time after the law had changed it was their first time attending such an event. Since that time, many thousands of couples have celebrated civil partnerships and marriages, with the latest census showing that across England and Wales about 400,000 people are in legally formalised same-sex relationships, compared with only 105,000 at the time of the last census in 2011.

There remains much still to be done. I welcome this Conservative Government's commitment to tackling the scourge and abuse that is conversion therapy. I very much look forward to the promised legislation being published. It is an issue upon which I have been proud to campaign, alongside my hon. Friends the Members for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), for Redcar (Jacob Young) and for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). That such practices still exist in our free and modern society should be a warning to all that dark forces are never far away. There can be no more dither and delay; the Government must crack on with it now.

People's solidarity with the trans community is important, as Monday's Westminster Hall debate clearly showed. The T in LGBT is just as important to our family, and to my family, as the L, the G and the B. As I learned of my nephew Luke's transition and his coming out as trans, I was reminded of the same journey of fear,

acceptance, love and celebration that gay men and women go through. We may live in enlightened times, but there is always more to do.

Pride is a celebration of our diversity and a symbol of how far we have come, but it should also be a challenge to us here to continue to fight against all forms of abuse towards members of the LGBT community in the UK, and a challenge to those countries around the world that do not share our love, tolerance and respect for the entire LGBT community. We can and should always do more, be it on conversion therapy, trans persecution, dismissed gay veterans or homophobic hate crime. We have a fantastic champion in the Minister who is responding to the debate. Happy Pride.

1.48 pm

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I am delighted to speak in this debate to mark Pride Month. As the years pass, we could be forgiven for thinking that the need to hold an annual Pride debate could be diminishing, as we should be making huge progress. We should live in a world of equality in the truest sense of the world, and of tolerance and respect. Sadly, that is not the world in which we live in 2023.

Next year marks 30 years since I became an elected representative. I was co-opted as a community councillor in autumn 1994, and then stood for election as a county borough councillor in May 1995. I remember a feeling of elation mixed with trepidation, but as a 24-year-old gay man growing up in a tightly knit Welsh valley, I also remember the fear, as no one knew my sexuality. I remember thinking, "Would they vote for me if they knew?" At that point, I had not talked about my sexuality openly. Possibly, I was too scared to mention it, because society was very different in the '80s and '90s, as we have already heard. There was very little in the way of advocacy or support for LGBTQ+ people, and certainly not in geographically isolated communities in the south Wales valleys, as well as lots of other communities in all parts of the country.

We have, of course, made much progress. There is much more awareness and support available for people, particularly young people, and it is no longer a taboo subject for most people. However, I recognise, as we have heard today, that that is not the case for everyone and there is still intolerance and ignorance in society, both in this country and in many other countries around the world, as I will come back to later. But there is much to celebrate. This weekend, Wales's biggest Pride event, *Pride Cymru*, takes place in Cardiff, and I wish everyone attending a very happy Pride. We all know that Pride Month is a great opportunity to reflect on the hard-won rights of the LGBT+ community.

We in the Labour party know that our movement has delivered monumental change for the LGBT+ community time and again. As anyone who has seen the amazing and inspirational film "Pride" will know, Labour's 1985 party conference voted for a resolution committing the party to lesbian and gay rights. The move was a response to the solidarity shown by Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners during the 1984 miners' strikes. The motion was successful in no small part because of the bloc vote of the National Union of Mineworkers, returning their solidarity.

The Labour Governments between 1997 and 2010 accelerated rights for LGBT+ people in the UK. As we have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for

Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), that included ending discrimination for gay and lesbian couples for immigration purposes, lifting the ban on lesbians, gay men and bi people serving in the armed forces, equalising the age of consent for same-sex couples, scrapping the Thatcher-era section 28 policy and introducing the UK's first ever law to prevent discrimination of lesbians, gay men and bi people in the workplace.

The Civil Partnership Act 2004 gave same-sex couples almost identical rights as married straight couples, which was first time that the legal status of same-sex relationships was fully acknowledged in law, and the Gender Recognition Act 2004 allowed trans people to have their true gender recognised in law. In Wales, our Welsh Labour Government are committed to making Wales the most LGBTQ+ friendly nation in Europe.

As numerous and welcome as those achievements are, there is, as I highlighted earlier, clearly more that needs to be done to embed equality in our society. A good start would be the Government bringing forward the ban on conversion therapy without delay, as we have heard time and again this afternoon.

On 19 August, Merthyr Tydfil will hold its first ever Pride event. Alongside our Member of the Senedd, Dawn Bowden, I have been pleased to work with local volunteers and members of the LGBTQ+ community to set up the Merthyr Pride committee. I am incredibly grateful to organisations such as Merthyr Valleys Homes and Merthyr College for supporting the committee to plan and put on what I am sure will be a fantastic celebration of diversity, equality, and inclusivity.

Sadly, the event has already drawn predictable, hate-filled comments from a small number of online bigots, showing exactly why a Pride event is needed and why we must continue to celebrate Pride every year, with events up and down the country and across the world. As we know, the LGBTQ+ community is not a separate group, removed from our society. LGBTQ+ people are our sons, daughters, friends and colleagues. We are an integral part of our society, and Pride Month is the perfect opportunity to celebrate our achievements and renew ourselves to the work that is still needed in 2023 and beyond.

1.54 pm

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on bringing the debate to the House. I am a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) rights along with him and the hon. Members for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) and for Darlington (Peter Gibson).

I begin by associating myself with some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Wallasey about funding, which is a critical issue when we are dealing with hate targeting the LGBT community. I cannot underestimate the impact of dark money in feeding the far right wing in the United States. This House really needs to get a grip on that, especially in relation to Scottish Limited Partnerships.

The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) was elected back in 1997. Many of us watched his election, because what we saw was an openly gay man standing for this House, even with so much thrown against him. We were glad, even on the SNP Benches, that he was elected; it was a great moment for many of us.

I also want to mention someone who never got into this House, because of the profoundly disturbing campaign against him during the election campaign in Bermondsey in the '80s: Peter Tatchell. Peter is a Marmite person for many, but the campaign led against him back then exposes that all the political parties represented here have many different aspects to their history. Even those of us in the SNP have had issues around LGBTQ rights. Every political party has its history, and not all of it is great in standing up for equality. Peter should have had the opportunity to be here. I think he is a great loss to parliamentary democracy, but he campaigns vigorously outside this House and many people, including myself, are very grateful for that.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Peter has run a successful campaign to try to get an apology from the Metropolitan police and other police forces around the UK. The Metropolitan police made an apology as recently as last week, after his campaign success. Should that not lead to other police forces around the country apologising for their treatment of LGBT people historically?

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** The hon. Gentleman is right; yes, is the simple answer. Peter also eventually got an apology from the Ministry of Defence for serving veterans who were so badly treated because of their sexuality.

I think I am the first openly LGBTQ Member for West Dunbartonshire, but like the right hon. Member for Exeter, that was not the first time I was elected. That was 31 years ago, to the old Clydebank District Council. It is a shipyard town, a burgh town—for the avoidance of doubt for *Hansard* that is spelled b, u, r, g, h. Growing up in a very working-class, Irish-Catholic background, sexuality, for many reasons, was never discussed, whether LGBTQ or anything else, because we had to deal with so many other profound issues of class and how that impacted our lives through poverty.

I was honoured to be elected back in 1992, but I did not come out to many of my friends until many years later. Actually, I came out before that. What am I saying? My mind has gone very foggy in my old age. I came out to my friends Neil and Stephen when I was 19, and their first reaction was, "Alright. Okay, tell us something we didn't know; can we go to the Radnor Park pub for a pint? Right, okay, nae bother." They, like me, are very open individuals—Stephen especially, because of his trade union involvement. As a heterosexual man and a trade unionist, he is keenly aware now, as he was back then, about dignity and equality for all.

But I was a lucky one. There were so many in my community, not just my hometown of Clydebank, but across Dumbarton and the Vale of Leven who did not get that support and whose lives were ended through sheer ignorance and hate—and that is not just those who died because of HIV and AIDS and the traumas that we in the community went through. That is why in 2015 I was glad that my sexuality was not an issue for anybody—absolutely no one. That said, it might be now!

Why are these issues important? It is important to reflect on where some of us, of a certain age, have come from, and why we believe it is so important that so many of the people behind us—those younger folk, who are under 50-odd—require that support. That is why I am grateful for the work of organisations such as the Equality Network in Scotland, the Time for Inclusive

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

Education—TIE—campaign, Scottish Trans and LGBT Youth Scotland. Ignorance breeds hate, and with hate comes oppression. That is why I said earlier that all the political parties represented in the House have a sometimes dark history when it comes to LGBT rights, but it is also relevant to the issue of our relationships, in this House, with other countries.

We have already heard mention of the Commonwealth. I have to be open about this: I am not a big fan, and that is not just because I am a member of the LGBT community. I keep being given the same answer—that the Commonwealth is doing a lot to promote LGBTQ issues—but I have to say that in the last 10 years it has not been doing enough to stop the dreadful ramping up of hate that we are now seeing in Uganda and many other countries. That brings me back to the point made by the right hon. Member for Wallasey about the systemic use of dark money, coming through the Russian Federation, possibly being used in the Scottish limited partnerships, going through Ukraine into the United States and then feeding into the entire continent of Africa. We have already talked about Uganda, where LGBTQ people are subject to life imprisonment or possibly the death penalty; that is an extraordinary state of affairs.

To my mind—and this is a personal issue—the Commonwealth is failing LGBTQ citizens in the majority of countries. It is an absolute disgrace, but how has it come about? Let us be clear: it is a hangover from a imperial and colonial legal system, based on white supremacy, racism and homophobia, which was imposed on many of those nations and is now being manipulated by dark money. We need to recognise that the foundations of those principles go to the heart of the reactionary right wing.

We have heard about books being banned in the United States, and possibly being burnt next. I grew up in a community that was obliterated during the second world war. For people like me, the Nazi regime is not the ghost of some distant past but something that has had a dreadful, post-traumatic effect on our entire community. We need only look at what the regime did in the lead-up to taking full power after the Weimar Republic to understand how we now see ourselves in many parts of the world, notably the United States, where school boards are banning books that refer to dignity and equality. We know where that leads.

In 1935 the Nazis revised paragraph 175 of the existing statute of the German criminal code that banned sexual relations between men. Under the new Nazi version of the statute, a wide range of intimate and sexual behaviours could be, and were, punished as crimes. As a consequence, between 5,000 and 15,000 men were imprisoned in concentration camps for being “homosexuell”. This group of prisoners were typically required to wear a pink triangle on their camp uniforms as part of the prisoner classification system. Many, but not all, of those pink-triangle prisoners identified as gay; notably, it would be gay men who were given that definition. The pink triangle called attention to this prisoner population as a distinct group. It is dreadful to think that even within the concentration camps there was a division of terror and hate, but that is the reality.

It is important for us to remind ourselves that that constant narrative of hate needs to be exposed. It needs to be taken head-on, not only by this Government but by other Governments. I am glad that the Minister for Equalities is on the Front Bench, because I know he is a keen advocate of LGBTQ issues and that, as other Members have suggested, he will speak up in Government. However, I think he needs to give some answers to questions about conversion therapy, and he needs to give answers to my Parliament in Scotland—the one that I participate in and vote for—about why it is not being allowed to proceed with its Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill. That is an extraordinary position for a devolved Administration in the 21st century to find itself in, especially given Scotland’s history in relation to homosexuality.

We have come so far in Scotland. We did not decriminalise homosexuality until 1980; I think it was done in 1967 in England and Wales. That gives us some idea of the utterly dreadful situations that the LGBT community faced in Scotland. What a difference; what a change. We can look at other European nations as well. I come from a very strong Irish Catholic background, and I never thought in a month of Sundays that the Republic of Ireland would have a referendum on equal marriage. Let us get the wording right first of all: it is “equal marriage”, not “same-sex marriage”. My marriage to my husband is the same as that of anyone else in the Chamber. It is not different; it is equal. My sexuality is irrelevant. That is what the law is about when it comes to equal marriage.

Let us consider what has happened in countries such as Ireland and Malta. The fact that in Ireland, a public referendum for the entire citizenry of the Catholic nation endorsed equal marriage was extraordinary, and the subsequent election of an openly LGBT Taoiseach was the most profound change. Gender recognition in Ireland came about because of a public discourse. It was not just about politicians; it was about people’s assemblies coming together to discuss the deep issues that may supposedly divide people. The Irish people made up their minds and said, “Get on with it”, and in 2015 the Dáil—and, of course, the Oireachtas, because it went forward to the Seanad—said yes. That led to the Gender Recognition Act 2015. Where was the hoo-hah in Ireland? There was none, and since then a review has been more forthright in its support for the trans community in Ireland.

Let me end by emphasising this point to the Minister: Pride is a demonstration. It is not just about parties. Some of us are mindful of the people who did not make it this far: we are mindful of the black and Latino trans women in California who, in the 1950s, were the bedrock of LGBT rights, and other black and Latino trans women in New York—people like Marsha P. Johnson—were the bedrock of gay rights for white gay men like me. They turned up, and that is why I am here today. I am turning up in memory of them.

I hope the Minister will answer the questions about conversion therapy and about why his Government think that the Government of Scotland do not have the right to a gender recognition Bill.

2.6 pm

**Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey



(Dame Angela Eagle) for securing the debate. The fact that we have this important annual debate for Pride Month, and the very fact of its existence, says something very positive about the progressive change that we have seen in Parliament and as a society in a relatively short time, since the disgraceful and discriminatory treatment following her outing of the lesbian MP Maureen Colquhoun in the late 1970s, and Chris Smith's becoming the UK's first openly gay MP in 1984.

Let me first associate myself, Mr Deputy Speaker, with your tribute to the late Glenda Jackson, who was a true ally of the LGBT community and who always advocated strongly for the rights of LGBT people in her constituency and around the world—an example that I think all parliamentarians should aspire to follow.

Pride is important because somewhere tonight, someone will still believe that they are better off dead than being themselves. Pride is important because there are countries all around the world where being LGBT is not only illegal, but could mean life imprisonment or even the death penalty. Pride is important because too many parents would rather disown their children than love them for who they are, which is one of the key drivers of homelessness among LGBT youth. Pride Month is an opportunity for us to celebrate who we are and the progress we have made, to acknowledge the giants on whose shoulders we stand but also to highlight ongoing issues and chart a course for fixing them.

This year is the 20th anniversary of the repeal of section 28. I was in year 9 when it was first legal for teachers even to acknowledge that LGBT people existed, let alone offer any kind of pastoral support to students who might be struggling to come to terms with their sexuality or experiencing bullying because of it. I know the difference that it made to me, as a teenager, when my art teacher, Mrs Tibbatts, was able to broach the subject with me gently after picking up on some unhappy and sapphic themes, shall we say, in my artwork. She did not “make me LGBT”, but she did let me know that she really would not care if I was, and made me feel, for the first time, comfortable and unbothered about being bisexual. When, many years later, I came out to friends and family, I was lucky to be met with the same kind of supportive indifference.

My favourite example recently was from a constituent of mine, a much older woman I met through one of my local churches. She asked me what I was doing after the visit. I told her that I had a date and she said, “Ooh, tell me about him, then. Where did you meet?” I said, “Actually, the date's with a woman,” and she turned to me and said, “Oh yes, of course; I shouldn't really have assumed, should I?” Then she was like, “Anyway, tell me about her. Where did you meet?” What she was interested in was the gossip, not the specifics of who it was. She had no problem with her MP going on a date with a woman, nor should she. But this supportive indifference is not something that I take for granted, knowing from my friends, colleagues and constituency mailbag how many LGBT people have been met with hostility, discrimination and even violence on coming out. But all of us should be able to, and until everyone can, that is why Pride matters.

It is horrible, having seen the difference that section 28's repeal has made even in my own time in education, that there are those in this place who would see it brought back by the back door. We clearly need changes to

relationships and sex education in schools to ensure that we have something that is LGBT-inclusive and that focuses on bodily autonomy, consent, respect, and the establishing and communication of boundaries; but that is not what is being proposed. It is about shutting it down and creating a hostile environment for LGBT youth.

This is important, and not just for young people who are themselves LGBT and may be at risk of harm if they have to rely on the internet to search out information on LGBT relationships or safe sex. It is important because more and more young people are growing up in households where their parents are LGBT and because of what that means for the discrimination they may face as a family, and because all of us will come into contact with LGBT people throughout our social and working lives.

There are those in this place who argue that parents should be able to opt their children out of having LGBT-inclusive relationship and sex education at school until they are 16 or potentially 18 years old. This comes in the context of a rise in violent attacks being perpetrated against LGBT people, including where the perpetrators are under that age threshold. There was a case recently in Liverpool of a homophobic hate crime where three men were assaulted and subjected to homophobic abuse by a group of teenagers, one of whom had a knife. Where exactly are we meant to deal with the hatred that sits behind these crimes—promoting a more inclusive and just society, and the right of us all to have happy, healthy and safe relationships—if we cannot even lay the foundation for that in our schools and classrooms?

My community in Warrington North, and the quiet, sleepy village of Culcheth, was cast into the national and international spotlight for all the wrong reasons in February this year, after the murder of Brianna Ghey. Brianna was 16 years old. She was much loved by her family, her classmates and her community, and she was also trans. With the upcoming trial of those accused of her murder, both of whom were under 16, I am going to be very careful not to say anything that is sub judice. What I want to point to though, in the wake of what has happened, is the fact that Brianna was out at school. She was supported by her school and by her family. Her mother has given a really beautiful interview, which I encourage everyone to read, with the *Warrington Guardian* this week, in which she says:

“I was proud that she was who she wanted to be and felt comfortable to tell us as a family...who she was.”

That is something that everyone should have the right to do. I hope every school can be as proactive as Birchwood High School has been in supporting LGBT students to live as themselves at school and in making sure that they receive that support, so that who they are has no bearing on their ability to access their education in a safe, nurturing and welcoming environment.

As we have heard from colleagues across the House, the very fact that we can talk about Pride as something to be celebrated is fantastic, and I am glad that we have this annual event. But until we live in a society where everyone can be themselves without risk of discrimination or violence, and where we can all talk about Pride purely as a celebration, without having to come to these debates and say anything negative, I will remain grateful to Members for securing debates such as this. I hope the Minister will give us some clear information in his

[Charlotte Nichols]

response about the many issues raised that still need to be resolved—the concerns about RSE in schools, conversion therapy, LGBT homelessness, and all these other issues—to get us to that place as a country.

2.14 pm

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): I am heterosexual and I identify with the same gender that was assigned to me at birth. I cannot share any stories as moving as those I have heard this afternoon, but I deeply sympathise with the struggles of the LGBT+ community.

Call me naive, but I cannot for the life of me understand why, in 21st-century secular Britain, people choose to make enemies of each other on the basis of sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, when, in those famous words, there is so much that unites us rather than divides us; or why it should be so difficult to make sure that we all enjoy the same protections and rights together; or why it should be so difficult for us—in the words of the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols)—to show each other supportive indifference on these issues. We are all people; we all are the same—human beings.

I am going to repeat quite a few things that I have heard in speeches already, but they should be repeated in this space. Pride Month is a time to celebrate progress and diversity and it is worth reflecting on how far we have come as a country. According to the British social attitudes survey, nearly 70% of people think that same-sex relationships are “not wrong at all”, compared with 11% in 1987. That is great progress, which should be welcome. However, Pride Month is also a reminder of how much more work still needs to be done, and we have heard plenty on that already this afternoon. In 2015, the UK was ranked No. 1 for LGBT+ rights in Europe by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association. The latest ranking puts us at No. 17. The struggle for true equality still needs to be fought in this country.

LGBT+ people face many obstacles in the UK. Take healthcare, where those who want to be parents face costs that heterosexual couples do not face. I have heard from many constituents who are concerned about unequal access to in vitro fertilisation. LGBT+ couples must fund 10 cycles of artificial insemination themselves before they can access NHS IVF, costing them up to £16,000—money they do not have to spend. It is unacceptable that so many couples face this extra financial stress. We have a moral duty to provide gay couples with the same help that we would make available to any prospective parents. I am interested to hear the Minister's plans to address these continuing inequalities and poor healthcare systems.

The Government also need to show leadership. They must not bow down to people who simply hold reactionary views—I am talking about conversion therapy. We Liberal Democrats believe that conversion therapy is an appalling practice that is incredibly harmful to anybody subjected to it. [Interruption.] I think I have just seen Jayne Ozanne in the Public Gallery. I commend her for the fearless work she has done in this space on conversion therapy. We have fought long and hard for a complete ban. The Government promised five years ago to ban conversion therapy, but Ministers are still dragging their feet.

The LGBT+ community also faces greater discrimination in the workplace. Seven in 10 LGBT+ workers have experienced sexual harassment at work, and one in five workplaces does not have policies in place to support their LGBT+ staff. Only half of managers surveyed by the TUC said that they had a policy prohibiting discrimination, bullying and harassment against their LGBT+ workforce. Less than half had a clear route for workers to raise concerns about harassment against them. With little support on offer, no wonder many workers feel unable to come forward and report their harassment. No one should have to suffer in silence. I hope the Government continue to support my Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Bill to protect people from harassment and to create safe and respectful workplaces, particularly for the LGBT+ community.

Although there has been clear progress in the UK, we must remember that intolerance remains widespread around the world. LGBT+ people have been imprisoned, stoned and publicly flogged. Uganda has passed an appalling new law that threatens LGBT+ people with the death penalty. Sixty-four countries have laws criminalising homosexuality, including 29 members of the Commonwealth, as has already been mentioned.

The UK cannot look the other way. We must oppose human rights abuses wherever we see them. Instead of supporting people fleeing persecution, the Government have treated them like criminals. The Home Office's own equality assessment of the Rwanda policy admits concerns about the treatment of some LGBTQ+ people but denies that these abuses are systematic. Human Rights Watch says this assessment is “wishful thinking”, with no basis in reality. LGBT+ Rwandans have reportedly been arbitrarily detained. Stigma persists, and the country has no specific anti-discrimination law to protect this community. To threaten LGBT+ people with deportation to a country where they will be at particular risk is pure cruelty. I am interested to hear what the Government will do to protect them.

LGBT+ refugees also face unique hurdles to securing asylum in the UK. Research by the University of Sussex has found that one in three claims was refused because officials did not believe a refugee's sexual orientation or gender identity. I hope the Minister will commit to working with colleagues to end this culture of disbelief.

Rights have been won, but they can be lost just as easily. Now is not the time to be complacent. Stigma and discrimination have no place in 21st-century Britain. The Government must match their words of support with concrete action.

2.21 pm

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): No Pride event has a bigger impact on a place than Brighton Pride. Our population more than doubles that weekend, with more than half a million visitors coming to Brighton, and an additional £30 million is spent in the Brighton economy on Pride weekend. It is an international festival, of course, and Kylie, Britney and Christina Aguilera have sung in recent years.

Unlike many Prides that have become commercialised—we often hear that critique—our Pride is a community interest company. All the money goes into the Rainbow Fund to run our mental health support, our community activities and our community space for the year ahead.

Like most Prides, Brighton Pride was established as a protest in 1972. It was a protest by the Sussex Gay Liberation Front, but it always had elements of fun.

Looking at the first programme, there was a gay dance, as they described it, the night before, with one dance for women and another for men. And there was a chill on the beach—"chill" is not the word they used—a fun time on the beach, afterwards. It was reincarnated in 1991 by Brighton Area Action against Section 28, which started the annual parade and party that we know today.

In 2023, there are more Prides than ever. They now often start not as protests but as community events promoting inclusion and celebrating diversity, but that is just as important as the protests that came before.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** New Brighton in my constituency had its first Pride last year. It does not make £30 million at the moment, but I am sure it aspires to do so.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Very good. There is competition looming for Brighton and Hove.

We now have Prides along the south coast in Seaford, Hastings, Eastbourne and Worthing, but it is a very recent development that we have seen such a huge number of public Prides. I lived in Bradford between 2005 and 2012 and, when I first arrived, our Pride events were held in basements. In fact, in 2008, we held one in a basement club with bouncers on the door to make sure we were safe.

The year after, many pioneers in Bradford—and I played only a very small role—decided that enough was enough and a public Pride would take place. The city centre square was secured and, as opposed to the protests in the 1970s and 1980s, the first public manifestation of Pride in Bradford celebrated diversity, and there was an awful lot of concern. Of course, we had had race riots only a few years before, and people were worried. Would Bradfordians really want something like this in their town square?

Well, the sun shone and the square was filled with families, friends and passers-by all joining in and wearing rainbow dresses. Drag queens mingled with people wearing football shirts because, of course, that year Bradford also got to the cup final. Everyone just got on and enjoyed the event. It seemed that Pride had not only come but had taken too long, because it was not an issue and people were enjoying themselves.

But, of course, when we talk about LGB, we cannot forget the T. Brighton has been at the forefront of acceptance and equality, and this year we are hosting our 10th Trans Pride on 14 July. It is the largest Trans Pride in Europe, and I have been a regular attender since its early years.

The trans community is under attack by fierce, hate-filled newspapers and right-wing culture warriors. For the trans community, Pride provides a sanctuary away from the hate, surrounded by fellow queers and allies, and stands as a beacon of political radicalism pushing against the political hate.

There is still a lot more to do. There are failures in the Commonwealth, and we have seen progress reversed. The asylum system lets down LGBT people too often, and it is intrusive in the answers and demonstrations that people need to show. We know that relationship and sexual health education is now under attack, only a few short years after it was introduced in our schools.

Conversion therapy has still not been banned, and I hope the Minister will give us reassurances. I am afraid the Government opened the trans Pandora's box when they said they would review the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and then, for years, failed to bring forward concrete proposals on how it would be done. In those years, everyone's worst fears and nightmares were put into a melting pot stirred by right-wingers who, of course, saw it as a great victory. They were able to question the very rights secured by the Act—that is the problem with opening up Acts without making positive proposals—and now we see the same happening with the Equality Act.

**Charlotte Nichols:** I am very mindful of what my hon. Friend says about the Pandora's box that has been opened on transphobia by some of the debates in this place. I referred in my speech to the comments made by Brianna Ghey's mother on the sickening trolling of her family on Mumsnet, Twitter and other places, with people making awful transphobic comments about her daughter. Does my hon. Friend agree it is incumbent on all of us to make sure that, in this place, we are not fanning the flames of that kind of hatred?

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** My hon. Friend is quite right. My thoughts are with Brianna's family and friends. We came out in solidarity in Brighton, and it is terribly sad.

Unfortunately, those who welcome reviews of the Equality Act, no matter with what caveats, are fanning the flames of hate and they cannot call themselves allies to the community. We must be clear: the opening up of that Act is a retrograde step when it does not come with clear, concrete proposals that we can materially discuss and debate.

We see also the banning of puberty blockers for under 18s. Puberty blockers are deliberately designed to delay the process of puberty, not to prevent or stop it, so that those young people can be given more time to work out who they are and what they will become. The banning of puberty blockers for under-18s is a cruelty because it forces people to go through puberty when they might not and should not be ready for it. We know, because of the judgments in swimming and other sports, that if they go through puberty, they will be banned for life from certain activities, even if they change their gender. So the ban on those blockers is a particularly cruel and nasty form of discrimination that will last for those children's lifetime. People who support that, in hand-wringing ways, saying, "Well, it is still a bit unsure" are not thinking about the wider consequences for those individuals. A puberty blocker does not stop someone changing their mind; they can revert back. A very small number of people might decide to do so. Of course we have seen huge cuts in sexual health services, which have ended up particularly targeting the LGBT community.

When I first arrived in this Parliament, only six years ago, relationships, sex and health education was normalised. It was being implemented by a Conservative Government and it seemed as though progress could only go forward. The Labour party even removed the Whip from one of its MPs and his ability to stand because he supported the anti-LGBT, RSHE protests outside schools, endangering children. The Labour party took a stand and the Conservative party was equally taking a stand. It apologised for section 28 and it felt as if we were united, all moving



[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

forward. But then the dirty money from the evangelical right in America started to flood in, often through Tufton Street, where extreme right-wing organisations are based. We have seen climate denial, the reckless economic policies from the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) and the LGB Alliance—all dangerous organisations that wish to roll back the progress we have made. We now have some Tory, Labour and SNP MPs—it is across the House—spreading fear and hatred about our community, and our parties seem unable to enforce any form of discipline and dignity for our community, instead allowing that to run amok. This is not one party or another; it has infected all our parties and they seem to be totally unable to stand up to hate.

We have MPs in this Chamber who sit on conversion therapy boards and then organise petitions to try to review RSHE. They are not neutral people, but they seem to have the ear of the Prime Minister and to have the Zeitgeist behind them. How do we turn that around? How did things get turned around in those six years? How do we move forward to start bringing dignity back to all of our parties and back to this place for LGBT people? A lot of this has been cheered on by those extremist backers, the same ones who have supported the Uganda reforms and who are supporting the reforms in the USA. They are the same people who advise people such as Putin and others in Russia who are pushing back against LGBT people there. There is a golden thread and, if our parties and our Parliament cannot see that, we are in dangerous territory.

Some politicians have stood as strong allies, with President Biden a good example in the US. He is a shining example when he says to trans kids, “You are loved, you have body autonomy and I, and we, will defend your rights.” I would love to see any of our party leaders be as unequivocal as him, and be clear that trans people have our support and that we do not get drawn into this parental consent nonsense, where people say that children should be outed to their parents, or that parents should know when they are going through these difficult times. Of course I would love parents to know, but it is not appropriate for all parents and for all children. The law must be written for the worst and there are some bad parents out there. We cannot send their children to parental arms that might be those of abusers.

As I was saying, that money has infected our politics and our political discourse. Pride is a celebration of our diversity, in all different forms, but it also says that we should be treated equally. That means many LGBT people will want to live in different ways, not just the 2.4 traditional monogamous family, although I recognise that many LGBT people will want to be the 2.4 traditional monogamous family. We celebrate all those sexual diversities that were once marginalised that are based on consent between adults and we celebrate them in Pride. Pride is a moment for us to remember where we have come from and to ensure that love conquers hate. So happy Pride Month. Let our hearts win over hate and, finally, Mr Deputy Speaker, in the words of Kylie, “Padam, Padam.”

2.36 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am really grateful to be able to sum up this debate for my party. It is always a privilege to do that. I feel fortunate to have

listened to all the contributions today, which have been powerful and important, not least the opening speeches from the hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle). The personal reflections we have heard today were exceptional. The speech by the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) was full of warmth. I, too, wish a happy 15th anniversary to him and Gareth—I am glad he repeated the name because I nearly wished a happy anniversary to him and Richard, which would have caused some confusion in that household.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) gave a powerful look back. That was important as we reflect on where we are now. The hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) was on point when we heard why we should aim for “supportive indifference” for everyone. That is where we need to get to. We are not there yet, which is why need to reflect on Pride, more than 50 years on. We must remember that it was conceived not as a parade, fabulous though Pride parades are, but as a protest and that the necessity for protest remains.

There is much to be positive about today, but we cannot shy away from the real concerns that exist, too. I will start on a positive note. The powerful contributions we heard about social change over decades were important. The fact we have a cross-party group of people here in the Chamber today making contributions who are all on the same track is important.

On a personal level, it is important to me to be a member of a party that has equality and LGBT rights front and centre. I thank Out for Independence for the work it does as our LGBT wing in the SNP. That work is important because, as we have heard, we all have work to do. It matters to me because I want to live in a fairer, more equal, independent Scotland, and celebrating our LGBT communities must be central to that. We have made real progress already in Scotland. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire has talked about the journey we have come on, with the Scottish Government’s work on non-binary identities, human rights, hate crime, LGBT health and gender reform. The commitment to LGBT lives being improved runs through the work of our Government. It is clear in the welcome commitment that the Scottish Government have made to ending conversion practices. I hope the Minister has something positive to say to us on that because, clearly, everyone should feel secure to be themselves; they should have no fear, no worry, about being themselves. The harm that is caused by this delay is immense. I heard the Leader of the House at business questions this morning describing conversion practices as “appalling” and I agree with that. That is why we need to see progress—it has been years and years—and the progress needs to be inclusive. It cannot have a consent loophole. It cannot leave out trans people.

That depressing note was echoed in what my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire said about the UK Government’s determination to ride roughshod over the cross-party votes of the Scottish Parliament in relation to gender recognition reform. The people who are affected by this are already potentially the most vulnerable and marginalised. They are not there to be a constitutional football. This measure was introduced after huge and significant consultation. I thought the comments earlier about the importance of adopting a

respectful tone are absolutely right. I always aim to do that. The principle of respect is crucial, and that has run through the work that has been done.

For me, LGBT rights go hand in hand with all our rights. This is definitely not the first time I have said this—it is not even the first time that I have said it this week—but I think it is worth saying again: I am a middle-aged woman and a feminist and my rights as a woman are in no way imperilled or in conflict with my support for LGBT rights.

One issue that has been spoken about quite a lot today is education—supporting all young people to recognise, positively, that we are all different, and that families come in many and various forms. That is a far cry from my own school days in the 1980s. I mentioned earlier this week that my own large high school, although a decent school, had no LGBT pupils in the 1980s; obviously that is not true. Obviously, there were many, but you would not have known because we could not talk about those things in those days. The hon. Member for Darlington spoke in a similar tone about his own school days. I am very grateful that things are different now. I know that, in my constituency of East Renfrewshire, our schools do a fantastic job on this. I am very grateful for the care and attention they give to all our young people. A special mention should be made—because I have been there most recently, but all the schools do a very good job—of the thoughtful and open way that LGBT education is managed in Mearns Castle High School. It does a fantastic job of making it a normal part of school life that everyone is celebrated and regarded as important. So hats off to them.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** On that point, there has been a huge change in the Scottish education system, not only in non-denominational schools, but even in denominational schools. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland accepted the recommendations of the Time for Inclusive Education campaign. We have come a long way, have we not?

**Kirsten Oswald:** My hon. Friend has obviously read my speech. We have indeed come a long way. I want to talk about the TIE campaign, which does such a good job. It is particularly important that we speak about this today, given some of the contributions that we have heard. The TIE campaign delivers LGBT inclusive education training. It supports teachers to develop their own curriculum materials in this area and facilitates teaching and learning about prejudice, discrimination and diverse families. It looks at past and present LGBT figures. It does that to support our schools in developing a greater understanding of diversity within our communities and within wider society.

Obviously, the knock-on impact for pupils in terms of their rights, their knowledge about equality, the impact of stereotyping and prejudice is immense. That matters because education is so vital in preventing hatred based on ignorance. We need to look at some of the statistics that we have heard today to put that in context. The Rainbow Europe statistics for 2022 showed the UK dropping from 10th to 14th place over only one year. There is no doubt in my mind that the climate in which we all live is, in many ways, that bit less accepting and that bit more fragile for our LGBT communities.

Hate crime statistics back that up. There has been a significant and continued rise in hate crime figures in

the UK—and in Scotland, too—against LGBT people. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington put that really well.

Of course, as we have heard today, this is not an issue that is only particular to us here. Undoubtedly, across the world, dark clouds are gathering. We have heard about the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda and anti-LGBT measures in Florida and other states. Reports there suggest considerable increases in hostility and practical difficulties for people just trying to live their lives. Notably, there is hostility in Rwanda. That is a particular cause for concern, given that this Government are determined to send people seeking asylum in the UK to Rwanda, despite the UK Government's own travel advice warning against LGBT people travelling to Rwanda.

The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) talked very eloquently about the culture wars, which do so much harm, and which, absolutely, must be resisted here. I would say that culture wars have absolutely no place in our politics. None of us should be engaging in or amplifying that kind of discourse. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire spoke very powerfully about the funding of hate and the funding of these campaigns. Our responsibility here in this place is to stand up and shine a light.

Therefore, we do have a particular responsibility in this place. We have a responsibility to speak up as well as to celebrate. I do not think that I can put that better than the First Minister Humza Yousaf. He was speaking when the UK Government decided to block the Gender Recognition Reform Bill. He said:

"I am firmly committed to equality for everybody because your rights are my rights regardless of who you are... My starting point is that I've been a minority in this country my whole life. I have understood that you have to fight for your rights, but my rights don't exist in a vacuum or in isolation. They exist because other people's rights exist too."

We all live in a better place when we all actively stand up for all of our communities.

I want to conclude on a positive note. I wish a happy Pride to all those in Scotland and across the UK and further afield who will be on Pride parades this month. It was good to hear from the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) about the first Pride parade in his area. The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) painted quite a fabulous picture of various Pride events. A number of years ago, I took my children on a Pride march. It is fair to say that they had a really good day. In fact, one of them requested to go again the next day, which, obviously, was not possible, but I hope—perhaps against my own expectation—that that spirit of celebrating and of welcoming progress is the direction of travel that we see this year. Happy Pride Month.

2.47 pm

**Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op):** I wish to pay my respects and offer my sympathies to Glenda Jackson's family and friends, as others have done. I think any of us in this place would be proud of her record as an MP, serving her constituents and as a Minister. The fact that she also won two Academy awards and three Emmy awards during a truly illustrious acting career as well is genuinely awe-inspiring. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for enabling me to say that.

[Anneliese Dodds]

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) and the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing it. I also thank everyone who has contributed to the debate today in such an inspiring way and to those who have shared their personal experiences in particular. I am proud to be surrounded right now by so many trailblazing colleagues who have championed LGBT+ representation in this place and many other places during this Pride month. The speeches we have heard speak to the enormous contribution of the LGBT+ community in Britain that we are here to celebrate. I hope we will all feel joy and inspiration from that contribution at Pride events across the country this month.

Personally, I am really looking forward to being at London Pride again and I was absolutely delighted that Oxford Pride celebrated its 20th birthday this year. It was great to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) about the history of Brighton Pride and the other amazing Sussex Prides. I was pleased to be at Hastings Pride last year, which was fantastic.

Pride celebrations present an opportunity to reflect on the progress we have made in furthering LGBT+ rights, but we have to be honest and open and say that that progress was incredibly slow. That is why we still celebrate and commemorate those who made it happen. To be the first to stand up and call for change is not easy at the best of times; to do so at a time when LGBT+ people were so demonised and ostracised was much harder.

One of the many awful examples of the way LGBT+ people were treated in the not-too-distant past, as has been mentioned by a number of speakers, is the ban on lesbians, gay men and bi people serving in the armed forces—a ban that endured for decades under Conservative and Labour Governments. Labour lifted the ban in 2000, as a first step towards delivering the justice that those brave servicepeople deserve but, 23 years later, we are looking forward to seeing the publication of the findings of the LGBT veterans independent review.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I am sorry that I have not been here for the whole debate, but I caught many of the speeches on the television and enjoyed them all. The independent report was due to be published on 8 June this year, but it is facing a delay. Will my hon. Friend put pressure on the Minister to go back to Government and make sure that the report comes out before the summer recess, so we have a chance to ask questions in this place?

**Anneliese Dodds:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that important point. I am also grateful to him and many others in the Chamber for the work they have done on that issue, with the amazing organisation Fighting With Pride, which has worked so hard on it. I encourage the Minister to do all he can to ensure that that review is published, because we need to act on it and act urgently. Sadly, that injustice lasted for a long period, so we are talking about some people who are reaching their older years now. They need to see the outcomes of that review. They have been incredibly brave in talking about their experiences and, having heard some of their stories,

the manner in which they have responded, despite appalling, traumatic experiences, has been incredible to behold. They need that resolution and support so that they can move forward and have at least a little closure, if not justice, on what happened to them.

The fact that that ban endured for so long reminds us how difficult it was for LGBT+ people. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) for his reflections on what has changed, in one of many moving speeches we have heard in this debate. He referred to the 1985 vote for a resolution committing to lesbian and gay rights in the Labour party, and I was proud that Labour led the way in delivering a number of moves towards greater LGBT+ equality.

There are many people in this Chamber who pushed for and helped to deliver those changes. My right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) detailed that record; in the interests of time I will not repeat his word, but I want to be crystal clear in saying when Labour is next in government, as I hope we will be, we will continue to stand up for LGBT+ people and build on that proud history of breaking down barriers for everyone. To any LGBT+ person who is watching this debate I say, “Labour will always have your back.”

It is important to say that because, as so many have reflected, these are worrying times for many LGBT+ people. There have been many reflections on the appalling rise in hate crime. Hate crime motivated by sexual orientation has risen by almost 500% over the past decade; crimes targeting transgender identity are up by over 1,000% and violent offences have increased sixfold across all five strands of hate crime over the same period.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I need to push a point: when it comes to the Government’s invoking section 35 of the Scotland Act 1998 against the Parliament of Scotland on its Gender Recognition Act, where does the hon. Lady’s Front-Bench team stand?

**Anneliese Dodds:** I am grateful for that intervention. I believe the hon. Member will be well aware of where Labour has stood on these matters, as we always stand on these matters: we believe it is incredibly important that LGBT+ people are not used as a political football in any circumstances. We have long called for a resolution to that issue and for the Scottish and UK Governments to work with each other, but I am afraid that they did not do that. We should have seen that, and above all we should have seen trans people treated fairly during this period. I am afraid it is they who have been let down.

I know that some on the Government side—not the Minister, I am sure—may say that the rise in hate crime is down to better recording of hate crime rather than an increase in crime itself. Although we welcome, of course, improvements in police-recorded hate crime, that does not explain the huge soaring of the levels of hate crime against LGBT+ people and other groups. My party will follow the recommendation made by the Law Commission five years ago to strengthen and equalise the law so that every category of hate crime is treated as an aggravated offence. This is not about redefining what hate crime is, as some have wrongly claimed; it is about fixing a basic inequality in the law so that everyone who falls victim to hate crime is treated equally. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) for



her powerful words on that subject. The Government should have made that change years ago, and I hope that the Minister will commit to doing so today.

Labour will also seek to build consensus around modernising the Gender Recognition Act to remove indignities for trans people while upholding the Equality Act, its protected characteristics and its provision for single-sex spaces. We will also appoint an international LGBT+ rights envoy to raise awareness and improve rights across the world—rights on which many countries are, unfortunately, going backwards, as Members have reflected. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington rightly spoke about Britain's influence in that matter. We can do more, however, and I praise the Kaleidoscope Trust for all its work in that area.

We have heard again, perhaps understandably, the claim that this is the gayest Parliament in the world. I know that there are gay, lesbian, bi and trans people in Parliaments right across the world, but sadly they are far too often unable to be public about who they are because of the appalling reprisals that they would suffer.

**Charlotte Nichols:** During a recent visit to Kenya with STOPAIDS, charities over there that support people in the LGBT community—they live in a country where that community is illegal—were really impressed and excited about our being allegedly the gayest Parliament in the world. One thing they said to me that I found quite moving was that, even in the gayest Parliament in the world, we are still going backwards in many places on LGBT rights, so it is important that, while we recognise that achievement, we acknowledge that being the gayest Parliament in the world does not mean that we are putting through the best policies for LGBT people here or globally.

**Anneliese Dodds:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that strong warning against any form of complacency. Many speakers have referred to that during the debate. Sadly, there are areas in which we are going backwards. I have just mentioned the unfortunate increased levels of abuse, including physical abuse, that many LGBT+ people have been experiencing. Sadly, that often also takes place in the workplace. Labour is committed to taking action against that. We will bring in a new deal for working people that will require employers to create and maintain workplaces free from LGBT+ harassment, including by third parties—it often comes from customers and service users.

We need to tackle the issues around LGBT+ healthcare as well. We will ensure that we have one of the biggest expansions of the NHS workforce in history so that everyone, including LGBT+ people, can access the treatment that they need on time. We will heed the advice of experts from the British Medical Association and Mind that conversion practices constitute abuse. We need an inclusive ban of such practices in all their forms for all LGBT people, and of course, we can do that while protecting the provision of legitimate counselling and talking therapies. We need a ban that is laser-targeted at coercive conversion practices, not one that can be assailed by strawman arguments about what does and does not constitute conversion therapy. International best practice shows that that is perfectly possible via well-drafted and precise legislation. Of course, the ban must close loopholes allowing anyone to “consent” to conversion practices, as no one can consent to abuse. I was encouraged by the

comments made from the Government Benches on that subject. I would appreciate it if the Minister could give us an update on this issue. It is urgent, and I know that many of the campaigners who have worked on it for many years really want to see progress.

We will always seek to bring people together around these issues, discuss them using evidence and make sure that we respect each other in those debates, rather than ramping up rhetoric and using LGBT+ people as political footballs. Pride Month reminds us that division will get us nowhere and that there is power in coming together to demand action and change. I hope the Minister will agree that we cannot continue to see progress stall on LGBT+ rights in Britain.

I hope we can stand here in Pride Months to come and celebrate LGBT+ people walking safely through our streets, freely going about their lives without fear of harassment, hate crime, conversion practices or other forms of unequal and prejudiced treatment. For too long, progress has been blocked by division and delay, but the British people are fair-minded; they want to see LGBT+ people treated with dignity, equality and respect. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey said in her powerful speech, a diverse society is a strong society.

3 pm

**The Minister for Equalities (Stuart Andrew):** I would like to begin by thanking all Members across the House for their honest, wide-ranging and often moving reflections in this debate to mark Pride Month. As recognised today, the first official Pride March in the UK took place on 1 July 1972. I pay tribute to our former colleague and one of my very good friends, Eric Ollerenshaw, who was on that first march. He talks movingly about people even being spat at by those who should have been there to protect them. Over 50 years later, those voices are louder than ever. LGBT people exist and should be accorded the same rights, dignity and respect as all other citizens, whoever they are.

I have enjoyed the competition during this debate for who has the best Pride. The hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) advocated for Liverpool and New Brighton, and given the phenomenal party that Liverpool put on for Eurovision, I am sure that will be one to go for. Ynys Môn was mentioned. I grew up in Anglesey back in the '70s and 80s, and the thought of it having a Pride would have been unbelievable back then. It has one now, as does Merthyr Tydfil. Let me say, if I may, “Dwi'n anfon fy nymuniadau gorau i Pride Cymru.” Of course, I could not miss out Brighton, and I definitely cannot miss out Leeds and Bradford, as I represent a constituency between the two of them.

Now more than ever, we must continue to support human rights activists working to ensure that LGBT people are able to live free from violence and discrimination. As we look back as a community and as a nation, we have much to be proud of. The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) said that when she was at school, no one was gay. It was the same in my school, which is a bit of a surprise, because I was there! It is brilliant to go around schools in my constituency now and see young people being so open about who and what they are.

It is over a decade since the passage of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 in England and Wales—a process that has since been repeated in Scotland and

[*Stuart Andrew*]

Northern Ireland. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) and his husband Gareth on their 15 years. I have to say that marriage is not something I have done myself, even though I have been with my partner for 22 years. I do not know which one of us has escaped the other one's grasp, but there you go. My friends are desperate for me to get married, because one of them wants to go and buy a hat.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** The Minister certainly has the tie—he should think of doing it sooner rather than later. I am thinking in Qatar.

**Stuart Andrew:** Who knows? Maybe that is where I am going next.

Tens of thousands of LGBT couples have taken the opportunity to stand in front of friends and family to declare their love and commitment to one another, safe in the knowledge that their relationship and their family are no less recognised or valid than any other.

However, as great as our accomplishments have been, challenges clearly remain. Harassment, discrimination and violence against LGBT people continue to exist within our society. As I have mentioned before, I have experienced that at first hand as a survivor of a violent homophobic attack when I was younger, which knocked me unconscious and hospitalised me. It was terrifying, and it still affects me today, but do you know what? I am still here, and I am the lucky one, because the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) spoke very movingly about someone who is not. The Government are clear that everyone should be free to be themselves without fear of harm. No one should face violence for who they are, ever. Globally, many countries and territories still criminalise same-sex acts: in 11 countries, they carry the potential for the death penalty, particularly among men who have sex with men, and we have all seen the appalling legislation that has just passed in Uganda, which many Members have mentioned today. It is important that we all demand better for LGBT people around the globe.

Turning to some of the specific points, every Member has mentioned conversion practices. I have spoken before about the need to take action in this area, and I agree with many of the points made today. It is key that we end any practice that falsely claims to cure or change LGBT people. Let me make it perfectly clear: such practices are harmful, and they do not work. I know that many Members have frustrations about the delay. I am personally very committed to this issue, and have campaigned on it for many years. That is why we intend to publish the draft legislation very shortly to ban this targeted threat to our LGBT citizens.

**Peter Gibson:** I am sorry to interrupt my right hon. Friend's speech, but in this House on 17 January, the then Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), published a written statement acknowledging and recognising the strength of feeling on conversion practices across the House. It went on to state:

"The Government will publish the draft Bill shortly".—[*Official Report*, 17 January 2023; Vol. 726, c. 4WS.]

That was on 17 January. Just how much longer do we have to wait?

**Stuart Andrew:** As I have said, I share my hon. Friend's frustration. If I have my way, it will be very shortly.

**Kirsten Oswald:** Will the Minister give way?

**Stuart Andrew:** I am conscious of time, but yes.

**Kirsten Oswald:** I am grateful to the Minister. Very briefly, I wonder if he is able to elaborate on what the scope of the Bill—which we hope will come very soon—might be.

**Stuart Andrew:** I want to make clear that the Bill will include targeting efforts to change someone from being transgender—that will be in there. I am also pleased to remind the House that the Government fund a victim support service run by the anti-violence charity Galop, which enables those at risk of, or undergoing, conversion practices to report their situation and access tailored support and guidance. I have been to visit that group—it really is very moving—and I continue to urge anyone in need of help in this area to contact that support service.

Today, many Members have also talked about the issues around transgender rights in this country. I must be absolutely clear: transgender people deserve our respect, support and understanding. Members have quite rightly talked about dialling down the arguments. We can have a debate that listens carefully to the considered opinions of both sides of the argument—and let us understand both those sides—but hatred has no place. I hate seeing the impact that this has on some people in our country. Courtesy and respect are not hard things to practise—I simply do not understand it. As the hon. Member for Wallasey said, empathy does not cost anything, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington mentioned, it is a reminder of the fear that many of us went through all those decades ago. I really do believe that we need to make sure we have this debate in a proper and dignified way, and I certainly commit that in any debate I take part in, I will always show respect to anyone, regardless of what their opinions are.

I also wanted to talk about some of the health areas that have been raised by other Members, particularly some of the issues relating to our campaign on HIV. We have made great steps in that area, as in other areas of LGBT healthcare. The published HIV plan, pledging a goal of zero new HIV transmissions and zero AIDS and HIV-related deaths in England by 2030, is to be welcomed. I am glad to say that the data tells us that we are on track to achieve that, which is good news.

Another area that Members raised in the course of the debate is RSE. Children need to understand the modern world in which they are growing up. Guidance is clear that pupils receive teaching of LGBT content. In secondary education, sexual orientation and gender identity are talked about and explored, but at a timely point, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) mentioned, and in a clear, sensitive and respectful manner. The Department for Education is currently reviewing that, and public consultation will take place in the autumn. The advice within it will have been led by an independent expert panel bringing together health, the curriculum and safeguarding.

I am glad that Members raised the issue of homelessness, because it is important for me personally. I remember when I lived in Manchester hearing the shocking story

of a young man who was kicked out of his family home because of his sexuality. He had no choice but to end up as a sex worker, and he was sadly murdered by one of the people who was abusing him. I am therefore keen that we do something about it. In May, I convened a roundtable with the Minister with responsibility for homelessness, my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), to bring together local authorities from around the country and the charity sector so that we could explore best practice and the importance of collecting data. The more data we have, the more we will know about the situation.

On the issue of LGBT veterans, we recognise the experience of many of those who wanted to serve our country and who were putting themselves forward and putting their own lives at risk to defend our freedom. I am as keen as everybody for the review to be published as soon as possible. I will certainly pass on the message from the House today.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Can the Minister please respond to the point I raised about IVF treatment and gay couples?

**Stuart Andrew:** I will have to get the line; I cannot remember the actual details. If the hon. Lady does not mind, I will write to her after the debate.

Touching again on international issues, while we are able to celebrate progress here, I am conscious that it is not always the same story abroad. That is one of the reasons why I wanted to wear the armband at the football World cup. It was an opportunity to show that a lot of LGBT people from around the world did not feel they could go to that competition.

The situation in Uganda is a stark reminder of the real and awful issues that people are facing. Uganda's anti-homosexual law is the most regressive piece of anti-LGBT legislation globally and of grave concern to us all. We are firmly opposed to the death penalty in all circumstances in every country, and in regard to the law's death penalty clause for aggravated homosexuality, the Prime Minister has raised our concerns with the Ugandan Foreign Minister. That is why at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, £2.7 million was given by the UK to help reform outdated and discriminatory laws. I will continue to work closely with Lord Herbert, the Prime Minister's special envoy on LGBT rights, and the FCDO to make it clear to other Governments moving in a similar direction to Uganda that it is not something we support, and I will certainly highlight the contributions made by Members in the House today to colleagues across Government.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** The Minister is making a good point about Uganda and giving strong representations from this Government. Can our embassy be given a clear direction that it would be appropriate for it to host LGBT events from some of the leading activists in Uganda in the safe confines of the embassy, as other European embassies do? Where that is not possible in Uganda, those events could be hosted in Kenya, where safe houses are being set up.

**Stuart Andrew:** If the hon. Member will forgive me, I meant to mention that point, because I thought it was an interesting one. I will happily speak to my colleagues in the Foreign Office about that because I think, from my perspective, that if we can do it, we should.

As Minister for Equalities—but also because I have felt passionate about this for most of my life—it is my privilege to build on the achievements of the past in furthering LGBT equality in the future both at home and abroad. I thank the hon. Member for Wallasey and my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing the debate. I also thank colleagues across the House for their contributions. I pledge that many of the things that are important to our community in my portfolio—such as loneliness, sport accessibility and youth policy—will, as far as I am concerned, have a heavy LGBT influence.

Finally, I thank all the groups and stakeholders I have met and continue to meet for the work they do to support the LGBT family. Do you know what? I am going to say a big thank you to my family and to my mum and dad for being there for me when I came out—they were brilliant—and I am thinking about you, Mum, because I know you are not well today. As I said at the *PinkNews* reception last week, and as the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) mentioned as well, we should remember the words of our former colleague Jo Cox. As a community, we should make sure that we hear her words loud and clear: there is more that unites us as a community than divides us, and others may want to divide us, but we will not let them. I look forward to working with Members across the House to deliver for LGBT people.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Before I call Elliot Colburn to speak for the last two minutes, may I say what a privilege it has been to chair the entirety of this debate? People have talked about Pride and love versus hate. I do not know whether hate has a colour. I suspect not, because Pride and love have a rainbow of them, and no other colour is represented. With rainbows, you get hope on either side. I hope that is what we can give to those in the 66 countries where it is illegal to be gay and, indeed, where they may even face the death penalty.

We are in a Parliament that has more openly LGBT Members than any other Parliament in the world. What did you do with one of those Members? You elected him Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons, and I am incredibly grateful for that. Wherever you live, have a happy Pride. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I call Elliot Colburn.

3.17 pm

**Elliot Colburn:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and it has been a pleasure to have you in the Chair for the entirety of this debate.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions and for coming along to the annual debate that we hold to mark Pride Month. I also thank the Minister for his very considered response. I am grateful that he was at the Dispatch Box for this debate. I am sure there is lots that will need to be followed up. As I said in my speech, there was a lot repeated this year that we have said in years gone by, and I hope that next year we can come back having made significant progress.

To send out a message of hope—not just to the 66 countries around the world where being LGBT is still a crime, but to every single LGBT+ person who perhaps feels they cannot celebrate Pride openly this year—let me say that you have friends in this place from



[Elliot Colburn]

all political parties and persuasions. Parliament will continue to do what it can and I know that the parliamentarians here today will continue to do what they can to ensure that all LGBT+ people are represented, feel safe and have friends with the ear of Government. Thank you all for coming.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The spirit of Glenda Jackson was with us today. Rest in peace.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered Pride Month.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. While we have been having this debate, my constituents and many people across Sussex and Kent have had no fresh water for three to four days. We had arranged a public meeting with South East Water, which continues to fail local residents who are having to use bottled water or have very low flows of water. However, South East Water has withdrawn from all public meetings on this matter, because it says it needs to focus its time on fixing the problem. This does not seem to be an appropriate response to families without running water on some of the hottest days of the year. Could you advise me how I can get the chief executive of South East Water to come and be held to account by my constituents and those in Wealden and Rother who have not had running water?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. It does seem an incredibly unacceptable position to be put in. I hope those on the Treasury Bench have heard that and will urgently get that through to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs who will engage in dialogue immediately.

## Migration

3.19 pm

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered Government policies on migration.

I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this area of policy, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for finding time and granting this debate. Few policy areas generate as much unwanted noise as migration, and my aim in securing this debate is to have a reasonable, rational, evidence-informed discussion on the impact of the Government's migration policies. Those policies are also looked at individually, whether that is Brexit and the impact of the end of freedom of movement, asylum, or other areas of immigration. I am grateful to the Father of the House and the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for co-sponsoring this debate. They both bring considerable expertise to this area, and I am looking forward to their contributions.

We are living in a world that is characterised by increased, near-constant movement. Goods, capital and services are increasingly unburdened by borders. One central pillar of the globalisation that we have been living through over the past 40 years or so is that human beings have to some extent also become units that can be moved around the world to enable profit. For decades, cheap labour and trained labour has been used here to lower costs and keep things going, and while we withdrew almost entirely from vocational training, we have seen increased immigration. For many working-class communities, their experience of immigration has been a form of wage suppression.

This is one of the most complex areas of policy that we encounter, cutting across several Departments and dividing public opinion. Specifically, we must begin to take a more focused look at the evidence of policy impact. Why has net migration hit a record high, and what will its impact be? According to the Office for National Statistics, net migration stood at 606,000 people in 2022, with 1.2 million people arriving. Of that number, 925,000 were non-EU nationals. Those numbers include refugees under the respective Ukraine and Hong Kong schemes, but that growth has slowed over the past few quarters as the impact of those two schemes decreased. Despite that record number, the Government continue to say that net migration will decrease. That is what successive Conservative Governments have said since 2010, but despite such promises, no decrease has ever been achieved. That huge gap between rhetoric and reality is borne out by the figures. Net migration stood at 256,000 in 2010, and is now 606,000. That is the reality of the situation.

The Minister will stand up and try to say that the Labour party voted against all the Bills that claim to address those increases, but the reality is that none of that legislation has achieved the Government's stated aims. Net migration has increased, small boat crossings have increased, and the asylum backlog has increased, and all that is because the increased movement of people, and increased migration, is a reality of the modern world.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend mentioned the increase in boat crossings, but overall the number of people coming over the channel, not just in boats but in trucks and through other irregular forms, has actually decreased over time,

has it not? The problem, partly, is that other regular forms of entry into this country are being tightened and people are prevented from them, which forces many people into dangerous forms of migration.

**Dan Carden:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point and share his view on the need for legal and safe crossing routes to this country. I look forward to hearing other contributions on that point.

Hundreds of millions of people around the world are displaced from their homes because of climate, poverty, famine, drought and conflict. Many more seek a better life as economic migrants. We must acknowledge that reality and engage with communities here at home that have understandable concerns about the effects of that increase on their ability to buy a house and access health and education services as well as what those increases mean for the public purse.

It is impossible to understand the ruptures in our politics over the last decade without thinking seriously about immigration as a social, political and economic issue. One of the biggest causes of the Brexit vote was a response in many working-class communities to being told that nothing could be done about the forces of globalisation. The mass migration of people around the world will continue, but our immigration system can be managed more effectively, can be more efficient and can be more humane. I believe that our politics needs to put more emphasis on addressing the root cause of some of the concerns that people have about the impact of immigration on suppressing wages and placing pressure on housing stock in local communities, if we are to continue to live in the open, tolerant society that we all wish to have.

There are some areas that we can address to improve the migration system for all involved. I want to use my time to discuss three such areas: visa costs, labour shortages and backlogs at the Home Office. On visa costs, the total minimum cost of the current 10-year settlement route for an adult with indefinite leave to remain stands at £12,836.50. For families, that is extortionate, with fees paid for each individual, including children. Those punishingly high fees force many applicants into debt. While there is a clear need for the visa system to pay for itself, in some cases the cost of visas stands many times higher than the administrative costs of processing them. To take one example, the fee for in-country naturalisation stands at £1,330, yet Home Office figures show that the unit cost for facilitating naturalisation stands at just £372. While those eligible to apply for a fee waiver may do so, applicants cannot apply for a fee waiver for indefinite leave. That makes little sense, especially for those who come to work in our NHS or social care. I would appreciate the Minister's views on that. Will he look at giving them the opportunity to apply for a fee waiver? The substantial visa cost does not include ancillary costs such as legal advice, translation services and the enrolment of biometric data.

Further, it is not just the substantial financial cost that presents a challenge. Repeat applications, which take an increasingly long time, must be made. Such applications are not subject to a service standard, and applicants are also subject to a default “no recourse to public funds” condition. That has an obvious detrimental impact on applicants, causing them stress and placing them in a form of bureaucratic purgatory. Surely it does not have to be this way.

A joint report by Praxis, the Institute for Public Policy Research and the Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, which are all organisations that do hugely valuable work in this area, highlights that if applicants had the option to apply for longer blocks of leave—for example, five years instead of two-and-a-half years—applicants' stress and anxiety and Home Office caseworkers' workloads would decrease. That would go a considerable way towards guaranteeing security for those who may have already lived and worked in the UK for a long period of time.

On costs, the Home Office could cap them at the administrative cost only, or grant an automatic fee waiver to those who have had their “no recourse to public funds” condition lifted. These are all little measures that could make a big difference.

I have heard the Immigration Minister say in this House on several occasions that the UK visa service is now meeting or exceeding every one of its service standards, but that means nothing if, as we currently see, many applications are not subject to those service standards. Will the Minister commit to introducing a service standard for all applications to improve performance? Will he also indicate what recent steps his Department has taken to simplify the visa application system and lessen the administrative burden on both applicants and caseworkers? It is clear that there is so much to be done in this area.

Labour shortages in areas such as health, social care and hospitality can only be described as hellish across the UK. Sector after sector tell us that they need more access to skilled staff and they simply do not have that access at the moment. The impact of the shortages is obvious. They act as a drag on our whole economy, holding back prosperity and reducing the quality of life for people across the country. Shortages affect productivity and public services and neither can be improved if we do not fill vacancies. The Recruitment and Employment Confederation estimates that, if labour shortages are not addressed, they will cost the UK economy a staggering £39 billion a year. That is a catastrophe and the Government must not allow their rhetoric on reducing net migration to act as a barrier in addressing that huge fiscal black hole.

Increasing access to skills training and education will go some way over the years to improving labour shortages, but we must also look to migration. Employers have long decried the onerous, bureaucratic and time-consuming nature of recruiting staff from abroad. While employers should make every effort to recruit locally, the Government should not act as a roadblock, stopping local businesses such as restaurants and other businesses across the hospitality sector, the NHS or social care from recruiting the staff they need from further afield.

Local businesses tell me of their frustration. They do not understand why, after Brexit, after leaving the EU and the end of freedom of movement, now we are in control of our own borders, we are not using that control to allow UK businesses to recruit to prosper and grow. It is clearly in the public interest to have a thriving visitor economy. For Liverpool, it makes up more than 50% of our economy. It is a matter of life and death that we have a properly staffed national health service and address shortages in social care. As it stands, the Government are sticking to their line that they must keep net migration down, but I think they

[*Dan Carden*]

should shift to look at how we can use migration policy to address the labour shortages. Many measures have been introduced in the form of a temporary exception to the skilled worker criteria under the points-based system and the introduction of a specific visa for seasonal agricultural workers, but workforce challenges are clearly not being solved. The Government must go further. I am aware that the Migration Advisory Committee recently launched a call for evidence on reform of the shortage occupation list. I urge the Government to heed its calls when they arrive.

Finally on labour shortages, why have the Government not moved to allow asylum seekers the right to work? There is support from both sides of the House for this policy change. Refugee Action highlights that the ban currently costs the public purse around £500 million a year. All available evidence, including the Home Office's own leaked report from September 2020, refutes the Government's argument that enabling asylum seekers to work is a pull factor. I have met many people residing in my constituency seeking asylum who also want to contribute to their new communities and are desperate for the right to work and to earn a living.

All these issues are made much worse by delays in the Home Office's decision making. My caseworkers frequently encounter cases with almost indeterminate delay. Although they try to make progress through the UK Visas and Immigration hotline, often responses are non-specific, unhelpful and sometimes contradictory.

To give just one example, one of my constituents applied for asylum in January 2019. She completed her interview in the same month and was referred to the national referral mechanism, as she was identified as a potential victim of trafficking. In November 2021, a positive conclusive grounds decision was reached on the case—in other words, she was identified as a victim of modern slavery or human trafficking. The nearly three years of waiting for a decision were difficult for her and her children, not knowing where their future may lie.

In February 2022, my office was told by the Home Office that my constituent would receive a decision on the asylum part of her claim within six months. That created an obvious expectation from my constituent. But when six months had passed, she informed me that no decision had been forthcoming. After my office notified the Home Office of that, we were told there was no timeframe for a decision, despite the previous commitment. My constituent's solicitor then issued the Home Office with a pre-action protocol. The Home Office committed to an asylum decision by 1 May. No decision came on 1 May. We wrote again to the Home Office, and I am still awaiting a response. Four and a half years have passed since the initial application, and nearly a year since the Home Office committed to making a decision. That case is not an anomaly; it is one of many I could have chosen to illustrate the point. I would appreciate it if the Minister's office could reach out to mine to discuss just a few such cases that would greatly benefit from his intervention.

More widely, backlogs are now a well-known aspect of our migration system. They are a feature, not a bug. The Minister has hinted that a quick decision-making process would act as a pull factor again. However, among other issues, that ignores the huge cost of asylum

accommodation in the meantime. I would appreciate it if the Minister could provide clarity on this point in his closing remarks.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** The cost of housing asylum seekers is huge. There is no ability for local communities who might believe they could do it cheaper and better in alternative forms of accommodation to draw down money. The Home Office has paid huge amounts, often to corporate organisations, even though local organisations would be able to do it better. Giving asylum seekers the ability to draw down that money on an individual or a community basis, and allowing communities and councils to organise accommodation, would at least help to alleviate some of the trauma that people face in Home Office hotels.

**Dan Carden:** I am grateful for my hon. Friend's point, and I hope that this debate is a space for exactly those kinds of ideas so that we start to see improvements in the system.

Delays seem to be worse in the asylum system, even as the Home Office chooses to be selective, applying service standards to other types of application, such as for naturalisation or further leave to remain. The backlog on so-called legacy cases has started to fall very slightly. However, the Prime Minister's commitment to clearing the backlog will not be met at the "current pace"—not my words but those of the Home Secretary.

There have been smart moves to address the huge backlog. For instance, last week, the Government quietly dropped the two-tier refugee system introduced in the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. That is a perfect example of the Government very quietly replacing a noisy, reactionary policy with one that has more chance of being workable. It is also illustrative of the desperate need for a coherent and honest long-term strategy in this area.

We all want a migration system that works for all our constituents, those seeking asylum and those wanting to work or visit our country. I am grateful for the time to put some of my thoughts on the record.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Members can see that this is a time-restricted debate. If everyone could show some constraint, it would be useful to get people in.

3.39 pm

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): As a co-sponsor of the debate, I thank the Backbench Business Committee, and I echo virtually everything said by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). We debate immigration quite a lot in this Chamber, but mostly the latest disaster or controversial piece of immigration legislation. Occasionally, it would be good to look at how we can fashion immigration policy that suits all of us, in the round and over the long term, in so much as it can.

Perhaps the title of the debate should be "Governments' policies on migration", because it is not just about this Government: all Governments have problems with migration. It goes up and down. This is an attempt at a measured debate on an issue where we often do not



have measured debates, so I am grateful to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton for starting the debate in a very measured way.

The subject is topical, but when is immigration not topical? The net figure of 606,000 people coming to the UK was recently announced, but it is always a mistake to be guided by a net figure, and it is certainly a mistake to have a net migration target. The problem with a net migration target is that we have control, in as much as we do, over only one side of the equation; we have no control over the number of people who choose to leave. If a Government are running the country so brilliantly that nobody wants to leave, clearly the number of people coming here is going to outstrip the number of people leaving. It is a something of a false figure, which I will come back to in a minute. We know the figure is so high because of certain groups of people who are here for very good reasons.

The latest figures on small boats are catching up with last year's figures, as we discussed with the Home Secretary at the Home Affairs Committee yet again yesterday. Recent forecasts from Italy predict that 400,000 people will seek to enter Italy from Africa this year, which is four times the level of 2022. Some 80,000 people have entered so far this year, and that figure was from a few weeks ago. Obviously, that will have an impact on the rest of Europe, including the United Kingdom. The Prime Minister recently attended a European Political Community summit in Moldova, which discussed more transnational approaches to migration; we need to see far more such approaches.

Most of us would agree, alas, that the migration system is pretty broken, has been for some time and shows little chance of getting fixed any time soon. It has been largely characterised by a series of short-term crises: a record number of people on small boats coming across the channel; the overwhelming of processing centres such as Manston; the fact that 9,000 of the 15,000 Afghan nationals who were legally, and quite rightly, airlifted from Kabul almost two years ago are still inappropriately housed in hotels; the pressure on hotel accommodation; the shortage of labour in the hospitality industry, the care sector and other areas, which the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton mentioned; the Windrush scandal; and pressure on the Home Office, which is a fairly dysfunctional Department. All of that gets conflated into the single issue of an immigration crisis.

However, the issue is not just about irregular immigration, but about regular migration levels and about how we decide the skills we want, how we hand out those visas—I entirely concur with the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton about the overpricing of visas in many areas—and how we fashion our points system. We need workforce planning and we need to consider the sustainability of how we deal with the increased population, including the pressures on homes for people who have already lived here for some time. The whole sustainability issue and the availability of services is hugely complex.

I want to touch on three main areas: irregular migration, migration policy for planned migration and the global issue, which will probably be the biggest single challenge that we and many other western nations will face.

First, on irregular migration, we know the figures. We know there has been a move to small boats because of the huge success, frankly, of Border Force and British

agencies, working with French agencies, around Eurotunnel, ferries and lorries. It is now very difficult to get across the channel covertly in the back of a lorry, which is why people have moved to using small boats. Whatever we think about migration policy—whatever we think about the number of asylum seekers we should or could be taking in this country—paying a people smuggler to cross the busiest shipping lane in the world is the worst possible way to gain access to the United Kingdom. We absolutely must do more to clamp down on it, which is why the Government's policy, whether controversial or not, is singularly aimed at cutting off that dangerous and criminal supplier.

The first problem is this. We are continuing to subsidise the French police force, to the tune of, now, half a billion pounds, but although they are intercepting more migrants before they get into the boats—the interception rate is now about 54%, which is great—the trouble is that they do not arrest those migrants, they do not detain them, and they are there again the following night and the night after that, with a new boat every time, and they only have to get lucky once. Until we can reach an agreement with the French that they will detain those migrants and scrutinise their status in France itself and then take action, or that if migrants are intercepted in the channel by Border Force or air agencies they can be taken back to France if that is where they started, our problem will remain.

We have not been able to reach an agreement with the French, but there are ways in which progress could be made. Several of us have had discussions with French politicians who see some merit in such an agreement, and I think there are negotiations that could be had, but that is not happening, although it is the long-term, sustainable solution to the problem of the boats. Why would someone pay €4,000 to a people smuggler for what is effectively a round trip, ending up back in France?

Secondly, there is the issue of processing in the United Kingdom, which is far too slow. As we discovered yesterday in the Home Affairs Committee, even given the increase in resources and staff it will take longer than until the end of the year to deal with the legacy backlog, let alone all the people who have come in since June last year. We must become much more efficient. I am glad that the Minister mentioned various new schemes and projects that the Home Office is undertaking, but we need to double up on that; perhaps he will give some more details later.

Thirdly, there is the issue of returns agreements. There are those who think that everything was rosy before Brexit. I am not going to blame Brexit for any of this—indeed, I remain a fan of Brexit—but in the last year of our full membership of the European Union, under the Dublin regulations we attempted to return to the EU 8,500 migrants who did not have a case for being in the UK, and the EU accepted 105 of them; that is 1.2%. So it was not working in the first place, when we were in the EU. Last year, only 215 of the 45,755 migrants who came here irregularly were deported. We have to do a lot better, because we know how problematic it is when certain countries simply will not take back migrants who have left those countries and applied for asylum here.

The whole issue has been discussed ad nauseam in the House of Lords, and will be back in this House next month in the form of the Illegal Migration Bill. There is

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of course the controversial situation surrounding the Rwanda flights, on which we are expecting a judgment soon. It is an apparently extreme solution, but what else can we do unilaterally if we do not have the agreement of our neighbours to take people back? We know it can be a deterrent, because when the Select Committee went to Calais in January and spoke to many of the officials in charge of the operations there, they said that when the Rwanda scheme was announced there was a big surge in the number of migrants approaching the French authorities about regularising their status in France, because they did not want to risk being put on a plane to Rwanda; but it has not happened yet, so the deterrent effect has subsided. That is why the scheme is so important, controversial though it may be.

I think we should be doing much more—and I have supported cross-party amendments on this in the past—to make better use of the migrants who have come to the UK and are having their claims processed. It is a complete waste of time and labour that they are not allowed to work in a properly organised way, certainly after a few months here, when we have so many labour shortages.

Then there is the foreign aid issue. It annoys me when we are accused of being far less generous than other countries in granting asylum claims, when last year France had something like 150,000 asylum applications—more than this country—but granted only a third of them. They were much tougher; indeed, many European countries do not accept any asylum applications from Albania at all. The Committee has just produced a report asking why on earth we should be taking so many Albanian asylum applications, other than in, say, trafficking cases.

This country also has one of the most generous foreign aid programmes, which supports refugees closer to the homes from which they have had to flee, as any of us who have been to places such as the Zaatari camp in Jordan will know. At one stage there were 85,000 Syrian refugees there, and we were one of the biggest donors to the camp. Something like 90% of the children there were receiving an education in schools that were funded by our taxpayers, and that were often staffed by teachers from Britain or those trained by British authorities. Those people just wanted to go back to Syria as soon as it was safe to do so, rather than come to the UK or another European country, so we should always consider the huge number of refugees we support overseas, no less generously than we do those for whom it is more appropriate to come to the UK.

We have to decide what sort of immigration system we want—who we want coming into the country—now that we have the power to fashion our own policy more than we did when we were part of the European Union. Of the 606,000 net who came to the UK last year, 174,200 were from Ukraine. Nobody is going to argue with the merits of that. Some 160,700 were from Hong Kong. Again, most people would see a justified case for that. I fear, as somebody who has been sanctioned by China and knows a little more about this, that that number will only rise. There is a big Hong Kong Chinese population in this country. They are more easily assimilated through existing links—family links and others—they tend to be very entrepreneurial, setting up businesses after studying here, and they really add to the economic prospects of this country.

Then there are the 155,000-plus dependants who came in—largely Indian nationals—and the many dependants who came on the back of foreign students. Is that where we should be prioritising an increase in population? We want foreign students to come to this country. We want them to study successfully here and then perhaps stay successfully here, contributing to the economy, setting up businesses and, with their expertise and skills, adding to the UK economy, but are valuable places in our creaking infrastructure being taken up by the dependants who seem to come with them? The Government are now looking at that issue.

We must also recognise that we have a very varied workforce, and that is a good thing. Some 20% of the UK workforce was born abroad, and that figure is likely to rise. That is a good thing, as long as we can integrate, and sustain and provide services and employment for everybody to benefit from, but we do have problems. Some 45,000 seasonal farm workers have been brought into this country, and that figure has increased, but we still have a shortfall of 40,000. We have a problem with our own British citizens working in the rural economy. Only 8,000 British citizens signed up for the Pick for Britain campaign jobs. We have a million job vacancies in the United Kingdom. We need to have a grown-up debate about how we fill those vacancies, because surely we want people who will do those jobs well and are appropriate for them. They are going to earn, pay tax and contribute to the economic wealth of the country.

Germany is desperately trying to recruit graduates and blue-collar workers under its points-based system. The trouble is that that is taking a lot of skilled health workers from places such as Albania, which is making Albania less and less sustainable, as the economy collapses in that country. Canada wants 1.5 million more migrants by 2025, and South Korea is bringing in 110,000 lower-skilled migrants.

In this country we completely fetishise the numbers. For me, it is not just about the numbers, although the numbers have to be sustainable—I know there are big pressures on housing, particularly in the south-east of England, in my part of the world—but it is really about control. It is about making sure that we welcome the people who are most appropriately accommodated in this country and who can most contribute to the well-being and economic prospects of this country. It is about controlling who comes here, rather than just raw numbers.

The last consideration is the global context, because the problem, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace, is that 19 countries are facing the highest number of ecological threats over the next 30 years. A total of 2.1 billion people live in countries that lack the resilience to deal with the expected major ecological changes over the next 30 years, and a large proportion of them are from sub-Saharan Africa, from countries that are among the most unstable and have some of the highest birth rates.

Those people are on the move. The birth rate in European countries, Japan and elsewhere is falling, so we have to decide what will be the long-term future of global migration. We can only do that in collaboration with other countries. Do we want African countries to thrive and to have economies that can sustain their own population and that can adapt to take advantage of climate change by generating energy, or whatever it may

be? Can we invest in some of those countries, or will we see people increasingly coming to these shores? How would we deal with that?

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure you would like me to shut up now, but this is a hugely complex situation that requires a long-term plan and a long-term vision, in collaboration with our neighbours. Without that, we risk going from one crisis to another, and nobody benefits from that.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I will have to introduce a seven-minute time limit, which may need to be reduced further to get everyone in.

3.57 pm

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Members for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on securing this debate. I was pleased to support their bid to the Backbench Business Committee. I hear the call for reasonableness and rationality in this debate, but I hope they will understand if I also express a little frustration.

My office has dealt with more than 1,400 immigration cases in one form or another since 2015. I have sat in my constituency surgery while people have pulled out their biometric ID card that says “No right to work” and “No recourse to public funds.” That is humiliating, disheartening and inhumane, and it speaks to everything that is wrong with the Government’s policies in this area.

The Foreign Office spends millions of pounds a year on an advertising campaign proclaiming “Britain is Great” in glossy aeroplane magazines, expo pavilions, embassies and visa processing centres. Although the advertising says “Britain is Great,” the message from the Home Office is that Britain is closed: closed to the ministers of religion who want to come here to provide cover in parishes and faith communities while local ministers have a holiday; closed to the women’s rights activists from Malawi who are invited to speak at all-party parliamentary group meetings in this House on violence reduction and economic empowerment; closed now to the families of international research students at some of our finest universities; closed to German rock bands that just want to play a few gigs and meet their fans before going home.

Britain is closed to interpreters who supported UK forces and companies in Afghanistan. Sometimes it is even closed to people who hold UK passports and who worked in our NHS but, because they also happen to hold a Sudanese passport, have been told they are not allowed to come here. It is closed to students who have won Chevening scholarships; closed, unless people are willing to pay hundreds, and sometimes thousands of pounds in processing fees and ongoing costs for visa renewals and access to the NHS, whether or not their visa allows them to have a job and pay into the tax system.

Britain is closed to Sana, the clinical psychologist I met at the Red Cross VOICES event yesterday. She is stuck in substandard accommodation and has been refused the right to work, while the NHS cries out for trained staff like her. It is closed, completely closed, to

anyone—men, women and children—who might be fleeing war, famine or oppression, simply because they arrived here on a small boat when no safe or legal route is open to them.

The hostile environment is not just directed at refugees and asylum seekers; it pervades every aspect of the Home Office and the UK Border Force’s operation, whether it is the interminable waits for passport checks in airports, the chronic under-resourcing of application processing or even the delays our own staff members face in trying to get answers for constituents. It is all deliberately designed to drag things out, with the aim of making people just give up and go back to where they came from.

The Government’s mindset always seems to be that arriving on these islands is some kind of privilege to be striven for and that people who want to settle, or even just visit for anything other than a holiday, should largely be treated with suspicion and a working assumption that they are planning to abscond or overstay their visa.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Patrick Grady:** I will not give way, given the time available

Anyone who doubts that that is the Government’s position should just look at their obsession with setting arbitrary net migration targets and then the repeated failure to meet those. Where did they even come from in the first place? Who decided that we needed a net migration target of 100,000, rather than 110,000 or 95,000? Perhaps it was just picked out of thin air because it sounded good. Rather than make the positive case for growing our population and workforce, the Tories sought to play to the lowest common denominator, trying to out-UKIP UKIP or various other outfits on the hard and far right.

Meanwhile organisations in commerce and industry across the country are desperate for staff. Some days it seems that just about every bar, restaurant and retail outlet in Glasgow has signs up saying, “Staff wanted”. Crops are being ploughed back under the earth because farms cannot get enough help, and NHS backlogs are literally costing lives as staff leave to work in other countries. I hear from the academic and cultural sectors that people are put off even applying to come here because the attitude is so restrictive. All of this simply diminishes the UK in the eyes of those institutions and the wider global community. The Government proclaim, “Britain is Great” but then allow their outriders and Back Benchers to raise the prospect of the UK joining Belarus and Russia as countries that have withdrawn from the European convention on human rights.

It is also worth reflecting briefly that the net migration figure is just that: a net figure, which, at least in theory, counts the number of people who emigrate from the UK. For centuries, people have left these islands to make their homes overseas. Sometimes they did so violently, forcing indigenous communities off their ancestral lands and destroying ancient ways of life. Sometimes they did so as the result of violence: people were cleared from the highlands to make way for sheep, or they were in search of pastures where crops would not be devastated by disease and blight. Even today, people seek sunnier climes or different opportunities and experiences, and are often welcomed in a way that is not necessarily



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reciprocated on these shores. Brexit, of course, has made this so much more difficult now. The very process of getting through the airport in many European countries takes longer and can be more complicated, let alone the effort of studying or getting a job, or putting down roots, as generations over the past 40 years had been able to do so easily.

I said during the debate on the Illegal Migration Bill that it might come as a bit of a surprise to some of the more excitable elements among the Government Back Benchers, who are obviously not represented here today, but the world is round—the Earth is a globe. There is no edge people can be pushed off in the hope that they will just go away. As the fantastic Glasgow charity Refuweege puts it, “we’re a’ fae somewhere”. Immigration, emigration and migration, in all its forms, always has been and always will be part of the human experience. We cannot simply pull up a drawbridge. We have to be willing to welcome people who are seeking refuge or who want to contribute, not least because one day we, individually or collectively, might look for similar treatment from others.

That is certainly the vision the SNP has of an independent Scotland, where migration policy helps to grow our population and works for our economy and society. If the Government were willing to devolve powers, we could begin to do that immediately. But the Minister wrongly claims that Scotland is not taking its fair share of asylum seekers, or seems to expect local authorities to implement Home Office policies without Home Office funding, and then says that Scotland does not need to have a different immigration policy from the rest of the UK.

Ultimately, it will not be up to this Government to decide. People in Glasgow North and across Scotland want an asylum and immigration system that treats people with fairness and dignity. That is not what is being delivered by the current Tory Government, and there is little evidence that the pro-Brexit Labour party would do much to change things either. The actions of the two pro-Brexit, anti-independence parties make the case for Scotland to become independent, because by refusing to adapt the current regime or devolve powers to Holyrood, they show that only way for Scotland to have an immigration system fit for purpose in the modern world is with those full powers of independence.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** What an interesting choice. Aha! But there is no choice, as the first choice is always the Father of the House.

4.4 pm

**Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con):** If the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) does not mind, I will not go too far down his line, except to say that if that is his appeal at the next general election, SNP Members are more likely to get the 37% of the vote that they got in 2017 rather than the percentage that they think they might get if they had everything their own way.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) for proposing this debate, and I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton).

It is worth remembering that the population of London 11,000 years ago was nothing. People migrated to London after the end of the Little Ice Age. If most of us look back through our family histories, or the family histories of those our families married into, we will find a great deal of mixture. I know that when some of my grandchildren were at school in California, there was an incredible mix of people in their classes.

A few days ago, Mr Speaker gave a reception in Speaker’s House for Multicultural Falklands. In the last census in the Falkland Islands, there was a population of 3,662, with 68 nationalities—from A for Australia to Z for Zimbabwe. If I may say so, I pay particular tribute to Zimbabweans who helped in the mine clearing and who obeyed the normal Falkland Islands rule that if a person lives there for more than 20 months, they will want to stay there and go on living there.

In 2005, in issue 3, volume 38, of the *International Migration Review*, which is linked to the Centre for Migration Studies, there is an article about the factors that make and unmake migration policies. In summary, migration policies often fail to achieve their declared objectives or have unintended consequences—well, that is a big surprise. It suggests that there are three reasons: the social dynamics of the migration process; factors linked to globalisation and transnationalism; and political systems.

I was reminded by somebody whom I met just before lunch today, who had been on a course run by the Royal College of Defence Studies in Belgrave Square, that 10 or so years ago, when they were having discussions about what the major issues would be over the next two or three decades, it was decided that it was going to be migration from Africa, where there are many unstable states, where climate change is making a difference and where there is not an ordinary flexible political or economic system. We all know that flexible economic systems lead to a growth in prosperity, as has been shown in many countries around the world. Where that is denied and there is high-level persistent civil war, people want to move out. Our ancestors did; we would.

However, that is not to say that we can just forget about migration. If there is uncontrolled migration against the policies of a country, there is unrest and uproar. This is one of the very few countries where, in a democratically elected Parliament, there are no extremists—whether from the left or the right. Some would put that down in part to our parliamentary system; others would put it down to other factors. I think that it is because, over the past 50 years or so, our migration and immigration policies have been debated fiercely.

There have been great arguments ever since James Callaghan, who was Home Secretary in the late 1960s, started putting controls on British passport holders from east Africa, even though, five years later, the Government—Robert Carr in particular and Edward Heath—rightly decided to admit the Ugandan Asians. I was honoured to be at Buckingham Palace when the King, in his first big public occasion, had a celebration service for the 50th anniversary of the Ugandan Asians coming here. We stood up and did what was right. We are doing the same thing with the people from Hong Kong, from Syria and from Ukraine.

My grandmother was a host to some White Russians after the great war. My parents had a Hungarian refugee in the 1950s, pushing one of the children out of their

room. My wife and I had Ugandan Asians and Zimbabwean refugees. There are people who are prepared to do their bit.

That is not to say that there is uncontrolled immigration, although I do warn visitors I take round the Palace of Westminster that the memorial to the Kindertransport process was something that people are proud of now, but that many opposed at the time.

Then there is the question: why only 10,000 children? What about their parents and the like? Some of those questions are unanswerable in a seven-minute contribution, but I would say that a Government—whether this Government or any alternative Government—who expect to get attention from both sides of the House should try to have policies that are not only likely to be fair and effective and that have a degree of humanity, but that recognise that a country such as this cannot accept very large numbers of people coming outside the rules. Inside the rules is one thing; outside the rules is another. That is why my right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister has not had detailed criticism from me on what he is trying to achieve. We know that what he is trying to do is right.

4.9 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What a pleasure it is to follow the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley). His contribution is always very wise—he is not called the Father of the House for nothing—and we thank him for that. I also thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to sow into this important debate.

I love to be part of a nation that embraces others. The fact that many of our hospitals could not currently function without international staff is testament to the mutually beneficial role that legal migrants play in all areas of the fabric of this wonderful society in which we are so blessed to live.

I will mention four points to begin with and then focus specifically on migration and the fishing sector. First, nearly 40% of those who crossed the channel in 2022 came from just five countries—Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Eritrea and Sudan—that are all in the top 12 of the Open Doors world watchlist, which details the countries that are the worst offenders for the persecution of Christians. That tells me that we open the doors for people who are fleeing due to persecution.

Secondly, yesterday an amendment was tabled in the other place to the Illegal Migration Bill that would make provision for an asylum pathway for individuals persecuted for their religion or belief. I ask the Minister and the Government to support the establishment of such a pathway.

Thirdly, pathway 3 of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme promised a pathway to 20,000 Afghans from vulnerable backgrounds, including at-risk religious minorities. The Government have promised to resettle more than 5,000 in the first year and up to 20,000 over the next five years. Currently, the pathway is open only to British Council and GardaWorld contractors and Chevening alumni. Again I ask whether that scheme will be opened to the groups identified as being at greatest risk.

Fourthly, I am mindful of something that has already been spoken about—those who have been in the system of hotels for almost two years. I have two companies in

my constituency that are willing and able to give jobs to those people right now. If people have been accepted under the asylum system, why not give them the opportunity to work and fill some of the gaps that we have in our area?

I want to focus the rest of my speech on fishing and the visa system. I have been discussing this with Harry Wick from the Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation, with whom I have been working closely to find a solution to the question of fishing and migrant workers, and he has asked me to stress something that must underpin this discussion: it is important not to conflate those entering the UK illegally with the safe and legal migrant workers that UK industry depends on.

The media tends to shift attention from those who applied correctly and bring skills to add to our workforce in many different forms to images of illegal immigrants, which is an entirely different debate. As I have said, there are jobs in the UK that need to be filled by highly qualified workers, including in hospitals, and that is accepted. What is not so well understood is that there are roles lying empty that simply are not filled, but which do not require significant training or specific expertise. Those jobs are no less valuable to our society because of that.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) referred to the farming sector. I encourage hon. Members to speak to a farmer who has crops dying in his fields because he cannot get the manual workers to come in. Low-skilled workers are an essential component of the workforce, and we cannot focus only on those with a degree education when other labour is just as essential. I know the Minister appreciates the point I am trying to make.

I am aware that lower-skilled labour is in short supply. The Home Office encourages industry not to look abroad but to look inwards to our own UK citizens, but they do not always fill the gap, whereas higher-skilled roles are filled by migrant workers through the points-based system. Given industry reports that labour supply is the biggest barrier to growth and that the UK labour market cannot fill our existing vacancies in either sphere, we need to understand our position in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in relation to migration in a more specific way.

The very clear question for the Minister is this: does he not agree that it would be in the best interests of UK workers to backfill those lower-skilled vacancies with appropriately sourced and legal migrant workers, while promoting an education system that allows children to pursue a vocational focus that suits their personality, character and what they are able to do, rather than an academic one?

I once read a quote—it might be a bit spurious—that went like this: “If we tell a fish that it is stupid for being unable to climb a tree, we prevent the fish from understanding the depth of its capacity.” It is all about capacity. Those who want to be on the fishing boats have the capacity to understand how fishing works. Instead of berating those who struggle with algebra, we must have a system that allows them to see that perhaps their love of the outdoors is exactly what the local farmer is looking for.

The gap in labour need cannot be filled internally, and the system of outsourcing, particularly in fishing, is too onerous. The language of the sea is understood by

[*Jim Shannon*]

all those who work it, and the language barrier on a boat is easily overcome by that common sea speak. Once again, I ask the Home Office to hear my plea. I spoke to the Minister before the debate to reiterate our request from the Westminster Hall debate two weeks ago.

I believe that this might be achieved by developing the existing seasonal workers scheme into something that can better support our fishing and farming communities, upon whom we rely three times a day, every single day, for our sustenance. That could also mean showing flexibility on the language requirement for skilled worker visas. The Minister knows my feelings on that. He has been very amicable in our meetings, and I genuinely appreciate it, as he knows. I am always trying to find solutions. For me, this is about solutions to the system, and I have given the Minister my thoughts about them.

I believe in change, but we need to move forward in a positive fashion to encourage migration for those who want to come here, work here, raise their families here and be a part of the wonderfully diverse British community—this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Before I call the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), I am so pleased to have the opportunity to congratulate her on becoming a dame.

4.17 pm

**Priti Patel (Witham) (Con):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your kindness and your warm introduction. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and the Backbench Business Committee for organising the debate, which has been interesting.

As colleagues will know, I spent just over three years in the Home Office, so I am familiar with these issues, challenges and difficulties. I have lived and breathed the problems around the migration policies, the complexities of the systems and other rather difficult issues. There were never just a handful of issues; there are always multiple, deeply challenging issues.

I will highlight some specifics and, importantly, where we can do things differently. It is important to discuss a range of matters when covering migration, including economic migration, the labour market—I have a background in labour market economics and feel very strongly about that—and the establishment of safe routes. I am grateful to colleagues who have already touched on such routes. The Afghan resettlement scheme and Operation Pitting were, I remind the House, a deeply traumatising experience for everybody at the time, particularly those in government. I worked with officials who simply did not sleep at night while we were removing people from Afghanistan. There was also the British national overseas scheme, which was about our responsibility to support British passport holders overseas. There is also how we deal with the asylum system and illegal migration issues.

On the economic front—the labour market aspect, linked to the points-based immigration system—yes, we ended free movement when we left the EU, which was important, and the new system we have in place is very

much governed by rules. We believe in firmness and fairness—fairness in particular—but also in people being able to come here based on their skills and qualifications and the labour market shortages faced by our country and our economy. I want to expand on that.

Britain should always be open to attract the brightest and the best from across the world in professions such as science, research and health in particular; we all remember the schemes to support health and care workers coming to our country. We can think about those routes and the categories of individuals I have mentioned, and yet we still hear cries—sometimes facile cries—that our numbers are far too high without an understanding of the contribution that people who are coming here make.

Under the points-based system, individuals are sponsored and pay thousands of pounds for their visas. On top of that, they pay thousands for the immigration health surcharge—and, by the way, many of them also end up being net contributors to the economy and higher rate taxpayers. These points are too easily overlooked when people just focus on numbers, and Members have touched on what happens when we do that.

I was in government for just over three years, and I was a lone voice in calling for a labour market strategy specifically to support the points-based immigration system. It is obvious that we need a labour market strategy. This would have sat with the Treasury at the time, and the Treasury simply did not do this work. I pay credit to the current Chancellor, who has picked this point up. We desperately need this strategy. Without that, we will continue to have labour market shortages and all the problems that Members have spoken about.

We also need to strengthen skills. I am afraid it is not good enough for the Government to say, “Let’s just train more fruit pickers.” People do not want to pick fruit; that is a statement of the obvious now. As this is a Government who invest a lot in technology, why are they not giving farmers capital allowances to help them bring in technology to pick fruit and vegetables, in the way that many of our competitors do?

I will quickly touch on illegal migration. It is right that we increase the fairness and efficiency of our system, so that we can better protect and support those in need of asylum, while also deterring illegal entry into our country. We need to break the business model of the people smugglers. The Government are seeking to do that, and it is hard work. There is no one single solution, but I am worried that the Government may be overpromising. They say, “We’ll just stop the boats,” when clearly, we cannot just stop the boats. There are so many other things that need to be done, such as offshore processing, bringing the Rwanda scheme to light, life sentences for people smugglers and making it harder for migrants to make these dangerous crossings. We must also stop the repeat and endless last-minute claims that go through our courts and the appeals system in particular. The “New Plan for Immigration” tried to do a lot of that, and I hope the Government will continue to pursue those policies.

In the time I have left, I would like to ask the Minister some specific questions regarding asylum accommodation, which is a very hot topic across many constituencies. We have a crisis in hotels, but at the same time, in Braintree district we have a proposed site to accommodate asylum seekers in Wethersfield. I thank the Minister for speaking to me about this issue last week. I was on a call with the



local authorities concerned yesterday, and they are still waiting to find out whether they will receive financial support. The police and the NHS are still waiting for clarification about the funding packages and when they will come. Our councillors are deeply worried about whether they will be held liable for service provision.

There is not enough clarity yet between Clearsprings, the service provider, and local authorities about who will have responsibility for the delivery of not just the site but services. There are areas in Essex already accommodating a large number of refugees—particularly in Chelmsford and Colchester—and asylum seekers. After a short period in Wethersfield site, they will then be dispersed in the community or potentially back into hotels. The Minister has spent some time with me on this issue, and I wonder if he could update me on it.

To conclude, these are difficult matters to address. There will never be a single solution to this, but it is important that we constantly in this House find the right kind of solutions and discuss these issues in a sensible and pragmatic way.

4.24 pm

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): I wanted to talk about the challenge posed by legal migration, but there is not much time. Therefore, as my constituency is about to be the victim of illegal migration, I must follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) in talking about that topic and once again raising the issue of RAF Scampton. I apologise if I am wearying the House on this issue, but unless people groan when you stand up, you are probably not making progress in this place, so I will keep referring to it.

The decision to house 2,000 migrants at RAF Scampton is a perverse decision that makes no sense in terms of public policy. To remind the House, RAF Scampton is an iconic RAF base, the home of the Dambusters and the Red Arrows. It is to the RAF what Portsmouth is to the Royal Navy. We had the most exciting scheme ever developed for a former RAF base, with £300 million of investment and really exciting proposals, but the Home Office is now intending to put 2,000 migrants in that base. It wants to take the whole base. There are 800 acres, miles of perimeter fence, a two-mile-long runway and 100 buildings—many of them listed, such as Guy Gibson's office. We were going to have a heritage centre. I have talked about the past and the rich heritage that could, and does, make RAF Scampton an iconic base, but most excitingly of all—as I said to the Innovation Minister yesterday—we were going to have a spaceport on the runway. We were going to launch rockets into space carrying satellites, so a whole new technology was about to be developed.

Why is the Home Office taking this huge, historic base to house 2,000 migrants? Apparently, it wants three or four decaying airmen's blocks that could maybe take 300 or 400 people, and a bit of hardstanding. The Home Office must own hardstanding all over the country; why can it not put portacabins up on hardstanding, and not try to stymie £300 million of investment? It would be a reasonable proposal as a starting point if the Home Office said to us, "All right, there are these airmen's blocks. We will take them and put a fence around them"—of course, we cannot lock people up under the refugee convention, but they could go to their own entrance and take a bus to Lincoln, where they could

access health, education, sport and all the rest of it—"and we will release the rest of the site to West Lindsey District Council." It has not even offered us that.

It gets worse. This is something that I have not yet said in the House, which I think is really bad: this is not an isolated site in the middle of the countryside. It is just five miles from Lincoln. There are 1,000 people who live cheek by jowl next to the RAF base in the former married quarters. Some of those people—maybe 100 of them—are still serving RAF personnel. What is really bad is that there has been a total lack of communication between the Government and those private citizens who live in the married quarters, who have bought their own home and put their life savings into those houses, but there has been regular communication with the Ministry of Defence personnel.

Only two or three weeks ago, there was a so-called secret meeting at the village hall on the site, with two military policemen outside, at which the MOD personnel employed by the RAF were told that because migrants were now going to be placed next to them, they would be moved at public expense. That offer has not been made to the ordinary people who have bought their house. The Minister will say, "I am not responsible for the MOD", but we have collective responsibility. How can the Government say that it is so shocking that their own people, who they employ, should live next to a migrant camp that they are prepared to move them at public expense?

The buildings that we are talking about are old—some of them were put up in the war. They are not built to a modern standard, they may be riddled with asbestos, and there has been contamination by fuel. The Government say, "The fact that we are going to put them in an RAF base is a deterrent", but I can tell them that if a person is desperate—if they come from the likes of Syria, Somalia or Iraq—they are not going to be deterred from coming to the United Kingdom because they will be put up in a warm room in RAF Scampton, rather than a hotel in Skegness. Skegness is very bracing; it might actually be warmer in RAF Scampton. The thought that we are going to deter people just by taking over an RAF base simply does not make sense.

There is such a lack of communication with the local authority, too. We have asked for risk assessments, but they have been denied us. We have asked for an assessment of the risk of asbestos and that has been denied us.

If the Illegal Migration Bill goes through—I warmly support it; it is the only hope that we can deter people because they know they will be detained and offshored—people will come to Manston. Apparently, they will then be immediately sent to RAF Scampton. By definition at that stage, if the Bill becomes law, they will be illegal migrants, but they will be in RAF Scampton. The Government tell us that there are no plans to make RAF Scampton a detention centre, so those people will be able to walk out the front door, take the shuttle bus to Lincoln, take the train to London and vanish. We have no ID cards. We will never find them. What is the logic of all this? It simply does not make sense.

We should have joined-up government. We are supposed to believe in innovation. Why are we stopping a fantastic piece of innovation to launch satellites into space? We are supposed to believe in levelling up, so why are we destroying £300 million-worth of levelling up? We are supposed to have a coherent policy on migration. Putting

[Sir Edward Leigh]

as many as 2,000 migrants in one place is not a good idea. By the way, it is not supported by local people, the local authority or the Refugee Council. It is bad for their stability and welfare to have 2,000 migrants in one place. For all those reasons, I very much hope the Minister will think again.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the SNP spokesman.

4.31 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) for leading this debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I welcome the opportunity to put a few points on the record. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), my case load tells a sorry tale about the UK Government's approach to migration. The volume is something to behold and it is because of their approach. Today alone, I am pulling my hair out because of someone in vain trying to help their elderly mother who has had to flee Sudan. The UK Government do not seem to be interested. I also have a wee baby stuck in Pakistan and again the UK Government do not seem to be interested. I feel often like I am banging my head off a brick wall when trying to help people who deserve the UK Government's help. If the Minister can stop flicking through his paperwork, perhaps he will indicate whether he feels able to help with either of those thorny cases.

**The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick)** indicated dissent.

**Kirsten Oswald:** The Minister shakes his head. What a shameful way to behave. I am trying to assist people in grave need and this says everything about the UK Government's approach to migration. It should not be like this, Minister. Migration and migrants can bring a positive benefit to our communities and people who are in the gravest peril deserve a good deal more support and respect. It is not just me and the Scottish National party saying that. Opinion polled a large number of UK adults on the Illegal Migration Bill and the people it spoke to felt that the way people seeking asylum are described in political debate is "overly negative". I thought that was interesting because that is not what someone would believe if they stood in the Chamber and listened to the UK Government.

**Sir Peter Bottomley:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Kirsten Oswald:** I am going to continue, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, as time is limited. We all see the impact of migration policies. There are labour shortages and skills shortages, and Scottish need is certainly not taken into account by the UK Government. Whether it is the kind of cases I talked about, floating internment camps, boat pushbacks, deportation flights or the circumventing of international law, the depths that this Government will sink to on migration are frankly depressing. They are hostile in every way. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North put that well.

The Prime Minister has had his say, too. He said:

"If you are coming here illegally, claiming sanctuary from death, torture or persecution".

That is Orwellian doublespeak because international law determines that, if someone is fleeing death, torture or persecution, they are seeking refuge legally. Nobody is illegal. It is not only confusing in that way. The Home Office's own logic is not logical. It said:

"Alternative accommodation options"—

that is how it puts things—

"including barges, will save the British taxpayer money."

But the very same Home Office is set to spend up to £6 billion over two years on detention facilities and ongoing accommodation and removal costs, and Treasury insiders say that the deterrent effect has not been reliably modelled, meaning that the numbers are likely to be wrong and costs much greater. The Refugee Council correctly says that barges are

"entirely unsuitable for the needs"

of those seeking refuge and are a

"direct consequence of the chronic delays and huge backlog in the asylum system".

Not only that, but a third of the UK's international aid budget is actually being spent on domestic asylum costs. The system is not working because it is underpinned by policies that are simply wrong.

The Illegal Migration Bill has been widely condemned across civil and political society. A coalition of 176 civil society organisations is calling on the UK Government to immediately withdraw it because it potentially breaches multiple international conventions and agreements. That is on top of the fact that UK family reunion rules are already among the most restrictive in Europe. The Dubs scheme for refugee children was prematurely closed. Brexit—that elephant in the room that neither the Conservative Government nor the Labour Opposition want to talk about—means that Dublin family reunion applications are no longer possible. My constituents really care about this. I hear a lot from constituents who are deeply worried about why we are not showing compassion for children who seek to come here for sanctuary, and why we are turning our back and turning our face away. I understand their concerns, and I agree with them. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is "profoundly concerned" about the direction of travel, saying that it

"would amount to an asylum ban—extinguishing the right to seek refugee protection in the UK for people who arrive irregularly, no matter how compelling their claim".

The chief executive of the Refugee Council is also concerned.

I spoke to the ladies from the VOICES Network whom the British Red Cross hosted here yesterday, and the main thing they want is a safe place to live for women seeking asylum. It does not seem like very much, does it? They are just looking to be treated with a bit of dignity, and the SNP wants to see migrants being given that dignity. We want them to have the right to work and to contribute to the society they call home, but they have no right to work here and no access to social security support in too many cases. The right to work, as article 23 of the universal declaration of human rights tells us, is a fundamental right, not that you would believe that here. People can apply for the right to work only after they have been waiting for more than one year, and even then very few are granted permission. People are essentially banned from working. Not only is that very unfortunate and difficult for them, but it is very unfortunate and difficult for us, as we miss out on the skills and talents that they bring with them.

The UK is an outlier. Other countries do not deal with things this way. Imagine the benefit to our NHS of allowing doctors trained elsewhere to come here and to work to look after the people here who need it. We are also completely opposed to the “no recourse to public funds” policies, which are blocking migrant groups from essential safety nets. Migrants, who are already likely to be vulnerable and in low-paid and insecure work, are therefore disproportionately likely to be at risk of destitution.

Then there are the unaccompanied children. Over 4,000 have been placed in hotels since 2021, and 200 children remain missing. That is shocking; it is inconceivable. The UK Government clearly cannot be trusted as a corporate parent, and the Scottish Government are deeply concerned about this. Scotland does take its responsibilities seriously. The Scottish Government want no part of the UK Government’s “hostile environment” approach to refugees and asylum seekers, or people who are among the most vulnerable in the world—*[Laughter.]* I do not know why the Minister finds this funny, because I do not think it is funny at all.

**Robert Jenrick:** The Scottish Government are not doing anything!

**Kirsten Oswald:** The Scottish Government will do absolutely what is needed for refugees if given the power to allow us to actually do so, and it is high time that the Minister stopped this damaging narrative, which is neither accurate nor fair. *[Interruption.]*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. The hon. Lady is about conclude. Just let her finish.

**Kirsten Oswald:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Rather than more damaging legislation, what we want to see is safe and legal routes for people coming here to seek sanctuary from war and persecution. We need an effective and efficient asylum system and, if that cannot be created here, the powers to do that must be devolved to Scotland so that we can create an asylum system with fairness and dignity at its heart. If we had the powers of a normal independent country, we could of course do that ourselves, and I much look forward to the day when we can.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the shadow Minister.

4.39 pm

**Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab):** I will begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) and the hon. Members for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this important debate.

There are currently around 220,000 migrants playing a critical role in our NHS. Their contribution is hugely valued, but the question the Government must ask is this: why we are so reliant on migrant workers, largely from developing countries, to prop up our struggling healthcare system? Ghana’s healthcare system is dealing with huge challenges, yet 1,200 nurses left Ghana last year to come to the UK, with 20 nurses leaving a single intensive care unit for Britain in the past six months alone. Why last year did the Government strike a deal

with Nepal, a very poor country on the World Health Organisation’s red list for health worker shortages, in order to drain that country of 100 nurses? The answer is clearly that the Conservatives have utterly failed to train our own homegrown talent. Thirteen years of neglect has seen nursing bursaries cut and the budget for further education skills reduced by 12% per pupil since 2010.

Where is the education and training that allows young people to upskill and progress? Why do businesses and public services feel that they have to look abroad when they could be recruiting homegrown talent, or increasing wages to ensure that those jobs pay a better salary that someone can raise a family on? Those are the questions that our constituents are asking.

Labour has a plan to fix the points-based system—a system that we introduced in 2008 for non-EU citizens, but that has since been broken by the Tories. There will be no return to free movement under a Labour Government, only a commitment to get the points-based system fit for purpose for both businesses and workers. That is why we are reviewing the points-based system to consider how we can put responsibilities on employers who recruit from abroad to invest in homegrown talent, and how the Migration Advisory Committee can work more closely with the Skills and Productivity Board to ensure that our immigration system feeds our wider economic aims.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has already announced that Labour will ditch the deeply flawed Government policy that allows businesses on the shortage occupation lists to undercut British workers by paying foreign workers 20% less than the going rate. The Government’s current policy is an insult to British workers, while also causing standards for those migrants who contribute so much to our economy to be diminished. It really is the worst of all worlds. While our system of economic migration is largely connected to our country’s wider economic needs, the asylum system is about our country’s shared international responsibilities and Britain’s role in meeting a challenge that is fast becoming a global crisis. We are living in an age of authoritarian Governments, many of whom, from Putin’s barbaric invasion of Ukraine to the Taliban in Afghanistan and China’s crushing of democracy in Hong Kong, are forcing persecuted and vulnerable people to flee their homelands. Chaos breeds chaos. It is therefore in Britain’s self-interest to work with our allies across Europe and the wider world to provide solutions. Instead, the Illegal Migration Bill, also known as the bigger backlog Bill, will make it harder to fix the system because it prevents the Home Secretary from processing asylum applications. Moreover, it breaks international law, as was confirmed this week by the Joint Committee on Human Rights. That will hardly help to facilitate international co-operation, will it?

The Rwanda scheme is an unworkable, unaffordable and unethical sham that, if it ever happens, will only be able to accommodate 1% to 2% of asylum seekers. We have had a failure to replace the returns agreement that we had when we were in the EU before Brexit. A deterrent will only deter if it is credible. These plans are not credible, and therefore the channel crossers keep coming, with 616 on Sunday alone and 8,500 so far this year. Earlier this month the Prime Minister flew on his helicopter to Dover to declare victory, but he needs to learn that an asylum strategy based on the weather is not particularly sustainable.



[Stephen Kinnock]

The Conservatives do not seem to care whether their policies work, and they certainly do not care how much they cost. They have handed the Rwanda Government £140 million for a press release. The cost of the asylum system is four times as high today as it was in 2010, at an eye-watering £2.1 billion per year. Emergency hotels are costing £7 million a day, and an astonishing £1.5 billion since the current Prime Minister assumed his role. The Prime Minister admits that the system is broken, and he should know—his party broke it. Much of this comes down to the backlog on asylum decision making, and a process that has been butchered by 13 years of Conservative incompetence. The failure to process asylum applications was initially caused by the Conservatives downgrading Home Office decision makers from higher executive officer to entry-level roles, leading to worse decisions that were often overturned on appeal, and a staff turnover rate of a whopping 46% last year. Astonishingly, the Home Secretary admitted to the Home Affairs Committee yesterday that she has no idea how many asylum caseworkers the Department employs.

The human and financial costs of the chaos are plain. Asylum seekers are stuck in limbo, unable to work as their mental health deteriorates while the British taxpayer is picking up the bill. It really is the worst of all worlds. Labour is clear: it is critical that these dangerous small boat crossings are stopped, because we cannot have people risking their lives in this way while the people smugglers are making millions by trading in human misery. We must clear the backlog quickly and securely, and we have a five-point plan to do it. We would: scrap Rwanda and plough the money into an elite unit in the National Crime Agency; negotiate an agreement with France and the EU to return asylum seekers in exchange for a strictly capped offer for resettling genuine refugees; get the backlog sorted by having triage for high grant rate and low grant rate countries; get the safe and legal routes such as those for Afghanistan working, because the Afghan scheme is completely broken; and get our international aid programme working much more in collaboration with what is happening in terms of the Home Office and countries that generate large numbers of asylum seekers.

The reality is that every single measure that Conservative Ministers have announced on asylum has turned out to be an expensive and unworkable headline-chasing gimmick. When it comes to net migration, the figure is clearly unsustainable, and yet the Government have no plan to get the number down. The root cause of the problem is that they are not taking responsibility. They blame their predecessors, they blame the Opposition, they blame the civil service, they blame the lawyers, they blame the judges and they blame the European Union—they even blame the football pundits. They also fudge the asylum statistics and fudge the cost of their legislation. They refuse to produce impact assessments. They even fudge their pledges when they realise that they cannot meet their targets. That is no way to run a country and it is no way to run the asylum system. We need to get this Government out of the way so that we can have a Labour Government who will stand up, take responsibility and fix the system, and we need that right now.

4.46 pm

**The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick):** I join hon. Members across the House in thanking my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham

(Tim Loughton), my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), the Father of the House, and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) for securing this general debate on migration. By the standards of immigration debates, it has been a thoughtful and reflective one. I plan to use the short time I have to answer directly as many of the questions raised by right hon. and hon. Members as possible.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton opened the debate with an understandable message that the UK should be a country in which those people genuinely seeking sanctuary can find safety and a new life, and we should be looking to continue to develop safe and legal routes. The Government share in that, and we believe that we have done that in recent years. Since 2015, almost 550,000 people have come to the United Kingdom on humanitarian grounds, which is more than in any comparable period in our modern history. They have come on individual country schemes, including those mentioned by many colleagues, from Ukraine, Syria and Hong Kong, and indeed on the global scheme operated on behalf of the United Kingdom by the United Nations. A small number have also come on the community sponsorship scheme, which enables any one of us, our communities or faith organisations to assist people directly in moving from places of danger to a new life in the UK. The Government strongly encourage others to take part in that if they care deeply about these issues.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton raised visa costs. I appreciate that, in particular for those people who have lived in the UK for many years and want now to settle here permanently, as well as for those who have settlement but want to obtain British citizenship. The Government believe that citizenship is important and something that everyone who lives here for a sustained period of time should aspire to. I appreciate that the costs of some of those routes are high, and we take that into account, but we have to balance that against the cost of managing the broader immigration system. It is right that the system should be as self-sustaining as possible, so that it places as low a burden as can be on the wider UK taxpayer. We have made concessions for certain types of visa. He mentioned the health and social care visa. Almost 100,000 were granted in the year ending March 2023. That visa carries a reduced fee and an expedited service for good reason.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the UKVI and its service standards. As I have said in the House on recent occasions, the UKVI is well run. It is important, as a Home Office Minister, to give credit where it is due. Not all things work well, but where they do and where the leadership is performing a strong service, it is right we recognise that. The UKVI is meeting its service standards in all regards, according to the last data I saw. It does have service standards, whether published or internal, for every type of visa or application and it is meeting those requirements.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about labour shortages, we take them very seriously. We have to be pragmatic as a Government to ensure that business has the workers necessary to drive forward the economy. We have to recognise that net migration last year of 606,000, which included about 300,000 work visas, is very high by historic standards. That means many, many people are coming into the country for work purposes, the system

is working and businesses can access that labour, but we have to balance their need for labour against shortages of housing, access to public services, in particular in the health service, and the ability of this country, like any, to integrate people successfully and to build a cohesive and united society. I am concerned that the current levels of net migration are too high and are not sustainable in the long term.

I also do not believe that it is a way to drive long-term prosperity and productivity by allowing companies, in some instances, to reach for the easy lever of foreign labour. Instead, they should be reaching for technology and automation, and above all investing in local people in the British workforce to help them into the labour market in the first instance. Those are the principles underlying the points-based system that my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), the former Home Secretary, established, which allows for a degree of pragmatism through the shortage occupation list and other bespoke visa routes, such as the health and social care visa. They give us, for the first time in our modern history, the ability to make changes where necessary.

One of those changes is the change to student visas, which we announced last month. That now enables us to take action against dependants coming with students who are here on short courses, such as one-year master's. I think that is the right decision because universities, although undoubtedly an incredible force for good here in the UK and around the world, should be primarily in the education business and not the immigration business, enabling a back route to life in the UK for individuals and their families. That is what we want to refocus the system on.

The hon. Gentleman raised, as did many others, the issue of the backlog. Let me be perfectly clear that one of the priorities for the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and me, since we came into office last year, has been reducing the backlog. To develop an efficient system, it is important to reduce the reliance on hotels, which we all agree is inappropriate, and to enable people who will ultimately be granted status the ability to get on with their lives and contribute to society here in the UK. I am confident we will be able to eliminate the legacy backlog over the course of this year. We put in place a number of further measures recently, some of which have been referenced today. We have also brought into play more resources, drawing not just on caseworkers—a growing pool of individuals in the Home Office thanks to our recruitment efforts—but on skilled workers from within the UK visa service and within the Passport Office as well, to bolster those efforts and give us a greater prospect of achieving our ultimate aim of reducing the backlog.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) rightly spoke of the international context underlying the present situation. It was for that reason that I have been to France, Italy, Tunisia and Algeria in the last few weeks—to work with partner countries together on our shared challenge and so that UK assets, such as the National Crime Agency, Border Force and the police, can work with those countries further upstream. They will help them stop migrants from leaving transit countries such as those in north Africa and getting anywhere near the UK. That is an incredibly important part of our broader plan.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham was right to raise the question of France. It is a significant achievement in the past six months that the relationship with France has improved significantly. That has led to more interception rates and more arrests, but there is more work to be done there in our relationship with the French. We have signed other agreements with Albania and Georgia, and a memorandum with Italy. We are working with the EU to develop a partnership with respect to Frontex. I am sure that there will be other opportunities with partner countries both within Europe and beyond. That is something I personally want to take forward to deepen those relationships.

Having spoken to my opposite numbers from a range of countries in the past two weeks, it is clear that we are all grappling with a very substantial challenge. The UK is not alone and is not considered an outlier. In fact, many of the steps that we are taking, including the Rwanda policy, are attracting great interest from other countries. If it is operationalised, it is likely that other countries will seek to pursue something similar. We want to work as closely as possible with other countries to tackle this challenge together.

On the point that my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham and others made about our ODA budget, it is incredibly important that we tackle illegal migration precisely because it is a very poor use of our resources. We are spending a great deal of money on things such as hotels, primarily to assist young men who have been in a place of safety such as France to come to the United Kingdom to continue their lives here. Those resources could be used far better upstream to support people in and around conflict zones, whether through international organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or otherwise. By tackling illegal migration, such as through the Illegal Migration Bill, we can help the United Kingdom to be a greater force for good in the world.

I am conscious that there is little time, but the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) raised concerns about the performance of the Home Office and the manner in which we house asylum seekers. We want to work with the Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities so that they can play a greater part in appropriately housing asylum seekers and refugees. We are currently in one such live discussion at the moment, and I very much hope that they will encourage their colleagues in Scotland to assist with those negotiations. I apologise for overrunning my time, Madam Deputy Speaker.

4.58 pm

**Dan Carden:** I want to use this final minute to thank my colleagues, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), for collaborating on this debate, which was very positive. I thank the Front-Bench spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), and the Minister for the replies.

I focused my comments on the costs and barriers to visas and labour shortages, and the backlog in the Home Office. Those issues need to be fixed before we can move forward to consider what a positive migration system can look like in future now that we are in control of our own borders. We should promote the virtues of

[Dan Carden]

migration, as many speakers today did, and the contribution that people can make to this country. Finally, the grave challenges that we face, which require international co-operation, are to do with poverty, climate and conflict, and the UK's role to support people around the world on that.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered Government policies on migration.

## Neuroblastoma Treatment

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Scott Mann.*)

5 pm

**Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): It is a privilege to have secured this debate on tackling neuroblastoma. I have been seeking the debate ever since I had the pleasure of meeting my constituent Mark Bell and his family at a fundraising event last year. I am pleased that Mark, Luke's father, and, Carol, Luke's grandmother, are able to be with us in the Gallery for the debate. I want to share with the House their story and how they came to establish their charity, the Team Luke Foundation, which is ably contributing to the battle against neuroblastoma. I would also like to thank Solving Kids' Cancer UK for reaching out to me in advance of the debate and sharing a briefing outlining their ideas on how we can move forward in the treatment of neuroblastoma.

The Team Luke Foundation was established as a registered charity by Mark and his wife Rebecca following the death of their inspirational eight-year-old son, Luke, who sadly died from neuroblastoma in December 2018, a mere 21 months after his original diagnosis. Luke was a typical young boy. He loved gaming, rugby, school, playing with his friends and, most of all, spending time with his mum, dad and big sister Alysha. He was incredibly active and full of energy.

I want to share an insight into Luke's diagnosis journey, which led up to his family hearing those awful words, exactly six years ago, that his symptoms were "suggestive of cancer". Over the preceding six months, Luke had started to have one or two unspecific viruses that seem to go around every school, at any time of the year. His symptoms amounted to a temperature, tiredness and not being that fussed about eating. They usually improved after a lie down in front of the telly, watching his favourites, but they never really bothered him.

Between October and December 2016, Luke started to look a little bit pale from time to time. Just before Christmas, his family had a trip to Kielder, in Northumberland, and the family remember occasions when Luke was a bit pale and tired, even asking for a carry one day, but it did not stop him doing a bit of ice skating, tobogganing and general mischief-making. His parents have looked back on photos of him from Christmas that year, to see whether there was something specific they might have missed, but nothing pinpointed anything that would have caused them any real worry.

By early 2017, things started to take a turn for the worse. Luke looked a bit paler and a few random symptoms started to cause some concerns. There were several conversations with Luke's teachers about him getting more tired in class, even falling asleep in a couple of lessons. He also developed a slight limp and, from time to time, he complained of pain in his leg, and asked his dad to be carried on his shoulders for the walk to and from school.

Luke's leg pain started to become pretty much constant, especially in the morning. He also had a visit to the local hospital after a phone call from the school one day to say that a large bump had appeared on his forehead. There was no known explanation for the bump. His family did not know until much later that it was a sign of a tumour on his skull.



In March 2017, Luke visited Center Parcs in France with his dad. Although his appetite was poor and his energy levels were low, he enjoyed the trip. On returning home, things moved quickly. An urgent visit to his GP resulted in him giving samples of blood. That was followed with a requirement to attend the local hospital for more tests. At around 2 am on the morning of 7 April 2017, his family were told the tests were “suggestive of cancer”, and Luke was taken by ambulance to the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle.

With the knowledge that it was cancer, Luke's parents did at least feel reassured that he would be starting treatment immediately. The initial diagnosis was of acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, which had a better prognosis than many other childhood cancers, but that was then changed to acute myeloid leukaemia, which had a much poorer survival rate. The family had to wait for further tests, and almost a week later the diagnosis was finally confirmed as high-risk neuroblastoma.

Later tests identified a particular characteristic of Luke's cancer genes known as MYCN. This meant that he fell into the ultra-high-risk category. To add to the mix, they learned that boys and older children generally had a worse outlook. Knowing how much time had passed since their concerns were first raised with the appropriate medical professionals has added to the family's heartbreak.

Neuroblastoma is a rare cancer that affects children. It mostly affects children under the age of five years, with fewer than 100 between the ages of 0 and 14 being diagnosed each year in the UK. Very rarely, it can develop in older children, teenagers and adults. Seventy per cent. of children with neuroblastoma survive for five years or more after being diagnosed. At present there are no known lifestyle-related or environmental causes of neuroblastoma, so it is important to remember that there is nothing that Luke or his parents could have done to prevent it.

Following his diagnosis, Luke commenced a gruelling course of treatments, including high-dose chemotherapy, extensive surgery to remove the tumour, radiotherapy, and immunotherapy. Unfortunately, routine tests in spring 2018 showed that he had relapsed. In September he was accepted on to a clinical trial, but tests as part of the trial revealed that the cancer had spread aggressively through his body. His family then received the devastating news that his cancer was terminal. Determined not to give in, Luke was accepted on to a clinical trial in Barcelona, due to start in January.

Sadly, Luke never made it to Barcelona. He passed away on 23 December 2018. He was eight years old. To lose any family member is devastating, but to have a child taken so prematurely—it is hard to imagine the pain that Luke's family went through then, and they are still grieving today. Luke was their brown-eyed, blond-haired boy who filled their hearts with joy and made them smile every single day, and I know that he will not be forgotten. It is truly a privilege to be able to put Luke's story on the record in the House, and to play a part in ensuring that his memory lives on.

In the wake of Luke's death, his parents set up the Team Luke Foundation to create a legacy for him. In the words of his father Mark:

“It is very much in the spirit of his personality. Luke was very inquisitive and had a great interest in the treatment he was going through. He was also a very helpful boy, who didn't like to see any sadness or suffering. He inspires everything we do.”

Since Luke's illness, his parents have heard of many children who have had similar experiences of late diagnosis. Although neuroblastoma is a rare disease, the survival rate is comparatively very poor, so catching it early is key. The foundation's aims and objectives are to make more people aware of this childhood cancer, to help parents access key services and information, to provide practical support, and to fund research to improve diagnosis and develop kinder treatments. The foundation has produced information posters for schools, which will be distributed to schools in Darlington and further afield.

If you will permit me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will list the signs to spot cancer in children: headaches; vision issues; sudden or persistent weight loss; changes in skin complexion; unexplained bumps, lumps or bruising; recurring high temperatures and night sweats; frequent tiredness and low energy levels; persistent or intermittent pain; and aching limbs and limping.

I am fully supportive of Team Luke's work, and want to praise it unreservedly for keeping Luke's memory alive and for the important work it is doing to tackle this awful cancer. A number of my colleagues have raised neuroblastoma during this Parliament. Last year my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) both shared powerful stories about children in their constituencies who had suffered with neuroblastoma, during a debate on childhood cancer outcomes. I was also very sad to hear that the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), who sadly could not attend this debate, has a constituent whose daughter died from neuroblastoma earlier this month. She has written to the Prime Minister to encourage him to do all he can to pioneer new treatments for this awful disease. I want to add my voice to that call. Will the Minister press our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to respond to the points that the hon. Lady has made?

Luke, like many children, was taken too soon by the awful disease that is cancer. I want to thank the Minister for listening, and end by leaving him with these questions. Will he work with me and other across the House to speed up and improve the diagnosis of neuroblastoma? Will he do all he can to increase the pace of research into treatments that are more effective at treating neuroblastoma? And will he do all he can to ensure that his Department does all it can to raise awareness of neuroblastoma?

5.11 pm

**The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) for securing this important debate. I thank him especially for sharing the experience of his constituent Mark Bell, and the challenging events leading up to the devastating loss of his much-loved son Luke to neuroblastoma. I am pleased that Mark and Carol could be here for this debate. As a parent who has sadly lost a child myself, I send my heartfelt condolences to Mark and his family. No parent should have to go through what his family have; I know that it is a void that can never be filled. I am full of admiration for Mark and his family: as my hon. Friend pointed out, following their tragic loss, they established their charity, the Team Luke Foundation, to help other parents in a

[Will Quince]

similar situation. I commend and applaud its important work in raising awareness of neuroblastoma and supporting parents in accessing the information and advice that they need.

My hon. Friend also referenced the letter to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister from the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) about her constituent Beau. I too would like to extend my deep condolences to the family of brave and beautiful Beau, who also lost her life to neuroblastoma. My thoughts are also very much with Shirley and her family. I would like to assure my hon. Friend and all families who are affected by cancer that one of my and the Government's top priorities is speeding up the diagnosis and improving the treatment of cancer, including neuroblastoma.

Working together with our colleagues in the national health service, the Government have three priorities for cancer care. The first is to recover from the pandemic and the backlog. The second is to get better at early diagnosis, which my hon. Friend made a very eloquent and articulate case for, and to get better treatment using the tools and technologies available to us. The third is to invest in research and innovation, because we know that things such as genomics and AI have the potential to transform our experience of cancer as a society. With my hon. Friend's permission, I will focus on diagnosis and research.

Let me turn first to early diagnosis. Cancer services, including those for children, are an absolute priority for the NHS—I know that and have seen it at first hand. The NHS is working to raise further awareness of the symptoms of cancer, lower the threshold for referral by GPs and accelerate access to diagnoses and treatment. The NHS long-term plan for cancer aims for three quarters of cancers to be diagnosed at stage 1 or 2. NHS England launched operational delivery networks in June 2021 to enable clinicians to lead and improve cancer pathways for children and young people.

We are also making interventions to diagnose cancer early. NHS England has announced that it is expanding direct access to diagnostic scans across all GP practices, which will cut waiting times and, importantly, speed up diagnosis for patients. Non-specific symptom pathways are transforming the way that people with symptoms not specific to one cancer, such as weight loss or fatigue, are diagnosed or have cancer ruled out. This gives GPs a much-needed referral route, while speeding up and streamlining the process so that, where needed, people can start their treatment sooner. Thankfully, the majority of people referred will be given the all-clear. It is crucial that people who are diagnosed start their treatment promptly, while giving peace of mind to those who do not have cancer.

We have previously discussed this, but I hope my hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that the Department has committed an additional £8 billion over the next two years to increase our capacity for elective activity and for adult and children's cancer services.

Community diagnostic centres have played a huge role in recovering the cancer backlog. We have 108 community diagnostic centres open and operational as of today, and our aim is to open 160 by 2025, but I want to go much faster. So far, we have delivered over 4 million additional vital tests and checks since 2021, including

for cancer. Testing and diagnosing early means we can provide the right treatment on time, which is why, as my hon. Friend said, it is so important.

The NHS continues to do groundbreaking research to improve treatment for children with neuroblastoma. Supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Research and Great Ormond Street, it has identified a new drug target for children with neuroblastoma, with the hope that new, less intrusive therapies will be developed by targeting a developmental cell type that exists only in neuroblastoma tumours after a child is born. This team of scientists and doctors at Great Ormond Street and University College London has been awarded a £519,000 Wellcome Trust innovator award to continue its groundbreaking research using image-guided surgery for childhood cancers—that is specifically for neuroblastoma.

The NIHR has also awarded funding to support the development of a treatment decision aid for parents of children with neuroblastoma that has sadly relapsed. The study will consist of two phases and aims to develop an intervention to support parents who are having to make multiple different treatment decisions after their child has relapsed. I will gladly meet my hon. Friend and the NIHR to see what further steps we can take to boost research into neuroblastoma.

My hon. Friend referenced the letter that the hon. Member for Batley and Spen sent to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister regarding the bivalent vaccine trial, which is not currently available in the United Kingdom. UK clinicians and researchers are hesitant about the US trial of bivalent vaccines for children in remission with neuroblastoma, because it has no comparator group to enable measurement of the treatment's effectiveness and effect. I also understand that the trial involves very intensive and invasive post-treatment monitoring. Nevertheless, I know discussions are ongoing in the international community, including here in the United Kingdom, on the optimal trial design that will generate the high-quality evidence needed to understand the real efficacy of the bivalent vaccine in this group of patients.

Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington for bringing this hugely important matter to the House and, importantly, for sharing Luke's story. I thank Luke's family for the work they are doing, not just in raising awareness, which of course is hugely important, but in the support they are giving to families in similar positions. I am pleased to assure my hon. Friend that, together with groundbreaking research supported by the NIHR and the continued efforts of the NHS in recovering cancer services, the treatment of neuroblastoma and all other cancers remains an absolute top priority for not just me but this Government.

Let me conclude by saying that my hon. Friend asked three specific questions, and my answer to all three is: yes, yes and yes.

Finally, I ask you to indulge me on something, Madam Deputy Speaker. Without embarrassing the Whip on duty—Whips rarely get a mention—let me say that I understand my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), is marrying his partner Nicola this weekend. I wish him all the very best for a wonderful day and them a very happy future together. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I am sure that the whole House will join the Minister and me in sending our congratulations and best wishes to the

hon. Gentleman and his fiancée and family for a wonderful wedding at the weekend—we hope the sun shines for them.

I also thank the House for a very constructive debate. I have said before that I do wish that people who watch our proceedings would pay more attention to these kinds of debates, where we are discussing a matter of great importance and sensitivity, and where the House

can welcome the family of a little boy such as Luke, and let them know that we, as a whole Parliament, are working for them and that this place is not only about loud and aggressive argument.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.21 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Westminster Hall

Thursday 15 June 2023

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

## Public Broadcasting in Scotland

1.30 pm

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Fifth Report of the Scottish Affairs Committee, Public broadcasting in Scotland, HC 1048, and the Government response, HC 1305.

I thank the Liaison Committee for enabling this short debate, and I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Efford; in these situations, young bucks like us are great examples to the younger Members in this House. I also welcome the Minister to his place. I do not know how many times he has been recalled to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, but it is great to see him providing maternity cover. He and I have had some great scraps in the past couple of decades as we have sought to ensure that the creative sector is defended and protected.

**John Nicolson** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): He's the Frank Sinatra of the Commons, isn't he?

**Pete Wishart:** Absolutely, and I look forward to his closing remarks in this debate. The Scottish Affairs Committee held evidence sessions for this inquiry between July 2021 and January 2023. In that period, we examined the performance of public sector broadcasters in Scotland, and the general environment for broadcasting in Scotland. The Committee's report was published on 2 March 2023. We found that Scottish broadcasting is generally in a reasonably good place. Scottish viewers can access a wide range of content, whether through the new streaming services that are now in practically every household, or through the established means of public service broadcasting. The services offer TV content that is made specifically for Scottish viewers—Scottish content—and globally recognised shows that are filmed in Scotland.

The screen sector is worth about £500 million to the Scottish economy, and between them STV, ITV and BBC have jointly spent £71.3 million on first-run content made specifically for viewers in Scotland. We have all seen the fantastic new programmes and series that have started to emerge across a number of services, including "Shetland", "Outlander" and the fantastic "The Rig", starring Martin Compston, which I think we have all particularly enjoyed over the past few months. Some of those shows have resulted in a nascent hospitality and tourism sector in some areas; people come to see where famous "Outlander" scenes featuring Jamie were filmed. I was in the States recently with colleagues from the Committee, and that was one of the points that came across to us: people were keen to come to Scotland to see the many locations where these fine shows were shot. I am delighted to be joined by colleagues from the Committee, who I know will be keen to contribute to today's proceedings.

We also found that the independent production sector is thriving. The Committee heard from various witnesses that the prospects for independent TV producers in Scotland

are better than they have ever been. That is great progress since the last time we looked at broadcasting some eight years ago.

As hon. Members would expect, we also identified a number of difficulties, challenges and issues, which our report highlights. The first regards Freeview, which is very important for Scotland. Scotland has more Freeview viewers than anywhere else across the United Kingdom; a third of Scots depend on Freeview as their essential and exclusive means of accessing content. The Government's intention is to keep Freeview going until 2034. Our report asks for that to be continually reviewed. We should look at the numbers and ensure that Freeview will still be available to Scottish viewers at that point.

We looked at issues around the proposed privatisation of Channel 4. When we started the inquiry, it was to be privatised, and by the end of it, it was not. The Committee is very proud of one thing that came out of the inquiry: through our conversations with Channel 4 executives, we managed to secure Scottish participants on "Gogglebox". It is not often that a Select Committee can claim any sort of success, but we were able to ensure that when we watch "Gogglebox", Scottish participants will be there.

On inter-Government relations, which my Committee obviously has a rolling brief on, we called for a new inter-ministerial group on media and culture. It would serve as a forum for joint working between UK and Scottish Ministers, and help to improve outcomes in the screen industry across the whole of the United Kingdom. The Government response was received on 19 April and we published it on 28 April. In their response, the Government noted that the draft Media Bill was introduced to the House on 29 March and confirmed to us that

"a Culture and Creative Industries Inter-ministerial Group will be set up this year"

to support intergovernmental relations. The Committee particularly welcomed that. In his summing up, can the Minister tell us what progress has been made on establishing the group, and whether he has had time to consider the terms of reference under which it will be established?

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): A positive change in recent years is that independent producers are not all sitting in London. It used to be that people in the creative industries eventually had to come to the capital of the UK, or else they could not progress. Does my hon. Friend celebrate Channel 4 not only not being privatised, but opening a hub in Glasgow, where it is promoting training and access to skills in the industry, so that it will hopefully thrive even more?

**Pete Wishart:** My hon. Friend is quite right to point to those innovations, which we welcomed in the inquiry and report. The developments she mentions are significant. I remember the situation when I was a new Member of Parliament: London-based producers and commissioners did most of the commissioning when it came to Scotland. Now, there are opportunities for people in Scotland to ensure that commissions are considered by a whole range of public sector broadcasters, as well as the streaming services.

Two issues dominated the inquiry and report, and we spent a little time looking at both to see if there was anything we could do to help resolve matters associated with them. It will not come as a surprise that the first was the prominence of Scottish television, which is timely given that prominence is considered in the draft

[*Pete Wishart*]

Media Bill. There are a couple of things I want to press the Minister on a little more. There is no statutory requirement for public service broadcasters' on-demand streaming services such as iPlayer or STV Player to be featured prominently on smart TVs or streaming sticks. That risks public service content becoming more difficult to access in the shift away from traditional TV broadcasting modes. We heard that the new TV platforms do not give that type of content the same sort of prominence as is secured on Sky, Freeview or Virgin TV, which have the benefit of the electronic programme guide that ensures that stations such as STV are prominently featured. I think STV is No. 3 on both Sky and Virgin TV and is easily found on the Freeview service.

New legislation to ensure prominence for public service broadcasters' on-demand services on internet-enabled TV was unanimously supported by all public service broadcasters who came to our Committee. It was something they were keen to stress to us throughout all our evidence sessions. The Committee's report recommended that the UK Government bring forward "time-sensitive reform" within two months of the report being published. Within that time period, the Government brought forward their draft Media Bill and mentioned prominence in the provisions. I look forward to the Minister's remarks on that; however, it is only a draft Bill with no time.

I heard the comments today at Culture, Media and Sport questions: we still do not know when the Bill will be introduced to Parliament, and the Minister was not able to reassure us that it would be delivered in this Session. That is important. Is there anything, over and beyond what is in the draft Bill, that the Government could do to address the issue of prominence? I worry that if nothing is done to resolve the issue, the habit will be formed, and systems might become embedded that make it difficult to locate services. I appeal to the Government to have a look at that again. The draft Bill would allow regional variation in the degree of prominence that regulated internet-enabled TV platforms would have to give certain content, but we need progress on that as a matter of priority.

Another issue, not covered much in the report, has emerged since its publication. In a recent meeting, STV was keen to communicate to us what was being asked of public sector broadcasters such as STV that wished to be hosted on big global networks, such as Amazon. STV told us that Amazon had indicated that it wants 30% of STV Player inventory to sell its own ads as a prerequisite if the STV player is to be on Amazon's platforms. Thirty per cent of total assets is an almost outrageous demand. That is something that Ofcom can resolve; it has the regulatory powers to get involved in such situations, and I hope that encouragement from the Minister might just encourage it to do so. This issue is exercising colleagues in Scottish television, and it may inhibit their ability to appear on some of the big global network platforms.

**John Nicolson:** Does my hon. Friend accept that one of STV's problems is that it does not know whether any of the other broadcasters will give in to this blackmail? If one gives in, it will be absolutely necessary that all the others do. Thirty per cent is an eye-watering percentage of the company's profits, and paying that would restrict its ability to invest.

**Pete Wishart:** I was loth to use the word "blackmail", although it is pretty hard to get away from that term, given that this is a gun to the head for so many public sector broadcasters. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the sense of not being left behind. Because of Amazon's importance, its worldwide reach and ability to get into households in Scotland, broadcasters have to take it seriously. He and all my colleagues listen carefully to representations from Scottish television. I hope that the Minister can put this right.

**Dr Whitford:** On that point, the sheer eye-watering ask of 30% of revenue could encourage other platforms, including those that are created in the future, to push for the same amount. That would quickly wipe out the viability of public sector broadcasters such as STV.

**Pete Wishart:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We have discovered that public sector broadcasting in Scotland is in a reasonably good place, but it remains fragile. Recovery and being able to provide the content that Scottish viewers want is important, so we have to be careful with all this. I know that the Minister is listening carefully, and I am sure that we will hear from him about this issue being taken forward.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that this issue is particularly disappointing given that witnesses from Amazon and Netflix came to the Committee, and what they said sounded very positive? They said that they were working closely with public service broadcasters to deliver production. That makes it particularly odd that this has come up as an issue.

**Pete Wishart:** Indeed. Unfortunately, we were not able to press the main streaming services on this issue when they came to give evidence, because it had not emerged as a particular difficulty at that point. As my hon. Friend rightly points out, witnesses did say that there is a good relationship between the streaming services and the public service broadcasters. We heard in the Committee that there is room for everybody. Obviously, people who are in the habit of watching "Eastenders" or "Coronation Street" will prefer to watch public service broadcasters through Freeview, and that will be their evening viewing. Other people like to watch feature films and to binge on mini-series.

We have found a positive broadcasting environment that enables viewers to access a range of content that was unimaginable when the Minister and I were mere slips of boys watching glorious coloured television for the first time, as well as—when Channel 4 arrived—"Brookside" and "The Tube". These are different days. It is unfortunate that there seems to be a dispute. It has really put a spoke in the works of what was described to us as a healthy working arrangement. We hope the issue can be sorted out.

There is one thing that we are not making progress on. It will not surprise you, Mr Efford, to see football—or "the fitba", as we say in Scotland—come up in a debate on broadcasting in Scotland and what is available to viewers. We did not really expect, although we should have, that once we started bringing people in to discuss this topic, football would become the main focus of conversation.



What is happening to Scottish football fans is excruciatingly unfair. This conversation is timely because the Euro qualifiers return on Saturday, with the mighty Scotland taking on Norway. As you know, Mr Efford, we are top of group A, looking down at Spain, Norway and the rest of them below. Never before—or not since probably 1998, when we were last in the World cup—has Scotland had such an exciting national football team. People want to watch it. There is huge excitement about international football and the prospects for the Scottish football team. The only problem is that we have to pay to watch it. We are the only part of Great Britain where that happens; Northern Ireland is in the same situation. People in England and Wales can watch their national football team free to air—no problem. But in Scotland, they have to fork out or go to the pub to watch it with friends. That is not a bad prospect, but why is it only Scots on this island who have to pay? And the cost is not cheap.

In a competition to secure the rights to host and broadcast Scottish football, Viaplay was successful, and it has the rights until 2028. A standard Viaplay subscription for a month is £14.99. Viaplay has been reasonably generous and allowed a package that amounts to £59 if someone takes up the opportunity to buy for this year. We have a cost of living crisis. People are struggling to meet household bills. Mortgage rates are going through the roof. We still have very high energy costs. The subscription is a lot of money to ask people to pay when everybody else in the United Kingdom is able to access and watch the football for nothing.

Before Viaplay, the rights were owned by Sky, which had the rights during the 2018 and 2022 World cup competitions, as well as during the UEFA European championship in 2020, which were all shown on Sky. To show how important this is and what a big issue this is for Scottish football fans, in an online report by *The Scotsman* in November 2020, 92% of respondents agreed that Scotland's men's national football team games should be available on free-to-air TV.

We know the situation is complicated. We know there are lots of complex arguments, and that the future of the national game is in question. The Scottish Football Association relies on the money that it secures from selling the rights to a variety of broadcasters. Without that, it would not be able to invest in grassroots sport or support and resource a number of activities, so it is immensely important to it. It cannot gift this away for nothing. It rightly relies on the money to develop and build the game. All that has to be taken into account, and nothing should be done that would threaten that type of investment and resource.

There are ways through this. We identified two ways forward in the report. One is a voluntary arrangement between the Scottish Football Association and Scottish football fans and the rights holder. It is worth highlighting a couple of examples of how this could work. When Sky had the rights, it allowed the play-off final between Scotland and Serbia in the last European cup to be broadcast free to air, so that Scottish viewers could see it. During our inquiry there was a generous offer once again by Sky. Scotland had qualified for the final of the play-offs, and that was going to be free to air, too. Those are the sorts of voluntary arrangements that football fans would love the broadcasters to make. It is a generous offer that would be recognised and celebrated. It might even encourage take-up of the subscription services.

That is a way it can be done, and we encourage more discussions and conversations about allowing particularly critical games to be free to air.

As for the listed events schedule, things are a little more complicated and technical there, but it is within the gift of the Government to say that those events should be free for Scottish viewers, recognising that everybody else in the UK has an opportunity to watch their country's games. Can Scotland's qualifying games be included? I know that is not the Government's intention, and that they would have problems with such a thing, but perhaps this could be done, with compensation given for the loss of the revenue that the Scottish Football Association would normally secure from selling off the rights.

We have to start addressing this issue. I had a look round the whole of Europe to find out what other major footballing nations had done. It could be argued whether Scotland is a major footballing nation, but we are huge supporters, and we love our football. Looking at the teams that normally qualify, Scotland is one of the few countries in Europe that cannot access their national football team's games, free to air.

**Dr Whitford:** I read somewhere—although I cannot vouch for the accuracy of this—that in relation to the size of its population Scotland has one of the highest attendance rates at football games, where people are engaging. But is it not vital that young people who are not going to games are able to see their team playing? We talk in lots of other sectors about the need to see role models in order to aspire. My hon. Friend talked about grassroots football being supported by the revenues, but it will not be there if we do not inspire children to want to go and play the game.

**Pete Wishart:** Absolutely—my hon. Friend is spot on. Scotland is a football-crazy nation, and it has been substantially proven that we have some of the highest numbers per capita going to football games. There is huge interest in our national football team, particularly now that we have such an exciting product to see, and it is good to be able to watch your heroes play. We have made huge strides in the promotion and viewing of women's football; thank goodness we have free-to-air access to the Scotland women's football team—it is great that that opportunity is afforded. We are trying to make football a community-based interest, and sitting around with the family to watch free-to-air football competitions is a healthy thing to do. I just wish that we could do it more.

The current lack of opportunities to watch Scottish international football on free-to-air broadcast is letting down fans in Scotland, who are at a disadvantage compared with fans in England and, for now, Wales. Wales has a curious arrangement, which the Committee found very attractive. It gets permission from Sky to show matches on the Welsh-language station, so people are able to watch their football team, albeit that they are listening in Welsh, which I am pretty certain is not a huge distraction for Scottish football fans.

**Dr Whitford:** We have Alba.

**Pete Wishart:** As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) says, we have BBC Alba. Could something be done to see whether a similar arrangement could be made? There are a number of ways to explore this issue, but the current situation cannot go on.

[Pete Wishart]

The last indignity is that when we all sit down to watch the football at 5 o'clock on Saturday evening—I know that all my colleagues will be shouting on Scotland to ensure that we stay in a dominant position in group A—and turn on the BBC or Channel 4, it will be the England game that is on. We are not able to see our national football team, but we also have the indignity of being forced to watch another nation's match. That is a huge disadvantage for my hon. Friends, who I know are great football fans, so it has to be sorted out.

We on the Committee were disappointed by the Government's response to our report. There was a sense that they recognised the issue, but they did not express great sympathy for our situation. They suggested that it was nothing to do with them and that there was nothing they could do to resolve it.

I want to say one more thing, which is down to my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who has done a power of work on all this, as I am sure colleagues recognise. My hon. Friend has got everybody together and made sure that roundtables have been put together so that this issue can be discussed. He has built great relationships, formed real alliances with football fans and the Scottish Football Association, and got everybody together. Everybody is working together; we just need the Government to engage a bit more in order to help us sort this out. It is not good enough to say that it is all a matter for the Scottish Government, because broadcasting is a reserved issue. It is really a matter for the Government to fix, to ensure that we get the same access that everybody else does across the whole United Kingdom. Let us see what we can do to fix this. I know we are all looking forward to seeing what the team can do on Saturday.

I am conscious that I have said a lot about our report, and I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say in response. What we have found is that things are relatively good just now, notwithstanding some of the issues we have identified—particularly the tricky issue of the relationship with Amazon. Viewers in Scotland are now able to see more content in a variety of different ways—more than they have been in the past. It is a great difference even from when I was a new Member, 20 years ago. There is now much more opportunity for people to enjoy broadcast television. Satisfaction rates with the BBC started from a low base and have improved, which is something else that we noted in our report, so there is a sense that the public sector broadcasters are responding to what Scottish people want and to their viewing habits.

Scottish viewers want to see much more Scottish content. When they turn on the television, they want to see their national life and culture reflected, and we are increasingly getting to that position. Innovations such as “The Nine” on the BBC have been fantastic. We now have STV giving a news service at 6 o'clock. I remember the conversations we had historically here about a “Scottish Six”, and we now have that “Scottish Six”, albeit delivered by Scottish Television. I think that is welcomed by Scottish viewers.

We are in a reasonably good place. There are difficulties. I am grateful to the Government for their response to some of the things we have highlighted, but I think they could do so much more, particularly on Scottish football. I look forward to the Minister's closing remarks.

1.55 pm

**John Nicolson** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): On this occasion, it actually is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I commend my colleagues on the Scottish Affairs Committee—well, at least some of them—on their excellent work. The report on Scottish broadcasting was thorough, and their recommendations are extremely helpful.

I absolutely support the Committee's call to establish, in short order, an inter-ministerial group on media and culture, as has been agreed, to enhance co-ordination between Governments across those briefs, especially around broadcasting. As we have heard, the matter is reserved to Westminster, so it is vital that our colleagues in the Scottish Government, especially the Cabinet Secretary, are able to input their knowledge and expertise on a regular, ongoing basis.

As we have heard, it is fairly clear that, as far as televised sport goes, Scotland isnae getting a fair kick of the ball, given that English and Welsh games are on free to air. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) mentioned in his speech that English and Welsh games are free to air, while Scottish men's team games are seldom allowed the same prominence.

I am well aware of how important local, regional and national news is for democracy. In Scotland, “STV News” plays a huge part in informing the electorate and providing credible news that can form the basis of public discourse. My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire mentioned the separate “Scottish Six”, which we now have along with a separate “Scottish Nine”. When I was on the Select Committee the first time around, I argued strenuously for a separate “Scottish Six” because, as a journalist myself, it seemed obvious that news should be based on news merit. If the main story of the day is a national Scottish one, that leads. If it is British, that leads. If it is international, that leads. No one in radio news or in a newspaper would ever dream of leading only on Scottish stories—it is unbelievably parochial. News should be based on merit.

I was delighted that my friends in the Select Committee agreed with this proposal cross party. I have to say that the Scottish Tories literally went into meltdown when they discovered that their colleagues south of the border had accepted this conclusion, when they had argued that a full hour of Scottish news would be SNP propaganda—how patronising to BBC journalists! In fact, the opposite is the case: it gives more time for scrutiny of the Scottish Government, which I happen to think is a very good thing.

**Dr Whitford:** Is it not the case that it is not just about what the lead story is, whether it is Scottish, UK or international? There will be different views and perspectives on British or international news from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is about having the lens the public want on big stories, regardless of where those are from.

**John Nicolson:** I think that is true. Obviously, Irish viewers will sometimes have different views on international stories than German viewers. It is common sense. One slight disappointment about “The Nine”, which is a terrific news programme, is that they are not using as many correspondents sent from Scotland to cover international stories as I would perhaps hope for.

My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire also mentioned the issue of prominence. One problem for the BBC Scotland channel is how hard it is to find. Although, as BBC Scotland itself points out, it does better in terms of viewing figures than Sky, for example, it could do much better if it was easier to find. There is something clearly absurd about the fact that, when we run down that wee box looking for news channels, Talk TV is about No. 4. It is utterly ridiculous. We see the BBC, STV, ITV and Channel 4, and then there is Talk TV, with somebody ranting away about some crazy Brexit conspiracy theory for hour after hour. It is not news, and it should not be. We have had this argument with Ofcom about GB News and Tory MPs who seem to go in a revolving door from the House of Commons to interview other Tory MPs about fantastic good-news Tory stories. Obviously, it is something that Ofcom should be interfering with; it should enforce its own rules. Certainly, that should not be given the prominence that it is, and in Scotland the BBC Scotland channel should be given far greater prominence.

The draft Media Bill includes lots of really good things that are absolutely necessary—among them, prominence for the languages of these islands, which is very healthy. Something that the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which Mr Efford and I are members of, is about to cover is how to protect and encourage the indigenous languages of these islands. The Media Bill encourages that and gives due prominence to STV on smart televisions, set-top boxes and similar. As we have heard, to fail to do so would risk a further diminution of the quality of information available to voters in Scotland. It is an interesting subject, and this is a very detailed report, which I commend to the crowds here in Westminster Hall listening to the debate.

The updated Media Bill is required, and I join the Scottish Affairs Committee in encouraging the UK Government to get on with it as soon as possible and to get it introduced into the Commons. We will engage with it in a constructive manner. Let us get this legislation, to catch up with the reality of broadcasting.

2.2 pm

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) on leading this important debate.

I begin by thanking the Scottish Affairs Committee for undertaking this timely inquiry over the last two years. During that time, Scottish broadcasting has achieved some big wins, as the hon. Member mentioned, from the first Scottish family finally appearing on “Gogglebox” to STV reaching a deal with Sky that meant Scottish football fans could watch their national team win on penalties to reach the Euro 2020 finals.

Scottish broadcasting forms a vital piece of the puzzle of the UK’s creative sector. Scotland is not only home to Amazon, but our public sector broadcasters—Channel 4 and the BBC—also operate from the nation, alongside the strongly performing STV, whose main channel reaches 80% of Scots every month, as of 2021.

Although broadcasting is a reserved matter, we must ensure that our creative industries represent, and prosper throughout, all our nations and regions, bringing communities together, promoting pride in place and strengthening local economies. However, as the Committee report shows, if the industry in Scotland is to thrive as we know

it can and better serve Scottish audiences, there is a range of important issues to be considered, particularly given rapid advancements in technology and the establishment of global media giants as competition for our public service broadcasters. Therefore, I will focus my remarks today on each of the main recommendations in the report.

First and foremost, I will address recommendations 4, 5 and 6 about prominence and the draft Media Bill. In essence, these recommendations reiterate what the industry and the Labour party have been saying for years: our public sector broadcasters and radio services need to be given the tools to survive in the modern era. Amid the rise of the global media giants and the game-changing impact of new technologies, the legislation that supports our broadcasting industry, which was made in 2003, is quite simply out of date.

The Media Bill is exactly the kind of intervention needed to address some of those issues—for example, by ensuring that our public sector broadcasters, including STV, are protected and promoted in the streaming age through a new prominence regime. There are questions to be asked about the detail of how the Bill will ensure that, particularly with regard to how prominence for regional channels in Scotland will work in practice, given the technology available.

However, instead of pushing on with scrutiny, the Government have wasted a year in pursuing the disastrous plans to sell off Channel 4. Now that they have finally U-turned on that decision, it is disappointing that the publication of the draft Bill did not come with a clear timetable for its implementation. As the report highlights, the Government need to get on with bringing those changes into law. The longer we leave it, the longer British broadcasters such as STV will risk losing further market share to the big global media corporations, to the detriment of our creative economy and British audiences, including those in Scotland.

The report also recommends that the UK Government commit to maintaining Freeview beyond 2034. As the Government themselves highlight in their response,

“millions of households across the UK, including in Scotland, rely on”

broadcast TV, and that is expected to continue “over the next decade.” Further, unlike internet streaming services, terrestrial TV does not require an internet connection or rely on a monthly subscription. Terrestrial TV content is therefore primarily relied on by those who are already marginalised in our society—people on the lowest incomes, older citizens and those in isolated rural areas. Indeed, as the Broadcast 2040+ campaign highlights, such services are relied on by an even greater proportion of those in Scotland because of its increased rurality, island communities and comparatively older population.

It is a start, therefore, that the Government have committed to preserving digital terrestrial television for over a decade, but the lack of long-term certainty over the future of the service is causing unpredictability both for the broadcasting industry, in terms of investment, and for the digitally excluded. What does the Department think are the disadvantages of providing long-term certainty about broadcast TV and radio, given their importance to both the industry and the community?

Further, the report makes two recommendations regarding sports rights. It was extremely pleasing to see STV come to a formal agreement with Sky to allow for



[Stephanie Peacock]

the viewing of the World cup qualifiers on a free-to-air basis. However, it is understandable that campaign groups are unhappy with the lack of a formal plan to ensure that Scottish international football is free to watch. Indeed, there is a careful balance to be struck between ensuring that crucial sporting moments are available to watch and securing investment in sport through the revenue generated by selling rights.

That is what the listed events regime seeks to recognise but, in the age of streaming clips, the problem goes beyond what is contained in the regime, and the question is whether it is still fit for purpose in the modern era. The Department is right to conduct a review of digital sporting rights, and it is positive that it is looking to ensure the longevity of the listed events regime through the Media Bill. As has been argued, however, it has taken too long for the legislation to see the light of day, and it is unclear how it will address digital rights.

Finally, it is pleasing to see the Government confirm, in response to recommendation 7, that the inter-ministerial group on culture and creative industries will be set up this year and that there will be an industry-led taskforce to look at skills. However, there is still more to be done to boost screen industry skills across our nations and regions. As part of our creative compact, Labour wants to see the apprenticeship levy reformed into a growth and skills levy that would allow creative industries to spend up to half their levy on shorter training courses and modular skills. The Government must consider such fundamental changes if we are to truly address the creative skills shortages that are holding industries back.

To conclude, Scottish broadcasting plays a vital role in our creative landscape, but the Government can and must do more if the industry is to thrive in the modern age and continue to serve the needs of viewers across all our nations and regions.

2.8 pm

**The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Sir John Whittingdale):** I thank the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for obtaining the debate and for the work that he and his colleagues have done on the Scottish Affairs Committee report. I know that the then and—when she returns from her maternity leave—future Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), was happy to give evidence to the Committee and will be interested to see the report's conclusions. I thank all the other members of the Committee for their contributions as well.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire was right that Scottish broadcasting is in pretty good shape, as indeed is broadcasting across the United Kingdom. We continue to have some of the finest broadcasters in the world—not just the BBC, but Channel 4 and those in the commercial sector—and independent production is going from strength to strength. I particularly welcome the growth of independent producers in areas of the UK outside London and the south-east—Scotland, in particular. As was acknowledged, the public service broadcasters are strengthening their presence in Scotland, such as with the establishment of Channel 4's Glasgow hub and the continuing success of STV in Scotland.

Saying that broadcasting is in good shape does not mean that there are not some serious issues that we need to consider, particularly as we look to the future. The hon. Gentleman did a good job of summarising some of them. As he knows, the Government published the Media Bill in draft in March. It has taken some time to reach that point—indeed, I recall Ofcom making recommendations for legislation on prominence when I was Secretary of State, and there have been other recommendations since. That was an important recommendation; we absolutely agree that if public service broadcasting is to thrive into the future, it needs to be prominently displayed, regardless of the means people choose to obtain their TV content.

We are moving into an era in which more and more people rely on smart TV devices. It is therefore only right that we replicate the existing prominence requirements on the electronic programme guide on traditional sets. We should also reflect smart TVs, Fire TV sticks and other means that are used. That does not just relate to television; the hon. Gentleman did not go into detail on this, but we believe it is important to apply similar requirements to radio, too. The Media Bill will also address that.

The hon. Gentleman raised a concern about the relationship between STV and Amazon, which has arisen relatively recently. I was concerned to learn about that, because, like him, I had understood that the relationship was reasonably good. One of our reasons for publishing the Media Bill in draft is to enable us to consider whether further measures are necessary. We have an opportunity to debate the provisions in the Bill, and I look forward to giving evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I will also be talking to Amazon and, I hope, Simon Pitts from STV. I am very happy to look further at the concerns that have been raised to find an appropriate solution.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) spoke about plurality and prominence. Although the PSBs hold the top positions, one or two other news broadcasters now appear on the schedule. I am surprised that he does not welcome plurality. He also seemed concerned about the appearance of one or two Members of this House on one or two channels, although he glossed over the show presented by the former leader of his party on RT. I do not think he particularly complained about that at the time.

**John Nicolson:** Oh, I did.

**Sir John Whittingdale:** I take it back if the hon. Gentleman did, but he is still there.

One of the reasons the Media Bill is important is that the take-up of smart TV will continue at pace. I suspect I am one of only a very small number whose television set receives only internet protocol television—I do not have DTT or a freeview application in my TV—and I have to say that IPTV is extremely impressive. As we move forward with more and more access to gigabit broadband under the Government's Project Gigabit scheme and the commercial roll-out, more and more people will move in that direction.

That prompts a longer-term question about whether DTT will remain the main means of accessing television. It is too soon to say. What the Government have said is that we foresee DTT continuing until at least 2034, but we will be looking in due course at what should happen after that. Giving that assurance until 2034 should give

confidence. Obviously, the debate about what happens beyond that time will continue, and we will see how the market develops.

**Stephanie Peacock:** Is there a reason why the Government will not go further and give longer-term security until 2040, as some campaign groups have called for?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** I think 2034 is still a long way off, and this technology is developing fast. Obviously, as we look at the roll-out and at consumer behaviour, that will influence our decision as to how much further to go. The roll-out is happening fast: Scotland is already approaching 70% gigabit coverage, and we anticipate that within a few years every part of the United Kingdom will have access to gigabit coverage. I was pleased to announce earlier this week that the Government will support the provision of gigabit coverage under Project Gigabit to the inhabitants of Papa Stour, a remote part of the Shetland islands, who will in future be able to obtain gigabit coverage from a low Earth orbit satellite as a result of Government investment in this area. No matter what part of the United Kingdom or how remote the area, it is our ambition that everybody should be able to enjoy gigabit coverage in due course. That may affect decisions as to how we continue to ensure that they have access to high-quality television content.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire concentrated a lot on the issue of listed events. This has always been a “but”. Under the Broadcasting Act 1996, we have a small number of events that are seen to be iconic, which bring all the nations of the United Kingdom together and should remain free to air. The obvious ones are things like the Olympic games, the grand national and the Derby. It is not the case that England football matches are listed. The reason people can watch them on television is that the free to air broadcasters have obtained those rights, but they do not have any exclusive ability to bid for them; others could, too. What are listed events are the FIFA World cup finals, women’s World cup finals, UEFA championship finals and UEFA women’s championship finals. If—as I am sure the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues believe will happen in due course—Scotland reaches the finals in one of those competitions, that will be free to air under the listed events regime. Until then, the Scottish team will have the same rights as the English team and those of other nations of the UK in terms of the football authorities’ ability to decide who they should sell their rights to.

**Pete Wishart:** The Minister is right that we mentioned the events as an example of something that could be done, without any real expectation that that would be delivered, because we understand the complexities and exclusivity of the listed events schedule. The point we are making is that it is a matter of scale. Scotland has 5.2 million people, whereas England has 55 million to 60 million, so the rights have greater value when it comes to England than Scotland. We are looking for a little more support, encouragement and understanding of our particular issues, given the difference in scale of the populations, and for that little bit of input from Government to help us to resolve this. That is our plea on this issue.

**Sir John Whittingdale:** Of course we are happy to keep it under review. I suspect the hon. Gentleman is as aware as I am that the determination whether an event

should be included in the listed events regime has considerable financial consequences for the sport involved. We have to strike a balance between giving as many people as possible the opportunity to watch that particular sporting event and the wish to obtain the revenue to put it back into the sport, which is possible from the sale of sporting broadcast rights to whoever is willing to pay the most. That is generally something that I have felt the sporting authorities are well placed to do. A significant proportion of the Scottish FA’s income comes from the sale of broadcast rights to a subscription service. Of course it needs to be kept under review. Although broadcasting is a reserved matter, sport is not. The Scottish Government might like to consider that, and if they have views we will be happy to hear them.

At the moment, we do not intend to change the listed events. As the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) said, we are currently examining whether the digital rights should be packaged with the linear broadcasting rights so that they come under the same rules, and we will come forward with conclusions on that matter in due course. I understand the frustration, but Scottish football benefits considerably from the sale of broadcast rights. It is also important to talk to the Scottish FA. I urge the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire to talk to the Scottish Government. I am happy to continue the dialogue with him.

Turning to that dialogue, mention was made of the establishment of the inter-ministerial group. Two days ago, I was happy to have a call with the Scottish Government Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development, Christina McKelvie. We confirmed that the inter-ministerial group is being established to cover the creative industries. I look forward to working through that with her. The purpose of my call was to give her advance notice of the Government’s package of measures that was announced yesterday—the creative industries sector vision—which contains really good news for Scotland. We hope that through the extension of the creative industries clusters programme the existing clusters will be increased by six. There is already one in Edinburgh; I am sure that there will be considerable interest from across Scotland, as there will be from elsewhere.

There is also the CoSTAR—convergent screen technologies and performance in real-time—package for research and development for some of the latest screen technologies. Four new R&D labs are being established. One of the preferred bidders is in Dundee. There are also various other measures, including the tripling of funding for the music export growth scheme. I know that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire has a distinguished record in music. Whether MP4 would qualify under the music export growth scheme I am not entirely convinced. Nevertheless, I know that as a great music supporter he will welcome that.

This has been an important debate. I want to see broadcasting thrive in all nations of the United Kingdom. The situation in Scotland is good at present, but that is not to say that there are not important issues, which we have had the opportunity to debate this afternoon. I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate and look forward to continuing to work with him and with Members across the House to ensure that Scotland and the rest of the UK continue to have some of the most successful broadcasters in the world.

2.23 pm

**Pete Wishart:** Thank you to everybody who has taken part in the debate. I was right to predict that it would be a convivial and consensual affair. I am grateful to the shadow Minister and the Minister for their contributions, and particularly to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for reiterating a number of our recommendations and conclusions. I am pretty certain that the Minister picked up on that.

On the football issue, there is one last thing that I think is important to address. At this point, we are trying to seek a solution. We recognise that we are a smaller market. We will not have the advertising revenue that is available to those that want to provide free-to-air viewing in the rest of the UK, particularly in England. We understand, too, that of course the SFA is totally dependent on the income that it receives from selling on the broadcasting rights. It is about getting together to see whether, through these sorts of conversations, we can find a way forward that will enable Scottish football fans to secure the same rights as everybody else on this island.

I am really grateful to everybody. I am glad that the report has been so positively received and that our recommendations and conclusions will be taken seriously. I commend the report to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the Fifth Report of the Scottish Affairs Committee, Public broadcasting in Scotland, HC 1048, and the Government response, HC 1305.

2.24 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## VAT on Audiobooks

### BACKBENCH BUSINESS

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

3 pm

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of VAT on audiobooks.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Sharma. We are in the coolest place in Westminster, so let us see if we can stay in here; this is probably the only room with any decent air conditioning.

I will start by declaring an interest: as well as being a former disabilities Minister, I am also dyslexic. I was not diagnosed until I was in the military, when I was sent on a course and was told by an education officer that I was dyslexic. I thought that it was some kind of tropical disease. No one ever said to me at school when I had real struggles with English and maths, particularly reading, that I might have a learning difficulty. I was told by my headmaster that I was thick and I was not allowed to take my 11-plus exam—I would have failed it. But no one with dyslexia is thick; they just struggle sometimes with understanding words and mathematics. I also declare an interest in that I am a non-executive director of a law firm, even though, unlike the Minister, I am not legally trained.

Let me say at the outset that I would like this to be a genuine debate, because it is not an “us and them” situation. For people with visual impairment, or with dyslexia or another learning difficulty that prevents them from being able to read the written word as easily as most people, the subject of this debate is an anomaly that I hope we can try to resolve.

I know that there are discussions about the issue within Government; I think there were when I was a disabilities Minister back in the coalition Government, but it looked at the time as if it would be difficult to resolve. Campaign groups out there have said to me, “We should be able to take the Government to court” under the 2010 legislation, although of course the Government are exempt—under section 29. My speech might show that the Government should take note when it comes to other pieces of legislation, because the legislation as it is at the moment may well be technically illegal; I again cite the fact that I am a lay person and not a legal beagle.

According to the Publishers Association, in 2020 sales of audiobooks rose by 69%, which might have had a lot to do with covid. The Prime Minister, who at that time was the Chancellor, said on 11 March 2020:

“A world-class education will help the next generation thrive, and nothing could be more fundamental to that than reading. And yet digital publications are subject to VAT. That cannot be right. So today I am abolishing the reading tax.”—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 290.]

He was talking about e-books, but I do not think that anybody out there knows the difference between audiobooks and e-books. Actually, I think the Government made a genuine mistake. We have zero VAT rating on books and publications of all types—whether that be academic, fiction or non-fiction—and e-books are exempt. Why were



a whole group of people, from many different backgrounds, thrilled for a minute or two by the announcement, only to realise, once they saw the small print, that they would still be excluded?

For many of our constituents, audio is their only communication with the outside world and their way of finding out what is going on. If someone uses audiobooks to read fiction or non-fiction, perhaps, as we all want to do, they want to get on in life. Audiobooks are part of that process—for training, learning and education. We are holding them back by having 20% VAT on every audiobook they purchase.

People with disabilities are already being penalised extensively; Scope has said they are £970 per month worse off—a figure I recognise from when I was the Minister. We give people with disabilities other benefits, but if someone is using audiobooks extensively, that 20% is a huge amount of their income or household income. We are not just talking about people who are visually impaired or who are dyslexic, like myself. My form of dyslexia is quite minimal, but I tend to memorise everything. As Members have probably noticed, I do not tend to read from a script; I get much too wooden when I try to. In my case, it is much better to memorise most of the points that I want to raise.

My question to the Minister is simple. I know she cares passionately about making equality fair, but the Equality Act 2010 as it stands does not quite hit the nail on the head or do what is says on the tin. Does it protect all people from discrimination? In other words, does it protect people who need to use audiobooks from discrimination, when they have to pay 20% to be able to read? The rest of the population who can read visual books do not have to pay that.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Is it not true that young people especially enjoy audiobooks and it is a real path for them into the joy of reading? Some will not be able to discover that joy because of the expense, but it is how many first access literature?

**Sir Mike Penning:** I agree, and I hope that is part of the problem that the Minister, as a Treasury Minister, will recognise. It is difficult to work out how we can ensure that people who are being discriminated against—as opposed to people who can read in general terms; I will return to that point—have the ability to access audiobooks, while protecting the Treasury from the cost burdens. That is probably where the biggest problem lies.

If we were just talking about people who are visually impaired—a group of people who, without being rude, can be quite easily identified—the Treasury could make those calculations quite quickly. But what about when we get into the realms of what I was just talking about—people with learning difficulties, one of which is dyslexia? A huge percentage of those people have not had a diagnosis. How do you capture them?

To the point made by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows): how do we take into account people who are not natural readers? I do not want to get into a class situation, but I did not read many books when I was at school because I struggled to read, and I know people who were in school with me who were not dyslexic but who just did not read. We want people to expand their knowledge, education and view of the world as much as possible, so if someone

can read—they are not visually impaired—but they want to use audiobooks, should that not be okay? I think the Treasury would turn around and say, “How do you find the costs?”

I agree with the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, but I am just trying to play devil’s advocate. That is the only way we can do it. We do not know who uses e-books but they have been removed from VAT. All printed books and publications are exempt, but audiobooks are not. Even though it would be easier to define an exemption for a certain group of people—I vividly remember conversations about that when I was disabilities Minister—I do not think that would be fair, not least for the millions of people out there who are dyslexic but have never had a diagnosis; dyslexia covers a very large spectrum.

The Equality Act means that no one should be discriminated against because of their disability, sex or race—a whole list of things. Given that Parliament cannot be caught under the Act, I suspect that it might be disingenuous to tell outside bodies that they may discriminate. It would be saying, “We are not breaking the Equality Act, but we are telling you to do so.” Take an obvious example: a local authority that wanted to sell audiobooks would have to charge VAT—in a library, for instance—whereas there is no VAT on books. Parliament is telling an agency of Government—that is, His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs—to charge VAT on audiobooks. If it did so without an Act of Parliament, that would be discriminatory, but because we are exempt under section 29, it is not.

Long before the word “Brexit,” I was pretty well known for being what used to be called a Eurosceptic. I wanted to leave the European Union and for this country to have its sovereignty. But if there are laws on our statute books, we should use them. Section 6(1) of the Human Rights Act 1998 states:

“It is unlawful for a public authority to act in a way which is incompatible with a Convention right.”

There are other Acts of Parliament on the statute book. I am sure that there are plenty of lawyers who would argue one way and plenty who would argue another, but morally and ethically it cannot be right that there is legislation on the statute book—the Human Rights Act, the Equality Act and other European Acts—that states that we should not discriminate, and yet we are still in a situation in which someone who wants to improve their life for whatever reason is, by no choice of their own, penalised by our tax system. I am sure that the Minister will probably say that this is very complicated, and I know what her brief will say, because it is not dissimilar to the briefs that were given to me when I was sitting in that very chair. But because something is difficult, it does not mean it is right to do nothing about it.

One of my constituents, whose sight is failing—I will not in any way indicate who she is—is finding that her ability to work in commerce is being affected. She now relies almost completely on audiobooks, although there is also now software that will help people. She relies on audiobooks, and she does not want anybody to know that. She works from home and for her own reasons—I will not put words in her mouth—she wants to use audiobooks, because of her visual impairment. How can it be right that, if she needs an audiobook this week, she has to pay 20% on the product, but last month or last year, when she could read the publication, she did not have to pay that 20%?

[Sir Mike Penning]

Let us look at education for a second. This is where I deviate from the notes that people have helped me try to write—I will come back to some of it; people have been very supportive of me bringing this debate. Education books are quite rightly VAT-free, like all printed books. Audiobooks are not. The Minister will probably say that a lot of the VAT can be claimed back, but for individuals it cannot. If mum and dad, or grandpa and grandma, want to help their son, grandson or granddaughter who is at a special needs school by buying them an audiobook, they cannot claim that VAT back, even if the organisation could. That child is being held back because the family perhaps do not have the money to buy the audiobook. For every five audiobooks they want to buy, one will be lost to VAT. We need taxes to pay for the schools that I have just alluded to, and for the education system, the health service and various other things. But for the public to have trust in our taxation system, it has to be fair and proportionate, and, in the public's eye—because we are spending their money on their behalf—it has to be right and proper.

This has been going on for too long. It is worth reading the comments of the Prime Minister when he was the Chancellor:

“That cannot be right. So today I am abolishing the reading tax.”—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 290.]

That referred specifically to printed books and e-books. Why on earth did it not include audiobooks? I really do not understand.

I will not be able to mention all the relevant organisations, but I have particularly been helped by Scope and the Royal National Institute of Blind People. The House of Commons Library has been fantastically helpful. I did not want the debate to be about me saying, “You’re a nasty, horrible Government, because you are not doing this”. It is not about that. Governments have not addressed this issue since before the current Government came in.

Things get left out when you are in government, and you think, “I wish I had done that.” I am leaving this House whenever the next general election comes, and I do not want to leave with a few things still on my bucket list that I wish I had done more about, perhaps when I was the Minister. I wish I had kicked harder when I was the disabilities Minister, particularly against my Treasury colleagues, so I am going to kick now for people who are suffering this 20% tax through no fault of their own, which surely has to be morally and ethically wrong.

3.17 pm

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, and as they say, “Follow that!” The previous contribution was a passionate and informed speech by someone who really understands the difficulties that the tax on audiobooks represents to some people. The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), whom I congratulate on securing the debate, might not be legally qualified, as he said, but he certainly knows what he is talking about. I followed his argument carefully, and I love the idea of him ticking something off his bucket list. Any kind of persuasion that can be used to get rid of the tax is well worth using.

One of the reasons why I enjoy Westminster Hall debates is that they tend to be less contentious. They tend to be a meeting of minds, with people who are

interested coming together to try to solve a common problem, which is not something that too many of our constituents see too often.

I also want to thank a number of organisations, especially the RNIB. In my time in this place, I have also been involved in the Axe the Reading Tax campaign, which led to the abolition of the tax on e-books. It is an aberration—an unintended consequence—that there is still a tax on audiobooks. I love audiobooks. I am a voracious reader—not of anything mind-blowingly interesting, I must say, but it is a great way to relax—and I know that many other people, especially those with visual impairment, dyslexia or other conditions, get great joy out of losing themselves in a good book for a few hours on an afternoon like today. There is nothing nicer.

Audiobooks benefit younger people, including people studying. I have to confess—I may have to ask *Hansard* not to record this, although I know it will—that I cannot read Dickens. I can read lots of older authors who are considered fantastic—I love Hardy—but I cannot read Dickens. I was required to read a Dickens novel for an Open University course I was doing, and I thought, “I can’t do that,” but an audiobook was my answer. I love listening to someone reading Dickens to me, but I cannot read him myself, so there are sometimes good educational benefits. If people who struggle to read can access the literature in a different form, it may pique their interest in reading. We all know that everyone, especially young people—and especially nowadays—benefits from sitting down quietly and absorbing things in a way that does not involve playing video games and killing people online.

It is really important that people with visual impairment, dyslexia or other medical conditions that require them to read in a different way are not excluded. I listened very carefully to the right hon. Gentleman, and there are real issues in trying to circumnavigate who is eligible for some kind of exemption. That is why in this case—in many other cases too, but especially this one—I plead with the Minister to make it a universal exemption. In other words, people should not have to prove that they cannot access books in any other way. The tax should be gone, because accessing literature is important for everyone.

**Sir Mike Penning:** The hon. Lady is making a very important point that I probably did not express very well in my speech. Asking people to prove their disability may exclude a whole tranche of people. That sort of vetting would be so negative for so many people that they just would not do it. I agree completely that a general relaxation of VAT is the only way forward.

**Marion Fellows:** I totally agree, and the right hon. Gentleman expressed it much better than I was able to.

Reading has many mental health benefits, and there is a clear link between reading and improved wellbeing. Given that the cost of living crisis has led to soaring rates of stress, anxiety and depression, there are clear benefits to making audiobooks more affordable. Norway—I frequently refer to small, independent nations in other debates, although I do not do so on this occasion for any other reason—has scrapped VAT on audiobooks altogether.

The National Literacy Trust says that two in five audiobook listeners are children, and young people said that listening to an audiobook or podcast got them

interested in reading books. Something that encourages children to read has to be good. Most children and young people who enjoy listening say that they also enjoy reading, compared with children who do not enjoy listening. Introducing children and young people to reading in a way that they find engaging and enjoyable is a vital means of improving literacy. I have grandchildren, and they love listening to stories on the BBC or through the fancy machine that I bought one of them for Christmas last year. It encourages them to think about books in a positive way. Many more children would benefit if there were no tax on audiobooks. Reducing VAT on audiobooks is essential to ensure that young people especially listen to books.

I want to ask the Minister a question—the RNIB asked me to ask her this, so I will. Has she evaluated the cost of extending the VAT exemption to those who are blind, partially sighted or have print disabilities? Has anything been done on that? As well as that question from the RNIB, I would like to ask a further question: how much would it cost to just remove the tax entirely?

I do not think I need to go on further because the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead covered this topic extremely effectively. I cannot find an argument against this, so I am going to let the Opposition spokesperson speak and listen carefully to what the Minister has to say on this very important topic.

3.25 pm

**James Murray** (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Sharma, my parliamentary neighbour in Ealing. I start by wholeheartedly congratulating the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing the debate. I listened to him with great interest and I thought his speech was very thoughtful, heartfelt and informative. Indeed, in preparing for this debate, I found it informative to understand the nuance of the issues relating to audiobooks in greater detail. As well as thanking the right hon. Member, I thank several organisations that have campaigned for this change, including the Macular Society, the Society of Authors, and the Writers' Guild of Great Britain, all of which have called for the exemption of audiobooks from VAT.

Before coming to the debate, I read an early-day motion that has been tabled as part of the campaign. I also found that informative in setting out the benefits of audiobooks for the many people with sight loss, visual impairment, dyslexia or other reading disabilities. The motion explains how audiobooks offer unique opportunities for visually impaired and dyslexic people to improve their education on a par with their peers. It recognises the role of audiobooks in enabling visually impaired and dyslexic people to continue working independently for longer and thereby contribute to the economy for longer. It explains how audiobooks open up a world of information, literature and poetry to visually impaired and dyslexic people. The attractions and benefits of audiobooks are clear, but there is the question of how much they cost.

Although this debate concerns VAT on audiobooks in particular, there is a wider context. Inflation and the high tax burden in our country affect people's spending across the board. Before the debate, I also read that the application of VAT to printed publications dates right back to the introduction of VAT in 1973, when printed books, newspapers and magazines were given a zero rate.

Recent technological changes are raising questions over how the tax system across the board adjusts to a more digital world. That applies in many parts of our society and economy, and it raises questions about fairness, consistency and revenue raising. In response to technological changes, since 1 May 2020, the zero rate of VAT charged on printed books, newspapers and magazines has also been applied to e-publications. However, as we heard from the right hon. Member, the sale of audiobooks continues to be subject to the standard rate of 20%.

I will listen with interest to the Minister's response, because the attractions and benefits of audiobooks are clear, and I am sure that she will recognise many of the points made about the importance of audiobooks for people with sight loss, visual impairment, dyslexia and other reading disabilities. The Opposition appreciate, however, that expanding the scope of VAT is complex and can add pressures to the public finances. I am sure that the Government will carefully consider this issue, and like other Members, I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

3.29 pm

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate, and I thank him sincerely for the personal experiences that he has brought into it.

For what it is worth, I did not know that my right hon. Friend has lived with dyslexia. I have seen him so many times in the Chamber, both at the Dispatch Box and as an eminent Back Bencher. I am genuinely in awe of his ability to memorise the briefs that we get. Anyone who has had to stand at the Dispatch Box, whether in Government or in Opposition, will know how densely written and complex they can be.

**Sir Mike Penning:** The Minister and the civil servants who are listening will realise just how petrified officials were when I walked into my first ministerial position and said, "By the way, I memorise—I do not read—the submissions that you want me to read out at the Dispatch Box." In a further seven Departments, the message not to try to push stuff in front of me eventually got round Westminster. It is interesting that we take for granted that people are reading verbatim what is in front of them. An awful lot of people with reading and learning difficulties do not. They actually go with their gut feeling, which is what I have always tended to do.

**Victoria Atkins:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point more generally, if I may have your munificence for a moment, Mr Sharma. It is so important that people such as my right hon. Friend show that dyslexia or other learning conditions need not be a barrier in a person's ability to achieve success nowadays. In many ways, he will have been at the forefront of that change. I was horrified to hear about the reaction he had at school. I hope and trust that nowadays, children with a similar condition would not have that reaction; it would be much better understood. The fact that he rather endearingly described that he thought it was a tropical disease shows just how far we have come. He and others have been at the forefront of that, and I am genuinely grateful to him for sharing his experiences with us.



[Victoria Atkins]

Ensuring that everybody is able to access books in all their forms is something that this Government take very seriously. Driving up standards in literacy has been our long-term priority in education, and our focus over the past decade has been on improving the teaching of reading for everybody. We have given students across the country a solid foundation in reading. That is not just to give young people the skills that are vital for their success in later life, but—as the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) put it so eloquently—to encourage a lifelong love and respect for one of life's greatest pleasures.

I very much understand the enormous pleasures that audiobooks can bring, as someone whose constituency is quite some distance from London—I know the hon. Lady's is, too. I have had an excitable seven, eight, nine, 10 and then 11-year-old throughout my career in this place, and having an audiobook that really grips a young child's attention can be a godsend to parents struggling on long journeys.

I am veering into flippancy, but there is a much more serious point about what an audiobook can mean for an individual's ability to read and enjoy reading. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead gave the compelling example of his constituent who is losing her sight and with it, she fears, her ability to continue enjoying reading. I take that very seriously. I understand his point about the difference in timing and the implications of VAT.

We believe that a love of reading should be ignited at a young age, which is why we have committed to ensuring that early reading is taught well in schools. We have introduced packages of measures.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Minister is making a good point. In a previous life as a university lecturer in journalism, I had a student who was blind. The books that were available as audiobooks were much more expensive because of the VAT, and there were fewer of them. With podcasts, there is more material. The educational value is not just in schools, but goes right through to higher education. I had an elderly grandparent who went blind, but was still able to read through audiobooks, which became a lifeline. The VAT is an obstacle to providing a vital lifeline to elderly people who can no longer read.

**Victoria Atkins:** Although this part of my speech focuses on children, I very much accept the point about people having a love of reading throughout their life. I want to mention the positive work, which I hope is welcomed across the House, in schools to improve literacy and give that love of reading to young people. The English hubs programme promotes a love of reading and spreads best practice in teaching pupils to read. It supports schools in England in providing excellent phonics and early language teaching. The hon. Lady will be able to help us with what happens in Scotland. The ability to teach reading, particularly through the use of phonics, is very much recognised. Through the hub programme, literary specialists provide tailored support to schools, including by running events to showcase excellent practice in teaching and reading, and by working with local schools to develop their practice. So far, it has supported

1,600 schools intensively, and focuses on supporting the children who are making the slowest progress in reading, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Sir Mike Penning:** The work the Minister alludes to is on key stage 1 English. It is on the teaching of phonics. The hubs are brilliant—absolutely great—but they do not help dyslexic kids, or kids who are visually impaired, because it is a book-reading hub; it is not what they need. Nothing I have said today takes away from the fact that we want more people to have that wonderful experience of reading, but those who cannot are being excluded from those hubs.

**Victoria Atkins:** I hope my right hon. Friend will understand that this is not my area of expertise, and that I am here responding on VAT, but I will take away his observations on the hubs. Schools find their own ways of teaching their children. I recently had the pleasure of a Friday afternoon visit to a wonderful primary school in my constituency, Mareham Le Fen Primary School. They have “mystery reading”, where someone reads an extract of a book to the entire primary school to try to encourage pupils to finish that book. Schools across the country have programmes like that to encourage reading and to make it a real pleasure for children, and I very much support any efforts to bring that about.

We have provided £8.7 million of funding this academic year to support schools in purchasing complete systematic synthetic phonics programmes for their curriculum—that is a good example of Department for Education jargon. By ensuring high-quality phonics teaching and improving literacy, we are giving children a solid base on which to build as they progress through school. We published the reading framework in 2021. Over 90% of schools have read that framework, which provides guidance on how to improve the teaching of reading. It focuses on the early stages of teaching reading, and on the contribution of talk, stories and systematic synthetic phonics. It also helps schools to meet expectations for teaching early reading.

We very much appreciate the fact that these measures are paying off. England came fourth out of the 43 countries that tested children of the same age for primary reading proficiency in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, the results of which were published last month. That is a real success, and we know that it is down to the concentration on phonics and is driven by improvements for those pupils who have perhaps struggled in the past. I am very grateful, as I know my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead is, to ministerial colleagues whose efforts over the years have driven those changes.

However, we also recognise the importance of provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities, including children who live with some of the conditions that we have heard about today, including partial sightedness and blindness, dyslexia and other learning conditions. These cohorts may require extra support, so the next reading framework to be published will include guidance on supporting children who are struggling to read, including those with special educational needs. The Government speak regularly to experts, including SEND specialists, specialist schools and English hubs, about how we can support teachers to ensure that children

with dyslexia and other learning difficulties can progress well in their reading, and meet the expectations on them by the time they leave primary school.

If I may, I will now turn to the subject of VAT. Of course, as colleagues from across the House know, VAT is a broad-based tax on consumption, and the 20% standard rate applies to most goods and services. Although there are exceptions to the standard rate, these have always been strictly limited by both legal and fiscal considerations.

We did indeed cut the VAT on certain digital publications in the March 2020 Budget to support literacy and reading in all its forms, and to make it clear that e-books, e-newspapers, e-magazines, and academic e-journals are entitled to the same VAT treatment as their physical counterparts.

The extension of the zero rate of VAT to e-publications was introduced to address the inconsistency of approach between certain physical publications and their digital counterparts, so that there is a mirroring between the two; if a publication in physical form has a zero rating, then in digital form it now has the same exemption. There will be categories of publication where, because the physical form does not have zero rating, the digital form does not either. I say that because audiobooks—and podcasts, which the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) mentioned—would not come under that approach, if one were to extend it to audio publications. We say that there is no such inconsistency in relation to audiobooks, but I appreciate that that is the point under discussion today.

As colleagues know, any VAT relief would come at a cost to the Exchequer, and it would be very difficult to target. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw said that the RNIB has asked if this approach has been costed, both for people living with sight conditions and the public more generally. My answer to her is that there is ongoing work on that. I do not have figures that I can give her today, because I need to satisfy myself that any figures I give are accurate, but I take her point, and I will write to her in due course, when I am in a position to do so, because that is a very fair question.

As was noted by the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), who spoke for the Opposition, there is a sense that the law has to try to keep pace with the speed of change in technology, which can be difficult; I think we all acknowledge that. For example, many audiobooks are now provided through subscription, along with other forms of media, such as podcasts, and trying to introduce distinctions between these different types of products would introduce additional complexity into the VAT system.

There is also no guarantee that the benefit of any VAT relief would be passed on to the consumer in the form of lower prices. That is quite an important point. We all assume that the VAT exemption announced in March 2020 was passed on to consumers by businesses, but it seems that that is not necessarily the case. It is not for me to advise either right hon. and hon. Members or charities, but where that benefit is not being passed on to consumers, perhaps publishers of e-books and so on should be asked why.

Audiobooks are enjoyed by a wide range of consumers, so the majority of any relief would primarily be felt by those not living with disabilities that prevent them from accessing physical and digital books. Also, I am obliged to mention, as in any debate on VAT, that it is the third

largest tax in the UK in terms of yield, and it allows the Government and the state to provide public services. It is forecast to raise £161 billion this financial year alone. Many public services are supported from those funds, so we have to look very carefully at every request to change or tweak the VAT system, or to use it to meet the laudable aims and concerns of colleagues from across the House.

There was a question about the VAT cut. Some might say, “Hang on a minute; if the Government have imposed the VAT cut, why can’t they force businesses to pass on that cut?” We set the tax framework, and businesses must operate within it, but if a business chooses to absorb that tax relief as profit, rather than pass it on to consumers, that is a commercial decision taken by the business. That may be something that others outside this Chamber may wish to reflect on when considering the issue as a whole.

In conclusion, we understand why my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead called for this debate. We agree that literacy is a vital issue, not just for our youngest citizens but throughout our lifetimes. We are confident that our record over the past 13 years shows that we are making the right decisions for children in school. We believe that the measures that we continue to take to support reading are the best way to target our resources to deliver this wonderful benefit to everyone. However, we do not rest on our laurels; that is why the reading framework guidance will also focus on the needs of children living with special educational needs.

I thank my right hon. Friend for his debate, and I thank hon. Members from across the House for their contributions. I am sorry that I am not able to give quite the news that my right hon. Friend was hoping for, but I look forward to discussing the matter with him in future.

3.48 pm

**Sir Mike Penning:** I thank the Minister for her restricted comments. I fully understand that she will not commit. To give her a little bit of help, the Publishers Association estimates that we are talking about £22 million a year going into the Exchequer. It may be wrong, and I accept that not everybody would pass on a VAT relief.

I should have done this earlier, but I thank the Library, the Publishers Association, the National Literacy Trust, the Macular Society, RNIB, Scope, Glaucoma UK, Sight Scotland, Sight Scotland Veterans and my former colleagues in the military, Listening Books, AbilityNet, Disability Rights UK and the Authors’ Licensing and Collecting Society. One tiny point: I think 57 colleagues signed my early-day motion. I look forward to further conversations with the Minister; we will be back. The Backbench Business Committee was generous to give me 90 minutes here. With those sorts of numbers supporting me, I might be on the Floor of the House with the Minister, perhaps in the autumn, when she might have nicer and more helpful comments for me.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the matter of VAT on audiobooks.

3.49 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*





# Written Statements

Thursday 15 June 2023

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Prescription Charge Upper Age Exemption: Consultation Outcome

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien):** In 2021, the Department of Health and Social Care held a public consultation on aligning the upper age for the NHS prescription charge exemption with the state pension age (SPA), which is currently 66, and due to increase to 67 and 68 in future years. The upper age for NHS prescription exemption was introduced in 1968 to be in line with the women's state pension age, which was 60 at that time. In the decades since, there have been increases to the state pension age, but the upper age exemption for prescription charges has remained the same.

The consultation received over 117,000 responses, the majority of which were opposed to the proposed change. Responses cited, among other issues, cost of living pressures and risk to health of people not taking prescribed medication correctly as reasons for retaining the current upper age exemption. The Government are committed to tackling cost of living pressures and has decided that the prescription charge upper age exemption will remain at 60, meaning that it will not change to align to state pension age.

It should be noted that, in England, a broad range of NHS prescription charge exemptions are in place to help those with greatest need. These measures include a variety of charge exemptions, and eligibility depends upon whether people are in receipt of certain qualifying benefits or tax credits, their age, receipt of a war pension or have a qualifying medical condition. The current exemptions mean that around 89% of NHS prescription items dispensed in the community in England are free of charge, in addition, those on a low income who do not qualify for an automatic exemption can seek help under the NHS low income scheme. For those who do not qualify for an exemption or the NHS low income scheme, prepayment certificates (PPC) are available to help those who need frequent prescriptions. The annual PPC can be paid for through 10 instalments, and covers all prescriptions in that period for just over £2 per week.

[HCWS851]

### NHS England: Government Mandate

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay):** I am today laying in Parliament the Government 2023 mandate to NHS England. The Government have promised to cut NHS waiting lists, meaning that people can get the care they need more quickly. That promise is at the very heart of this mandate, which will help us deliver for patients, and we are delivering. To support delivery, the Government have

made up to £14.1 billion available for health and social care over the next two years, on top of record funding to improve elective, urgent and emergency, and primary care performance.

In February 2022, NHS England published its delivery plan for tackling the covid-19 backlog of elective care. This set out a clear vision for how the NHS will recover and expand elective care and cancer services in the next three years. Since its publication, hard-working health and care staff have made great progress in recovering elective care despite continued pressures from covid-19, flu and industrial action. The NHS succeeded in meeting the ambition to virtually eliminate waits of two years or more in July 2022, and reduced by over 90% from the peak the number of patients waiting 78 weeks or more by April 2023. Patients will also get more choice about where they have treatment. Alongside this, I have set out that the NHS must recover the cancer backlog to pre-pandemic levels and go further to improve one-year and five-year survival for all cancers, achieved by maintaining and improving performance against the 62 and 31-day standards; diagnosing cancers faster and earlier; and continuing work to expand diagnostic capacity.

In January 2023, we published the delivery plan for recovering urgent and emergency care services, reduce waiting times, and improve patient experience. I want to see a system that provides more and better care in people's homes, gets ambulances to people more quickly when they need them, sees people faster when they go to hospital and helps people safely leave hospital having received the care they need.

And in May 2023, the delivery plan for recovering access to primary care was published, committing to tackle the 8 am rush and make it easier and quicker for patients to get the help they need from primary care through empowering patients, implementing modern general practice access by making sure patients are either given an appointment immediately when they call or signposted to a more appropriate service, building capacity, and cutting bureaucracy. Later this year, subject to consultation, the NHS will enable patients to access prescription medication directly from a pharmacy, without a GP appointment, for common conditions such as earache, sore throat or urinary tract infections.

All of the above priorities will be enabled by supporting the workforce and by accelerating digitalisation, and this will also support ongoing delivery of the NHS long-term plan, including on maternity and neonatal services, mental health services and prevention. The NHS will need to support the workforce through delivering the long-term workforce plan, and building on the functions formerly held by Health Education England: training, retention, and modernising the way staff work. Following the merger of NHS Digital and NHS England, I have also asked the NHS to do more to utilise the power of technology and the skills, leadership and culture that underpins it, to drive a new era of digital transformation. This will allow the health and care system to thrive long into the future, delivering vast benefits for patients—such as using AI to give better treatment, the latest screening techniques to detect illness sooner and equipment that allows more people to be treated at home.

The mandate meets my duties under section 13A of the NHS Act 2006 to set out objectives that NHS England should seek to meet in carrying out their

functions. It will apply from today until the date it is replaced. The mandate complements the general duties on NHS England to provide a comprehensive health service with planning and prioritisation done by integrated care boards and integrated care partnerships for their areas.

I have listened to what the health system has asked for: fewer, focused priorities, giving systems clarity on what I am asking them to deliver. This mandate is deliberately shorter than the previous mandate and both emphasises the Government commitment to delivery on the public's key concerns while allowing integrated care systems the freedom to deliver effectively. The NHS provides a comprehensive health service, and by focusing on these priorities, we can help to make sure everyone gets the treatment they need.

[HCWS853]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Daniel Morgan Independent Panel Report: Government Response

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman):** The former Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), on 10 May 2013 announced the formation of the Daniel Morgan independent panel. Two years ago, on 15 June 2021, the report of the Daniel Morgan independent panel was published. Today I report on the progress made against the recommendations made in that report.

The panel made 23 recommendations as a consequence of the failings of process and accountability it identified in the course of its work. Most of the recommendations were for policing, however there were several for the Government to address. The Government response focuses on four main themes: investigations; tackling corruption; working with inquiries; and information management. Those recommendations relating to the investigations were primarily directed at the Metropolitan Police and policing.

In response to the report's publication, the previous Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), asked His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service to investigate the issues raised by the panel. HMICFRS concluded its inspection and reported on 22 March 2022. This report was troubling and outlined several failures of the Metropolitan Police, particularly in tackling corruption.

It is not for the Government to respond on behalf of the police or individual forces. But it is clear from the independent report that serious failings occurred over a period of three decades that run counter to the British tradition of policing by consent and the code of ethics this Government introduced in policing in 2014. I expect chief constables to do all they can to ensure that HMICFRS' recommendations are delivered upon, that similar failings do not reoccur, and that the damage done to public trust is repaired.

In recent years, several steps have been taken by Government to combat police corruption. A new offence of police corruption, applicable solely to police and

National Crime Agency officers, now sits alongside the existing offence of misconduct in public office. The new offence carries a maximum prison sentence of 14 years. To prevent corrupt police officers evading accountability by resigning or retiring, the Policing and Crime Act 2017 enabled the extension of disciplinary procedures to former officers, ensuring that misconduct proceedings can still take place, even where an officer has resigned or retired from policing.

Vetting acts as the first line of defence against corruption within police forces. In January this year, I asked the College of Policing to strengthen its statutory vetting code of practice and make clear the standards expected of all chief officers. I also asked HMICFRS to undertake a rapid review of progress on improving vetting—HMICFRS' findings were published in May 2023.

Further to improving existing vetting arrangements, I also launched a review in January to ensure that the police officer dismissal process is fair and effective at removing those who are not fit to serve the public. We are considering the findings of this review very carefully and expect to make announcements on next steps in the coming weeks.

The media play an essential role in holding all public institutions to account and it is vital that journalists are able to do their job freely and without restriction. The very fabric of the panel's report, however, focused on the police's inappropriate relationships with private investigators and journalists. HMICFRS's report in response to the panel's report shows that policing still has work to do to ensure that these types of conflicts of interests are properly investigated.

There were several issues raised by the panel about how they were unable, at times, to progress their work. HMICFRS and the Independent Office for Police Conduct did not find any deliberate obstruction by the Metropolitan Police but there was, at least initially, insufficient support from the force for the panel's work. We are working across Government to ensure that inquiries and panels of a similar type are able to do their job without hindrance, and we will also work with the police to make clear their responsibilities in this respect.

Policing as a profession is fully aware of the importance of public scrutiny and that shifting the culture away from defensiveness needs to start from within. In 2020 the Home Office introduced a statutory duty of co-operation for police officers, to ensure that officers participate openly and professionally with investigations, inquiries and other formal proceedings. In addition, the College of Policing is currently reviewing the code of ethics, which I expect to further promote a culture of openness and accountability.

I am very grateful to Baroness O'Loan and her panel for their tenacious efforts to review the handling of this matter, and to ensure that lessons are learned for the future. The torment experienced by Daniel Morgan's family must not be repeated.

The Government response (Cmd 857) has been laid before the House and is also available on gov.uk.

[HCWS854]

## LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

### Thurrock Council: Best Value Inspection Report

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley):** I am today publishing the best value inspection report into Thurrock Council, authored by their inspector, Essex County Council. The final version of this report was submitted to the Secretary of State on 19 May 2023, following a representations process whereby any particular individuals criticised were given an opportunity to read and respond to those relevant parts of the report before it was published.

This publication follows my update to the House on 16 March in which I confirmed that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and I had formally expanded the Government intervention in Thurrock Council, appointing Dr Dave Smith as an independent managing director commissioner, and providing commissioners with further powers over Thurrock's governance and staffing functions.

The best value inspection report details widespread failure in Thurrock Council's financial, governance, and leadership functions. The challenges facing Thurrock "stem from a series of self-sustaining, systemic weaknesses which have allowed for repeated failure over many years." Although individual officers and members made significant mistakes, particularly in relation to financial investments, they were operating within broken systems at the council which are in urgent need of reform and improvement.

The report clearly sets out the events which led to the collapse of the council's commercial investment strategy last year, after that strategy was allowed to operate in an environment with wholly inadequate scrutiny and governance arrangements.

That failure has had profound consequences for the council's financial sustainability, and the inspection report confirms that Thurrock is unable to balance its budget without exceptional financial support from Government, which has now been granted in principle for the financial year 2022-23. Going forward, the report makes it clear that in addition to realising extensive efficiency savings, the council will have to review the scope of its local services.

The report reveals that the pattern of failure which has characterised the council's approach to commercial investment can also be seen in its delivery of major infrastructure and regeneration projects. These failings have resulted in the loss of substantial sums of public money. The council's lack of openness and transparency prevented these failings from being properly scrutinised, and these losses were often concealed, or not properly reported.

The report concludes that these failings are attributable to the breakdown of political and managerial leadership; inadequate governance arrangements; and profound weaknesses in the council's control environment.

#### *The Government's Response*

The best value inspection report makes a number of recommendations, some of which pertain to actions that the council should take, for example to expand the scope of its improvement and recovery plan, and some of which relate to expanding the powers of commissioners.

I am pleased to confirm that the majority of the report's recommendations have already been addressed by the expansion to the intervention I announced on 16 March, which provided commissioners with the powers to drive forward change in Thurrock council's finance, governance, and staffing functions, which the report highlights as areas of particular concern.

The recommendation in the report on member development, and the importance of engaging residents in local democracy, accords with the concerns about leadership and member training raised in the first commissioner's report and best value inspection update letter. The importance of strengthening member capacity at the council cannot be overstated, because all members will have a vital role to play in the council's recovery. I expect Thurrock council to carefully consider this recommendation, and to work closely with commissioners to ensure that it is taken forward, for example, by being incorporated into the council's improvement and recovery plan. I would expect that equally close attention is paid to the section of the report which focuses on the council's delivery of major projects, where there are clearly lessons to be learnt.

The report also recommends that Thurrock council change its scheme of elections, from electing its members in thirds, to "all-out" elections, where all members are elected at the same time. The report recommends that if the council does not make this change by 31 July, that the Secretary of State should consider making an order under section 86 of the Local Government Act 2000 to secure this.

Given the pressing need to bring stability to the council, the Secretary of State has concluded that he wishes to seek representations on using his powers under section 86 of the 2000 Act, to bring about a move to whole council elections from May 2025. The May 2024 elections of one third of members will go ahead as planned, to ensure residents have the opportunity to have their say. It is important that Thurrock council can express its view on this proposal before a final decision is made. I have written to the leader and commissioners of Thurrock council today to notify them of the Secretary of State's proposals, and representations should be received, from the authority or any other interested party, by 29 June.

This report lays bare a rare but significant case of a council failing to comply with its best value duty across several fronts. As I noted in my statement to the House on 16 March, I am hopeful that the recent expansion to the intervention will help the council to address the concerns set out in the best value inspection report, and to continue its vital work to improve the way in which the council is run.

The people of Thurrock deserve a well-run council that can fund the delivery of good-quality services in a sustainable and responsible way. Progress has been made in recent months but this will require significant improvements in the COUNCIL'S leadership, finance, and governance functions at both the political and managerial level. Commissioners will play a significant role in securing these improvements and informing Ministers' ongoing response to the situation in Thurrock.



The Secretary of State and I look forward to receiving the commissioners' second report at the end of this month.

This will be a challenging time for Thurrock's officers and members as they reflect on the findings and recommendations of the best value inspection report. The Government will continue to work closely with

Thurrock council and its commissioners, and we remain fully committed to supporting them in their improvement journey.

A copy of the best value inspection report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS852]

# Ministerial Correction

*Thursday 15 June 2023*

## DEFENCE

### Global Military Operations

*The following is an extract from the debate on Global Military Operations on 14 June 2023.*

**The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison):** I cannot do justice to the detailed points made by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland). As a logistician, I expect him to make a number of forensic points, but he is quite right to say that we should not be matching the good against the exquisite. Never let the excellent be the enemy of the good. I think he mentioned a medal for CASD. Of course, all medallic recognition is kept under continual review. I cannot give him a commitment. I would just point out, although I know it

is second best, that the deterrent patrol pin was produced in 2009, the 50th anniversary of CASD, which I know a lot of submariners wear with pride.

*[Official Report, 14 June 2023, Vol. 734, c. 403.]*

*Letter of correction from the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families, the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison):*

An error has been identified in the response given to my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland). The correct response should have been.

**The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison):** I cannot do justice to the detailed points made by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland). As a logistician, I expect him to make a number of forensic points, but he is quite right to say that we should not be matching the good against the exquisite. Never let the excellent be the enemy of the good. I think he mentioned a medal for CASD. Of course, all medallic recognition is kept under continual review. I cannot give him a commitment. I would just point out, although I know it is second best, that the deterrent patrol pin was produced in **2019**, the 50th anniversary of CASD, which I know a lot of submariners wear with pride.

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**not later than  
Thursday 22 June 2023**

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