

**Monday  
19 June 2023**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Monday 19 June 2023**

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# House of Commons

*Monday 19 June 2023*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NEW WRIT

*Ordered,*

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the County constituency of Somerton and Frome in the room of David Warburton, who since his election for the said County constituency has been appointed to the Office of Steward and Bailiff of His Majesty's Manor of Northstead in the County of York.—(*Simon Hart.*)

## Oral Answers to Questions

### WORK AND PENSIONS

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Employment: Adur and Worthing

1. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help fill vacancies and increase employment in Adur and Worthing. [905446]

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride):** I commend my hon. Friend for the extensive work that he does to promote skills and employment to his constituents. In his constituency, we of course have the full offer from Jobcentre Plus, with fairs, recruitment days and an extensive skills offering, to make sure that we keep bearing down on unemployment and economic inactivity.

**Tim Loughton:** Mr Speaker, you may be aware that the age profile in Adur and Worthing in my constituency is slightly higher than the national demographic, so I was particularly pleased by the Secretary of State's expansion of the mid-life MOT—although perhaps it is slightly too late for him and me, in our seventh decade. Given the higher reliability, productivity and loyalty of older workers, what more is he doing to keep older employees in work or to tempt back those who may have taken early retirement?

**Mel Stride:** I have to say that I am surprised that there are so many elderly—an exemplar of the spring chicken brigade as my hon. Friend is—but he raises a very important point. There is the mid-life MOT, but we also provide returnerships—a shortened, accelerated version of apprenticeships for older workers—and of course the Chancellor announced important changes to the tax treatment of pensions to keep some older workers, particularly in the NHS and our medical services, in work.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Whatever the Secretary of State does in relation to Adur and Worthing will happen across the great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. With that in mind, let me try to make a helpful suggestion for increasing employment. Has consideration been given to enhancing steps to work placements, whereby jobseekers help out in registered community groups, with community workers, to increase their confidence? Community groups do great work, and they can be a step to further employment.

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend the Minister for Employment recently visited the hon. Gentleman's constituency to look into those matters and reported back very favourably. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that important point.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Father of the House.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): While my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and I have represented Worthing and district, we have survived the equivalent of eight coalmines closing in the town. Flexibility matters.

Let us remember, looking back at the youth opportunities programme and the employer assistance scheme, that it is enterprise that makes the biggest difference. Will my right hon. Friend emphasise that? In tribute to Lord Young of Graffham, let us make sure that we combine individual enterprise and public enterprise with private partnerships.

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend the Father of the House is absolutely right. It is really important that we operate with all those relationships across the private and public sectors. Jobcentres up and down the country are heavily engaged with employers at all levels, and not just the large ones but the small and medium-sized enterprises that are so important.

#### Local Housing Allowance

2. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of the local housing allowance. [905447]

18. **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of the local housing allowance. [905464]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):** The local housing allowance policy is kept under regular review and rates are reviewed annually. LHA rates were boosted with a £1 billion funding increase in 2010, and this significant investment has been maintained since then. Discretionary housing payments, or DHPs, are available for those who face a shortfall in meeting their housing costs.

**Gerald Jones:** Private rental costs in Wales increased by 4.2% in the year to February 2023, the highest annual percentage since the Tories came to power. The Government have accepted the need to uplift benefits in line with inflation, but they have completely failed to accept that the same principles should apply to the local housing allowance. Given that rent is the largest outgoing for a typical family budget, can I ask the Minister why?

**Mims Davies:** There is no one-size-fits-all in regard to the challenge we face. This is a multi-layered and multi-textured challenge, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will be assured that I am focused on addressing the issue of rising housing costs. To that end, I am engaging with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and have consulted with the Local Government Association and other stakeholders. The hon. Gentleman has noted the devolved point—of course, I will look at that issue as well. LHA rates are not intended to meet all rents in all areas where rents may perhaps be more expensive. Those in receipt of benefits will have to make challenging choices, as others do, but people listening today should have a look at the household support fund and the benefits calculator on gov.uk and make sure that they are getting all the support that may be out there, as well as the cost of living payments.

**Dan Carden:** I listened carefully to the Minister's answer. Liverpool, Walton is the most deprived constituency in the whole of England, yet the annual gap between local housing allowance and the cheapest 30% of properties now stands at over £1,500. My casework contains more and more heartbreaking stories of families unable to afford the cost of their housing. People need their Government to act on rising private rents and the lack of decent homes: to raise the allowances and take control on rents in the short term, but to increase the supply of housing in the long term. What is this Government's plan?

**Mims Davies:** Mr Speaker, may I just confirm that the LHA rates were boosted by a £1 billion funding increase in 2020? I may have said 2010, so I apologise to the House, but that significant investment is maintained.

I recognise that rents are increasing, as the hon. Gentleman has said, and that it is a challenging fiscal environment and difficult decisions are having to be made. He has mentioned the most vulnerable. For those of working age or with disability benefits, those benefits have been increased in line with inflation for 2023-24. The benefit cap has also increased, but I want to reassure the House that I understand this is a real concern for many of our constituents of all sizes of house, and I am focused on addressing those challenges.

**Mr Speaker:** We are only on Question 2, so I am a little worried about how long it is taking. I call the shadow Minister.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): The Government's mortgage crisis is about to be the next blow to hit renters, because so many are renting from those with buy-to-let mortgages. Already, 49%—almost half—of children in privately rented homes with parents receiving universal credit are in absolute poverty, to take the Government's preferred measure, and as we know, many of those parents work. Since then, rents across the country have risen by 9.5%, but the local housing allowance has risen by 0%. What does the Minister think is going to happen to low-income families with children in the private rented sector this year?

**Mims Davies:** Those struggling with mortgage payments should engage with their mortgage lenders. We have abolished the zero earnings rule to allow claimants to continue to receive support while in work or on universal

credit, and there is support for mortgage interest rates out there, so please do reach out. In fact, £25 million was paid in loans to 12,000 households in 2021-22, in order to support low-income homeowners. Over 200,000 low-income homeowners have been supported, and that has been a focus, but I understand the point that the hon. Lady makes. I assure her and the House that this is something that the Secretary of State and I are working on, as well as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—it is not solely an issue for my Department—but I take on board her points.

### Menopause: Workplace Support

3. **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve workplace support for women experiencing menopause. [905449]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):** I have appointed Helen Tomlinson as the first ever Department for Work and Pensions menopause employment champion, and she is driving awareness of issues around the menopause and employment and what challenges women may have. She has already met with members of the DWP's 50Plus Choices roundtable group; with the Chair of the Women and Equalities Select Committee; with Dame Lesley Regan, the women's health ambassador; and with Andy Briggs, the Government's business champion for older workers. We are working with sectors and with large and small employers to disseminate best practice.

**James Sunderland:** It is really important that we in this place do what we can to support all those going through the menopause, including the wider availability of hormone replacement therapy. Are the Government considering offering paid leave to those who may need time off work to attend clinics for medical support, noting also the variation and the consistency of those offers of support to those going through the menopause?

**Mims Davies:** The Government expect employers to treat their staff well and fairly, and to accommodate all sorts of flexibility requests. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that a private Member's Bill, the Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Bill, is going through Parliament, and we will ensure the development of flexible working policies, which is crucial.

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): We know that over 700,000 women over 50 are currently economically inactive in this country. Does the Minister agree that including menopause among the assessment criteria for occupational health would help to promote retention and the return to work of countless women?

**Mims Davies:** I thank the hon. Lady for her point, and I know she has already met Helen Tomlinson. I will take on board the point she makes and take that away.

### Universal Credit: Food Bank Use

4. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of universal credit deductions on levels of food bank use. [905450]

13. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What assessment has his Department made of the potential impact of universal credit deductions on levels of food bank use. [905459]

**The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman):** The Department for Work and Pensions has reduced the standard deduction cap from 40% to 25% of the standard allowance since 2019. Where a person feels they cannot afford benefit overpayment recoveries, they are encouraged to contact the Department.

**Chi Onwurah:** Across the north-east, 120,000 children are impacted by universal credit deductions. Take my constituent Amanda: she has two small children, yet her entire personal allowance of £300 a month was deducted, and on top of that she was sanctioned because of tech issues with her work journal. I have worked to support her, as has Citizens Advice Newcastle, but of course she had to go to a food bank. Does the Minister think that is a working system?

**Guy Opperman:** In recent years, the standard cap has been reduced, as I said, from 40% to 25%. Reducing the threshold further would risk key social obligations such as child maintenance not being met. We aim to continue to strike the right balance between ensuring that protections are in place and allowing claimants to retain as much of their award as possible.

**Dr Huq:** The role of accommodating food bank Britain has fallen to churches and places of worship, which have also housed playgroups, vaccination centres and warm spaces of late. Given that they are stepping up to fill gaps in state provision—state failure—would Ministers be able to exempt their often crumbling and creaking buildings, whether or not they are listed, from VAT on building repairs, as generosity and him upstairs alone will not pay the bills?

**Guy Opperman:** That is a matter for the Treasury, as I am sure the hon. Lady knows.

### Safeguarding

5. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the effectiveness of his Department's safeguarding policies. [905451]

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove):** The Department is required to pay the correct amount of benefit to the customer at the correct time. We do not have a statutory duty of care or a safeguarding duty, but that does not mean that we do not care. The Department is continually looking at ways to support vulnerable customers, as we often need to consider a customer's particular circumstances to provide the right service or ensure appropriate support.

**Debbie Abrahams:** The woeful inadequacy of the DWP's safeguarding policy has been revealed time and again, with five prevention of future deaths notices issued by coroners to successive Secretaries of State since 2012, the section 23 notice from the Equality and Human Rights Commission because of fears of discrimination against disabled claimants, and 140 more claimant deaths investigated by this Department between July 2019 and

June 2022, while the reality is that the figure is probably much higher. What does it say about this Government that successive Secretaries of State have failed to safeguard vulnerable claimants?

**Tom Pursglove:** I say to the hon. Lady, who of course raises the most serious and important of issues, that we had a good debate on this the week before last, when I was able to place on record the significant work that officials have been undertaking with Ministers to address these matters. We continue to be open to proper engagement around these processes, to ensure that they are the best they can be and are fit for purpose. What we want to do is to support claimants on the basis of an individual, tailored approach to make sure that their needs are properly met and safeguarding support is provided from a whole host of relevant agencies.

### Disability Action Plan

7. **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What progress has his Department made on the disability action plan. [905453]

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove):** We are planning to consult on the disability action plan this summer. The consultation will be published in accessible formats, and we will publish the final plan once we have fully considered the consultation responses.

**Marsha De Cordova:** The Conservatives have consistently failed disabled people throughout the past 13 years. They promised a national disability strategy, which was ruled unlawful, and now they have promised a disability action plan. The European Accessibility Act will improve access to digital products and services, and reduce barriers to accessing transport, education and the labour market for disabled people throughout Europe. When do the Government plan to consult and publish their action plan, and will they follow the lead of our friends in the European Union by removing those accessibility barriers?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the opportunity to set out our ongoing commitment to have this disability action plan, and I am disappointed by the tone that she takes on that. There is a real opportunity for the House and our country to come together in welcoming this, and to shape it, get it right, and ensure that it addresses many of the issues that disabled people tell us are important, with the right answers to those questions. I hope she will engage with that in such a spirit.

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): On a recent visit to the Waitrose Belgravia branch, the Minister and I saw how the Government's Access to Work programme is working, with the branch employing five deaf people. Does he agree that Waitrose is showing the way, and that other retailers can embrace the Access to Work programme, not just for their businesses but for disabled people across the country?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am hugely appreciative that my hon. Friend extended that invitation for me to come along and visit the Belgravia Waitrose branch. It was incredibly inspiring to see that dedicated team, who are part of the



wider customer service family within that business, achieving so much and providing brilliant service to their customers. It demonstrates that not only is it right for businesses to engage in disability employment, but it has had a great impact on those employees and on the community as a whole. That demonstrates what can be achieved with the right Government support, working with businesses to increase those opportunities and support people.

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

**Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Let us be absolutely clear: the 2019 Conservative manifesto promised a radical strategy for disabled people before the end of 2020. It finally emerged in summer 2021 but was found to be illegal. It was quietly replaced by the disability action plan in December 2022, but six months on we still have very few details. We do not know whether it will be co-produced, and ultimately it is unlikely to result in any changes before the next election. How many years does the Conservative party need to take meaningful action? I will tell the Minister who is disappointed: disabled people after 13 years of this Conservative Government.

**Tom Pursglove:** We might need an Adjournment debate to correct the number of inaccuracies entailed within the hon. Lady's question. This Government are committed to a disability action plan that I am confident will respond to the many issues that are raised with us by disabled people. We will have full consultation on those plans to ensure we get it right, and that will of course involve disabled people. This is an opportunity to get on and deliver in those areas over the next 12 to 18 months. I think that is a good thing that we should all be able to welcome.

#### **Employment: Don Valley**

8. **Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase employment in Don Valley. [905454]

**The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman):** I was delighted that my hon. Friend convened a roundtable with key local hospitality providers, including the Mount Pleasant Hotel, the Eagle and Child, and Yorkshire Wildlife Park, as we drove forward opportunities for greater employment in his Don Valley constituency. Since then we have ramped up the offer locally, matching job finders with the vacancies that we know are available, and providing key worker support, including a jobs fair coming up in the next few weeks.

**Nick Fletcher:** I thank the Minister for his recent visit to Yorkshire Wildlife Park regarding the jobs fair that will now be taking place on 4 July. Will he also speak with the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology about the opportunity of bringing the advanced manufacturing research centre to Doncaster? That will create further jobs for our next generation, and could also see the likes of Boeing coming to Don Valley.

**Guy Opperman:** My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for Don Valley. I am delighted to support his campaign and am happy to write to the Secretary of State. There is full support for Boeing in Doncaster.

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

**Sir Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): Very little data is being published on the outcomes of the restart programme in Don Valley or anywhere. There was a one-off statistical release last December, but nothing regular at all. In the past, we have had monthly data from the Work programme, and we still have regular updates from the Work and Health programme. Does the Minister recognise the value of regular publication of outcome data for the flagship restart programme?

**Guy Opperman:** With great respect, I think we do publish data on all aspects of the Department for Work and Pensions' programmes, and I addressed this matter in great detail in front of the right hon. Gentleman and the Select Committee recently.

#### **In-work Poverty**

10. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle in-work poverty. [905456]

17. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle in-work poverty. [905463]

22. **Paula Barker** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle in-work poverty. [905468]

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride):** In-work progression is the best way of improving the earnings potential of those who are in work, which is why we are bringing hundreds of thousands more people into the kind of support that will develop that.

**Cat Smith:** I wonder whether the Secretary of State can support me with some casework that I am working on at the moment. My constituent is working a minimum wage job and tells me that she is frightened about what will happen. She is 68 years old, but due to errors in the state pension, she is not receiving that yet, and we are finding that there are permanent backlog pressures with the Pension Service. Can the Secretary of State help me get my 68-year-old constituent out of the in-work poverty bracket and receiving her state pension? I am happy to share the details of the case with the Secretary of State.

**Mel Stride:** If the hon. Lady would like to share those details with me, I will make sure that I and the Minister for Pensions, the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) will have a close look at the case she raises.

**Grahame Morris:** A moment ago, the Secretary of State's colleague, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) referred to the publication of data. Can I draw the Secretary of State's attention to the GMB trade union's research, which found a shocking 155% increase in the number of public sector workers relying on universal credit? How will the Department rectify this alarming trend and ensure that our hard-working public servants receive the fair pay they deserve, instead of being forced into reliance on inadequate in-work benefits?

**Mel Stride:** I do not think we should make any apology for having a system of benefits that is there whether someone is out of work or in work, and which encourages those who are in work to work longer hours if that is appropriate and to earn more through many of the kinds of provision that we provide through our jobcentres.

**Paula Barker:** Despite my question relating to in-work poverty, the Government often herald historically low unemployment rates to avoid their shame over falling living standards and endemic wage stagnation. Those on the Government Benches know they have failed British workers. Can the Secretary of State answer this, without blaming the war in Ukraine, covid or the last Labour Government? Do the Government now accept that there is an inextricable link between their failed economic policies and the fact that British workers in low and middle-income households are financially worse off since they came to power?

**Mel Stride:** It is not appropriate to dismiss completely the significant downside of covid—we spent £400 billion supporting the economy during that—the significant impact through energy price spikes of the war or the deleterious impact of the last Labour Government, to whom the hon. Lady refers. The simple fact is that since 2009-10, there are 1.7 million fewer people in absolute poverty after housing costs, and 400,000 fewer children and 400,000 fewer pensioners in that position.

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

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): The reality is that after 13 long, cold years of Conservative rule, people have never worked harder, but never felt poorer. We know that 2.6 million people on fixed-rate mortgages are about to see their fixed rate expire, which will see their mortgage rates go up. Has the Secretary of State made any assessment as to how many staff in his Department will struggle to make ends meet when their mortgages skyrocket under this Conservative Government?

**Mel Stride:** The Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies) has already addressed the approach that we would recommend to those struggling with mortgages and the approach that the Government are taking to that. I would point to the many in my Department, and indeed up and down the country, who may be, for example, among the 8 million low-income households who are receiving £900 cost of living support. There are also the £150 payments to those who are disabled and £300 payable to pensioners along with their winter fuel payments. Those, along with increasing the national living wage and the energy price guarantee, are real things that the Government are doing to help those who are feeling the most financial pressure.

### Benefit Fraud

11. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle benefit fraud. [905457]

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride):** My hon. Friend will know that we are investing £900 million to ensure that we prevent a total of £2.4 billion of fraud and error by 2024-25. We launched our fraud plan last May, which is already delivering results.

**Bob Blackman:** I would like to thank publicly for all those who have congratulated me on my honour in the King's honours list. Thank you for your kind words in appreciation, Mr Speaker.

My right hon. Friend is setting out a plan to deal with benefit fraud in its entirety. My private Member's Bill—the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill—had its Third Reading in the House of Lords on Friday. Of course, supported housing has unlimited housing benefit for those who claim it. Unfortunately, there are numerous rogue landlords who exploit vulnerable people and the housing benefit system. What action can he take to ensure that we rein in those rogue landlords and prevent vulnerable people from being exploited?

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend is quite right, and I wrote to him to congratulate him on his well deserved CBE. Part of the answer to his question lies in his private Member's Bill, which we see as an important tool to allow us to tighten up the regulations and requirements as expressed through local authorities to ensure that those who are abusing the system—it is not everyone—are dealt with appropriately.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The National Audit Office found that benefit fraud and error was unacceptably high, totalling £8.6 billion in 2021-22. What actions will the Secretary of State take to reduce fraud? Importantly, how will he ensure that the clawing back of DWP errors—those that are not the fault of the claimant—is carefully and fairly considered so that that does not put the claimant further into poverty?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Lady raises an important point. The Government's record under my stewardship at the DWP is a good one. In fact, since the fraud plan was published last May, fraud across the benefit system has reduced by some 10%, and across universal credit there has been a 13% drop. We expect to see those figures increasing through time. We are doing that through targeted case reviews—going through cases and looking for fraud and error—and I have another 1,000 people being recruited for that purpose. We are also using artificial intelligence, data analytics and machine learning to ensure that we catch up with the more sophisticated attacks on our system. There is evidence that we are making good headway.

### Benefits System: Work Incentives

12. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that the benefits system incentivises work. [905458]

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride):** My right hon. Friend will be aware that, under universal credit, there is always the incentive to work. That operates through the taper, which we reduced in recent times from 63% to 55%, and we increased the work allowance by £500 in November 2021.

**Theresa Villiers:** At this time of rising prices, I feel certain that many of my constituents are worried about the high cost of childcare. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the changes to universal credit announced in the Budget will help people into work by giving them better up-front support with the cost of childcare?

**Mel Stride:** I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend. Some of the most significant measures in the Budget, particularly on helping people get into work, were the childcare measures that the Chancellor announced. Within UC, that means that the up-front payment difficulty has been removed. Of course, there has been a 47% increase in the maximum amounts available to those seeking to pay for childcare through UC.

**Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab):** The benefit system is an important part of helping and incentivising people to get back into work, but an increasing problem is the amount of time people are on hospital waiting lists, preventing them from getting themselves fit to get back into work. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Health Secretary about helping people get back into work and dealing with very long waiting times?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. There is no doubt that mental health and musculoskeletal issues in particular underpin part of the recent growth in economic inactivity. My Department is very engaged with the Department of Health and Social Care on those matters, not least in the piloting of Work Well, which brings together health-based solutions with employment support and universal support, which we will roll out to tens of thousands of people in the years ahead.

#### Pension Credit

14. **Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con):** What steps he is taking to encourage eligible pensioners to claim pension credit. [905460]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott):** Last week was pension credit awareness week, which follows our big push ahead of the cost of living payments. As a result of that and the national advertising campaign, I am pleased to say that pension credit applications up to May were 75% higher than the year before.

**Elliot Colburn:** I am grateful for that excellent news. As part of that awareness week, I wrote to older people in Carshalton and Wallington to inform them of the credit, as thousands of people living in my constituency who are eligible for it sadly do not claim it. I sincerely hope we see some good numbers from that. Does my hon. Friend agree that public awareness must happen at both local and national level? I extend an invitation to her to come down to Carshalton and Wallington and see some of the amazing work being done, including at the older persons fair later this year.

**Laura Trott:** What an invitation—I would be delighted to attend. I commend my hon. Friend on all his work in his constituency. Older persons fairs are important and effective. I held a pension credit one on Friday in Swanley, and I recommend them to Members.

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

**Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab):** Sadly, the figures also show that hundreds of thousands of pensioners are still missing out on pension credit. To make matters worse, this large group of pensioners is also missing out

on the Government's £900 cost of living payment, because receiving pension credit acts as a gateway to other help. Could the Minister explain why the Government designed their cost of living payments in that way? Could she explain what she will do to fix the problem, which the Government themselves created?

**Laura Trott:** I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the figures that I just announced on the uptake of pension credit. We will not have the eligibility figures for a while—hopefully, they will be out later this year. I hope we will see a rise, but in the meantime we are doing all we can—as I know is true across the House—to get as many people as possible to apply for pension credit so that they qualify for those important cost of living payments.

#### Defined-benefit Pension Schemes

15. **Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con):** What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for defined-benefit pension schemes. [905461]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott):** The Pension Protection Fund publishes data on the funding of defined-benefit pension schemes. Average funding of the schemes was 113.1% in 2022 versus 104.3% in 2010—a significant improvement.

**Nigel Mills:** Does the Minister accept that we have spent 20 years—probably quite rightly—working out how we get more money into pension schemes to pay for the promise, and that now we need to work out what we do with the money in there that is in excess of what we need? Does she accept that in those 20 years we have seen pension funding increase probably at the expense of current workers, who get a much lower pension? Is there anything we can do to use the surplus to support the pension incomes in retirement of those current workers who will get a far less generous pension?

**Laura Trott:** As I would expect from a member of the Work and Pensions Committee and the head of the all-party parliamentary group on pensions, my hon. Friend makes an interesting point. In my time as pensions Minister I have tried to reduce the gap between DB and defined contribution pensions. I would be interested to talk to him about any further suggestions.

**Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab):** Clear, accessible pension schemes information was a priority for former Chancellor George Osborne in 2016, but the pensions dashboard programme has consistently missed its deadlines to go live. This month the Minister announced a further delay, with a new connection deadline of October 2026. Could she please explain this consistent failure to meet delivery dates?

**Laura Trott:** We are absolutely committed to the pensions dashboard programme. October 2026 is the final deadline for connection, not the point that it is necessarily available to the public. The dashboard availability point could come earlier than that, and I hope that it will.



### Economic Inactivity

16. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What proportion of the population is economically inactive. [905462]

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride):** The latest data from the Office for National Statistics indicates that some 21% of the working-age population are economically inactive.

**Stephen Metcalfe:** As my right hon. Friend will be aware, the staff at Basildon Jobcentre Plus are doing incredible work to help people back into work. That has led to a local inactivity rate that is 12.6% below the UK average. Events such as its large employer-unemployed connection event, bringing together organisations with hundreds of jobseekers, are leading to really meaningful job opportunities. Can my right hon. Friend tell the House what else the Government are doing to get people off out-of-work benefits?

**Mel Stride:** May I first commend my hon. Friend for all the good work he is doing locally? The 12.6% figure for economic inactivity is extremely low and is a great tribute to the work he has just referred to. Other things we are doing include: the provision of job interventions for over-50s who have retired early; the childcare provision I referred to for parents with childcare duties; and a great deal of work on how we better facilitate getting the long-term sick and disabled back into the labour market.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In Westmorland and the south lakes our challenge is somewhat different. With an unemployment rate of only 1.4% and an average age of population 10 years above the national average, our issues are 20 million visitors every year, a hospitality and tourism industry without the staff it needs, and a care sector likely to be without the staff it needs. That needs direct intervention: more affordable housing for local people, T-levels for local young people and visa rules that work for us. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and local business leaders in the south lakes, so that we can come up with a bespoke solution to solve our workforce crisis?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman refers to a smorgasbord of different policy areas across several Departments, including housing, skills and matters in the purview of the Department for Education, as well as my Department. However, I have heard what he says, and I will take it away and consider.

**Mr Speaker:** We come to the shadow Minister.

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): The Bank of England sets interest rates independently, but economic inactivity and the wider state of the labour market is a feature of our economy that will influence whether the Prime Minister is able to meet his promise to halve inflation. Can the Secretary of State tell us exactly what targets have been agreed by his Department with the Treasury on the role of the labour market in reducing inflation?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right that economic inactivity lies right at the centre of those elements that will determine our economic success in the years ahead—the others being the levels of inflation and interest rates, and other matters. On what has actually happened, we reached a record low level of economic inactivity just prior to the pandemic. It then spiked up. We have now reduced that spiked-up figure by about 300,000, with a reduction of 140,000 in the last quarter alone.

### Claimant Inquiry Waiting Times

19. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of waiting times on (a) personal independence payment and (b) employment support allowance claimant inquiry lines. [905465]

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove):** The Department recognises that wait times for the PIP and ESA inquiry line have been too long. To reduce waiting times, we are recruiting more staff and, in the short term, are diverting staff to support better performance. PIP recruitment is expected to reduce waits by the end of summer, while ESA waiting times have improved significantly in recent weeks.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I am glad to hear that action is being taken, although it sounds like it will be quite a long time before it starts to have an effect. I have a constituent, Shani, who has been trying to get a copy of her PIP award letter so she can reapply for a disabled person's bus pass. She says she has tried to call the PIP hotline on many occasions, but that, "The phone just continually rings out. I've tried for hours and it doesn't matter what time of day I call, it just rings." I know other MPs' offices are experiencing the same. May I urge the Minister to act sooner and try to bring recruitment forward so constituents such as mine do not have to wait?

**Tom Pursglove:** I would be very grateful if the hon. Lady could share the details of that specific case with me, so I can take them away to look at. What I can say, hopefully to reassure the House, is that we are seeing 600 additional agents recruited for PIP from April and for ESA 160 additional agents will be put on telephony through both recruitment and redeployment.

### Social Mobility: Young People

20. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve social mobility among young people. [905466]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):** The DWP celebrated National Social Mobility Awareness Day last Thursday, when we focused on the daily work done by our work coaches and youth clubs to help young people to overcome barriers, build up their confidence, move into work and, ultimately, achieve their aims.

**Alexander Stafford:** Rother Valley is blessed with unemployment that is significantly lower than the national average, but its youth unemployment is slightly higher than the national average. It is still harder for young

people to get into work. What are the Government doing to ensure that they have the jobs they need so much?

**Mims Davies:** I am determined to ensure that, regardless of their background or postcode, young people can succeed in Rother Valley and beyond, and that is why the DWP has introduced the youth offer. It includes youth employability coaches and youth hubs such as the one at the local football club, Rotherham United, which helps to build confidence and provides a range of mental health support as well as supporting neurodiverse local customers.

### Employment: Keighley and Ilkley

21. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help fill vacancies and increase employment in Keighley and Ilkley. [905467]

**The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman):** The jobcentre team in Keighley work with local employers and partners to arrange sector-based work academies to support hospitality businesses along the Airedale corridor. They also run an excellent initiative with Bradford Care Association and Keighley College to fill vacancies in the care sector.

**Robbie Moore** Inactivity is down by 300,000 since the covid peak, and UK inactivity is lower than the OECD and European Union averages. Does the Minister agree that the recent labour market statistics provide very encouraging news about the positive work the Government are doing to reduce economic inactivity across the country, notably in areas such as my constituency?

**Guy Opperman:** My hon. Friend is right. Economic inactivity is down, employment is up and vacancies are down, thanks in part to the efforts of my hon. Friend and Keighley Jobcentre Plus, whose next jobs fair is on Wednesday week and will be attended by 17 employers across all sectors. I urge everyone in Keighley to attend as well.

### Topical Questions

T1. [905471] **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride):** When I was appointed to this job, I came to the House and said that one of our key focuses would be economic inactivity, which, as we have just heard, has fallen: it is down by 45% since its peak, and was down by 140,000 in the last quarter alone. Another key focus is bearing down on fraud, and fraud levels have fallen by some 10% across our benefits system since we published our fraud plan in May last year.

**Gareth Bacon:** Some on the political left have made much noise about the third-party universal basic income pilots that have been launched in recent days. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the concept of a universal basic income was roundly rejected even during the pandemic, and that this kind of uneven, untargeted and dependency-creating communism is doomed to failure?

**Mel Stride:** I agree with my hon. Friend that a universal basic income is not the way to proceed, and it is certainly not something that the Government are considering. Our approach is to ensure that work always pays, and to incentivise work. A universal basic income would create perverse incentives, would come at huge cost, and would not be targeted at those who need the help the most.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. May I remind the Secretary of State that these are topical questions? Questions and answers are meant to be short and punchy. We are getting carried away. Let us see how it works now: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Jonathan Ashworth** (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I listened to the “Chopper’s Politics” podcast recently. The Secretary of State was the guest, and revealed that he was saying to his friends in their 50s who were not working:

“Why don’t you just go and serve in the local restaurant or do something in the pub?”

Well, a very prominent 59-year-old has just taken early retirement. Will the Secretary of State be voting to sanction him, or is he advising him to just go away and work in the pub?

**Mel Stride:** I am happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman in any pub that he cares to name, and I am sure we will have a very convivial evening. I did also mention people with accountancy qualifications, among others, so it is not all about the pub, alas.

**Jonathan Ashworth:** The House will have noted that the Secretary of State did not tell us whether he would be sanctioning that particular 59-year-old in the House later today. As for the issue of economic inactivity, he will know that we need to do more to get the long-term sick and the disabled back to work. The working-age disability benefit bill is going to rise to £25 billion—it was £19 billion before the pandemic—but in the last 12 months the DWP has cut the number of disability employment advisers by 10%. Why is that?

**Mel Stride:** When it comes to the long-term sick and disabled, the right hon. Gentleman is right that that is the one cohort where inactivity is increasing—in others it is reducing. He will be aware of our White Paper and the forthcoming legislation we have planned to make sure that we focus on what those who are long-term sick can do in work, rather than what they cannot. He will be aware of universal support and the working well pilot, all of which, together, will help to bring those numbers down.

T7. [905479] **Dame Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Having helped Ukrainian guests to get childcare support and then get into work, I was delighted when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State changed the rules so that childcare support was available up front. He will be aware that most nurseries require a term’s fees in advance, so what more can be done to ensure that sometimes unstable and infrequent work is not further hampered by uncertainty about whether childcare will be available?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):** This Government are focused on making sure that work pays for all parents in every situation. My right hon. Friend will be pleased to know that I will take up the specific concern about nursery charging models and ensure that the matter is raised with the Department for Education.

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

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): Last week, I was in Aberdeen to attend the annual conference of the Scottish Pensioners' Forum and outline why we think an independent Scotland would be the best place to grow old. In contrast, at the weekend, the former Tory leader William Hague wrote in the papers that his party should abandon the triple lock. Is that why pensioners are now supporting independence more than ever?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott):** I do not think they are. Also, the triple lock is very proudly a Conservative policy.

**Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): With interest rates looking to hit around 6%, are the Government considering making the support for the mortgage interest scheme a little more generous, perhaps by raising the cap or the interest rate, so that it provides the safety net that people expect?

**Mel Stride:** As my hon. Friend will be aware, the Treasury has made it clear that there will not be a significant fiscal intervention around mortgages. Unfortunately, that would serve only to complicate the effectiveness of the measure and the monetary policy effects that the Government and the Bank of England are looking to achieve to halve inflation by the end of this year.

T2. [905473] **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The charity Scope reports that a disabled household is £900 a month poorer than a non-disabled household, because of essentials such as specialist medical equipment, aids, adaptations, diet and heating. Does that not make the one-off £150 payment look pretty miserly?

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove):** The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the challenges that disabled people face with the cost of living, but it is important to recognise that many disabled people receive various aspects of the wider package of support. That is materially relevant in answering this question. We have had some good debates on this issue in recent weeks, and I refer him to those.

T3. [905474] **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Pensioner poverty is on the rise, with an additional 200,000 people of pension age being pushed into poverty last year. What hope can the Minister give pensioners in Portsmouth that they will not have to choose between heating their home and eating this winter?

**Laura Trott:** I am sure the hon. Gentleman will note that pensioner poverty has gone down by 200,000 in absolute terms since 2010. I point him to the record state pension increase, the record rise in pension credit

and the pensioner cost of living payments, as well as to the fact that Labour's record on this issue was a decimation of private pensions and a 75p rise.

T4. [905475] **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): In February this year, I took care leavers from Plymouth to see the Secretary of State about introducing a deposit guarantor scheme, so that young people leaving care can afford to get their first rental property. Will the Secretary of State give an update on how the DWP is progressing with that proposal put forward by me and Barnardo's?

**Mel Stride:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman; I opened my door to him as soon as he requested and had him and his colleagues in for a discussion. We continue to consider those matters as part of the general policy going forward, and I will keep him informed of news as it may or may not occur.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Is the disability action plan in addition to the national disability strategy?

**Tom Pursglove:** The plan is in addition to the national disability strategy. We as a Government disagree with the position that the Court has taken regarding consultation. We have been given permission to appeal, and we are appealing. The disability action plan is about short-term measures that we can get on and deliver.

**Mr Speaker:** Let's go to a new grandma, Mary Kelly Foy.

T5. [905476] **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Baby Brida is an absolute bundle of joy. She is the new branch of our family tree.

Policies cooked up by Tories in Whitehall are having a devastating impact on the people of County Durham. The number of people fed by food banks, using food vouchers, has increased by over 60% in a year, so can the Secretary of State honestly say he is doing a good job of tackling food poverty in County Durham?

**Mims Davies:** I congratulate the hon. Lady on the new addition.

New statistics on food bank usage will help the Government to understand the characteristics of the people most in need, and we will continue to work across Government to support the most vulnerable. I was very interested to read the recent "Child of the North" report, which we are taking very seriously.

T6. [905477] **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The cost of the most common family foods has risen by nearly 30% in the past year alone, according to new research by consumer group Which? The Governments of Ireland and France have worked with retailers to reduce costs for families, while the UK Government have sat on their hands. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with Cabinet colleagues about how to learn from our European neighbours and reduce the crisis in people's homes now?

**Mel Stride:** What we are learning from our European neighbours is that this is a common problem. In fact, food price inflation in Germany, Portugal and other



countries is higher than it is here. Rather than intervening in markets, as some are spuriously suggesting, and taking us back to the prices and incomes policies of the 1970s, we have entered discussions with the supermarkets, some of which have recently suggested that they will be able to lower prices, or lower the rate of increase in some prices, on the more essential items.

T8. [905480] **Dame Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): Food inflation is rising by double the rate of inflation, and the rate for basic foodstuffs—bread, pasta, milk—is even higher, often going up by 40% or more. In my constituency, 38% of people have skipped meals. Will the Secretary of State investigate the role of sanctions and benefit inadequacy in a system in which people cannot feed themselves?

**Mel Stride:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I have fond memories of serving with her on the Treasury Committee.

We always keep sanctions under review, but I am currently satisfied that they are broadly operating in an effective and proportionate manner. The hon. Lady mentions inflation on essential foods, and I point her to the cost of living payments, which are very significant, equivalent to £3,000 per family over the two-year period in which they will apply. The energy price guarantee has been extended until June, and there is a rise in the national living wage.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What steps are the Government taking to improve the sensitivity of language on the DWP website? I recently became aware of a case in which a person trying to update their universal credit claim following the death of their wife generated a page stating, “You stopped caring for”—then the name of the wife—“from the date on which she died. This was due to the person dying. Are these details correct?”

That is pretty disheartening, to say the least. Will the Minister look at this specific case, and at the issue more generally, if I send him more information?

**Mel Stride:** I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman on the importance of sensitive language, particularly for the most vulnerable and particularly in the circumstances he describes of someone who is recently bereaved. I will most definitely take away the specific issue he raises and look at it extremely carefully.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Child Maintenance Service recently wrote to my constituent Deborah to confirm that the father of her children is in arrears by £47,000. Deborah recently heard that the bailiff is potentially unable to collect the debt and, if so, the money she is owed will be written off by the CMS. Can the Secretary of State explain why parents can be left with so little by the CMS when it gives up on collecting debts for parents who work so hard?

**Mims Davies:** The Government are supporting the private Member’s Bill that aims to streamline CMS enforcement processes. The CMS will not hesitate to use robust enforcement measures where someone is consistently refusing to meet their obligation towards their children. I am happy to look at that case and ask my colleague in the Lords to look at it.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Why is statutory sick pay in this country so much lower than European comparators?

**Tom Pursglove:** I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the issue of statutory sick pay, and, of course, we always keep these matters under review.



## Stop and Search

3.30 pm

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the police's use of stop and search.

It is utterly devastating when someone is killed by a weapon. Passivity is not an option, nor is wishful thinking; this will change only if we act. The police have been crystal clear with me that stop and search is a vital tool—it is literally vital; we cannot hope to get weapons off our streets without it. Of course, it must be used skilfully, responsibly and proportionately, as is true of every power with which we invest the police. But it would be a tragic mistake to conclude that stop and search is too controversial to use extensively or that it cannot be used effectively with sensible safeguards.

Suggestions that stop and search is a means of victimising young black men have it precisely the wrong way around; the facts are that young black men are disproportionately more likely to be victims of violent crimes. They are the ones most in need of protection. This is about saving the lives of young black men. Moreover, being stopped and searched when carrying a weapon can prevent someone, of whatever background, from making a terrible mistake that they can never undo. Sometimes we lose sight of that point when debating stop and search.

Black people account for about 3% of our population, yet almost a third of under-25s killed by knives are black. Ninety-nine young people lost their lives to knife crime in England and Wales in the year to March 2022: 31 of them were black; 49 were white; 16 were from other ethnic minority groups; and three victims did not have their ethnicity recorded. It is always bad policy to place unsubstantiated theories ahead of demonstrable fact—in this case, it would be lethal.

Stop and search works. Sir Mark Rowley, the Met police Commissioner, has said there are

“countless examples of offenders being discovered to have dangerous weapons”

during stop and searches, as well as

“tools for burglary and drugs”.

Sir Mark cited research from the Oxford journal of policing that showed that stop and search can cut the number of attempted murders by

“50 per cent or more”

in the worst crime hotspots. Since 2019, more than 40,000 weapons have been taken off our streets and there have been more than 220,000 arrests following a stop and search.

We are starting to trial serious violence reduction orders, which can be given to those with convictions for knife offences. An SVRO means that the police can stop and search that individual at any point, to see if they are carrying a weapon. This will deter those people who repeatedly carry weapons and endanger the public. I saw for myself how well this is working in Merseyside, where there are five live orders already. Superintendent Phil Mullally, Merseyside's lead for serious violence and knife crime, has said:

“These new powers will enable us to continue to drive down knife crime and reoffending.”

I am proud to say that under this Government it has never been easier for the police to make legitimate use of their stop and search powers, and the use of those powers has never been more transparent and accountable. The public are crying out for common-sense policing, such as the use of tried-and-tested methods to drive down crime. Stop and search is a prime example of such a method.

I am working in lockstep with police forces to get this right. Today, I met Chief Constable Amanda Pearson, who leads on stop and search for the National Police Chiefs' Council, to discuss how best to empower police officers to better use stop and search.

I have written to all chief constables, asking them to provide strategic leadership and direction in the use of stop-and-search powers; ensure that every officer is confident in the effective and appropriate use of all stop-and-search powers, including the use of suspicionless powers; to investigate instances where someone is obstructing or interfering with the use of these powers and, if necessary, make arrests; and to be proactive in publishing body-worn video footage, which will protect officers who conduct themselves properly and instil greater public confidence.

Public confidence is the linchpin of our model of policing by consent. Therefore, I am looking carefully at strengthening local community scrutiny. Transparency is vital; so is community engagement. I want every community to be able to trust in stop and search. I want to present a clear picture of the stop-and-search landscape that shows the good work being done on the frontline.

That is why the Government will amend the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 code A, to make clear when the police should communicate when suspicionless powers are used in a public order and section 60 context. Suspicionless stop and search must be used responsibly, but we cannot do without it.

I am also mandating data collection on stop and search, as part of the annual data requirement for the Government's statistics bulletin, published every year. We already collect more data on stop and search than ever before. That data is posted online, enabling police and crime commissioners and others to hold forces to account for their use. Disparities in the use of stop and search remain, but they have continued to decrease for the last three years.

My Department has trialled a more sophisticated approach to calculating disparity in the Metropolitan Police Service. It has produced an analysis based on actual suspects of violent crime, rather than usual residents of an area, as the denominator for calculating rates of stop and search. This is still experimental but shows that disparity ratios were significantly reduced for black people compared with the traditional method, falling from 3.7 to 1.2.

It is always heartbreaking and distressing to read reports about stabbings and shootings. I am struck by how often mothers of murdered young black men say that stop and search could have saved their sons' lives. We owe it to them to heed their call. The facts are on their side. Stop and search works and is a vital tool in the fight against serious violent crime. I commend the statement to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Home Secretary.

3.37 pm

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Knife crime destroys lives, devastates families and creates fear and trauma in communities. Last year, too many young people lost their lives to knife crime— young people who had their whole lives ahead of them

Knife crime is up nearly 70%, compared with just seven years ago. Knife-enabled rapes and knife-enabled threats to kill are at record highs, with some of the steepest increases in the suburbs, smaller cities, towns and counties. Compared with over a decade ago, knife crime is up more than fivefold in Surrey and has almost trebled in Sussex. From Milton Keynes to Swindon to Newcastle, I have spoken to distressed parents and community leaders about rising knife crime and their devastation at young lives being lost.

The Government's response is wholly inadequate. The serious violence strategy is more than five years out of date, the serious violence taskforce was disbanded and everyone knows, from their own communities, that too little is being done to divert young people away from violence and crime. There are just 18 violence reduction units. When the Home Secretary claims serious violence is going down, she is focusing on the covid period, because the worrying truth is that knife crime and gun crime are rising again.

Today's statement, therefore, is wholly inadequate as a response to knife crime. Stop and search is an extremely important tool in the fight against knife crime, but it is not the whole strategy. That is why we need a much more comprehensive approach: as part of our mission, Labour has set the determination to halve knife crime and serious violent crime. As stop and search is an important tool, it also needs to be used in an effective and fair way. His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary said that

"well-targeted stop and search is a valuable tool",

but how the police do it is as important as the act itself, and communities have clear concerns about the fair use of stop and search. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services had previously said:

"Unfair use of powers can be counterproductive if it leads people to think it is acceptable to not comply with the law. It may also make people unwilling to report when they are the victim of crime or come forward as witnesses."

That is why it is important that the recommendations that the inspectorate and the police watchdog have made are taken seriously and implemented, and why best practice from forces who are doing a good job is spread across the country.

There have been reports from the inspectorate in 2015, 2017, 2021 and from the police watchdog, little of which the Home Secretary has even acknowledged. She has dismissed concerns about disproportionality. Of course, stop and search for knife crime and for dangerous weapons will likely be used most in the areas and communities where attacks have been the highest. That will affect the number of searches for weapons among young black men, but the chief inspector has said that the presence of disproportionality in crime victimisation rates does not adequately explain why there is disproportionality in stop and search rates. In her statement, the Home Secretary seems to be focusing only on young black men. I think she refers to them around six times,

with only one reference to people who are white, even though her own statement recognises that young black men are still the minority of knife crime victims. Does she recognise the importance of following the evidence wherever it takes the police?

The inspectorate said that

"35 years since the introduction of stop and search, the police still cannot explain why these powers are used disproportionately."

It points out that that is partly because the majority of searches are for drug possession, not for knife crime, and yet figures show that drug use is lower among black people than among white people. The Home Secretary has not addressed that at all in her statement. Will she address the issue of disproportionate drug possession searches?

I welcome the references to the introduction of stronger community scrutiny and better data collection. Those are vital, but they should have been mandatory for many years—they were recommended many years ago. Where is the action that has been repeatedly recommended: training on the use of force; training on de-escalation and communications skills; and proper data collection on traffic stops. None of those has been referred to in her statement. How many of the 18 recommendations by the Independent Office for Police Conduct last year have been fully implemented? How many recommendations from the inspectorate have been fully implemented?

Stop and search is a vital tool as part of a proper strategy, but we need the wider strategy, too. Why is the violence reduction unit approach being used by the Home Secretary in only 18 areas when knife crime is rising in communities across the country? Why has there been no new serious violence strategy for five years? Many people now fear a long, hot summer without swift action. Why is there still no action to bring in a new law on the criminal exploitation of young people, which we have called for? Why is there still no comprehensive action on youth mentors and support for early intervention?

We need a serious approach to tackling knife crime and supporting the police to use their tools in an effective and fair way so that they can save lives. Too many young lives are at stake. We need more than this from the Home Secretary.

**Suella Braverman:** I thank the right hon. Lady for her response. It is not just my view, but the view of police that stop and search is fundamentally about saving lives and keeping the public safe. Where used proportionately, stop and search works. Since 2019, more than 40,000 weapons have been seized through stop and search, and 220,000 arrests have been made. The 2021 inspectorate report concluded that the vast majority of stop and search decisions are based on reasonable grounds. That is potentially thousands of lives saved and countless violent incidents prevented.

To those who claim it is a disproportionate tool—a racist tool—I say that we must be honest about what that means for victims. The right hon. Lady, when she was Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, stated:

"Stop & search is more disproportionate now than 22yrs ago, with no adequate explanation or justification for nature & scale of racial disparities."

Yet again, she is on the wrong side of the argument, and yet again she is not on the side of victims.

What is disproportionate is that black people are four times more likely to be murdered than white people. What is disproportionate is that young black men are more likely to be victims of knife crime than young white men. That is the disproportionality that I am focused on stopping. It is important that we look at the matter with a cool head and on the basis of the evidence.

The emerging picture based on London suggests that when we adjust the data to consider the proportion of suspects in an area and its demographics, rather than considering the data for the country as a whole, the disproportionality of stop and search falls away hugely. I urge the right hon. Lady to consider and reflect on those facts rather than jumping to knee-jerk assumptions. Of course it is right that the powers are used in a responsible and measured way—that is why engagement with communities must be respectful—and it is right that the powers are subject to the highest levels of scrutiny. We now see very few complaints about individual stop and searches. Training on legal and procedural justice has improved and we have seen confidence levels increase.

Overall, I am very proud of this Conservative Government's achievements: a record number of police officers ever in the history of policing, 100,000 weapons seized since 2019 and falling crime—in fact, serious violent crime has fallen by 40% since 2010. What has Labour done? Labour Members voted against our measures to strengthen the police. They voted against tougher sentences for rapists. They voted against our Bill to stop the militant protesters. Same old Labour—they never fail to miss an opportunity to be on the wrong side of the argument. This Conservative Government are on the side of common-sense policing and on the side of the British people.

**Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Everybody in the House will share the Home Secretary's laudable aim of cutting knife crime. However, she will remember that when we debated the new stop-and-search powers—I think it was the day after the Casey report came out—I cited some examples from that report where police officers had justified carrying out a search based on the person's ethnicity alone, had been rude or uncivil while carrying out the search, or had used excessive force, leaving people, often young people, humiliated and distressed and thus damaging trust in the Met. Casey called for a "fundamental reset" of the Met's use of stop-and-search powers. At the time, I took it that the Home Secretary agreed with the Casey report. Can she tell the House how what she is proposing today, which may have considerable merit, takes on board that reset? How has she absorbed that reset into what she is doing today?

**Suella Braverman:** This Government and I fully support the police in the fair use of stop and search to crack down on violent crime and to protect communities. Every knife taken off our streets is potentially a life saved. That is the value that stop and search brings to fighting crime. Today's announcement brings together a series of measures, including an obligation to do more reporting and a greater increase in the data—something that has been commented on by previous inspectors and reports—so that we have a clearer picture of the use and efficacy of stop and search. Guidance will be issued by the College of Policing, but already we have seen an improvement in accountability and in scrutiny and, as a result, a fall in the number of complaints.

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

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In 2021, the Home Affairs Committee inquiry into how much progress had been made in tackling racism in policing since the landmark Stephen Lawrence inquiry found, as a cross-party Committee, that the disproportionate use of stop-and-search powers against black people was even greater than it had been when Sir William's inquiry concluded 22 years earlier. No evidence provided to the Committee adequately explained or justified the nature and scale of racial disproportionality in the use of stop-and-search powers. That has damaged confidence in the tactic and in policing by consent.

Of course, stop and search is a valid policing tactic, as the Home Secretary said, but it must be used in a focused and fair way, and underpinned by an evidence base. Can she explain what evidence base she is drawing on when she says that police forces need to "ramp up" the use of stop-and-search powers? Will she commit to commissioning a fully independent and comprehensive study of the efficacy of stop-and-search tactics, and to undertaking an equality impact assessment on this new policy?

**Suella Braverman:** As I mentioned in my statement, the Department is trialling a more sophisticated approach to calculating disparity, with a focus on the Metropolitan Police Service. That has produced a useful analysis based on actual suspects of violent crime, rather than the totality of usual residents of an area, as a denominator for calculating the rates of stop and search. It is experimental, but the data emerging from that advanced study demonstrates that disparity ratios are significantly reduced for black people compared with the traditional method, falling from 3.7 to 1.2. That is an emerging evidence base upon which policy will be made.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): I strongly support the Home Secretary's further measures to cut the unacceptable loss of life from violent crime. Will she confirm that her statement is part of a much wider strategy to tackle the underlying causes and problems, as well as the use of weapons?

**Suella Braverman:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: stop and search is one tool in our armoury in the fight against violent crime. We have increased police resources and broader police powers; we have continued funding for our violence reduction units, which bring together local partners to tackle the drivers of violent crime in their area; we are working on piloting serious violence reduction orders; we have rolled out knife crime prevention orders; and we have been working intensively with all agencies to ensure that they prioritise such crime and take appropriate action.

**Ms Diane Abbott** (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): The Home Secretary spoke about black mothers. I am a black mother, and I know very many black mothers: they are my friends, my relatives and my constituents. I have represented an inner-city constituency for nearly 40 years. Will the Home Secretary explain to the House how her statement meets the long-standing concerns of black mothers not just about the tragedy of a life lost, but about the use of suspicionless powers, and how, as was asked earlier, it fits in with the Casey review?



**Suella Braverman:** As I said, the use of stop and search is, at its core, about saving lives and preventing crime—that is what it is about. I have been incredibly encouraged and reassured by the evidence emerging from local forces. In Manchester, for example, Chief Constable Stephen Watson has said that a 260% increase in the use of stop and search over a defined period correlated with a 50% reduction in firearms discharges and a fall in the number of complaints. I think there is a concerted effect to improve and increase the way in which stop and search is applied. It must be applied judiciously, proportionately and legitimately, but it is a vital tool in saving lives.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Of the 220,000 arrests, how many were for repeat offences, and of those, how many resulted in a custodial sentence?

**Suella Braverman:** My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. That is exactly why we are piloting serious violence reduction orders, which empower the police to place an order on an individual who already has a conviction for a knife-related offence and give police greater powers to stop them should they breach the terms of their order. The initial reports are very positive about the way this extra power is being used by the police.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): Maya Angelou said:

“When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.”

The Home Secretary has showed us who she is time and again. Just 9% of stop and searches yield offensive weapons or items linked to burglary. No other organisation would ramp up something that yielded a result of only 9%. Scotland was the knife capital of the UK. It reduced its knife crime by 69% by using a public health approach. Why is the Home Secretary not using a public health approach?

**Suella Braverman:** I disagree with the hon. Lady's characterisation. Last year, stop and search resulted in almost 67,000 arrests and removed around 14,900 weapons and firearms from our streets. Crime statistics show that increased use of stop and search is driving the continuing increase in police-recorded possession-of-bladed-weapon offences, helping the police to save lives. Obviously, we work with all agencies, because stopping crime needs a multidimensional, multi-agency approach. That is what our violence reduction units are all about; that is what our Grip funding is all about; that is what our safer streets funding is all about—bringing together all the relevant agencies to prevent crime in the first place.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I agree with the Home Secretary's support for stop and search when it is used skilfully and responsibly, but when the all-party parliamentary group for children did some work on this a few years ago, we found that an alarming number of under-10-year-olds were being stopped and searched, and that police procedures for younger children were not being used properly. What assurances can she give me that things have changed and that, in particular for sensitive, younger children, stop and search is used only in extremis and under controlled circumstances?

**Suella Braverman:** There are clear legal limits around the use of stop and search, and it is only applicable for over-18s—the section 60 power. It is vital that the police understand the use of the legal limits, and that is why I am glad that training in procedural justice has improved. The authorised professional practice issued by the College of Policing will include greater detail on the limits and on how police officers should exercise their powers. The use of body-worn video footage has been a game changer in improving the accountability and transparency of how the power is used. That is why we are seeing a fall in the number of complaints.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): I am a London MP, and my community has felt the effect of young lives being tragically lost to knife crime. Some innocent teenagers and black and mixed-race people in my constituency tell me they feel that they have a target on their back for stop and search. With knife crime having risen 65% since 2015 at the same time as suspicionless stop and search has hugely expanded, and with the IOPC itself saying that suspicionless stop and search undermines confidence in the police, why does the Home Secretary once again insist on policy by press release for such complex, sensitive issues instead of focusing on the hard yards of properly resourced community policing based on intelligence gathering to prevent and solve crimes?

**Suella Braverman:** I do not accept that. Of course, there is nothing that any of us can say to someone who has lost a loved one to knife crime that will make it better, but tackling serious violence is an absolute priority for this Government, and we are making progress. Since 2010, serious violent crime has fallen by 41%. Our approach has been twin track, combining tough law enforcement such as intensive police patrols in hotspot areas of violence and ramping up the use of stop and search with a more long-term strategy to engage more young people and steer them away from a life of violence. Operation Sceptre, which was recently rolled out through many forces, focuses on knife crime and on using powers proactively, and it has had very good results in many forces when it comes to the seizure of offensive weapons.

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Obviously, stop and search can play a big role in keeping people safe on the streets, but it has to be part of a much wider strategy, particularly encouraging young people not to carry a knife in the first place. Would my right hon. and learned Friend consider encouraging police forces up and down the country to use knife wands, which can prove more helpful for those who are being searched and for those searching, and be less intrusive in the whole process?

**Suella Braverman:** We have a range of orders, and one of them is being piloted—the serious violence reduction order. If there is any doubt about what I said, let me clarify: SVROs are for over-18s, but section 60s can be used on anyone, including under-18s. Let me just be clear about that.

SVROs are aimed at providing a targeted tool for the police. They are being piloted at the moment, so that anyone who has a conviction for a knife-related offence can be subject to a specific order that will enable and empower the police to stop them more quickly, and therefore prevent crime should that person breach the terms of their order.



**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The Home Secretary talked in her statement and in her answers about the benefits of body-worn camera footage. What percentage of current stop-and-search operations are actually filmed by officers wearing body cameras?

**Suella Braverman:** We know that the use of body-worn video has increased dramatically throughout police forces, and it is now a significant element in the transparency and accountability. Several layers of scrutiny and challenge are injected into the system these days, whether that is internal supervision, internal feedback, the stop-and-search scrutiny panels, or various other inspections. Body-worn video footage can inform the training and accountability, and that is one reason why there are greater levels of public confidence in stop and search and a lower number of complaints.

**Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. Suspicionless stop and search must be used responsibly, but does she agree that any Members who think that that tactic is wrong should speak with officers who have had to deliver the news to a mum or a dad that their son has been stabbed?

**Suella Braverman:** My hon. Friend puts it very well. The police—our frontline partners who are dealing with this issue day in, day out; who have to break that tragic news to parents, every parent's worst nightmare—report back that stop and search, when used lawfully, proportionately and reasonably, is a vital tool in the fight against crime and is fundamentally very effective in saving lives.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Frankly, I hope that my residents in Walthamstow are not listening to this statement, because it is just plain offensive to those of us at the heart of this challenge. Just a few weeks ago, I got up to ask the Prime Minister about a 16-year-old boy murdered in my community outside his school, and another 16-year-old in court charged with that murder. This weekend, last night, I was sat with residents, having an emergency residents' meeting because we had had a serious shooting in my community—another young man, critical but stable in hospital.

None of my residents would dispute the role that stop and search can play, but we are all arguing—begging, pleading—for this Government to recognise the epidemic of youth violence in our country. If the Home Secretary cares about these young people, as she says she does, she should invest in their future. Under her Government, investment in youth services has plummeted from £158 per head to just £37. I asked the Prime Minister to make this issue one of his national priorities, but he ignored the question. Will the Home Secretary do something different and put her budget into correcting that deficit?

**Suella Braverman:** I am very proud of what this Government have achieved when it comes to law and order. We have falling crime; we have a record number of police officers—ever, in the history of policing; this financial year alone, we have put over £100 million into tackling serious violence; and since 2019, 136,000 violent offences have been prevented in places operating Government initiatives. That is thousands of lives saved and thousands of violent incidents prevented. I only wish the hon. Lady would welcome that.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Ind): Despite the Government's efforts to free up the time of frontline police officers by reducing the amount of bureaucracy and paperwork, which takes up more and more of their time, officers often say to me that this increases year on year and so reduces the amount of time they can spend on the beat. What steps are the Government taking to cut out the paperwork and free up frontline time to keep our communities safe?

**Suella Braverman:** My hon. Friend raises a very good point. One of the big programmes of work that I am leading at the Home Office relates to freeing up police time and reducing bureaucracy, so that police officers are unencumbered to fight crime and respond to the public's priorities. That is why we have announced changes to the way police officers will interact with health partners when it comes to mental health incidents. We are reforming the Home Office counting rules, which will save thousands of hours in avoiding duplicative or unnecessary recording of crime. We have a programme of reform to help to empower the police so that they can better respond to the priorities that the British people have.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Streatham) (Lab): The Minister talked about common-sense policing, but I have to ask what sense she applied when making a statement about suspicionless stop and search while making no reference to the well-evidenced racist discriminatory use of it. Does she not think we should be focusing on solutions that would actually make communities like mine safer, like reversing education cuts, ending school exclusions, improving mental health services and taking people out of poverty? If she has already said that the police have the powers necessary, why is she arguing that they have greater powers for this particular practice, which actually leads to less confidence in policing?

**Suella Braverman:** I do not consider the use of stop and search, when done lawfully, to be racist. What I do consider to be disproportionate and unjustifiable is that black people are four times more likely to be murdered than white people and that young black men are more likely to be victims of crime than young white men. That is the disproportionality, that is the disparity I am working to stop.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Last year, a response to a freedom of information request revealed that the gap in the stop and search rates between white people and black people was greater in Wales than in England. We do not know the latest rates, however, as the Home Office does not provide regular Wales-specific data on stop-and-search rates by population. Before the Home Secretary pushes for further use of stop and search in Wales, will she commit to regularly publishing Wales-specific data so we can properly understand the effect of this policy on our communities?

**Suella Braverman:** My announcement today is all about increasing the levels of data that are reported by police forces so that we can have a clearer picture of exactly how these important powers are being used.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Across our country, including in my Slough constituency, knife crime is up by 70% compared with seven years ago, but, shockingly, there is only a 1% success rate in terms of

[Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi]

the policies of the Home Secretary. She is today asking the police to ramp up the use of stop and search but, as I have said, in terms of the conviction rate, there is only a 1% success rate. Meanwhile, we have had funding to youth centres slashed—decimated—over the last decade, so is the Home Secretary embarrassed by the failures of Conservative Government policies over the last 13 years, and can she explain why black people are, despairingly, nine times more likely to be stopped and searched than everybody else?

**Suella Braverman:** I listen to frontline police officers and I look at the data when I make policy, and the police tell us that stop and search is a vital tool to crack down on criminals and to protect communities. Sir Mark Rowley, earlier this year, said he had countless examples of offenders being discovered to have dangerous weapons, tools for burglary or drugs on their person that have been uncovered by his officers being in the right place at the right time, and using this important power. These are examples and this is evidence of the utility of stop and search.

**Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op):** The framing of knife crime as a black issue is frankly lazy and a dangerous narrative. We need to work with all our communities to understand the core issues around the root cause of crime, and why some of our young people feel that they need to carry a knife. Some of them are victims. I want all my Vauxhall constituents to feel safe and go about their daily business, but stop and search on its own is a blunt tool. The Independent Office for Police Conduct found that a single black boy was searched 60 times—60—between the ages of 14 and 16, leaving him fearful of the police. No Member of the House will think that is an effective use of police time, so can the Home Secretary outline what measures she is taking to end what the IOPC found is the “disproportionate impact” of stop and search on black, Asian and minority ethnic people?

**Suella Braverman:** As I said, it is vital that stop and search is used judiciously, carefully, reasonably and proportionately, and that there is effective community engagement and scrutiny. There are today more layers of scrutiny and challenge than ever before on the use of that particular power—internal supervision, first and foremost; internal feedback on each stop and search, depending on the force; stop and search scrutiny panels, chaired either by a member of the community, or by police and crime commissioners; inspectorate observations; and internal force professional standards investigations when there is a complaint. That is why we are seeing higher levels of confidence and lower levels of complaint.

**Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab):** Will the Home Secretary commit to an independent evaluation of her proposals, with particular emphasis on the impact on confidence in policing among marginalised minority communities and on community relations?

**Suella Braverman:** What I hear from chief constables is that there has been much needed awareness of the impact on different communities. Therefore, in many forces, there has been an improvement in the way outreach

has been conducted, and much more respect with communities and to communities that may be affected by the use of these powers. The 2021 inspectorate report noted that there had been an improvement in engagement and training by forces. We should welcome that.

**Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab):** Institutional racism is a fact. It is also a fact that stop and search is not used proportionately or sensibly. Liberty has said that stop-and-search powers are “ineffective” and “discriminatory”, disproportionately impacting on black communities. These powers will worsen existing divisions between police and communities when public trust and confidence in the police is at a serious low. So can the Home Secretary confirm what evidence she has that ramped up stop and search will tackle serious violent crime?

**Suella Braverman:** In her inspectorate report of 2021, Wendy Williams confirmed that the majority of stop-and-search decisions were based on “reasonable grounds”—that is the legal test. She said that most forces have “good external scrutiny arrangements” and that forces are “better at monitoring” the use of stop and search, compared with previous years. She said that training has improved. That is the evidence I find encouraging.

**Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab):** Policing by consent depends on trust and confidence in the police. Officers are increasingly stopping law-abiding young people, under the spurious claim that they “smell cannabis” when none has been smoked or is present. And then the police are refusing to provide the necessary receipts and documents to those they have stopped. That failure to follow guidelines is shattering the trust that young people have in the police. What is the Home Secretary doing to address that?

**Suella Braverman:** I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Lady’s proposition. Stop and search can be used in the case of drugs and it is largely used in those instances. It is a vital tool in the fight against drug possession and supply and it can prevent young people from falling into the spiral of drugs.

**Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab):** Why on earth does the Home Secretary think it is a good idea, in a free and democratic country, to encourage more section 60 searches, known as suspicionless powers, which allow an individual to be stopped without cause, without need and without reasonable suspicion, instead of adopting a targeted, intelligence-led approach? Is it because of a lack of intelligence in the Home Office?

**Suella Braverman:** Simply put, it is because such searches prevent crime and save lives.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. The use of stop and search has been raised with me during an ongoing feud in my constituency, yet the Police Service of Northern Ireland has used stop and search as an effective tool to combat the transport and sale of illegal drugs, to take lethal weapons off the streets and to find evidence of criminal activity. Will the Home Secretary’s advice to police forces on the mainland be extended to our police

in Northern Ireland? They live under a high threat level and need the legal ability for stop and search to be fully understood and endorsed. If not, will she ask her colleague the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to make this messaging crystal clear in Northern Ireland too?

**Suella Braverman:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, I cannot speak for the PSNI. Since the county lines programme was launched in England and Wales in 2019, police activity has resulted in more than 3,500 lines closed, 10,000 arrests and 5,700 safeguarding referrals, all linked to drug offences. That is a success story and we must keep going.

## Points of Order

4.16 pm

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, in response to my question on the two-child benefit cap last week, the Prime Minister responded by claiming that his Government had lifted 400,000 children out of absolute poverty since 2010, which on the face of it seems like an achievement worth celebrating. However, as the Prime Minister well knows, that statistic does not support his claim. Absolute poverty does not take into account the impact of inflation, which is why economists and organisations such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies use relative poverty as a much more accurate measure of the reality—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Obviously you need a reply, but you cannot make a speech.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. I have had no notice of such a statement being made. She will know that ministerial responses are a matter for Ministers, not the Chair. If the Prime Minister accepts that a mistake has been made, it is open to him to correct the record. In any event, the hon. Member has certainly put the matter in perspective for the House.

**Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, I seek your guidance on two issues of potential contempt. Last Friday, *The Daily Telegraph* published the headline, “Johnson allies vow to oust MPs who vote for his censure”. In accordance with paragraphs 15.14 and 15.16 of “Erskine May”, these attempts to influence Members voting on a quasi-judicial finding of this House seem to me to be a *prima facie* issue of contempt. May I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker, on whether I am correct on this point? Perhaps even more importantly, would any attempt to carry out such a threat to deselect a Member based on their votes in today’s debate in itself be a contempt of this House?

**Mr Speaker:** First, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for notice of his point of order. The proper course for raising a matter of privilege is to write to me privately, but I note that the Committee has indicated that it will report further on the pressures placed on its members. As I have said before, the House referred this matter to the Committee and its members, and that should always be respected.

## BILL PRESENTED

### ECONOMIC ACTIVITY OF PUBLIC BODIES (OVERSEAS MATTERS) BILL

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

Secretary Michael Gove, supported by the Prime Minister, Oliver Dowden, Robert Jenrick, Robert Halfon, Stuart Andrew and Felicity Buchan, presented a Bill to make provision to prevent public bodies from being influenced by political or moral disapproval of foreign states when taking certain economic decisions, subject to certain exceptions; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the first time; to be read a second time tomorrow and to be printed (Bill 325) with explanatory notes (Bill 325-EN).*



## Privilege: Conduct of Right Hon. Boris Johnson

4.19 pm

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):** I beg to move,

That this House approves the Fifth Report from the Committee of Privileges (HC 564).

In accordance with convention, as Leader of the House I have brought forward this motion at the earliest opportunity to allow Members to take a decision on the Committee's recommendation. It is for Members of this House, in accordance with the principle of exclusive cognisance, to investigate matters of privilege in this place, and the findings being debated here are those of the Privileges Committee. The Government respect those important constitutional principles, which is why we have facilitated today's debate.

The Privileges Committee exists to defend our rights and privileges in this place. Parliamentary privilege refers to the range of freedoms and protections that each House needs to allow it to perform its functions effectively and without outside interference. The right of each House to control its own proceedings and affairs is a fundamental aspect of privilege. Without such freedoms and protections, our ability to carry out our duties will be diminished; and if we do not enforce them, they risk being rendered meaningless.

A breach of privilege—that is, interfering with one of the unique rights and powers of Parliament—is punishable by Parliament. Each House also claims the right to punish contempt, which “Erskine May” defines as

“any act or omission which obstructs or impedes either House of Parliament in the performance of its functions, or which obstructs or impedes any Member or officer of such House in the discharge of their duty, or which has a tendency, directly or indirectly, to produce such results”.

Those rules are obligations that we have to one another, to this place and to those who sent us here. They are also obligations that we have to future generations who will sit in this place.

On 21 April 2022, the House agreed to the resolution and order that established the inquiry from the Committee of Privileges. The Committee membership was established—again, with agreement from the House—the Committee selected its Chairman, and the House approved them. It commenced its consideration of this matter on 29 June 2022 and published its report on the 15th of this month. The motion before us today is not only votable but amendable. No amendments have been tabled against the motion.

The Committee's report found that Mr Johnson “deliberately misled the House” and the Committee, and, in doing so, “committed a serious contempt”. It also found that Mr Johnson breached confidence, undermined the democratic process of the House and was complicit in a campaign of

“abuse and attempted intimidation of the Committee.”

It is for Members to decide whether the Committee's findings, conclusions and proposed sanctions are correct and reasonable. That is the question in front of us today.

**Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab):** The Leader of the House referred to the evidence, and it is important that people who perhaps do not have the report in front of them understand the depth of evidence that the Committee looked at. That included: visiting No. 10 Downing Street; looking at evidence supplied by the Government, emails, WhatsApp messages and photographs; and conducting many hours of interviews. Does she agree that those who have not had all that evidence and have not done all those interviews should not presume to say that the Committee was wrong when it did that hard work on our behalf?

**Penny Mordaunt:** We all owe the Committee a debt of gratitude for the work that it has done on our instruction, but it is for Members to decide whether its conclusions are correct or not.

**Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab):** I have listened carefully to the Leader of the House. Will she confirm whether she will be voting in support of the motion in her own name tonight? A couple of years ago, when I had a previous Leader of the House in front of me, he brought forward a motion that he then in effect voted against.

**Penny Mordaunt:** Again, as the Member for Portsmouth North, I will be voting to support the Committee's report and recommendations, but all Members need to make up their own minds and others should leave them alone to do so.

I do not intend to detain the House for long, but I think it would be helpful to briefly address some false assumptions that colleagues may be relying on. First, the process has not determined who gets to sit in the House of Commons. In vacating his seat, Mr Johnson has removed the right of his constituents to retain him as their Member of Parliament if they wish to do so.

Secondly, it has been suggested that the Government are wrong to give the House time to consider the report, and that it is to their detriment to have done so. No. Not to allow the Commons to vote on a report that it commissioned one of its Committees to produce would be wrong, just as it would be wrong to whip any Member on such a matter. This is the work of Parliament, and it is right that the Government give precedence to matters of privilege. Governments are scrutinised and held in check by Parliament. These important balances are a strength to our political system. A Government's ambitions may well be limited by Parliament, but in being so they are not diminished. When Governments seek to interfere with the rights and privileges of this House, it is diminished.

Thirdly, it has been suggested that the Government should have stopped the work of the Committee of Privileges or should stop its future planned work. No. These are matters for the House. The House can at any time halt or direct the work of the Committee. It is doing such work because the House has directed it, and it is in the House's interest to have such a Committee and that Members should wish to serve on it.

**Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC):** Seven years ago, during the Brexit referendum, the former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip pledged to restore parliamentary sovereignty. Last week he utterly defiled that, in what the Committee described as “an attack on our democratic institutions.”



The Committee of Privileges found him to have lied over and over again. Its jurisdiction is limited to statements made in this Chamber, but my party has consistently advocated for a law against the peddling of political falsehoods in public life. Does the Leader of the House agree that the time has come to enshrine in law the need for all politicians to respect the very concept of the truth?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The right hon. Lady brings me to my closing remarks on why what we do this afternoon matters, whichever way we decide to vote, or not to vote. The real-world consequences of a vote today may seem to come down to whether the former Member for Uxbridge has a pass to the estate. Our constituents may not appreciate why we are focused on contempt towards the House as opposed to contempts that they may feel have been made against them: the lockdown breaches themselves, which grate hard with those who sacrificed so much to keep us all safe; for others, the creation of a culture relaxed about the need to lift restrictions; for others, wider issues such as the debasement of our honours system. But we would be wrong to think that there is no meaningful consequence to our actions this afternoon.

The Committee of Privileges, in its work producing this report, did not just examine the conduct of a former colleague but sought to defend our rights and privileges in this place: the right not to be misled and the right not to be abused when carrying out our duties. As a consequence, it has also defended the rights of those who sent us here and those we serve. I thank the Committee and its staff for their service.

This matters because the integrity of our institutions matter. The respect and trust afforded to them matter. This has real-world consequences for the accountability of Members of the Parliament to each other and the members of the public they represent. Today, all Members should do what they think is right, and others should leave them alone to do so.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Leader of the House.

4.29 pm

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): “The truth is incontrovertible. Malice may attack it, ignorance may deride it, but in the end, there it is.” Those are the words of Winston Churchill, first said in this House decades ago, and they hang over us today. Boris Johnson in particular and his supporters should heed the words of his hero. Mr Johnson undermined and attacked our democratic institutions—a far cry from a Prime Minister this country can be proud of. He lied to this House and to the people of this country and, when exposed, lashed out at the system designed to hold him and all of us here to account.

The backdrop to the report is the thousands of red hearts on the covid memorial wall just over the river. Every single one represents a life lost to this awful disease. For every single heart there is a human being loved, mourned and missed. For each, there is a story around them of awful loss—grief compounded by goodbyes done over smartphones, lives ended alone, people robbed of precious time together, and relatives unable to comfort each other at funerals. I urge Members who continue to defend Mr Johnson and attack the Committee and its

findings to think of those families and what it means to them. They are our constituents. Defending Mr Johnson’s consistent insistence that thank yous, birthdays and morale-boosting parties were essential work events hurts them.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way; she is making a strong case. Does she agree that Members who seem to think that abstention is an appropriate response to this debate are wholly wrong and that this debate goes to the very heart of the democratic principles on which our democracy is founded? Those who are abstaining are guilty not just of cowardice, but complicity with the very contempt for which Boris Johnson has been found responsible.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. Of course, this is a House matter. It is therefore not whipped. Like the Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), I will be voting to approve and endorse the report and its recommendations, and I urge others to do the same.

By failing to admit that such events were against the rules and that he should have admitted that as early as possible, Mr Johnson is dishonouring our constituents’ sacrifice—sacrifices they made in the correct belief that they were doing so to protect others; losses that can never be recovered. Birthdays happen every year—it is Johnson’s today. Weddings can be postponed. Plenty were and I know it was hard, but it was possible. But funerals cannot. So I ask each and every MP to look into their hearts and before they risk dishonouring their constituents’ sacrifice, to ask themselves this: if a relative of a victim of covid from their constituency were in the room right now, what would they say? Colleagues across the House are decent people who want to do the right thing and I urge them not to follow Johnson’s example.

Mr Johnson claims the public do not care and that we should all simply move on. Believe me, I did not want to spend my weekend reading 30,000 words on the former Prime Minister. But to tackle soaring mortgage rates, rising crime, NHS waiting lists or any issue that the people we represent rightly want to see addressed, MPs and the public must be able to trust what Ministers say in the House of Commons. Telling the truth is the foundation of a functioning Parliament, the basis on which we hold Ministers to account. It is how we scrutinise new laws and it is how we do our jobs properly. Our democracy depends on it.

It is worth reminding Members today, before they vote, that the public do care about Ministers lying to Parliament. I cannot quite believe that some need reminding of that, but clearly they do. The Constitution Unit at University College London recently found that public anger over dishonesty in politics runs deep. People watching this debate today support the work of the Privileges Committee and rightly so. We all owe the Committee a debt of gratitude. Our constituents want us to step up and enforce the rules when MPs, including Ministers, break them. Being honest came top on a list of characteristics the public told UCL were most desirable for politicians to have. The health of democracy ranked high on issues that matter. They want a Prime Minister who acts honourably, who tells the truth.

[Thangam Debbonaire]

The public can take some reassurance from this sorry saga, in that when a Prime Minister fails to act honourably and fails to tell the truth, we have a system here in Parliament to hold them to account. Far from the unfounded claims of a “kangaroo court” that I have heard from some, the Committee members detailed their process and took every possible step to ensure fairness. They, their Clerks and other staff deserve our thanks.

As the Leader of the House explained so admirably, the House voted unanimously to establish the inquiry. The Committee took legal advice from the right hon. Sir Ernest Ryder, former Senior President of Tribunals and Lord Justice of Appeal, from Speaker’s Counsel and from the Clerks of the House, consulting on how to “apply the general principles of fairness, the rules of the House, and...procedural precedents”.

In the interests of transparency, the Committee published a report last summer setting out its intended processes. It made “further public comments” on its workings “when appropriate.” It gave Johnson further time to respond to the evidence and make his own submissions—and yet, since the start of the inquiry, there has been a sustained, seemingly co-ordinated attempt to undermine its credibility, and the credibility of its individual members. At no point, as far as I can see, did Johnson denounce this campaign. When asked, he said that he had “respect” for the Committee, and that

“he deprecated terms such as ‘witch hunt’ and ‘kangaroo court’”, but, as we have now found out, he kept those terms in his back pocket all along to use as soon as things did not go his way.

Let us look at what the Committee found. It analysed six events that took place in Downing Street between 2020 and 2021, which it refers to as “gatherings”. Using the evidence available, it was able to establish: what the covid rules and guidance were at the time of each occasion; Mr Johnson’s knowledge of those rules and guidance; his attendance at or knowledge of events which breached rules or guidance; what he had been told by others, and what assurances he had been given about compliance; and, finally, what he had told the House.

That last point is obviously a matter of parliamentary record. We know from *Hansard* that Mr Johnson spoke in the House of Commons about covid compliance in No. 10 many times, and the Committee established that it was, in fact, more than 30 times. The examples that stand out include those that occurred during Prime Minister’s Question Time, starting with a question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on 1 December 2021. I commend her, and many other colleagues who did their jobs as scrutinisers. Speaking then and to the Committee, Johnson asserted that the rules and guidance were followed “completely”, “at all times”, and while he was present at gatherings.

Having established all that, the Committee then measured what Johnson had said against the actual facts of what had happened and what he had either known or should reasonably have known, at the time and subsequently, and found that it was not correct. The term that he had used, “imperfect social distancing”, could not be found in the guidance. He had put forward an

“unsustainable interpretation of the Guidance”

which was

“both disingenuous and a retrospective contrivance to mislead the House”.

In other words, Boris Johnson lied. This was a new low in his disregard for standards in public life.

I suggest that hon. Members across the House should ask themselves simply, “Does this pass the common sense test?” After he has lied his way through his career, and given the meticulous way in which the Committee has approached this whole inquiry and its carefully considered report, do they still trust Johnson? They should think back to 2020. In the first wave of covid, we had no vaccine, no mass testing, and no cure. People were afraid. People were dying. Would any one of us have considered that an event with an invitation list of 200, with wine, to boost staff morale or to say thank you for hard work, was essential for work purposes? Yet, even now, the former Prime Minister continues to say that it was.

Every single one of us will have constituency examples of heartbreaking cases in which people did not meet in person when they desperately wanted to do so. Doctors, nurses, care workers, teachers and bus drivers would not have dreamt of asking the then Prime Minister if they could get together for a “bring your own bottle party” with a “plus one”. They would never have brought their interior designer either. They knew the true meaning of sacrifice. They did not need to ask; they listened to him, night after night, telling us and reminding us what the guidance and the rules were. He was, as the Committee said, the “most prominent public promoter” of those rules. So it is simply not credible for Johnson to claim repeatedly that they were complied with, when the evidence is so damningly clear that they were not and that he must have known, because he was the one announcing them. This is not just the reasonable person test; it is the “Who on earth do you think you are kidding?” test. And he fails both.

The final area I want to cover is the current Prime Minister’s reaction to the report and where it leaves standards in Parliament and public life more generally. It is painfully clear that the Prime Minister is not strong enough to turn the page on his predecessor. When stories or scandals like this one cut through with the public, it offers the Prime Minister the chance to press the reset button, show leadership, get to grips with an issue and tackle it head on, but this Prime Minister is simply too weak to do so. Despite promising integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level, he has shown that he is too weak to stand up to Boris Johnson and his sycophants, which is profoundly dangerous, because if we cannot have a Prime Minister that stands up for standards, what have we got?

All we have heard so far are mealy-mouthed statements. It was on the Prime Minister to come to the House and set an example to his MPs. Instead, I hear that he has proactively said that he does not want to influence anyone on this. How is that integrity at every level? If the Prime Minister cannot even show leadership when it comes to holding liars to account, how can he expect the people of this country to trust him on anything? Is he at least planning to say something of note after the vote, or is his judgment so poor that he is sitting this one out completely? He is the Prime Minister; we should know where he stands.

I ask the Leader of the House: has the Prime Minister at least read the report? Does he personally endorse the Committee's conclusions? Does he back the sanctions in full? The Leader of the Opposition has done just that; why cannot the Prime Minister?

As I said, the Government have form. I was shadow Leader of the House two years ago when Boris Johnson and the then Leader of the House tried to rip up the rules to save their friend, Owen Paterson. Hundreds of Tory MPs voted with them and, I am afraid to say, that included the current Leader of the House. The current Prime Minister was missing then, too. This has all the hallmarks of Paterson 2.0. This time, MPs have been actively encouraged to dodge the vote. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will prove me wrong, because a real leader would not abdicate responsibility. A real leader would encourage Members to rise to the moment. I welcome the motion in the name of the Leader of the House, but I ask: who on the Government side actually supports it? The Government Front-Bench team, from the media over the weekend, otherwise seem to be in chaos. Where are they?

Just yesterday, the Levelling Up Secretary said that he disagrees with the Committee's conclusions. Does the Leader of the House know how many of her other Cabinet colleagues are not supporting her motion? Perhaps the easiest way to work it out is to think about which Cabinet Minister fancies their chances when it comes to the next Tory leadership election. That seems to be what we have been reduced to: Cabinet Ministers jostling for position with the membership. This is no way to run a country.

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. Does she agree that the Prime Minister not being here and not saying that he will also vote for the motion does not show him trying to avoid influencing the outcome? It shows a Prime Minister who knows exactly what outcome he is trying to influence. His very absence seeks to influence the way Members vote tonight.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I must agree; it seems to me that this is a Prime Minister whose judgment is so poor that he cannot even find it in himself to give an opinion on the Committee's conclusions.

**Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): I want to make a brief point. I am voting in support of the motion and I did not vote in support of Owen Paterson, but I remind the hon. Member that we got rid of Boris Johnson a year ago because we lost faith in him, because he was probably not telling the truth. I am also an Iraq war veteran, and the reality is that when Tony Blair lied and lied and lied, you lot covered up for him.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, but I must remind him that it was only last Friday that the current Prime Minister was too weak to stand up to the former Prime Minister and put a pause, at least, on his dishonourable honours list.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It is sad, is it not, that we have come to this? This has been inevitable, but it is sad and it is not good for the House or the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that we also have to learn the lessons from this? It should not be possible for this to happen again. We should look at

patronage and the way that it has been used recently, with people put into positions in the House of Lords with no experience. We have to learn from this experience, and it should never happen again. Does she agree?

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Of course, it is quite wrong that this weak Prime Minister waved through that dishonourable honours list. He should really have thought again.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am still confused about Labour's position on the former Prime Minister's honours list, because I have never heard anyone on the Labour Front Bench say they would abandon the practice. Surely, after all this, they cannot agree to a Prime Minister's honours list. Will the hon. Lady now take this opportunity to clarify Labour's position?

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I suggest the hon. Gentleman listens to the "Today" programme on catch-up, because my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the Leader of the Opposition, made it very clear. Tony Blair did not have a resignation honours list and Gordon Brown did not have a resignation honours list. We believe this Prime Minister should have stood up to the former Prime Minister and his dishonourable honours list. This is no way to run a country. It is time the Conservatives stopped squabbling among themselves and focused on doing the right thing by the people who put them here.

As I mentioned earlier, Johnson attacked the Privileges Committee. The severity of the sanction imposed on him takes this into account, but it was not just him. Other Tory MPs have labelled the Committee a "kangaroo court", so would the Leader of the House be able to tell us at some point, such as at business questions on Thursday, whether the Prime Minister understands the significance of these comments? What is he going to do about his own MPs who are undermining our democratic institutions? As this weak Prime Minister fails to step in to protect Parliament's standards systems, I ask the Leader of the House whether she could step up. Will she explicitly condemn colleagues who have acted in this way? As Parliament's representative in Government, will she demand that Ministers respect the institutions and practices of the House?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The Prime Minister is on record defending the work of the Privileges Committee. He has called out those who have overstepped the mark of genuine and legitimate questions about process, and so forth, and who have attacked and intimidated members of the Committee, bringing the House into disrepute.

The hon. Lady seems to be implying that the Prime Minister and other colleagues are not doing particular things because they might stand in any leadership contest. I gently point out that the Prime Minister does not need to win a leadership contest. He is the Prime Minister.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I thank the right hon. Lady for that clarification. It is not me she needs to remind but some of her own colleagues, who are obviously fighting the next leadership contest already. As Parliament's representative in Government, I ask her to remind her colleagues of the importance of telling the truth at the



[*Thangam Debbonaire*]

Dispatch Box and of the process by which, when Ministers make honest, inadvertent mistakes, they come back to clarify them as soon as possible. She could start by asking the Home Secretary to do that in relation to the asylum decision backlog, which I understand she still has not clarified.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Streatham) (Lab): We all now know that Boris Johnson lied to the House but, as my hon. Friend said earlier, we also know that he came to this House and told those lies on 30 occasions, and he did so to cheers and whoops from all the Members opposite. Does she agree that they bear some responsibility for this and, if they do not absolve themselves by voting in a certain way today, their constituents will look on them very unfavourably?

**Thangam Debbonaire**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and they not only cheered on the former Prime Minister. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) says Conservative Members got rid of him as Prime Minister last year, but that was only after they propped him up for a considerable amount of time.

Standards matter. Rules matter. Parliament matters. Respect for truth, behaving honourably, abiding by our rules and respecting our processes—this all matters. Why? Because without them we are nothing. If we are nothing, we fail democracy and we fail the people we have been elected to represent. If we lose their trust, and if they stop believing in democracy, our ability to serve them is crushed and our mandate to represent them is diminished.

To come back to where I started, the hearts on the covid memorial wall are what Members should have at the front of their mind when they vote this evening. On this side of the House, we hold democracy in the highest esteem, we respect the institutions of this House and we respect the process that the Committee has undertaken. I will approve the clear and just conclusions of the Privileges Committee, and I urge all colleagues on both sides of the House to vote with me to endorse, support and approve the Privileges Committee's report, and to do right by our constituents.

**Mr Speaker**: I call the Father of the House.

4.49 pm

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): The last speech was perhaps more party political than was deserved by the occasion. I would have preferred to have spoken after the Chair of the Privileges Committee, but I do so now and I draw the House's attention to annex 3, on page 90, which deals with the:

"Purported response of Mr Johnson to the Committee's warning letter".

What he says and the Committee's comments seem to provide the context on process.

The Committee has given its understanding of what the facts were and how it tried—successfully, I believe—to exclude the things that were not facts. The question facing each of us is: no matter how many good things we have done—the former Prime Minister did many good things—what do we do when we have done something wrong?

Although this was on a pretty unimportant issue, on 2 December 1985 I managed to get two sentences into one line of a column of Hansard. My words were:

"I made a mistake. I apologise."—[*Official Report*, 2 December 1985; Vol. 88, c. 84W.]

For anyone else caught in the kind of situation we are considering today, let me say that I hope someone would advise that approach, and that it is the sort of advice I hope I would take. I will support the Committee.

**Mr Speaker**: May I just say to the Father of the House that if he gives me notice in future, I will certainly put him down the pecking order, but I did not know that he wanted that?

I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

4.50 pm

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): We have always had a great deal of concern about the conduct of this Tory Government, who misled us through the pandemic from beginning to end, and at times it terrified us. We saw the photos of Boris Johnson surrounded by empty champagne bottles; we heard how the former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), got his pandemic strategy from the "Contagion" movie; and we saw how the former Chancellor and current Prime Minister was on the receiving end of a fixed penalty fine over partygate. In fact, 100 of these fines were issued to officials and politicians at the heart of government, and investigations are not over yet. This was a culture of not just bending the rules, but shattering them. Yet, right until this moment, Members such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) were being thrown out of this place for pointing out that Boris Johnson lied and lied and lied about these incidents, all while the liar himself was protected by procedure.

The fifth report of the Privileges Committee is forensic in its approach and has revealed a culture of entitlement that has eroded the very foundations of that which passes for democracy at Westminster. It says:

"The overall thrust of Mr Johnson's evidence to the Committee has been to downplay the significance and narrow the scope of the assertions he made to the House."

It uses words such as "disingenuous" and "misleading". It talks of Mr Johnson using language that was "contrary to common English usage"

and of his

"advancing an unsustainable interpretation of Guidance".

The report's tone is flat, completely professional and absolutely damning.

The report has also shed more light on behaviour that proves without doubt that it really was one rule for them, another rule for us. Since its publication, we have seen some clips that reveal the unbelievable arrogance of those posing for photos and being filmed dancing at Tory HQ, apparently on a day when it was announced that London was entering tier 3 restrictions—and some of those taking part have then been rewarded with honours. People died alone while No. 10 officials had Friday wine time. The reason these people spent their final moments alone was that they were following the orders of a Government who disregarded their own policies so blatantly, with suitcases filled with booze and with office karaoke machines being ignored as they were wheeled in. And then Boris Johnson lied about it.



Paragraph 210 of the report is scathing. It states:

“There is no precedent for a Prime Minister having been found to have deliberately misled the House. He misled the House on an issue of the greatest importance to the House and to the public, and did so repeatedly.”

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the outpouring we have seen on social media of people sharing the pain of instances of a daughter lost to suicide, or of funerals of those close to them that they could not attend, shows that these scars are not going to disappear in people's lifetimes? So is the demand to move on and the trivialisation of this matter not just the final insult?

**Deidre Brock**: I completely agree. The stories I have seen on social media and heard from constituents are utterly heartbreaking. The report vindicates every single person who made immense personal sacrifices during the pandemic. I am extremely grateful to the Committee and its officers for their work, particularly in such a hostile environment of relentless intimidation and insults.

One would like to think the Committee's recommendations will ensure that such a monumental betrayal of public trust will never be undertaken so lightly again. However, Boris Johnson and his allies' continued refusal to accept the findings and recommendations of the report is a further affront to the democratic process. In fact, the former Prime Minister's relationship with the truth is so distorted, I am not sure whether he comprehends the depths of his own deception. Either that, or he still thinks he can play us all for fools. In that, at least, I would say the game is up.

We cannot risk reinforcing the message that those in positions of power can deny, dismiss and evade the consequences of their own actions. Instead, the House must now work to regain at least some of the trust it has already lost and safeguard the democratic process. To do otherwise would set an extremely dangerous precedent.

The report comes alongside the news that the Scottish Government have published plans for an independent Scotland to have a codified constitution, written by the people, for the people, and, crucially, holding our representatives accountable to the people. Not only would that constitution guarantee our human rights and an NHS free at the point of need, it would ensure that no Scottish Parliament would ever take so much time, during a cost of living crisis, figuring out how to discipline out-of-control politicians who like to push flimsy Westminster conventions to the absolute limit. I note that over the weekend Mr Johnson may have tested that again, by again breaching the ministerial code with the announcement of his latest side job.

This mess is also about a party that ignored the obvious failings of a man because it thought he could win it power. I have read that many Members on the Government Benches plan to abstain, terrified of those among their constituents who are, unfortunately, still taken in by the clown prince, the former Prime Minister, playing the buffoon for them. He has, of course, jumped ship and escaped the censure of the House, but we need to turn our gaze on all the Members on the Government Benches who ignored his track record and indulged his behaviour and the obvious failings of the man, simply because they thought he could win them their seats.

**Pete Wishart**: My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech, as always.

They knew exactly the character of that man. They cheered on his buffoonery. It was them that foisted him upon our nation, and it is going to be them who will have to be held responsible and accountable for all the Johnson mess that he has left behind. We have four by-elections coming up in the next few weeks—three of them because of Johnson's legacy. What does she think their chances are in those by-elections?

**Deidre Brock**: I never like to guess anything, but I would suggest that given the behaviour we have seen in recent weeks, those chances look pretty slim.

At the very least, Government Members should show some remorse for that cynicism, accept the recommendations of the report and vote to approve them. If they do not, I hope their cowardly refusal will dog them for the rest of their political lives. If ever there was a moment for them to stand up and be counted, it is now.

However, it is too much to expect apologies from all those who defended Johnson and kept him in his place. Unbelievably, the Secretary of State for Scotland, the right hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), continues to support him, claiming he was not as unpopular in Scotland as was thought. The month before Johnson resigned as Prime Minister last year, an Ipsos MORI poll found that 83% of respondents had a negative view of him. If the Secretary of State for Scotland thinks opinions of the man have got better in Scotland since then, he has another think coming.

The Secretary of State for Scotland also claims, astoundingly, that the decisions Johnson took for Scotland will

“serve Scotland very well for decades to come”.

What a statement, when we consider the disastrous impact of the Brexit that Johnson was instrumental in persuading people to support on individuals and organisations up and down Scotland. Then there is the inadequacy of a replacement for EU funding, Treasury funds being ransacked like a sweetie jar to reward MPs, the Internal Market Act 2020, and the constant interference in devolved responsibilities. We are seeing the consequences of that with the UK Government effectively having a veto over legislation passed by our democratically elected Parliament in Scotland. The Secretary of State for Scotland is right in one way: Johnson's toxic legacy of the decisions made by his Government and imposed on the Scottish people will certainly be affecting them for years to come, given Labour's refusal to ditch Brexit in any Government that comes after this one.

As we know, some Members will not even be attending today's debate. I hear that the Prime Minister is swithering—perhaps it is all a little too close to home given his own fixed penalty fine. What a spineless dereliction of the responsibilities of his office if he does not show active support for the Committee's recommendations. The Committee's conclusions are that Johnson deliberately misled the House and the Committee, breached confidence, impugned the Committee thereby undermining the democratic process of the House, and was complicit in the campaign of abuse and attempted intimidation of the Committee.

[Deidre Brock]

What of the Prime Minister's mantra of integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level? This House must not only endorse the report in full, but recover the legal fees wasted on Boris Johnson's lies, rescind the honours he bestowed in disgrace, and prevent a single penny more of public money entering his pocket. We have suffered enough at his hands and at the hands of his Government. Boris Johnson lied to Parliament, deliberately misled the country and has shown no remorse for his behaviour. While time, money and energy have been spent on examining what was a self-evident truth a long time ago, the cost of living crisis continues to balloon and our constituents are suffering.

Is it not shameful and depressing, Mr Speaker, that it has taken this prolonged, detailed scrutiny by the Privileges Committee to force some Conservative Members finally to admit to Johnson's faults? It is shocking that, even now, some of them are refusing to accept its conclusions. Scotland deserves better than this corrupt, outdated Westminster system that allows the likes of Johnson to rise to the top. I fear that even these recommendations from the Committee, decisive as they are, will not prevent the same from happening in the future. I worry that some Conservative MPs think that, by accepting the recommendations and taking some medicine, this will all go away again, and that cannot be allowed to happen.

In conclusion, yes, it is clearly beyond time that Westminster abandons the damaging traditions that protect those who lie in Parliament, reforms protocol, and enables MPs to accurately hold Ministers to account. All Members of the House should of course vote for the Committee's recommendations. The question is this: is anything going to change—really change—on the back of the report. If Parliament fails to reform after this most egregious and obvious case, it will just prove that Westminster is incapable of even the most basic scrutiny of power, reform, or improvement. Are we confident that standards here will keep other Ministers to account when they stand up at the Dispatch Box? I am afraid that I am not.

5.2 pm

**Mrs Theresa May** (Maidenhead) (Con): I do not intend to dwell on the events covered in the report of the Committee of Privileges or its conclusions. It is a rigorous report and I accept its findings. I do wish to comment on the role of the Committee, the role of this House and the importance of today's debate and vote for our political life, this Parliament and our democracy.

It is not easy to sit in judgment on friends and colleagues. One day we are judging their behaviour, the next day we may be standing next to them in the queue in the Members' Tea Room. I know that it is not easy because, as Prime Minister, I had to take decisions based on judgments about the behaviour of friends and colleagues—decisions that affected their lives and, potentially, their careers. But friendship and working together should not get in the way of doing what is right.

I commend members of the Privileges Committee for their painstaking work and for their dignity in the face of slurs on their integrity. The House should, as the Leader of the House said, thank all of them for their

service and for being willing to undertake the role. Particular thanks should go to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for being willing to stand up to chair the Committee when the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) rightly recused himself. This Committee report matters, this debate matters and this vote matters. They matter because they strike at the heart of the bond of trust and respect between the public and Parliament that underpins the workings of this place and of our democracy.

**Mr Tobias Ellwood** (Bournemouth East) (Con): The Leader of the House spoke about representing Portsmouth; I returned early from Portsmouth today from a Defence Committee meeting to be here to vote in support of this report.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that, even though Boris Johnson's having absented himself from the House makes the report to some degree academic, the nation—who put us here—wants us to ensure that the process reaches its conclusion? I repeat that I will support the report today.

**Mrs May:** I am pleased to hear from the Chairman of the Defence Committee that he will support the report. I think he can take it from the fact that I just said that the Committee report matters, the debate matters and this vote matters that I think people want to see us come to a conclusion today.

If people see us making rules for them and acting as if they are not for us, that trust that I spoke about between the public and Parliament is undermined. If they see Members of this House trying to save the careers of friends who have been clearly found by due process to be guilty of wrongdoing, as happened in the case of Owen Paterson, their respect for us is eroded. Without that trust and respect, their faith in our very parliamentary democracy is damaged.

As MPs, we are in some sense leaders in our communities, but with that leadership comes responsibility. We each and every one of us bear the responsibility to put the people that we serve first, to be honest with them and with one another, and to uphold the standards of this place. We all know that in the rough and tumble of parliamentary debate between people of opposing views there will be exaggeration, careful use of facts and, in some cases, misrepresentation, but when something is said that is wrong and misleads the House, we are all—not just Ministers—under an obligation not to repeat it and to correct it at the first opportunity. Above all, we are all responsible for our own actions. Beyond that, this House has a responsibility to ensure that standards are upheld by showing that we are willing to act against the interests of colleagues when the facts require it. In this case, I believe they do.

The decision of the House on the report is important: to show the public that there is not one rule for them and another for us; indeed, we have a greater responsibility than most to uphold the rules and set an example. The decision also matters to show that Parliament is capable of dealing with Members who transgress the rules of the House—if you like, to show the sovereignty of Parliament. Following an unsettling period in our political life, support for the report of the Privileges Committee will be a small but important step in restoring people's trust in Members of this House and of Parliament.

I say to Members of my own party that it is doubly important for us to show that we are prepared to act when one of our own, however senior, is found wanting. I will vote in favour of the report of the Privileges Committee and I urge all Members of this House to do so—to uphold standards in public life, to show that we all recognise the responsibility we have to the people we serve and to help to restore faith in our parliamentary democracy.

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

5.9 pm

**Ms Harriet Harman** (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the serious and important speech of the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), every word of which I agreed with.

The evidence on which our conclusions are based is fully set out in the report. I want to place on record the great debt of gratitude that I believe the House owes to the Clerks of the House, to Speaker's Counsel and to Sir Ernest Ryder. The quality of their work and their dedication to the House is extraordinary. They are public servants of quite remarkable calibre.

The evidence shows that, on a matter that could hardly have been of more importance, Mr Johnson deliberately misled the House, not just once but on numerous occasions. The evidence shows that he denied what was true, asserted what was not true, obfuscated and deceived. It is clear that he knew the rules and guidance: as Prime Minister, he was telling the country about them nearly every day. He knew that there were gatherings: he was there. He knew that the gatherings breached the rules and the guidance. Yet he told the House that the rules and the guidance were followed in No. 10 "at all times".

Misleading the House is not a technicality but a matter of great importance. Our democracy is based on people electing us to scrutinise the Government, and, on behalf of the people we represent, we have to hold the Government to account. We cannot do that if Ministers are not truthful. Ministers must be truthful; if they are not, we cannot do our job. It is as simple and as fundamental as that. The House asked the Privileges Committee to inquire into the allegations that Mr Johnson, who was then Prime Minister, misled the House. That is the mechanism—the only mechanism—that the House has to protect itself in the face of a Minister misleading it. We undertook the inquiry, scrupulously sticking to the rules and processes laid down by this House under Standing Orders, and following the precedents of this House.

**Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg** (North East Somerset) (Con): I wonder whether the right hon. and learned Lady could say something of her own position in relation to the precedent set by a judicial Committee of the House of Lords, when a decision in which Lord Hoffmann was involved was set aside not because he was biased, but because of the perception of bias. In relation to her famous tweets, how does she think she met the Hoffmann test?

**Ms Harman:** I am happy to answer the right hon. Gentleman. I was appointed by this House in the expectation that I would chair the Committee, with no one speaking against it. After the tweets were brought to light and highlighted, as I am concerned about the

perception of fairness on the Committee—I agree that perception matters—I made it my business to find out whether it would mean that the Government would not have confidence in me if I continued to chair the Committee. I actually said, "I will be more than happy to step aside, because perception matters and I do not want to do this if the Government do not have confidence in me. I need the whole House to have confidence in the work that it has mandated." I was assured that I should continue the work that the House had mandated, and with the appointment that the House had put me into, and so I did just that.

Our report was based on two things: the evidence and our keen awareness of the seriousness of misleading the House. The Committee was unanimous that a sanction that would trigger the Recall of MPs Act was justified in the light of our conclusion that Mr Johnson deliberately misled the House and the Committee. We then felt it necessary to increase the sanction to 90 days to reflect the seriousness of his breaching of the confidence of the Committee, his impugning of the Committee, thereby undermining the democratic process of the House, and his complicity in a campaign of abuse, attempting to intimidate the Committee, to stop us from carrying out our work and to discredit it.

Like the right hon. Member for Maidenhead, with whom I share a great deal—including, it turns out, a necklace—I thank every member of the Privileges Committee. Over the course of the past year, they have considered thousands of pages of evidence and participated in more than 30 meetings to do the job that the House asked them to do with outstanding dedication and commitment, particularly the Conservative members of the Committee, who have also had to be extraordinarily resilient. They have had to withstand a campaign of threats, intimidation and harassment designed to challenge the legitimacy of the inquiry, to drive them off the Committee and thereby to frustrate the intention of the House that the inquiry should be carried out. Yet through all that, they have not given in to the intimidation. They have been unflinching in their duty to the House, and we owe them a huge amount.

We need Members to be prepared to serve on the Privileges Committee. They must be free to base their judgments on the evidence, free from pressure one way or the other. If the House wants its rights to be protected in the future, it must act to stop intimidation of members of the Privileges Committee.

Attacks by hon. Members on other hon. Members designed to pre-empt the Committee's findings frustrate the will of the House, erode public confidence and thereby undermine our democracy. They may themselves be contempt of the House, because they are attempts to impede the functioning of the House. We will make a further report to the House on that shortly, inviting consideration of what could be done to prevent it from happening in the future.

None of that is a threat to the free speech of Members. Members can engage in the process throughout: they can speak and vote against a referral to the Privileges Committee; they can speak and vote against the appointment of any member of the Privileges Committee; they can bring to the House proposals for changes to the procedure; and they can speak about a report's conclusions, but what they must not do is interfere with the work the House has mandated.



[*Ms Harman*]

The report does not create a chilling effect on what Ministers say at the Dispatch Box. If Ministers make a mistake, which inevitably happens, and inadvertently say something that is misleading, they are expected to correct it at the earliest opportunity, and that is done routinely. Inadvertent misleading, promptly corrected, is not an issue; it is the system working. The House understands it if Ministers decline to answer, for example, on matters of national security or market sensitivity.

Too many members of the public already think that we are dishonest, but hitherto I have found in my 40 years in this House that most Ministers, in all Governments, are at pains to tell the truth. The sanction in the report reinforces and upholds Ministers' high standards and shows the public that that is the case.

**Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con):** The right hon. and learned Lady has referred to the wording "misleads", which was in the original motion on 21 April 2022. That is not the wording of the resolution of 1997, which still pertains today and quite explicitly uses the words "knowingly misleads". Does she not accept that there is a huge difference? That decision was made unanimously by the House and it is still in existence and still pertains.

**Ms Harman:** I think the Committee found on the evidence that Mr Johnson knowingly and deliberately intended to mislead the House.

Because he was Prime Minister, Mr Johnson's dishonesty, if left unchecked, would have contaminated the whole of Government, allowing misleading to become commonplace and thus eroding the standards that are essential for the health of our democracy. Far from undermining Ministers, the report does precisely the opposite.

I want to say something about the press. This episode has shown that wrongdoing has not gone undiscovered and attempts to cover it up have failed, but it would have been undiscovered had not the press doggedly investigated. Many journalists played their part, and Isb want in particular to mention Pippa Crerar and Paul Brand. Democracy needs a free press.

The House sent this inquiry to the Privileges Committee without a Division. It unanimously endorsed the membership of the Committee. We have done the work we were asked to do. This is the moment for the House, on behalf of the people of this country, to assert its right to say loud and clear: "Government will be accountable. Ministers will be honest. There is no impunity for wrongdoing. Even if you are the Prime Minister—especially if you are the Prime Minister—you must tell the truth to Parliament." I urge all Members to support the motion.

5.19 pm

**Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con):** The motion before the House today is of the utmost importance. Yes, it is about the behaviour of a Member, but there is also a huge degree of controversy about the process and the make-up of the Committee. I want to say from the outset that it is entirely reasonable for right hon. and hon. Members to have differing opinions on both the findings of the Committee and the sanctions imposed by it. However, where I part company

with those who would vote against today's motion is that I strongly believe this House must uphold the processes and Committees that we create.

As a former Leader of the House for two years during the 2017 to 2019 hung Parliament, when the harassment scandal hit this place, colleagues from every party—many of whom are in the Chamber today—and from the other place worked for the best part of a year to put together the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme. I certainly do not defend that scheme as being perfect; I myself have some grave concerns about how it has been implemented, which are not for discussion today. However, what I believe the original ICGS, as agreed by this House in July 2018, got right was to uphold the principle that those who are elected to this place should only ever be removed by those same electors. The second principle that underpinned the ICGS was that the House should be responsible for its own affairs, ensuring a collective responsibility to uphold standards and giving all Members the right to be judged by a group of their peers.

The Committee of Privileges, which is responsible for this fifth report and is the subject of today's debate, has in my opinion been entirely properly established, and has carried out its duties with great care and with every opportunity for the provision of both evidence and opinion to be taken into account. I thank all members of that Committee, and congratulate them on what I am certain will have been an exhaustive, and exhausting, process.

I remind colleagues, the vast majority of whom will have been involved in cross-party Committees such as Select Committees and inquiries, to recall that all the participants on a Committee have an equal voice, and that this particular Committee—with its majority of Government Members—simply cannot reasonably be accused of political bias. Our Standing Orders, while far from perfect, ensure that Members are judged by a politically balanced group of their peers, and that the ultimate sanction available to them gives the right and the obligation to that Member's own electors to decide whether to call a by-election in the first place. If that 10% threshold is met, it is for those voters to return or reject that Member.

What is the alternative to our Privileges Committee? The only alternative is a Committee made of non-Members. That might address the fears about political bias, but surely the risk of lay members having their own agendas is also great, and with lay members there is a vital constitutional issue around unelected people having the power to dismiss those who are elected. If we do not uphold this crucial principle of our democracy, we risk undermining the preferences of voters by appointing unelected assessors to wield power. That would be a dramatic change to one of the world's greatest and longest-lived democracies, and we would effectively be saying that we are unable to govern ourselves, overturning a precedent that is hundreds of years old. That is a reality that many right across the country would be deeply uncomfortable with.

In my opinion, the time to challenge the make-up or the proceedings of the Committee of Privileges for its fifth report is long past. Colleagues with concerns about that Committee quite rightly raised those concerns before the House instructed the Committee in April 2022, but they were overruled by a significant democratic majority. The procedures and processes of this House are in

constant need of review and reform—of that, there can be no doubt. However, we must make sure that a proper process of reform is followed, not seek to rewrite the process at the eleventh hour because some do not like the conclusions.

For my own part, I will be supporting today's motion to approve the fifth report. I am sad that it has come to this, and I am particularly sorry to all of my constituents who have written to tell me that they kept the rules when others clearly did not. I urge all Members across the House to approve this motion without a Division.

5.24 pm

**Dame Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): I rise to support the recommendations in the fifth report of the Privileges Committee on the conduct of Boris Johnson. They should be accepted in full, and they should be supported by all Members of this House who wish to uphold our democratic institutions and our system of parliamentary democracy itself. That is especially the case after the former Prime Minister's disgraceful reaction to the draft report last weekend.

The Committee's conclusions are very clearcut and they are unanimous. The Committee has concluded that the most senior member of the Government, a sitting Prime Minister, engaged in very serious contempt and wrongdoing, which is worthy of the very long suspension that was to be recommended as punishment. He leaves the House in disgrace, spewing Trump-like conspiracy theories and attacking the integrity of the parliamentary system he has done so much to bring into disrepute.

This report is not about so-called partygate, although the gravest civilian crisis since the second world war, which took 230,000 lives, is the sombre backdrop against which the Prime Minister's wrongdoing took place; it is about Parliament's requirement that Government Ministers tell the truth, so that they can be held to account for their actions. Parliamentary accountability lies at the heart of our democratic system.

Serious matters concerning Boris Johnson's lack of ability to tell the truth were referred to the Committee for investigation by a unanimous decision of the whole House on 21 April 2022. That was when Boris Johnson was still the Prime Minister, and it is therefore safe to assume that he consented to this course of action. The Committee was then constituted—as is customary, as we have heard—with a Government majority, but chaired by an Opposition Member. In this case, it was my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who is a distinguished and long-serving Member of this House. She is also a lawyer. There were no objections at that stage to any Member who was asked to serve on the Committee for the purpose of investigation. Had there been such an objection, the Government could have used their majority to change the personnel who had been asked to conduct the inquiry. They did not, and the membership of the Committee was agreed unanimously by the House.

Fourteen months of painstaking and forensic work later, the Committee has produced its excoriating verdict in the report we are debating today. It is a damning verdict, and one that I believe the whole House must not only note, but vote to accept. I will comment on the findings of the report later, but I first wish to make a few further observations about the importance of today's proceedings.

Boris Johnson and his acolytes have engaged in a systematic attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the Committee and its work for their own purposes. They claim it is unfair and biased against the former Prime Minister. They claim that the individuals are biased and that the procedure is biased, but anyone who has read the report and seen the painstaking way in which the Committee went about its investigation will know that this is false. As the Committee itself points out, comparisons between the inquisitorial nature of the Committee's proceedings and those of an adversarial court of law are “fallacious”.

**Sir George Howarth** (Knowsley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the way my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) dealt with the allegations against her of bias, as she explained earlier, and the reaction of Boris Johnson are in sharp contrast? Does that not just tell us everything we need to know about this report and the consequences of it?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I agree with my right hon. Friend. I also think we must commend the honour and steadfastness of all members of the Committee of Privileges who have been put under enormous pressure during this process. The House of Commons has its own rules and regulations, which it must police itself as the courts rightly have no jurisdiction over those. As the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) explained, the courts do not have jurisdiction over this Parliament, and that is to protect Parliament, and by extension our democracy, from being subverted or undermined by outside pressure from the powerful. To portray that inquisitorial procedure as inherently unfair is simply not credible.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for the excellent speech she is making. Does she agree that today is a good day for the House of Commons, because the system has fundamentally worked?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** Let us see what happens at the end of today's debate to see whether the system has worked. It is being challenged, and we have to accept that and respond to that challenge, which I hope we will in this debate. Despite the hysterical reactions to the contrary, it is important to state, as the Leader of the House did in her remarks, that this was a properly constituted senior Committee of the House. It was asked to do a difficult but vital job, and it discharged its duties with integrity and honour. It is now our duty to ensure that we support the members of that Committee, and support the conclusions that they came to after that detailed work.

I also believe that we should thank the members of the Committee of Privileges, because they have done the House of Commons a great service under the most intense pressure. Instead of being thanked, they have found themselves traduced in the Boris Johnson-worshipping print and TV media, which has called into question their motives and their very integrity, and it has been egged on in that disgraceful behaviour by the former Prime Minister himself. It is beneath contempt for serving Members of this House and the ex-Prime Minister to accuse the Committee of being a “kangaroo court” or being “biased” against him. In my view, all those who

[Dame Angela Eagle]

have made such baseless accusations should themselves be referred to the Committee of Privileges for contempt of this House.

As the Committee points out, this inquiry goes to the heart of the democratic system in this country. This House exists to pass law, and also to hold the Government of the day accountable for their actions. For that crucial purpose to be fulfilled, the House assumes that any Minister tells the truth to Parliament. Inadvertent errors can and must be corrected at the earliest opportunity, but we cannot work if we have rogue Ministers lying on the Floor of this House with impunity. In deciding to resign prior to the publication of the report, Boris Johnson has heaped further opprobrium upon himself. He broke confidentiality by leaking the provisional report, ahead of its being finalised, for his own ends. He fled the judgment of his fellow MPs in a Chamber that contains a large Conservative majority. He ran away from the judgment of his constituents in Uxbridge and South Ruislip, without attempting to defend himself to them. He used his considerable public platform to make outrageous accusations of bias against the Committee members, who have had to be provided with extra security as a result. Allies of his have threatened any Conservative MP who supports the report with a confidence vote and deselection in their local constituency parties.

According to reports over the weekend, Boris Johnson believes that he left Parliament in a “blaze of glory”. He has left in disgrace. He has run from accountability for his lies and untruths. There has been no self-reflection, no apology, no acceptance of a shred of responsibility, just the narcissistic howl of a man-child who will not see that he has only himself to blame. So egregious and so damaging for public trust in our democracy are Boris Johnson and his cheerleaders’ actions that it is now imperative that this report is accepted.

All MPs from the Prime Minister down must be seen to be upholding the integrity, professionalism and accountability required to ensure that our system operates, and we must unite to defend truth-telling and punish those who believe they can lie with impunity. That is why this is not merely a symbolic debate, the former Prime Minister having fled the scene of the crime. He clearly harbours designs to make a comeback, having fled accountability and a reckoning, which is why we must support the bravery of those we ask to serve on the Privileges Committee by actively endorsing their recommendations. Mass abstention in tonight’s vote on the Conservative side would be a total dereliction of their duty, and that includes the Prime Minister. I hope that we will see all of them in the Lobby tonight voting to defend the integrity of this Parliament and our democracy.

5.35 pm

**Lia Nici** (Great Grimsby) (Con): I have to speak in the House today because I cannot see where the evidence is that Boris Johnson misled Parliament knowingly, intentionally or recklessly. [Interruption.] I am from Grimsby, and I have to say it as I see it. [Interruption.]

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order, it is important to listen to the hon. Lady.

**Lia Nici:** I have to say it as I see it, because that is what my constituents would want me to do. [HON. MEMBERS: “Have you read the report?”] Yes, I have read it, and I think that is an appalling question to ask a Member in this House. The reality is that Boris Johnson did not knowingly or intentionally mislead the House. [Interruption.] If people would like to listen, the reason I say that is last year, for six months, I was one of Boris Johnson’s Parliamentary Private Secretaries. I was the only Member of Parliament who was with him for the whole day on the publication of the Sue Gray report.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): The hon. Lady says having read the report that she sees no evidence of Boris Johnson’s wrongdoing. Does she agree that there is none so blind as those who will not see?

**Lia Nici:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, but I am aiming my speech at members of the public who have got more interesting things to do than to spend their time reading the whole of the report, as I unfortunately did. I suggest that people go to pages 85 to 88 and read the quotes. The reality is that there were some people who had parties, but sadly those people were unelected officials who still should have stood by, making sure that they were not putting Ministers potentially in difficult situations by advising them incorrectly.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Prime Minister led all of those people. He was the team leader for all those working at No. 10 and in the Cabinet Office who were at those parties. During lockdown, I volunteered at West Middlesex Hospital, taking food to the wards because the staff working in them were not allowed to go to the canteen. They certainly were directed by the chief executive of the hospital trust that they could have no parties—not even leaving parties, not even wine Fridays. They had no parties for that whole period. Does the hon. Member have any comprehension of what her constituents in the same position were feeling like when they heard the evidence?

**Lia Nici:** Yes, I do. What we need to look at here is what I witnessed first-hand, and what happened was that people advising the then Prime Minister at no point advised him that there were parties. They advised him again and again—

**Sir Jake Berry** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Lia Nici:** No, I will not give way at the moment. Those people advised the then Prime Minister again and again that no rules were broken and that guidance was followed at all times. Everybody in this place knows that no Minister stands at the Dispatch Box and knowingly misleads. They have to take counsel from people who advise them, many of whom are giving legal advice that they know to be the truth, but the public do not necessarily know that that is the case. If you are a Prime Minister and you are advised in that way again and again, no matter how you question that advice, you have to stand at the Dispatch Box and give those statements, because that is what you have been legally advised to do. People may not like that, but that is the truth, and that is why I am standing here and saying this.



The sad thing is, many people who gave that advice are still working in and around No. 10 and Whitehall, but we do not know who they are because they are not a high-profile politician.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I wonder whether the hon. Lady might reflect that it sounds like she is trying to deflect blame from Boris Johnson and put it on to unelected members of staff, and that people here and people at home may find that, to put it mildly, rather unedifying.

**Lia Nici:** I thank the hon. Lady. What I would say, actually, is that I have had the privilege to work with many unelected officials—special advisers and civil servants—who have been professional, worked hard and been good at giving accurate advice, but, from the evidence in the report, we all know that there were those who did not. We cannot shy away from that; we know that is the case.

**Sir Jake Berry:** To build slightly on my hon. Friend's point, the report needs to be narrow in scope—it is about what the Prime Minister said to this House—but I draw her attention to paragraph 20 on page 71, which seeks to go much further than that. It talks about not what the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson said but about the interpretation given to that by Members of this House, by the media and by the public. The former Prime Minister cannot be held responsible for what people thought he may have meant; if the report is to hold any water, he should be held responsible for what he said.

**Lia Nici:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that. Of course—[*Interruption.*]

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. We really must hear what the hon. Lady has to say. It is not fair just to mutter away when she is making her argument.

**Lia Nici:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank my right hon. Friend for identifying that. Of course, he is absolutely right. I have to say that I do respect the amount of hard work put into the report, but if, in my former job as a college lecturer, I was grading this, I would say it is not impartial. It says Boris Johnson “claimed” and Boris Johnson “purported”, and that is not impartial language. Therefore, in my opinion, the report is not impartial in the way it is written.

To go back to my original point, on the day that the Sue Gray report was published, the Prime Minister was horrified to read what had been going on, and at no time did anybody on oath give evidence to this inquiry that they reported that there were parties or rule-breaking to the Prime Minister. Now, some people might say, “Well, he lived in No. 10—he should have known.” Actually, those people who have worked in No. 10 will know that it is a rabbit warren of rooms with thick walls, the people working there are running the country and the Prime Minister is not the caretaker of the building. It is not the Prime Minister's job to go round, look in rooms and decide who may be working and who may not be working. In fact, the Sue Gray report did state that unelected officials were rude to doorkeepers and staff, yet given that No. 10 is full of police officers and security people, if the rules were being broken and that was seen, why did nobody report that to the Prime Minister so that he was aware of it?

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady made the very good point that the Prime Minister at the time was not the caretaker of No. 10. However, he was the caretaker of the nation's health, the nation's wellbeing and the nation's trust. In that, he let people down and he misled this House, and that is why the report came up with the conclusions that it did.

**Lia Nici:** I do not agree. I am from Grimsby and I can only say it as I see it. I saw on the day that the report was published that Boris Johnson had not been aware of the parties that had been going on.

**Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I am from Birmingham and I say it as I see it. Does the hon. Lady think that there is any chance that Boris Johnson could also have lied to her?

**Lia Nici:** No, I do not believe that he did. I think I am a very good person who can see character, and I saw what was going on in and around No. 10 on that day. Sadly, I believe that some unelected officials—many are very good and professional—made a choice not to inform the then Prime Minister because they wanted to cover their own backs. I am very sad to say that.

**Ms Diane Abbott** (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): Is the hon. Lady aware that, in 2019, Max Hastings, the editor of *The Daily Telegraph* and a Tory, said about Boris Johnson:

“Johnson would not recognise truth, whether about his private or political life, if confronted by it in an identity parade”?

Is not the truth that Boris has lied for so long and so often that it can come as no surprise that he is lying in this instance?

**Lia Nici:** I am not a Conservative party grandee. I am not somebody who has followed Boris Johnson's political or other career for a long time. I am somebody who came here to serve my constituency and my constituents, who are the reason I am here. The majority of them supported Boris Johnson, his policies and his vision for the country.

Sadly, the whole saga in and out of the media is becoming a kind of political opportunism for those people who do not like Boris Johnson's approach, do not like Boris Johnson's policies and do not like Boris Johnson's plan. I have to say that that is not what I am getting on the doorstep. Perhaps if the Opposition had a plan and had the people, they might have a chance of getting into government some time soon. This is about people who want a formidable opponent out of their way, because they do not believe that they will get into government in any other way. That is my stance.

5.48 pm

**Sir Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): May I first thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman)? I should probably thank her more than anybody in the Chamber because the wisest thing I have ever done in my political career has been to recuse myself from chairing the Committee. She has done an absolutely admirable job. I also thank all the Committee members—as has often been referred to, the Conservative members in particular. I will not go into the other matters that, for other reasons, the Committee Chair referred to, about privilege and whether this

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

should be referred back. I simply point out that I know all the Conservative members of the Committee because they are also on the Standards Committee. They do a wonderful job every single time.

The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), was right to say that it is very difficult to sit in judgment on your colleagues, including your opponents. That is not actually any easier than sitting in judgment on people who have sat on the same Benches as you or have been in the same party as you. But let's face it: Boris Johnson lied. He said the guidance was followed completely. It wasn't. He said that the rules and guidance were followed at all times. They weren't. And I take the plain meaning of his words. You do not have to investigate any further—just the plain meaning will do. He said he had repeated assurances. He didn't. He misrepresented the facts as he knew them. Meanwhile, people died in isolation, lost their livelihood—we often forget that bit—or missed out on a wedding or another very important moment in their family life because they abided by the rules. They thought that the big truth of the pandemic was that we were all in this together. That is why there is visceral anger. I hear it often from those who think that some people did not abide by the rules and that those were the people who wrote the rules.

This is not a single instance of accidentally mis-speaking either. Many Members have said that of course that happens. We have a proper process, which we have had since 2007, for a Minister to correct the record. Interestingly, the only time Mr Johnson corrected the record as a Minister was when he said that Roman Abramovic had been sanctioned and realised that he had not been sanctioned. So a Russian oligarch is perhaps more important than other matters. Yes, Mr Johnson was careless—reckless, you could say—about the truth, but far, far worse than that, he deliberately, intentionally and with knowledge aforethought sought to cover his tracks. It was a pattern of behaviour, a string of lies. And I do not much care for the version of the debate today which says, “Oh, it was all junior officials and they should be thrown under the bus” or “It was the fault of the police because they did not bother to report it or deal with it.”

**Lia Nici:** I thank the hon. Gentleman most graciously for giving way. Actually, it was not just about junior unelected officials. Where were the senior managers in this? Where were the line managers in this stopping this happening? Does he know?

**Sir Chris Bryant:** The thing is that, sometimes when you try to take the spade off somebody when they are digging the hole, they are absolutely determined to take it back and bring a pitchfork and a JCB to the process as well.

Mr Johnson says he has been brought down by a witch hunt, but in all honesty the only person who brought down Mr Johnson was Mr Johnson and I suspect he knows that. I think that this House feels that he should be ashamed of himself and that will be what it concludes later today, but I fear that he remains completely shameless.

Is the sanction proportionate? Of course, it is very difficult to sanction somebody who has already taken the option of running away from this House and from

facing the music here or for that matter in their constituency. But that is still important. What we debate today is not an academic matter. That is not a criticism—

**Mr Ellwood** rose—

**Sir Chris Bryant:** Now I have prompted another intervention. I did not mean to do that.

**Mr Ellwood:** We all now know very clearly, if we did not know before, that this is not academic. I am afraid that many people on the Conservative Benches will treat it as academic because Boris has left the building. That is wrong. I have learnt that as well. That is why I am back here. It is important that colleagues follow the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), and indeed the Leader of the House and vote to support the motion today.

**Sir Chris Bryant:** The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I have looked around for some parallels for what can be done about a Member who has already left the House by the time the Privileges Committee, the Standards and Privileges Committee, the Standards Committee or the Independent Expert Panel has adjudicated. The only one I can find is Sir Michael Grylls, the former Member of Parliament for North West Surrey, who was involved in the Ian Greer-Mohammed al-Fayed cash for questions row in the 1990s. He stood down in the 1997 general election so he was not an MP by the time the Standards and Privileges Committee reported on him. It said, categorically, in relation to the question of whether lying to Parliament is a contempt that

“Deliberately misleading a Select Committee is certainly a contempt of the House... Were Sir Michael Grylls still a Member we would recommend a substantial period of suspension from the service of the House, augmented to take account of his deceit.”

That is precisely, following precedent, what the Privileges Committee has done in its report. The truth is that Mr Johnson, as Prime Minister, was a senior and long-standing Member of the House. It was not the first time he got into trouble with either the standards system in the House or the rules. He has shown absolutely no contrition. He chose to attack, intimidate and bully the Committee, which could indeed be a breach of the rules in itself. Everything he did fell far, far short of the standards that this House and the public are entitled to expect of any Member.

I just want to say a few words about the process. The House has always claimed, as the Leader of the House said in her excellent speech, exclusive cognisance; that is to say, apart from the voters and the criminal law, the only body that can discipline, suspend or expel a duly elected Member of the House is the House of Commons in its entirety. I still hold to that principle. It is why any decision or recommendation to suspend or expel a Member that comes from the Standards Committee or the Independent Expert Panel has to be approved by the whole House. It is also why the only way to proceed when there is an allegation that a Member has committed a contempt of Parliament, for instance by misleading the House, is via a Committee of the House and a decision of the whole House. That is why we have to have the motion today and had to have the Committee on Privileges. It cannot, I believe, be a court of law. It has to be a Committee of the House. I do not think some commentators have fully understood that, including Lord Pannick and some former Leaders of the House.

I say to those who have attacked the process that they should be very careful of what they seek. There are those who would prefer lying to Parliament to be a criminal offence, justiciable and punishable by the courts, but that would drive a coach and horses through the Bill of Rights principle that

“freedom of speech and debates or proceedings in Parliament ought not to be impeached or questioned in any court or place out of Parliament.”

So I am left feeling that those who attack the process simply do not believe that there should be any process for determining whether a Member has lied to the House. As I have said before, I kind of admire the personal loyalty, but I dislike the attitude because it is in effect an excuse for appalling behaviour.

**Sir William Cash:** I am most grateful to the Chairman of the Standards Committee. He and I took part in the debate, as he will well remember perhaps, on 21 April 2022. I raised the question of “knowingly misleads” because it was not included in the original motion, which was then passed, which led to the reference to the Committee on Privileges. In the course of the debate, I raised—I think with him directly, but he certainly made the remark, for which I pay credit—the fact that intention is at the heart of this question. If we knock out the word “knowingly”, we knock out the intention as well and that is a fundamental question of process on which I will, if I catch your eye Madam Deputy Speaker, want to refer.

**Sir Chris Bryant:** I am going to ferociously agree with the hon. Gentleman. I said earlier that Mr Johnson knowingly lied to Parliament and that is what the Committee has concluded. There was a point at which people thought they would only consider “recklessly” but they found that he knowingly, with knowledge aforethought, misled Parliament and was deliberately duplicitous. I think the hon. Gentleman’s point is destroyed—

**Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg** *rose—*

**Sir William Cash** *rose—*

**Sir Chris Bryant:** If the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) does not mind, I will give way to another Member.

**Sir William Cash:** On the point the hon. Gentleman was just making—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. I think the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) is giving way to Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg.

**Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg:** I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) is absolutely right—we must maintain exclusive cognisance—but that does not mean we should not follow a proper process and a fair process, or admit that this is ostensibly political.

**Sir Chris Bryant:** The word “political” can cover a multitude of sins, can’t it? We are talking about the politics of the nation. I would argue that trying to defend the constitutional principle that Ministers always tell the

truth to Parliament and that, if they have inadvertently misled the House, they correct the record as soon as they possibly can, is an important part of ensuring our political health in this nation, but I do not think that the process was unfair. Most of our constituents, if they go to a tribunal nowadays, have no representation paid for by the taxpayer. Mr Johnson had, I think, more than £250,000-worth of representation provided by the taxpayer.

The membership of the Committee was agreed by the whole House when—I think I might be right in saying this—the right hon. Gentleman was Leader of the House.

**Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg** *indicated dissent.*

**Sir Chris Bryant:** I am wrong; I apologise. However, it is certainly the case that the whole House agreed that membership, fully knowing everything that had been said up until that moment. Three members of the Committee had sat on a previous case in relation to Mr Johnson that came to the Standards Committee. The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards had found against Mr Johnson, but we, the Committee, found in his favour. I therefore do not think that this was in any sense a biased Committee. Let me also say that anyone who thinks that Speaker’s Counsel, or, for that matter, Sir Ernest Ryder, who ran the whole of the tribunals service in England and Wales, would not stand up for a fair hearing and due process is misleading themselves, and doing so almost recklessly.

**Sir William Cash** *rose—*

**Sir Chris Bryant:** I am tempted not to give way to the hon. Gentleman. I am very hopeful that he will have an opportunity to speak to the House fully a bit later.

Some people have attacked the process for a different reason, and I understand the nature of that attack. They say that Johnson won a general election, and they argue that only voters should therefore be allowed to remove him from office. I passionately disagree with that view, because I hold a different understanding of democracy. It

“does not mean, ‘We have got our majority, never mind how, and we have our lease of office for five years, so what are you going to do about it?’ That is not democracy, that is only small party patter, which will not go down with the mass of the people of this country.”

Members may recognise those words. They are not mine; they are Churchill’s, addressed to the Labour Government in 1947. He went on:

“there is the broad feeling in our country that the people should rule, continuously rule, and that public opinion, expressed by all constitutional means, should shape, guide, and control the actions of Ministers who are their servants and not their masters.”—[*Official Report*, 1 November 1947; Vol. 444, c. 206-7.]

I agree, and that is why I think it important to note that public opinion on this matter is extremely clear. Most people think Johnson lied. A few of them do not think that that matters very much, but most of them do. Most of them think that Ministers who lie should be removed and punished, and being truthful is the one quality that they seek above all else in a Member of Parliament.

Harold Wilson said, in a debate in the House when John Profumo had just been forced to resign for lying:

“The sickness of an unrepresentative sector of our society should not detract from the robust ability of our people as a whole to face the challenge of the future. And in preparing to face



[Sir Chris Bryant]

that challenge, let us frankly recognise that the inspiration and the leadership must come first here in this House.”—[*Official Report*, 17 June 1963; Vol. 679, c. 54.]

Leadership means taking a stance. Abstention is a failure of leadership. I believe that today is a good day for democracy. We have remarkably few checks and balances in our system, and the only real check is the collective conscience of the Members of this House. That is the burden of our elected office, and I pay tribute to Conservatives, and people of every party, who have had to face a difficult decision in relation to this. We exercise our conscience on behalf of our constituents. Edmund Burke said that the most important thing we owe our constituents is our conscience. Thereby we tarnish or we burnish the reputation of Parliament. So let us assert today that no one is above the law and the rules apply to all, because every abstention is another excuse. I repeat Wilson’s words: the leadership must come first here in this House.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. There are still a great many Members who want to contribute to the debate. I would advise that if they speak for about 10 minutes each, we will probably be able to get everyone in with equal amounts of speaking time.

6.4 pm

**Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I rise as one who, if there is to be a vote on this motion tonight, will vote in support of the Committee of Privileges, but let me share with the House my sincere hope that there will not be a vote, because there should not be a vote. We should remind ourselves that the Committee was set the task on a Government motion when Boris Johnson was Prime Minister, and that the motion passed through the Commons unopposed. I add my thanks to the Committee’s members for a diligent and, no doubt, at times difficult task, which they carried out at the request of the House.

It is customary for MPs to accept the recommendations of such a report without a vote, but, as I have said, if there is a Division I will vote in support of the report. Its recommendations, unfortunately, chime in many respects with my own view that Boris Johnson knowingly misled Parliament, which is why I withdrew my support from him—the then Prime Minister—in May last year, and asked him in a meeting to retire at that stage with, perhaps, a modicum of grace. Sadly, I continue to believe that he knowingly misled Parliament, as the report has duly concluded.

This debate—and the vote, if there is a vote—is terribly important. It is of the utmost importance that we attach due deliberation to what it represents. Our parliamentary system compares well with others, and is the beating heart of our democracy. A central component of this system depends on Ministers telling the truth at the Dispatch Box. Indeed, the ability of the legislature to question the Executive can be properly executed only if Ministers tell the truth at the Dispatch Box; if they do not, accountability is impossible, and then we are on a very slippery slope.

No party, no individual, no ego, is bigger than Parliament. It is the very system that safeguards our freedoms, and through which we try to create a more prosperous, fairer society, regardless of party. History will be very unkind to anyone who impugns its integrity. Members who are found to have knowingly misled the House bring it, and by extension other Members, into public disrepute, and that does nothing for the dignity and calling of politics. Indeed—and this, perhaps, leads to a further point—if some Members maintain that we as Members cannot regulate ourselves, they are in effect asking for an independent body to do that job. The thought of unelected officials regulating the conduct of elected Members of this House should concern every parliamentarian, and that is why I think that, in many respects, today is a good day. As it should be, our Parliamentary system itself is putting right a wrong—or certainly I hope it will be doing so.

As we all know, the reason the rule-breaking in Downing Street during the pandemic resonated so strongly with the public is that the rest of us went through real pain during the lockdowns, at the instigation and compulsion of the then Prime Minister. I for one could not say goodbye to my beloved mother as she lay in hospital and passed away, because we were abiding by the rules, and I know that many, many people had similar experiences. To find that unlawful gatherings were taking place at the heart of government was bad enough, but that has been compounded by the failure of the then Prime Minister to be truthful to the House. It is simply not acceptable, and I know that those in this Chamber will find it to be unacceptable later this evening. Agreeing with the report’s recommendations is thus, in my view, an essential step in restoring standards in public life and to restoring the centrality of truthfulness to our parliamentary system.

Finally, I say to my Conservative colleagues that the last year or so that we have spent deliberating on the various aspects of partygate has served as a massive distraction from the otherwise good work that we have been doing on many fronts. It is time to put this to bed, and agreeing the report is the best way of doing that.

6.10 pm

**Dame Margaret Hodge** (Barking) (Lab): There are moments when we know that our parliamentary debates will form part of our nation’s history, and for the wrong reasons, today is such a moment. Everything that we do in Westminster—whether it is about addressing the crises facing our communities, from spiralling inflation to skyrocketing mortgage rates, or about strengthening support for the brave Ukrainians—all our actions, all our words, will only matter if we are trusted. That trust exists only if we tell the truth, especially when we are called to account for our decisions.

Confidence that this is a place where politicians are honest and accountable is completely central to the effectiveness and sustainability of any healthy democracy. Conversely, a culture where lies are ignored, tolerated or even excused is one that inevitably damages democracy. That is exactly the dangerous culture we saw nurtured under Boris Johnson. This is why the Privileges Committee report and its recommended sanctions are so important and why it is vital that everyone supports them in their entirety.

I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and all the members of the Privileges Committee for their forensic and painstaking work in sifting and evaluating the evidence. That evidence might not have been available but for the revelations first made by Pippa Crerar, so I pay tribute to Pippa for her work as one of the most talented journalists of our time.

The Committee's conclusions are based entirely on evidence, and that evidence is incontrovertible. The attempt by a few people today to traduce the members of the Privileges Committee to delegitimise the process is utterly shameful.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): I am conscious that the Chair of the Standards Committee, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), said that we should not make too many comparisons with the criminal justice system, but the reality is that, in the criminal justice system, in which the burden of proof is beyond reasonable doubt, we ask jurors to look at the evidence and infer the actions and intent of the perpetrator. Does the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) agree that it is quite strange that some colleagues are looking for an even higher level of evidence than that?

**Dame Margaret Hodge:** That is an extremely interesting point, for which, as a non-lawyer, I thank the hon. Lady.

If it is true that attempts were made to bully and, yes, blackmail Privileges Committee members so that they came to conclusions that were not based on the evidence but prioritised Boris Johnson's personal interests, that is shocking. The integrity of Parliament must come above all else. It takes courage to stand up against such political pressures, but showing integrity and leaving party tribalism at the door is absolutely vital if we are to uphold democracy and protect this place from a further erosion of trust.

**Seema Malhotra:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point about integrity and the protection of this House. Young people have contacted me about this debate, which they are following. Does she agree that for a former Prime Minister to lie to the House and to the Privileges Committee, to seek to undermine the Committee and then to threaten parliamentarians who support the Committee's findings is behaviour on which we must take a stand, in the interests of our constituents and the next generations? In voting for this motion today, it is important that we take this decisive stand on integrity, which will have an impact on confidence in this House for generations to come.

**Dame Margaret Hodge:** I agree, and I am pleased that the Privileges Committee will look at the conduct of some Members of both Houses in attempting to intimidate Committee members.

Today's debate has to be considered as part of a bigger problem facing us. Over the past six years, we have seen consistent attacks on the fragile pillars that act as vital checks on Executive power. We have seen judges and judicial review denigrated; senior civil servants sacked for speaking truth to power; cronies appointed to key public positions; pals rewarded with honours and contracts; attempts to undermine the independence

of the BBC; and our Parliament systematically bypassed. Boris Johnson allowed that creeping culture of corruption and unchecked executive power to infect our democracy.

Let us not beat about the bush: Boris Johnson did recklessly and deliberately mislead this House. His behaviour helped to support a culture that threatens our democracy. Today, I hope we are beginning to undo the damage that has been done. We are reaffirming the importance of Ministers and Prime Ministers being properly, honestly and truthfully accountable to Parliament and, through us, to the public.

Mr Johnson was not just called an "honourable" Member of this House; he led a major political party. He was our Prime Minister, yet he misled us time and time and time again, and he did so with impunity. Conservative Members knew this man before he became their leader. They knew he had been sacked as a journalist for lying. They knew he had been sacked from the Opposition Front Bench for lying. They knew he routinely bent the rules and misspent public money at City Hall. They knew he was a liar, yet they still made the terrible mistake of electing him as their leader.

So today, I hope that all Members of this House, and particularly Members on the Government Benches, do not make another terrible mistake by choosing either not to turn up or not to vote. This should not be about Conservatives versus Labour. Every parliamentarian needs to look at the evidence and ask themselves if they can honestly ignore the heaps of information that shows that Boris Johnson lied to us all, and through us, to the people in the country. I strongly urge every single Member of Parliament to walk through the Lobby and register their vote—a vote for the resolution, a vote that demonstrates our support for truth, justice and democracy.

6.17 pm

**Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg** (North East Somerset) (Con): It is perfectly reasonable to challenge the views of Select Committees of this House. It is neither eccentric nor, indeed, rare, so I should like to start with some of the things that I think are most contentious in the report, bordering on erroneous.

Let us start with paragraph 48, which makes reference to the fixed penalty notice received by Mr Johnson for the birthday party. It seems to think that the fixed penalty notice is, in fact, an admission of guilt. But in *R v. Hamer*, Lord Chief Justice Thomas said:

"It is quite clear that the issue of a notice is not a conviction. It is not an admission of guilt nor any proof that a crime has been committed. The scheme of the Act makes that clear. Any person reading the form would plainly understand that it is not to be regarded as a conviction and will not be held against him save in the respect mentioned. It seems therefore clear, both as a matter of the statutory scheme and as a matter of what a person accepting such a notice would reasonably be led to believe, that he was not admitting any offence, not admitting any criminality, and would not have any stain imputed to his character."

Yet this report, against what a Lord Chief Justice says and against what is a principle of our criminal law, decides to impute a stain upon his character. It seems to me that this is quite clearly a deliberate attempt to take the most unfavourable interpretation of Mr Johnson's activities, but this is not the only contentious paragraph.

Let us go to paragraph 83, which decides, as if it were an Elon Musk chip, to insert itself in the brain of Mr Johnson to work out what he must have thought at a

[Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg]

particular moment. Well, I am glad to say that, as far as I am aware, Mr Johnson does not have one of these little chips stuck in his brain for the Committee's benefit. Paragraph 83 says

"we conclude that Mr Johnson is unlikely to have been unaware".

That is an obscure use of a double negative to try to impute malfeasance to somebody where the Committee cannot prove it. The Committee assumes something and imputes something because it wants to come to a particular conclusion.

**Sir William Cash:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that the very word "disingenuous," which is used in the context of this report, is in the same category as the things he has just mentioned?

**Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg:** I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and I refer him further to paragraph 182, on the line to take. Mr Johnson, as Prime Minister, was advised before Prime Minister's questions to say that the rules had been followed at all times, and the report goes into great detail as to the authority for that advice—who had told him, whether they were senior enough and whether it was right—but it does not ask whether other Ministers were given the same briefing. Was this the cross-Government line to take, approved, as far as I could be aware, by all officials? Well, I can tell the House that, prior to business questions for the weeks when this was at the forefront of public interest, I was given the briefing that the rules had been followed at all times, with "at all times" emphasised. The only reason I did not say this to the House is because the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), the shadow Leader of the House, never had the wit to ask me the right question. If she had, the cross-Government line to take was absolutely clear, yet this report concludes that the Prime Minister, as he then was, was not advised by senior enough people—that they were involved in the press office. The idea that Ministers are not advised by people who work in communications shows quite how long the Opposition have been out of government.

Based on this tendentious reading of the facts, we come to the 90-day sanction. It is a vindictive sanction, it seems to me, that the Committee cannot implement because Mr Johnson has left Parliament, so the Committee goes from the vindictive to the ridiculous by not allowing him a parliamentary pass. Of all the trivial sanctions that could be imposed, that seems to be the most miserable. But the Committee emphasises in paragraph 229 that this sanction has been made more savage, more brutal and more vindictive because Mr Johnson impugned the Committee and undermined the democratic process.

On what basis? Is it thought that this House, when it comes to a conclusion, must be obeyed? Is it the case that we must not criticise the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 because it was passed by this great and noble House, or are we, in fact, allowed to criticise, as a fundamental of free speech, that which happens to us, that which is reported about us and that which is said of us? When a person is in court, they are allowed to say that the court has made a mistake. The protections of the junior courts, in which juries sit, are rightly very strict, but we can still say that the court has got it wrong. Indeed, we are allowed to say a court has got it so wrong that we

may go to appeal. We do not have to kowtow but, for some reason, the Privileges Committee thinks it is in communist China and that we must kowtow. The report goes on to say that Mr Johnson was

"complicit in the campaign of abuse and attempted intimidation of the Committee"

without a single, solitary shred of evidence. It is pure assertion.

This leads me on to the issue of partiality. I was most intrigued by the response of the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) to my intervention. She said that she had told the Government, that it had all been approved and that it was fine and dandy. I refer her to paragraph 12 of her own report:

"Our guiding principles included being transparent."

We suddenly discover, in this transparent approach, that there was a secret agreement that her involvement was all right. Well, I was in the Government at the time, and I never heard that this had happened, so it seems to me that it is important to examine the position in which the right hon. and learned Lady found herself. I note that the Committee does not do this in annex 1, which purports to answer appendix 3. I am sure the House is listening and following very carefully, but appendix 3 is the letter of Mr Johnson in response to the draft report. Fascinatingly, although paragraph 6 of appendix 3, on page 100, questions the impartiality of the Committee, annex 1 ignores that. Annex 1 answers lots of other points, but it rushes over this point, perhaps because the Committee thought it was on relatively thin ice.

**Sir Chris Bryant:** The right hon. Gentleman called for me to recuse myself from the Committee. Did he ever ask my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) to recuse herself from the Committee before Boris Johnson started demanding it?

**Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg:** I said it very publicly, and it is a matter of record that I said it. I assumed people were aware, and people clearly are aware of what is said publicly. I will come to paragraph 14 in due course.

**Sir Chris Bryant:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg:** No, I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman, which seems to me to be sufficient.

Paragraph 9 of the report says:

"we leave our party interests at the door of the committee room".

That is all very good, and it is to be encouraged, but it does not meet the Hoffmann test, which is important because the Judicial Committee of the House of Lords, like the Privileges Committee, was a Committee of Parliament following a judicial or, in this case, quasi-judicial process. I quote from its judgment:

"The contention is that there was a real danger or reasonable apprehension or suspicion that Lord Hoffmann might have been biased, that is to say, it is alleged that there is an appearance of bias not actual bias.

The fundamental principle is that a man may not be a judge in his own cause. This principle, as developed by the courts, has two very similar but not identical implications. First it may be applied literally: if a judge is in fact a party to the litigation or has a financial or proprietary interest in its outcome then he is indeed sitting as a judge in his own cause. In that case, the mere fact that he is a party to the action or has a financial or proprietary interest



in its outcome is sufficient to cause his automatic disqualification. The second application of the principle is where a judge is not a party to the suit and does not have a financial interest in its outcome, but in some other way his conduct or behaviour may give rise to a suspicion that he is not impartial”.

That is the fundamental point, and it led to the Judicial Committee—for, I believe, the only time in its history—overturning a decision it had made. It is reasonable suspicion.

The judgment of Lord Nolan runs to only four lines. I will read out only two of them:

“I would only add that in any case where the impartiality of a judge is in question the appearance of the matter is just as important as the reality.”

This seems to be fundamental: the Judicial Committee followed a proper process, which the Privileges Committee did not.

I have slightly exceeded the time limit, but I will finish relatively swiftly. Fortunately, the previous two speakers were brief, which is encouraging.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con) *rose—*

**Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg:** I will not give way. Let us come to paragraph 14, on a special report, because this is important. Paragraph 194 cites the 1978 resolution of this House that its “penal jurisdiction” would be used

“sparingly...in order to provide reasonable protection for the House, its Members or its officers from improper obstruction or attempt at or threat of obstruction causing, or likely to cause, substantial interference with the performance of their respective functions.”

That does not mean criticism; it is absolutely legitimate to criticise the conduct of a Committee or its members—that is politics. Our politics is adversarial, which is one of the great strengths of our political system. It is open to us, within this Chamber, to accuse people, within the bounds of good order, of saying things that we disagree with. Outside this Chamber, freedom of speech is paramount; we are allowed to say what we like.

The House has historically tried to call people to the Bar—indeed, in past times it even imprisoned people—and it made the House look ridiculous. When John Junor was called to that Bar of the House because he had said in the *Sunday Express* that Members were fiddling their petrol coupons, it was not he who looked ridiculous but the House. We must defend the right of freedom of speech. Frankly, if politicians cannot cope with criticism, one wonders what on earth they are doing with a political career.

I have one final question, which arises from annex 1 and the answer to question 7, where it says that Sue Gray’s report was not important in this case. When the witnesses have come from Sue Gray’s report, it is odd then to say that her report was not important. It might also be interesting to know, in the interests of paragraph 12-style transparency, quite how many communications, private and public, the Chairman of the Committee had with Sue Gray.

6.32 pm

**Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Let me begin by commending the Privileges Committee and its report. I thank each and every member on it, both Conservative members and other members. They had an incredibly difficult task, and the pressure, media attention and scrutiny upon them were incredibly high. I thank them for the job that they have done.

Anybody who reads this incredibly detailed and in-depth report has to conclude that the reality is that Boris Johnson was a liar. There is no question here. Every time he stood up, I thought he was spewing out complete and unadulterated untruths in this Chamber. One would often be surprised that he was getting away with the things he was saying, but it is now proven that he is dishonest.

I have concerns about questions that are raised by this report. The public will wonder why on earth Boris Johnson was entitled to more than £250,000 in legal aid. There is no example of any other Member—any former or serving Minister—being before what used to be the Standards and Privileges Committee and receiving money from the taxpayer to pay lawyers. Johnson got 250,000 quid from the taxpayer and the Prime Minister allowed that to happen. I say to the Prime Minister that he should say no now. We know that Johnson is a liar and that he has been discredited, so the Prime Minister should force him to pay up himself. An ordinary member of the public who earns more than £12,570 does not get legal aid, and often they are facing very difficult legal proceedings. Boris Johnson has earned some £6 million since he left this place, and he has just done a deal with one newspaper for £1 million a year to write a column, most of which will undoubtedly be untruths. People do not understand how it is possible, especially in the circumstances of a cost of living crisis, for the taxpayer to be paying his legal bill.

The second point that people will be concerned about is the honours list. The very idea that somebody who has left here discredited, having been convicted by a Committee of the House of lying, should be entitled to put people in the House of Lords or give them honours from the King is just unfathomable to people, especially when we read at the weekend that some of those on his honours list were partying during lockdown. We saw boozy shenanigans at Tory HQ—what utter contempt for this country.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. On the revelations about the party that took place at Conservative party headquarters, as we all know, some of those people have been given honours by the former Prime Minister. Does he agree that those honours should be withdrawn?

**Karl Turner:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The people, who are perhaps more important than us, will be wondering how on earth it is possible for liar Johnson to leave here and for the Prime Minister to nod through a list of honours for people who were boozing it up in Tory central office when others could not see dying relatives. It is utterly deplorable. As for anybody who thinks that that is all right, I suggest that they get out there, knock on doors and see what their electorate think of them.

Thirdly, Johnson gets £115,000 a year for his office costs. We are talking about 115,000 quid a year from the taxpayer to run an office to assist him as a former Prime Minister. People will not get that. They do not understand that. Let me warn Conservative Members that it will cost them at the ballot box. If we allow that nonsense to carry on, people will not be happy about it.

Fourthly, where is the Prime Minister when we are debating something so important? I was elected in 2010 and this is the most important piece of House business that I have witnessed. The very idea that a former Prime

[Karl Turner]

Minister has left here to avoid further scrutiny by this House, after a Committee of this place has found that he is a liar, is pretty deplorable, but the fact that the Prime Minister has not got the bottle to be here to say whether he agrees or disagrees with the Committee's report is an absolute scandal. He should be ashamed of himself.

Finally, I do not know what happened during lockdown—I can speak only for myself and my family—but it is despicable, and it adds insult to injury, that Johnson alleged as he left, in a letter to the Chair of the Committee, that other parties were going on. In effect, he was imputing that of people in this place, one of whom was a member of the Committee. I do not know whether that is true—perhaps it is a matter for the Met police to investigate, I know not—but the fact that his parting gesture was to do that speaks to the fact that the man is a complete and utter disgrace and he should never get anywhere near this place again.

6.39 pm

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): When I visit schools to discuss my work in Parliament, we often discuss speaking at the Dispatch Box, as I was honoured to do myself last year, although sadly only a handful of times, and what is in those boxes. As we all know, the boxes contain copies of religious texts, such as the Bible. Ministers do not speak under oath, so those texts are important reminders to them about the truth of what they say.

None of us is perfect—we all make mistakes. Ministers are charged with remembering lots of specific facts, figures and wording, such as the difference between rules and guidance, and they may make mistakes. If they do make a mistake, they must correct the record, once they are aware of the issue and have the opportunity to do so; they are asked to do so “at the earliest opportunity”.

In the report, the Privileges Committee considered whether Boris Johnson, as Prime Minister, lied to the House, which is a serious allegation. The Committee found him guilty and recommended a substantial suspension. I looked for precedents and found a helpful House of Commons Library briefing that showed there have been only 22 specific referrals to the Privileges Committee since 1979. Of those, only four—an average of one a decade—related to a specific Member or Members of Parliament. In 1994, two Members were sanctioned as part of the cash for questions inquiry, one for 10 days and the other for 20 days. In 2005, a Member was found to have been untruthful, but not to have lied, meaning presumably that it was unintentional. So this case is unusual.

Those examples took place before the Recall of MPs Act 2015. In that light, a 90-day suspension seems rather long, as others have said. It is not just a matter of the suspension itself, which has been served by Members previously; there is also the prospect of a recall. In common with other right hon. and hon. Members, I am concerned fundamentally that Members should not be removed from Parliament by other politicians, except in circumstances highlighted in the Recall Act, such as for criminal convictions resulting in imprisonment that meet the threshold of the Act or convictions for fiddling expenses.

My concern is that the process allows parliamentarians to remove other parliamentarians who have been duly elected, without clear, prior guidance on where those thresholds lie. Currently, there could be a suspension for nine or 10 days, but there is no guidance on when the suspension should last for nine days and when it should last for 10 days. That could lead to suspensions being seen to be politically motivated, as we have seen with the Committee. Whether we agree or disagree with the Committee, nobody has not noted that some people consider the report to be politically motivated. Elements of the population believe that. We need to ensure that everybody, wherever they live or work, and whatever their political allegiance, can see that the process is fair.

The other danger is that this could lead to people playing the man and not the ball; instead of trying to take down arguments made by politicians, Committees could try to take down the person. That would weaken our faith in parliamentary processes. Therefore, I hope the Leader of House will make time for a debate on when the House believes the threshold for a 10-day suspension should or should not be met. It seems to me that that is crucial. Indeed, in the report about the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), the Standards Committee, which is a Committee with a similar membership to the Privileges Committee, suggested that that matter should be given further consideration.

**Sir Chris Bryant:** I think I speak for all members of the Standards Committee when I say that we are a bit exercised about how the Recall of MPs Act now functions. When deciding on a sanction, nine days looks like the possibility of recall is being deliberately avoided, but more than 10 days looks as if the Committee has decided that it is the end of somebody's career. We want to look at the matter more fully and we intend to launch an inquiry in the autumn into that precise issue.

**Dr Johnson:** I thank the hon. Gentleman. If the Standards Committee undertakes that inquiry, I hope it will ask Members from across the whole House to contribute, because that is something that needs to be decided by the whole House, not just half a dozen or so members of a Committee, with due respect.

The other issue I want to raise is about Members being critical of the Committee. We are here today because there is a vote in Parliament. That means we have the opportunity to say “yes”—aye—or “no”. The fact that we can say “no” means that it is perfectly legitimate to respect the Committee and to respectfully disagree with the Committee. I have respect for my colleagues and hon. Friends who make up the Committee and who have taken on the unenviable job of making a highly politically charged decision. I am sure they have given that their full due diligence over a long period. The Committee must never be intimidated, bribed, blackmailed or bullied. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said in her opening remarks, it is a contempt of the House to seek to intimidate a member of the Committee.

However, a balance must be struck. We are here to debate and discuss, but we are free to disagree and question whether the Committee's processes and procedures are fair. In my view, it is entirely legitimate to question whether a person who has politically opined on an issue can judge it impartially. It is reasonable to consider, do I agree with the report? Do I think the Committee has

given insufficient weight to evidence provided by my hon. Friends the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Miss Dines) or for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) in their witness statements? Do I think insufficient weight was given to Boris Johnson's evidence, when he said, "How is it obvious that this event was a transgression if it was published in the newspapers and nobody complained?" Are we to presume, for example, that no members of the Opposition or no one among his political opponents read *The Times*, and that it was not obvious to them?

That said, I understand the Committee is cross that its letter was leaked in advance of the publication of the report. Having looked at what constitutes contempt of the House, I agree that leaking a report or letter is a contempt of the House. For that, the Member concerned should apologise and, if they will not, they should be sanctioned. But due process is important. If someone has done something wrong, they deserve the same due process as those who may be innocent. In my view, we should always assume someone is innocent until they are proven guilty.

Today, we are being asked to vote on a sanction based, in part, on the statement that Boris Johnson was "complicit in the campaign of abuse and attempted intimidation of the Committee."

That is a very serious allegation, but having read the report, I do not see where that is evidenced. That evidence has not yet been provided. If I understand the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) correctly, she said that evidence would be provided in a future report, when the Committee discusses that evidence. I am happy to take an intervention if she would like to say that it is in the report but I have missed it. I am concerned that we are being asked to vote on a sanction with essentially only half the evidence; I am not able to do that.

6.46 pm

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I rise to speak in support of the Committee's report. I thank the Committee and its members for all the work they have done in protecting us and our privilege in the work that we do for our constituents, as the Leader of the House pointed out earlier.

Many of us, I am sure, hope that this will be the final act in one of the most disreputable episodes in British politics for many years. At that time, the country was looking to its premier elected politician—its Prime Minister—to lead us through the most difficult and traumatic of times, which I hope we never have to endure again. Lives were lost; lives were interrupted for two years; young people could not sit their exams, complete their education or start employment; people lost loved ones. The people of this country were looking to this place and the rules it was making, which were being announced from No. 10, and trusting that everything was being done in their best interests. They were following those rules and having faith in those who had set them.

I believe this is a day not for party politics, but for us all, wherever we may sit in this place, to recognise the significance of supporting the report, the moment for us and our constituents, and, as others have said, our democracy. In criticising the Committee and rejecting the validity of its conclusions, Mr Johnson attacks each

of us and what we believe in. He shows contempt for the people whom we serve, and whom he purported to serve. He undermined perhaps the most intangible, and yet invaluable, foundation of our democracy: trust and confidence that our politicians, who have been voted for, tell us the truth in everything they do, and in everything they say that we, the public, must do in difficult times.

The Leader of the House talked about the real-life consequences of what we decide today and I believe that they cannot be underestimated. When we return to our constituencies from this place, our constituents will be looking to us to see how we have stood up for them, defended them and protested at the way in which they were let down by the incumbent of No. 10. They will look to us to recognise what they endured—the sacrifices that they willingly made.

Each one of us carries the title "honourable" or "right honourable". If it is not to become a meaningless sobriquet in the 21st century, we have to live up to that today in what we decide and in what we do. The only way that we can do that is by supporting the Committee, the work that it did, the evidence that it considered and the conclusion that it came to. The honour of this House and of this democracy is at stake and we cannot risk that.

6.50 pm

**Sir William Cash** (Stone) (Con): The original motion, which was discussed on the Floor of the House on 21 April 2022, in which debate both I and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) happened to speak, should never have been allowed through by default, as I said at the time. I cannot understand how it happened and I have never had a proper explanation. What I do know, as I said earlier to the hon. Member, to others and to the Chair of the Committee, is that it uses the word "misleading" but not the words "knowingly misleading". There is a vast difference. It is about intention. It is about whether or not Boris Johnson could have lied. That is the crucial issue.

I put down an early-day motion immediately after the Privileges Committee produced its process report, on 21 July 2022. The Committee itself drew attention, as I have, to the divergence from the established convention of deliberately or knowingly misleading the House—I made that point; I am afraid the Committee did not—as set out in the unanimously agreed 1997 resolution of the House on ministerial accountability. My motion therefore called for the 21 April motion to be rescinded. I have not changed my mind, especially as the proceedings have unfolded. My concern is also that the procedure followed has pursued a course that could even tend to undermine democratic and ministerial accountability because that is contained in, fundamentally, a unanimous resolution of 1997, which is still very much alive and kicking. Every day, the words "knowingly misleads" apply to Ministers who speak from the Dispatch Box. It was well said by the great constitutional lawyer Maitland that "justice is to be found in the interstices of procedure."

Thus, the procedures should reflect natural justice and the right to fairness in proceedings. I know that the Chair of the Privileges Committee has chaired the Human Rights Committee. One of the most fundamental



[Sir William Cash]

questions in relation to the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European convention on human rights is fairness in proceedings and trials.

The Committee of Privileges is uniquely concerned with personal accusations and complaints, as compared with all other Select Committees, which concentrate largely on departmental policy. Natural justice therefore requires cross-examination by counsel. The rule of law requires that, where there is an accusation of misconduct or of lying, particularly by Members of the House, an individual should be entitled to have his counsel cross-examine the evidence and obtain the names of potential witnesses. Indeed, counsel can be heard in person with the leave of the House and I truly believe that the Committee of Privileges could and should have proposed that itself.

I have already dealt with the question raised earlier with respect to the admission. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rhondda for saying in the debate on 21 April 2022 that “intention” is essential. I am glad that he reconfirmed that point today. In my view, intention cannot be excluded by any presumption of strict liability. That, as I understand it, was considered by the legal adviser to the Committee and he came to the view that strict liability applied. I do not agree, but that is a personal view and it is a view that I take as a lawyer. I do not think that strict liability is consistent with ensuring that the word “intention” is applicable in such circumstances.

**Sir Chris Bryant:** I have two very quick points. The hon. Gentleman has referred to motions of the House. He will be aware that there is also a motion of the House that says that a Member will always represent themselves and not be represented by legal counsel. Therefore, if we are going to barter off motions, that is also the will of the House universally expressed. However, the bit I really cannot understand is why he goes on about this intentionality point, when page 7 of the report says that Boris Johnson was guilty of contempt by “deliberately misleading the House”. That is intentionality. They have proved it.

**Sir William Cash:** I will leave that for a moment. I have more to say on that very question.

Only by cross-examination of witnesses can truth be properly established. The 1997 resolution went through unanimously after a series of many Select Committee reports in the 1990s following the arms sales to Iraq saga. There were intensive cross-party discussions and, eventually, John Major and Tony Blair insisted on the words, “knowingly misleads” in the resolution that was unanimously passed; the House agreed to it. That resolution, as I have said repeatedly, prevails to this day. Therefore, no Minister shall be expected to resign, or be forced to resign, unless that can be proved.

The motion of 21 April deliberately left out the word “knowingly”. It was a Labour bear trap for Boris Johnson and the Government. Changing this fundamental principle through a new precedent would, in my view, affect all Governments and democratic accountability in future, and would, incidentally, apply to civil servants, who are also governed, under the civil service code of conduct, by the words “knowingly misleads”. They are the people

who have to put together the answers to the questions that are raised on the Floor of the House and, for that matter, in speeches, too.

**Sir Julian Lewis:** My hon. Friend is, indeed, a true friend and, normally, we find ourselves in the same Lobby under heavy crossfire, but I want to ask him a simple question that I would have asked my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) had he found time to give way to me. Given that he is so hostile to the report of the Committee, will he do people like me a favour and divide the House today, so that we can have the opportunity to cast our vote, either against the report, as he wishes to do, or in favour of it, as I wish to do?

**Sir William Cash:** My right hon. Friend is a very good friend of mine—he really is—as indeed of some Members on the other side of the House. I would simply like to say this. I am not in control of whether there is going to be an amendment. [Interruption.] No, I am making the point that, as far as I am concerned, there is an issue here that is being debated. Many people are absenting themselves for what they believe to be very good reasons. I am simply taking the view that somebody may decide that they are going to divide the House and I am leaving that as an open question for the time being. However, the statements made by Boris Johnson on the Floor of the House—

**Pete Wishart:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir William Cash:** Not just now, thank you. I want to get on to this other point.

The statements made by Boris Johnson on the Floor of the House were in fact about legal interpretation of the covid rules and the guidance in respect of No.10. The Justice Committee conducted an excellent inquiry, reporting in September 2021, on the meaning and effect of the covid rules and guidance, several months before partygate emerged as an issue. That report is of great importance because it endorsed the incisive legal analysis of the former counsel for domestic legislation, the present Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. He highlighted the legal uncertainty of the regulations and guidance, stating in evidence to the Committee that

“there has been a lack of clarity as to what regulations applied to specific situations at what times...The combination of regulations and guidance, and the lack of clarity as to where one starts and the other stops, have been recurring themes of the coronavirus regulations.”

I strongly recommend that Opposition Members listen to that. It is very important in deciding whether a person can lie in those circumstances, because the same applied to subsequent regulations. The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards emphasised that that lack of clarity undermined the rule of law. That could not have been more apparent than in the differences in approach between that of the Durham police authority on the Barnard Castle incident and that taken in relation to the Leader of the Opposition and beer drinking at a particular event, which led to no action and, on the other hand, the Metropolitan police in relation to No. 10, which did lead to action. The essential point about all of this is that no one, not even the lawyers, knew what the law was. The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards made that crystal clear. Even the civil servants who drafted the regulations were fined for non-compliance.

I now come to the fundamental issue of whether Boris Johnson can be accused of knowingly lying to the House. It is clear from what I have said that the accusation that the former Prime Minister had deliberately or knowingly misled that House, as set out in the current and existing 1997 resolution, put together by Tony Blair and John Major and endorsed unanimously by the House as a whole, can only be derived from a proper legal interpretation of the words on which Boris Johnson was relying and of the legal advice he had received inside No. 10 on each occasion on which he is accused. I find no publication of that legal advice in this report. Boris Johnson therefore, in my view, cannot have been found guilty of knowingly misleading Parliament if no lawyers, let alone the Prime Minister, who is not a lawyer, could get the legal position right. The regulations and the guidance entirely lacked legal certainty. Therefore the Prime Minister could not have knowingly misled the House.

Why, as I believe to be the case, did the Committee not obtain evidence from those lawyers in No. 10 who provided legal advice when it was so crucial? If it did, why has that evidence apparently not been published? Boris Johnson cannot therefore have knowingly misled the House, and that should have been the end of it. I do not see how contempt can be attributed in these circumstances, for he simply could not have knowingly misled Parliament on any rational interpretation of the word “knowingly”, which the original motion left out.

Those who argue that now the report has been published it is all over and done, and those who say that the dogs bark but the caravan moves on, miss the wood for the trees. The caravan of this House, having moved on, will certainly come back. Then the dogs will not merely bark, but they will bite, and Parliament will be the victim, and it is likely that any future Labour Government will get caught up in it—although heaven forbid one should ever be elected. I therefore do not approve of this motion.

7.3 pm

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is clearly a very serious matter when one of our number is found in contempt of the House, and no one can or should take any pleasure in the report that we are debating this evening. However, in light of what has just been argued by the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), it is important that we remember that the revelations about the parties at 10 Downing Street, and they were parties, caused many people a great deal of anger and distress. They saw what went on there and contrasted it with what they had done in faithfully upholding the rules and guidance as they understood them, at great personal cost—above all, when they were not able to be present as their loved ones breathed their last—and they have the right to be angry about what happened.

That is why we asked the Privileges Committee to look into what happened and what we had repeatedly, if I may use the word, been told by the Prime Minister. Having looked at the evidence, our colleagues—we are talking about our colleagues here, on both sides of the House—formed their judgment, and I think we have a duty to accept their report and what they have found. That point was made forcefully in a number of speeches, not least by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May).

Why should we do that? First, because we traditionally accept reports of the Privileges Committee, because it did give Mr Johnson every opportunity to explain what he said and why he said it, because it was a cross-party group of MPs, as the Privileges Committee always is, and because its conclusions were unanimous. That is why to suggest there was some sort of conspiracy—I am sorry that one or two Members have veered in that direction in this debate—by one party or certain people to do down the Prime Minister is frankly implausible and insulting to this House.

What is more, I agree with the Committee that Mr Johnson’s behaviour following the receipt of the draft report and since it was published, and the public attacks he has made on the integrity of the members of the Committee, their report and its findings, have been, to put it mildly, distasteful and certainly egregious. They have only compounded the contempt he has committed against this House.

To address the argument that has been put about whether people can criticise the report, it is one thing to argue one’s case, to be found against and then to disagree with the findings. Everyone is entitled to do that, and to cast their vote accordingly this evening. It is completely another to call the whole process and those involved in it into question, to accuse them and the report of being “nonsense”, “beneath contempt”, “rubbish” and “deranged”—those are the words that have been used—especially when it is a blatant attempt to undermine the very democratic system we are sent here to uphold. As has already been said, when the Committee is attacked for doing its job by a Member, now a former Member, it is us as MPs who are also being attacked.

The other thing that worries me about this situation, and I think it should worry all of us, is that the type of conduct we have seen from Mr Johnson is all too reminiscent of what is going on as we speak on the other side of the Atlantic ocean. People look at what he has said and done here and what Mr Trump is doing over there, and they see the similarities. Here are two people who are trying to trash our institutions and our democracy in the process. That is very different from expressing disagreement with the judgment of the Privileges Committee.

Why does this matter? The word has already been used many times in this debate, but it is about trust. I think the Committee summed it up perfectly when it said:

“The House proceeds on the basis that what it is told by Ministers is accurate and truthful...Our democracy depends on MPs’ being able to trust that what Ministers tell them in the House of Commons is the truth. If Ministers cannot be trusted to tell the truth, the House cannot do its job and the confidence of the public in our democracy is undermined.”

Let us be honest with ourselves: there is no doubt that the public’s confidence in our democracy, and in us as politicians, has been damaged by what has gone on. Therefore, this is our chance to show that we too think that telling the truth to the House of Commons matters and that we as a House are collectively determined to uphold that fundamental principle, however high and mighty a Member may have been. To agree this report today will not be proof of the shortcomings of the process or of our democracy or the way in which we work; on the contrary, it will be to uphold its integrity and its strength.

7.9 pm

**Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): In 2019, Boris Johnson won a majority that no one expected. What was most important about that majority was that it broke the shackles of socialism in the north for the first time. Whether it had been me or another Conservative, the fact that Doncaster got a new voice—someone to call out the neglect that had been allowed to take hold in my town—should never be forgotten. We should be eternally grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that.

We all know why we are here today, but we should remember that the right hon. Gentleman broke the deadlock of Brexit, started to undo the decades of north-south divide and started to put right the consequences of austerity—coalition austerity, yes, but it was caused by the inept economic policies of the Labour party. He vaccinated the country faster than any other, saved thousands of households and businesses from certain bankruptcy, and was the first to offer support when Russia invaded Ukraine. We must remember that he is a human, too. In addition to running the country, he dealt with the highs and lows that this life brings. During covid, he nearly died. He got married, lost his mum, and had a child.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Member give way?

**Nick Fletcher:** No, I will not.

All that happened under the media spotlight, with a three-day camping trip for a break.

The report says that the right hon. Gentleman “misled the House”. The question is this: is the Committee right that he did so deliberately and is the punishment fair? That is where I struggle.

There are some good people on that Committee—my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) is someone I am pleased to call a friend—but I have to say that I think these Committees are set up to fail before they start. Why? Let me use a football analogy. If Man City’s star player had to sit in front of seven of his peers for a hearing, how fair would it be if three of the committee were Man United players? Not very. No matter how honourable they were, the opportunity to take out the opposition’s star player would be too much. If we are going to use MPs as Committee members, which I think we should—who else knows what this job is like—they must be of the same party. We must select Labour Committee members for hearings of Labour MPs, and Conservative committee members for hearings of Conservative MPs. Many may say, “But they will always find them not guilty,” but that is not what happened here, and lay members could still sit on the Committee.

Now, I want to speak to our constituents—the ones who did not break the rules; I know some did, but two wrongs do not make a right. We in this place set those rules, so we should always try our best to lead by example, and I want the public to know that most of us did. The right hon. Gentleman paid a fine that I would have challenged. A piece of cake in the Cabinet Office is hardly a party. And let us remind ourselves that it was the only fixed penalty that he received after a previous inquiry.

**Lia Nici:** Does my hon. Friend realise that Mr Johnson was advised by advisers not to challenge that fixed penalty notice?

**Nick Fletcher:** No, I did not know that. It is good that it is now on record and that the House does.

The report looked at six events and the photos that had been produced and concluded that they were in breach, but not at the events in the most recent videos. Parties happened, and stronger leadership may have prevented them, but the right hon. Gentleman was not at those parties. I saw this weekend the video of others partying. He was not there, but I can see the hurt that it has caused, and I know that people feel wronged and want justice. I know that people lost loved ones; I did, too. But the storing up of hate for those people will not bring our loved ones back, so I ask this for their sake: somehow, we need to find it in our hearts to move on.

The right hon. Gentleman has lost the top job. He has now resigned his post as a Member of Parliament. Trust me, he has paid the price. As for the young people in that video, they should have known better and do not deserve to be honoured, but I cannot ask the public to forgive and not do so myself, so I do. But I ask them to learn from these errors, or life will be tough for them and everyone around them. The video was posted by the media—a media whose only intention is to sell papers. Do not be tricked, anybody: the media are bastions of free press, but not always for the right reasons, so I say to the press: “Do the job, by all means, but think of the implications.” I ask them to use their power wisely.

I come now to the motion. If I vote for the report, my haters will love me for five minutes and then hate me again. If I vote against it, the ones who have lost loved ones will think that I do not care, and I desperately do. If I abstain, I please no one. But I am not here to please; I am here to do what I think is right. I will therefore vote against the report because I think the process is flawed. I will vote against because pleasing the Opposition will not bring back my constituents’ loved ones. I will vote against because the right hon. Gentleman has already left, so, in some cases, the vote is already futile. I will vote against because he has been punished enough. I will vote against because if I ask people to forgive, then so must I. I will vote against because this country has had enough, and so have I.

I finish by asking the right hon. Gentleman whether, if he cares about our country and his party as much as I think he does, he will back our Prime Minister and our party, and help to get this country back on track. This country and its people have suffered enough through covid, and it is time to move on. A decade of Labour will be terrible.

7.16 pm

**Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): In my 26 or so years in the House, I have never read a report from the Privileges Committee that has been so damning and excoriating. Nor have I read one that has been so carefully prepared over such a long time by Members from across the House who have clearly taken the obligations placed on them by the House with great seriousness in difficult circumstances.



We in this House all owe the right hon. and hon. Members on the Privileges Committee, who conducted the work to produce the report that we are considering, an extensive debt of gratitude—I am not the only person to say so, but I think it bears repetition. It matters to us all, no matter which party we are in; whether we are Back Benchers, Ministers or hope to be Ministers; whether we were Ministers for a few weeks and perhaps hope to be again; or whether we intend to remain Back Benchers, intend to stand down, or end up getting defeated at a future general election. It matters to everybody in this House that the privileges of this House are properly upheld. If they are not, our representative democracy cannot properly function, as the beginning of the report's conclusion makes perfectly clear. I agree very much that this matters.

Those who take the view that we are now considering a trivial punishment given that Mr Johnson has left could not be more wrong. It is important that the House, which established and asked the Committee to do the report, considers the findings and votes as it wishes to. I hope that every Member votes in favour of the Committee's findings and recommendations.

There have been ample opportunities for those who object fundamentally to the way in which the report has been produced to have an influence on it. The motion was amendable, but it has not been amended. As other right hon. and hon. Members have said, there have been opportunities throughout the process, which has taken over a year, to have an impact on the Committee's membership, on the terms of reference, and on the work that it has been asked to do.

The Committee has done what we asked it to do, and its findings are quite shocking. The report sets out egregious behaviour by the former Prime Minister, amounting to multiple contempts of Parliament. We must draw a line in the sand to stop Ministers thinking that they can lie to Parliament. Whether they are the most junior Under-Secretary or the Prime Minister, they cannot go to the Dispatch Box and deliberately lie. If they do, they must be punished for it by this House. If they do it and get away with it, as is the way with liars, they think they can do it again.

Mr Johnson appeared to think that one should lie repeatedly and lie big, but if we do what I believe we should tonight and support the report of the Privileges Committee, he will have been stopped in his tracks and dealt with for the lying that he did at that Dispatch Box. That can only be good for our democracy. That is why every Member of this House who is present should vote in favour of the report.

I commend those Conservative Members—particularly those in the Government—who are here and have made it clear that they will support the report. I had rather hoped to see the Prime Minister and far more of the Cabinet here, because it should matter to them as much as it matters to Opposition Members. Some day in the future, when they are in opposition—I think that will happen—they will want to know, just as much as any other Member of the House, that they are being told the truth from that Dispatch Box. It is a shame that the Prime Minister does not seem to be here. It does not send the right signal—it does not show that the House takes the matter seriously enough—if some parts of it

decide on a party political basis that for party management reasons it is easier to run away and hide. That is a shame.

The debates we have been having about “knowingly” are legally esoteric, but the Committee found that Mr Johnson had deliberately misled the House—that takes knowledge aforethought; to be deliberately doing something, one has to be aware that one is doing it—that he deliberately misled the Committee; that he breached the confidence of the Committee when he did not like the findings that he was shown in the report, which he got to see before the Committee had finalised it and before it was published; that he impugned the Committee, thereby undermining the democratic process of the House; and that he was complicit in the campaign of abuse and attempted intimidation of the Committee.

This has gone on over an extended period. The Committee found that there were five times when Mr Johnson misled the House: first,

“when he said that Guidance was followed completely in No. 10, that the Rules and Guidance were followed at all times, that events in No. 10 were within the Rules and Guidance, and that the Rules and Guidance had been followed at all times when he was present”;

secondly, when

“he failed to tell the House about his own knowledge of the gatherings where rules or guidance had been broken,”

even though he was there and he could have said what he saw; and, thirdly, when

“he said that he relied on repeated assurances that the rules had not been broken.”

The Committee stated:

“The assurances he received were not accurately represented by him to the House”.

The final two times were when Mr Johnson

“gave the impression that there needed to be an investigation by Sue Gray before he could answer questions when he had personal knowledge that he did not reveal,”

and

“when he purported to correct the record but instead continued to mislead the House and, by his continuing denials,”

the Committee.

It is pretty clear, and the evidence can all be read. The Committee stated that Mr Johnson was being

“deliberately disingenuous when he tried to reinterpret his statements to the House to avoid their plain meaning and reframe the clear impression that he intended to give, namely when he advanced unsustainable interpretations of the Rules and Guidance to advance the argument that the lack of social distancing at gatherings was permissible within the exceptions...and when he advanced legally impermissible reasons to justify the gatherings.”

It is pretty clear from the report that this was not an inadvertent or occasional slight slip, but a pattern of behaviour.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

**Maria Eagle:** The right hon. Gentleman has only just come in, but I give way.

**Sir John Hayes:** I heard several of the speeches prior to the right hon. Lady's, but I am grateful to her for giving way none the less.

[Sir John Hayes]

My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) made the point about the difference between being deliberate and being knowing, but I will not dwell on that. Will the right hon. Lady comment on the sanction? It seems to me that she is right that the privileges of this House matter, and that the way the privileges are managed matters too, but one might have expected the Privileges Committee to have some kind of sentencing guidelines, if I can put it in those terms. One might have expected the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who chaired the Committee, given that she has been here since I was in full-time education, to have insisted on that at the beginning.

**Maria Eagle:** It is entirely a matter for the Committee what sanction it proposes. It seems pretty clear from what it has said that the proposed sanction was increased following the further contempt that occurred when the draft report was sent to Mr Johnson, because of the way he behaved in leaking the report. I am not on the Committee, so I do not know what proposals were being considered before that further contempt, but I do not think 90 days is unreasonable, given the extensive period of time, the number of contempts, and the way he behaved having been confronted with his behaviour.

By the way, I think that the sanction concerning the former Member's pass is important too. People might think it trivial, but it sends a signal of extreme disapproval and indicates that, if a former Member decides to behave in this manner, that will not be allowed with impunity. I think that is entirely reasonable.

I do not wish to go through any more of the details. This is an egregious example—one of the worst I have seen. The Committee members have done the House a service. The truth starts here, at that Dispatch Box. It must be observed. If we do not have that, we do not have a functioning parliamentary democracy. That is why every Member of this House must, in my view, vote this evening to support the Committee and to approve its report.

7.26 pm

**Angela Richardson** (Guildford) (Con): Let me start by putting on the record my thanks to the Privileges Committee for its diligent work over many months, and to the Clerks to the Committee for supporting that work.

Today's debate is focused on the Committee's work and report on the misleading of this House, and whether that constituted a contempt of the House—not on wrongdoing, but on what was said at the Dispatch Box in response to allegations of wrongdoing.

No one is perfect—let he who is without sin cast the first stone—but it is how we respond to the errors we make that defines us. I agree with the Father of the House, who is no longer in his place: if one makes a mistake, one apologises at the earliest opportunity, not many, many months later.

I draw the attention of those outside the Chamber who may be watching the debate to annex 1 of the report, on process and procedure. In brief, the House referred the matter to the Committee without a Division, its members were agreed to without a Division, and it had no power to sanction; it could only make a recommendation to decide on, which is why we are here today to debate and decide.

I deplore the attacks on members of the Privileges Committee, whether they come from external commentators or from within this House. The work of the Committee is thankless; there is no need to make it potentially dangerous, too. The additional security that was needed is deeply shameful.

The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) is an exceptional parliamentarian and it was a privilege to serve with her on the Joint Committee on Human Rights. I also deplore the attacks on my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), who is a voluntary magistrate as well as serving his constituents in this place. Shame, shame, shame on those who are working to undermine him and his future prospects. He is a decent and honourable Member, as are all members of the Privileges Committee.

As this is a House matter, it is up to each Member to decide individually how to vote and to explain their decision to their constituents. I will not try to persuade or urge Members to do other than their conscience dictates. No one should be whipped on a House matter. I will be voting to support the Committee's findings.

7.29 pm

**Sir Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): We have been reminded in this debate that the report makes the fundamental point that:

"Our democracy depends on MPs being able to trust that what Ministers tell them in the House of Commons is the truth."

On 24 November 2021, at Prime Minister's questions, the then Prime Minister said that

"now, almost a month after furlough ended, there are more people in work than there were before the pandemic began."—[*Official Report*, 24 November 2021; Vol. 704, c. 344.]

That statement was untrue. The monthly employment statistics at that time showed that there were over half a million fewer people in employment than there were before the pandemic began, and total employment remained lower than before the pandemic until this month's employment statistics.

The former Prime Minister made the same untrue claim on 15 December 2021, then again on 5 January 2022—when he said it three times—and then on 12 January and 19 January 2022. On 1 February 2022, the director general for regulation at the Office for Statistics Regulation wrote to the director of data science at 10 Downing Street to point out that that repeated claim was untrue. The Prime Minister repeated the claim again on 2 February, and again on 23 February 2022. I thought at first that the Prime Minister might have just misunderstood the numbers. It was true, as he claimed on a number of occasions, that the number of people on payrolls was higher than before the pandemic, but that was because a lot of self-employed people gave up self-employment during the pandemic or afterwards and became employees on payrolls instead.

The letter from the director general having had no impact, the then chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove, wrote to the Prime Minister on 24 February 2022:

"Dear Prime Minister...it is wrong to claim that there are now more people in work than before the pandemic began: the increase in the number of people who are on payrolls is more than offset by the reduction in the number of people who are self-employed."

At the Liaison Committee in March 2022, I asked the then Prime Minister whether he accepted that correction in Sir David Norgrove's letter. His reply was not straightforward, but the transcript of the meeting shows that Mr Johnson understood fully and clearly what had happened in the labour market—he did not misunderstand the figures—and he also accepted that employment was in fact lower than before the pandemic. He said that he was going to correct the record on that point, which he did not do, but he did recognise that his claim had been mistaken.

Despite that, Mr Johnson subsequently carried on making the claim. He said it again the next month, on 20 April and on 27 April. In his final Question Time as Prime Minister on 20 July last year, he said, despite knowing well that it was untrue,

“We have more people in paid employment than at any time in the history of this country.”—[*Official Report*, 20 July 2022; Vol. 718, c. 951.]

My conclusion from all of this, which I think sheds some light on the events covered by the report, is that Mr Johnson just is not interested in whether a statement is true or not. He is a clever man—he thinks quite hard about what he plans to say—but the criterion, “Is this true?” is not an important consideration for him.

**Bob Seely:** The right hon. Gentleman is making a good speech. Boris had a complicated relationship with the truth—I am not denying that. The right hon. Gentleman has been in this House for a very long time, and it is great that he is saying that truth and integrity are very important. New Labour had a reputation for injecting lies into the British political process as never before. [*Interruption.*] It is true, actually. Did he specifically object to the lies that were told in the run-up to the Gulf war? He was in Parliament then.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I was in Parliament, and I do not believe that Ministers at that time said things that they knew to be untrue. I think it is absolutely clear, as far as I can tell—I am just spelling out the facts—that the former Prime Minister did say in this House things that he knew well to be untrue, because I had the chance to discuss them with him at the Liaison Committee and he agreed they were untrue, but he carried on saying them.

**Bob Seely:** So when Ministers were sexing up documents about weapons of mass destruction, they believed those claims to be true.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** Yes, I do believe that those who made those points in the House at the time believed that they were true. It subsequently became clear that they were not. I defy anyone to claim the same about Boris Johnson, given the particular history that I have recounted. As we have been reminded in this debate, that approach to politics is toxic for democracy. What is the point of us standing up and asking Ministers questions day after day if they routinely give us answers they know to be untrue? We have no chance of building confidence in Parliament, in democracy and in politics if Ministers do not care whether what they say is true or not.

Maybe there is a contrary argument that great men should not have to worry about such trivial details, but the Committee is absolutely right: if that view prevailed, our democracy would be at very serious risk, as I think it is across the Atlantic at the moment. With Boris Johnson having made a pretty successful career out of

not telling the truth, thank goodness that the Committee was willing to take a stand. It is absolutely right, and I hope the whole House will support the Committee this evening.

7.36 pm

**Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): First, I accept the Privileges Committee report, and I thank the Chair of that Committee and everyone who worked on it. Trust and integrity are important in politics. People think that politicians sometimes lack that, and when there is a chance to show that we are doing the right thing, it is important that that happens. As such, I will vote for the report and I accept the substance of it, while respecting some of the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) and my hon. Friends the Members for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici). Although I think they have a case, I am afraid that it does not quite convince me.

More broadly, I am so over Boris, and I am pretty over lockdown as well. The point I want to make tonight is that we are sometimes in danger of making Westminster look small and petty. Do not get me wrong: truth, and politicians at the Dispatch Box telling the truth, is a fundamental building block—a keystone—of this place. However, I can tell the House that, going by my inbox, for every person in this Chamber or every person watching who says, “Fantastic, you’re getting Boris,” or, “The Privileges Committee is doing its job,” there are other people saying, “Yet again, you are talking about yourselves. Yet again, it is politicians talking about process.” There were other big scandals to do with lockdown that arguably had more impact on our nation. That is not to deny the importance of Boris’s casual attitude to the truth. He saw lockdowns as being difficult to obey and, frankly, he was right. At that point, a wiser leader would probably have questioned his own rules, not sought to get around them—after all, they were his rules, and while one can love Boris, I think it is true to say that remorse is probably not one of his fine qualities.

For me, the scandal of lockdown and how we dealt with covid is not only whether there were wine Fridays and cake in Downing Street, and people carrying about pints of milk in protest; it is whether lockdown worked and the cost of lockdown in terms of lives, learning, sanity, money and truth. Since lockdown, we have had extraordinarily little conversation about those critical issues, but give people a chance to give Boris a kicking and we are queuing up to do so. I am just going to mention some of the other things that I think are important.

**Sir John Hayes:** Before my hon. Friend moves on to those other things, I want to reinforce the point he has made about calumnies in this House. By far the greatest deception I have seen in this House was when Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister, came before us and said that he had secret information that our country was at risk from weapons of mass destruction. Whether he was knowing or whether he was simply careless, the consequences were bloody, and we are now introspectively discussing cake and sandwiches. That is how the public see it, and my hon. Friend is right about them regarding us as both introspective and self-indulgent.



**Bob Seely:** For me, if it is cake versus the lives of 179 soldiers, it is pretty easy to say which I think is more important, but that does not excuse misleading the House.

I will briefly run through the other scandals, which are really important. We are now paying in excess deaths, as our constituents die of the cancers and heart diseases that went undetected when we in effect shut down the NHS for covid, exactly as doctors, experts, scientists and professors such as Karol Sikora warned. They paid a high price for it in the attacks on their integrity or on why the media should be carrying their comments. Given these excess deaths, it is not impossible that lockdown may end up killing more people, and certainly taking more life years, than it saved. One report recently—it is only one report, but there is a plethora of peer-reviewed reports, and one does try to follow some of them—suggested that lockdown may have saved 1,700 lives. That is the equivalent of the UK's natural deaths in about 26 and a half hours. That was at the cost of shutting down our schools, the £400 billion and so on.

To come on to the next scandal, our schools were shut. That is a disaster that has stalled educational improvement, and 100,000 kids—ghost kids—have disappeared off the rolls. What has happened to those kids—drifting into abuse, mental health crises, drugs, crime, solitude and loneliness? We do not know. It is one of the great scandals of the day. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Leader of the House is shaking her head, and saying, “What’s that got to do with this?” The point I am trying to make, and I will take an intervention if she wants, is that there are important scandals to do with lockdown. I do not defend Boris—

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for inviting me to intervene. I just want to clarify that this debate is about the Privileges Committee report into whether or not Boris Johnson knowingly misled the House. It is not about whether the lockdown rules were good or bad. That may be a debate worthy of parliamentary time, but it is not this debate.

**Bob Seely:** It is a debate worthy of parliamentary time, but when I held a debate on the use of Imperial modelling, not a single Labour Member turned up apart from the shadow Minister. The point I am trying to make is that there were scandals and other important things about lockdown. One of the things we are criticised for, as the shadow Leader of the House will know, is having an obsession with ourselves when there are other great and important things to be discussed about covid and lockdown, not only whether Downing Street had—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. We have to remember what we are discussing today, without going too wide, because there are 14 other Members who want to contribute to the debate, and I think they want to talk about what is in the report.

**Bob Seely:** Mr Deputy Speaker, I will wind up if you think I am speaking out of turn or too widely. However, I was going to say that our mental health crisis is a scandal worth reporting. The fact is that this cost £400 billion, and the fact is that science was misused and trust abused. Lockdown was an experiment, and I do sometimes think that focusing the lockdown debate on the behaviour of the then Prime Minister is too narrow and does not do this House a service.

I will vote to support the Privileges Committee report, but I do wish that the same level of interest, especially from the Opposition, would sometimes focus on the stuff that actually made a difference in lockdown, not just on vindictively going after Boris Johnson.

7.43 pm

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): All that glitters is not gold. The Overton window is framed by a vignette of deceit, and right hon. and hon. Members seem intent on paying homage to it above all else. Some will say and some have said that Boris Johnson misled the Committee and misled Parliament, and others that the Committee set out to achieve its predetermined goal of finding him guilty on all charges. Many of the public hold both views at once, and they are not mutually exclusive, so this pantomime staggers on.

The reality is that Parliament and the public are about as far out of lockstep with each other as they have ever been. I am not sure that the public in the real world care too much about this any more. I think very few people out there in the real world trust Boris Johnson. Sadly, through the process we have seen and the collateral damage to the reputation of this House, I think the Privileges Committee itself has been damaged and may be damaged further by revelations.

The public concern is very much to say, “a plague on all your houses”. What has caused this loss of public confidence in the procedures of the House? Well, the evidence is damning: Boris Johnson and his Government used behavioural scientists and spin doctors to clinically instil unreasonable fear to scare the public into ceasing their normal lives under the guise of a biological threat so deadly that they dared not go outside to see another person.

We all remember the relentless, day in, day out, informing of the public by Ministers in No. 10 about death rates and horror stories. We remember the signs everywhere we looked, we remember the adverts on the television and we remember the supermarket car parks filled with masked citizens each forced to stand in their own car parking bay. The relentless messaging from No. 10 was, “Stand on the stickers, follow the signposts, wash your hands, don’t see your loved ones”. The Government decided it was their job to be that of a parent and they saw the country as a toddlers playgroup, turning our police into teaching assistants, au pairs and, dare I say it, nannies. On every single account, they robbed the public of their dignity. It was nothing short of unacceptable. Our ancestors would be rightly ashamed of the situation.

During that period, the public yet again showed that their natural inclination, as fellow Brits, was to good-natured compliance and community spirit. We saw some of the largest demonstrations of kindness I have ever seen and those demonstrations, under immense pressure, showed the real spirit of the British people. Their altruism held up a mirror to the true nature of the appalling behaviour at No. 10. Any contention the public had that, in No. 10, “They have the latest, most accurate scientific data in front of them, and therefore these measures were justified in the face of the extreme risk” now has absolutely no bearing whatsoever on the truth. The fact is that the same people who took the unprecedented powers to suspend our freedoms knew that these measures were nothing short of political posturing. They knew

they were pointless. If the risks were really what they said they were and the science of the effectiveness of the lockdowns was that demonstrable, surely they would have been the most strident adherers to the rules—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. Mr Bridgen, you heard what I said to Mr Seely. We are talking about the contents of the report and you are going way wider than that now.

**Andrew Bridgen:** Well, I think the behaviour of No. 10 was—

**Adam Holloway** (Gravesham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Bridgen:** I will give way.

**Adam Holloway:** Look, while it is very exciting to see what is going on and to remove a Prime Minister with an 80-seat majority, can we not just think about what happened here or did not happen here? What did the police and Sue Gray actually come up with? The guy was delivered a piece of cake. I would have been the first person, if Boris had had parties in the flat or whatever else, to stand up here and whinge about it, but the reality is that what we know is that he accepted a piece of cake. So can people not accept that, just possibly, the guy stood there and really did not believe he was misleading the House?

**Andrew Bridgen:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and I think his misplaced loyalty to Boris Johnson is laudable. However, the behaviour in Downing Street bore a closer resemblance to the set of “Love Island” than to a collection of our country’s top minds and high performers working tirelessly to steer us through dangerous waters. This was at the same time as they went further than any other British Government have gone before them to take more and more powers under the wing of the state.

The question is: are internal parliamentary Committees and state inquiries agenda-driven? Well, who can fault the public for thinking that they probably are, because when we look at the covid inquiry that has now started, it is requiring all participants to take lateral flow tests in 2023. Yes, the bubble surrounding the Westminster political elite has become absolutely opaque. The public cannot understand it and it cannot understand the public. I am afraid that the bubble has well and truly burst. The consensus still about the lockdowns is that they were sensible, practical and acceptable for the public. The only discussion ever allowed in this place was how long the lockdowns should be. But lockdowns and restrictions were not for anybody at No. 10; they were only for the little people.

If the data had really indicated that the virus was “the most vicious threat this country has faced in my lifetime”—they are the words of the former Prime Minister himself—then why were those who were seeing the data at first hand and were privy to all the later briefings continually breaching their own rules? While they locked us in our houses, they went to parties. When they forced us to wear masks, they broke out the party hats. They closed our schools and they opened the bottles. Well, I’m glad they had such a good time.

**Adam Holloway:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Bridgen:** I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman.

The rest of our experiences and the collective memories of lockdown were not that great, to be honest. It was isolation, destroyed livelihoods, missed goodbyes to loved ones, and a new relationship with our state that bore an uncomfortable resemblance to history lessons and modern China—something that none of us ever dreamed would be true in present-day Britain.

We are all human, with all our human failings. Our health is incredibly important to us all, and we all welcome modern advances in medicine that over the centuries have reduced the nastier realities of life. But we never wanted this. What has happened at the top of our Government? The makers of the covid regulations deemed that their work meetings were more important than our children’s education. It is almost as if they wanted to make incompetence endemic. We can never give the children back the years of schooling that they lost, and we can never give the public back the time that we robbed from them. But we can give them answers and legislative assurances that we will never, ever replay that fiasco. Finally, let us sign the whole thing off as a job badly done, a chapter to consign to history and a stark lesson in how not to govern. The people of North West Leicestershire feel betrayed and they have been betrayed. It must never, ever happen again.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** A gentle reminder: we are talking about the report and its findings. If Members have speeches that they wrote two or three days ago and it contains things that are not relevant to the report, please could they lose those pages and concentrate on this debate? Jess Phillips is going to show us how to do it.

7.51 pm

**Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I will very much focus on the report. To comment on the last two speakers, not necessarily the wildly tangential line that they went down, but the idea that everybody is a bit sick of this and they do not want to be talking about it, quite a lot of people have been in touch with me while the debate has been going on and they are watching the debate. One of the people who got in touch with me is a brilliant woman called Mina Smallman, whose daughters, Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, were killed during the period when our country was in lockdown, in a double murder. She said to me:

“Please mention our story and Bibaa and Nicole. Had they broken the rules they would still be alive.”

They went to a picnic in a park, and they staggered it so that there would not be too many people, because they understood the regulations. Because of that, they were murdered. Mina Smallman also said that Sarah Everard was so frightened of the covid regulations that she ended up dead. So there were people in our country who listened to Boris Johnson talking on television, they took away from him what the rules were, as the primary message giver in the pandemic, they understood the rules, and it cost them their lives in a completely different way from that which has been discussed so far.

The idea that Boris Johnson did not understand the regulations—it is a cracking defence on his part because it basically means that he is too stupid. He’s either lying

[*Jess Phillips*]

or he's thick. Somebody said earlier they were not mutually exclusive. I think that is the case in this instance. Those two things are not mutually exclusive.

I did not come to this place as a big cheerleader of it. I felt that I was going to think that parliamentary procedure was silly in a lot of regards, and all the Northstead bailiffing has not disavowed me of that in the last couple of weeks. What I found, however, was that I became a total cheerleader for parliamentary democracy. I had not expected to. It has really been quite a shock to me that I became such a cheerleader of parliamentary democracy, but it is because it matters. People in our country putting trust in us to do the right thing really matters. Since I have been here, I have seen the fragility of that, with lies, misdirection and constantly feeling like you are never getting an answer.

Our constituents say over and over again, "Oh my God, just answer the question." That is the most pressing thing for most people in our country: "Oh my God, just get someone to answer the bloody question"—excuse my language, I am quoting the public. They said it worse; it could have been much worse. So it really matters that the institution of this place be protected, and that it is considered to be truthful and honest.

The only people who are served by the public hating politicians and the institution of Parliament are the people who already hold power. It is so important for the people to feel empowered in the thing that represents them and is there to drive them. If they opt out and say, "You're all the same: you're all liars and cheats", the same people who have always ruled always will rule. They do not mind that people say that.

This is about the importance of telling the truth in this place, and respecting the systems that we all have to live by and that we all vote through; like this Committee, we all voted for that and passed it through this building. It matters so much. That is why I stand here to say that I have watched that degrade and, for the first time, with this Privileges Committee report, I have felt like it has a chance to come back. I have felt that there is a lock on the system and a valve to release the pressure. I have seen for the past five years people—specifically Boris Johnson—lying and deceiving. I have felt, "Oh gosh, it's okay. The system is bigger than this demagogue. It is bigger than that man who thinks he is bigger and more important than the world." The system fought back with honour and I thank the members of the Committee for their hard work.

Boris Johnson's demagoguery in receipt of the report should surprise absolutely no one. It is to be laughed at, frankly, and the public are laughing at it. It looks really desperate. Some of the defences that I have heard today on behalf of Members trying to stick up for Boris Johnson look a little like people dancing on the head of a pin. Frankly, they were laughable and people are watching. I feel very bad that that will be represented as if it is the Conservative party's view, when there are very decent Members who absolutely will do the right thing and stick up for democracy.

It is a crying shame that, in this moment of release valve, the Prime Minister of our country cannot even express how he would vote if he were to turn up today. In my view, that is a dereliction of duty. Democracy has been degraded. It is important to fight for it. I cannot

believe that he could not take five seconds out of parroting his pledges to tell us what he thinks should happen. I praise the Leader of the House today for showing leadership in that regard. I cannot believe that the Prime Minister cannot even express what his view is one way or another.

**Sir Chris Bryant:** Interestingly enough, he did not express a view on Owen Paterson either.

**Jess Phillips:** There are many things that are matters of conscience in this place. When I look back on the record and see the Prime Minister of the day has not expressed a view on them, I think it is weak—it is quite a lot of unparliamentary words that I am probably not allowed to say, so I will not say them. I can now say that Boris Johnson is a liar and I believe my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who will be speaking after me, has been completely vindicated by the fact that we can all say that Boris Johnson is a liar. I just wish there had been a united front today. I understand that it is a matter of conscience, and there will always be some people who feel a different way, and I totally respect that. It is a real shame if the House cannot express today how important democracy is to us because of the failure of one leader leading to the weakness of the next.

7.59 pm

**Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab):** We all owe a debt of gratitude to the Privileges Committee and its Chair, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who has had to sit through some of the strangest speeches I have heard in this House. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for mentioning Mina Smallman, who is an amazing woman who continues to fight to keep the memory of her daughters alive and to change the system, whether that be the police or other systems.

This debate is all about democracy. The trust that should exist between the Government and those who are governed has been badly damaged. The question to every single Member of this House must be: how do we repair that damage? The way we do that is by demanding transparency, honesty and integrity from those who hold positions of power and those who stand at the Dispatch Box. The Leader of the House gave an impassioned speech saying just that. We must not tolerate the casual disregard for truth that has become the hallmark of this Government. It should shame us all.

We are honourable Members of Parliament. It is not just a title, but something we should hold dear. We should be honourable in what we do in this place. We should be honourable to the people we serve, because they have elected us. Democracy demands honourable conduct, and we have not seen much of that over the past few years. If we allow lies to go unchecked and deceit to become the norm, our democracy begins to crumble, and that is what has been happening. We sit here time and time again and see Ministers coming to the Dispatch Box. We all stand up and say, "That is not true, that is not true", and we are told that we are not allowed to say that. We have to say, "They have inadvertently misled the House and they will have to come back to the House to correct the record", but they never come back.



They tell a lie, they sit down with a goofy grin on their face, they walk out and they never come back to correct the record, and that is a problem for our democracy.

This House must be able to speak truth to power. Honourable Members of this House must be able to stand up and say, “That is incorrect”, otherwise what is the point or the purpose? We must also not be so obsessed with the archaic rules of this House. We must be honest with ourselves and say, “We have got to challenge the rules of this House if they are not working.” We have to challenge the system of this House if it is not working. It is a nonsense that in this House we cannot call somebody a liar if they are lying. People say, “It will degrade the House and everyone will be calling each other a liar.” If people do not want to be called a liar, do not lie—tell the truth. That is the solution to the problem. The truth must prevail and integrity must be restored. All Members of this House are guardians of our democracy, and I am sorry, but we are not doing a good job; we must do much better, and this report does bring some of that back to us.

It is ironic that two years ago I was thrown out of Parliament for calling Johnson a liar, when if he was not such a weasel and had not resigned, he would have been thrown out of this place for 90 days for lying. Okay, yeah, it would have made me a little bit happy to see him thrown out of the House, but ultimately, it is not about that; it is about our system in this place, and we have to do better. It was not easy breaking the conventions of the House. I got a lot of abuse from some Members on the Government Benches, saying, “How dare she? Bleurgh bleurgh bleurgh.” [*Laughter.*] That was a Jacob Rees-Mogg impression. I talk about the aftermath of what that was like in my book, “A Purposeful Life”. Sometimes I wonder what the purpose of Parliament is if we cannot hold Ministers to account and if we are just going to allow them to lie. Johnson knew he was lying. We all knew he was lying, and he knew we knew he was lying, but the system protected him. We have got to change the system, so that the system does not protect the liar or the lies, but protects Parliament and our democracy.

**Florence Eshalomi:** My hon. Friend is making a passionate and honest speech. Honesty is the best policy. On the system protecting the former Prime Minister, as she alluded to, does she agree that while the motion we are discussing today is on privilege, that privilege is sometimes not afforded to other Members of this Parliament even though we are all elected in the same way? The privilege of saying and doing what we want is not afforded to some Members in this Chamber.

**Dawn Butler:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Some people’s privilege extends beyond this House. When they lie in this House, they also have the privilege of their mates in the newspapers and the media then protecting that lie and that privilege. They put that coat of protection around them. Our democracy needs to be strong enough to stop that happening and to expose it.

As we get ever closer to a general election, Ministers will try to whip up moral panic and begin to spread further lies. They will push this fake culture war, some of which we have seen on display today. We cannot wait two years for a Privileges Committee to find them guilty of lying or misleading the House, because that would be too late. The question has to be: what do we do, where

do we go and who will stand up for democracy and truth? The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), is no longer in her place, but she said that as a Prime Minister it was difficult to make decisions about friends. I understand that, because a Prime Minister might make a decision about somebody, then find themselves standing with them in the queue in the Tea Room and feeling bad about it. I completely understand where the former Prime Minister was coming from. The solution should be that we take that responsibility away from the Prime Minister and make it the responsibility of the House to decide when somebody breaks the ministerial code, because we cannot have, as we did, the Prime Minister deciding who is lying and who is not lying, when he was the chief liar himself. That responsibility should become the House’s responsibility.

I have re-tabled my early-day motion on that, which I first tabled in 2021, when it got 105 signatures. I hope more Members will sign that re-tabled early-day motion about how we talk about the ministerial code of conduct. To end, the parliamentary record shows that I was asked to withdraw from Parliament for calling Johnson a liar. I will be writing to the House asking whether that can be expunged, or whether some kind of amendment or addendum can go beside it to say that it was actually correct and he was a liar. I will do that, and I put that on record.

I will end on Winston Churchill, who I understand is Boris Johnson’s favourite politician and who said: “There can be no democracy without truth.”

8.8 pm

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow my friend the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). The responsibility that we all have in this House is to defend democracy. We own, collectively, the rules of this House, and we need to consider carefully when we need to refresh them.

I thank all the members of the Privileges Committee for their report, which is damning. The Committee has found Boris Johnson guilty of deliberately misleading the House; deliberately misleading the Committee; breaching confidence; impugning the Committee, thereby undermining the democratic process of this House—our House; and being complicit in the campaign of abuse and attempted intimidation of the Committee. We need to think carefully about that, because we now know that members of the Committee needed to have additional protection put in place because of the former Prime Minister’s actions. It is a disgrace that Members of this House are having their security threatened by the actions of Boris Johnson. Of course, these would be most serious matters for any Member of this House, but for someone who was Prime Minister to be a guilty in such a manner is absolutely unprecedented.

Before I get to the report, let us remind ourselves of how we got into this position. The character, the personality and the traits of Boris Johnson were known long before he became Tory leader and Prime Minister. Indeed, in Prime Minister’s questions on 19 June 2019, during the contest in which Boris Johnson was elected Tory leader, I said to the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May):

“This is a man who is not fit for office. It has been said, ‘The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort, but where they stand at times of challenge

[Ian Blackford]

and controversy.’ This is a time of challenge, so does the Prime Minister realise that...he has a record of dishonesty?...Does the Prime Minister honestly believe that this man is fit for the office of Prime Minister?”—[*Official Report*, 19 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 233-34.]

We knew all about Boris Johnson. The Tory Members knew all about Boris Johnson, yet they were prepared to elect such a figure as their leader and impose him upon us as our Prime Minister.

Sadly, there was always an inevitability that it would end in a dramatic way for Boris Johnson, but we all suffer for his failure to respect the responsibilities that go with the office of Prime Minister. So let me ask the few Tory Members in the Chamber: just why were they prepared to elect a leader with a history of dishonesty? Honesty and integrity are characteristics that we expect from our political leaders—and not just expect but demand. We have a responsibility to society to lead by example. In this place, we are either right honourable or honourable Members. Some of us may find that the rules of this place belong to another time, but that very principle of being honourable, of having honour and behaving with honour, strikes at the heart as a key tenet of our democracy. We have to show that we are all worthy of the public’s respect or we are all diminished. That is why the behaviour of Boris Johnson in office matters.

The backdrop to the matters under consideration was the covid pandemic. How often did we stand in this Chamber to applaud our NHS and all our frontline workers and to implore society—the public—to follow the lockdown rules? So many made sacrifices. The rules were for the rest of us; they were not for Boris Johnson or those around him.

Now we have the verdict of the Privileges Committee. The verdict is indeed a confirmation: Boris Johnson is a liar. We knew that long before now. It is of course not the first time that he has been caught out by his mistruths: he was sacked from *The Times* for making up a quote and sacked from the Tory Front Bench for lying about an affair. This is the well trodden path of a man who believes he is above the rules that the rest of us must follow. He is the epitome of the Westminster bubble—no longer serving others; instead, serving only themselves.

We are here today because truth still matters. Partygate was a sorry and unforgivable episode even by the low standards that the Government have set, with “bring your own bottle” events and multiple large gatherings with little adherence to social distancing measures. All the while, people around the world were making unimaginable sacrifices to help stop the virus. It is all covered in the report, and Johnson’s desperate excuses are a slap in the face for those who missed funerals and last words with loved ones, and those whose mental health scars from isolation and anxiety remain today.

Johnson argues that the parties were necessary as a “thank you” to staff and to help to motivate them—try telling that to NHS staff and those on the frontline who battled the pandemic day in, day out and who stuck to doing what they were told by the Government. It is hypocrisy on stilts. His other get-out was that he followed the guidance as he understood it. How can he be held accountable if he did not understand his own laws? It was the last desperate stand of a desperate man.

Johnson tried to treat the Committee and the public like idiots. He knew the rules. He broke them willingly and lied about it afterwards. Startlingly, not content with these most dishonourable actions, his behaviour during and after his investigation has been almost contemptible. He has deployed the full Trump handbook of trying to burn all around him to save his own skin. The Committee found that he not only misled it and Parliament but engaged in a campaign of abuse against its members to undermine its findings. He called the Committee a “kangaroo court”, said its findings were “deranged” and called into question its motives and impartiality at every turn. Let us remember that it is a majority-Tory Committee. The tactics were transparent: they are classic Trump, which is why politics across these islands is well rid of Boris Johnson.

Neither Johnson nor Trump has any issue with undermining democratic institutions for their ill-gotten gains. It is born out of the same entitled born-to-rule mentality. I could always see those traits in Johnson, so I am pleased that the Committee has stood up to his threat and let the truth prevail. The truth is also that while Johnson is the nadir of Tory sleaze, he was not the only one who attended these parties. He was in charge at the time, but let us remember that literally dozens around No. 10 received similar fines. Johnson has perhaps shown us one thing: actions do have consequences and lies will catch up with you.

As it is, Boris Johnson is once again the talk of the town, and again for all the wrong reasons. The Committee concluded that he should be suspended from Parliament for 90 days. He, of course, took the coward’s way out and resigned instead of facing up to the punishment—a mark of the man if there ever was one. He will continue his crusade to undermine and attack, just as Trump does in the face of his own struggles in the USA. However, I hope that the public now largely see through Boris Johnson’s bluff and bluster. I think that the most significant punishment for him is that the populist fondness that he once enjoyed is now over. That is something that his ego will take severely.

I genuinely hope that Johnson’s toxic legacy and descent into Trump-style tactics are seen to be precisely that. He has no power now. He has no influence. Make sure that he is never allowed it again.

As we close the door on Boris Johnson, more and more is coming out into the public domain. There is the contempt of those at the Conservative central office Christmas party, as witnessed in the video published by *The Mirror* this weekend. The behaviour of contempt is still with us: Boris Johnson’s resignation honours are just the latest example. A junior special adviser just in her 30s has been given a job for life as a Member of the House of Lords. Many implicated in partygate are receiving honours; this is sickening to the public. Where is the leadership of the current Prime Minister? He should have stepped in to stop Boris Johnson offering such tainted honours. A disgraced ex-Prime Minister cannot be allowed to confer honours. Will the Prime Minister step in now and bring a stop to this? Will he reverse the honours?

Let us put the report to a vote tonight. Let the House endorse the Privileges Committee report, and let us have a roll call of those going through that Aye lobby. Then, let us finally put an end to the very sorry chapter that was Boris Johnson’s political career.

8.19 pm

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): I will not detain the House too long, but I want to put three points on the record on behalf of my constituents. First, I am sorry to say to my constituents that when Boris Johnson was at the Dispatch Box as Prime Minister and I came to this House for Prime Minister's questions, the feeling that it was pointless to ask a question because the answer could not be relied upon will not ever leave me as long as I am in politics.

When the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) or any Prime Minister other than Boris Johnson was at the Dispatch Box, I always felt that, political disagreements—as substantial as they are—aside, if I asked a question as a constituency Member of Parliament, I would get an answer that could be relied upon. I might disagree with it or want it to be better, but I would rely on it on behalf of my constituents. I will never forget the sinking feeling that being in this place on behalf of my constituents was pointless. That is the truth at the heart of this report. Members from all sides of the House on the Conservative-majority Committee worked so hard and diligently to produce the evidence that gives us the truth of what has happened.

Secondly, I am sorry that we have been through this terrible time for parliamentary democracy, but I am proud to be in this House and to have listened to the Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), with whom I agree; the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), with whom I agree; the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), with whom I agree; and the Mother of the House, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), with whom I agree and who has done a diligent job under very difficult circumstances to bring the truth of the situation to the attention of this House.

We should be glad to be in a position to have clarity at last. Because we know what has happened and we can account for it, we can begin to try to understand exactly how it came to be. It is funny that lots of people in public life have commented that we, sort of, knew the truth of what Boris Johnson was like for a long time. We did all, kind of, know that. How was he able to tell the untruths from the Dispatch Box, and why did we have to go through this process, when we all had little reason to believe what he was saying? That is the question I ask myself.

The unfortunate truth that we have to reckon with in this country is the injustice that some people's testimony is taken as truth more readily than others. I tend to agree with those who have mentioned that structural inequality. Some people's word is taken as truth. Why were some people so terrified of the covid regulations when others—particularly Boris Johnson, as covered in this report—clearly did not care or feel that what they did mattered? It is because the structural power inequality in our country means that some people's word is taken as truth more readily than others.

We have so much to learn from this report. Many Members have discussed it well—this has been a good and strong debate. Across this House, we can all move forward and get things right, but if we do not reckon with the injustice that it is so much easier for some

people in our country to get a hearing than others, we will never change the power structures. This House must welcome people from different backgrounds who speak with different accents, come from different social classes and have done different jobs. We must be a better House at listening to all voices in our country, not just to some people who, for historical reasons, get heard when others do not.

8.24 pm

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). I speak in support of the Privileges Committee report and pay tribute to all Committee members, particularly the Chair, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), on the diligence and the evidence-based approach that they have taken in the final report that they produced. The findings are clear. As an evidence-based scientist, I see the golden thread of how they used that evidence going through the report. It is a very strong report in that regard. What is so disappointing, as we have discussed, is that it exposes the shameful behaviour of a Prime Minister of this country. We have talked about the impact that it is having across our country but it has international ramifications as well, which we have not discussed in detail.

I have no doubt that Boris Johnson deliberately misled the House of Commons, not just in relation to the parties that the report focuses on. While people in Oldham, Saddleworth and across the country sacrificed so much during the pandemic lockdowns, Mr Johnson and his team had parties. As they partied, they knew they were breaking the rules. As Prime Minister, he lied about it on the Floor of the House and to the Committee.

I also have evidence of how the former Prime Minister deliberately deceived the House in February 2021 in relation to the publication of covid contracts. The hon. Members for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), and for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and I were involved in the High Court action, which showed what contracts had been published according to law and what had not. Boris Johnson said, "No, no. They have all been published," but we had a High Court decision saying that they had not. That is the absolute gall of the man who was our Prime Minister. To go back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South, when I raised that issue in the House, I was not listened to. When I pointed to the High Court judgment, I was told that that was my view. I tried on a number of occasions, including on 20 April 2021.

Mr Johnson's most recent antics are quite breathtaking in their selfishness. His denial is breathtaking and is the absolute polar opposite of what the Nolan principles—the standards in public life that we all agreed to abide by—demand of us. His pattern of behaviour, underpinned by an attitude that he is above the law, has tarnished the reputation of the whole House and all its parliamentarians. We are all tarred with the same brush. Our democracy as a whole suffers. Polling from the group Compassion in Politics shows that eight out of 10 people do not trust politicians. That is serious. It is the lowest level of trust we have ever had from the people we represent. How can we represent people if they do not trust us? The report is ultimately about honesty, another of the seven



[Debbie Abrahams]

Nolan principles of public life. It should mark a sea change for honesty in politics, because in recent years we have seen the rise of politicians who believe they can mislead without consequences.

Earlier this year, I introduced the Elected Representatives (Code of Conduct) Bill, which proposed the establishment of an ethics commission to look at how to bring our political system into the 21st century. I disagree in some respects with my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant). I think we are past the point where we can say that we can govern ourselves. My Bill had a number of proposals to strengthen things and fill the gaps. The Bill looked to ensure that the adviser on ministerial standards was fully independent—of course, at the moment he is not—and able to commission his or her own inquiries, rather than being subject to the whims of political leaders acting in the interests of their own internal party dynamics. The content of the Privileges Committee report shows a truly egregious example of that, but it is far from the only one.

Ten days ago, I wrote to the Prime Minister asking him to explain the decision he took to ask the adviser on ministerial standards not to investigate allegations that the Home Secretary pressured civil servants into assisting her with a speeding fine she received. My letter asked the Prime Minister whether or not he spoke to Home Office officials and special advisers to ask if the Home Secretary's version of events was accurate. It also asked him if he reviewed emails sent by Home Office civil servants to the Cabinet Office's propriety and ethics team, in which they expressed concerns about what was being asked of them by the Home Secretary. It asked him if the independent adviser reviewed any correspondence or conducted any interviews on the matter. To date, I have not received a reply. I wait in anticipation to see if the Prime Minister will fulfil his promise to lead a Government with integrity "at every level".

8.30 pm

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): I begin by expressing my thanks to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for her stewardship and for chairing the Privileges Committee with such strength and integrity. I thank all the members of the Committee.

The report was a damning indictment of the former Prime Minister's behaviour, finding that, yes, he did indeed deliberately mislead the House. That was no surprise to me, as in my opinion he was never suitable for high office, especially the great office of state of Prime Minister, given his disgraceful track record. There is an old saying that goes, "When someone shows you who they are, believe them." Let's face it: there is a litany of examples of Mr Johnson's failures and lies. He lied about Brexit. He was sacked for lying multiple times. Indeed, he lied to Her late Majesty the Queen. I will be voting to endorse the report. I wish the Committee could have chosen to ban him for life, but I encourage all Conservative Members to join us in the Lobby.

The first point I want to raise is about leadership and accountability. In this place, we are all leaders. I believe that leaders must lead by example. We should hold ourselves to a higher standard and a higher level of accountability, and follow the laws and rules as the

representatives of the people, our constituents. That is even more important during a global health emergency. As Prime Minister, Boris Johnson was meant to be responsible for ensuring that everyone in the country was working towards the common goal of defeating covid, so how shameful is it that he failed to uphold the laws he introduced and has shown zero accountability for his actions?

Mr Johnson failed to show any regard for the millions of people in our country, like my constituents in Battersea who followed the law and made huge sacrifices: those who could not visit their dying family members, nor attend their funerals; the ill and disabled people who were stuck without vital health and social care support, not to mention the blanket application of do-not-attempt-resuscitation orders, which were in place up and down the country until we intervened on the then Health Secretary; and the small businesses economically impacted by lockdown, causing immense financial hardship that some are still experiencing today. I honestly could go on, sharing more examples, but let us not forget the more than 225,000 people who lost their lives to covid. Yet there has been no apology from the former Prime Minister. Instead, enabled by his supporters, he claimed that there had been a "sustained attempt, seemingly co-ordinated" to weaken him. We have heard some distasteful examples of that this evening.

My third point is about Boris Johnson's persistent undermining of Parliament and the impact that his reckless actions have had on Parliament and on trust. Our parliamentary democracy depends on Members across the House being certain that Ministers can and will tell the truth and that if, for any reason, a Minister makes a mistake at the Dispatch Box, they will come to the House and correct the record. That is how this place should function. One would think that, as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson would have known the importance of that, but he put our parliamentary democracy at risk when he thought—in fact, I think he probably believes it now—that the rules did not apply to him and debased the greatest office of state. I have to ask—and I think we would all ask—what message that sends to the public, our constituents. What confidence can they have in this place and in our political institutions? This has to be a watershed moment for us in this House.

My final point is about our current Prime Minister and some other Conservative Members. They knew that the former Prime Minister had misled the House—they knew that he had lied—but they failed to act to remove him, instead allowing him to continue in office. We were all here on these Benches, watching him at the Dispatch Box. Worse still, even after the lies had been revealed, those Members thought it right for taxpayers to pick up the tab, paying for his legal fees of up to £250,000 during this cost of living crisis. As for all the talk from the current Prime Minister about integrity, he has failed to do the right thing and block the former Prime Minister's honours list. It was well within his gift to do so, but he chose not to. Why? Because he is too weak, and his absence today demonstrates just how weak he is. We can see from the Conservative Benches who is still in control of that party.

It is clear that the current Government cannot be trusted with our precious democracy. This Government govern only for themselves and their own interests. It is always one rule for them and another for everyone else,

and that is not good enough. They do not care about the public interest: we saw that not only when they kept Boris Johnson in power for so long, but when they handed out covid contracts to their friends and cronies, and I could go on.

This Government have presided over one of the worst scandals in our country's history. I believe that it is time to restore trust in our parliamentary democracy, because if we do not have trust in our democracy and in this place, what do we have? It is a privilege to serve here; I certainly see it as a privilege. It is not my right to be here. It is no one's right to be here. Our constituents elect us, and we take an oath of office when we stand in this place. It is important for all Members in all parts of the House to remember that.

8.38 pm

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to follow my friend and constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), who reminded us of our role as Members of Parliament. I was elected in 2019, and during the last three and half years—an interesting three and a half years—I have always held dear, and kept close to my heart, the fact that being an hon. Member comes with responsibilities. Sadly, as my hon. Friend said, there are some people in the House who feel that it is their birthright, but I am humbled to have been elected by my constituents. I take pride in that, and every time I stand up in this Chamber, I remember that I am here to speak on their behalf, not mine. I am here to articulate their concerns and their interests to the Government of the day. I am here to work across parties, and there are some Conservative Members with whom I have done a great deal of work on issues that are in the interests of our constituents. That is why what we are debating matters: it is about the fabric of our democracy.

A number of Members have said that this is a kangaroo court or that it does not matter, but let us stick to the facts. On 21 April 2022, this House, without Division, referred to the Privileges Committee the matter concerning the former Prime Minister's conduct. That cross-party Committee has at all times followed the law and the customs set by Parliament, and the fundamental procedures governed by the Standing Orders and precedent of this House. All the evidence that the Committee heard in the course of its inquiry was given under oath, including the evidence from the former Prime Minister and the signed evidence. The former Prime Minister had the opportunity to give written and oral evidence, which he did on 22 March; I understand that he subsequently gave written evidence on 22 May.

After all that work, the Committee's conclusions were presented to the former Prime Minister, who, for want of a better phrase, went out on a hissy fit and got quite angry, breaking with procedures and confidentiality. What we are discussing matters if we are to restore trust in our democracy.

One of the best aspects of this role is going around to visit schools. When we speak to young people, they do not lie, and they will ask honest questions. To have young people in my constituency ask me, "Why do MPs lie?", is quite hard. When we are sat in front of those young people, what do we say? We want to say to them, "The majority of Members are doing a decent job. The

majority of Members are here to represent their constituents," but what those young people see and hear from their parents and carers paints a different picture. That is why what we are discussing today matters.

We want more young people to get involved in our politics. We want people to trust our democratic system, but that will not happen if we have Ministers misleading the House.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Member is making an important point. Much of the education of our young people is based on the concept of true and false, including mathematics, chemistry, physics and biology. This sum of human knowledge is based on facts, which are either right or wrong, and there is a clear concept of what that means. That reminds us why these concepts are so valuable. I draw the House's attention to a poem written by Hilaire Belloc in 1907 called "Matilda"—read it; it is instructive.

**Florence Eshalomi:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and I agree. I read many books to my eight-year-old and six-year-old and I will make sure that we add that to our collection.

The Committee found that the former Prime Minister deliberately misled the House and the Committee, breached confidence, impugned the Committee and was complicit in a campaign of abuse and intimidation towards it. When people ask me, "What don't you like about your role as an MP?", I am very honest. One of the sad aspects of being a Member of Parliament is the abuse, the misogyny, the racism and the threats that I have faced and that other Members face just for doing the job that we like. To see that Committee members, having been asked by us in this House to carry out that role, have faced abuse and intimidation is worrying. No one should have to face that for carrying out their role.

I want to bring us back to why all this matters. I have spoken in this House on many occasions about the tragic death of Ismail Mohamed Abdulwahab, who was 13 years old. He was one of the youngest people who lost his life to covid, and his family could not attend the funeral. I still remember when I spoke to his mum and his sisters to console them. As I have mentioned, I broke down on that call because to hear a mother say, "I wasn't able to hold my son. I'm never going to see him again," was hard.

The covid memorial wall is just across the river in my constituency, and when one walks up and down and looks at the hearts and the lives lost, one cannot fail to be moved. Those were the families who followed the rules. They were the ones who sacrificed those precious moments for the ones they loved. They are the ones who will look at this report and ask, "Why did we?"

Not only do we have a former Prime Minister who broke the rules he was primarily responsible for setting, but we have a former Prime Minister who went on to mislead the House and be disingenuous in his statements. The public rightly expect high standards from us. Going back to the report, it is not just about high standards. It is about being truthful, owning up to our mistakes and taking responsibility. How can any of us, as hon. Members, ask our constituents to trust us if we do not take these breaches of trust seriously? I understand that the consequences of his own actions may be a novel concept

[Florence Eshalomi]

for the former Prime Minister, but we have to deliver those consequences today if we are to ask our constituents to trust us.

I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), my constituency neighbour, whose fair and experienced chairing of the Committee produced this report. It is disgraceful that the Committee's members have faced inaccurate and unjust briefings against them.

I finish by reading from a poem, "Anthem for the pandemic dead" by Susie Flinham, which we heard on the second anniversary of the first hearts being drawn on the covid memorial wall, an event I attended, with many Members who are in this Chamber, on Wednesday 29 March:

"Ours shall be the voice of the lost  
Names resurrected, candles lit, heads bowed  
We the ones who contemplate the cost  
We the ones who speak their names aloud.  
They exist between one heartbeat and another,  
The heart that inexplicably still beats.  
We speak their names while the world recovers.  
To us, recovery is bittersweet."

8.46 pm

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), and particularly the powerful poem she just quoted.

I rise to express my sincere gratitude to the Privileges Committee, particularly the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), and all the staff and Clerks who supported its vital work, which is of profound democratic importance to this country.

I speak today with a feeling of overwhelming relief that, at last, the truth is being told in this House and the collective gaslighting of a nation is finally over. In a way, it is shocking that a parliamentary Committee has had to spell out:

"If Ministers cannot be trusted to tell the truth, the House cannot do its job".

Even more shocking is that, on this occasion, the Minister in question was the most senior person in Government, the Prime Minister—a Prime Minister who sought to obscure the truth from those to whom he was accountable by lying deliberately and repeatedly, and who, by lying to Parliament, was also lying to the people who elect it; and a Prime Minister who has effectively shredded the ministerial code, which is, in the words of the constitutional historian Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield,

"a crucial part of the spinal cord of the constitution".

Boris Johnson announced on the day the report was published:

"This is a dreadful day for MPs and for democracy."

In fact, the reverse is true. It was a day that saw British parliamentary democracy vindicated against an unprecedented attack. But let us be very clear that our democracy is fragile and that there was nothing inevitable about this particular outcome.

The report shows that our "good chap" conventions of government allowed a rogue Prime Minister to run amok for far too long. It offers some hope because it also shows that, if an MP or, indeed, a Prime Minister deliberately lies and undermines the processes of this House, they can be held to account. But I say "can be", not "will be", advisedly, because this inquiry had to be fought for. There was nothing guaranteed about it, because our standards systems are still not fit for purpose.

It is both negligent and dangerous to assume democracy is inevitable, perpetual and unshakeable. It is not. It is breakable and contingent. We have to actively and vigilantly defend it, which is why standing together as a Parliament in support of the Privileges Committee's report is so essential, and why it goes beyond just the rogue activities of one particular Member of Parliament.

We also need to strengthen the mechanisms we have to hold Government to account because there remain serious instances of former Ministers misleading this House that have gone uncorrected and unchallenged. We need new mechanisms to call any Minister, including a Prime Minister, to account if they deliberately mislead the House—a view shared prior to partygate, in 2021, by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, chaired by Lord Evans. It is shocking that the role of the so-called independent adviser on the ministerial code is, essentially, false advertising, and will continue to be so until that person is appointed by an independent panel, is able to initiate their own investigations and has the authority to determine breaches of the code. Those basic, yet fundamental changes would allow Back Benchers to raise concerns and evidence with the adviser, who could then act as they, and not just the Prime Minister, saw fit.

The current Prime Minister could have made those changes, but he has chosen not to. Nor has he appointed an anti-corruption champion after the position has been left vacant for more than a year. Our systems need to be strengthened so that, if a Minister misleads the House deliberately, or if they do it inadvertently but do not correct at the earliest opportunity, a formal process to hold them to account should be an inevitability. This inquiry only came about in April 2022 because of the spiralling unease and rebellion of some Members on Boris Johnson's Back Benches, which meant he could not whip his MPs to prevent it. Over a year before that, in April 2021, I joined a wide cross-party group of MPs to call for an inquiry into Boris Johnson's repeated lies to the House on other matters, and it did not happen. So it was somewhat ironic to learn, via a subject access request, how that call has been labelled as "misinformation" or indeed "disinformation" by one of the Government units supposed to be acting as an arbiter of accuracy and honesty.

Hon. Members of all parties must stand by this Committee and demonstrate that rules matter, that Parliament is more important than party and that standards in public life must be upheld. Conservative Members, in particular, must face down the Trumpian intimidation orchestrated by a small band of, frankly, anti-democratic Johnson supporters. Those Members need to be very clear that abstention is not just cowardice—it is complicity in the former Prime Minister's contempt of Parliament.

The current Prime Minister ought to be here. He ought to be leading by example. Instead, he has chosen to be silent and is conspicuous by his absence tonight.



Nor has he even ruled out the idea that Mr Johnson could be permitted to stand as a Conservative parliamentary candidate some time in the future. If there were any shred of seriousness in the Prime Minister's pledge to restore accountability and integrity to public life, he should unambiguously endorse the Privileges Committee report tonight and urge his fellow party Members to do the same.

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that, with the Prime Minister not attending and failing to vote, he is endorsing the conduct? Is not it time that we depart from this principle of dishonesty, which was baked into the offer made by Boris Johnson originally? That is what got us into this mess in the first place; it was deemed to be acceptable in return for electoral advantage.

**Caroline Lucas:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and agree entirely with the points he makes. By not speaking out tonight, the Prime Minister is guilty of collusion, effectively. He has not stood up for the key principles at stake and he has not done his duty tonight.

To conclude, this Committee report is a vital part of the fightback against post-truth politics. Truth is not a technicality. As the report states, our democracy depends on it. So what is at stake here are our most profound democratic principles and the very concept of decency in public life: leading by example versus hypocrisy; truth versus lies; and respect versus contempt. There can be no failing to turn up or sitting on the sidelines. The choice is either being prepared to stand up and defend democracy, or being prepared to turn a blind eye to it being under attack. This is much bigger than one rogue Prime Minister. All of us will be rightly judged tonight on what we choose to do.

8.54 pm

**Samantha Dixon** (City of Chester) (Lab): Every time another news story breaks about the conduct of the former Prime Minister during the pandemic, I am reminded of the quote attributed to Sir Douglas Bader:

"Rules are for the guidance of wise men and the obedience of fools."

I have never agreed with that sentiment and I certainly do not now, because while our constituents followed the rules, frontline workers risked their lives and people lost their lives to the deadly virus, the former Prime Minister misled this House and our constituents and took us all for fools.

I echo the thanks expressed by hon. Members across the House to the members of the Committee, who have worked diligently to bring us this report, often under the most difficult circumstances. The report could not be clearer. People feel angry, betrayed and let down. I could stand here all day and talk about the anger and injustice felt by so many people.

Last week, I met the landlord of a pub in the heart of my constituency. Like so many other businesses in Chester, he closed up shop as soon as the former Prime Minister instructed him to do so. He observed all the lockdown rules and guidance, and, like thousands of other small businesses, the price paid was a heavy one. Some are still feeling the impact to this day.

Chester Zoo fought tooth and nail to keep going and caring for the thousands of animals and plants, with the mission of preventing extinction, with no money coming in. Workers at the zoo thought No. 10 was working hard to help them; they are now disappointed and saddened at what the Committee has discovered was actually going on.

Finally, two of my constituents, whom I met at the service of remembrance at the covid memorial wall, just across Westminster bridge, stood in tears remembering their late parents, who died within 24 hours of each other during the pandemic. They pointed at the Houses of Parliament and said, "We will never forget and we will never forgive."

As the report spells out, if the Prime Minister cannot be trusted to tell the truth, then Parliament cannot do what it should do. The public's confidence in democracy has been undermined and the public want him to be held accountable for undermining our democracy. On behalf of my constituents and everyone who did follow the rules, I will be voting for the motion. The Government, including our current Prime Minister, should follow precedent, approve the report and endorse the sanctions in full.

8.57 pm

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Boris Johnson is a liar. It would have been unthinkable to say that in this House only a few short months ago: Boris Johnson is a liar. There is something still fundamentally and profoundly shocking about saying that in this hallowed setting of the House of Commons—this institution that we revere so much. But there is no other way to put it: Boris Johnson lied to this House.

We were saying that long before that concept became fashionable. The SNP even held a debate on that very issue several months ago, to highlight that point and to ensure it was heard loud and clear in this Chamber. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) was grandly marched out of this place for asserting something that is now a profound truth, as was the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). She is absolutely right that a retrospective apology should now go to both of those Members for getting it absolutely right. There is a stain on their parliamentary records for the fact that they were asked to leave this place for saying something that we now know to be a conventional truth.

SNP Members were some of the first to bring up issues about the parties. We wanted to ensure that the House understood clearly what was going on: we had a Prime Minister who was happy to have drinks parties for his staff in a number of locations in No. 10, when he had overseen the introduction of legislation that everybody else in this country diligently followed. Constituents of ours missed christenings and weddings—for goodness sake, they missed funerals—while seeing newspaper photos of that Prime Minister standing with glasses of wine in his hand. We said that his cavalier attitude towards interpreting the rules—rules that he himself had set—made him unfit for public office. We knew that a reckoning would be coming and that, eventually, his reign of chaos would come to an inevitable and disastrous end. This report vindicates us utterly and absolutely for everything that we have been saying for 15 or 16 months. We even predicted his response to this report: his refusal to take responsibility; his lashing out at others who had correctly

[Pete Wishart]

judged him; his attempts to undermine others who had adjudicated on this process; and his attempts to divert attention and to obfuscate.

Although this report is bad enough—and it is awful—his behaviour since has compounded everything that we thought we knew about him. It is hard to believe that there has ever been anyone so ill-equipped for high office or so ill-disposed to lead a country. He is a man-child playing politics. He invented this bizarre persona to sustain him through the day, creating a smoke screen to divert attention from his real essence.

Johnson's inevitable defenestration and removal from public life could almost have been scripted. Not for Boris Johnson a casual and easy departing into the night, but the screaming and shouting of someone who just cannot leave the scene. Not for him any hanging around to accept his punishment and the verdict of his peers. He was such a coward when it came to this decision that he quickly resigned his seat so that he would be beyond the clutches of this Parliament. Almost unbelievably, though, he still hankers after this notion—this fantasy—that he will have some route back to elected politics. It is hard to imagine a situation where that would be allowed in this House. I think that we can conclude today that he is toast and thank God he has gone.

Let me turn now to some of the responses of Conservative Members. They knew everything about Johnson. He is a serial sackee. There are very few places where he has worked that he has not been sacked from, but they still made him Prime Minister. I made my maiden speech the same day as Boris Johnson. I actually followed him from these Benches the day he made his maiden speech. Even at that point there were doubts about his character—his ability even to be just a Member of Parliament. But not for Conservative Members; they went on to make him Prime Minister. They celebrated him. They cheered him on through his bizarre and boorish speeches. They credited him with the 2019 victory and they made sure that it was him who delivered the disaster that is Brexit—something that my constituents, as well as constituents right round this country, are still paying for.

We are in the end period of the Johnsonian era. Regardless of how much Conservative Members want to move on, they will never be able to move on from him until they take decisive action to cleanse their party from the stain of him—something that they do not seem prepared to do. But they have an opportunity to do so tonight. There will be a vote. Here is the challenge to every single member of the Conservative party: line up with us and back the Privileges Committee report and ensure that we have a decisive outcome in this House. Every Member has an opportunity to express their opinion.

We do not share the reverence for this place that other Members on both sides of the House have. We want to leave it. We do not share the value that people place on this House of Commons. We are not dewy-eyed about it. But there are things that we do believe in: democracy, truth, and doing the right thing. Those are the fundamental values of politics that should determine the actions of everybody here. Failure to live up to them should have a consequence—a consequence that should be taken forward right now. I do not think that the

report of the Committee of Privileges went far enough. I would have had Johnson banned and excluded from ever getting back into elected politics, but I welcome what the Committee has done—the thorough job that it has undertaken on behalf of everybody in the House. I now say to everyone in the Chamber: back us this evening. Let us speak with one voice, with everyone trooping through the Lobby. There should be no return for Johnson. Let us pledge that loud and clear.

9.4 pm

**Simon Lightwood** (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): This Friday marks my first anniversary of being elected to this House, but this is perhaps one of the most powerful moments I have experienced. It is a chance for us all to begin to reset trust in our politics. I put on record my thanks to the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House, who have sat and listened to each and every word of this debate. I know that does not always happen.

This time last year, I was still pounding the pavements in the Wakefield by-election. Yes, people wanted a fresh start in Wakefield, but they also wanted Boris Johnson out of office because they did not trust him. They felt betrayed by him and by the wider Conservative party. They knew he had been to those parties while their loved ones lay dying in hospitals and care homes. I have heard too many heartbreaking stories about that last phone call or last text message with their mum, husband or sister from people still raw with grief and anger. Their stories and the sheer pain in their eyes will stay with me forever.

I am afraid it is not a surprise to most of the country that this report is so damning. Deliberately misleading the House and the Privileges Committee are very serious conclusions to reach, but that was not just a one-off. The report clearly evidences a concerning pattern of behaviour. The Committee's findings are damning, but they are nothing that the people of Wakefield had not already concluded a year ago when they told the Tories decisively that enough was enough.

For those on the Government Benches who are here today to defend the indefensible, it is worth reflecting on what the public think. A YouGov poll last week seemed to chime closely with what I have heard speaking to people in Wakefield, with 69% of those surveyed thinking that Mr Johnson knowingly misled Parliament. We must draw a line in the sand.

I will be voting in favour of the Privileges Committee report today and I thank the members of the Committee for their diligent work, in spite of the abuse that was levelled at them, including, sadly but not surprisingly, by the former Prime Minister. I will vote for all those who have shared their stories with me, for those who bared their scarred souls to me, for all those who sacrificed so much, for those who followed the rules, for my former NHS colleagues and for other key workers. I will vote to take a stand in support of the fundamental principles of public life, for our democracy and truth.

In Yorkshire, we call a spade a spade, so let me say this clearly and unambiguously: Boris Johnson is a liar. He will never be forgiven. To those who still seek to defend him and those intending to hide from their moral duty in the forthcoming vote, I say, "Your actions, or your failure to act, will never be forgiven or forgotten." Today we recognise that the former Prime Minister

knowingly misled the British people and Parliament and we finally, I hope, close this damaging, Trumpian chapter in our Parliament's history.

But where is our Prime Minister, with his integrity, with his professionalism and with his accountability? To our Prime Minister I say, "Grow a backbone and finally stand up to Mr Johnson." It is wrong that taxpayers' hard-earned money is being used to fund Boris Johnson's ongoing lies. Given the findings of the Committee, the Government must demand that he pays back every single penny. I will finish with this: the public are watching.

9.8 pm

**Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I start by thanking the Privileges Committee for its thoroughly decent, honest, fair and strong report, based on the evidence. It was crystal clear in its findings that the former Prime Minister, Johnson, misled this Parliament. He misled the House, he misled MPs, he misled the people and he misled our great nations. To put it bluntly, he lied—a serial liar on almost an industrial scale. He lied to nurses, doctors, care workers, bus drivers, train drivers, ambulance workers, firefighters and everybody putting their life at risk in the pandemic to save lives. We remember that mantra—he repeated it enough every evening, did he not?

That all matters because people in this very Chamber and well beyond sacrificed so much, and they deserve Prime Ministers, Ministers, MPs and politicians who value truth and honour, as Members have said. Leading by example, lawmakers should not be lawbreakers. It is a fact that the former Prime Minister broke the law, so I find it intriguing and fascinating to listen to some—a minority of contributors from the Conservative side—try to defend the indefensible. I thank right hon. and hon. Members from right across the House, including on the Conservative side—some have incredible experience in this place—who are doing the right thing by this Parliament and this democracy.

Former Prime Minister Johnson has shown nothing but contempt for the friends and families of the 227,000 people who lost their lives to covid. Over the weekend, many of us saw the video clips of some Conservative party staff partying while people could not visit their loved ones, as they were drawing their last breath, to say their goodbyes. That shows nothing but contempt, and it is absolutely disgraceful. That culture was driven from the top. It is one rule for them and another rule for everybody else—unacceptable.

Many constituents have been in touch with me, as they have with Members right across the House, particularly over the weekend. That was a stark reminder. Then we saw what the shadow Leader of the House called the "dishonourable honours" list. Every one of those names should be withdrawn. If that does not happen, and the current Prime Minister does not intervene—again, it is disgraceful that he is not here—maybe some of the people who have received those peerages and honours could finally do the honourable thing, return them and say, "On behalf of those who passed away, and on behalf of families who are still grieving, we do not accept these."

**Mr Sheerman:** My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. During the pandemic, many of us did cross-party work in our constituencies, meeting every week with public health and all the people involved in fighting

covid, to find out where we were getting less take-up in vaccinations and so on. There was, I think we should remember, a lot of cross-party activity in constituencies up and down the country. That is why so many people feel let down by what happened at the top.

**Mike Amesbury:** Absolutely. Again, I thank hon. Members right across the House for showing that leadership—like my good self—with volunteers in their patches.

In relation to the current Prime Minister, I ask: where is the leadership? Where is the sign of strength in rising up to do the right thing? This is the right time to do so, yet once again, the Prime Minister, in the face of former Prime Minister Johnson, is shown to be weak, weak, weak. He cannot escape that—it is the truth. Today is the chance for Parliament to assert its authority and uphold the standards that we expect, and that our constituents expect, of parliamentarians.

My late mother always spoke about telling the truth: "the truth shall set thee free". And that principle—honour, honourable Members, right honourable Members—is enshrined into Parliament. That escaped Prime Minister Johnson, and the facts have been borne out in the report. Together with most right hon. and hon. Members across the House, I will be voting for the motion—voting to uphold the truth and parliamentary democracy. I will also be voting to show what needs to happen to the bullies who have tried to intimidate members of the Privileges Committee, whether it is the Chair, who has done a sterling job, or the four Conservative members, who have stood up to incredible intimidation and abuse. Let us send a message to those bullies. I can see two of the Committee members—the hon. Members for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) and for Warrington South (Andy Carter)—on the Conservative Benches. I thank them for all they have done, and I hope that people right across the House join us in doing the right thing.

9.15 pm

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Yesterday I spent some time with my dad, who is about to enter his 90th year, but too many people across Clydebank, Dumbarton and the Vale of Leven did not get time to spend with their dad yesterday. I am sure there will be many people in this House who took that opportunity and who have constituents whose fathers, mothers, brothers or sisters are not around because of covid-19. How many disabled people were locked in their homes because they listened to what the Government had to say? My nephew, in a wheelchair in his own home, was unable to go out because of covid-19 and a British Prime Minister who told him what to do but broke the rules himself. My sister, who is a constituent and a kidney transplant patient, sat in her own room unable to go about the house with the rest of her family, just like other constituents across Clydebank, Dumbarton and the Vale of Leven.

This is personal. It is personal for every constituent that I represent, and I am sure it is personal for every other constituent represented by Members of this House. But I am afraid the House has to take a lesson. While I commend the report and all the members of the Committee, including the Chair, and I commend all the Clerks who helped, the report does not answer some fundamental questions that the House will need to consider in the



[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

long term. How is it possible that Boris Johnson walks out the door and earns millions within days and all we can say—I will quote from the report—is:

“In view of the fact that Mr Johnson is no longer a Member, we recommend that he should not be granted a former Member’s pass”?

How ridiculous we look, yet the Committee is hamstrung by the very regulations of this place.

The report is not a panacea for democratic practice in the House of Commons for the British state. It is not an answer, but it does contain evidence about the former Member for Uxbridge, who lied through their teeth and partied on while our constituents were dying. As the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) talked about, there were people in working-class communities the length and breadth of these islands—ambulance drivers, paramedics, orderlies in hospitals—who could not get personal protective equipment, even though we have seen it dumped in fields in the shires of England in the last couple of days. How ridiculous that communities like mine had to suffer the indignity of that buffoon sitting in Downing Street while our families were dying.

Some Conservative Members said they saw no evidence. Well guess what? Here’s the evidence! It is in the report. They might as well read it for a change.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): Does it not make a bit of a mockery of the process that the report recommends that Boris Johnson should not have a former Member’s pass, yet he still has the privilege of sitting as a member of the Privy Council and representing this country at the Cenotaph? Should we not be looking at trying to strip him of those things as well?

**Martin Docherty-Hughes**: I will come on to honours in a minute, because I believe that I may have a wee bit of time.

Another former Prime Minister, David Cameron, said at the covid inquiry today that

“from all my experience of chairing COBRs...the system works...but the system works better when the Prime Minister is in the chair”. The Conservative party removed the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). While we may disagree, I have every confidence that she would have been at every Cobra meeting during covid-19, unlike the person they replaced her with. That is the ridiculous proposition that David Cameron came up with today. He agrees that that idiot—if that is not parliamentary, I will retract it, but I think it is—missed five covid-19 Cobra meetings. People were dying, it was the greatest tragedy since the blitz, and he could not be bothered to turn up. My constituents turned up. They had to go to work; they drove ambulances; they were working as porters in hospitals. What do they get told? I will say it again: that the former Member for Uxbridge gets his pass taken off him. That actually sounds quite pathetic, but those are the limitations that have been given to us in this report. They are the limitations placed on the Privileges Committee itself.

Back on 9 December 2021—because we had heard about Christmas parties in 2020; you might remember that, Mr Speaker—I asked whether the then Paymaster General, the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis), agreed

“that if something looks like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck and it is at a Christmas party, it is usually a duck.”—[*Official Report*, 9 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 563.]

It seems that the duck was also a liar, and that liar said that those parties never took place. On the issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) talked about, that of the rights and privileges of the former Member for Uxbridge now that they have left, do not give him a damn thing. Do not allow a single honour that he has sought the monarch’s approval for to go through. I am no monarchist, but I believe that the monarch—the Head of State—or the advisers to the monarchy have the ability to say that the person is not befitting the honour. That whole goddamn list is not befitting any honour. Every single one of them should be withdrawn.

But that brings us back to the crux of the whole issue: the limitations on the House. We are giving out honours left, right and centre to people who sit as legislators who broke the law. The report expunges them: they are lawbreakers, but through privilege, we are allowing them to sit in the other place. We are forcing the Head of State, the monarch—through the Prime Minister, in practice—to make sure that those people go to the other place to dictate law to us and our constituents. What an absolute laughing stock!

Finally, there is the issue of those who see the report as some sort of panacea that will allow the House of Commons, this mother of Parliaments, to move forward. Democracy is imperfect, and I think the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) was the first Member to talk about the issue of truth in our politics and how far it goes back. I am afraid that this report will not answer why Boris Johnson came about. It will not answer the questions about the dark money that funded his campaign for Brexit. It will not answer the issues around Scottish limited partnerships that funnel money—issues that so many Members know about and that we have talked about consistently, but which the Government do nothing about. That is why this report exists: we have allowed it to happen.

I hope to God—I am a doubting Thomas when it comes to that; I am an imperfect Christian—that Members on all sides of the House will go through the Lobby tonight to support the report, with all its limitations. However, it does not answer the question that my constituents want answered as to why Boris Johnson is not at the Bar, being held in contempt as a stranger. Some people may say that that is a bit of an arcane process, but he was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is the first time that a Prime Minister has been held in contempt of the House, and this is all we have got to say to him. How ridiculous this place must seem to our constituents; how ridiculous it must seem to the people of Clydebank, Dumbarton and the Vale that this ex-Prime Minister swans off while they are living in the traumas of the modern age. What an absolute parcel of rogues in a nation.

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

9.24 pm

**Penny Mordaunt**: It is not really my duty to close this debate, but with the kind permission of the Chair of the Committee, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), and the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), there are three things I want briefly to say.

First, I thank again the Privileges Committee, as many Members have said, for the work it has done. It is a task that we gave it to do, and it has carried it out in very difficult circumstances.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): Does the Leader of the House agree that, whatever view one takes on this matter and whichever side one is on, the House unanimously set up the membership of the Privileges Committee—all seven Members—who worked for months diligently to produce this report, but they have come under huge criticism and abuse, so much so that they have had to have extra security, to preserve the reputation of this House, and this House therefore owes them a huge debt of gratitude?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend, and I think he makes that point very well.

Secondly, I acknowledge the tributes that some colleagues have paid to their friend and former colleague. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said, for many Members this is a sad and difficult duty.

Finally, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. This is an important matter. As I have said, Members should make up their own minds and follow their conscience. They may agree or disagree with the report, or they may agree and disagree with the report and different aspects of it, as some Members have. They should do what they think is right. They should be left alone to make up their own minds, they should be left alone to vote and, having cast their vote or not, they should be left alone afterwards. I hope that is something all Members of this House can agree on.

*Question put.*

*The House divided: Ayes 354, Noes 7.*

**Division No. 258]**

**[9.26 pm**

# **AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i> )	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Abrahams, Debbie	Bowie, Andrew
Afolami, Bim	Bradley, rh Karen
Aiken, Nickie	Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Aldous, Peter	Brady, Sir Graham
Ali, Rushanara	Brennan, Kevin
Ali, Tahir	Bridgen, Andrew
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Brine, Steve
Amesbury, Mike	Brock, Deidre
Anderson, Fleur	Brown, Alan
Argar, rh Edward	Brown, Ms Lyn
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Baker, Duncan	Browne, Anthony
Baker, Mr Steve	Bruce, Fiona
Baldwin, Harriett	Bryant, Sir Chris
Barker, Paula	Buchan, Felicity
Baron, Mr John	Buck, Ms Karen
Begum, Apsana	Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Bell, Aaron	Burgon, Richard
Benn, rh Hilary	Butler, Dawn
Betts, Mr Clive	Byrne, Ian
Blackford, rh Ian	Byrne, rh Liam
Blackman, Kirsty	Cadbury, Ruth
Blake, Olivia	Callaghan, Amy ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara</i> )
Blomfield, Paul	Carden, Dan
Blunt, Crispin	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Bonnar, Steven	Carter, Andy

Chalk, rh Alex	Furniss, Gill
Chamberlain, Wendy	Gardiner, Barry
Champion, Sarah	Gibb, rh Nick
Churchill, Jo	Gibson, Patricia
Clark, Feryal ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i> )	Gibson, Peter
Clark, rh Greg	Gideon, Jo
Clarke, Theo ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )	Glindon, Mary
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Grady, Patrick
Colburn, Elliot	Graham, Richard
Cooper, Daisy	Grant, Peter
Cooper, rh Yvette	Green, rh Damian
Cowan, Ronnie	Green, Sarah
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Greenwood, Margaret
Coyle, Neil	Griffith, Dame Nia
Crabb, rh Stephen	Gwynne, Andrew
Creasy, Stella	Hall, Luke
Cruddas, Jon	Hamilton, Fabian
Cryer, John	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Daby, Janet	Hammond, Stephen
Dalton, Ashley	Hancock, rh Matt
Davey, rh Ed	Hanvey, Neale
David, Wayne	Hardy, Emma
Davies, rh David T. C.	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Davies, Mims	Harris, Carolyn
Davies-Jones, Alex	Hart, rh Simon
Davis, rh Mr David	Hayes, Helen
Day, Martyn	Healey, rh John
De Cordova, Marsha	Hendry, Drew
Debbonaire, Thangam	Hillier, Dame Meg
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Hinds, rh Damian
Dixon, Samantha	Hobhouse, Wera
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Dodds, Anneliese	Hollern, Kate
Doogan, Dave	Holmes, Paul
Dorans, Allan ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara</i> )	Hopkins, Rachel
Doughty, Stephen	Hosie, rh Stewart
Dowd, Peter	Howarth, rh Sir George
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Huq, Dr Rupa
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Hussain, Imran
Duguid, David	Jardine, Christine
Dunne, rh Philip	Jarvis, Dan
Eagle, Dame Angela	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Eagle, rh Maria	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Eastwood, Colum	Johnson, Kim
Edwards, Jonathan	Jones, Andrew
Edwards, Ruth	Jones, Darren
Efford, Clive	Jones, Fay
Elliott, Julie	Jones, Gerald
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Elmore, Chris	Jones, Sarah
Eshalomi, Florence	Jupp, Simon
Esterson, Bill	Kane, Mike
Evans, Chris	Kawczynski, Daniel
Evans, Dr Luke	Kearns, Alicia
Farris, Laura	Keegan, rh Gillian
Farron, Tim	Keeley, Barbara
Farry, Stephen	Kendall, Liz
Fell, Simon	Kinnock, Stephen
Fellows, Marion	Kniveton, Kate
Fletcher, Mark	Kyle, Peter
Flynn, Stephen	Lake, Ben
Foord, Richard	Lammy, rh Mr David
Ford, rh Vicky	Lamont, John
Fovargue, Yvonne	Largan, Robert
Foxcroft, Vicky	Lavery, Ian
Foy, Mary Kelly	Leadbeater, Kim
Freeman, George	Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Fuller, Richard	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
	Lewer, Andrew
	Lewis, Clive
	Lewis, rh Sir Julian

Lightwood, Simon  
Linden, David  
Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast  
by Chris Elmore*)  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Loughton, Tim  
Lucas, Caroline  
Lynch, Holly  
MacAskill, Kenny  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
Mahmood, Shabana  
Malhotra, Seema  
Mangnall, Anthony  
Marson, Julie  
Maskell, Rachael  
May, rh Mrs Theresa  
Mayhew, Jerome  
Mc Nally, John  
McCabe, Steve  
McCarthy, Kerry  
McDonagh, Siobhain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonald, Stuart C.  
McDonnell, rh John  
McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
McGovern, Alison  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote  
cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
McMahon, Jim  
McMorrin, Anna  
Mearns, Ian  
Miliband, rh Edward  
Miller, rh Dame Maria  
Mills, Nigel  
Mishra, Navendu  
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
Monaghan, Carol  
Moore, Robbie  
Moran, Layla  
Mordaunt, rh Penny  
Morden, Jessica  
Morgan, Helen  
Morgan, Stephen  
Morris, Grahame  
Mumby-Croft, Holly  
Mundell, rh David  
Murray, Ian  
Murray, James  
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
Nandy, Lisa  
Neill, Sir Robert  
Newlands, Gavin  
Nichols, Charlotte  
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote  
cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
Nokes, rh Caroline

Norman, rh Jesse  
Norris, Alex  
O'Hara, Brendan  
Olney, Sarah  
Onwurah, Chi  
Opperman, Guy  
Oppong-Asare, Abena  
Osborne, Kate  
Oswald, Kirsten  
Owatemi, Taiwo  
Owen, Sarah  
Peacock, Stephanie  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Penrose, John  
Perkins, Mr Toby  
Phillips, Jess  
Phillipson, Bridget  
Philp, rh Chris  
Pollard, Luke  
Poulter, Dr Dan  
Pow, Rebecca  
Powell, Lucy  
Prentis, rh Victoria  
Qaisar, Ms Anum  
Rayner, rh Angela  
Reed, Steve  
Reeves, Ellie  
Reeves, rh Rachel  
Reynolds, Jonathan  
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
Richards, Nicola  
Richardson, Angela  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Roberts, Mr Rob  
Robertson, Mr Laurence  
Rodda, Matt  
Ross, Douglas  
Rowley, Lee  
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
Rutley, David  
Sambrook, Gary  
Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
Saxby, Selaine  
Scully, Paul  
Seely, Bob  
Selous, Andrew  
Sharma, Mr Virendra  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Shelbrooke, rh Alec  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Skidmore, rh Chris  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smith, Alyn  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, rh Chloe  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, rh Julian  
Smith, Nick

Smyth, Karin  
Sobel, Alex  
Spellar, rh John  
Spencer, Dr Ben  
Starmer, rh Keir  
Stephens, Chris  
Stevens, Jo  
Stevenson, John  
Stone, Jamie  
Streeter, Sir Gary  
Stringer, Graham  
Sturdy, Julian  
Sultana, Zarah  
Sunderland, James  
Syms, Sir Robert  
Tami, rh Mark  
Tarry, Sam  
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
Thomson, Richard  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Throup, Maggie  
Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Tugendhat, rh Tom

Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Derek  
Vaz, rh Valerie  
Vickers, Martin  
Wakeford, Christian  
Walker, Sir Charles  
Walker, Mr Robin  
Webbe, Claudia  
West, Catherine  
Western, Andrew  
Western, Matt  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Whitford, Dr Philippa  
Whittome, Nadia  
Williams, Craig  
Williams, Hywel  
Wilson, Munira  
Wishart, Pete  
Wragg, Mr William  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
Liz Twist and  
Colleen Fletcher

#### NOES

Cash, Sir William  
Fletcher, Nick  
Holloway, Adam  
McCartney, Karl  
Morrissey, Joy

Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Wheeler, Mrs Heather

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
Sir Alan Campbell and  
Lilian Greenwood

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House approves the Fifth Report from the Committee of Privileges (HC 564).

### Business without Debate

#### COMMITTEES

**Mr Speaker:** With the leave of the House, we will take motions 3 and 4 together.

*Ordered,*

#### ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

That Mark Pawsey be a Member of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

#### ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

That Geraint Davies be discharged from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and Cat Smith be added.—  
(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)



## Service Family Accommodation: Maintenance

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Joy Morrissey.)*

9.42 pm

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): On Thursday, I was delighted to attend an annual reception at RAF Shawbury in my constituency. That important base trains helicopter pilots for all the armed forces, and we are proud to host it in North Shropshire. However, I am less proud—indeed, I am not proud—of some of the accommodation provided for service families there. This Armed Forces Week, I have had to secure an Adjournment debate to raise the unacceptable repair and maintenance and the poor overall state of housing, as it has become increasingly apparent that service families who live both in Shawbury and at the barracks in Tern Hill in my constituency have not always been able to return to safe and warm houses at the end of each day. Worryingly, the situation has worsened since the maintenance contract was restructured and renegotiated in April 2022.

Let me provide the House with some examples. One of my constituents had a roof in need of full repair and a bird cover for the chimney. The repair simply did not happen. My constituent wrote:

“We still get massive crows falling down our chimney, but we have learnt to live with it.”

A second family endured severe damp and mould, and their children suffered ill health as a result. They wrote:

“My children have been ill for months due to damp and mould never being resolved. We’ve never as much as had a call back to arrange a visit... We called yesterday to raise a repair with water pouring out of our pipes outside. It was classed as ‘non urgent’, so no appointment was made. This morning, we have woken up to no running water in our property—none. We cannot flush the toilet. We cannot wash our hands. We cannot access basic human rights... When I called Pinnacle to raise this issue, I was told it’s ‘non urgent’ and they will keep the job open, but with no guarantee anybody will fix it today.”

At the reception on Thursday, I met a serviceman whose family had suffered from damp and mould, no heating in their utility room and blocked guttering. For three years, they had to wash using a bucket because the water pressure was too low to shower. In another case, I was told,

“we were without heating from 5th December 2022 until 6th January 2023, with 2 young children aged 2 years and the other 6 months.”

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on bringing forward this issue. The fact that 46% of personnel are married or in a civil partnership and 23% are in a long-term established relationship underlines the importance of family in the support network of our service personnel. The standard of accommodation that those families are in is a vital cog in that network. Does the hon. Lady agree that it should be of the highest standard and well maintained, so that the focus of our troops remains on their job and not on a flood in their bathroom at home?

**Helen Morgan:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s points. Finally, a constituent wrote to me:

“About to go my third night without heating or hot water.... After also having 26 days without running water, I have run out of avenues to pursue with Pinnacle etc and I think I speak for thousands of service families across the UK when I say that this needs to be addressed. Please help!”

When I raised these cases with the former Minister, the right hon. and learned Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), the Defence Infrastructure Organisation and the contractors Pinnacle and Amey, which serve service families in my constituency, I was grateful for their response and their genuine desire to resolve the issues. We had a constructive meeting, and they have looked into each individual case as a matter of priority. However, when the local MP, a Minister of State and senior management in the contractor companies have to become involved in a process to resolve such basic issues, it is clear that the process is broken not only for my constituents but for service families up and down the country.

The situation is entirely unacceptable, especially given that families are paying rent for the unsuitable housing. That is why it was no surprise to read the results of the Ministry of Defence satisfaction survey last week, which showed that the poor standard of housing is taking its toll on our military families. Satisfaction in the overall standard of service accommodation has fallen to 46% in 2023, from 60% in 2014. Satisfaction with requests for maintenance and repair work decreased to a paltry 19% in 2023 from an already low 46% in 2014, while satisfaction with the quality of the work has also fallen to 19% this year, from 40% in 2014. It was also not a surprise to hear that the poor state of housing means many servicemen and women are considering leaving the profession because of the strain on their family life.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I draw my hon. Friend’s attention to the armed forces continuing attitudes survey, which found that one third of spouses said that they would be happier if their partner chose to leave the service. Does she agree with my constituent, retired Colonel Michael Woodcock, who wrote,

“Remaining in the service too often depends on a most hardy spouse”?

**Helen Morgan:** My hon. Friend raises a good point. Community, support and family life are extremely important to servicemen and women, and I will come to that shortly.

It is important to recognise that families cannot resolve the issue simply by moving to private rented accommodation elsewhere in the vicinity of their base, as often it is unaffordable or just unavailable, and outside the military community. As we know, service families often move house every two years or have a parent or family member away from home on a tour of duty for an extended period. The support network of families who understand their circumstances is really important. It is crucial that service family accommodation is suitable.

If the usable stock is decreasing or service families are put off taking a home because of the issues I have described, the vibrancy of the community is badly affected and service life overall becomes less appealing, as the survey results have showed. Empty and dilapidated housing stock often exacerbates the situation, because where there is a shortage, families must stay in substandard homes. There also appears to be a failure of the contract arrangements to deal with empty properties. One constituent reported houses being left empty and unheated, but with the mains water still turned on. In the winter cold snap, the pipes burst, meaning that the ceilings fell in and serious damage occurred.

[Helen Morgan]

Other houses on the estate have had insulation fitted to roofs with unrepaired holes in them, meaning that when water ingress occurs, it causes even more damage. The houses will now cost thousands to repair to an acceptable standard and the families affected will be owed compensation. It is a truly false economy to have allowed that to occur. It is wastes taxpayers' money and reduces the options for service families who want to live near their base and their community.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a degree of hypocrisy in the fact that we celebrate brave servicemen as our heroes because they put their lives on the line for the security of our nation, yet we cannot guarantee them the most basic support?

**Helen Morgan:** I agree with my hon. Friend wholeheartedly.

My understanding is that the current maintenance contract allows just two weeks after a family leaves a house to carry out any required upgrade work, including any repairs but also big-ticket works such as retrofitting insulation and replacing kitchens and bathrooms. Clearly, two weeks is not long enough if a significant amount of work is required. That leads to incomplete or poor-quality work, which costs more to fix in the future and causes disruption to the family living there.

The overall feedback from my constituents—there has been a lot of it—is that the response to requests for repair and the management of empty houses have deteriorated since the contract was restructured last April, and that while the coming of spring and summer has improved living conditions in the short term, there remain significant concerns about the operation of the process. There appear to be too many hand-offs between, in the case of my constituents, the contractors Pinnacle and Amey. I note that in response to an urgent question in December last year, the former Minister acknowledged that there were IT issues. That rings true with the experiences that have been related to me, in which requests have either not been logged in the first place or have gone missing in the hand-off between the two companies.

Anyone who works in a business knows that IT issues in a contract restructuring of this scale are inevitable, but the Minister suggested that they were unresolved in December 2022, a full nine months after the restructured contracts went live. Has there been any further improvement to date? I have a constituent still reporting little progress on a leaking roof and radiators. The roof was fixed in five days, but the scaffolding remained up for five weeks at goodness knows what unnecessary cost to the taxpayer and the radiators still leak. There is damp and mould, and they have not been given the results of a damp survey that was apparently carried out in December last year.

I hope I have illustrated the chaotic and broken process of reporting an issue and getting it fixed under the newly restructured contract, the shocking state of dilapidation of some empty homes that could otherwise be used for housing our service families, the impact on the service family community, and the unacceptable waste of taxpayers' money. This is the price of a failing process. We have spent much time in this Chamber

rightly debating, and indeed agreeing on, the need for social housing to be of a decent standard, and for tenants to have the right to demand a decent standard, both in the context of the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill as it passed through Parliament and in demanding an end to the system that led to the shocking death of Awaab Ishak.

**Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** I congratulate the hon. Lady on setting out the issues in her excellent speech. Labour launched our “Homes Fit for Heroes” campaign a few months ago to focus attention on this scandal and my Front-Bench colleagues have said that, if elected, we will make addressing it a priority. As she said, we cannot carry on with leaky roofs, broken boilers and damp; we must make this a priority. Does she agree that the Government could have done a lot of work already to improve things for the services?

**Helen Morgan:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I broadly agree with her.

We need to accept that our service families have the same right to decent housing as everyone else in this country. When they report a problem, they should expect a response. I do not need to remind anyone that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) pointed out, servicemen and women are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for us. We should at least ensure that they can have a hot shower and a mould-free home in a supportive community. I am sure the Minister will agree with that point, so I would like to conclude by asking him to respond to some questions about the functioning of the contract as it currently stands.

Will the Minister update the House on the current situation regarding outstanding calls and issues raised? How confident is he that all the data on those calls has been captured, given the issues I have recounted of problems not being recorded or being lost in the hand-off between the two companies? What is the long-term plan to deal with the issue of empty properties falling into disrepair and out of use altogether? Does the Minister believe that the current contract structure is commercially viable in the long term, given the unanticipated additional resource that the contractors have had to commit to resolving backlogs and dealing with the additional hand-offs within the process? Is there a deadline by which he expects these contracts to be operating on an acceptable “business as usual” basis? Has he considered restructuring and renegotiating the contracts, given the obvious operational difficulties that have been experienced? Finally, is he able to quantify the additional cost to taxpayers of dealing with the problems that have occurred over the last year?

I am grateful to the Minister for his time at this late hour on a Monday, and to Mr Speaker for granting a debate on an issue that I know is of the utmost concern both to the service families currently based in North Shropshire and to those elsewhere in the UK. I look forward to the Minister's response.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. Before I call the Minister, I should remind him that as the debate started before 10 pm, we will go through the interesting procedure of interrupting his speech at 10 pm so that the Whip can move the motion for the Adjournment one more time.

9.55 pm

**The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison):** Thank you for the reminder, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a while since I was last in this situation.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for her interest in this matter, and for initiating the debate. I represent a garrison town, I am a veteran and an active reservist and two of my children are in the armed forces, so, unsurprisingly, I am determined that we should do everything we reasonably can to give service people the accommodation that they deserve.

Unfortunately, our personnel have not been well served in this area for decades covering numerous Administrations, including one involving Liberal Democrats. Too often our people have had to put up with poorly built housing that has been crudely adapted with the advent of central heating. I have lived it in my service career, and I have seen it professionally. Sadly, in the years after the Annington deal only £100 million of the £1.66 billion in sale proceeds was reinvested in upgrades, with predictable consequences, and the Future Defence Infrastructure Services accommodation contract, which went live on 1 April last year, has yet to live up to its potential. We have heard some examples of failure today, and I have examples of my own.

We should not forget, however, that there are some great examples of service family accommodation. I can say from first-hand experience that some of it is truly exceptional. On 18 May this year, the Ministry of Defence announced a £173 million investment in capital purchase of family homes in the UK for armed forces families, comprising the purchase of 310 brand-new homes and the purchase of the freehold of 113 modern, formerly leasehold, homes. The brand-new homes have been purchased in the last 12 months, and are due to be occupied by the end of this year. All will meet modern energy performance certificate standards, and some will meet the very highest, a grade A rating.

In 2022-23, as part of that purchase, the MOD bought 66 homes to support Imjin Barracks at Innsworth, 58 homes at Brize Norton, and 36 homes at Aldershot. As well as those, we have agreed to purchase an additional 176 homes at Innsworth over this and the next financial year, to be completed by 2025. These homes will be net zero. So investment in accommodation is going up. During the last seven years the MOD has invested more than £936 million in service family accommodation improvements, including about £185 million last year spent on modernising homes, tackling damp and mould, and improving thermal efficiency. This is part of a wider £3 billion FDIS programme that has replaced the old facilities management contracts.

However, customer satisfaction has fallen, especially in relation to damp, mould, heating and maintenance. During the December cold snap, there were reports of personnel being without heating for more than five days. Response times for maintenance and repair works have been slow, although I have to say that conversations I have had recently suggest that families have noticed an improvement in responsiveness. That is anecdotal, but I offer it for what it is worth, and we shall see whether it feeds through into our survey data in due course.

In relation to the hon. Member's concerns in her constituency, on 9 June, DIO's regional manager and estate officer for RAF Shawbury met Amey counterparts

and a warrant officer representing the station. All parties were also at a families' surgery that morning. Only two families attended the surgery, a significant reduction on previous surgeries, linking to the point that I made earlier from my experience.

10 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(Joy Morrissey.)

**Dr Murrison:** I hope that the scale of the challenge and the financial commitment that Defence has made to improving accommodation are clear. They are certainly heartfelt as far as I am concerned, but for context, it is worth pointing out that we are also committed to keeping rents low. The hon. Member for North Shropshire may be interested to know that, on average, our service families in North Shropshire pay £323 a month for a three-bedroom property. I have checked and I found that private renters in the same area can expect to pay an average of £750 a month for the equivalent home.

Defence is responsible for 47,800 military homes across the country. Right now, 97% of all MOD family accommodation nationally meets or exceeds the Government's decent homes standard, and the figure for occupied service family accommodation in North Shropshire is also 97%. By means of comparison, in Shropshire, 76% of all private rented homes and 79.5% of social housing meet the Government's decent homes standard. I hope that the hon. Lady has raised that with her local authority.

I should say that the seven occupied properties in the hon. Lady's constituency that are below the decent housing standard are structurally safe and sound and met the standard when occupants moved in, but have since fallen below. Remedial action on the door and window lintels at fault is expected this summer. I hope that she is reassured by that.

However, when we are dealing with housing, it is inevitable that things will go wrong, as we all know. When they do, the response needs to be first-class, but according to the last armed forces continuous attitude survey, which canvassed service personnel late last year—and was published earlier this month—only 19% of respondents were satisfied with the response that they got. That is not good enough.

**Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con):** My right hon. Friend is being characteristically frank about the problems, as well as the successes, of the policy. Can anything be done to the model of financing for the maintenance of service housing that would perhaps incorporate a financial incentive on the people who have the contracts, so that if they do not arrange for repairs quickly enough, they could conceivably feel it where it hurts, in their bank balance?

**Dr Murrison:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is absolutely right. The FDIS contract that was introduced early last year does just that. If he will forgive me, I may just come on to describe what that might mean, or has meant, in a few moments.

The day-to-day management and maintenance of service housing has, since early last year, been through FDIS, and it has been contracted out to three separate contractors: Amey in the central and northern regions;



[Dr Murrison]

VIVO in the south-east and south-west; and Pinnacle, which runs the national service centre and co-ordinates activity.

Any contract transition is fraught with difficulty, and it certainly has been with FDIS. But there is a third issue that challenges delivery to our service families—namely, the underlying issue of poor original build quality, which flowed from decisions made in the 1950s and 1960s and was compounded by historical underinvestment. When combined with a resource-constrained “fix on fail” regime, the resulting effect has led to a maintenance logjam estimated to cost around £960 million.

These are explanations, not excuses. The new contracts introduced a number of improvements: clear customer satisfaction targets, for the first time in MOD housing history; more demanding target response times for most types of reactive maintenance; a higher standard of preparation of homes for families to move into; and financial consequences for contractors that fall short, and incentives to go beyond the minimum standards.

Currently, as a result of some of the poor performance already outlined this evening, the MOD’s contractual rights to withhold payments from suppliers are being exercised and deductions are being made, as appropriate. Withheld profits will be reinvested for the benefit of service families. In addition, a total of £1.14 million in compensation has been paid direct to service personnel by FDIS suppliers, at no cost to the Ministry of Defence, since the FDIS accommodation contracts went live on 1 April 2022.

We are taking further measures to address issues related to damp and mould. We have established a dedicated hotline to address specific concerns, and we have improved the initial triage process to prioritise cases. This is followed by an on-site visit to apply the initial treatment, assess the need for a follow-up and decide whether a professional survey is required. Since early 2022, homes are not being allocated where there is a known damp or mould issue.

Separately, tomorrow we will table a written ministerial statement titled “Defence Infrastructure Update,” which will update the House on the work being undertaken to reduce a backlog in expired gas and electrical safety certificates in MOD properties through an accelerated and targeted renewal process. I am not going to pre-empt that announcement, but suffice it to say that Ministers were made aware in May of an issue relating to a backlog of expired gas certificates that had accrued while families were occupying their properties. That has occurred for a variety of reasons, including residents

being unavailable to allow access to their homes for inspections, and supply chain resource and contractor IT issues.

The backlog of electrical certificates is a consequence of changes in regulations in August 2020, which required certificates to be completed every five years instead of every 10. Needless to say, we have acted immediately. The Secretary of State and the Minister for Defence Procurement have spoken with FDIS contractors personally, stressing that we expect this backlog to be cleared in the next few weeks. The Defence Infrastructure Organisation has worked with its suppliers to improve communications to families, to ensure availability for inspections. The MOD’s contractors have also made progress in recruiting additional resource and improving their data management to reduce this unacceptable backlog.

The Government have required all contractors to submit rectification plans. There is no complacency, but those are now showing progress. Pinnacle’s national service centre is answering all calls in an average of 14 seconds, which is significantly better than its 90-second target. Amey and VIVO have brought waiting lists down significantly, with very big improvements in maintenance response times. At the end of last month, the maintenance backlog stood at about 5,000, which is down from a high of 21,100 in December 2022. The number of open complaints is down by about 70%, and most key performance indicators are now at acceptable levels or better across most regions.

We need the final few measures to be brought up to scratch and, crucially, for that performance to be sustained. That is easier said than done, but we are making headway. The Defence Infrastructure Organisation is working with VIVO and Amey to develop a programme of straightforward interventions to address damp and mould. Critically, we also have the means, through FDIS, to hold our contractors to account should they fail to meet their end of the bargain. If required, we can recoup money or refuse to pay it out. We have already used those levers robustly where we can and where it is appropriate to do so, and they have made a difference.

So I hope I have reassured the hon. Member for North Shropshire that we are on the case, and we will most certainly continue to hold our contractors’ feet to the fire. Our new accommodation strategy, published last October, sets out a clear ambition for where we want to be: a situation where all our people have access to good-quality accommodation, in line with modern living standards.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.10 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Monday 19 June 2023

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

## Cost of Living: Parental Leave and Pay

*[Relevant document: Summary of public engagement by the Petitions Committee, on the cost of living and statutory parental pay, reported to the House on 12 June, HC 73.]*

4.30 pm

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 617155, relating to the cost of living and parental leave and pay.

It is a real pleasure to have you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. The petition asks the Government to

“Increase statutory maternity pay in line with cost of living crisis.”

I am sorry that this debate unfortunately coincides with events in the main Chamber that are taking the attention of an awful lot of Members as they debate the Privileges Committee’s report on the former Prime Minister. The situation does rather highlight how important matters that concern the people we represent do not get the attention they need in this place or in Government because of the issues that are being debated today.

This very important petition also asks the Government to

“Review statutory maternity pay in line with inflation and cost of living.”

It notes that the

“cost of living has been increasing across the UK since early 2021” and that the impact of inflation on

“the affordability of goods and services for households” has been significant.

Raising a child is a gift. I am fortunate to know from experience the joy of being a parent, just as I also know the many challenges that parenthood can throw up. I want to outline, on behalf of the petitioners who brought it to our attention in Parliament, the fact that the gift of parenthood is being eclipsed for many by the mire of spreadsheets, cost cutting and the damaging health effects of the cost of living, which has shot up over the past year or so.

The petition’s creator Nicola Sheridan, who is here with us today, counts herself very fortunate. She is a meticulously organised professional who made many plans in advance of having her baby. She looked at the many costs and saved up for a safety net so that she could take a full year away with her son Harry. But while she was following the news during her pregnancy, that first year of their life together, which she had so carefully planned, was continually thrown into doubt by soaring costs. Excitement was replaced by fear and anxiety. I am grateful to Nicola for sharing her experience of the spiralling costs that many parents face, as I know having heard from them ahead of this debate.

Nicola’s experience is far from unique. The number of signatories to the petition indicates that there are many parents who have either experienced the same level of anxiety or share the same concerns. Charities and campaign groups have also been campaigning on the issue, and understandably so. I am grateful to Pregnant

Then Screwed, Maternity Action and the Institute of Health Visiting. When I met them prior to this debate, they impressed on me the stresses that parents are feeling; I will expand on that point in more detail later in my speech. Alison Woodhead and Katharine Slocombe from Adoption UK shared the distinct pressures that adoptive parents face. Dr Alain Gregoire from the Maternal Mental Health Alliance set out clearly the scientific case for early years investment. The Child Poverty Action Group stressed that inequality has worsened and is being embedded by a lack of support for low-income parents. From all the people I heard from, one message was resoundingly clear: failing to adequately support new parents in the face of the worst cost of living crisis for generations will have profoundly damaging consequences for parents and children in both the short and the long term.

The headline inflation figure remains stubbornly high at 8.7%, after a peak of 11.1% last October, but inflation is only half the story. It has been concentrated in the fundamentals that new parents rely on: heat, food and personal care goods. The spiralling cost of energy has been widely reported, and has outsized food inflation, which rose to 19.2% in April this year. What has received less attention is the startling rise in goods essential for looking after a newborn. Since March 2021, the cost of formula milk has risen by 24%, with the cheapest own brand option increasing by 45%. Last year, in the 12 weeks to 19 August, the price of Pampers rocketed by up to 60%.

Meanwhile, statutory maternity pay, statutory paternity pay and maternity allowance have risen by 10.4%. It is not hard to do the maths. There are two primary concerns about how the uplift is calculated and administered. First, the uplift comes in only once a year and uses the consumer prices index from the six months before. As a result, by design, the money that new parents receive from the Government will be out of step with what they actually need. Secondly, many feel that the financial support for new parents is simply not enough anyway. The current statutory rate for parents is £172.48. Compare that with the minimum wage for an average 37.5-hour week, which comes in at £390.20. When the added costs of a new child—cots, prams, clothes, food and formula—are considered, many parents are left with big holes in their budget.

The support for parents is not generous at the best of times. The UK has one of the least generous support programmes for new mothers among OECD countries, with only Ireland and the USA offering less. Add a near-unprecedented cost of living situation to that state of affairs, and we are not far off a crisis. I know that it is easy to slip into a jumble of numbers when discussing the cost of living crisis, so I will focus on the reality for parents, especially mothers, on the ground. We know that women still provide the majority of childcare, and significantly more than men. When we talk about the impact of the cost of living on parents, we absolutely must include fathers in that, but we have to focus on the stress and strain of raising a baby, which is often borne by mothers.

While preparing for the debate, I spoke to a group of really inspiring and strong mothers from Newcastle, alongside the charity Children North East. The reality of modern motherhood that they painted was fraught with challenges. Stress was a recurrent theme, as mothers

[Catherine McKinnell]

described the anxiety that rampant inflation is causing them. It is making budgeting almost impossible. Mothers dismiss the Government's promise of free childcare as a myth, as cost pressures are forcing nurseries to charge for nappies and food, and the number of hours and weeks covered by the Government's scheme does not match working reality. For those mothers, labelling it as free feels rather like an insult.

One mother spoke vividly of being a new mother as "one of the most challenging moments in your life".

Her overarching view was that

"it's just so stressful—everything is new, your hormones are all over the place".

Even if you do make a plan, the stress can be overwhelming. She said that

"we are going to end up with a mental health crisis and we're going to ask why."

That is even before she has factored in the struggles with budgeting. Add the impact of being a new mother, on top of wondering whether you can even afford formula for your baby, and the stresses and strains that new parents are under become very clear.

Soaring prices and a lack of support are leaving mothers on the brink. I fear that the Government just do not get the reality for new mothers on low household incomes. The Government's response to the petition justified current statutory pay levels, saying that they are

"higher than the level of other out of work benefits".

That line rankled with many mothers, and not without cause. Being a mother, especially a new mother, is far from being out of work. Motherhood is work. One mother told me that

"it's the hardest thing that you'll ever do in your life".

You are left alone, weakened after often traumatic childbirth with a tiny person you are entirely responsible for keeping safe and nurturing. Waking up throughout the night to feed them, breastfeeding, changing nappies, playing games, placating them when you have no idea what is wrong—the Government would do well to stop calling that being out of work.

For many prospective mothers, fathers and adopters, the joy of adopting and welcoming a child has been subsumed by anxiety stemming from financial concerns. Paired with this, the tightening of budgets leads parents to spend less on heating and less on healthy food, which affects their mental and physical health as well as the mental and physical health of their child.

In preparation for this debate, the Petitions Committee conducted a survey of petitioners, made up largely of current parents and prospective parents. Some 93% of new parents who responded thought that Government support was inadequate, and a staggering 89% of new parents recorded difficulty in accessing basic equipment like a pram. Faced with such crippling financial hardship, mothers are missing meals, going without heating and cutting down on all spending on themselves. One parent told us that

"the lack of financial support is a constant stress and worry",

while 92% of parents reported financial difficulties in accessing social activities as basic as visiting family and friends. It is difficult to overstate the importance of

these social activities. Raising a child is a full-time job and can be incredibly isolating; moments of happiness can be interspersed with periods of profound loneliness, stress and vulnerability. Family and friends provide that vital relief and support. Taking away a mother's ability even to visit people can prove overwhelming.

Some 97% of new parents who responded to our survey were concerned about the impact on their mental health of having a child. We are already seeing a decline in parents' mental health. In January, the Institute of Health Visiting found that 83% of health visitors reported an increase in perinatal mental illness. We must be clear that financial and mental stress also have a direct impact on children. Dr Alain Gregoire, who has studied the impact of early adversity on children, has found that from the moment of conception onwards, poor maternal mental health has an impact on babies, leading to worse outcomes across health, educational attainment and happiness later in life. The stakes are incredibly high, and we are storing up problems for the future if we do not address this. Any Government who look at the evidence have to conclude that early years support for parents and children must be a priority.

It will be little surprise to Members that the cost of living is having a disproportionately large impact on the poorest mothers and babies in our society. We already know that inequalities lie at the root of poorer outcomes for pregnant women and infants, but these are now being compounded by the cost of living crisis. Some 91% of health visitors have observed an increase in poverty affecting families, alongside an increase in families needing food banks.

I have spoken before in this place about the impact of poverty on child development; it is a big issue in my region, and the number of children growing up in poverty is staggeringly high. But it is a vital point and is worth repeating: poverty leads to worse educational attainment, worse physical health, worse employment prospects and worse life expectancy. Poverty even leads to a higher risk of neonatal death.

These outcomes cannot simply be accepted. The Government have a responsibility to act. For example, Healthy Start vouchers are an important lifeline for struggling parents, allowing them to access nutritious food that we know is vital for child development. After the digitalisation of the scheme, take-up was more than 10% short of the Government's own rather modest target of 75% in March, yet there is no clear plan to improve the uptake. It is well within the Government's scope to change that. I hope that the Minister will respond specifically to that point.

Furthermore, as Pregnant Then Screwed and others have pointed out, the UK has one of the most complicated parental pay systems among developed countries, resulting in many parents missing out on the support that they are entitled to. Difficulty in accessing Government support is particularly acute for adoptive parents: they are not entitled to the same support as other parents, and self-employed adopters have no statutory right whatsoever to parental pay, so even when support exists, access is clouded in uncertainty. Self-employed adoptive parents can apply to local authorities for grants, but whether that money is given or withheld is entirely discretionary. The all-party parliamentary group for adoption and permanence has found that 90% of adopters said that



their social worker had failed to advise them to apply directly to their local authority, so even those who are working in this field cannot work out the system.

Adopted children are already especially likely to have specific and costly needs that can take a significant financial toll on adoptive parents, and the cost of living is making the situation worse. Nine out of 10 prospective adopters told Adoption UK that the cost of living is having an impact on whether they choose to adopt. Of course it is. This is the impact of the cost of living: the children most in need of loving and supportive families are being left in homes and in foster care. Government inaction has meant that a child's start in life could be determined by nothing more than their postcode. The next generation will be defined permanently by today's inequality if we do not take action.

I have heard from a mother who spent most of her time applying for the support available worrying that she was getting it wrong. She was so nervous about having it clawed back that she cut her access to some of those support payments. Even when parents are entitled to support, the lack of clarity and the complexity in the system cause great anxiety for parents, on top of the sleepless nights looking after their children. It is probably the sleepless nights that are inducing the anxiety. It is a vicious cycle for many parents.

Inequality becomes embedded early and is self-fulfilling. Intervention at the earliest possible stage is our best defence against it. The earlier the intervention, the earlier the rolling snowball of inequality is halted. Money today will have drastic positive benefits further down the road. It is not just wishful thinking; game-changing early investment has happened before and could work again. Sure Start, introduced by the last Labour Government, led to around 13,000 fewer hospital admissions in older children each year, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. At a time when our NHS is severely overburdened, the case for early intervention could not be stronger.

The next Labour Government will introduce free breakfast clubs for all primary schoolchildren, a vital investment that will ensure children have access to healthy food and have a full stomach so that they are ready to learn. Let us remember that many parents who have taken time out to have a baby will often have older children they are trying to feed as well. This is the kind of investment in the future that we will see after many years of inequality.

We know that in the earlier stages of life, time spent with parents is vital for children. What is more, parents want to spend time with their children. Research by the Trades Union Congress found that one in five dads are forgoing all paternity leave because of financial concerns, while mothers are being hurried back into work because statutory pay simply does not go far enough.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an excellent and powerful speech. Does she agree that with statutory paternity and maternity pay levels so low, at less than half of full-time pay at minimum wage, parents are not being given any choice? Choice is so important. As she says, research shows that in the early days of a baby's life, having a parent at home, whether it is the mother or the father, is critical. Given the cost of living crisis in which people are struggling with mortgages and soaring food prices, people

just cannot afford to take the option of staying at home. They are being forced back to work before they want to go back.

**Catherine McKinnell:** I absolutely agree. The hon. Lady raises the dreaded mortgages issue, which I have not even touched on, but that is a cliff edge looming for many families, if they have not already gone over it.

One of the mothers we spoke to told the Petitions Committee survey:

"I and many other women felt they had to go back to work at 6 months because it wasn't possible to continue".

No mother should have to go back to work for any other reason than that it is right for them and their family, and right for them in their career. If they want to stay off work for the full statutory entitlement, that should be their choice, as the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) rightly pointed out.

Those first months with a newborn are irreplaceable—you never get that time back—yet unsupported parents are being left with no choice. That is the key point. Some mothers may want to go back much earlier, and that is their choice, but the difficulty is that for parents who want to stay off for longer, their choice is often taken away by the reality of soaring prices and a shortfall in support. Mothers are being stranded in an impossible situation, completely torn in two by their work and their childcare responsibilities, and many parents who go back are finding how unaffordable it is because of the soaring costs of childcare. For so long, the motherhood penalty has suppressed mothers' earning power and independence. That short period of time when they have a small child at home can affect their earnings for the rest of their career and life.

Several mothers in Newcastle spoke to me about the isolating impact of fathers being required to return to work, unable to take the parental leave that many mothers would love to see them take. One mother even said:

"As a Mam, when you're left on your own after 2 weeks it's terrifying."

I remember that feeling. Another described the claustrophobia of being left with her children day in, day out without respite. She said:

"You see your husband going out the door to work and you want to race out the door with him."

Frightened and alone, new mothers are being let down. A broken childcare system, fathers feeling as if they are unable to take leave, and the negative mental and physical health impacts of raising a child, amplified by the cost of living, are confining women back to their homes. The gender inequality that we should have left in the distant past is creeping back into our lives, and it feels as if the Government are asleep at the wheel.

**Munira Wilson:** I thank the hon. Lady for giving way again; she is being very generous. I am passionate about the question of fathers, because in families up and down the country, including my own, fathers are taking the primary responsibility for looking after children. I am proud that it was the Liberal Democrats in government who introduced shared parental leave in 2015, but sadly the take-up has been far too low. We need to build on that by improving pay. We should make parental leave for all mothers and fathers, whether they are employed or self-employed, a day one right. Does the hon. Lady

[Munira Wilson]

agree, and does she agree that paternity leave should also be increased from the short period of two weeks? On average, it is about 10.4 weeks across advanced economies.

**Catherine McKinnell:** The hon. Lady speaks very passionately about the impact of parental leave. I am not here to make policy for either the Government or Labour's Front-Bench team; I will leave that to the two Front Benchers who are here to speak on behalf of the main parties. But I can speak for the petitioners. One mother who spoke to me said that increased paternity pay and leave would be

"the dream, it would have stopped it being all on me."

I think that quite often the petitioners, who have brought us all here today, say it better than many of us could.

The Petitions Committee has previously highlighted the further action that must be taken to protect expectant and new parents from redundancy, by making it illegal from the moment employers are notified to six months after maternity leave is over. We are proud of the work we have done to see some of those changes in Government.

I want to ask the Minister a few questions about the issues that I have raised; I am sure she has been scribbling notes already. Will she commit to reviewing the way in which statutory maternity pay, statutory paternity pay and maternity allowance are calculated, so that the pay better reflects the rate of actual inflation and so that the money that parents are getting is not diminishing before their eyes? That seems to be the source of a huge amount of anxiety, as I am sure the Government appreciate.

What is the Minister doing to ensure that every mother knows the support that they are entitled to? Too often, parents seem to lack the information necessary, or they are given incorrect information and miss out on vital support. Will the Minister consider equalising access to statutory parental pay for adoptive parents, including those who are self-employed? Can the Minister account for why the take-up of Healthy Start vouchers remains below Government targets? What are the Government doing to improve that? It is within their gift to do so.

Finally, what recent assessment have the Government made of the impact of maternity pay rates on social health outcomes for new mothers and babies? It is important that we monitor what can be assessed, and outcomes for children can be clearly assessed in age two developmental assessments. Sadly, indications are that they are getting worse, not better. The petitioners would certainly indicate that improving support for new parents would improve outcomes in those age two development assessments.

The status quo does not need to be permanent. Yes, we are in a cost of living crisis, but we can change it. We can change it for the youngest people in our society to ensure that it does not have long-term negative consequences, but that requires the Government to listen to the concerns raised by petitioners and take action. It is a complex issue, and a multitude of stakeholders will be engaged in it. However, at its core is that profoundly important experience of raising a child. If our society allows having a child to become unaffordable, fewer people will choose to have children. One new parent told us:

"Having children in 2023 is no longer a choice you make with your partner, it's a calculation on a spreadsheet".

That is the cold reality of modern parenting in the UK. Western societies are existentially threatened by ageing populations, falling birth rates and the need to pay pensions, yet our Government are standing by while this car crash happens in slow motion. The cost of living crisis has shined a sharper light on a situation that was already becoming untenable.

To return to Nicola, the petition's creator, it is a broken system when even the best prepared mothers feel that they have no option but to create a petition to get the Government to listen and do something. Through no fault of their own, children today are being born into precarity rather than stable, financially secure homes, with parents burned out by stress and isolated by incomes shrinking relative to inflation.

I urge the Government to look seriously at what can be done for new parents, whether that is following up on the recommendations of petitioners by linking statutory pay to the cost of living, by expanding paternity leave or by ensuring that more support is available for new parents in other ways. One thing is clear from the plethora of evidence I have taken ahead of this debate: doing nothing is not an option.

**Steve McCabe (in the Chair):** As the mover of the motion said, it is unfortunate that this debate has possibly been affected by events elsewhere, but none the less we are blessed to have the omnipresent Jim Shannon. I call him now.

4.56 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I am going to lead the charge of the Back Benchers all by myself. I do not intend to speak for too long; I will do my customary 10 minutes or thereabouts. It is a joy to follow the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), who set the scene incredibly well with her knowledge as a mother. That brings a real example to the debate, but she also spoke on behalf of all the other mothers out there who have to make these difficult decisions. We have had a number of debates in which the Minister has been in a position to respond. I know she grasps these things very well, and I am very hopeful that we will get the answers to our questions.

The cost of living is difficult for so many people, but especially for young families. I am thankful that we have a form of maternity leave in this country, unlike other developed nations such as the United States, which is severely lagging behind. However, if we look at other nations, we can see that we are not so far forward after all.

When my wife Sandra and I married in 1987, we both wanted children and that was our decision—in a different age, let us be quite clear. I had my own business, which meant that I was able to afford that. It ensured that, along with Sandra's say-so, she could stay at home and look after the children. My three boys have grown up to be wonderful young men. I cannot take any credit for that—my wife can. They are three young men who are established. They have their own wives and two children each. We are very blessed to have that.

As an elected representative, one thing that affects me in the office is when people come along and I can see the pressures of finance. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) mentioned the mortgage issue, and I watched the news last night, Mr McCabe, about the

effect of mortgages on people when their tenure comes to an end. I really wonder how people will afford it. Last night's news illustrated that costs were going from 2.9% to 5.6% as well as the costs that had accumulated over all the years. They are massive! One of the mortgages last night was an accumulation of some £26,000 and the other was an accumulation of £14,000. People cannot just click their fingers and make that money appear. There is no money tree at the bottom of the garden that money can be picked off like leaves—we live in the real world—so I understand the burden that is coming down the road.

There are financial worries when people get that wonderful news—or not so wonderful news, as sometimes happens. That does not change their love for the child, by the way—I make that quite clear. *[Interruption.]* People are always very pleased. I wanted three boys—my wife was not quite so sure, but there you are. When people's families expand, there comes the natural worry of how the money will stretch. That was never as true as it is today. We hear stories from the people who come to our constituency offices, tell us about their burdens and troubles, and ask us how they can get help.

I read an article by Smart Cells, which encourages parents to consider the storage of baby stem cells—life is moving on, and there are different ways of doing things and new technology. That article worked out, from independent data sources and research online, that families in the UK spend about £6,000 during the first year of their baby's life—wow! That will be the price of some people's new mortgage rate, so that becomes a big problem. That cost is for the mummy who is able to breastfeed. Many do, but those who cannot must add on the cost of milk, sterilising equipment, bottles and so on, and there are endless other costs that can become real burdens.

The Smart Cells budget includes £350 for a year's worth of clothing. My wife is a grandmother now—we have six grandchildren. The last, Ezra, was born in October, and is now eight months old. He is a lovely wee boy—I do not say that just because he is my grandchild—and we love him greatly. I cannot understand how my son, Luke, and Rachael can find the money to look after Ezra when they already have wee Freya. They wanted two children, but at the end of the day a real burden comes with that.

I believe I am in touch with the normal families in my constituency. My sons are in the baby stage, and I know from them and my wife—Sandra tells me this all the time—about the financial strain they are under. My oldest son, Jamie, told me at the weekend that he had to fix his car. It needed new brakes, a new battery and other work done, and all of a sudden it was £600. That comes out of his month's wage. His new mortgage rate will have to be paid; that money has to be found. That is where we are. For some, the parents are able to step in—the bank of granny and grandad is sometimes really important in helping with the purchase of a pram or a cot—but for many families, the strain is obvious. The matter of statutory parental leave must be addressed.

Way back in 1987, when Sandra and I got married and our first child arrived, my mother presented us with us with a cot that she had kept. It was the same cot that I was reared in. Nothing is ever thrown out in our house, so we got the benefit of that. We still have it, and

we will pass it on to the next generation. That is what Ulster Scots people do: we make good use of what we have.

The rates at which the statutory payments for parental leave are made come in two types. One is 90% of the person's normal weekly earnings, and one is a flat rate, which is currently £172.48 a week. The payments are at the 90% rate for the first six weeks, followed by whichever is lower of the 90% rate or the flat rate for the remaining 33 weeks. A child benefit entitlement is also paid, which covers the cost of nappies and wipes for many children—never mind the additional heating. You cannot have a cold house for a new baby—it cannot happen. That is not on. There are so many things that people need to have for their baby, and we must understand that. Those extra costs become real issues.

If a family is working, their entitlement to a Healthy Start maternity grant is severely limited. Perhaps the Minister may be able to speak about that, because it was mentioned by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North, who set the scene so well. The Government have not upped the earnings brackets in line with inflation, and yet again it appears that those who are hardest hit are those on low incomes. These are changes that must be made—and made soon. If I were to ask the Minister for one thing specifically, it would be to ensure that the Government respond. In that response, I hope that the Minister can give us some encouragement and help. For some women, the thought of returning to work after a year is difficult, while for others staying off for more than their six weeks at 90% is impossible. It is clear that more must be done.

I will give a brief snapshot of some other countries. As the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North mentioned, Bulgaria offers new parents an incredible 410 days of paid leave. We should be matching Bulgaria. Bulgaria's maternity leave covers 90% of the employee's salary through social security. All the Scandinavian countries are equally generous when it comes to maternity leave, and Norway is no exception. Norway has a flexible option that allows new mothers to take up to 59 weeks on maternity leave paid at an 80% pay rate, or 49 weeks at full pay. Again, I give those as examples because I think it illustrates what other countries are doing and where they see the need to help. The father can choose to take up to 10 weeks, or no leave at all, depending on the wife's income.

Those countries seem to accept the importance of enabling family units to learn to be family units at the hardest times. When a crying child enters a home, we know that we have to reach out to help. The pressure on mum and dad is incredible. When the weight of today's finances is added in, many families cannot take the strain. It is my belief that we in this place must seriously consider our obligations and increase the maternity allowance and the statutory maternity payment for every person. We should not simply accept that those who work in the civil service or in a health trust can take six months off, while the mummy in the local shop, who we see in our office every day, is back to work after six weeks through necessity.

Last night, a lady at home was talking about what would happen if her mortgage changes. She already faces pressures on childcare, and has to take time off from her business for it, which means her income is reduced. There are so many equations in this issue, and



[*Jim Shannon*]

we really do need fairness. I support the calls of colleagues in this place for change to be a priority for Government. In the paper last week there was a suggestion of tax relief for those with larger mortgages. Although that may not directly be an issue for the Minister today, if we are going to do something practical, honest and physically helpful for people, let us do that. We should have tax relief for the extra mortgage costs that may come through. If we do that, we will take the pressure off and ensure that people can retain the homes that they have already invested so much in and, at the same time, have their family.

I want to support families. The Government are clear that family is a priority. The Minister has said that before in debates in this House, and I know that others have said it. If that is true, and not simply words, we need to do better. Maternity pay is one such way of doing better by our families, along with childcare help and an increase to the child benefit threshold. We can and must make immediate changes. I look to the Minister to make those necessary steps.

I am very pleased to be part of the debate, and to represent my constituents who asked me to raise these issues. When I noticed that the debate had been scheduled, about a fortnight ago, I had already committed myself to coming here and making the case. We are all indebted to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North for setting the scene, and I look forward to what my friend, the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) will say. I know that we are all saying the same thing, and singing from the same hymn sheet. We all look to the Minister for a positive response.

5.9 pm

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. I join the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in paying tribute to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for opening the debate. I also welcome Ms Sheridan to the Gallery and thank her for creating the petition.

To pick up where the hon. Member for Strangford left off, I have a great deal of sympathy for the proposal that we introduce some sort of salary sacrifice scheme for mortgages. The reality is that 2.6 million fixed rate mortgages are due to expire before the end of the year. Unfortunately, my fixed rate mortgage expired in October, so my mortgage has doubled in the course of the last year. As a Member of Parliament, I can obviously absorb that cost to a certain extent, but as the hon. Member for Strangford outlined, for far too many families that will simply not be the case. It is perhaps no surprise that mothers are, for example, facing the indignity of having to ask for formula to be taken from behind the counter because there is a fear that it could be shoplifted.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North was spot on about the cost of living crisis. It has certainly been my party's No. 1 priority; we have been doing everything in our power to support our constituents throughout this incredibly difficult time. It is because I have seen the impact of the crisis on my constituents day in and day out that I wanted to take part in today's debate. I have seen the frankly devastating consequences

of my constituents being unable to afford their weekly food shop and struggling to pay their energy bills. That is an irony that is not lost on people who live on an island that is energy-rich.

While the pervasive crisis is clearly impacting everyone, the parents of young families are perhaps feeling the belt tightening the most. I caution colleagues that it is not necessarily a new issue; the Government in Westminster sadly have a long and torrid history of penalising young and single-parent households in particular. The SNP has consistently urged the British Government to improve parental leave and pay. Upon arriving here in 2017, I spent my first few years using just about every parliamentary mechanism possible to push the Government to introduce legislation that would give additional leave and pay to parents such as myself who had premature or sick babies, in addition to the maternity and paternity leave and pay that they are entitled to.

Whenever I leave this place, the proudest moment of my time as an MP will still be when my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) chose to take on that cause for his private Member's Bill, which I am pleased received Royal Assent last month. In short, it means that parents of premature and sick babies, as we were with Isaac and Jessica, will never again have to go through that terrible time. I pay tribute to all who joined that long and hard-fought campaign. The legislation will change the lives of thousands of families and will undoubtedly make life that little bit easier for parents who are already experiencing a difficult time.

We have come so far, but we have so much further to go. Another colleague and friend of mine, my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), has campaigned tirelessly for paid leave for anyone who has suffered a miscarriage. Alongside those campaigns, my party has continually—as have others, to be fair—called on the British Government to improve parental leave and pay generally. That issue is more important than ever, not just in the face of the ongoing cost of living crisis but in recognition that the world of work is changing.

Against the backdrop of the cost of living crisis, it is concerning that among OECD countries the UK has the second-lowest payment rates for maternity leave. Less than one third of gross average earnings are replaced by maternity leave and despite lengthy maternity leave entitlements, full-rate equivalent paid maternity leave lasts for only 12 weeks.

As a Scottish National party MP, I obviously disagree with the fact that employment law is reserved to lawmakers here in Westminster. Similarly, I remain bemused, as does the Scottish Trades Union Congress, that the Labour party refuses to support the devolution of employment law. But while such powers still rest here, I must urge the British Government to increase maternity and paternity pay, to review the eligibility for maternity allowance and to give partners an additional 12 weeks' paid leave on a non-transferable "use it or lose it" basis within shared parental leave.

It is truly appalling that many workers still do not qualify for statutory maternity leave and pay, including those on insecure contracts, such as zero-hours workers. That is why the Conservative Government must act urgently to rectify this injustice by legislating to expand eligibility for statutory maternity leave and pay. However,

the reality is that the British social security system is unjust and penalises parents, particularly young families. I am fed up doing so, but I again ask the Government to bring forward the long-awaited employment Bill that could deal with some of these issues.

As the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North outlined on its behalf, the Petitions Committee has highlighted before that there is a real disparity in the treatment of maternity allowance and statutory maternity pay, particularly when it comes to universal credit, which further penalises self-employed mothers and those on low incomes. Under the Universal Credit Regulations 2013, and certainly in contrast to statutory maternity pay, maternity allowance is treated as unearned income by the Department for Work and Pensions, and is deducted in full from UC awards. For any of us who operate within the sphere of the DWP, it is clear that maternity allowance and statutory maternity pay should be equalised. I invite the Minister to address that point in her response to the debate.

In addition, the Government must end the young parent penalty in universal credit that denies single parents under the age of 25 the same level of social security as those above that age, pushing those impacted into poverty. I pay tribute to One Parent Families Scotland, which campaigns relentlessly against the young parent penalty.

It has also been a staple element of my party's policy to oppose the two-child limit and its associated rape clause, or—to use the Sunday name that the UK Government prefer—the non-consensual sex exemption. This policy has been on the statute book for far too long. I suspect that the Minister will stand up and talk about the importance of families, but it is rather difficult for her to do so when there is a Government policy that has a state cap on the number of children that the Government will support and, more despicably, a rape clause attached.

These individual policies are all part of a larger picture of a social security system that penalises the very poorest and the most vulnerable. You are a committed Member of the Work and Pensions Committee, Mr McCabe, like myself, so I know that you too see this situation every Wednesday morning when the Committee takes evidence—overwhelming evidence that we need to provide greater support. The evidence that we see is the likes of research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that shows that families with younger children, and particularly lone-parent families, are predominantly headed by women and face a disproportionate risk of poverty.

It is clear that under the Tories, the current social security system is inadequate and is now at the stage where frankly it is falling apart at a time when people need it most. The SNP has long called for the British Government to fix these fundamental flaws. However, the sheer reality is that with 85% of welfare expenditure and income-replacement benefits reserved to this place, our hands in Scotland are tied. Yes, the SNP Government in Holyrood can do what they can, whether that is with the baby box, the best start grant or the limited devolved benefits and powers that we have, but the reality is that the vast majority of welfare decision making remains in the hands of a Tory Government we did not vote for; indeed, we have not voted for a Tory Government since 1955.

I will name just a few policies in Scotland: the fair work first policy promotes fairer work practices across the labour market; the baby box ensures that every child begins life with the essential items it needs; the Scottish child payment, which by the way is not confined to just two children, is now £25 per week and has been described as game-changing by charities; and free childcare is provided to all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds, saving eligible families £5,000 per child per year. I declare an interest as somebody who is a recipient of that.

The SNP is committed to social security being an investment in people, and it is part of the Scottish Government's national mission to tackle child poverty, levels of which are still far too high. In April, all Scottish benefits were uprated in line with inflation, by 10.1%, at a cost of around £430 million. In addition to that, £5.2 billion was invested in benefits expenditure in Budget 2023-24, supporting over 1 million people.

I could go on listing the policies that the Scottish Government have put in place to support low-income families and to tackle child poverty, from the £50 million commitment to the tackling child poverty fund—providing £69.7 million for employability support for parents through the no one left behind approach—to providing £50 million for the whole family wellbeing programme and a further £30 million for the keep the promise plan for care-experienced children and young people. But the reality is that we are doing all this from our devolved budget while trying to mitigate poor welfare decisions, such as the bedroom tax, which is mitigated entirely in Scotland through discretionary housing payments. However, I would always remind people back home that what we spend on nullifying the bedroom tax is money that we cannot spend on health or education, for example. That is just the stark reality.

My party is committed to alleviating poverty and ensuring that people live in a fair and just society. On the other hand, the Conservatives here in London are intent on deepening inequalities and on cementing poverty and hardship across communities in Scotland, where they have no democratic mandate. Yes, we can enact all the policies I mentioned just a moment ago with one hand tied behind our back, but every additional pound that we spend on measures to help with rising costs must be funded from reductions elsewhere, given our largely fixed budget and limited fiscal powers. The Scottish Government are using those limited powers and resources to do everything they can, but this must be matched by the Government here in London. With every day that the UK Government fail to use their reserved powers to adequately tackle the rising cost of living, they are demonstrating that independence is the only way for Scotland to boost incomes and build a fairer society—and having social justice at its heart is so important.

5.22 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr McCabe, and I thank everyone who has spoken in today's debate. Despite the attendance, this is a matter of great importance to millions of people up and down the country. I am sorry to Nicola, the organiser of the petition, that more Members were not here to speak. I am sure we are all aware that other business is catching

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people's attention today, but I hope that those who have heard the debate will see that there is a lot of interest and well-informed opinion about the challenges that new parents face.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for her introduction to the debate, which gave a comprehensive overview of the challenges that new parents face. She mentioned—I will discuss this in a little while—the huge costs that new parents face, which have increased in recent times. There is a chasm between those costs and the rates of statutory maternity pay, which have also been discussed. She gave us a whole range of facts and figures to demonstrate that, and the personal testimonies from mothers she has spoken to illustrate the real difficulties that many people are facing. She mentioned the Government line that maternity pay is in line with other out-of-work benefits, which shows how completely out of touch they are and demonstrates the lack of understanding about the huge workload that any new parent will face.

My hon. Friend rightly identified loopholes in relation to self-employment for adopted parents. Obviously that needs to be addressed, because we know that formally adopting a child is a huge financial commitment, and those financial barriers need to be removed. Her wide-ranging speech touched on childcare costs, the impact that maternity leave can have on a woman's pay for the rest of her life—something that still exists, 50-odd years after the Equal Pay Act 1970 was introduced—and maternal mental health, which is grossly overlooked at times. Her conclusion that having a child is a calculation made on a spreadsheet really hit home. All parents look at that when planning a family, but when we look at the costs households face—huge increases in housing cost, student loan payments, an increased tax burden, pension contributions and childcare costs—we can see how, for many, the sums do not add up, and that brings home what a challenge this is.

It was a pleasure, as always, to hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It would not be a Westminster Hall debate without a contribution from him. Like him, I have three boys. I wonder how similar they are—it would be interesting to compare notes at some point. He made some valuable points about the cost of raising a family, with the cost of the first year being £6,000. It probably feels like more for many because babies grow out of their clothes so quickly and there are all the set-up costs.

We are fortunate in my part of the world that the charity KidsBank, which is based in Chester but operates in Ellesmere Port and Neston, provides new parents with a lot of those essentials. They are all recycled and donated goods, but it is a critical thing for those families who are on the breadline and who need that support. It shows how difficult it is to raise a family.

**David Linden:** The hon. Member makes the powerful point that more often than not it falls to the third sector to step in and support people. Does he agree that it is not a sign of the big society that these groups, however great the work they are doing is, fulfil that need, but a sign of a broken welfare state that is fundamentally beyond repair?

**Justin Madders:** I hope our welfare state is not beyond repair. I sincerely hope that we are able to build back the blocks of society that have been dismantled over the past 13 years, but wherever we turn in society now, we see the third sector stepping in because the state has not been able to meet the demand, and that is a signal that something has gone fundamentally wrong in this country.

Let me return to the contribution of the hon. Member for Strangford, who mentioned mortgage costs. As other Members have mentioned, that will become a huge issue over the next 12 months. As the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said, it is a live issue, and the Government are still grappling with the implications. The hon. Member for Strangford raised the example of Scandinavian countries. Of course, they are always held up as the most progressive examples of welfare support and progressive societies, and I am sure there is something to learn from them.

It is important that we do not see the debate as something that has only happened recently because of the cost of living crisis. Many of the extra pressures are ones that new parents have faced since time began, but they are particularly acute at the moment. In that context, it is important to look at the issue raised in the petition, which is the level of statutory maternity pay. As we know, inflation has skyrocketed in the past two years. Although this year's increase in statutory maternity pay more accurately reflects the economic situation, last year there was an increase in statutory maternity pay of only 3.1% when inflation was running at about 9%. The figures do not capture the full picture, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North mentioned. Inflationary increases in the essentials for parents have been particularly acute. She traded some figures about the costs, and I have a few of my own. We can pick whichever ones we want, but they go far beyond the headline rate of inflation for new parents.

The *Mirror* showed an increase in costs of 38% in a year. The *Guardian* found that the cheapest baby formula had gone up by 22% in a year. First Steps Nutrition Trust showed that the cheapest brands had gone up by 45% in the past two years and other brands had gone up between 17% and 31%. There is a range of percentages that shows how the issue goes way beyond the headline rate of inflation, which statutory maternity pay is based on.

As the recent Sky News report highlighted, theft of formula milk is becoming more prevalent. Is there anything that symbolises more the current crisis in our country than images of formula baby milk stacked on supermarket shelves with security tags around them? That sends a very clear message about what kind of country we are and the crisis we face. As my hon. Friend mentioned, we know how important it is for children to have a healthy start in life and how their formative years can shape the ones that follow. I worry that the fallout from the issues we are talking about now will be with us for many years to come.

On a more positive note, I pay tribute to all the charities and volunteers who do their bit to ensure that everyone has access to food and support when they need it. As the hon. Member for Glasgow East said, that is not something we should accept as the norm. That should not be substituted as a safety net for the state, but, sadly, that is where we are. In my constituency we have great groups that help out, such as West Cheshire food bank, the Whitby Community Cupboard and the People's Pantry at Stanney Grange, which I recall visiting recently



and being told how much demand there was for formula milk and help and how important it was to get donations, which shows how out of reach all that is for many people.

Of course, the issue is not just about formula milk; it is about the general increase in essentials. Food inflation is just under 20% at the moment. Gas and electricity inflation has reached 129% and 67% at various points in the year, and, as we have already discussed, mortgage rates are shooting up for many people, resulting in instant requests for hundreds of pounds extra a month that people simply do not have.

Looking at inflation in a year in isolation does not tell us the full story. If we go back to 2012, the basic rate of statutory maternity pay equated to 62.5% of a 35-hour week on the national minimum wage, but today it equates to 47.3% of a 35-hour week on the same rate of pay. We are towards the bottom of the league table of decent maternity pay in Europe. Women receive only around 25% of average earnings. As the hon. Member for Strangford suggested, countries such as those in Scandinavia do far better on those metrics.

Research conducted by Maternity Action shows that most women have concerns about money, with the number who are worried increasing at an alarming rate as the cost of living crisis bites in very real terms. In 2022, 64% of women who responded to the survey reported being worried about money when pregnant or on maternity leave. That increased to 71% this year. Widespread concerns about money are all-encompassing. Only 2% of those surveyed claimed that they did not worry about money at all. Some 73% of women told Maternity Action that they struggled to buy the things they needed while pregnant or on maternity leave, of whom 18% reported struggling “a lot”. That has practical consequences.

Some 76% of women surveyed reported that they reduced the number of hours their heating was on; 70% turned down their thermostat; and 55% stopped heating whole rooms altogether. As we know, those choices are made reluctantly and have significant consequences, particularly for newborns, who can pick up infections as a result of the cold, damp and mould. Equally, some parents have reported that they have reduced the amount that they spent on food. Half did that by buying less healthy food, more than one third reduced portions or skipped meals, and one quarter prioritised giving food to their children over themselves.

Just listening to the testimony collected shows the stark reality and human cost of this situation. One respondent talked about the impact of cutting back on heating and said:

“We did use the heating less at first but my...baby ended up with pneumonia and a lower left lung infection...so now we have reduced the thermostat instead.”

Another stated:

“I have had days when the only thing I have eaten is the kids’ leftovers. Some days my only meal is toast.”

We know how hard it is to be a parent at the best of times, but being forced to make those kinds of decision can only add to the burden.

Financial insecurity is one huge aspect of motherhood, but job insecurity is another. Research has consistently found massive discrimination at work due to pregnancy. The Equality and Human Rights Commission estimated in 2015 that

“around 54,000 new mothers may be forced out of their jobs”

in some way due to their pregnancies. Pregnant Then Screwed made similar findings in 2020, which were actually based on a larger sample. In between those surveys, the Taylor review also reported that at least one in 10 employers—perhaps as many as one in five—were not willing to support pregnant women and new mothers, and that one third believed that women should have to disclose family plans at an interview and be at the company for at least a year before being able to have children. Such views really belong in the dark ages.

What has the Government’s response been to those shocking revelations? Despite their being a manifesto commitment and being in the 2019 Queen’s Speech, we have seen no expanded protections for pregnant workers and new mothers until this parliamentary Session. Three times in the previous three Sessions, private Members’ Bills were left to flounder, with none receiving a Second Reading. However, thanks to the tireless campaigning and work by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), such legislation has finally received Royal Assent.

It is clear that the Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy and Family Leave) Act 2023 has the potential to better protect pregnant workers and new mothers, although the Act only gives enabling powers to the Secretary of State to pass new regulations; it does not, of itself, introduce new protections. Although the Act received Royal Assent only recently, we see no sign of those regulations. I know that that is not within the Minister’s brief, but could she update us on when those regulations can be expected? If she also told us by how long the protected period will be increased, or at least who will be consulted before such judgments are made, that would be warmly received. Given that the Act gave no indication of the length of the protected period or the requirements there would be for consultations before regulations were issued, there is a concern that we might end up, at the end of the day, with a bit of a damp squib.

Of course, extending a period of protection is only as good as the protection in the first place, and, as we have heard, tens of thousands of women face discrimination under the existing law. A single enforcement body might help to address that. Again, that was being promised in that same Queen’s Speech, but since the employment Bill has not surfaced, it seems that we have little hope of seeing that body in place before the next general election.

I turn briefly to the issue of shared parental leave, which a couple of Members have mentioned. It is clear that it is not working and it needs to be urgently reviewed. The Women’s Budget Group, an independent organisation that monitors the effect of Government policies on men and women, has called the scheme “complicated” and said that, because leave was shared, the onus on taking parental leave still often fell on the women—men tended to earn more, so they would be less likely to want to sacrifice that salary as part of the arrangement. Ros Bragg, the director of Maternity Action, said:

“Shared parental leave was brought in seven years ago now and it’s clear that it’s not working—take up is woeful. Our advice lines are full of parents who want to share parental leave, but confusion around the rules means that they are completely baffled. Add that to the low level of pay on offer, and the system seems almost designed to put parents off sharing leave, rather than encourage it.”

The common view is that the shared parental leave system is too complicated. It is poorly understood by employers and parents; there are low rates of pay;

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and the fact that not all workers qualify, including agency workers, those on zero-hours contracts and the self-employed, means that it needs urgent review. A Government consultation on high-level options for reforming family-related leave and pay, including a right to neonatal leave and pay for parents with premature or sick babies, and proposals to encourage transparency on flexible working and parental leave policies, was launched in July 2019, but the Government have still not published their full response to the consultation. They have addressed some of the proposals, but not all; we are still waiting for the rest.

It seems, as always, that a Labour Government will be needed to come in and address these issues. We will eliminate the restrictive time limits attached to statutory maternity pay, making it a day one right. That will allow women to take control of their family planning. No longer will they be forced to plan one of the most important life decisions around the needs of their employer. We will also extend statutory maternity and paternity leave, as well as urgently review the failed parental leave system. Buttressing those reforms—as well as many others in the new deal for workers, which I encourage hon. Members to review—will be a single enforcement body, which will possess extensive powers enabling it to stand up for workers.

We understand that reforms to employment rights and protections require a multifaceted approach—one that really cannot work through the piecemeal approach we have seen from the Government. After more than a decade in government, the Conservatives are holding back women at work, meaning that a Labour Government, as the last Labour Government did, will stand up for women and bring true equality into the workplace and beyond.

5.41 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank hon. Members for joining us this afternoon. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for introducing the debate so thoughtfully.

As we have heard, being a parent is an incredibly important and rewarding job. It is one that comes with a unique set of challenges, from recovering from birth with a newborn to balancing employment and care and, in my own life, being a sandwich carer, so I absolutely understand the challenges. While I have the floor, I pay tribute to local firefighters who were battling a fire in Burgess Hill in my constituency just this afternoon, with members of the public being sent home and asked to be vigilant after another one yesterday in Sharphorne. If you will indulge me, Mr McCabe, I thank them very much.

An 18-year-old will be coming into my house very shortly, and another teen. As a single mum and a woman returner, I really do get it, and I hope that some of my remarks will reflect that. I will be clear that I cannot answer all the issues, because they are not all in my remit, but I will undertake to write and share what I can and bring other Departments to account.

Last week was Loneliness Awareness Week. As parents, I think we have all felt incredibly lonely and isolated. Being a single parent can be overwhelming and incredibly difficult. It can be hard work; the pressures are not new, but they are definitely challenging right now. Overall, it is a wondrous, joyous slog—let us all be honest about that. Just after fathers' day, we reflect that the boost for gender equality and equal parent support is vital. I thank Nicola for being here today, and all the groups and charities that support parents through this precious and—as we all recall, if ours are a little older—challenging time.

Speaking of baby boxes, on a slightly different point, I remember that my mum and dad gave me a war chest. They had been struggling with long-term illness and not having a huge amount of money, but it was a labour of love and of many trips to Poundland, and it really made a difference. We know that everything makes a difference at the start, when the parent is feeling the pressure and has had a big change in their life, particularly if the child is their first. Of course, added to that are high inflation, the cost of living challenges and global pressures, which make it very difficult to look after that precious little bundle. That is why it is important that in April we increased the rate of all statutory parental payments by 10.1%, in line with CPI, and we will continue to take decisive action to help households. I will outline some more of what we are doing shortly.

It is our firm belief that the best way to help people improve their financial circumstances throughout their life is through work, but, as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North said, only when the time is right. It is important that people are given a choice, so I strongly agree with the points she made. We need to be ambitious in enabling parents to progress in work; it must not be only people without children who can do that, so we need to get things right. We need to support children by enabling their parents to be there when they want. That is equally valuable, and the flexible parental leave entitlements for new parents support just that.

I recognise that this is a complicated area, as hon. Members have said—I have taken their points on board. It is also vital that adopters get a better deal and more assistance. My wider family has experience of that, and it is really important too.

Parents must have access to the range of support and entitlements they need for their child's first year. We are giving working families more choice and flexibility about who cares for their child when the parents are at work. Our statutory maternity leave entitlement is rightly generous, but hon. Members have said it is not generous enough—if only I had a magic wand. We offer 52 weeks of maternity leave, of which 39 are paid through statutory maternity pay. For self-employed women, who are not eligible for statutory maternity pay—I was one, so I very much understand the insecurity—maternity allowance is available. Both payments are designed to enable women to stop working towards the end of their pregnancy and in the precious months after childbirth. That is in their and their baby's best interest; it supports their health, wellbeing and, above all, bonding.

I fully recognise the role that fathers can and must play in that crucial time, their child's first year. We have a real opportunity to boost gender equality and support parents; I will say more about that later. Statutory paternity leave and pay arrangements enable employed

fathers and partners who meet the qualifying conditions to take up to two weeks of paid leave within the first eight weeks following the birth of their child or placement for adoption. Qualifying parents can share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) rightly said that shared parental leave gives mothers who wish to return to work the opportunity to do so, and rightly enables the father or partner to be the primary carer if they wish.

We want more men to confidently take the helm. Employers can really help with that by understanding that dads want and need to be there at key moments, not just the nativity or the parents evening. In fact, I am the guilty party who is never there for the parents evening, so it is flipped around in my world these days. If men can confidently be there, perhaps, as Opposition Members said, we can boost the take-up of the scheme, which started in 2015. We forecasted that between 2% and 8% of eligible couples would take part, and the actual take-up is broadly in line with that. It is increasing each year, but not fast enough. That is the challenge for us all: how we make the scheme something that people really feel they can take part in. In order to do that, the shared parental leave online tool is accessible for parents to check their eligibility and plan their leave together. We are currently evaluating the shared parental leave scheme and will publish our findings in due course.

There has been a clear message today on rates. The rate of all statutory parental payments is reviewed annually and, as mentioned, generally increases in line with the CPI. The Government will spend around £276 billion in 2023-24 on welfare support in Great Britain. I will come to further support for those who may be listening this afternoon who perhaps have not reached out for additional help. I understand the point made by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North about the slightly indelicate link between out of work benefits and the support that we give to parents. I note her comments on that, and pretty much agree with her. I will take that away in terms of how we talk about supporting people who are out of work, and how we support pregnant working women when they are in the special position—let us be honest—of coming to the point when they want to do what is right for them next, and new mothers.

The Government spend approximately £3 billion on maternity payments. There is a balance to strike both in language and in any changes to the rate of SMP, taking account of economic circumstances and affordability for taxpayers. We also need to speak to stakeholders, some of whom have been mentioned, and businesses. It needs to be a holistic effort. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) gave a list of future plans that he may have, but in reality we want to ensure that we hear the asks both of the petitioners who have challenged us this afternoon and of the sectors and businesses, to ensure that we take people on any change journey. We have talked about planning, saving and spreadsheets where needed. I was—briefly, it feels like—married to an accountant, so I felt as if I was living in a world of spreadsheets. It is what we all have to do, and it is a challenge, particularly when we do not know what we do not know when it comes to parenting, and the impact that it will have on our back pocket.

I think employers can do more. The work of the civil service was mentioned. We have a very tight labour market. Consider a talented, skilled, brilliant woman who is adopting or becoming a mum in whatever way, whether for the first time or growing her family. Employers really need to think forward about job design and making it work for such women to return. I mentioned that I am a single mum; when I came to this place, I was a woman returner. Many of us are, and many mums, for various reasons, have been locked out of the labour market for far too long. They have incredible ability and talent. Employers have a chance to look at job design. In my constituency, Boeing has created a deliberate part-time role—not a role where a person squeezes full time into part time, but an actual role where they add value in a way that works for their circumstances. If we have more people in the labour market doing more, everyone will do better, so let us all challenge ourselves on that.

I have been given an extremely long speech, so I will try not to repeat things that many people will know, and will try to answer some of the questions. Hopefully I have covered the way in which things are calculated and equal access for adoptive parents. I agree with the point on the Healthy Start scheme needing a boost with regard to take-up. I will take that away to work on with colleagues. I think the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North made a fair point on outcomes and monitoring, and I note that.

My friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), talked about tax relief, which was reiterated by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden). I am not in the Treasury, and I am delighted about that every day; until I get the call-up, I will pass on that headache for as long as possible. I say that very gently—did I actually say that out loud? My point is that it is a matter for the Treasury. I am sure it is listening and I will leave it to get on with it.

Regarding the Scotland Act 1998, I am delighted that the hon. Member for Glasgow East is using those powers. I note his point about under-25s; that is not my policy area, but he knows that I have a strong interest in youth policy and single parents. I undertake to understand his point and take it away.

For those listening to this debate who have a concern about mortgages, I said on the Floor of the House this afternoon, and I reiterate here, that if people are worried they should engage with their mortgage lender. There is support for mortgage interest out there. We have abolished the zero-earnings rule to allow claimants on universal credit to receive support while in work and on UC—support is now available after three months. People should engage with their lenders. We paid £25 million to 12,000 households in 2021-22 and we will continue to extend that support for mortgage interest rates. People should use the benefits calculator on gov.uk if they are concerned; there is help for households on that site and links to the household support fund, which I will come on to shortly.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East raised a concern about miscarriage leave. Miscarriages are a deeply challenging, personal and devastating experience for many women, as well as their partners and families. In this place we have got better at talking about such things, but it is still too unspoken and difficult in the workplace, which is something a friend of mine recently spoke to me about. The Government believe that individuals are



[*Mims Davies*]

best placed to know their own specific needs, and that good employers will rightly respond in a sensitive way to requests made by employees.

**David Linden:** I do not intend to make this issue a party political point. Knowing the Minister very well, I think there is a genuine willingness to try and fix the issue. It is not something that should be hard. I caution the Government, however, that simply hoping that employers do the right thing is not something that we can rely on in this place. The Minister is right that the vast majority of employers would agree if an employee went to them and said, “I have had a miscarriage. Can I have some time off?” The reason that we legislate in this place is to ensure that the few are looked after. It is for that reason that it is important the Government look again and do not just leave it to the market. They should step in and do what the state does best.

**Mims Davies:** I understand the point the hon. Gentleman makes. It is not an area that I am in charge of, but I am sure that those who are will be listening. Of course, if a woman unfortunately has a miscarriage, there are protections that extend to two weeks after the end of that pregnancy. That is a protection under the Equality Act 2010. I understand, however, the hon. Gentleman’s point about what happens before 24 weeks. This is a difficult one, which is why Nicola and the other petitioners, by bringing the petition to the House and making us focus on all of the issues, did the right thing. I have nearly got myself in enough trouble this afternoon, without creating any more policy in this Chamber, so I will refrain from saying more on that one.

I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s point on the two child policy. We disagree on that point in terms of families on benefits facing the same financial challenges and choices when it comes to growing their family as those who are supported solely through work. It is important that child benefit continues to be paid for all children in eligible families, but it is right that we continue with that policy where appropriate. The hon. Gentleman mentioned those particular exemptions. Again, I note that it is a challenging area.

Opposition Members raised the issue of support for childcare. It is important to provide the right support for parents who are balancing childcare and returning to work. The Government have already put in more than £20 billion in the last five years to support families with the cost of childcare, and thousands of parents have benefited from that support. However, more changes are coming. We announced in the Budget that by 2027-28 we will provide £4.1 billion to expand the current free childcare offer to eligible working parents of children aged between nine and 36 months. I recognise that Government-funded childcare, which is free to the recipient, needs design. That was mentioned to a degree in the Chamber this afternoon. We are expecting to spend more than £8 billion a year on that funding and early education, which represents the biggest ever single investment in childcare in England.

I will quickly cover neonatal pay and pregnancy discrimination and then try to conclude, because I am mindful that I have spoken for some time. We are aware that more needs to be done to support parents whose children are in neonatal care. Many of us in the House

know people personally who have been impacted by this issue. Again, the House has come into its own by talking about it and its impact on families.

In March 2020, following a Government consultation, we committed to introducing a new entitlement to neonatal leave and pay. The Neonatal Care (Leave and Pay) Act 2023 will introduce an entitlement of up to 12 weeks of paid leave for parents whose child is admitted to neonatal care. The entitlement will support new parents during the most stressful days of their lives, ensuring that they can be there for their youngster. The Act received Royal Assent on 24 May this year, and we anticipate that the entitlement will become available to parents in April 2025. I hope that that helps hon. Members.

**David Linden:** The Act was originally my Bill, so I am familiar with it. There is a slight issue with His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs dragging its heels. Notwithstanding what the Minister said about not being a Treasury Minister, will she at least write to HMRC following today’s debate, outlining that there is cross-party agreement? Indeed, the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) has been excellent on this issue. There is cross-party agreement that £50 million has been committed in the budget line, but there is no need for us to wait that long because of the lag in HMRC guidance.

**Mims Davies:** I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point. I know it was a deeply personal Bill for him and he will be strident on this issue. I will take away that ask as he wishes.

I turn to pregnancy and maternity discrimination protections. Ensuring that parents have the leave and flexibility that they need during this period is important, as is ensuring that they are protected against discrimination and do not suffer any detriment for taking that leave. That is why we are rightly extending pregnancy and maternity discrimination protection for those returning from periods of eligible parental leave. The Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy and Family Leave) Act 2023 will enable redundancy protections to apply from the point at which an employee told their employer that they were pregnant, until six months after returning from maternity, adoption or shared parental leave. The provision will protect individuals from redundancy and help mothers to remain, rightly, in the workforce.

Support needs to go way beyond the first year of a child’s life, so it is important that there are further entitlements for others. Time off for dependants is important as well, and I will update the House further on that.

It is important for me to cover flexible working. We are fully committed to ensuring that parents get the support that is right for them. The Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Bill received its Second Reading in the other place on 19 May. That Bill will increase the number of requests that an employee can make in a 12-month period, reduce the time allowed to administer requests, and support more effective conversations about what flexible working arrangements may work to the benefit of both employer and employee. Alongside the Bill, the Government will introduce regulations, as mentioned, to make the right to request flexible working apply from the first day of employment, bringing an estimated additional 2.2 million employees into the

scope of the legislation. My understanding is that as soon as parliamentary time allows, this will be moving forward.

I mentioned cost of living support. Statutory parental pay is only one aspect of Help for Households. There is support worth £94 billion across 2022-23 and 2023-24 to help people with rising bills; the support is worth £3,300 per UK household on average. Included in that are cost of living payments to more than 8 million low-income households, about 6 million disabled people and more than 8 million pensioner households. I would say to anybody, “Please look at the benefits calculator. Please look at Help for Households. Please reach out to your local council or your devolved Administration, because there is extra support out there.”

I will close by reiterating the Government’s commitment to supporting parents as we continue to face high inflation. We understand the added, varied and complex pressures that we have heard about and discussed this afternoon, which parents are experiencing alongside the cost of living and inflation challenges. That is why we have done the right thing with the uprating, in line with CPI, of statutory parental payments—alongside other payments—by 10.1%. We will continue to take decisive action to help all households.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions this afternoon, and the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North for opening this petition debate. I will continue to support women—as long as I have breath, and a seat in this House—in any role that I have. It is great that we all come together on something that is so important. On some areas there will of course be disagreements, but as long as we continue to work together to support parents, at this most difficult time, in any part of our community—I am seeing some of my great local charities, the local food bank and other supporters on Monday; there is additional support from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, by the way, for local charities—we will really make the difference and ensure that no parent, whatever their situation, and no family ever feel alone.

6.8 pm

**Catherine McKinnell:** I thank the Minister for that response, which covered in quite some detail many of the issues that have been raised. I also thank the hon. Members who made contributions today: the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); the SNP shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden); and the Labour shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders).

The Government’s response on broader help for households during this cost of living crisis is clearly welcome, but I worry that speaking in such general terms somewhat neglects the very specific challenges that parents are facing at the moment. I could go back to all the statistics that we have looked at on the impact of the cost of living on parents, and on the challenges around the Government support. The Minister mentioned the headline figures, but the reality for parents that we are hearing—their experience of how anxious they are and how much they are struggling—does not match up to the big numbers that the Government cite.

I want to focus my closing remarks on those mothers and fathers whose struggles have made this debate necessary today. Society’s duty is to look after our next

generation—to protect and nourish them. Parliamentarians and Government in particular have a huge role to play in support of families to do just that. Mothers are crippled by stress, with rocketing prices and the isolation that people experience in society today. The way it is formed means that support is just not available to deal with such a level of crisis as in this acute period.

We have had a lot of talk about parental leave, pushing on paternity leave, but clearly that comes down to money. An awful lot of families cannot afford for the dad as well as the mum to take parental leave; the Minister spoke powerfully about that, and I hope that we see the Government take steps. There is also the absence of Sure Start centres in many localities, which used to provide some of that support for mothers who feel very isolated. We are finally seeing the rebirth, to some extent, of Sure Start through the family hubs, which are very welcome, but there has been that gap, and there is still a real gap.

Many mothers carry the burden on their own. That has been the case for some time, but they are now carrying it with the crushing anxiety of rising prices—I do not know about everyone else, but every time I go to the shops I am shocked by how much the products I buy every week have gone up. Given that isolation, we are seeing worsening maternal mental health: the statistics show that that is with us already. With the economic disenfranchisement and the deeply entrenched inequality, the impact on children of the deepening maternal mental health challenge is already evident.

One of the mums who spoke to me referred to the soaring costs as “always in my head”—constantly, every day, having to work out what to make for dinner and what she can buy from the shops. She says that it is never out of her head. She can already see the impact on her child, who knows now not to ask for anything until payday. That period when nothing can be bought is getting longer, not shorter, every month. Things are getting harder for families, not easier.

From my preparation for the debate, what has been hard is that for many families raising a child is no longer a source of joy and hope; it is a source of stress and anxiety. We cannot sustain that as a society. The call for statutory parental pay is just another addition to the clamour of calls for change, on top of our discussions about the costs of childcare and housing and, before that, about the food bank crisis, which has now become normalised. We are going from a bad situation to a worse one, and we need to turn that around.

I am encouraged by the Minister’s response, and I do not doubt her personal commitment to the issues, but I hope that the Government have listened today to what parents have said. My final word goes to our petition’s creator, Nicola Sheridan, who amid all her preparations during pregnancy for childbirth did the heroic thing of starting a petition to bring the issue to the House to be discussed and debated so that the voices of those struggling parents are heard. I hope she does not mind me saying this, but she did that because she knows that she is the fortunate one and that many are not in as fortunate a position as she is. She has done a truly heroic thing by bringing the issue before Parliament.

The Minister has been restricted in what she can say in response to the debate, but I hope she will take it away and give it to the various Departments that can truly make a difference to the many aspects of our

*[Catherine McKinnell]*

concerns, and that we will see change and see that support for families. The future of our children being born today is too important to leave to chance.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered e-petition 617155, relating to the cost of living and parental leave and pay.

6.15 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Monday 19 June 2023

## INTERNATIONAL TRADE

### Developing Countries Trading Scheme

**The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston):** On 19 June 2023 the developing countries trading scheme entered into force. A written ministerial statement announcing the developing countries trading scheme and detailing proposed changes was issued on 6 September 2022 following the launch of the scheme by the former Trade Secretary on 16 August.

The developing countries trading scheme provides generous access to UK markets for 65 developing countries. The scheme is an important component of the Government efforts to maximise the benefits of trade for developing countries. The scheme delivers greater market access by cutting more tariffs, simplifying rules so more goods qualify for duty free tariffs and enabling more countries to have access to more generous tariffs.

Developing countries trading scheme tariff rates offer tariff savings of over £770 million per year, helping to reduce prices and increase choice for UK consumers, particularly for household items such as clothes and food.

The UK's approach to trade for development as set out in the international development strategy is to combine generous market access with aid for trade and advocacy at the WTO to increase trade with developing countries. By championing free, fair and inclusive trade, the UK maximises the benefits of trade for developing countries whilst building resilient supply chains and markets for the future for the benefit of the UK.

The developing countries trading scheme represents a marked increase in UK market access for developing countries, in particular for 37 least developed countries. When combined with our network of eight economic partnership agreements, the new scheme means that the UK now offers duty free or nearly duty free trade in goods to over 90 developing countries.

In addition to this, the UK has spent over £830 million on aid for trade since 2015, delivering major impact in beneficiary countries by addressing burdensome regulations and delays at customs, increasing the role of women in trade and supporting developing countries to negotiate and implement trade agreements.

Changes to the UK's trade preferences are possible because as an independent trading nation we can go further and offer developing countries one of the most generous sets of trade preferences in the world, surpassing those of the EU and USA. Since its launch the developing countries trading scheme has received widespread praise in developing countries and at the WTO.

Further information on the developing countries trading scheme can be found here:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/trading-with-developing-nations>.

A series of detailed guides has been developed alongside an interactive tool which provides product or country

specific information on tariffs and rules of origin. Digital guides make it easier for businesses to understand and use the scheme.

Developing countries trading scheme regulations can be found at these links:

The Trade Preferences Scheme (Developing Countries Trading Scheme) Regulations 2023:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/id/uksi/2023/561>

Rules of Origin: The Customs (Origin of Chargeable Goods: Developing Countries Trading Scheme) Regulations 2023 ([legislation.gov.uk](http://www.legislation.gov.uk))

[HCWS863]

## BUSINESS AND TRADE

### Post Office: Horizon Compensation

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake):** The Government are determined that postmasters affected by the Horizon IT scandal receive the compensation that they deserve. The historical shortfall scheme has made good progress in achieving this outcome, with over 99% of original claimants receiving an offer to date.

However, the tax treatment of awards has in some cases had the effect of unfairly reducing the net compensation received by postmasters. In particular, the problem that has arisen on the historical shortfall scheme is that awards for loss of earnings are paid as a lump sum through compensation, but if the postmaster had stayed in employment and received that income over several tax years, they may have faced a lower tax bill.

The Government are today announcing that we will support the Post Office with an estimated £26 million of funding to make additional payments to postmasters in the historical shortfall scheme to ensure that compensation is not unduly lost to tax.

Every postmaster involved in the scheme will benefit from these additional payments. To avoid further complexity, the Government intend to legislate to make these additional payments exempt from income tax, capital gains tax and national insurance contributions.

So that payments can be made as swiftly as possible, the top-ups will be calculated so that no postmaster pays more than the basic rate of tax on the taxable elements of their compensation. This approach ensures that postmasters do not need to provide any further information.

Additionally, all claimants involved in the scheme will be able to access funding for tax advice of up to £300 to support them in filling out their tax returns.

[HCWS860]

## CABINET OFFICE

### Procurement Bill: Consultation on Draft Regulations

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart):** One in every three pounds of public money—over £300 billion a year—is spent on public procurement. By improving the way public procurement is regulated, the Government can save the taxpayer money and drive benefits across every region of the country.

Following the UK's exit from the EU, we now have an opportunity to develop and implement a new procurement regime. The Procurement Bill will help deliver the Prime

Minister's promise to grow the economy by creating a simpler and more transparent system that will deliver better value for money, reducing costs for business and the public sector.

The Government want to make it easier for small businesses to work with the public sector by ripping up unnecessary rules and tackling late payment in the supply chain. We will ensure that all public bodies consider small and medium-sized enterprises when designing their procurements.

Following wide-ranging public consultation and stakeholder engagement, and close working with colleagues in the devolved Administrations, we have brought forward legislative proposals to establish the new regime. These measures and the training we will roll out to support them will deliver greater value for the public purse, from huge infrastructure projects to services by local councils.

In support of the Bill, which last week completed Third Reading in this place, I am launching a public consultation on the draft implementing regulations that will form part of the new regime. This consultation, which is highly technical and not seeking views on policy development, will be split into two parts, with the first part of the consultation remaining open until 28 July. The first part of the consultation, announced today, focuses on policy areas that require specific detail, such a calculation of thresholds, or lists of services or organisations, in secondary legislation. The forthcoming second part will address the transparency provisions and notices that will be used by contracting authorities to fulfil their legal requirements under the Bill. The second part will also include information on the proposed approach to transitional arrangements for procurements already underway at the time that the new regime enters into force and the position on other legislation that will need to be amended in order for the full provisions of the Bill to take effect. I expect to launch the second part in July.

The consultation we are publishing today, and laying in Parliament, gives everyone an opportunity to help shape public procurement for the future and I wish to encourage all involved in public procurement to have their say.

[HCWS859]

## TREASURY

### Co-operatives and Friendly Societies: Law Commission Review

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith):** The Government recognise that co-operatives and friendly societies make an important contribution to the growth and diversity of the economy, supporting competition across all sectors of the economy and providing products in the interests of consumers and businesses across the UK.

HM Treasury will therefore be commissioning the Law Commission—an arm's length body of the Ministry of Justice—to conduct reviews of the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 and the Friendly Societies Act 1992. These two pieces of legislation underpin the co-operative movement and the friendly society sector in the UK, respectively.

These reviews will aim to identify necessary updates to the legislation that will set co-operatives and friendly societies up for future growth and success. This will include a comprehensive consultation with interested stakeholders, in line with the terms of reference that will be agreed between HM Treasury and the Law Commission. At the end of the review, the Law Commission will produce a set of recommendations for reform for the Government to consider. Work is expected to start in the autumn.

[HCWS862]

## DEFENCE

### Armed Forces Incentivisation Review

**The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison):** The Haythornthwaite review of armed forces incentivisation (HRAFI) was an independent review of our service personnel's terms and conditions, which the Ministry of Defence committed to undertake in the Defence Command Paper of March 2021.

The final report has been delivered and published on time and is available for all those who wish to study its recommendations. I am also placing a copy of the report in the Library of the House. These recommendations are wide-ranging. They provide a potential roadmap out to the 2030s aimed at improving the proposition to those who serve now, and those who may consider serving in the future. I note the report's acknowledgement of the good work already underway across Defence to improve the lived experience of our service personnel and make it more attractive in a modern workforce marketplace.

The MOD is currently studying the review's recommendations and I will make a formal response in due course, but overall I agree with Rick Haythornthwaite's analysis and his conclusions.

I would like to place on record my thanks to Rick and his team for their work in producing this ambitious and comprehensive review. It is my intention to invite Rick, at an appropriate point after the report has been published and implementation has started, to take stock of our progress towards achieving the vision for our armed forces highlighted by his review.

*Attachments:*

#### 1. Haythornthwaite Review

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-06-19/hcws857>

[HCWS857]

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### European Political Community

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):** On Thursday 1 June, the Prime Minister attended the European Political Community (EPC) summit in Chisinau, Moldova. The summit brought together 49 leaders from across Europe for the second time to discuss common challenges, including strengthening Europe's resilience to hybrid threats, energy security, and illegal migration.

Hosted by Moldova, it was a powerful demonstration of pan-European unity in support of Ukraine and Moldova, in the face of continued Russian aggression.

The Prime Minister co-chaired a security roundtable alongside Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. The Prime Minister outlined the areas where the EPC could helpfully respond: (1) energy security; (2) our ability to deal with aggression and hybrid threats to our continent; and (3) our ability to secure our borders. On the third point specifically, the Prime Minister noted that illegal migration has become a serious issue for Europe requiring a lawful and compassionate approach and should be part of the agenda for the EPC from now on.

The Prime Minister also met with over 20 leaders including with Spanish Prime Minister Sánchez where they discussed Gibraltar and with Bulgarian President Rumen Radev, with whom he confirmed a new UK-Bulgaria partnership to tackle organised immigration crime.

The Prime Minister also met Moldovan Prime Minister Recean and welcomed the UK-Moldova announcement to begin negotiating a readmission agreement, as well as the UK's recent full liberalisation of tariffs to support Moldova's economy. The Prime Minister underlined our continued long-term support to Moldova, including £10 million announced in March to support reforms in the energy sector as well as £12.5 million to UN agencies to support Ukrainian refugees in Moldova. The Prime Minister was also pleased the UK could support the security of the EPC summit including through the participation of the RAF in a joint US-France-Romania-UK exercise during the event.

The Prime Minister reiterated the UK's continued commitment to supporting Ukraine, attending a meeting with Ukrainian President Zelensky and leaders from Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands and Sweden. They took forward discussion on further ways to support Kyiv, including building on the G7 announcements on air capability.

The Government look forward to hosting the EPC summit in the UK in spring 2024, and are working closely with EPC leaders, including Spain who will host in October 2023, to promote coherence across the summits.

[HCWS856]

## UK and Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):** My noble Friend, the Minister of State (Overseas Territories, Commonwealth, Energy, Climate and Environment), Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park, has made the following written ministerial statement:

On Thursday 11 and Friday 12 May, I chaired the tenth UK-Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council in London. The Council was attended by elected leaders and representatives from Anguilla, Ascension Island, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, Pitcairn Islands, St Helena, the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, Tristan da Cunha and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The overseas territories are a core part of the British family. The 14 overseas territories span the globe and allow the UK to lay claim to being a truly global Britain. The UK has a constitutional responsibility to ensure security, good governance and prosperity for the British nationals and inhabitants of the territories.

The key themes of discussion at this year's Council were the partnership between the UK and the overseas territories, law enforcement and irregular migration, economic and financial resilience, environment and climate change, healthcare and maritime strategy.

I, in my capacity as Minister for the Overseas Territories, chaired the Council. Other ministerial colleagues attending the discussions included the Treasury Lords Minister (Baroness Penn), the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), and representatives from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

The Council agreed priorities and set out commitments and areas for joint work in the year ahead. Representatives welcomed the announcement of a new UK Government strategy on the overseas territories, towards a modern partnership, which will be developed in collaboration with overseas territories Governments. The overseas territories also welcomed the announcement that each Government Department will have an assigned Minister responsible for their Department's relationship with the territories. I will chair meetings with these Ministers to ensure all parts of the UK Government are working collectively to provide our overseas territories with the support required.

We discussed the importance of protecting the unique environments and biodiversity in the overseas territories, recognising that the territories are on the frontline of the effects of climate change. Overseas territories leaders reaffirmed their support for net zero and energy transition ambitions. We discussed and agreed a new ministerial-level annual dialogue focused on tackling illicit finance and a technical working group on beneficial ownership transparency.

Representatives welcomed the progress in implementing the long-awaited reforms to the NHS quota system, which brings equity in approach to the overseas territories enabling access to the NHS for a limited number of people from each territory.

We agreed a joint communiqué, which was issued following the conclusion of the conference and was published on the gov.uk website.

The communiqué and associated press statement reflects the joint commitment of the Governments of the overseas territories and the UK to deepen our unique and modern partnership. We will continue to fulfil our constitutional and moral obligations to the overseas territories. In line with the commitment set out in the June 2012 White Paper, "The Overseas Territories: security, success and sustainability", we will continue to report to Parliament on progress by Government Departments.

[HCWS855]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Sight Testing in Special Schools

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien):** I am pleased to announce that NHS England will make available sight testing to all special schools from 2024-25.

We know that children with a learning disability are 28 times more likely to have a serious sight problem, and over 40% require glasses. Whilst free NHS sight tests are available for all children, the Government acknowledge the particular challenges faced by children and young people who attend special school settings in accessing high street sight testing services and also the benefit of these settings in receiving personalised advice on optimising the environment for learning.



The NHS Long Term Plan made a commitment to provide sight testing in special residential schools. To meet that commitment, NHS England commenced a proof-of-concept programme in 2021 to pilot a potential sight testing service model. This pilot was subject to an independent evaluation. As a result of that evaluation, NHSE is proposing to build upon the Long Term Plan commitment and extend provision to all children in special education day schools.

NHS England now intends to undertake a period of engagement with key stakeholders, schools, and the public over summer 2023, in order to share the learning from the proof-of-concept scheme and further develop the care model that will underpin the proposed future of the new expanded sight testing scheme. Following which NHS England will publish a revised service specification and roll-out plans.

Whilst this engagement is undertaken existing contractors will continue to operate under the current proof-of-concept arrangements until such time as NHS England complete its engagement and confirms the future commissioning arrangements.

I hope this will be welcome news and I thank those from across the eye care sector who have helped to shape this valuable service.

[HCWS861]

## LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

### Elections Act 2022: Implementation

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison):** My hon. Friend the Minister for Faith and Communities (Baroness Scott of Brybrook) has made the following written ministerial statement:

Through the Elections Act 2022, Parliament legislated to improve the accountability of the Electoral Commission. Following the electoral fraud exposed in Tower Hamlets, then, Sir Eric Pickles' 2016 report "Securing the Ballot: Review into Electoral Fraud" recommended that a greater emphasis needed to be placed on tackling electoral fraud in Great Britain and that the existing system of oversight of the Electoral Commission by the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission did not provide an effective third-party check on the Commission's performance.

To facilitate scrutiny by the UK Parliament of the Electoral Commission's work while respecting the Commission's operational independence, sections 4A and 4B of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 ("PPERA")—inserted by section 16 of the Elections Act 2022—provided for a power for the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to designate a strategy and policy statement for the Commission.

The draft statement sets out the Government's strategic and policy priorities and the roles and responsibilities of the Commission in enabling the Government to meet those priorities, such as the Government's determination to tackle issues such as voter fraud, to improve accessibility of elections and to improve participation. These are important aims and ones it would be wholly appropriate for an electoral regulator to support. The draft statement also sets out guidance relating to particular matters in respect of which the Commission has functions.

The procedural requirements for the statement—set out in new sections 4C to 4E of PERA—require, among other things, the Secretary of State (Michael Gove) to consider the views of the Electoral Commission, the Speaker's Committee and the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on a draft statement, making any changes the Secretary of State deems necessary, before laying a draft statement and a report on the Government's response to the consultation before Parliament for representations to be made.

On 22 August 2022, the Government published a draft statement on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) and wrote to the statutory consultees as well as Members of the Parliamentary Parties Panel and other relevant stakeholders to inform them about the start of the statutory consultation. The statutory consultation closed on 20 December 2022. We also received and took into consideration comments from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and the Association of Electoral Administrators. The Government are grateful for the consultees' time and engagement with the consultation on the draft statement.

On 8 June 2023, the Government laid before Parliament a document containing the revised draft strategy and policy statement. Specifically, pursuant to section 4C(4) of PERA, the document includes the explanation of the Secretary of State's proposals, those proposals set out in the form of a draft strategy and policy statement and the report prepared in accordance with section 4C(3) of PERA that sets out the Government's response to the consultation carried out in accordance with section 4C(2) of PERA. The Government are clear that the statement must always be compatible with the foundational principle that the Commission should remain operationally independent. The Commission will only be required to have regard to the statement in the exercise of its functions. Notwithstanding this, the Secretary of State has listened to the feedback of the consultees and has amended the draft statement to make a number of clarifications and provide additional reassurances that the statement in no way amounts to the Government directing the Commission.

Pursuant to section 4C(5) and (6) of PERA, this document has been laid before both Houses for a 60-day period within which Members of both Houses may make representations in relation to the document. The Secretary of State must consider these representations, before preparing the draft statement for laying for parliamentary approval. The 60-day period excludes any period when Parliament is dissolved or prorogued, or when both Houses are not sitting for more than four days. It will end on 14 September 2023.

To facilitate parliamentarians' access to the document and exercise of their right to make representations, the document has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses on 13 June.

[HCWS864]

## TRANSPORT

### High Speed 2 Parliamentary Report

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman):** I am reporting continued progress on High Speed 2 (HS2) with the Government's sixth update on HS2 to Parliament.

The Government remain committed to delivering HS2 from London Euston to Manchester and the east midlands to bring our biggest cities and economic regions closer and giving companies and workers more choice about where they locate and live.

Since notice to proceed on phase 1 three years ago, we have seen significant progress on construction of the Birmingham to London section, Royal Assent to the High Speed Rail (West Midlands to Crewe) Act 2021 and the introduction of High Speed Rail (Crewe to Manchester) Bill to Parliament.

On 9 February 2023, Sir Jon Thompson was appointed as the Chair of HS2 Ltd following an extensive search. The Secretary of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) was pleased to meet him and the HS2 Ltd Board in Birmingham on 12 April 2023 to discuss the programme.

Progress on building the railway has been achieved in the face of significant challenges from the effects of covid-19 and the impact of excess inflation driven by the war in Ukraine.

As the Secretary of State for Transport outlined in his written statement to Parliament on 9 March 2023, the Government have acted to balance the nation's books, necessitating deferral of some of the Department for Transport's capital spending including rephasing the delivery of parts of HS2. As set out in previous reports, the Government remain concerned about the increasing projected costs to complete phase 1 reported by HS2 Ltd.

Construction of the Old Oak Common to Birmingham Curzon Street section continues at full pace, which will provide initial passenger services to schedule. There has been notable progress on this section in this period.

HS2's tunnel boring machine (TBM), Dorothy, began and completed her second one-mile tunnel bore under Long Itchington Wood in Warwickshire and the Chiltern TBMs reached the halfway point of their 10-mile drive at Christmas. Six TBM journeys have now been launched on phase 1 and driven a total distance of approximately 14.5 miles. Work is progressing north of Birmingham but has been rephased south of Old Oak Common and at Euston.

We remain committed to delivering HS2 services to Euston. We have decided not to proceed with construction at Euston over the next two years both to reduce expenditure during that period and to address the affordability challenge set out in the recent National Audit Office report. We will use this time to develop a more affordable scheme design that delivers for passengers, the local community and taxpayers.

The Government will not be proceeding to construction on phase 2a—west midlands to Crewe—in the next two years to reduce expenditure. We will use the time to develop mature designs and delivery approaches to ensure that this section is delivered in the most cost-effective way.

The High Speed Rail (Crewe to Manchester) Bill Select Committee Members have now been appointed and the Committee has begun hearing petitions against the Bill and first additional provision (AP1), which gives effect to Parliament's instruction to remove the Golborne Link from the bill while alternatives are considered.

Other notable milestones of the HS2 programme in this reporting period include:

HS2 Ltd and its supply chain have now begun over 1,200 apprenticeships, more than halfway to the target, with the programme now supporting over 28,500 jobs as of March 2023.

There are now 19 diesel-free work sites on the HS2 programme. This is a significant step towards the project's aim to cut carbon emissions during construction and improve air quality for workers and local communities.

In North Warwickshire, the Marston Box Rail Bridge—the world's longest box slide—was successfully installed. During a short closure of the M42 over Christmas 2022, 450 people worked to move the 12,600-tonne box structure 165 metres across the motorway into position.

Despite the global economic challenges, this Government are continuing to invest in the country's future infrastructure. HS2 is not just a railway: it will drive economic growth and opportunities across the country, provide a low-carbon alternative to car travel and domestic flights and train a skilled workforce for the UK's future infrastructure sector.

This report uses data provided by HS2 Ltd for phases 1, 2a, 2b and HS2 East and covers the period between September 2022 and February 2023 inclusive. Unless stated, all figures are presented in 2019 prices. Data on benefits performance is reported on quarterly; the data included in this report is taken from March 2023.

#### *Programme update*

##### *Schedule*

The forecast date for initial HS2 services between Birmingham Curzon Street and Old Oak Common remains within the range of 2029 to 2033.

On the phase 2b western leg, we continue to aim for the delivery of the railway within the estimated delivery-into-service date range of 2035 to 2041, as provided in the Strategic Outline Business Case. The High Speed Rail (Crewe to Manchester) Bill is currently working its way through Parliament.

Following the decision to rephase the construction of Euston and phase 2a, revised delivery-into-service ranges for these elements of the railway will be confirmed once plans have been redeveloped.

##### *Affordability*

As set out in the last Parliamentary Report, HS2 Ltd has advised the Department for Transport (DfT) that its projected costs for phase 1 would exceed the target cost of £40.3 billion if unmitigated.

HS2 Ltd's Executive and Board are currently reviewing the estimate at completion for phase 1. This will assess the previous pressures and further emerging costs as well as the work the Government commissioned from HS2 Ltd to address these pressures.

With around half of the phase 1 budget spent and significant work completed on enabling and main works, this is an appropriate time to review the projected costs against the budget noting that significant judgments remain in any projection. I will update Parliament further once this important work has been concluded and assured.

As reported in the recent National Audit Office report on Euston, the latest proposed target price from the construction partner—Mace Dragados joint venture—is £4.8 billion—around £2.2 billion over HS2 Ltd's budget and a higher cost than the previous design.

I visited the Euston site on 5 April 2023 and saw for myself the challenges of constructing a complex station in a dense urban environment that will integrate with the existing conventional station and London Underground and local transport, as well as enabling oversite development.

Nonetheless, the station is not affordable at this cost, nor in any case, does the Government have the financial headroom to proceed with the construction over the next two years. We will, therefore, use the time to look again at the Euston station design to ensure it delivers for passengers, the local community and taxpayers. This will include considering how we might partner with the private sector to capture benefits for customers. It will require careful prioritisation of requirements and a willingness from stakeholders to compromise.

I welcome the NAO's report and recommendations, and we will act upon them as we look again. Officials are now working with the Euston Partnership, HS2 Ltd and Mace Dragados to understand the causes of the additional costs and to develop alternative delivery options. I will update Parliament as this work progresses through future publications of this report.

As it was noted in the last Parliamentary report, like the rest of the economy, the HS2 programme has experienced higher-than-expected levels of inflation, which HS2 Ltd is actively seeking to mitigate alongside its supply chain.

The Secretary of State's written statement to Parliament of 9 March 2023 outlined the action we have taken over the short term to rephase certain parts of the programme in order to live within annual cash budgets.

HS2 Ltd is working with its supply chain to understand the wider cost and schedule implications for the programme, including identifying mitigations that seek to protect taxpayer value-for-money from these deferrals. Nonetheless, the decisions I have made will ensure that spending on the programme in the next two years remains within the annual budgets that have been allocated to HS2, and reflect the need to manage the inflationary pressures that the UK is facing.

Reporting progress on the programme in 2019 values does not reflect the significant inflation that has occurred since and I intend to work with HM Treasury to update the price base.

#### *Delivery*

Phase 1 delivery continues to build momentum with around 350 active construction sites between the West Midlands and London. Six years after beginning work, all the early works contractors have now left sites having prepared them for the main work civils contractors who are entering peak construction effort this year.

Tunnel drives are making good progress across all three sites. In March 2023, the TBM named Dorothy completed its work under Long Itchington Wood in Warwickshire, completing its second one-mile drive and marking the first complete twin-bore tunnel across the project. In the Chilterns, the TBMs called Florence and Cecilia have successfully reached Amersham Vent Shaft, which represents the halfway point of their 10-mile drive. Sushila and Caroline, the two TBMs used to create the first section of tunnel that will make up the 8.4-mile Northolt Tunnels between West Ruislip and Old Oak Common station, are also making progress.

Overall, five of the 10 TBMs boring the tunnels for the route have launched, two of the 12 TBM journeys are now complete and approximately 14.5 miles have been dug.

In November 2022, I attended the launch of a 1.7-mile-long conveyor system that is removing spoil excavated from three London construction sites: Old Oak Common Station, Victoria Road Crossover Box and Atlas Road. The conveyor transports excavated material to Willesden Euro Terminal, where earth is processed and then removed by rail freight to three sustainable sites in Kent, Rugby and Cambridgeshire, significantly reducing HS2's carbon footprint.

To date, approximately 125,000 tonnes of excavated material has been transported by the conveyor, removing circa 7,400 lorries from the roads, significantly reducing the traffic congestion and carbon emissions for residents.

At Old Oak Common, the excavation of the underground box that will house the subterranean HS2 station platforms is well underway. In line with the programme, groundworks for the conventional rail station that will accommodate eight platforms on the realigned Great Western mainline and relief lines commenced in October 2022, which together will provide a step change in connectivity for the area. This is a crucial step forward in realising the potential for creation of jobs and provision of housing enabled by the station, which together with the Mayor we are working hard to achieve.

Stage 1 of the 2 two stage design and build contracts for Birmingham Curzon Street Station and Interchange Station at Solihull are expected to conclude later this year, subject to agreement of affordable target prices.

HS2 Ltd continues tendering for phase 1 and 2a rail systems packages, including track, catenary, mechanical and electrical power, control and communications. The tendering process has been extended to clarify scope and provide opportunity for tenderers to submit updated competitive bids.

On phase 2a, early environmental works have demonstrated good progress, with design complete for all sites. Five utility diversions have been completed along the phase 2a route. These have predominantly related to diversions of high-pressure gas pipelines, which are works that only the network provider can perform and have annual windows for outages that constrain when works can be done. Further construction work will be suspended for the next two years, but we expect to continue some design work in preparation for the start of major construction works.

On the phase 2b Western Leg, the High Speed Rail (Crewe to Manchester) Bill had its second reading in June 2022 and it was remitted to a Select Committee. The first additional provision (AP1) was deposited on 6 July 2022 and a further additional provision will be deposited shortly. The committee is continuing its work hearing petitions against both the bill and AP1. While the bill progresses through Parliament, HS2 Ltd is working to develop a robust future delivery strategy for the scheme applying lessons from phase 1.

The Government have committed to progressing HS2 East, which is currently in its development stage. HS2 East will feature a new high-speed line between the West Midlands and East Midlands, which will allow



HS2 to serve Nottingham and Sheffield (via Derby and Chesterfield). HS2 Ltd and Network Rail are undertaking work to develop advice on these plans, in conjunction with work by Network Rail to electrify the Midland Main Line. The output of this work will be used to inform future decisions by the government on how to progress the scheme, including how HS2 East can support economic growth aspirations in the East Midlands and South Yorkshire.

### *Benefits*

#### *Growth and opportunities for local communities*

We are committed to bringing the transformational benefits of HS2 to places as soon as possible. HS2 will act as a catalyst for growth around new station sites and this is already well underway at station sites along the route.

At Old Oak Common, work continues to strengthen collaboration with the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation, the London Mayor and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to bring forward regeneration proposals for the area around the station, with a projected 25,500 new homes and 56,000 new jobs.

Through regional development, HS2 will provide an opportunity to level up the economies of the midlands and the north.

At Interchange Station in Solihull, HS2 Ltd continues to work collaboratively with private and public sector stakeholders to support local ambitions to realise the economic and social benefits of HS2 and provide up to 30,000 new jobs and 3,000 new homes through a high-quality masterplan for development.

In the heart of Birmingham, the West Midlands Combined Authority anticipates 19,600 new jobs and 2,200 additional new homes around the Curzon Street area. DfT and HS2 Ltd are also working closely with DLUHC to make sure that wider regeneration is delivered at Crewe.

HS2 offers an unprecedented opportunity to transform local areas. We are developing an HS2 local growth action plan outlining how this Government will continue to work with host station places to support their local growth ambitions. Alongside this, later this year, we will publish an HS2 investment leaflet and brochure showcasing HS2 places to potential investors.

#### *Green transport for a net-zero future*

Environmental sustainability is integral to HS2's design, with huge efforts being made to minimise the impact of construction on biodiversity, to limit the level of carbon emissions during construction and to respect people and places.

HS2 Ltd's latest Environmental sustainability progress report was published in December 2022, highlighting key environmental achievements, including how we are continuing to update designs on the project to minimise impacts to sensitive habitats. For example, on phase 1, we have now reduced the ancient woodland impacted by construction by a third.

HS2 Ltd is leading on the decarbonisation of the construction industry.

I was pleased to confirm in December 2022 that HS2 Ltd had launched a Diesel free plan, which sets out how all HS2 construction sites will eliminate diesel use by 2029. Good progress is being made with 19 construction sites on the project now operating completely diesel-free.

Further efforts to reduce carbon emissions in construction include the launch of a construction railhead in Aylesbury to move more materials by rail and the 1.7-mile conveyor system in West London. These initiatives will remove over one million lorry journeys from local roads, improving air quality around sites and reducing noise pollution and traffic impacts for local communities.

HS2 will be an important part of the sustainable transport network. The programme will improve active travel opportunities such as cycling and walking, creating a sustainable transport legacy for local communities.

HS2 Ltd has appointed an active travel team to oversee the delivery of facilities for more cycling and walking in 20 locations across phase 1 and to assess five locations on phase 2a. HS2 Ltd has continued to assess opportunities to repurpose some sections of haul roads and access routes into cycling and walking routes, where local communities are in agreement.

#### *Skilled workers for an innovative industry*

HS2 is playing a significant role in growing skills for the wider construction industry and today is supporting over 28,500 jobs. The programme celebrated its 1,000th new apprentice and is now over halfway to its target of creating 2,000 apprenticeships over the course of the programme, with over 1,200 apprentices recruited to date. Over 3,200 people who were previously unemployed have been supported into work on the project.

HS2 continues to support businesses across the UK—there are over 3,000 unique UK businesses in the supply chain and over 61% of the overall supply chain are small or medium-sized enterprises. The HS2 supply chain continues to beat industry averages for female and BAME employees, achieving 28% and 23% respectively.

Following the spring Budget 2023 and in light of the rephasing of parts of HS2, we anticipate that some roles will be redeployed within the programme, or individuals will secure relevant employment that builds on the skills they have gained working on HS2.

HS2 is helping to train a skilled workforce for the UK's future construction industry and it is expected that many of those currently working on HS2 will, in the future, go on to work on other infrastructure programmes in skilled, well-paid jobs.

Innovation across the programme is making HS2 more efficient—HS2 Ltd has established an ecosystem of innovative partners across a world-class supply chain, leading academic frameworks from infrastructure and rail, and an entrepreneurial accelerator to boost and scale digital technology start-ups into the sector.

#### *Local community impact and engagement*

The decision to rephase construction for phase 2a and Euston will lead to increased uncertainty around the schedule and status of HS2 works in these areas and we are sympathetic to the prolonged impact on some local communities in the areas where we have rephased work. HS2 Ltd will continue to focus its community

engagement to address any uncertainty and ensure that affected communities and residents are kept informed and involved.

The Independent Construction Commissioner and Residents' Commissioner will continue to report regularly on the delivery of HS2 works, including on the impact of delays and uncertainty, and provide assurance that HS2 is still being delivered in a considerate, efficient and responsible way.

The HS2 Helpdesk has now recorded 204,918 enquiries since its launch in 2018. Of the overall enquiries, 5,469 have been complaints, of which 100% of urgent construction enquiries and complaints have been responded to within 2 working days between April 2022 and February 2023. HS2 Ltd received 1,032 complaints between April 2022 and February 2023. This compares with 1,515 for the same period in 2021 to 2022, a decrease of 32%.

The volume of anti-HS2 protestor activity has decreased significantly since September 2022 when the High Court granted HS2 Ltd an injunction prohibiting trespass on, and obstruction of access to, land acquired. There are currently no protestor sites that directly threaten safety, the supply chain or the delivery of HS2. HS2 Ltd is currently seeking an extension and renewal of the injunction.

To date, illegal protest has cost the project an estimated £38 million in direct costs and around £113 million in consequential costs such as delays.

HS2's community and business funds, the Community and Environment Fund and the Business and Local Economy Fund, are helping to leave a positive legacy in areas affected by construction near the new railway. Over £15 million has so far been granted to 268 projects from Crewe to London, helping to attract over £65 million in additional match funding.

#### *Land and property*

We continue to acquire land between the west midlands and Crewe to meet the five-year limit set by Parliament for phase 2a.

We continue to protect the route from the west midlands to Manchester from alternative development by means of safeguarding directions. We also maintain current safeguarding and property schemes across the Eastern Leg and committed in the Integrated Rail Plan that this will remain in place until final decisions on routing HS2 services to Leeds are made.

We are publishing research into attitudes to a variation to the Need to Sell non-statutory scheme alongside this report. We have concluded that pursuing the variation further is not justified, as any potential improvements it offers to the existing scheme appear marginal.

#### *Programme governance and controls*

Following a comprehensive search, on 9 February 2023, the Secretary of State for Transport announced the appointment of Sir Jonathan Thompson as the new Chair of HS2 Ltd. He will be supported by Elaine Holt, whom the Secretary of State has asked to take on the role of Deputy Chair and reappointed for a further term on the HS2 Ltd Board, alongside Dame Judith Hackitt and Stephen Hughes.

These appointments are critical to ensuring the HS2 Ltd Board has the right capability to oversee the delivery of this large and complex project and ensure benefits are fully realised.

#### *Forward look*

On phase 1, as we enter peak construction there will be more earth moved, more concrete poured and more visible progress of construction above ground.

HS2 Ltd has appointed a managing director for the rail systems alliance, the team that will be responsible for delivering systems packages including track installation, overhead catenary and high-voltage power in a collaborative and integrated model.

In the coming months, HS2 Ltd will continue to develop its internal processes and capabilities, including governance arrangements, to manage the integration risk between the 14 different systems suppliers in advance of appointing contractors.

On the phase 2b Western Leg, ongoing design development work has enabled HS2 Ltd to identify further scheme changes that may be brought forward in relation to highway, environmental mitigation and utility works. Some of these changes will be proposed in a second additional provision (AP2), focusing on the northern part of the route between Crewe and Manchester.

The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) trailblazer deeper devolution deal, in addition to highlighting the benefits of HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail for Greater Manchester, confirmed the GMCA's commitment to engage meaningfully on a locally led funding strategy for scope in the High Speed Rail (Crewe to Manchester) Bill. This is subject to a local funding contribution, with the expectation of significant progress by the end of 2023.<sup>1</sup> I welcome this commitment and look forward to progress being made on these issues.

I will continue to engage closely with Parliament and provide an update in the next publication of this report.

#### *Financial Annex <sup>[1]</sup>*

##### Forecast costs by phase—2019 prices.

Phase	Target cost (£ billion)	Total estimate cost range (£ billion) <sup>[3]</sup>
One	40.3	35 to 45
2a	To be determined	5 to 7
2b Western Leg	To be determined	13 to 19 <sup>[4]</sup>
HS2 East (West to East Midlands) <sup>[5]</sup>	To be determined	To be determined

<sup>[1]</sup> The numbers set out in the tables have been rounded to aid legibility. Due to this, they do not always tally.

<sup>[2]</sup> In line with the approach for phase 1, Target Costs for phases 2a and 2b Western Leg will be agreed once the respective phases receive Notice to Proceed.

<sup>[3]</sup> Rounded to the nearest billion.

<sup>[4]</sup> Removal of the Golborne Link from the scope of the phase 2b Western Leg Bill scheme reduces the overall estimated cost range of the phase 2b Western Leg to £13 billion—£19 billion.

<sup>[5]</sup> The Government confirmed in the Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) that a high-speed line between the West and East Midlands (known as HS2 East) will be taken forward, with HS2 trains continuing to Nottingham and to Chesterfield/Sheffield (via Derby) on the upgraded conventional rail network.

Historic and forecast expenditure—2019 prices, including land and property.

Phase	Overall spend to date (£ billion)	2022 to 2023 budget (£ billion)	2022 to 2023 forecast (£ billion)	Variance (3 billion)
One <sup>[6]</sup>	22.5	5	5.5	0.5 <sup>[7]</sup>
2a	0.9	0.3	0.2	-0.1
2b Western Leg	0.7	0.3	0.1	-0.1
HS2 East (West to East Midlands) and East Midlands to Leeds HS2 Eastern Leg (West Midlands to Leeds)	0.7 <sup>[8]</sup>	0.1	0.0	-0.1
Total	24.7	5.7	5.8	0.1

<sup>[6]</sup> Spend to date includes a £1 billion liability (provision) representing the Department's obligation to purchase land and property.

<sup>[7]</sup> The total variance of £0.5 billion on phase 1 is due primarily to additional design costs within the main works civils contracts (MWCC), and additional costs across Stations.

<sup>[8]</sup> The Government are proceeding with HS2 East—the new high-speed line between the West and East Midlands—HS2 East—and is providing £100 million to look at the most effective way to run HS2 trains to Leeds, including understanding the most optimal solution for Leeds Station capacity, and starting work on the new West Yorkshire Mass Transit System. As at the end of August 2022, £0.65 billion had been spent developing the HS2 Eastern Leg to Leeds, including workforce costs. A substantial proportion of this has been spent on HS2 East—the West to East Midlands section of the HS2 Eastern Leg, which is proceeding as confirmed in the IRP. The £0.15 billion has been spent on land and property along the full HS2 Eastern Leg to Leeds, and again a substantial proportion of that land and property spend is along the section confirmed in the IRP between the West and East Midlands. Any land or property not ultimately required for the railway will be resold, enabling the Government to recover costs.

Evolution of phase 1 HS2 Ltd contingency—2019 prices—drawdown over last five Parliamentary reports.

	Oct 2020 report (£ billion)	Mar 2021 report (£ billion)	Oct 2021 report (£ billion)	Mar 2022 report (£ billion)	Oct 2022 report (£ billion)	May 2023 report (rounded to billions)
Total HS2 Ltd contingency drawdown and % used	0.3 (5%)	0.4 (7%)	0.8 (14%)	1.3 (23%)	1.5 (28%)	1.83 (33%)
Total HS2 Ltd contingency remaining	5.3 (95%)	5.2 (93%)	4.8 (86%)	4.3 (77%)	4.0 (72%)	3.7 (67%)

Evolution of phase 1 Government-retained contingency—2019 prices—drawdown over last five Parliamentary reports.

	Oct 2020 report (£ billion)	Mar 2021 report (£ billion)	Oct 2021 report (£ billion)	Mar 2022 report (£ billion)	Oct 2022 report (£ billion)	May 2023 report (£ billion)
Total Government-retained contingency drawdown and % used	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%) <sup>[9]</sup>
Total Government-retained contingency remaining	4.3 (100%)	4.3 (100%)	4.3 (100%)	4.3 (100%)	4.3 (100%)	4.3 (100%)

<sup>[9]</sup> As highlighted in the October 2021 report, £0.015 billion has been allocated to enable Old Oak Common to increase the number of trains it serves before opening services to Euston Station from three to six trains per hour but has not yet been drawn down from Government-retained contingency.

[HCWS858]







# ORAL ANSWERS

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