

**Wednesday
28 June 2023**

**Volume 735
No. 181**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 28 June 2023

House of Commons

Wednesday 28 June 2023

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—
Labour Market

1. **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the strength of the labour market in Scotland. [905581]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): I pay tribute to two great Scots who have sadly died in recent days. Winnie Ewing blazed a trail for women in politics. She was admired by colleagues from all Scotland's parties as one of the most important politicians of her generation. Our thoughts are with her friends and family, particularly her children Fergus and Annabelle. And with Craig Brown's passing on Monday, Scottish football lost a true legend who was held in high regard by players and fans across the country. Again, our thoughts are with his loved ones.

I am encouraged by the resilience that the Scottish labour market has shown, despite global issues still causing significant economic challenges. The latest official figures show that Scottish unemployment is close to a record low at 3.1%. I welcome that fact.

John Stevenson: If we are to grow the Scottish economy as well as the national one, it is vital that we have a skilled workforce and the right level of investment. It is also important for areas such as the Borders, between Scotland and England, to have the least friction in trade and labour market conditions. Does the Secretary of State agree that politicians of all persuasions have a responsibility to ensure maximum opportunities on whichever side of the border, to ensure the least amount of friction, particularly for those looking for employment?

Mr Jack: I agree. That is exactly why this Government introduced the United Kingdom Internal Market Act (2020): to protect frictionless trade across the UK. On maximising opportunities on whichever side of the border, it is a matter of some regret that Scotland is the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom.

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

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State and I represent large, rural constituencies with large hospitality and tourism sectors. Will he therefore name one benefit that ending freedom of movement has brought to the labour market in either sector?

Mr Jack: The Scottish National party likes to blame everything on Brexit, but for the past two years we have had record immigration into the United Kingdom. That is a simple fact—record numbers since immigration figures began.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I had the pleasure and privilege of being elected to the Scottish Parliament in 1999 alongside Winnie Ewing. She was undoubtedly an iconic figure of modern Scottish politics, from the Hamilton by-election to Madame Écosse and the opening of the Scottish Parliament. I always found her to be kind and sympathetic to new Members, and she always had the best stories. May she rest in peace.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the one thing that will reduce confidence in the Scottish labour market is the prospect of another independence referendum—real or de facto?

Mr Jack: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Business does not like uncertainty, and the constant harping on about independence is causing uncertainty among business. The devolved Administration in Scotland should focus on the things that they were set up to do: education standards, the health service, drug deaths and getting some ferries rather than trying to create the island clearances.

Cost of Living

2. **Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the cost of living in Scotland. [905582]

4. **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the impact of cost of living increases on households in Scotland. [905584]

5. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the impact of cost of living increases on households in Scotland. [905585]

7. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the impact of cost of living increases on households in Scotland. [905587]

8. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the cost of living in Scotland. [905588]

11. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the impact of cost of living increases on households in Scotland. [905591]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): These questions show the originality of thought among the Opposition parties. The United Kingdom Government recognise the challenges facing households due to elevated costs of living and so have taken action to protect struggling families with the largest support package in Europe. UK-wide, support to households to help with higher bills is worth £94 billion, or £3,300 per household on average.

Julie Elliott: Over the winter, too many have had to make the decision whether to heat or eat—in fact, too many could not afford to do either. With food inflation well in excess of 15%, and much higher on specific staple items, people simply cannot afford to eat. What advice does the Minister have for households in Scotland, and those in Sunderland who I represent, who are worried about being able to provide food for their families?

John Lamont: Inflation is a problem affecting many western economies, particularly those in Europe, and it is right that this Government continue to provide cost of living support while sticking to our plan to avoid adding unnecessary inflationary pressures. The average household in Scotland receives £1,850 from the UK Government, with the poorest households receiving £2,445. About £5.2 billion was spent in 2022-23, which is more than the Scottish Government's entire annual welfare budget.

Steven Bonnar: After 13 consecutive hikes in interest rates, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned that 1.4 million more householders could face a 20% fall in disposable income. This mortgage crisis started with a disastrous Tory mini-Budget last September and is adding to the cost of living crisis. Will the Minister please explain what the hell his party is doing to clean up the mess it created?

John Lamont: We do not accept that analysis. We recognise that this is a worrying time for homeowners and mortgage holders, but we cannot ignore the fact that interest rates have risen across western economies as a result of the pandemic and the impact of the war in Ukraine. The Government remain committed to responsible economic management to bring inflation back under control, which is the only way to achieve sustainably lower interest rates and mortgage rates.

Peter Grant: It is not just homeowners who are affected by spiralling interest rates; they also contribute to an average rent increase of over 8%. The Scottish Government are doing their bit, using the limited powers they have. They have extended the rent cap and extended the evictions freeze into March, so that nobody in Scotland will be thrown out of their house because they are poor; and of course in Scotland, thanks to the Scottish National party, we are not selling off council houses but building more of them. What exactly are his Government doing to protect tenants in Scotland and to prevent an increase in homelessness?

John Lamont: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know he recently announced that he will be standing down at the next election, and while he and I clearly do not agree politically, his eight years of service to the people of Glenrothes is worthy of recognition.

As I said previously, tackling inflation is this Government's priority. It is the best way to support mortgage holders and the people who rent accommodation.

Chris Stephens: Is the Minister aware of the recent YouGov survey commissioned by Feeding Britain, which shows that, in May, almost one in six adults in Scotland reported that they or someone in their household had accessed food aid in the previous three months? Does he agree that it is now time for the Government to launch a food poverty strategy? Will he support the principles outlined in my private Member's Bill to end food bank use by 2030?

John Lamont: This United Kingdom Government remain absolutely committed to supporting the most vulnerable in society during these difficult times. That is evidenced by our providing support to people who need it the most: for example, over £137.5 billion to pensioners on benefits, £67.9 billion on benefits to support disabled people and people living with health conditions, and a further £114.3 billion on welfare benefits for working-age adults and children. In addition, since April, benefits and state pensions have been uprated by 10.1%. This Government are taking the action that is most required to support the people in most need, and we reject the hon. Gentleman's analysis that we are doing nothing.

Vicky Foxcroft: Under the last Labour Government, absolute child poverty levels in Scotland fell from 40% in 1997 to 20% in 2007, but that has been all but reversed. The SNP Government are not on track to meet their own goal of lowering child poverty to less than 10% by 2030—[*Interruption.*] SNP Members shout, but there is a reason why they do so. What steps are the UK Government taking to ensure that child poverty returns to the low levels last seen under the last Labour Government?

John Lamont: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the failures of the Scottish Government, and SNP Members' reaction shows that they do not like being challenged. They shout, heckle and try to shut down any contrary argument.

As I said, this Government are absolutely committed to supporting the most vulnerable in society. We will continue to support all parts of our society—children, householders and anyone else who needs support during these cost of living pressures.

Alan Brown: Last year, £4.2 billion in balancing costs was added to our energy bills. That means paying wind farm operators to turn off their turbines and at the same time paying gas operators to fire theirs up owing to grid constraints and a lack of storage. However, pumped-storage hydro schemes in Scotland could create 15,000 jobs and lower bills, so why are this Government not fighting tooth and nail to put in place contractual arrangements that would get these schemes up and running?

John Lamont: In relation to the cost of living—the theme of these questions—the energy price guarantee will save households £160 for the period until July, bringing the total Government support for energy bills to £1,500 for a typical household since October 2022. We are also ending the premium paid by more than 4 million UK households for prepayment meters, bringing

their charges into line with those paid by comparable customers using direct debit. This Government are absolutely committed to supporting people who face cost of living pressures.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I know that the Prime Minister and the Government are entirely focused on helping people to deal with those pressures. However, the focus of the SNP Government seems to be elsewhere, as we saw last weekend when the First Minister announced that the next election would be entirely focused on yet another independence referendum. Does the Minister agree that that is the wrong priority for Scotland, and that Scotland's two Governments should be working together to improve the delivery of public services and help people with the cost of living?

John Lamont: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Both of Scotland's Governments—the UK Government and the Scottish Government—should be focused on delivering better public services and supporting people with the cost of living, but instead we hear the SNP cheering about another independence referendum. This Government remain focused on delivering for the people of Scotland; I am just sad that the SNP Government in Edinburgh fail to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Let me join the Secretary of State in his earlier tributes to Winnie Ewing and Craig Brown, both of whom passed away last week, and both of whom will be sadly missed. I hold Craig Brown personally responsible for moments of completely unbridled joy and total heartbreak.

Let me also wish the Secretary of State a happy birthday—a significant birthday—for next week. *[Interruption.]* Whoever shouted “80” from the Back Benchers is not far away from his age, so happy birthday to him.

Nearly five months ago, the Secretary of State promised to arrange a meeting for David Williamson, a Scottish terminal cancer patient, but neither his Department nor the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has been able to do so. I wonder whether that could be sorted out as soon as possible.

Millions of people across the country are facing spiralling mortgage rates and rents. Statistics released by Citizens Advice Scotland this week show that the number of Scottish mortgage holders searching for advice on repossession is up by 341%. Does the Minister agree with the insightful advice from the Prime Minister that worried mortgage payers hit by a Tory mortgage premium should just “hold their nerve”?

John Lamont: I can confirm that the Scotland Office did write to the Department for Health and Social Care about the case of David Williamson, and I will undertake to ensure that we pursue that.

As for mortgage rates, the Government recognise that this is a very concerning time for homeowners and mortgage holders, but we cannot ignore the fact that interest rates have risen across western economies as a result of the pandemic and the impact of the war in Ukraine. Of course, the Bank of England sets the base rate, which has an effect on mortgage pricing—as the hon. Member will recall, it was the Labour Government

who made the Bank independent of Government. As he will also know, last week the Chancellor agreed with mortgage lenders a brand-new mortgage charter, which will hopefully provide some protection and reassurance for mortgage holders.

Ian Murray: The Scotland Office is saying that Scottish mortgage holders should just “hold their nerve”. What the Minister did not include in his list of excuses was the fact that the Tories actually crashed the economy, which has resulted in some of these mortgage interest rates. Is it not incredible that during the worst cost of living crisis in living memory the Prime Minister's entire approach is to tell people to hold their nerve, while the approach of the First Minister in Scotland is to launch proposals for a de facto referendum and a written constitution—something that he himself admits Scottish voters do not want? Scotland has two Governments so out of touch with the priorities of the Scottish people that polling shows that 70% think they are doing little to help with the cost of living. Does the Minister agree that what Scots need and deserve is a UK Labour Government focused solely on delivering the priorities of Scottish voters?

John Lamont: This UK Government are very clear that now is not the time for another independence referendum, but the Labour party so often ends up backing SNP policy after SNP policy in Scotland. As we are approaching the summer holidays, perhaps the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) should take his flip-flops and see whether there is space in the SNP's camper van.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the SNP spokesperson.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his kind words about Winnie Ewing and Craig Brown. Let me pay my own personal tribute to Winnie Ewing, who was such an icon for our party and, almost uniquely, served in three Parliaments—our own Madame Écosse.

At over 19%, food inflation in the UK is 50% higher than among our EU neighbours, yet both the Government and the Labour party seem to be in complete denial about Brexit's contribution to this cost of eating crisis. With 28% of the UK's food coming from Europe, how will the UK Government prevent a new surge in food prices next winter, when extra post-Brexit checks are introduced at the border?

John Lamont: As the Chancellor has said, food price inflation has been a problem in many parts of Europe. In Germany, Sweden, Portugal and Poland, food price inflation is around 20%, so this is not a UK-only problem. The Government are doing everything they can to deal with Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the aftermath of the pandemic. We have one central focus, which is bringing inflation down. We are ensuring that is this Government's one priority.

Dr Whitford: The London School of Economics has shown that a third of food inflation in the UK is due to Brexit. With the loss of freedom of movement and European workers, Brexit has also caused £60 million of Scottish fruit and veg to rot in the fields, threatening farms and further increasing the cost even of domestic

produce. As a Brexiteer, should the Secretary of State not apologise to the Scottish public, including his own constituents, for driving up food prices, and maybe explain why he still supports the proven liar who was one of its main architects?

John Lamont: We do not accept the SNP's analysis. As I have already explained, food inflation is an issue in many parts of Europe. It is a bit rich for an SNP Member to bring up food price inflation and rising costs, especially when leaked papers this morning revealed that SNP Ministers in Edinburgh are discussing raising council tax by up to 22.5%, meaning that some people will end up paying £751 more per year. Under the SNP in Scotland, local government funding has been gutted, forcing councils to slash local services and impose large tax hikes. I will take no lessons from the hon. Member about bringing prices down for households in Scotland.

Allegations of Impropriety in Public Life

3. **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his Department's policies on strengthening the Union of allegations of standards of impropriety in public life. [905583]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): The United Kingdom is the most successful political and economic union in the world—the foundation on which all our businesses and citizens are able to thrive. When we work collaboratively as one United Kingdom, we are safer, stronger and more prosperous; we are better able to draw on the institutions that unite us, such as the health service, the armed forces and our world-class education system; and we are better able to respond to challenges, such as supporting families with the cost of living and leading the international response to Russia's illegal war in Ukraine.

Christian Wakeford: Does the Secretary of State think that the former Prime Minister, who was fined by the police and subsequently found to have knowingly lied to the late Queen, this House and therefore the public, strengthened or weakened the Union?

Mr Jack: The Union has never been stronger, and this Prime Minister has said that those in public life should aspire to the highest standards of propriety.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I think we can all agree about the importance of politicians telling the truth. In that context, has my right hon. Friend seen the video released by the Scottish Government in which Cabinet Secretary Angus Robertson makes a range of spurious claims about devolution being under attack by the UK Government? If so, what does he think of it?

Mr Jack: I did see Angus Robertson's video clip, and I think I counted 16 false claims in the space of one minute and 40 seconds. That is a false claim every six seconds—pretty impressive, even by his standards. As usual, the nationalists are desperate to invent a grievance, but the reality is that the UK Government respect devolution, support it and strengthen it. The only people who want to destroy devolution are the ones who want to rip us out of the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Privileges Committee's conclusions are crystal clear that the former Prime Minister knowingly misled this House and subsequently tried to intimidate the very Committee carrying out the inquiry he set up. Why did the Secretary of State not set an example and vote for the Privileges Committee's report?

Mr Jack: As I said to the media when this question was raised in an interview last week, it was simply because I felt the report was too excessive in its conclusions.

Support for the Energy Industry

6. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for the energy industry in Scotland. [905586]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): Scotland's energy industry is vital to supporting the UK's energy security. This Government have listened to Scotland's energy industry, and we understand the need to encourage industry investment. That is why we recently announced the energy security investment mechanism, which will remove the energy profits levy if oil and gas prices fall to normal levels for a sustained period prior to March 2028.

Alexander Stafford: It is great to hear a cheer for the Secretary of State as he stood up. I am sure he agrees that hydrogen production will be vital to meeting both the UK's energy needs and our net zero targets. Will he set out what the UK Government are doing to promote the development and production of hydrogen in Scotland?

Mr Jack: Low-carbon hydrogen is critical to delivering energy security. It presents a significant growth opportunity and will help the UK to reach net zero. We have doubled our ambition to 10 GW of low-carbon hydrogen production capacity by 2030, and at least half of it will come from electrolytic hydrogen, drawing on the scale up of UK offshore wind, other renewables and, of course, new nuclear.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Will the discussions with the Scottish Government also include the problems with national grid transmission, which means National Grid is paying to turn off wind turbines because it cannot afford to get the electricity they generate to the south of the country?

Mr Jack: By law, transmission network charging is a matter for Ofgem, which is an independent regulator. It has recently produced a report on charging reforms, and the Government are looking at that report.

Productive Forestry

9. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): Whether his Department has had recent discussions with the Scottish Government on supporting productive forestry planting in Scotland. [905589]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): Although forestry is a devolved policy, we continue to work with the devolved Administrations to deliver a UK-wide step change in tree planting and establishment.

Selaine Saxby: Last year, 50% of forestry planting was much-needed productive forestry for our construction and manufacturing industries. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there should now be a new UK-wide target that aims for 60% of new planting to be productive, allowing Scotland to lead the way for the rest of the UK?

Mr Jack: My hon. Friend is a champion for this industry, and it is the UK Government's ambition to increase planting across the United Kingdom. I know she is keen for productive forestry to be used to support the construction and manufacturing industries, which is also the Government's ambition.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Scotland, as in so much else, leads the way on forestry and tree planting, at 10,000 hectares, fully three quarters of all tree planting across these islands. Can the Secretary of State instruct the House on how, around the Cabinet table, he has championed Scotland's progress in this area, or is he too cowering?

Mr Jack: Not only do I champion it, I plant trees myself.

Child Poverty

10. **Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD):** What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on trends in the level of child poverty in Scotland. [905590]

14. **Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD):** What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on trends in the level of child poverty in Scotland. [905595]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): This Government are committed to tackling child poverty and protecting the most vulnerable in society. In the recent Budget, the Chancellor announced additional support measures for households and families across Scotland and, indeed, across all parts of the United Kingdom. A further example of support for families was announced earlier today, with the UK Government making childcare more affordable.

Wendy Chamberlain: Almost 90,000 food parcels were given to children in Scotland last year, and the Trussell Trust's "Hunger in Scotland" report shows that single parents make up only 2% of the population but 17% of those who have gone hungry. This is about insufficiency of income. The adult rate of benefits should be restored to single parents under the age of 25 on universal credit, which would be a practical way for the UK Government to support them. Does the Minister agree?

John Lamont: I recognise the work that the hon. Lady undertakes with the all-party group on food banks. The Government are protecting the most vulnerable, with a £94 billion support package for households, and we have helped nearly 2 million people out of absolute poverty, after housing costs, since 2010.

Christine Jardine: My constituency is not among the poorest in Scotland, but we already have one in 10 children there—in some areas, one in three—living in poverty, with two thirds of them in working families. With the soaring food prices, sky-high mortgage rates and Edinburgh having the highest increase in annual rents in the UK, families are struggling. We know that our Scottish

Government are only interested in independence, so will the Minister tell me what the UK Government are going to do for those families?

John Lamont: The Government recognise the anxiety that people feel about rising mortgages, which is why the Prime Minister's priority is to halve inflation this year. That is the single best way we can keep costs and interest rates down for people, and we have a clear plan to deliver that. The Chancellor also met mortgage lenders last week and has agreed a mortgage charter, covering 75% of the market. We hope that that will provide reassurance to mortgage holders and others affected by this.

Speaker's Statement

12 pm

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in paying tribute to John Angeli OBE, Director of Parliamentary Broadcasting, who is leaving the House service at the end of this week. During his 12 years as director, John not only oversaw the expansion of live video coverage to all public proceedings, but delivered the hybrid capability which enabled Parliament to function during lockdown and, of course, made history with President Zelensky being beamed into this Chamber. He has more recently brought live subtitling and British Sign Language to our proceedings. I am sure I speak on behalf of the whole House in thanking John and wishing him all the best for the future. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [905667] **Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con):** If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 28 June.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): Today, we will have the Second Reading of the Holocaust Memorial Bill. For decades, survivors such as the late Sir Ben Helfgott showed extraordinary courage in sharing their testimonies so that we would never forget. I hope the whole House will unite today to get this Bill through and put those testimonies at the heart of our democracy for generations to come.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Dr Evans: For three years, since I was elected, I have been campaigning to improve health facilities in my community. I am pleased to see significant investment in Leicestershire, with £14 million for a community diagnostic centre in Hinckley and, as part of a £20 billion programme, hospital improvements at the Leicester Royal Infirmary and the Glenfield Hospital. But I am looking for a hat-trick of health in Hinckley—I am looking for a day case unit. The money is already there but it is tied up in red tape. I have raised this issue with the Health Secretary. Will the Prime Minister look to see what he can do, and would he like to come to open the unit next year in Hinckley?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted that since its opening last month the Hinckley CDC has already delivered more than 300 additional tests to the local community. My hon. Friend will know that it is for the local health authorities to determine how to allocate the NHS budget in their area, but I have no doubt that he will continue to make the case to them for a day case unit in his community.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Mr Speaker, may I join your tribute to John and wish him all the best on behalf of the House? I also join the Prime Minister in his comments about the holocaust memorial. I would also like to wish Muslims across the country a happy Eid.

Last week, the Labour party lost Margaret McDonagh, our first female general secretary and a trailblazer in every sense of the word. Margaret provided guidance, leadership and loyal friendship to so many in the Labour movement. It was not long after I started in this job that Margaret was at my door, and I will be forever grateful for the advice and support she gave me. We will all miss her terribly.

The Prime Minister's party spent thousands of pounds on adverts attacking plans to build 300,000 new homes a year. At the same time, his Housing Minister says that it is Tory party policy to build 300,000 new homes a year. So is the Prime Minister for building 300,000 new homes a year or against it?

The Prime Minister: I remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman of our record since being in office: 2.2 million additional homes; housing starts double the number we inherited from the Labour party; more homes meeting the decent homes standard; housing supply up 10% in the last year for which we have figures; and, also in the last year for which we have figures, we saw a 20-year high in the number of first-time buyers. That is a Conservative Government delivering for this country.

Keir Starmer: It was not a difficult question. Can he point to a single person, in housing, construction or anywhere, who thinks that he will actually hit his target of 300,000 new homes a year? Anyone?

The Prime Minister: The record is that in the last three years we have delivered almost record numbers of new home building in every one of those years. He talks about targets, so let us be clear: I promised to put local people in control of new housing and I delivered on that policy within weeks of becoming Prime Minister. But I am confused by the right hon. and learned Gentleman, because first the shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), said "communities should have control", but then he said that we should bring targets back and disempower local people. I want to give him some advice: I do not think it is local people that are the problem—it's the Labour party's policy.

Keir Starmer: Presumably, if he could have identified a single person who thought he would hit his target, he would have told us. There you have the problem: one minute he says he is for building new houses, but the

next he is campaigning against them. The truth is that far from delivering, since he crumbled to his Back Benchers and scrapped mandatory targets, house building has collapsed. He knows it, they know it and every expert is telling them that. Why does he not just admit it? He is not going to get anywhere near his target, is he?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman now claims that he supports house building, especially on the green belt, but unfortunately—

Keir Starmer: Yes.

The Prime Minister: It's good that he agrees that he does believe that now, but unfortunately for him, the shadow Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), the shadow Minister for Women, the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), the shadow Health Minister, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), the shadow Justice Minister, the hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed), the shadow Minister for Defence, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), the shadow Business Minister, the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), the shadow Minister for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), and the shadow Minister for Scotland, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) are all united against more house building in their areas. I have to say to them that they do not have to worry too much, because he has never actually kept a promise he has made.

Keir Starmer: You can tell from his answer, Mr Speaker,—his non-answer—and his body language that he has actually given up. His failure is not just shattering the dream of those who desperately want to own their own home; it is also hitting those who already have a mortgage. Because of the Government's economic chaos, mortgage holders will be £2,900 a year poorer. How can the Government ever look the British people in the eye again and claim to be the party of home ownership?

The Prime Minister: I do not think he has noticed that his shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Wigan, does not actually agree with his new policy of concreting over the green belt. She has been campaigning against development in her own constituency. She said she wanted to "prevent urban sprawl" and

"provide...green space for local people."

I think that is quite sensible, but it is classic Labour—saying one thing here and doing another thing elsewhere. You simply cannot trust a word they say.

Keir Starmer: At least he is not claiming they are the party of home ownership any more, because we are. He's given up. The Prime Minister says he is "100% on it", but his definition of "100% on it" is to gently ask the banks to do the right thing. His softly, softly approach, refusing to put mandatory measures in place, risks leaving a million households without support. How many will have to lose their homes before he will stand up for the people his party have pushed into economic misery?

The Prime Minister: In fact, the vast majority of the mortgage market is now covered by the new mortgage charter that the Chancellor has brought in. That is delivering practical help for mortgage holders, allowing them to extend their terms, switch to interest-only mortgages and saving them hundreds of pounds a month. So instead of scaring them, actually there is now practical support in place.

It is right that he raised home ownership. That is why we, on the Government Benches, introduced a 95% mortgage guarantee scheme. It is why we introduced the first homes and shared ownership schemes to get people on to the housing ladder, and, crucially, it is why we cut stamp duty. Now what we see is the highest number of first-time buyers in 20 years—twice the number that the Labour party ever managed.

Keir Starmer: It is, “housing crisis, what crisis?”, with this Prime Minister. He must be the only person in the country who thinks that enough houses have been built in the past 13 years. Whether it is those dreaming of getting the keys to their first home, or those already with mortgages, the ambitions of families across the country have been crushed by his failing Tory Government: house building at its lowest rate since the war because he cannot stand up to his own party; a Tory mortgage bombshell because they crashed the economy; and millions left without support because he will not make lenders put families first. Rather than lecturing the rest of the country on holding their nerve, why does he not try to locate his?

The Prime Minister: As always, the right hon. and learned Gentleman has not taken the time to understand the detail of what we are doing, so I am happy to explain it again. It is right that we provide support for mortgage owners, which is why we improved the generosity of the Support for Mortgage Interest scheme. It is why we have introduced the new mortgage charter, which, by the way, goes much further than the Labour party's policy on protecting mortgage holders. On house building, we are proud to protect the green belt and invest millions more in developing brownfield sites. The simple truth is that that is what I said I would do, and that is what we have delivered. That is the difference between us: I deliver on my promise, the Leader of the Opposition just breaks his.

Q2. [905668] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): Labour-run Kirklees Council's local plan is seeing hundreds of homes being built on greenfield sites, but the agreed developer levies, the section 106 agreements, which are supposedly for local infrastructure spending, seem to be disappearing into a black hole. Does the Prime Minister agree that agreed infrastructure levies from developers should not be going into a general slush fund? They should be spent on local roads, local schools and local health services for the communities impacted by those developments.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an excellent point. That is why the Government are reforming the section 106 payment system to ensure that new development is matched by new infrastructure. The current system sees far too little of developers' profits going to build new schools, hospitals or transport infrastructure. It is also too slow and plagued by uncertainties and that

particularly hampers smaller local developers. It will be replaced by a new, non-negotiable, locally determined infrastructure levy, which will deliver exactly what my hon. Friend and others want to see—investment in local communities.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP Leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I wish to start by paying tribute to SNP legend Winnie Ewing and to the former manager of Scotland men's national team, Craig Brown, who both sadly passed in recent days, and I send best wishes to all Muslims who are celebrating Eid Mubarak.

On Sunday, the Prime Minister patronised the public when he told them that, in the face of ever-increasing mortgage bills, they simply need to hold their nerve. What a nerve! May I ask him, the near billionaire, when was the last time that he struggled to pay a bill?

The Prime Minister: Mortgage rates are rising because of inflation. That is the root cause, which is why it is absolutely the right policy to halve inflation and reduce it back to target. That does mean that we have to make difficult decisions. That does mean that we have to be patient while those decisions actually have an impact. In the meantime, as I was explaining previously, we are taking practical steps to support mortgage holders across the United Kingdom, particularly through the new Support for Mortgage Interest scheme and the new mortgage charter.

Stephen Flynn: That answer confirms what we already know—this Prime Minister is out of touch and the Tory party is soon to be out of time. What the public really want is change but, in a week when the Conservative party and indeed the Labour party both refused to accept proposals for public sector pay rises, while at the same time accepting the economic damage of Brexit, is it not the case that Westminster offers the people neither real change, nor real hope for the future?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman just exposes the complete economic illiteracy of the SNP's position. His first question talks about the challenges posed to ordinary families by higher interest rates, caused by higher inflation. What does his next question do? Support a policy that would increase Government borrowing and make the situation worse. That just demonstrates, completely candidly, why the SNP's approach to economic management is simply not fit for anyone in the United Kingdom.

Q3. [905669] **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Local police stations are a key part of communities such as Aldridge in my constituency, which is why I continue to make the case to Labour's police and crime commissioner for saving and strengthening the role of Aldridge police station, rather than forcing it to close. Does the Prime Minister agree that any such closure would be reckless, and that police and crime commissioners should be working with local communities and local police teams to provide greater certainty, particularly given the extra 1,376 police officers this Government have put into the west midlands?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to hear about the extra police officers the Government have funded in my right hon. Friend's community, but I am concerned to hear about the planned closure of Aldridge police station. I thank her for raising such an important issue. I know it is one on which she is championing her constituents. As she will know, unfortunately, that is a decision of the locally elected Labour police and crime commissioner, and I join her in urging them to think again.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Lefarydd. The Prime Minister's solution to inflation is to push families into poverty while letting corporate profits pile up. Economic illiteracy? The International Monetary Fund said this week that the way to cut inflation is for companies to cut their profit margins. It is corporate greed that is fuelling inflation, not workers' need for fair play. Can he explain to the one in five people in Wales facing hunger because they cannot afford to buy decent food why they must pay his price for lowering inflation?

The Prime Minister: Actually, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor met with all the economic regulators this morning and they will be making an announcement later about their plans to ensure fairness of pricing in supply chains to ease the burden on consumers. I am glad the right hon. Lady brought up the IMF when it comes to tackling inflation. The IMF, in its words, strongly endorsed our plan to halve inflation and called our steps "decisive and responsible".

Q7. [905673] **Mr Jonathan Lord** (Woking) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, I have been liaising closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and with the Treasury with regard to the terrible news of Woking Council's recent section 114 notice. Does he agree that, in this scenario, the vulnerable must be protected and local councillors of all parties must work together to try to put the council's finances back on the right track?

The Prime Minister: I know my hon. Friend is a great champion for his Woking residents. As he knows, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up has intervened in that authority and appointed commissioners to ensure that decisions are taken that provide the best outcomes for residents, including the most vulnerable, and for the public purse. I agree with him that local councillors should be working together with the commissioners to put the council's finances in order. The commissioners will submit their first report to the Secretary of State setting out progress on the council's path to improvement and financial sustainability, and I look forward with him to seeing further progress.

Q4. [905670] **Sir Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): The Prime Minister has had responsibility for the UK economy now for 1,323 days, and he has delivered—he has delivered the largest national peacetime debt ever, the largest tax burden since the second world war, the highest core inflation since 1991, the fastest interest rate rises since 1989 and the biggest fall in living standards in our history. Will he stop lecturing my constituents about holding their nerve, ditch the lame excuses and admit

that he is literally the worst person to be leading this country through a cost of living crisis, because he created it?

The Prime Minister: Again, what do we hear from the Labour party? Only ideas that would make the situation far worse. It is as simple as that. The hon. Gentleman has sat there and supported plans to borrow tens of billions of pounds more. That would make inflation worse. He has sat there and said that we should not stand up to unaffordable union pay demands. That would make the situation worse. And he has sat there and supported plans to not exploit our domestic sources of energy, imperilling our energy security. Those are all things that would make the situation worse for British families not just today but for years into the future. This Conservative Government will keep doing the right thing to support them.

Q10. [905676] **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): My constituents rely on many nearby hospitals: Milton Keynes, where the Government have committed to a new women and children's hospital; Stoke Mandeville, which has just completed the build of a new children's A&E; but also Wycombe, where infrastructure and maintenance issues in the ageing tower are preventing about 2,000 operations from going ahead every year. My local NHS trust has a plan for a new £200 million clinical centre at Wycombe Hospital. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister work with me and Buckinghamshire colleagues to make that a reality?

The Prime Minister: Although, as my hon. Friend knows, we are no longer inviting further schemes to join the new hospital programme, I can tell him that new schemes will be considered through the rolling programme of capital investment in hospital infrastructure. That will secure the building of new hospitals beyond 2030, and it will mean investment to upgrade the NHS estate across the country. Future plans for that will be set out in spending reviews and fiscal events, but in the meantime, I know that he will continue to make the impassioned case for Wycombe Hospital, and I join him in that.

Q5. [905671] **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): Hundreds of steelworkers are outside Parliament today, and some are in the Gallery, to call on the Prime Minister to act now to back our vital steel industry before it is too late. Will he confirm today that he will match the ambition of the Labour party, and our international competitors, to deliver competitive energy prices, invest in green steel production, use UK steel in our procurement systems, and protect us from dirty steel imports by introducing climate measures? When will he get on with protecting and supporting the industry?

The Prime Minister: We are proud to support the steel industry and value the contribution that it makes to this country. That is why we put in place the energy-intensive industries exemption scheme, which provides hundreds of millions of pounds of support to steel companies for their energy bills; we have also introduced the industrial energy transformation fund so that companies can apply for capital grants to help them with the transition and are taking forward plans in the Treasury for carbon border adjustment mechanisms to ensure

a level playing field. That is also why, during the pandemic, I stepped in to support financially a steel company in Wales.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Sadly, despite five years of lobbying, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association international branch will leave the United Kingdom. As you know, Mr Speaker, that is of great concern to the House and, although it is perhaps a little niche for our constituents, it is important. The CPA needs special status, but the Government have not granted that by way of a short Bill or an amendment to an existing Bill. Could the Prime Minister, at this late stage, this month, do something about that because otherwise the association will be gone, never to come back?

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom values the work of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made it clear that he does not want the CPA international to relocate. He wrote to it in March to confirm that officials from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office would work with the CPA to find a mutually acceptable solution to the status issue, and I look forward to seeing progress.

Q6. [905672] **Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): Mr Speaker, your constituents and mine have been made a promise by the Prime Minister: inflation at or below 5% by the end of this year. So let me ask the Prime Minister what will happen if he fails to meet that promise. Will it be yet more ranting on about the Labour party, or will it be the general election that my constituents crave?

The Prime Minister: No, we are sticking to the course of bringing inflation down. What the Labour party needs to understand is that that requires making difficult and tough decisions; it requires prioritising; it requires being able to say no when people come asking you to borrow more money. Those are the types of responsible decisions that I and the Conservative Government will make because they are the right ones for the country.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): For over 160 years, Southport pier has been at the centre of our visitor economy, welcoming visitors from far and wide, including from Chorley, Mr Speaker. It has stood the test of time, but the mismanagement of Labour-controlled Sefton Council has closed our pier. Businesses are concerned, and the impact on tourism will be huge. Will the Prime Minister condemn the council's actions and support my campaign and efforts to work with this Conservative Government to get our pier open?

The Prime Minister: I welcome my hon. Friend's commitment to the important community assets in his constituency, such as the historic grade II-listed Southport pier. I am pleased that he has succeeded in getting the Government to provide £2 million to undertake improvements as part of the coastal community fund, and that comes alongside the landmark £35.5 million town deal for Southport—the second largest town deal in the country.

Q8. [905674] **Samantha Dixon** (City of Chester) (Lab): This is my first opportunity to put a question to the Prime Minister for the residents of the City of Chester,

so why does the Prime Minister think it is acceptable for sewage to be pumped into the beautiful River Dee, which flows through Chester, for the next 27 years?

The Prime Minister: Of course it is not acceptable, and that is why this Government have gone further than any other in tackling the issue, committing to monitor 100% of storm overflows and to an investment programme of £56 billion to upgrade infrastructure, enshrining strict targets in law, and introducing unlimited fines for water companies. But when it came to talking about those policies in this House, the Labour party could not even be bothered to turn up and vote for them.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): Later today, Parliament will welcome apprentices from around the UK who work in the aerospace industry, and I am very much looking forward to meeting Callum and Britney, who are apprentices at Collins Aerospace in my constituency. Will the Prime Minister join me in celebrating apprenticeships in the aerospace industry and encourage colleagues to attend and meet their apprentices?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in celebrating everyone doing an apprenticeship and in encouraging everyone to go and meet their apprentices later today. I pay tribute to Callum and Britney in particular. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of the aerospace industry, particularly because of our new defence co-operation agreement with Italy and Japan to build a new generation of fighter aircraft, which will create thousands of new jobs across the country, many of which will come through apprenticeships. That is an example of this Conservative Government providing opportunities for the next generation.

Q9. [905675] **Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): Last year, 1.7 million children missed more than 10% of their schooling, 125,000 were absent more than they were in school, and a further 140,000 were completely missing from formal schooling. This safeguarding and educational catastrophe is happening on the Prime Minister's watch. Yesterday, the Schools Minister told the Education Committee that primary legislation is required to initiate a national register of children missing from education so that we can find out where they are. Will the Prime Minister commit to bringing forward the necessary legislation as a matter of urgency to combat this crisis for our children?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that children missing school is a tragedy and is incredibly damaging for educational outcomes, which is why during the pandemic and afterwards we invested £5 billion to help children catch up with lost learning. It is important that we continue to deliver on those plans, and we will of course ensure that we work with the sector to have more children attending school more often.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Economic recovery and reconstruction will be vital to Ukraine when it comes to rebuilding a free and sovereign nation. So will my right hon. Friend help to galvanise the expertise of the UK's private sector to strengthen Ukraine's recovery and economic prospects after this devastating war?

The Prime Minister: Time and again Ukraine has shown its ability to rapidly harness innovation and creativity, and I know that its economic recovery will be no different. My hon. Friend is right to highlight that private sector expertise and investment will be critical to that recovery. I was pleased that over 400 world-leading companies pledged to back Ukraine's reconstruction at the successful recovery conference that the UK hosted the other week. We are doing our part as well, with a \$3 billion World Bank loan guarantee on top of all our other investment. I think the conference showed that there is enormous momentum across the world to support Ukraine's recovery, and that recovery and ambition are being led by the United Kingdom.

Q11. [905677] **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): A university student in Lewisham East has seen her rent rise by £200 a month due to the mortgage rate increases. She is now at risk of homelessness and cannot return to the family home. She has no choice but to use food banks, even though she has two part-time jobs. Not only is she falling behind in her studies; she is falling further into debt and falling into depression. What does the Prime Minister say to constituents like mine who are paying the dual price of this Government's cost of living crisis and their mortgage rates crisis?

The Prime Minister: We have taken significant action to help families across the country, most notably by taxing the windfall profits of energy companies and using that money to pay around half the energy bill of a typical family, including all of the hon. Lady's constituents. That support is worth £1,500, and I am pleased that energy bills are forecast to fall by £430 when the price cap resets in a couple of days. Beyond that, there is considerable support for the most vulnerable in our society, including £900 in cost of living payments for those on universal credit and additional support for pensioners and disabled people. That is what we will continue to do.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): We are heading into the fifth week of Sandwell Labour's refuse strikes. We have had flying pickets, reports of the GMB blocking ambulance workers from getting out of their depot as a result of its picket lines, and a police and crime commissioner encouraging the police not to police it. I ask my right hon. Friend to convene a meeting urgently so that we can resolve this, and perhaps he will join me in telling Labour politicians—one in particular—to grow a spine and put people before their paymasters.

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: Order. We have done very well—don't spoil it now.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend put it very well: he has illustrated exactly the issue. The Labour party is unable to stand up to its union paymasters and back our plans to introduce minimum service and safety levels in critical industries. That is the type of practical action that supports working families, and it is action that the Labour party is not strong enough to support.

Q12. [905678] **Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): After the events in Russia at the weekend, it is unclear what the future holds for the Wagner Group, but the catalogue of crimes it has committed

across Africa and the middle east and, of course, in Ukraine can never be washed away. Despite all that, the Government do not yet have a permanent Cabinet Office official to co-ordinate all the organs of Government to pursue the criminals in the Wagner Group. Will the Prime Minister appoint one and, crucially, will he fund the collection of evidence of Wagner Group war crimes that have been committed across the world, so that no matter what happens, these criminals can be brought to justice in future?

The Prime Minister: We have consistently condemned the Wagner Group, and we carefully monitor its actions in Ukraine and the wider world that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned. We have designated both the Wagner Group and its leader under our sanctions regime, and we support international mechanisms that hold individual mercenaries in the Wagner Group to account for violations of international law, but I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are also working very closely with our partners to counter the malign use of such proxies, both by Russia and more generally across the continent.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): On Monday night, an illegal Traveller encampment was established in Bretton Park. On Saturday, the much-loved Bretton festival is due to take place in that park. This House passed legislation that gives police more powers to tackle illegal encampments. Will the Prime Minister make it clear from the Dispatch Box that he expects the police to use those powers on these encampments, which blight public spaces and public parks in places such as Peterborough?

The Prime Minister: We absolutely recognise the misery that unauthorised encampments can cause to local communities. That is why we have delivered on our manifesto commitment to give police the powers they need to tackle those people in unauthorised encampments who are causing harm. Of course, how the police use those powers is an operational matter for chief constables, but we would not have legislated for them if we did not expect chief constables to use them. I am told that Home Office officials are liaising regularly with the National Police Chiefs' Council on this exact matter.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Final question—Martin Docherty-Hughes.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In the past couple of days, yet again we have been reminded that a Member of the other House was appointed contrary to the recommendations of MI5. We learned from a Channel 4 film that even the monarch was asked to be involved because Whitehall officials were so opposed, given that the person was deemed a security risk to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. So I ask the Prime Minister: does he agree with MI5, or does he agree with his predecessor that that peer should still be in the other House?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, for obvious reasons I will talk in more general terms. The House of Lords Appointments Commission vets Cross-Bench and party political life peerage nominations to the House of Lords and, where appropriate, seeks advice from Government Departments and agencies. The House of Lords

Appointments Commission has previously undertaken that, were a Prime Minister to recommend a peerage against the commission's formal advice, it would write publicly to the relevant parliamentary Select Committee.

Mr Speaker: That completes Prime Minister's questions. We come now to the urgent question. *[Interruption.]* If people could stop having conversations in the middle of the Chamber, that would be helpful, Mr Slaughter.

Water Industry: Financial Resilience

12.36 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the financial resilience of the water industry.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Water is what makes life possible on our planet, and it is essential for our health and wellbeing, as well as for our economy, including the production of food and clean energy. The Government are taking significant steps to ensure that the water industry is delivering the outcomes that bill payers expect and deserve. Water companies have invested £190 billion since privatisation in 1989. In April, the Government published the plan for water, bringing together more investment, stronger regulation and tougher enforcement capacity for regulators in relation to those who pollute.

Ofwat and the Government take the financial resilience of the water sector very seriously. Ofwat is the independent economic regulator for the water sector and has responsibility for its financial resilience. The sector as a whole is financially resilient. Ofwat continues to monitor the financial position of all the key water and waste water companies. Ofwat reports annually on the sector's financial resilience, and Ofwat's latest annual monitoring financial resilience report shows that the water sector is financially resilient.

Market confidence in the sector is demonstrated by new acquisitions, such as Pennon's purchase of Bristol Water, and by shareholders being willing to inject new capital. Ofwat has taken steps in recent years to strengthen the sector's position. That includes action to update the ringfencing provisions in water company licences to better safeguard the interests of customers, and barring water companies from making payouts to shareholders and removing money or assets from the business if they lose their investment grade credit rating. Ofwat has outlined that water companies must be transparent about how executive pay and dividends align to the delivery of services to customers, including environmental performance. Since privatisation, total capital investment has outstripped dividends by 250%.

On 20 March 2023, Ofwat announced new powers that will enable it to take enforcement action against water companies that do not link dividend payments to performance for both customers and the environment. In December 2022, Ofwat strengthened its powers on executive pay awards by setting out that shareholders, and not customers, will fund pay awards where companies do not demonstrate that their decisions or pay awards reflect overall performance. We support Ofwat's work, and we urge all water companies to take this opportunity to review their policies.

The scale of Government commitment to the water industry is highlighted by the integrated plan for water, and by our commitment to the financial resilience of the sector in delivering for customers and the environment.

Jim McMahon: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question, but it is a concern that the Secretary of State did not proactively make a statement to the

House on an issue of such importance. Indeed, where is the Secretary of State? One of the largest water companies in Britain is potentially going to go to the wall, and the Secretary of State is missing in action.

It was clear to anyone looking on that a culture that allowed vital investment in ending the sewage scandal and tackling water leaks to be sacrificed in favour of a goldrush for shareholders was never sustainable. Just last year, as raw human sewage was being pumped out across the country, £1.4 billion was paid out to shareholders. Now, all that was warned about is coming to pass: leaks are leading to water shortages; sewage dumping pollutes our rivers, lakes and seas; and the only thing on the up is debt, at £60 billion. The Conservative party's cycle of privatising profit, usually for multibillion-pound foreign sovereign wealth funds, and nationalising risk is not sustainable, and neither is it a fair deal for working people.

The news we are seeing is the result of the Conservative party's failed "profit above public interest" experiment, in which it handed over the water industry at a knock-down price to private enterprise, together with the entire infrastructure serving the nation. That was almost unique to water. For instance, when rail was privatised, the tracks were not sold off. With water, however, the lot was handed over, with few safeguards for our national interest, our national security or bill payers.

When was the Minister's Department first made aware of the financial situation at Thames Water? Has her Department had any reason to believe that those responsible at Thames Water would not be able to meet their licence conditions or legal obligations? If this means a taxpayer-funded bail-out, how much will that cost and how will it be paid for? What assessment has she made of the liability of UK pension funds that are invested in Thames Water, and in other water companies considered to be at risk? Given where we are, will she confirm her confidence in the financial regulator? Finally, given what we see with Thames Water today, does she have concerns about any other water companies, or does she consider this to be an isolated case?

Rebecca Pow: In the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, we have our individual portfolios, and I am the water Minister. The Secretary of State has full confidence in her Ministers when sending them to the Dispatch Box.

The shadow Minister raised the issue of debt. For information, debt to equity fell last year by 4% in the water industry, actually making it more resilient. Since privatisation, capital investment in the water industry has been 84% higher than it was pre-privatisation—we need to get that out there and on the table.

In terms of Thames Water, it is not for me to comment on the individual financial position of a water company. We have an independent regulator that is doing that; indeed, that is what the regulator, Ofwat, is for. Water companies are commercial entities, and it is for the company and its investors to resolve any issues. The Government, of course, are confident that Ofwat, as the economic regulator of the water industry, is working closely with any company that is facing financial stress.

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

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Sewage treatment plants are all too often overwhelmed at times of heavy rain. As well as installing stormwater tanks, such as the new 4 million litre stormwater tank in Scarborough, does the Minister agree that we should do more to encourage homeowners to harvest grey water, which can buffer the effects of heavy rain, and use that for such things as flushing the toilet?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. Friend for broadening the scope of the debate. We are in discussions with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—many of these issues involve working with other Departments—on grey water harvesting and better using the rain that does fall. A farmer in Devon whom I visited was collecting all the water from his farm buildings roofs to supply his animals.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): In assessing, as the Minister has explained, the resilience of the water industry, what assessment is she making of the impact on UK pension funds if a major company such as Thames Water fails, as is being widely suggested in the press?

Rebecca Pow: There is a structure and a process for working through this matter. It is up to the individual water companies and the regulator working with them to ensure that they are resilient. That is why Ofwat reports annually on how resilient each water company is. If that flags any issues, Ofwat works closely with them, because we need our water companies to be fully functioning. We need to attract investment—a huge sum of money has been invested since privatisation, as I mentioned earlier—in infrastructure to give our customers the kind of service they deserve. We should also be mindful that it is not all piled on to customers; we have to share the load.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is worth making the House realise that it was the Opposition who voted against the Environment Act 2021, which gave Ofwat more powers. Can my hon. Friend assure me that the water regulator Ofwat will be able to clamp down on excessive cash payouts and ensure that water companies put their customers first?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for pointing that out. He is absolutely right: whatever the Opposition say today, one of the measures they did not vote for in the Environment Act 2021 was to enable Ofwat to hold water companies to account where they do not demonstrate a link between dividends and performance. They must have sound performance and be performing for their customers, otherwise they cannot pay out their dividends.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The staggering complacency we are hearing from the Minister will come as no comfort to my constituents who were flooded out three years ago in the west London floods, which were the second 100-year event in less than a decade. If Ofwat has been doing such a good job in holding the water companies to account, as she is now apparently telling us, why are we in this situation? What exactly has Ofwat been doing?

Rebecca Pow: It has to be remembered that privatisation occurred in 1989. We have had a succession of different Governments during that time, and it has been this

Government who have accelerated clamping down on water companies and opening up transparency. The hon. Lady asks what Ofwat has done, and I will name just a few things. Since 2020, Ofwat has updated the licences so that if a water company loses its investment credit rating, it is barred from making payouts to shareholders. In July 2022, it set out additional proposals to increase financial resilience, including companies having a stronger credit rating. In March, it announced that it would take enforcement actions against water companies that do not link dividend payments to performance. We have done more than any Government before to ensure that we have a fully functioning, strong regulator.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): On financial resilience, has the Minister taken the opportunity to consider the hotchpotch of policies coming from Opposition Front Benchers on the subject? Under their prescription, they would seek to take all the profit of water companies to invest in capital expenditure. That would undermine the financial resilience of those companies that rely on private capital for investment in tackling this problem. In the one part of the country where Labour does have responsibility—Wales—has she noticed that the sewerage overflows are almost double the rate per overflow pipe as in England?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. Friend for pointing that out; I cannot support more strongly what he said. We have a private system, and Ofwat says that it is financially resilient. We need investment in these companies to make them function properly. Obviously, we need to hold the companies to account, but we need to see enormous investment. Everything in the Government's plan for water, including the storm overflow discharge reduction plan, is fully costed. We are not pulling the wool over people's eyes; we are telling them clearly what this will mean and how it will deliver the water services that we need.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Thames Water, which is on the verge of going under, provides a quarter of the population with their water supply. When was the Minister told about its financial plight? What is the plan if the worst comes to the worst and it does go under?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Member is right that Thames Water supplies an enormous part of our population. Ofwat has been working closely with Thames Water, as it does all water companies, and the Government work with Ofwat, giving it our strategic policy statement on what its priorities will be. Overall, the water companies are considered resilient, and much work is going on behind the scenes with Thames Water to ensure that customers will not be affected. If necessary, there is a process in place to move us to the next stage.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): Swindon residents will be concerned about the future of Thames Water, so I ask my hon. Friend please to keep me and colleagues updated on any issues relating to that. Underlying this issue, Labour's model will clearly never work—we must understand that only the private sector will be able to invest. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members bleat now, but they did nothing about it when they were in government. Is the point not that where we have in effect a private

[Sir Robert Buckland]

monopoly, the regulator must be as effective as possible? Will my hon. Friend do everything possible to ensure that Ofwat is working in the full interests of customers? Aspects of its operation do not seem to pass that test.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend. Thames Water is a big water company that delivers on a wide scale. Ofwat is working very closely with the company on its plans, which will be looked over and submitted, and accounts will be submitted in due course, so that we have a resilient pathway. Customers, including his constituents, should rest assured that both their water and wastewater supplies will be protected.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): This privatised industry knows that, at the end of the day, the banker of last resort is the British taxpayer. That is exactly where we are with Thames Water, which has been taking profits for the last 35 years and not investing for the future. Regardless of what went on before, we must have investment in what is in front of the industry, but Thames Water has failed to plan ahead. It has taken money but not done the job expected of it while being in charge of such an essential public service. What will the Government do to protect consumers and ensure that we plan ahead for the industry?

Rebecca Pow: Ofwat is the independent regulator and, as the hon. Member will know, the Government direct it through the strategic policy statement. It is Ofwat's job to ensure that in the price review, when the water companies submit their plans—they are going over the draft plans now—they demonstrate that they will deliver on the Government's targets on storm overflows, leakage and demand reduction. It is for Ofwat to ensure that companies will be resilient in delivering that infrastructure. There is a firm structure in place. Ofwat also constantly monitors companies' gearing—debt-to-equity—levels, and the Government are confident that the regulator is taking reasonable measures to challenge companies to reduce those gearing levels where appropriate.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): About a quarter of the country's economic output is in sectors under regulators, including the water industry. With Ofwat and in other sectors with Ofgem and the Financial Conduct Authority, we have seen regulators not performing to the standards that the public, or indeed industry, would expect. If we are honest, we in this House and in Parliament do not have the toolkit to assess regulators' performance on a systemic basis year in, year out. Will my hon. Friend work with ministerial colleagues to see whether we can improve the regular oversight of regulators such as Ofwat so that we can take a more rounded view on such issues, rather than have them come through urgent questions as brought by the Opposition?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that. It is essential that we have fully functioning regulators. Since the Government came to power, Ofwat has done an enormous amount to streamline what it does, improve transparency, change licences and make changes so that dividends are not paid if any environmental damage is being caused. The Government have directed that through the strategic policy statement. Indeed, our targets will ensure that the regulator enables the water companies

to put the right measures in place. He is right, however, that one should never be complacent, and if things need to be improved through the regulators, they should happen. But I assure him that a big effort is being made.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents are hugely worried about reports of Thames Water being on the brink and what that could mean for their bills. Thames Water has been managed appallingly: leaks have not been dealt with, sewage has been continually dumped and the former chief executive officer Sarah Bentley needed to be asked to forgo her bonus. All the while, the Government have been missing in action. Why are the Government yet again running to catch up—nothing in the Minister's statement gives confidence that they have a grip—with our constituents paying the price?

Rebecca Pow: Where water companies underperform and do not meet their targets, a process is in place whereby basically they have to credit the money back to their customers. Last year, £143 million was credited back in that respect. So the regulator does have the tools to do that. It has tightened up so many of its measures, all of which will affect all the water companies.¹

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Minister will not be able to comment on Thames Water's finances in detail, but can she assure my constituents, who will be really worried, that, whatever happens, their day-to-day services will be protected and the much-needed upgrades will still be delivered?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that. He is right that customers come first, and Thames Water customers will be assured their water supplies and wastewater services. I am happy to meet him to discuss that.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Residents in Twickenham, Teddington and the Hamptons will be extremely worried to hear that Thames Water is on the brink of collapse, but they are also fed up to the back teeth with this company. Not only does it pump sewage into our precious River Thames, but recently we have seen sewage flooding our streets at times of flooding from rainfall, and there are now plans to pump treated sewage into the Thames at times of drought. That is indicative of the company's underinvestment in fixing leaks and being stripped to the bare bones while lining executives' pockets. All the while, the Government have been missing in action and the regulator has failed. Will the Minister back the Liberal Democrats' proposals to reform water companies into public good companies, transforming their boards and priorities in the interests of the environment and consumers?

Rebecca Pow: I will highlight the Thames super-sewer—it will be ready to open in the not-too-distant future—which is a tremendous project for the people of London, including many of her constituents. We have a privatised system, whose financial resilience, as I have reported, has increased rather than decreased in the last year. These companies attract money from investors so that we can get what we need. The Government have costed plans. The Liberal Democrats have no costed plans for what they suggest they might do with the water companies, nor plans for where the money will come from.

1. [Official Report, 10 July 2023, Vol. 736, c. 1MC.]

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): It is worth pointing out to Opposition parties that 93% of all UK coastal bathing waters meet good or excellent conditions. In North Norfolk we have lost three blue flag beaches, which went from excellent to good. But guess what? There is not a single reason why they lost that flag. Under the Environment Agency's marking, it looks like it is down to not combined sewage overflows but entirely natural phenomena. Could the Minister help me get my blue flags back and hold the Environment Agency to task, to ensure that it has a proper testing regime that transparently shows that we have excellent bathing water quality all over North Norfolk?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue of bathing water quality. Since privatisation we have virtually the best quality water coming out of our taps of almost anywhere in the world. We also have phenomenal results for our bathing water areas—93% are classed as good or excellent. He has concerns about his area, but I hope those beaches will soon be back up to blue flag status. The Environment Agency works closely on individual cases where concerns have been highlighted. I am happy to put him in touch with the Environment Agency or work with him to find out what those individual cases were, so that we can get those beaches back up to the fantastic standard that they deserve.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Today, not for the first time, most of my constituents have little or no water supply. Two years ago, not for the first time, hundreds of my constituents had their homes flooded with raw sewage. Year after year, Thames Water has failed its customers while obscenely rewarding its management and shareholders. No one will miss the asset strippers at Thames Water if it goes under. All we want is working infrastructure and good customer service at a reasonable cost. Is that too much to ask?

Rebecca Pow: That is what we want for all our customers. That is why we have launched our plan for water to pull everything together to ensure that we deal with any pollution incidents, water supply issues and the future of the water industry. It is why we have set our targets and produced our storm sewage overflow plan, and why the water companies will have to spend £56 billion on capital investment by 2050 to address that. Every water company, including Thames Water, has to make an action plan for each of its storm sewage overflows. Thames Water will do that.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): When they were privatised, water companies had all the debt written off, so they started with zero. Since then, they have borrowed £53 billion, much of which has been used to help pay £72 billion in dividends. The investment has been made by borrowing and putting it on to customers' bills. Now, the ratings agency S&P has negative outlooks for two thirds of the UK water companies it rates, because they are over-leveraged and took out too much debt in an era of low interest, which they now have to pay back. This is not a triumph but a huge problem for the resilience of our water industry. What will the Minister do when water companies start falling over?

Rebecca Pow: For information, Thames Water itself has not paid any dividends for the last six years. Ofwat will rightly hold companies to account when they do

not clearly demonstrate the link between dividends and performance. We made that possible through the landmark Environment Act.¹

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I want to bring the Minister back to the figures we have just heard. Water companies had no debt when they were privatised. Since then, they have borrowed £53 billion, and much of that has been used to help pay £72 billion in dividends. Meanwhile, we have an appalling sewage scandal, particularly in the south-east of England. The failing company Southern Water, which my constituents have no choice but to rely on, is considering raising bills by £279 per year by 2030, largely to pay for the investment that it should have been making in previous years. Does that not show that the privatisation of water was a serious mistake that needs to be permanently rectified?

Rebecca Pow: Privatisation has enabled clean and plentiful water to come out of our taps. It has unlocked £190 billion of funding to invest in the industry. That is the equivalent of £5 billion annually, and is double what we had pre-privatisation. I am not saying that there is not still a lot of scope for improvement. I have stood at this Dispatch Box many times, as has the Secretary of State, to say that some actions of water companies are completely unacceptable. That is why we have introduced the storm overflow plan and our plan for water.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): As two Members have said, funding and loans to the water companies are a huge issue, as that is where they have paid their dividends from. On shareholders, we have foreign investors taking huge amounts of money away from this country, and we need better fund managers who are able to assess where they put their money. They should be held accountable, too.

Ofwat has not been doing what it is supposed to do. I believe that the chief executive of Ofwat applied for a job at Thames Water. That shows what the companies are doing and how Ofwat works with them—rather than scrutinising them, people are looking for the next job. We have to stop that and stop my constituents paying more for water. They need decent water in their homes and in the environment around them. That is what we want the Government to ensure. This Tory policy has failed for years.

Rebecca Pow: I am not sure what the question was. We want the same things: value for customers, and clean and plentiful water. We want to hold the water companies to account. We want them to invest the money needed to deliver the right services. That is why we have a plan for water, our targets and the measures in the Environment Act. It is why the regulator Ofwat has taken all the actions I mentioned to increase the transparency of water companies and to ensure that money is not being paid out if there is any environmental impact or performance negativity.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): In the last year, a number of my constituents on the Westfield estate have had their homes and gardens flooded with raw sewage. Yorkshire Water accepts that it is its sewage, but does not accept responsibility to help with the clean-up. Will the Minister look at the legal position to ensure that water companies are held accountable? In

1. [Official Report, 10 July 2023, Vol. 736, c. 2MC.]

[Mr Clive Betts]

the meantime, we should put pressure on Yorkshire Water and others to pay for the clean-up that my constituents are having to fund themselves.

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman will know that we have put huge pressure on the water companies, which now have to invest £56 billion in infrastructure to deal with sewage issues. If he wants to meet me to talk about that issue, I will be happy to.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Back in January I asked the water Minister whether she thought that the current system of regulation was fit for purpose, and she said yes. I ask her again: does she still think that it is?

Rebecca Pow: Yes.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Water companies were sold with no debt when they were privatised in 1989. In fact, they were given a £1.5 billion green dowry by the Government. Since then, they have taken on borrowing of £60.6 billion, diverting income from customer bills to paying dividends and interest payments. As a result, water bills have increased by upwards of 40% in real terms. Does the Minister honestly think that consumers hail privatisation as a success?

Rebecca Pow: Ultimately, the customers pay for investment in the industry, but over a very long period, as the hon. Lady will know. If a company did not pay out dividends it would struggle to get access to finance to fund future investment. That would limit the level of investment and have an impact on future customers. Companies have to pay up front for a lot of that investment, because they need to secure a large amount of funding to pay for it. To avoid customer bills increasing drastically to pay for that, companies have to secure the money by raising debt or equity. She knows how it works. The regulator has to ensure that that system is fully functioning, the water companies are resilient and we have all the resilient water supply that we require.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It has been reported that the companies are drawing up their business plans for 2025 to 2030 and that, on average, they are looking at a 25% increase in bills. Given what we have heard today, would billpayers in my constituency not think that rather than paying extra to water companies, they may as well just flush their money down the drain for all the good it will do to improve water quality, services and investment in infrastructure?

Rebecca Pow: All those plans are being assessed right now. The draft plans go to Ofwat, where they are analysed with a fine-toothed comb. All the things I have mentioned today will be scrutinised, so that we can deliver the infrastructure that is needed and have the clean and plentiful water supplies we require as well as a clean and healthy environment, with no undue impact on customer bills. All those things have to be taken into account to deliver the water supplies that the people we meet and the people we serve deserve.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): The British public should not be asked to cover the cost of failures by the water monopolies and their shareholders. They have

borrowed extensively to pay dividends while failing to make necessary investments in infrastructure and resilience. Does the Minister agree that if the Government are compelled to take Thames Water into public ownership, it should stay in public hands?

Rebecca Pow: I am not aware of the situation the hon. Gentleman is referring to. Ofwat is working very closely with Thames Water to ensure that the business is viable, that customers are not impacted, and that water supply and waste water services are delivered. As I mentioned, Ofwat has strengthened many measures so that we have a much more resilient industry in the future. Indeed, those changes and the fall in the debt to equity ratio demonstrate that we do have a more resilient industry.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): We have seen bonuses and dividends put ahead of investment in infrastructure or maintaining sufficient reserves. Our area of Devon and Somerset is covered by South West Water; the company has paid out £112 million in dividends this year, despite having just £144 million in reserves, which is £2.5 billion less than it had two years ago. This week, a water firm chief executive officer has resigned, but no Conservative Minister has ever taken responsibility. When will a Conservative Minister finally take responsibility and get a grip, or step aside?

Rebecca Pow: As the hon. Gentleman knows, Ofwat has announced new measures to enable it to take action against water companies that do not link dividend payments to performance. That is just not happening. I think he needs to look again at some of the stats he has just quoted, because I think they might relate to the wider Pennon Group. I have just visited South West Water to have a really forensic look at its systems and how it delivers water. That is what we do with our water companies. It is Ofwat's job to hold water companies to account, and it has just got measures through the Treasury so that it has another £11.3 million to tackle enforcement.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers. We are ever mindful that house building is important, and development opportunities are critical to the future as well, so with developers being charged more and more to connect to the network but facing delays in those connections being installed, what plans does the Minister have to make the connection system for new developments more affordable?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. We always have to be mindful of costs, not just to customers through their bills but to developers building houses. We are working closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on a range of measures and on its planning guidance, so that we can tackle a range of issues connected to water, working with developers on things like rainwater harvesting and sustainable urban drainage systems, which will really help the whole of our water infrastructure.

John Cryer: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think the Minister may have inadvertently misled the House. She said clearly that Thames Water has not been paying out dividends. The reality is that Thames Water has not

been paying out dividends in the usual way, but it did pay dividends last year to the parent company, so it has been paying out dividends.

Mr Speaker: Does the Minister wish to respond?

Rebecca Pow: Yes, Mr Speaker. I will check the wording, because I would hate to mislead the House. If I have inadvertently said something incorrect, I will happily put it straight on the record.

Mr Speaker: Right.

Mental Health In-patient Services: Improving Safety

1.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on improving safety in mental health in-patient services across England. Before doing so, I want to thank all the right hon. and hon. Members from across the country who have campaigned tirelessly on behalf of their constituents to improve mental health care. Too many people have experienced care in mental health in-patient settings that has been well below the high standard that we all deserve when we are at our most vulnerable. I would also like to put on record my sincere condolences to the families and friends of those who have lost their lives.

First, I will update the House on the independent inquiry into mental health in-patient care across NHS trusts in Essex between 2000 and 2020. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for tabling a Westminster Hall debate on the Essex mental health inquiry earlier this year. She and colleagues, including our hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (Sir James Duddridge) and our right hon. Friends the Members for Witham (Priti Patel) and for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), all spoke passionately about the need to get justice for patients and their families. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) also tabled an Adjournment debate on mental health in-patient care in Essex before the independent inquiry was launched in 2021.

I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch) and my hon. Friends the Members for Clacton (Giles Watling), for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), and for Southend West (Anna Firth) for their determined campaigning on behalf of their constituents. Of course, we should all remember the important contribution of the former Member for Southend West, and a great friend to many across this house, the late Sir David Amess. He tabled a Westminster Hall debate on mental health services in Essex back in 2014, and he was a passionate campaigner for improving mental health care. I know he is very much in our thoughts.

In 2021 we launched the independent inquiry to investigate the deaths of mental health in-patients across NHS trusts in Essex between 2000 and 2020. The Government appointed Dr Geraldine Strathdee, a former national clinical director for mental health for NHS England, to chair the inquiry. I want to place on the record my thanks to Dr Strathdee and her team, because a lot of good work has been done. I applaud the bravery of all the victims and their families who have come forward to tell their stories.

I also recognise the work that the Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust—EPUT—has done to assist with the inquiry. The trust has been in the spotlight, and progress has already been made to learn lessons and improve in-patient mental health care. EPUT's chief executive, Paul Scott, joined in 2020, and since then the trust has invested £20 million in its mental health in-patient wards and a further £20 million in

[Steve Barclay]

community services. Compared with 2019, patients absconding from care has decreased by more than 60%, and the use of inappropriate restraint has fallen by 88%.

However, in January Dr Strathdee raised concerns with me about a lack of engagement with the inquiry by current and former EPUT staff. I know that many right hon. and hon. Members share her concerns. Since then, the inquiry and the trust have worked together in a concerted effort to increase staff engagement. None the less, I have listened to Dr Strathdee's concerns that the inquiry still needs further staff engagement to get victims' families the answers they deserve. In a letter to me in March, she said that

"30 percent of named staff, those essential witnesses involved in deaths we are investigating, have agreed to attend evidence sessions. In my assessment, I cannot properly investigate matters with this level of engagement."

She has also raised with me concerns about ongoing safety issues at the trust. To quote from her letter once again, she said:

"I am very concerned that there are serious, ongoing risks to patient safety. Due to the nature of these issues, I am confident that these cannot be properly investigated by the Inquiry without statutory powers."

The Government take both concerns extremely seriously, and I agree with Dr Strathdee that we have now reached the point where the only appropriate course of action is to give the inquiry statutory powers.

Statutory inquiries do take longer, but this does not mean that work will start from scratch. Dr Strathdee's existing findings will inform the next phase of the inquiry. She has informed me that, owing to personal reasons, she will not be continuing as the inquiry's chair, so I want to thank her once again for all her commitment and hard work. I am sure the House will agree that she is a true public servant. Our work to find her successor is proceeding at pace, and I will update the House on the progress of setting up the inquiry in due course.

I recognise that Members' concerns about mental health in-patient facilities are not confined to Essex. The Government are committed to improving mental health care across England, which is why we are boosting mental health funding by at least £2.3 billion this year compared with four years ago, why we are making urgent mental health support available through 111, and why we are delivering three new mental health hospitals to provide specialist care and cut waiting lists.

In January, we commissioned a rapid review of how data is used in in-patient mental health settings in England. More effective use of data has the potential to reduce duplication, ensuring that healthcare professionals can spend more of their valuable time with patients. The review team—well led again by Dr Strathdee—heard from more than 300 people representing every part of the in-patient mental health sector, including former patients and frontline staff. Dr Strathdee has made recommendations for how data and evidence can be used to identify risks to patient safety and failures in care more quickly and effectively. The findings and recommendations of the rapid review will be published today, and I will deposit a copy in the Libraries of both Houses. The Government will consider its findings carefully and respond in due course.

We recognise, however, that patients and families want to know how their concerns will be taken forward as soon as possible, and I also recognise that a wide-ranging statutory inquiry relating to other settings, or covering multiple patient safety issues, would not deliver those answers quickly. My Department has therefore agreed to work alongside the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch to prepare for the launch of a national investigation of mental health in-patient services, which will commence in October, when the HSIB receives new powers under the Health and Care Act 2022.

The new Health Services Safety Investigations Body will investigate the following themes: how providers learn from deaths in their care and use that learning to improve services, including post-discharge services; how young people are cared for in mental health in-patient services and how that care can be improved; how out-of-area placements are handled; and how to develop a safe staffing model for all mental health in-patient services. Across all those areas, it will explore the way in which providers use data. I want to reassure the House that the new body will have teeth and will work at speed, that it will have the power to fine those who refuse to give evidence when they are required to do so, and that its predecessor's investigations were typically concluded within a year.

I hope that today's announcements will be of some comfort to the bereaved families who have done so much to raise awareness of the failings of mental health care in Essex and elsewhere. I want them to know that the Government are committed to obtaining for them the answers that they deserve, and to improving mental health across the country. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

1.23 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. However, it beggars belief that it has taken the Government so long to address the House on this matter. It seems that every month there are new scandals regarding needless loss of life and dehumanising behaviour in in-patient mental health settings. That must be stamped out now—these are people's lives.

That brings me to the subject of Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust. I welcome the announcement today that the inquiry will be given vital statutory powers, because for several years families who have lost loved ones at the trust have been calling for the inquiry to be given those powers. The grieving families I have spoken to have told me about the pain and anguish they have felt during their fight for answers, and that has only been compounded by an inquiry that lacked the necessary powers to seek the truth.

I must pay tribute to those families for their tireless campaigning and effort. In particular, I thank Melanie Leahy, who has fought for too long to achieve the announcement that has finally come today. I hope that Melanie, and every other family, will now start learning the truth.

Dr Strathdee has been a powerful advocate for the Essex inquiry, and we want to express our thanks to her for the work that she has already put in. The next

inquiry chair must continue her work, and hold the confidence of the families who have been impacted in Essex.

I have repeatedly called on the Secretary of State to give the Essex inquiry statutory powers, and I am pleased to see that he has finally listened to our calls, but why were families left in the lurch for so long? Following months of scandals in in-patient mental health hospitals, public confidence is falling. More than one in three people say that they do not have faith that a loved one would be safe if they needed hospital mental health care, but every patient must be treated with dignity. I have repeatedly asked Ministers whether they have visited failing trusts. The Minister refused to answer, so will the Secretary of State commit himself to greater transparency? The Secretary of State has announced that urgent mental health support will be made available through 111, but 1.6 million people have been left languishing on waiting lists for mental health treatment, their condition deteriorating and reaching crisis point.

It is welcome that we will finally see the publication of the rapid review today—better late than never—but Labour has been calling for in-patient mental health settings to be reviewed in the light of these serious failings, and any rapid review should have had patient voices at its centre rather than being simply the data exercise that the Government commissioned. When we look at the planned national investigation into in-patient services that they will conduct alongside the Health Services Safety Investigations Body, we see that, yet again, there is no mention of working with patients and their families. Where is the learning? Where is the focus on what staff need in these settings? Are the Government looking at additional training needs, given that mental health care relies on staff and not simply on shiny equipment?

Let me turn briefly to the planned consultants' strike, about which the Health Secretary has said absolutely nothing. Yet again he has been missing in action. For my consultant colleagues to have voted to strike is extraordinary, and the risk to patients of seven days of strike action is intolerable. Next week marks the 75th anniversary of the NHS, and it has never been in a worse state. The country is clear about who is to blame. It is not nurses, it is not junior doctors, it is not consultants, and it is not paramedics; it is this Conservative Government. They have lost control of the NHS, they have lost the confidence of NHS staff, and they have lost the support of the British people. The only ballot that we need now is a general election.

Steve Barclay: It is a shame that the hon. Lady chose to conclude her remarks in such a way. Let me address that head-on. It is bizarre to accuse a Minister who is literally at the Dispatch Box of being missing, particularly when the shadow Health Secretary, having managed to turn up for Prime Minister's Question Time, has failed to turn up for this statement. It is even more bizarre that, although we are constantly told that the Labour party sees parity between mental health and physical health as a key priority, when it actually comes to debating the issue, the contrary is clearly on show.

This debate is not about the issues normally raised during Prime Minister's questions about the politics of the day; it is about the families who have tragically lost loved ones, about how we can learn the lessons from

that, and about how we can ensure that we get the data right, get the support for staff right, and get the procedures right so that other families do not suffer loss. We have responded to the excellent points made by Dr Strathdee through her rapid review about data. There are two elements to that: there is data that is collected that does not add value, is often duplicative and takes staff away from giving care—that is somewhere that we can free up staff—but there is other data that is needed to better identify issues early, and we need to look at how we improve that data. Specific issues arose in respect of engagement by staff, and we have actively listened and responded to the concerns raised by families and by many Members of the House, particularly about the Essex inquiry. I will come on to those as I go through the wider issues.

The shadow Minister mentioned speed. Of course, there is a balance to be struck between the completeness of a statutory inquiry and the greater speed that is often offered by other independent inquiries. Indeed, the Paterson inquiry was a non-statutory inquiry commissioned through the Department, and that is another vehicle that is often successfully used. There are also inquiries commissioned through NHS England, such as the Donna Ockenden review. There is often a balance to be struck between those inquiries, given the speed at which they can proceed, and a statutory inquiry, which has wider powers but often takes longer.

It was because of our desire to move at pace to get answers to families that we initially commissioned a non-statutory inquiry, in common with Bill Kirkup's inquiry into Morecambe Bay and inquiries into many other instances in the NHS. However, we have listened to families and to right hon. and hon. Members who have raised concerns about the process and, in particular, the engagement by staff, and decided to make it a statutory inquiry.

The shadow Minister asked about our commitment to transparency. The very reason that we set up the rapid review in January was to bring greater transparency to the data. That is why I will be placing in the Libraries of both Houses the outcome of the rapid review. That speaks to the importance of transparency as we learn the lessons of what went wrong in Essex and in other mental health in-patient facilities.

The shadow Minister made a fair point about waiting times. We are committed to cutting waiting times, including in mental health. That is why we are spending £2.3 billion more on mental health this year than four years ago, we have commissioned 100 mental health ambulances, we have 160 different schemes looking at things such as crisis cafés to support people in A&E, and we have schemes such as the review through 111 and the funding the Chancellor announced in the Budget for mental health digital apps to give people early support. Of course, that sits alongside other mental health interventions, such as our programme to train more people to give mental health support in schools.

The shadow Minister made an important point about working with families. I agree with her about that. HSIB will be meeting families—indeed, Ministers have been doing likewise—and we are keen that that should feed into the terms of reference, both for the statutory inquiry and for the HSIB review.

We have touched on consultants, but let me make a final point on that. As far as I am aware, the Opposition do not support a 35% pay rise, whether for junior

[Steve Barclay]

doctors or for consultants, but if that is their position, perhaps they will tell us whether this is yet another area that the stretchable non-dom contribution will reach to. Exactly how will it be funded?

This is a serious issue. The measures that we are taking address the concerns of families who have suffered the most tragic loss. It is important that we learn the lessons, both in Essex and more widely. We have actively listened to the points raised by Dr Strathdee, who has done a fantastic job. It is right that the work moves on to a statutory footing, but it is also right that we look more widely at the lessons from other mental health in-patient facilities. That is exactly what we intend to do.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): First, let me put on the record my personal thanks to the Secretary of State and Ministers for their honest and frank engagement with colleagues and with bereaved families, whose concerns they have listened to. It was my constituent Melanie Leahy, who was at one stage a constituent of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), who brought the issue to our attention and to the attention of the Secretary of State. She deserves a lot of support for the way she has conducted herself. None of us would want to go through the sheer anguish and personal trauma that she has experienced. We owe a lot to her and to others who have come forward.

There are still 80-plus families who did not engage with the inquiry led by Dr Strathdee, to whom I pay tribute. The statutory inquiry will give them the confidence and courage to come forward, speak up and share what will be—we should be frank about this—deeply harrowing evidence. Will the Secretary of State expand on how evidence received by Dr Strathdee's inquiry will be treated? I know that he said he will come back to the House on the processes. We are interested, in particular, in the inquiry's terms of reference. Importantly for bereaved families, what measures will be in place to support people to come forward and give evidence? There have been too many barriers in that regard for families and, if I may say so, those who have been employed by EPUT. What involvement will the families have in drawing up the terms of reference? They are the ones that need confidence in the process. Again, I thank Dr Strathdee, and I thank the Secretary of State and Ministers for their engagement.

Steve Barclay: In my discussions with my right hon. Friend and colleagues, I found the compassion that they showed and the way they championed the family voice compelling. I absolutely agree that it is important that families take confidence from the decision to move the inquiry on to a statutory footing and come forward with their evidence. I know that she plays an active part in that. Of course, we want families to be part of the discussion on the terms of reference. I know that, with her significant experience, my right hon. Friend is keen to be part of that too, and we are keen to engage with her on it.

My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the evidence that has already been gathered through the excellent work of Dr Strathdee. I had a meeting with her yesterday to ensure that we capture that as part of the work that is moving forward. I hope—I reinforce my right hon.

Friend's point—that families will take confidence from today's announcement and that those families who have not come forward to date will be able to do so. I know that in my right hon. Friend they will have a resolute champion supporting them to do so.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State's statement, but I am disappointed that he did not say more about the serious risks that we have raised in the House—not least about timely access to services and the significant risk that many of my constituents have faced out in the community—in respect of Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust, which serves York. I wonder whether he can expand on that, and on his proposals for taking things forward at the trust. I am meeting one of his Ministers next month, but I would like to hear his position on addressing the serious concerns that have been raised.

Steve Barclay: The hon. Lady raises a very valid point. There are real concerns about Tees. We considered that when considering the scope of the statutory inquiry. Given that significant work had been done in Essex, we decided to strike the balance by putting that on a statutory footing but enabling work to proceed at pace through HSIB on Tees and some other areas. The hon. Lady will know that the Care Quality Commission prosecuted the trust in May for a regulation 12 breach, and that significant work has already gone in; the report of the system-wide independent investigation was published last March. They are very serious issues on which I think there is concern across the House, and we stand ready to work with her and other elected representatives from that area as part of the wider work.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a deep, deep tragedy that, over the 20-year period, around 2,000 people lost their life under the care of mental health services in Essex. Families and survivors are right to want transparency and accountability. Given the slow progress of the independent inquiry, it is right that it now moves to a statutory basis.

When I spoke in Westminster Hall, I shared the testimony of a constituent who had been an in-patient in the early 2000s. She described being raped by another patient and being laughed at by staff when she asked for support. She described being able to make many suicide attempts, absconding from the ward and overdosing. She described how staff refused to treat her self-harm injuries and how she was repeatedly restrained and forcibly injected. I put on record my incredible respect for the people who are coming forward to relive their horrors and share their testimony. They are doing this because families and survivors want to know that change is embedded so that lives are safeguarded now and in the future. Will my right hon. Friend give assurance to my Essex constituents that mental health services in Essex will now be given the support they need to keep vulnerable people safe?

Steve Barclay: Having discussed that harrowing evidence with my right hon. Friend, I do not think any Minister could either forget it or not be moved. I found it an extremely moving experience to hear her talk about the experiences of a number of her constituents. She is right to praise those who come forward, and to recognise that

it is often a difficult ask to relive the most awful circumstances, but it is important that families come forward so that we learn lessons and ensure this is not repeated.

My right hon. Friend is also right to highlight the two broad elements of learning the lessons of what happened in the past and maintaining services for the future. I am therefore happy to give her an assurance that we will work closely with her on support for Essex as lessons are learned through the statutory inquiry and as services continue to be delivered. We are working closely on that with the chief executive.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): My thoughts are, first and foremost, with the bereaved families and all those involved, because this process must be utter agony for them. It is right that the inquiry is put on a statutory footing.

In his statement, the Secretary of State quoted from a letter he received from Dr Strathdee, in which she said:

“I am very concerned that there are serious, ongoing risks to patient safety.”

The Secretary of State did not expand on that, and I do not know whether he is able to do so. If I may extrapolate, we know that, more broadly, there are risks to patient safety when there is not enough workforce and when there are not enough beds. Hertfordshire is the most under-bedded area of the country. When we see the workforce plan, potentially this week, will it include estimates of the number of qualified mental health staff we need in in-patient settings, NHS community settings and schools? Will he meet me and my local mental health trust to discuss the number of beds we have in the county and our plan to expand them?

Steve Barclay: Dr Strathdee did not particularly focus on staffing numbers, as far as I recall; she focused on some of the issues with care from staff. That was the nature of the concerns. On the ongoing risk, part of the reason why we commissioned the rapid review was to look, in particular, at the quality of data. There was a quantity of data that was not effective, and that often distracted staff from spending time with patients. There were also gaps in the quality of data that needed to be filled, and the document that will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses speaks to that point. That is why we are so keen to move at pace on learning lessons.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I welcome that sentence and the seriousness and speed with which this is being taken forward.

As a now non-practising consultant psychiatrist, I have a variety of declarations in this area, which are best summarised in the pre-legislative scrutiny report on the draft Mental Health Bill. My constituents are waiting for the rebuild of the Abraham Cowley unit in my constituency, but the framework under which patients are looked after is very important. People in in-patient settings are, by definition, some of the most vulnerable people looked after by the NHS, and a fair proportion are a detained population. Could the Secretary of State update the House on how soon we will see the Government's response to the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee report on the draft Mental Health Bill and when we expect the proper Bill to be brought forward?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of pre-legislative scrutiny, into which he had a personal input. I am hugely grateful for his work and the work of Baroness Buscombe and others. I met Baroness Buscombe some months ago to discuss the outcome of that pre-legislative scrutiny. I do not have a date to share today, but I am happy to write to my hon. Friend with a further update.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents depend on mental health services provided by the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, which provides a range of services for very vulnerable people across a large part of south London. The in-patient service includes cleaning and catering facilities, and it is vital that those services are run well so that well-trained professional staff are able to treat mental health patients. Some of the trust's staff are contracted to a company called ISS, and they have been on strike. Does the Secretary of State agree that ISS should come to the table and discuss the issues of the pay dispute so that staff can provide the cleaning services for mental health professionals to continue with their vital jobs?

Steve Barclay: We are investing more in mental health services as a whole, and that includes the important area of cleaning and catering services. Obviously, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on that specific contractual dispute, but industrial action, in its wider sense, is clearly disruptive and I am very keen for it to be resolved as quickly as possible, whether in the context of consultants or cleaning and catering services.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the move to put the EPUT inquiry on a statutory footing. He mentioned that putting it on a statutory footing means it will take longer. On behalf of constituents and those who are keen to get closure on these important issues, can he give any kind of indication of when the findings might be available?

Steve Barclay: The chair is to be appointed, and given that statutory basis and the independence of the chair, it would be wrong for me to pre-empt the terms of reference. People can look to other statutory inquiries and come to a conclusion. The inquiry is not starting from scratch, and part of the reason we originally went with a non-statutory inquiry was because of the desire for speed. Of course, Dr Strathdee has done a huge amount of work and it will be available to the new chair of the statutory inquiry. One can look to other inquiries and draw conclusions, but I would expect it to move more quickly in this instance because a significant amount of work has already been done.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the statutory inquiry, which is a step in the right direction. I also welcome the Secretary of State's focus on families. Ensuring family involvement in the care of mental health in-patients not only improves patient outcomes but enables proper scrutiny and questioning of care. In regions such as the south-west, many patients facing the most serious mental health crises receive care outside the region, which is often a long way for families to travel. Is he considering the increased commissioning of local provision so that families

[Luke Pollard]

can know their loved ones are being well cared for? Many families will be concerned about the statement and the experiences of patients in Essex. The right care and the best care for many patients is closer to home.

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point, and he is right that a particular downside of out-of-area placements is often the distance from families. Indeed, one can see in the data that there is often a corresponding uptick in issues of harm. The crux of his point is very valid. That is why we are committed to building new facilities, with three new hospitals for mental health announced in the statement I gave on the new hospitals programme; that included three new mental health ambulances. This is also about preventing people from needing in-patient care through our crisis cafés, our earlier intervention in community services and the interplay with 111. More fundamentally, it is about giving greater power to commissioners on a place-based basis. The reforms through integrating health and social care, having fewer targets from the centre and allowing more devolved decision making mean that those areas that want to put more money into in-patient mental health, for example, have greater flexibility to do so. The point the hon. Gentleman raises is extremely important and it is exactly what we are facilitating.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend observed, a non-statutory inquiry is generally more fleet of foot than a statutory one. It is so disappointing that the failure of staff to engage in that process has brought us to where we are now. That would indicate a very poor culture and sets the tone for how this inquiry will be taken forward. Let me remind him that one reason we are so anxious to get the Mental Health Act reformed is that kind of behaviour towards patients. Too many in-patient settings see patients as an inconvenience to be managed, rather than having their real welfare at heart. Will he therefore redouble his efforts to make progress on this, because many people who have been through the other side want to see that progress?

Steve Barclay: First, I do not want to wait for legislation before we make changes. Indeed, under the leadership of Paul Scott, who joined EPUT in 2020, investment has been made, with an extra £20 million being put into the in-patient wards and a further £20 million into community services. We are keen to make further progress on that. On the wider issue of legislation, I know that my hon. Friend, as a former Government Whip, is particularly acquainted with how the legislative process works, but the Government take her comments, and those of the House, on engaging staff in this process seriously, and we are working very actively on that.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): It is vital that the Government work with sector experts and those with lived experience of in-patient mental health services in getting this vital area of policy right. As someone who spent almost a month as a psychiatric in-patient back in 2021, I know at first hand how difficult, disorientating and dehumanising these settings are, at a time when you are at your most vulnerable, and how easily things that are well-intentioned can and do go wrong. Will the Secretary of State therefore commit to working with Mind and other organisations giving

patients and their families a voice to shape these improvements, to ensure that any changes happen with patients and their families, and not to them?

Steve Barclay: I very much agree on that. The hon. Lady speaks powerfully of the importance of engaging with those with experience—the charity sector, the families and those directly impacted by the decisions taken in in-patient mental health facilities. She makes an extremely pertinent point and it is very much part of the approach we are taking.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for mentioning our great friend Sir David Amess. I am sure that, if he were still with us today, he would welcome this statement, as do I, as does his successor and, as is clear, as do all other Essex MPs. The Secretary of State has done the right thing and should be commended. EPUT has been a troubled organisation for some time, although I believe that its chief executive, Mr Paul Scott, is genuinely trying to turn it around. As we look back to find out what went wrong—some things clearly went very badly wrong—will the Secretary of State work with the chief executive, providing support and resources, not just to make sure this does not happen again, but to try to help EPUT improve in the future as well as examine the past?

Steve Barclay: I know that my right hon. Friend was particularly close to Sir David and is uniquely qualified to speak of his interest and involvement in these issues. I am happy to give him the reassurance that he seeks on working closely with the chief executive and the leadership team there. I know from my engagement with colleagues across the House that they will be closely involved in this in the weeks and months ahead.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): South London and Maudsley is the mental health trust that covers my constituency. This year, as a direct result of the Secretary of State's wider policies, SLAM is cutting £45 million from services. He has said today that he wants to improve mental health care and that he takes safety concerns seriously, but when will those words be meaningful for mental health care for patients and their families in Southwark?

Steve Barclay: The meaningfulness of those comments can be seen in the fact that we are putting this inquiry on a statutory basis; the £2.3 billion additional investment compared with what we had four years ago; the crisis cafés and the other schemes we have, as part of the 160 schemes we are bringing forward; and our willingness to innovate in mental health through the use of mental health digital apps. There is a whole range of initiatives because that is the right approach. Across the House, it has been recognised that in the past mental health did not get as much focus as physical health, which is why we are investing more. Again, the House recognises that covid has brought more focus to these issues, which is why this is a priority for the Government. Today's statement is a further continuum in that effort.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his attitude to this issue and the time he has put in. I fully support the points he has made about non-statutory and statutory

inquiries. It was right to start off non-statutory and to change when the situation changed and we were not getting what we wanted.

I reflect on the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) about, “Where did this go wrong?” Since I first visited Rochford Hospital, part of what is now EPUT, in my constituency, I believe we have had three Secretaries of State visit, as well as at least five Ministers responsible for these areas. What was the South Essex Mental Health Partnership grew to take in more of Essex, and it then reached across the border into Hertfordshire and, if I recall correctly, went further. It perhaps just got too big. Early on, the constituents I spoke to were concerned about getting in; they wanted their children to get in, but there were delays and this was about overall capacity. Now the issue is about the quality of what goes on. The hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) mentioned beds and I can tell her that this is not a problem of beds, certainly in Rochford Hospital, where there are plenty of beds; it is about having the clinical psychiatrists specialised in children’s services and the supporting nurses to deliver. We should also pay attention to the fact that things are much better where people have simple mental health problems, but very few people have those. When these problems are combined with drug use or autism, particular challenges are presented while people are in these places and during discharge. I urge the Secretary of State to encourage the inquiry to look into all those issues.

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend makes extremely important points, and I absolutely agree with him. Indeed, I will draw the inquiry’s attention to the points he raises. He is right about the trade-off between non-statutory inquiries giving speed and statutory inquiries having a wider range of powers. We have followed the evidence on that, which Dr Strathdee has shared. There is also a balance between the size of a facility and the quality of the care. Data is a key component within that and the rapid review was focused particularly on it. All of us are focused on, “How do we get the best patient outcomes? Where those have fallen short, how do we ensure the lessons of that?” That is what the statutory inquiry is absolutely focused on and it is important that families then engage with it.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Care Quality Commission report at the end of last year said that workforce issues and staffing shortages are the greatest challenge facing the mental health sector. I am sure that that would not have come as a surprise to the Health Secretary. The Glenside campus, part of the University of the West of England, is in my constituency, and it runs mental health training courses for nurses. What conversations is he having with the sector about how we can ensure we get enough mental health nurses trained, so that we get the right people coming through and they are encouraged to stay the course?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Lady’s point is important, given that in the wake of the pandemic we have seen significant increases in demand, particularly for children’s and young people’s services. For example, in a year, the demand increased by 41%, so there is significant demand, which places pressure on the workforce. That is why the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have committed to

the long-term workforce plan, which we will be bringing forward very shortly. We have been engaging with the sector, including the mental health sector, as part of that plan. NHS England has been doing significant work on that in recent months.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): The background stories to today’s announcement are truly heartbreaking, and I welcome the statutory inquiry. The Secretary of State referred to recent announcements about funding and the 111 helpline. Will he expand on what support can be accessed by people, especially young people, if they are going through a crisis right now?

Steve Barclay: It is extremely important that we get support to young people, because many mental health cases start at a young age. Indeed, data suggests that as many as 50% of mental health cases crystallise by the age of 15, so it is important that intervention is made early. Our programme in schools, for example, is focused on that. It is also important for us to have better community support, which is why we are looking at what mental health support can be offered when people phone 111 and at how we can better scale up the use of digital apps that offer support, given that people often access information through their phones or digital channels in a way that they did not five or 10 years ago.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On behalf of my party, I express my sympathy to all the families who have been bereaved and hurt by what has taken place. I thank the Secretary of State for his announcement about the statutory inquiry and the new powers. It is clear to those of us in the House who listened to his statement that he is committed to making patients’ lives better; we thank him and I put it on the record that he deserves credit for that. I know that the Secretary of State is always keen to share progressive strategies and policies with the regional Administrations; he is on record as having said that. It is clear that many lessons can and will be learned, so does he intend to share them with the regional Administrations?

Steve Barclay: I am extremely keen to share our experience, so that we can learn from each other. As the hon. Gentleman knows, this is a shared challenge across our United Kingdom. The pandemic shone a spotlight on the mental health pressures that many people face, and I am extremely keen to work on a UK-wide basis with colleagues to ensure that we learn from each other as we take these measures forward.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Given that a recent report into mental health services in York established that communication is a clear concern that is affecting mental health outcomes and safety locally, what specific steps would my right hon. Friend take to ensure better communication between primary and secondary care services? As we all know, that is vital in delivering faster and better outcomes for patients not only in York but across the country.

Steve Barclay: That is an extremely good point. In fact, a key element of the primary care recovery plan looks at the handover points between secondary and primary care, which are often the cause of significant additional work within primary care. We are keen to see

[*Steve Barclay*]

where we can ease those pressures, which in turn frees up our experienced GPs to do those tasks that require more time, so that is part of the primary care recovery plan. Through the rapid review and the focus on data, we are better able to identify where there are gaps or areas of duplication that take clinicians away from spending time with patients. That matters both in secondary and primary care, and it is something that the rapid review has been addressing.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the publication of the rapid review. While Essex is rightly getting its statutory inquiry, it appears that the situation in Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust will merely be covered by the new powers of the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that TEWV will be covered by the HSIB review? When can families expect to hear anything from that review? Will he keep the need for a statutory inquiry into TEWV under review?

Steve Barclay: It will be covered by the HSIB review. On how long that will take, investigations under the predecessor body typically took around a year, which is one of the advantages of the speed at which these things can be done. I hope my hon. Friend can see from the statement today that we will follow the evidence, given the decision we have taken to put the Essex inquiry on a statutory footing, but the HSIB approach has the benefit of speed. I hope that will benefit his constituents, as we learn the lessons.

It is worth clarifying that the new body will have much greater teeth, as a result of the reforms that were passed by the House in 2022. While it is not on a

statutory footing, it actually has more power than was the case in the past. That is why we think it is the right approach for learning the lessons in his constituency and more widely.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The Secretary of State has rightly pointed to the £2.3 billion in extra funding and has reiterated from the Dispatch Box his belief that early support for children's mental health is vital. Does he agree that this is sadly still patchy across the country? Early access to children's mental health services needs to be a priority for all new care systems. I commend to him the approach being taken in north Lincolnshire, where that is absolutely the case and where it has been championed by the wellbeing boards and in all our health partnerships. That should be replicated across the country.

Steve Barclay: I commend my hon. Friend for the service he gives as a community first responder. Through that, I know he takes a huge interest in these matters. As with the point about data, I am extremely keen that where there is good practice, we are socialising that across the country as a whole, rather than having it in pockets. I would be extremely keen to work with him on the lessons coming out of north Lincolnshire and on how we scale that across the country, so that good practice can be adopted more widely. Indeed, the statement today is about how we will ensure that the lessons from Essex can be applied more widely, so that best practice is socialised across the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, which will be welcomed by everyone across Essex.

Childcare Reform Package

2.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the progress we have made towards delivering the genuinely radical childcare reforms announced in the Chancellor's spring statement.

The Chancellor announced that from September 2025, working parents will be able to access 30 hours a week of childcare, for 38 weeks a year, from the term after their child turns nine months to when they start school. I am pleased to announce that from today, the Department for Work and Pensions has raised the amount working parents on universal credit can claim for their childcare to £951 a month for one child and £1,630 for two or more children. That is an increase of roughly 50% from the previous limits, which were £646 for one child or £1,108 for two or more children.

The Government are also helping eligible parents to cover the costs for the first month of childcare when they enter work or increase their working hours. Those parents will now receive up to 85% of the first month's childcare costs back before next month's bills are due, meaning that from then on they should have the money to pay for childcare one month in advance.

When I have spoken to families on universal credit, many have told me that they have struggled with up-front childcare bills, making it harder for them to get back into work. These childcare reforms support one of the Prime Minister's five key priorities—to grow the economy—by giving families on universal credit up to £522 extra each month to cover childcare costs. This is a transformational package that is designed to remove as many barriers to work as possible.

The evidence is clear: the earliest years, before a child goes to school, are the most critical stage of a young child's development. That is when they are learning most rapidly, and when the foundations are being laid for future success.

We are also committed to improving the availability of wraparound childcare. Reliable wraparound childcare, before and after school, helps parents to work and can offer children great activities around the school day. The education and care provided in childcare settings up and down the country is pivotal for children. Visiting and talking to nurseries, childminders and other providers is one of the best parts of my job. I wish to put on record my thanks for the hard work and dedication of the talented people who work in the sector.

I have travelled across the country visiting providers: from Chestnuts Childcare in Shirebrook to Kids Inc in Crowthorne; from Little Stars in Peterborough to Imagination Childcare in Moredun; from Curious Caterpillars in Stroud to Playsteps Day Nursery in Swindon; and from Bright Horizons in Didcot to Acorn Day Nursery in Emberton. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Peterborough (Paul Bristow), for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), for Bracknell (James Sunderland), for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and others for hosting me on those visits. They all share my determination to get this right for parents and providers.

When I am out on those visits, I often hear how much of a lifeline the settings are for parents, allowing them to work and develop their own careers, while providing the high-quality early education that gives our youngest children the best start in life.

I support the ambitious expansion of childcare support for working parents that the Chancellor announced in his spring statement. It represents the single biggest investment in childcare this country has ever seen. It will make sure that parents are able to access the high-quality, affordable childcare that they need.

Today's changes are just one part of our generally radical plans. By 2028, we expect to be spending more than £8 billion per year on early years education, which is double what we spend now. This will build on the 30 hours of funded childcare for three to four-year-olds that this Government introduced in 2017, extending the entitlement to eligible working parents of children aged from nine-months-old to when they start primary school. It will remove one of the largest hurdles that working parents face, and it will save parents £6,500 per year on average.

We have heard it loud and clear from the sector that getting the funding right is crucial. From this September, we will provide £204 million of extra funding for local authorities to increase the hourly rates that they pay providers, and we will make sure that rates continue to go up each year. That means that, from September, the average hourly rate for two-year-olds will go from £6 per hour to around £8 per hour, and the average rate for three to four-year-olds will be over £5.50 per hour. From 2024-25, the average rate for under-twos will be around £11 per hour. We will confirm the September rates for each local authority before the summer break. We will also ask the sector for its views on how we should distribute the funding for the new entitlements from April 2024, including the rules that local authorities will have to follow when distributing the funding to providers.

Of course, money is not everything. We also want to boost the early years workforce, who are so crucial to the success of nurseries across the country. There are multiple ways that we are doing that. I have heard from many people who manage nurseries that the way that we regulate staffing in settings is stopping providers from making the most effective use of their staff and giving their best people responsibilities that match their abilities.

Likewise, childminders and nurseries have been telling us about barriers to delivering the education and care that they want for children. That is why we have launched a consultation on proposed changes to the early years foundation stage requirements. Every single one of our proposals has come from conversations with people working in the sector. They will give settings more flexibility and help address some of those barriers, while maintaining high-quality provision and keeping our youngest children safe. Indeed, 96% of childcare providers in England were judged good or outstanding at their most recent inspection, which should give parents huge confidence in the standards of provision.

Some of the new measures will help free up staff to pursue professional development opportunities. We are investing up to £180 million in the early years education recovery programme, which offers a package of training, qualifications, expert guidance and targeted support for everyone working in the sector.

[*Claire Coutinho*]

To train people up, we need to get more people in, so we are also going full steam ahead with a new national campaign early next year to promote the sector and support the recruitment and retention of talented staff. We will also consider how to introduce new accelerated apprenticeship and degree apprenticeship routes, so that new entrants can build careers at all levels of the sector.

I wish to reassure Members that we will work closely with the sector to deliver these historic reforms, just as we did on previous successful roll-outs of the 30 hours entitlement for three to four-year-olds, the 15 hours entitlement for two-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the holiday activities and food programme. We cannot do this without early years providers, childminders and local authorities. We have a strong track record of working together to deliver childcare for parents, and I will be listening closely to them when considering our next steps.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister.

2.14 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advanced sight of her statement.

The Government's realisation of the importance of childcare remains striking, despite what the Minister says, for how long it has taken. Childcare is important for so many reasons—for giving every child the best start in life, for helping every parent to take on and succeed at the jobs they love, and for the foundation that it provides for success at school and throughout education. Above all, as my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Education has rightly said, childcare is important for supporting families to achieve and thrive together. Yet it is only now that the Government have arrived at the party. It is typical of this Government that they are not only late but focused on tweaks that they trumpet proudly but that do not deliver the scale of reform that is urgently needed.

The reforms reflect some of the changes to universal credit that the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has repeatedly called for. But, as he has also warned Ministers, they do not go far enough in giving people the chances and choices to go back to work at the scale necessary to tackle the challenges.

On childcare, the Government's fixation on their broken hours model leaves them blind to the wider challenges around supply and demand of childcare and the extraordinary structure of the market for extra hours. The failure of that market is felt by every family. A decade of sticking-plaster politics from the Conservative party has caused them pain. But the announcement does nothing to ensure that childcare places are available in the cities, towns, and villages of our country. In some places, nursery and childcare spaces are outnumbered 10 to one by the children who need them.

I am delighted that the Minister has visited the seats of so many of her newest and presumably most nervous colleagues, but, as well as talking to parents who have

found childcare, she would have done better had she spoken to parents who have not. The announcement does little to deliver the extra staff who will be needed to deliver the extra entitlements for parents that the Minister so enthusiastically announces. It does nothing to deliver the childcare places in which our children will be cared for and in which, we hope, they will learn in those extra hours and months of their lives. It is great to hear that the Minister will be listening to providers and local authorities, but listening is no substitute for action. It does little to retain or upskill the existing staff in the sector who are leaving in their droves for work that is more clearly valued. It does little to enrich childcare, to drive up quality, to make it a part of our education system, and to deliver a foundation for achievement and success right through school and life. It does little to deliver the flexibility that parents need not merely at work, but to get into work—to get the training and skills that they need and that our companies, communities and country need. In short, the announcement today is little more than a post-dated cheque. It is a promise of jam tomorrow—a promise that brings more questions than answers.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let me briefly set out a few questions in the hope that the Minister can address them in the debate today. When the 30-hours childcare entitlement is spread over a year, it is the equivalent of 22 hours a week. What steps is she taking, right now, to address the cliff-edge in costs between the Government-funded hours and the hours for which parents have to pay? Will she repeal the restrictions that councils face in making more childcare provision available? Is she genuinely confident that a new advertising campaign will be enough to attract workers to the sector? Is she aware that, for an increase in entitlements to childcare places to work, there must be more staff, and more settings, otherwise more parents will simply find that they cannot get the childcare that they need and to which they have entitlement? Finally, how does the Minister intend to ensure better uptake of childcare entitlements among eligible families given the complexity and bureaucracy of the existing system?

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his reply. Let me address some of the points that he raised in turn.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the ability of parents to look for childcare in the holidays. We have the £200 million holiday activities and food programme, which is particularly targeted at disadvantaged children. Last summer, more than 600,000 children accessed that. When we did our initial survey of that programme, about 70% of those children said that they had never been to anything like that before, which is a great sign of the opportunity that it is spreading. He talks about the work that we are doing with local authorities. To understand sufficiency and any challenges, we are contacting every single local authority as part of the roll-out.

The hon. Gentleman talked about getting more staff, and we have set out some flexibilities; I talked in my statement about the recruitment campaign we are doing next year. He talks about better uptake, but I would say that the uptake of the offer for three to four-year-olds is in the 90% range; for two-year-olds it is in the 72% range and tax-free childcare in recent years has gone from 172,000 up to 500,000. Yes, there is more to do, but we

have very good uptake and any parent thinking about more childcare should look at our Childcare Choices website to see what they might be entitled to.

Overall, however, I get the sense from the hon. Gentleman's comments that he did not listen to my statement. I talked about the £4 billion extra that is going into the sector, about plans for staff and for childminders and about routes for apprenticeships. I remind him that it was a Conservative Government that expanded the offer for three to four-year-olds and introduced the offer for two-year-olds, and now it is the Conservative Government making the single largest-ever investment into childcare.

What do we know about the Labour party policy? We know the Opposition wanted to do universal childcare, but they denied that last week. That was last week's flip-flop—or I should say one of last week's flip-flops. They have talked about means-testing childcare, which would mean taking away childcare from middle-class parents at a moment when we know that families are struggling with their finances. On the Government side we recognise that childcare is important for families and important for growth. Our childcare plans, as announced at the Budget, were called by the International Monetary Fund a serious point of growth in this country. We recognise that that is important.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Chair of the Education Committee.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on this important statement. I agree with her and, more importantly, I agree with the Treasury that childcare is worth investing in. I welcome the changes to universal credit, which I think will make a significant difference, but I particularly welcome the £204 million of extra funding for local authorities to distribute to providers; from what the Select Committee has heard from providers, that is urgently needed. We need to make sure we have capacity in the system to meet the challenge of providing all that additional childcare for families. I urge her to make sure that as much of that funding as possible is distributed, and to talk to local authorities about ensuring they do not top-slice it too aggressively. When the Government announced the £8 and £11 rates for the younger years, we heard from childminders in particular that they simply did not believe that they would receive that. We want a system in which the providers on the frontline of providing childcare get the funding that the Government announce.

Claire Coutinho: We have a rule at the moment that local authorities have to pass on 95% of the funds that they receive, and our returns show that they pass on 97%. However, as the years go on, with the amount of extra money that we have put into the system, we can definitely look at those figures and at what can be done. Some of that will be set out in our consultation before the summer.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): The Minister told us about several childcare providers that she has spoken to, but she has clearly not spoken to Munchkins Village Nursery in Burscough in my constituency. The nursery got in touch with me to say that, while the help for parents is very welcome, the Government have by their own admission underfunded the sector to the tune of about one third of the funding promised—about

£2 billion—and the nursery staff believe that the sector is in financial risk. Does the Minister appreciate that, regardless of any funding for parents, they simply cannot find the childcare that they need?

Claire Coutinho: I recognise that it has been a challenging few years for the sector. In this piece of work we have surveyed about 10,000 providers, we have a providers' finance report and we have surveyed about 6,000 parents, so we used a very data-driven estimate to come up with the figure. We will be consulting on the funding before the summer and, as I said, there will be funding coming in September before any expansion of the entitlements, which start in April next year. There will be additional money next year and by 2027-28 we will be spending an additional £4 billion that will be distributed via local authorities to those settings.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on such an excellent statement today—I think the shadow Minister needs to read it, because he clearly did not listen to it.

My hon. Friend has clearly thought about the need for top-quality childcare, which for many young children is vital when their home life is perhaps not all it could be. One thing she has not talked much about is the provision of new workforce. Can she comment a bit more on her consultation on changing the requirement for high-level qualifications to a requirement for qualifications that are more appropriate to providing empathetic and supportive care?

Claire Coutinho: I know my right hon. Friend is incredibly passionate about this area, and I share her passion. In the consultation we have set out some flexibilities after talking to the sector; an example of that would be relaxing some of the requirements around having level 2 maths for level 3 qualifications, which we know has been a barrier for some people. We are looking at all kinds of flexibilities that mean we will get the right staff at every stage to make sure that our children get the right education.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Minister would have been very welcome in the north of England, particularly in Westmorland. This announcement is welcome in many ways and will help many parents in my constituency who cannot afford to work at the moment. It is a good step forward. However, many childcare providers—probably the majority in my constituency—are linked to the primary school in that community, and primary schools have never faced such awful financial circumstances as they do now. I have visited many schools in Westmorland the last few weeks, from Appleby to Windermere, from Kendal to Brough, from Shap to Witherslack and many others. They all tell me that the deserved pay rises for teachers and other staff are unfunded by Government and that energy costs, which they have seen go through the roof, are also largely unfunded, leaving many schools in deficit and having to shed staff. All that undermines their ability to provide childcare and other forms of education. What has the Minister to say to our local schools in Westmorland, which are desperate for her support so that they can carry on providing education and childcare?

Claire Coutinho: We are taking schools funding to a historic real-terms high. We are also making the single largest ever investment in childcare. I recognise that it

[*Claire Coutinho*]

has been a difficult time for public sector services, and the most important thing we can do is to grip inflation and make the pound go further, but overall we are putting record funding into both areas.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): We do need more childcare, and I wish the Minister every success with these policies, but we are going to need a lot more people, businesses and other institutions to come forward to provide that care. Will the whole Government do more? Can we get rid of IR35, a tax on the self-employed? Can we raise the value added tax threshold for small business? We must look at making childcare more worthwhile, because we need the teachers and the childcare workers.

Claire Coutinho: I thank my right hon. Friend—I have just had a bit of a flashback to my days as a Treasury Parliamentary Private Secretary. He is absolutely right that the supply of childcare will be a really important part of growth, as has been reiterated by the IMF and others.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): Progress in this area is very welcome and necessary, but parts of the statement will be dispiriting for families in Northern Ireland, as we fall even further behind. Can the Minister confirm that Northern Ireland will receive commensurate funding through the Barnett formula, and have she and her officials given any thought to how the new regulations and resources might be applied in Northern Ireland? Furthermore, given the extremely austere budget settlement in Northern Ireland, does she acknowledge that even where there are improvements in childcare, many children will be going on to increasingly degraded and under-resourced primary schools?

Claire Coutinho: The money will be passed on in the normal way across the education budget. We regularly meet Education Ministers from the devolved Administrations, and the Secretary of State held such a meeting, I think from memory, in early June.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): An excellent statement—on behalf of nurseries in Winchester and Chandler's Ford, I thank the Minister. The recruitment drive in particular is much needed. However, it would be easier to do that, and to retain staff, if we could give staff a pay rise. The sector tells my all-party parliamentary group on childcare and early education—I thank the Minister for coming to address us—that if it were not paying business rates, that would be a lot easier. School-based settings do not pay them, but the rest of the private, voluntary and independent sector does. I realise that that is a matter for Treasury, but will she please take that away and look at it again? That would make a her a true hero in the sector when she continues her very welcome visits.

Claire Coutinho: I will of course look at everything we can do to support all settings. As part of the work we did to assess costs, we looked at other costs, including things such as business rates, to assess the level of funding we should give for the hourly rates, but of course I will always look at anything I can do to support nurseries.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Looking at the existing childcare entitlements for two, three and four year olds, the Early Years Alliance and the Women's

Budget Group estimate that the current offer falls short by about £1.8 billion—and that is even before we expand the offer, as was announced in the spring Budget. The Government are providing only an extra £204 million this year and £288 million next year, before we expand the hours. That clearly falls well short. There is no point expanding the hours if the providers are not there, so could the Minister explain what she is doing to ensure that early years providers actually remain financially viable?

Claire Coutinho: As I said, it has been a challenging time for providers, but the work we have done to come up with the hourly rate has been based on a lot of evidence. I do not recognise that figures that the hon. Lady talks about. As I said, we surveyed 10,000 providers and 6,000 parents, and looked at providers' finance reports, to look deeply at the costs and come up with the hourly rate. I continue to talk to all providers as we continue the expansion.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a tribute to the Minister that she secured the single largest ever increase in funding in this important area and that the Labour Opposition could not even be bothered to turn up today. She will know at first hand from visiting Imagination nursery, which is now an outstanding provider, that it has the sort of provision that we want to expand. For it to have the confidence to do so, it needs certainty on funding to recruit and retain staff and secure additional premises. Will she keep pushing for as much advance clarity and certainty as possible so that all children can benefit from this wonderful announcement?

Claire Coutinho: I absolutely will. It was a joy and a delight to visit Imagination nursery, which does outstanding work, and I congratulate it on its recent grade. I will take my hon. Friend's point on board.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): This is the first time in history that a Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer have put the early years at the centre of the country's growth strategy. I note that an International Monetary Fund analyst singled it out in saying that

"supply-side measures, notably the increase in childcare support...should have a positive effect on medium-term growth", so that is absolutely welcome.

I cannot thank the Minister enough for visiting BarBar Nursery, Allsorts, and Curious Caterpillars Day Nursery. In our work with Onward, we have called for a national campaign on recruitment. If there is any possibility of that happening this year rather than next, I would like a commitment from the Department that it will get a wriggle on, because that is important.

Will the Minister work with the Local Government Association to have a good look at what different councils are doing, not only with the money flowing down from Government but on how often childminders are paid? I know of childminders who are paid only about three times a year. Not many of us could cope with that type of cashflow.

Claire Coutinho: As always, my hon. Friend makes excellent points on this matter. I will absolutely consider her point about childminders and will ensure that I continue to talk to her. She has been incredibly helpful throughout this process and in securing the funding.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend's statement, which will help some of those on the lowest incomes either to take up work or to take on more work. She will recall that when I had the pleasure of taking her to a nursey in Didcot, it raised the varying rates that nurseries are paid by local authorities across the country for the same work. Does she agree that, although the Government's largest single investment in childcare ever is welcome, it is important that local authorities pay a broadly comparable amount of money to providers?

Claire Coutinho: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for taking to me to Bright Horizons in Didcot, which was a useful visit. Local authorities have different rates. We will set out funding rates before the summer, and will consult on them. We take different costs across the country into account, but he makes an interesting point.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I warmly welcome the Minister's announcement and thank her for all the work that she has done for childcare providers. I was going to raise the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) about business rates. Will the Minister explain what help she is giving to local authorities to help providers deliver the expanded childcare offer to parents?

Claire Coutinho: At the moment, the way the policy works is that providers have to pass on at least 95%, and can keep 5%, of the funding rates that they are given. Most pass on more—from our returns, most pass on 97%—but they can use the additional money for the administration of payments and such.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): May I congratulate my hon. Friend on her statement and on the hard work she has put in to get us here? I held a roundtable of early years providers in Barrow a few weeks ago. The issue that came up time and again was that they are losing good staff—staff the kids like and the parents get on with—because of the qualifications requirements for English and maths. Can the Minister confirm whether part of the consultation will look at that? May I invite her to come and visit Cheeky Monkeys Childcare and some of the other providers in Barrow at some point in the future?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That was one of the things that I heard from the sector as well, particularly on the qualification barriers. I can confirm that we are consulting on that—particularly on the maths point—in the flexibilities consultation that we set out at the beginning of the summer. I would be delighted to visit him.

Points of Order

2.35 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In but 10 minutes time, we will move on to consideration of the Holocaust Memorial Bill. It is very important in my view that the Minister and the House should have available on the Table the "National Memorial and Learning Centre: Search for a Central London site" document issued by the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation in September 2015. May I ask you to convey that to those on the Treasury Bench so that that document is available to Ministers and the House?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am grateful to the Father of the House for his point of order and for giving me notice of it. I have paid careful attention to the point that he made. I can assure him that the Vote Office has printed from the internet and prepared copies of the document that he mentions. I entirely agree with him that it is important that the House be well educated on the facts of the matter that we are about to discuss, so I have myself obtained some copies. I will give one forthwith to the Whip to give to the Minister, and one to the Labour Whip to give to the shadow Minister. I hope that the Father of the House will thus be satisfied that the document that he considers very important is fully available. I do not have copies here for everyone, but they are available in the Vote Office.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 12 August 2021, seven people were shot in Keyham and Ford, and we lost five of them. The subsequent inquest identified a catalogue of serious failings in our police, and made recommendations to the Home Office. On 21 February, the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), confirmed to the House that he had asked the coroner for a delay in responding to the inquest's findings until 30 June, and said that

"no doubt there will be a statement to the House"—[*Official Report*, 21 February 2023; Vol. 728, c. 158]

at that point. That is tomorrow. The families of the victims are desperate to know how such tragedies can be prevented in future. Can you advise me on whether you have heard from the Home Office that an oral statement will be made to the House, and what more can be done to ensure that any measures announced as a result of the inquest receive proper parliamentary scrutiny so that no tragedy like the one we saw in Plymouth can ever happen again?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I can well understand his consternation. The matter to which he refers was truly a tragedy, and there are families who must be suffering dreadfully because of it. The only answer that I can give him from the Chair is that I have no notice of the intention of any Minister to make such a statement, but I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what he has said, and I sincerely hope that his concerns will be conveyed to the appropriate Minister. Of course, I hardly need remind him that

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

there are various mechanisms that he can use to raise this matter substantively on the Floor of the House, and I am sure that he will go to the Table Office to see what he can do.

Global Climate and Development Finance

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23) 2.38 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish proposals for increasing the on-lending of UK Special Drawing Rights via the IMF, for transferring the capital returned to the UK by the European Investment Bank to the World Bank, and for increasing the UK's support for the African Development Bank, for the purpose of reducing debt burdens and the cost of capital and contributing to the implementation of the Paris Agreement on climate change.

I start by declaring an interest as chair of the international Parliamentary Network on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which brings together 2,000 parliamentarians from 140 countries to argue for the changes that I will put before the Government today.

If anything, this Bill is overdue. Eight years ago, the world came together to agree an ambitious plan to spread freedom, security and justice to every corner of the planet. The sustainable development goals agreed in New York in September 2015 offered hope, progress and a better life to billions of people. Months later, we came together again, not in New York but in Paris, to agree the climate change agreement that would help us guarantee that there would be a planet left on which to make those goals a reality.

However, the truth is that such ambitions are in deep trouble. There are just 10,000 days to go before the Paris climate agreement deadline. A perfect storm is now threatening the world's potential to deliver on the goals that we agreed just eight years ago. In fact, seven giants now stand in the way of progress: want, hunger, disease, lost learning, conflict, debt and climate change. They are a cascading, connected set of challenges with lethal force.

Extreme poverty has risen for the first time this century, with 600 million people now forecast to be living on less than \$2.15 a day by 2030. Globally, 200 million people now wake up without enough to eat, and 300 million children will need humanitarian assistance this year. On current trends, we will not meet our goal of ending hunger by 2030. That scarcity is fuelling violence. About half of the world's extreme poor are expected to live in conflict-affected areas by 2030. In turn, those conditions are threatening our ability to make good children's lost learning during covid, which could cost \$21 trillion over the course of their lives. Poorer nations have now exhausted their reserves. In fact, debt in developing countries is now the highest it has been for 50 years, and levels are rising.

Looming deadly over all of that are the changes in our climate and the chaos of extreme weather. Across half the world and most of Africa, the seasons are simply no longer predictable. The sun which once brought life now brings death because it burns so ferociously. The rains, when they fall, fall with such force that life-giving water floods and destroys the land it once nourished. Against that murderous maelstrom, low and middle-income countries need to mobilise some \$6 trillion between now and 2030 to hit their Paris climate targets.

Poor countries did not cause climate change, but the world's poorest are somehow expected to pick up the pieces. We cannot go on like this and, as President Macron said in Paris last week, we must not go on like this. If the world fails to act—if we fail to act—all of us may fall prey to those who preach that the rules-based order is not fit for purpose. New institutions outside the World Bank, the IMF, and perhaps even the United Nations, will come forward beyond our influence, so we must change.

That is why my Bridgetown Bill calls on the Government to lead, to take the initiative and to help champion the agenda set out with such passion, force and eloquence by Prime Minister Mia Mottley. The whole House should salute her work. She has helped to galvanise the biggest shake-up of global development finance since the World Bank and IMF were created in 1944. Her Bridgetown initiative is a pragmatic collection of ideas with radical implications for the World Bank's mission and model, the resources deployed by the IMF, and the goal that richer countries must step up to and meet.

Reforms are under way and the agenda is moving. I am grateful for the Government's support, such as it is, but our best estimates are that the Bretton Woods institutions must at least triple the finance that they supply. That is why the UK should lead and help to champion this debate internationally. The Bill is needed because it is a matter of regret that the once-proud record of our country—once lauded as a leader in global development—is now much reduced. It is a matter of regret that the Prime Minister found time to enjoy the company of Mr Murdoch in London last week and declined to join President Macron in Paris, with 50 other leaders from around the world. It is a matter of regret that the UK is not leading the debate on green development finance, but lagging behind.

Important steps forward were taken last week in Paris. The World Bank, under its brilliant new president, Ajay Banga, committed to an expanded crisis toolkit, replete with new types of insurance to backstop development projects, and crucially, to a pause in debt repayments so that countries can focus on what matters when crisis strikes without worrying about the bill. Kristalina Georgieva, the head of the IMF, gave us some reassuring news about how we may now be on track to meet the target of sharing \$100 billion in special drawing rights. However, there is still a gap in what needs to be accomplished, which is why the UK needs to rediscover the lost art of leading, and that is what this Bill proposes.

First, we should be increasing the on-lending of special drawing rights and following Japan's lead. We have £19 billion-worth of new special drawing rights, and they are sitting there gathering dust in the exchange equalisation account. We have said that we will share 20%, but Japan said it will share 40%. If we match that target, we could supply nearly £4 billion of extra resource to the poorest countries. I have been asking Foreign Secretaries and Treasury Secretaries for two years why

we are not matching the ambition of countries such as Japan and, frankly, I am yet to receive a good and coherent answer.

Secondly, we should be using some of those special drawing rights to support the work of the African Development Bank. If we lent £500 million-worth of special drawing rights, the ADB could quadruple it in new concessional lending to countries across Africa.

Thirdly, we should be helping to build a bigger World Bank. The World Bank remains the most efficient and effective way of mobilising development finance. A \$20 billion increase in its capital base would unlock \$200 billion in concessional lending over the course of the decade. If the UK contributed to that kind of increase, our share might be about \$1 billion—\$200 million a year over five years—but we could step up to that challenge. We will get £3.5 billion back from the European Investment Bank—I suppose some in this House would call that a Brexit dividend—between now and 2030. We should recycle that money into the World Bank to help it radically expand lending to some of the world's poorest countries.

Nobody can be more eloquent in debates such as this than a hungry child, so let me conclude with the words of a 10-year-old boy at a primary school in rural Narok County, Kenya. I had the privilege of meeting him at his school with the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), and I want to thank the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, World Vision and the Coalition for Global Prosperity for helping to make that visit possible. This is what he had to say:

"I like coming to school because I have many friends who I play with and learn together. My teachers always teach us how to read, write and many other new things. They are good to us."

But he also says:

"Sometimes we eat once in a day because there is no food and we don't have enough water to drink. Despite all these challenges we still come to school to learn."

The children of that school have the same dreams as our children. They want to be lawyers, doctors and teachers, and some—so help them—want to be politicians. Yet such is the drought, such is the poverty, and such is the desperation that many families struggle to survive. Girls as young as 11 are sent to get married, and boys are sent to work even younger. Children are not in school because they are hunting for water all day. If we do not step up and solve these challenges, there will be not just an opportunity gap for those children, but an opportunity cost for all of us. That is a price we cannot afford, so I call on His Majesty's Government to act.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Liam Byrne, Sarah Champion, Sir Stephen Timms, Tony Lloyd, Sir George Howarth, Clive Efford, Debbie Abrahams, Mr Virendra Sharma, Mike Amesbury and Patrick Grady present the Bill.

Liam Byrne accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 336).

Holocaust Memorial Bill

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The reasoned amendment in the name of Sir Peter Bottomley has been selected.

2.50 pm

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This short Bill serves a vital purpose. It ensures that the undertaking that this Government have given, supported by the official Opposition and all parties in this House, is honoured, and that a fitting, Government-led national memorial and learning centre to honour the 6 million who died in the holocaust is established in a suitable, prominent centre at the heart of our capital city.

I know that everyone in this House recognises that the holocaust was a unique evil. Genocide—the greatest crime that humanity can inflict on other human beings—has been a dark feature of our shared history since the dawn of time, but the holocaust stands out in scale and in horror. It was a unique desire on the part of a nation to wipe out an entire people. Mechanised cruelty executed on a scale that could never have been imagined beforehand meant that, from the Pyrenees to the Urals, the Nazi war machine was bent on the elimination of an entire race. I think all of us, whatever our views on the Bill and all of the inevitable details that follow in making sure that an appropriate memorial is sited, will share a desire to ensure that the commitment “Never again” is in all our hearts.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I fully concur with what my right hon. Friend has just said, and I am fully supportive of a national holocaust memorial, but the reason I will not be supporting the Government in the passing of this Bill this evening—if it is passed—is that there appears to have been a complete lack of public consultation. Westminster City Council was against it, and it seems to me as though this has been imposed from above by Government. That is not what we do in this country: we need a much wider consultation. That is why many prominent Jews, including Malcolm Rifkind, former rabbis and so forth, have signed the open letter arguing against the siting of the memorial in Victoria Tower gardens.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There has been controversy and there has been opposition to the site of the memorial, but it is only fair to say that the decision to site it in Victoria Tower gardens has followed consultation. There was extensive consultation on this project, starting with Prime Minister David Cameron’s holocaust commission in 2014, which received almost 2,500 responses. Following the announcement in January 2016 that Victoria Tower gardens had been identified as the most fitting site, an international design competition was then held to select a suitable design team.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I do not put this as a point of argument, but as something that I hope my right hon. Friend is aware of: when the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation put out its specification in September 2015—a copy of which, I think, is available to my right hon. Friend—it said that it wanted various

criteria to be taken into account, including a possible location in central London, which on page 10 of the specification is illustrated as west of Regent’s Park, east of Spitalfields and down from the Imperial War Museum. In the four or five months between September 2015 and January 2016, there was no public consultation about the site at all. I do not want my right hon. Friend to feel that he needs to answer that point now, but if he could say before the end of the debate what consultation there was between September 2015 and January 2016, that might be helpful to the House.

Michael Gove: The consultation was undertaken after the announcement of the winning design, and from January to September 2017 the public were invited to comment on the shortlisted designs, which were exhibited in Parliament and across the United Kingdom. Of course, as the Father of the House will know, there was a planning inquiry, and during that inquiry extensive material about the memorial and the learning centre was published and shared. Interested parties were given an opportunity to raise concerns and objections, and objectors had the opportunity to make their case to the independent planning inspector at that point.

However, I stress that the decision on the site was not taken by Government Ministers, and—in respect of the understandable concerns raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron)—it was not imposed by the Government themselves. The decision was arrived at by the independent Holocaust Memorial Foundation, with representations from different political traditions, including the right hon. Ed Balls and the right hon. Lord Pickles; the Chief Rabbi; the very distinguished president of the Community Security Trust, Gerald Ronson; and a host of others from civil society. While my hon. Friend is right to say that some people within the Jewish community have expressed concerns, the overwhelming view of the Jewish community and its representative organisations is that this is the right memorial in the right location, and that we must press on.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. On the location, what assurances can he give that the Bill does not undermine the environmental protections that Victoria Tower gardens currently enjoy?

Michael Gove: Victoria Tower gardens will continue to be a park with public access—only some 7.5% of the location of the park will be occupied by the memorial. Of course, when David Cameron initiated the commission, it was made clear that any memorial should be suitably striking, suitably prominent, and in a location that has political, cultural, emotional and historical resonance, which it will be.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): When I was Leader of the House of Commons, between 2017 and 2019, I received so many representations personally from people who made the case that there are now so few holocaust survivors still living that we simply have to get on with this. As my right hon. Friend said, that consultation began under David Cameron’s leadership, which is now a long time in the past. If we are going to do this, and it needs to be in a prominent place to show our respect and commitment to remembering that horrific time, we must get on with it.

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend, who was a brilliant Leader of the House, for making that point so clearly. As she reminds us, the holocaust is moving from living history to history. The voices of those who are survivors and witnesses are fading, and we must ensure that their example endures.

Just a fortnight ago, Ben Helfgott, an ambassador for the Holocaust Educational Trust, sadly passed away. Ben was a holocaust survivor who went on to represent this country in weightlifting at the Olympics. Thanks to the Holocaust Educational Trust, I had the privilege of meeting Ben and hearing his testimony. I do not think any of us who have heard the testimony of any of the witnesses and survivors for whom the Holocaust Educational Trust has provided a platform will forget that—there is nothing as powerful as hearing from those who lived through and survived the hell of the holocaust. As Ben and other survivors pass on, it is our duty and our responsibility to move as quickly as we can to ensure that the memorial they fought for and wished to see is established suitably.

Of course, one of the other reasons why it is so important that we move quickly and show resolution is that not only are voices fading, but antisemitism is rising. In 2022, the last year for which we have figures, the Community Security Trust recorded 1,652 antisemitic incidents. In the year before that, the number of antisemitic incidents in this country had reached a record high. As Jonathan Sacks reminded us, antisemitism is a virus that mutates. We need to be vigilant, always and everywhere, against hate and prejudice, and the memorial and learning centre will establish a means of doing so for generations to come.

Jonathan Edwards: I agree with everything that the Secretary of State has just said. He will be aware that the Jewish Museum in Camden is due to close because of a lack of funds—that is my understanding. What consideration have the Government given to providing some funds to keep that recognition of the holocaust alive?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Of course, the Government stand behind the memorial, but there will also be philanthropic funding. Here again, Gerald Ronson CBE is one of the figures at the forefront in supporting this cause, as he has so many good causes. The Government also support the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust. Indeed, I was proud as the Education Secretary to carry on the great work of Ed Balls in making sure that holocaust education was a critical part of the history that every child learns in our schools.

As the former Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), pointed out, David Cameron established a commission with cross-party support in 2014, and it is that commission's work that we seek to honour today. Again, the commission was clear that the most important thing is to make sure that we have a striking new memorial in a prominent central London location and accompanied by a world-class education centre. That is what the holocaust memorial commission is charged with delivering, and the detail of its proposals have commanded respect and approval from historians and from within the Jewish community.

This Bill seeks specifically to change the London County Council (Improvements) Act 1900, which governs public parks. All we seek to do is to make sure that those parts of the 1900 Act that Mrs Justice Thornton rightly invoked in the case that was heard before her are altered. We wish to ensure that it is the clear will of Parliament—both the Commons and the Lords, across parties and across political traditions—that the memorial goes ahead, while also continuing to respect free access to Victoria Tower gardens, respecting its position as a public park, and making sure that those green spaces are accessible to all and that the existing memorials there are respected as well.

As I have mentioned, the choice of venue has attracted some controversy, but I can put it no better than the Chief Rabbi himself. When questioned about why, he said that this

“is an inspirational choice of venue... this is a most wonderful location because it is in a prime place of great prominence and it is at the heart of our democracy... we don't want to tuck the Holocaust away somewhere—similar to...a tiny monument in Hyde Park, that most people have never heard of. We want all of British society to be aware...for the sake of the whole country and its future.”

We are all privileged to be parliamentarians, and we all know that when people think of this country, the symbol they associate with it is this House. We all know that this nation—the mother of Parliaments, the home of Parliamentary democracy—has a proud tradition. It is only appropriate that, when we reflect on the greatest evil that humanity has ever been responsible for, it is here in the home of parliamentary democracy that we find the space, the time and the common endeavour to make sure that a fitting memorial can be established, and that is what this Bill seeks to do.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very effective and powerful speech in support of the Bill. The point he has just made about the proximity of the memorial and learning centre to this institution is exactly right. Does he agree with me that, when we talk about the holocaust and the horrors of the past, it is not just something that happened to other people over there; it is actually part of our story and our history as well? So Westminster, close to Parliament, is the ideal location for this memorial.

Michael Gove: I could not agree more. There are representatives in this House and in the other place who are the relatives of those who died or survived the holocaust. Lord Austin, a distinguished Cross Bencher in the other place, is the adopted son of a holocaust survivor. This is about recognising the intimate links between this country and that crime, and the fact that distinguished figures such as those responsible for the Kindertransport played an heroic role in helping people fleeing persecution to come to this country. However, it is also the case that all history is complex, and there are mistakes that this nation and some of its leaders or leading politicians made at that time that we also need to remember, if we are to ensure that “never again” is a phrase that resonates with meaning rather than being simply an empty repeated platitude.

Jonathan Edwards: My interest in this Bill is primarily driven by constituents of mine who are related to Thomas Fowell Buxton, and there is a very important monument

[Jonathan Edwards]

to his memory and the campaign he waged against slavery on this site. If this Bill proceeds, what can we do to ensure that this memorial complements that memorial?

Michael Gove: Again, the hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. The whole design by David Adjaye and his team is designed to complement the Buxton memorial. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman is quite right that it is fitting that a memorial intended to ensure that we remember those who fought against the evil of slavery is located alongside a memorial to ensure that we remember the victims of the greatest crime that humanity was ever responsible for.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend has been right in talking about the site for the memorial, and colleagues have raised the issue of opposition to it. Does he agree with me that the principal reason why some Jewish people and Jewish leaders are raising objections is the sheer length of time this whole process is taking? Actually, they do not object to where it is sited, but just want to make sure we get on with the job and get it done.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. From the meetings I have had with the commission and the conversations I have had with people in the Jewish community and beyond, I know they want us to proceed. They understand that we are a country governed by laws and they understand why the court came to the decision it did on the 1900 Act, but they also want the Government, as well as this House and the other place, to proceed at the fastest possible pace—giving due consideration to all the arguments that are and have been made, but at the fastest possible pace—to ensure that an appropriate memorial is established.

I would like to close by reflecting on the words of Mala Tribich MBE, who is now 92 years old, and a holocaust survivor herself. As she says:

“As the Holocaust moves further into history and we survivors become less able to share our testimonies this Memorial and Learning Centre will be a lasting legacy so that future generations will understand why it is important for people to remember the Holocaust, to learn from the past and stand up against injustice. The memory of the Holocaust cannot be left to fade when us eyewitnesses are no longer able to share our memories.”

I believe we owe it to Mala and to all survivors to pass this Bill, and I commend it to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

3.6 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I want to start by saying that Labour strongly supports this Bill and welcomes the Second Reading of it today. We agree very much with the sentiment expressed by Conservative Members that the sooner and more swiftly we are able to make progress with this, the better. The movement to create a fitting national memorial to mark, to remember and, most of all, to learn from the horrors of the holocaust is something that rightly commands the support of Members on all sides of the House. So we welcome the Second Reading of the Bill and its, I hope, swift progress through the House.

The holocaust is undeniably the greatest crime of the last century. People were taken from their homes, stripped of their possessions and subjected to the horror of the concentration camps, forced labour camps and ghettos just, in many cases, because they were Jewish. The murder of 6 million Jews and so many others by the Nazis must never ever be forgotten.

I was in my early 20s when I first visited Auschwitz, and it is something I will never forget. I knew it would make an impression, but I do not think I had any real comprehension of what a deep and lasting impression it would leave on me to this very day. History lives in that camp, and we can feel the pain in the air. It is a very difficult thing to comprehend, but it is a privilege to be able to learn and to understand about the horrors of the past in order to ensure that it never happens again.

For my generation, whose grandparents lived through and, in my grandfather's case, fought in the war and fought for the establishment of the state of Israel as somewhere where Jewish people could find a natural home and where they were safe—where they would always be safe—this is not just history. We have grown up with the stories of what happened in that era, and of why it matters so much that we remember. However, it has actually been through the work of those incredible charities and museums, and those who support them—they provide the chance to hear from those who survived and, through them, the stories of those who did not—that we have been able to understand the true horror of what human beings are capable of.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): Given the experience of my predecessor in this place, who was targeted due to her allyship with the Jewish community, does my hon. Friend agree that this memorial and education centre is more important than ever before in telling the truths of the holocaust, and in remembering the 6 million lives lost to it, so that we learn those lessons and people never have to go through that kind of thing again?

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Like me, she will have had the experience of going into schools and colleges in our constituencies, and had the privilege of meeting survivors of the holocaust, and watching the faces of young people as comprehension dawns of the true horror of what happened, with resolve forming in them that never again should that be allowed to happen. The power of that cannot be overestimated, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for adding her voice and support to the Bill.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with the Secretary of State, as I do wholeheartedly, about the importance of the positioning of this memorial, and of it being right next to the mother of all democracies, with the symbolism that that provides?

Lisa Nandy: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. There are many, many lessons to learn from the darkest era of our recent history, but one of those lessons must surely be the importance of political courage and political leadership. Those of us on the Opposition Benches know how important that is, and that no institution is immune from the scourge of antisemitism. One of the reasons why I raced back from Manchester this morning, where I had been at a conference debating

housing, was in order to be here today to say loudly and clearly on behalf of the official Opposition how strongly we support what the Secretary of State and his colleagues are doing.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned Manchester, and as the MP for Bury South I am proud to represent many holocaust survivors, and I have been fortunate enough to meet them and share their stories. An institution and a museum, and more importantly an educational facility such as this, is intrinsic to us not only learning those lessons, but to making sure such things are never repeated. Does my hon. Friend agree that the best thing we can do to honour their memories and have a legacy for them while they are still alive, is to get this project going as quickly as possible, and ultimately to get it built and used?

Lisa Nandy: Absolutely. As a former student of Holy Cross College in Bury, I have met many of my hon. Friend's constituents over the years. I know how important it is to them that they hand on the baton to the next generation, and that we do not allow this to be the moment when understanding and comprehension of what happened in that darkest moment of history is lost. They can then hand over that baton, and feel reassured that the future is safe in our hands and with future generations. I thank my hon. Friend for the work he has done in standing up for his community over and over again in this place. It is noticed in Bury, and it is noticed here.

With the march of time and the continued loss of survivors, the holocaust is moving from being part of lived experience to being part of history. As we begin to approach that moment, our generation should commit to teaching the next about the horrors in our past, and the lessons for the future. That is what this new, purpose built memorial in the heart of London is. It is a commitment to arm future generations against the horrors of the past, so that when we say "never again", they can be sure we mean it. That is why Labour stands squarely behind the Holocaust Educational Trust, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Board of Deputies. We pay tribute to their work, and to the two co-chairs, Lord Eric Pickles and the right honourable Ed Balls, who have shown that this is not, and should never be, an issue that divides us.

As Karen Pollock, the inimitable chief executive of the Holocaust Educational Trust, said yesterday:

"It is crucial to remember that the Holocaust Memorial—and remembering the Holocaust in general—is not about planning permission, or square footage, or underground pipes. What these discussions are about at their heart, is people. People who were subjected to unimaginable suffering, simply because they were Jewish."

Like many others, she has reminded me that none of us should ever make the mistake of thinking that this is history. Antisemitism did not die at the end of the holocaust. Around the world, Jewish communities have been targeted by terrorists in Germany, France, Belgium and many other countries.

Last year, anti-Jewish hate hit a record high in the United Kingdom, with abuse, threats and violent assaults levelled at Jewish children, women and men on the streets of Britain. The Jewish Leadership Council and the Community Security Trust are powerful advocates

for their community. They have reminded me so often of the human cost of this, often with heartbreaking stories about the impact on their own families and children—children who go to school behind locked gates; security guards at the doors of synagogues. It shames our nation. This group accounts for less than 1% of the total religious population in the UK, but antisemitic hate crimes account for a staggering 23% of all religious hate crimes. It is completely unacceptable in a modern society where the experiences of the past are still so raw that that is happening every day in our communities, on our campuses and in our workplaces. We on the Labour Benches know that only too well and we are determined to tackle it.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): From what she has chronicled, my hon. Friend reminds us how easy it is for history to be forgotten but, were it not forgotten, these incidents would not occur. That makes the creation of this memorial doubly important. Does she also agree that the argument about the location has just got to stop? The location that has been chosen puts the memorial in the centre of London where it will be visible and accessible to the largest number of people. That is what we want. We want as many people as possible to see something that will ensure they do not forget. Arguing about the location does a disservice to the memory of the 6 million Jews who were killed in the holocaust.

Lisa Nandy: As ever, my right hon. Friend speaks incredibly powerfully. I do not doubt the sincerity of those who have taken part in the debate on the location, but that debate has run for long enough. Labour Members share the Government's view that it is now time to move forwards with a memorial that is incredibly important to every single person in our country, but holds particular significance for our Jewish community here in the United Kingdom.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I personally am not convinced by the location, but want the memorial to go ahead. If it is to go ahead, surely it must do so speedily—that is the point the hon. Lady is making. If Second Reading is passed this evening, motion No.8 on the Order Paper is about paying a Select Committee Chair to come and do a job. That is normally done—it happened with High-Speed 2—when something is going to take a long time. It is not about meetings in one or two Committees. When the hon. Lady talks about speed, what is she talking about and why are we paying someone? That indicates to me that this is going to be a long process.

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. As I said, I do not doubt the sincerity of those who have raised concerns about the location, including the Father of the House. It is right and legitimate that we should have a debate about that, and it is right, fair and proper that they should make their concerns known. Labour Members believe that this is the right location and that it is important that we do not delay any further. We believe that it is important that the hybrid process is followed; that is the process set out for the path of the Bill. We cannot make that process any quicker, but we can remove any unnecessary obstacles and delay. We know that that is the Government's intention and we will support them in that.

[Lisa Nandy]

As I said a moment ago to my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), the battle for progress is never won. My father and his generation were involved in fighting the race relations struggle. My dad came to this country from India in the 1950s, and dealing with racism and discrimination is something that he, I and my family have dealt with all our lives. It was one of the motivating forces for me to go into politics—seeing the impact of that on people around me and people in my community. That generation went on to deliver the Race Relations Act 1976, and helped to build the architecture of modern Britain that aims to make racism and discrimination a thing of the past. They remind me constantly that that battle is never won, and it falls to every generation to pick up the baton and fight those battles anew. That is what we are determined to do, and that is why we strongly support this memorial and its location next to the Palace of Westminster, within walking distance of the heart of our democracy and the centre of decision making, to show how important it is to us in this place that we never, ever forget.

There are many people in the other place who have worked on this matter. The Secretary of State mentioned Lord Austin, but I also think of Lord Dubs, who came to this country on the Kindertransport, has been a powerful advocate for child refugees and is someone we admire greatly. It pays tribute to the work they have done over many, many years that this House is speaking with one voice, on all sides of the House, to try to move forward.

Mr Baron: The speakers from the Front Bench have so far been generous in giving way. I appreciate what the hon. Lady said about the sincerity of those who are concerned about the location. We in our family have Jewish blood, and I do not think there is any doubt about the sincerity of all views on this. Would she acknowledge that, while we all agree there needs to be a national holocaust memorial, a lot of people within the Jewish community oppose the siting of the memorial that the Bill will install, if there is a vote and it passes? That should be acknowledged. They include people such as Maureen Lipman, Malcolm Rifkind, former rabbis, Jonathan Romain, Sir Richard Evans and several holocaust survivors.

Lisa Nandy: I am more than happy to acknowledge that and to restate the commitment that we on the Labour Benches do not doubt the sincerity of those engaging in this debate. We acknowledge the strength of feeling and the different views that exist within the Jewish community and across the country, as well as in this place and on the Government Benches in particular. The hybrid process provides an opportunity for those concerns to be expressed and for those debates to be had. I would say to the hon. Gentleman that, having worked with the Jewish community in this country and leaders of major Jewish organisations for a long time, I am left in no doubt about the strength of feeling among many members and leaders of the Jewish community that they support the location at this venue and that they want to see it proceed at the heart of democracy, where it matters most that we remember the past in order to shape the future.

We believe that the symbolic siting of the memorial next to this House is a demonstration that the British Government, the official Opposition, our Parliament and our nation are committed to remembering the horrors of the past and ensuring that we do not repeat them. This memorial is a vital step on that path and Labour is pleased to support the Bill today.

3.22 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “That” to the end of the Question and add:

“this House, while accepting the value of a national Holocaust memorial, declines to give a Second Reading to the Holocaust Memorial Bill because no adequate reason has been given for seeking to build the memorial and learning centre in a long-established small public park, thereby contradicting the Government’s own policies on environmental and green space protection; because the Government has not implemented its 2015 promise to establish an endowment fund for Holocaust education, which would have spread the benefits of the learning centre around the country; because the proposed site is opposed by many in the Jewish community, including many Holocaust survivors; because there was no public consultation on the choice of site; and because there has been no consideration of alternatives to Victoria Tower Gardens since the criteria declared in September 2015 were set aside.”

I am grateful to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for how they have introduced the debate on the Bill. Just to clear up one thing that may have been inadvertent, my right hon. Friend responded to my intervention by talking about 2016 to 2017. My precise question was on how it went from the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation’s specification in September 2015 to 13 January 2016, when some say the first suggestion of using Victoria Tower Gardens was considered by the foundation. The Government publicly announced later that month that that was what they had decided. I repeat my assertion that there has been no public consultation on that site.

I meant to start my remarks by saying that, within months of my birth in July 1944, and besides my father getting rather badly injured in Normandy, later that year, Margot and Anne Frank caught typhus in Bergen-Belsen. They died early in 1945. In April 1945, my father’s cousin—my first cousin once removed—Dr George Woodwork was one of the Westminster medical students who went to Bergen-Belsen to try to save as many lives as they could. They did valiant work in appalling conditions.

When I heard directly from George what it was like, I was as moved as I was when I first read reports of the concentration camps, the death camps and the treatment of Jews. That feeling is only reinforced when I go to the Imperial War Museum’s holocaust galleries. If anyone has not done so, I commend them doing so. One only need go there, or look at the online material on the education side, to be reminded that the purpose is, as set out by the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation, that we should know what was happening when those who survived are no longer with us. There was no intention in the Holocaust Commission report to the Government and there was no intention with the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation in September 2015 that the memorial had to be up before holocaust survivors had died. That is a later creation and justification, and some regard it as pretty weak.

I think it was 4 November 1952—it was; I looked it up, as I could not remember—when aged eight I first stood outside the Victoria Tower and went into Victoria Tower Gardens after the Queen went to her first state opening of Parliament the year before her coronation. I have lived in this area for 35 years, I have worked here for 47 or 48 years and I was educated here for seven years. Together—some of those years overlap—I think I am probably one of the longest lasting people to have been aware of Victoria Tower Gardens as a quiet place where the local population, those who work here and visitors can enjoy the surroundings.

I have a home here, so people can say I have a vested interest. I have also got a vested interest in having proper education about the holocaust. Since this process started, one of my cousins has established what we knew vaguely, which is that more than 100 of my grandfather's cousins died during the holocaust. I do not regard myself as Jewish—I regard myself as Christian—but I am proud to be associated with what they went through, which I know is possibly still happening now around the world, whether that is in Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, Cambodia or Srebrenica. We are not going to stop holocausts by where our memorial is. It is right that we should have one, but the education side matters.

The Holocaust Commission recommended, and the then Prime Minister accepted, that there should be an endowment fund for education. In the years since, that has not happened. We then go to the Government's commitment that, if the voluntary side can raise £25 million, they will put in £50 million. The Government have now raised that to £75 million. The majority of the money should be spent on education, as set down by the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation. That has not happened.

The principle of this Bill—here I disagree with the Government—is not clause 2 as well as clause 1, but clause 1; it is regularising future payments. The earlier payments, which amount to well over £17 million so far, have been paid under common law. It is right and necessary that there should now be legislative authority for the Government to spend more and that is why I do not oppose clause 1.

If we go to clause 2, we come to the reasons that I tabled my reasoned amendment. I should say to the Front Benchers that I do not propose to push my reasoned amendment to a vote. A reasoned amendment, to be acceptable for the Order Paper, needs in effect to kill the Bill, and I am not trying to kill clause 1. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) for supporting the reasoned amendment, as I know do many others.

Page 10 of the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation's proposal for a memorial and learning centre illustrates the acceptable area of central London. It goes from the west of Regent's Park to Spitalfields in the east and down to Victoria Tower gardens.

I interrupt my flow to say that the inspector, who took over consideration of the planning application by the Secretary of State—this is a planning application by a Secretary of State, albeit one of the previous Secretaries of State—said that he would not be able to consider the Imperial War Museum's proposals because they were not detailed. I do not think I am giving away any secrets in saying that the Imperial War Museum was told not to provide detailed proposals to the Government's call for where the site should be and what should be there. The

Government are responsible for allowing the inspector to come to that perverse decision that alternatives should not be considered.

The Government, through their foundation—for the foundation is an arm of Government—said, "Where should it be?" Fifty places were put forward and one person—albeit the then chairman of the Conservative party—wrote to a Conservative Minister to say, "Have you thought about Victoria Tower gardens? Perhaps the learning centre could be at Millbank." The Government later decided that they would put the learning centre and memorial together in this very small royal park, thereby wrecking it.

I say this, through you Madam Deputy Speaker, to the Secretary of State and to the country. If the Government continue with their proposals, they know that there will be a four-year construction programme after permission eventually gets through the Houses of Parliament and the Secretary of State's junior Minister—I will say his colleague Minister, to put it politely—makes a decision, independently of the Secretary of State as the applicant. That will take, say, another nine months in Parliament. We are talking five years from now, so that takes us to at least 2028—people talk about 2027, but that is unrealistic—for a proposal made in September 2015. If it is important that holocaust survivors can be there for the memorial's opening, we should not be continuing with this process. Indeed, it is not the one that we should have started with.

I make this proposal to the Secretary of State and the Government: why not have a competition for an alternative memorial by itself? The learning centre can come later; survivors do not need to be waiting for the learning centre. It should be a proper memorial—preferably not the one rejected in Ottawa, which is essentially what we have adopted; although the fins may have changed slightly, it has the same number of fins and the same interpretation—that could be put up in Whitehall, in Parliament Square or on College Green across the road from Parliament. Then, once the education centre at the north end of Victoria Tower gardens is gone, it can be placed there.

We know that space in Victoria Tower gardens will be needed for the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster—I doubt that Parliament Square will be used for that—and we know that memorials can be moved, because the Buxton memorial was moved from Parliament Square to Victoria Tower gardens. We could have a competition for a memorial to be created for less than £20 million and to be erected within two years. We could have the opening ceremony with holocaust survivors there, and then later the memorial could be moved to wherever people chose. That would not be a rush, but it would be three years faster than the current proposal.

The Government are stuck on a course that any sensible person could have diverted them from at any stage. I invite the Secretary of State to ask the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation to have a roundtable with him, me, Baroness Deech, holocaust survivors and others who are interested from the local community—including the Thorney Island Society, of which I am a member, and London Parks & Gardens—so that rather than shout at each other in public, we discuss the issues together. Suppose that we set the object of establishing, at reasonable cost, a memorial that would open within two years as an alternative to this process? I am not

[Sir Peter Bottomley]

saying that we should stop the process straightaway; they could run in parallel and then we could have the option between my proposal and what the Government appear to be committed to.

I commend the House of Commons Library's good briefing on this saga. It is pretty comprehensive, although in my view it does not give quite enough attention to the September 2015 specifications. Let us remember what they were. One was that the local authority would approve the plan. Westminster City Council was not going to do so, and that is why a former Secretary of State took the decision away from the council. There was consultation with local people, who overwhelmingly and rationally argued against putting the memorial in Victoria Tower gardens, and especially having this tank of a learning centre associated with it.

After that, either the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation or the Government—I cannot remember which—got a firm to go and stand outside asking, “Would you like to have a holocaust memorial?” A load of people put a tick, as many people in the establishment have to this proposal. It was not argued. My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) could probably give more evidence if she chose to. That was bogus and irrational. Then, we come to the planning process, which I do not want to go into.

To those who think the way I do, in whole or in part, I commend not voting against Second Reading, but not voting for it. That will show that the Government have not been able to establish large numbers of people in support of it. We will have a separate debate on the instruction, and I will invite colleagues to vote with me on that. When we come to it, I will argue more about the hybridity.

I am probably the only person in the Chamber who was present when Michael Heseltine conducted the Labour Back Benchers as they sang “The Red Flag”. Something peculiar had happened in the votes on the hybridity of the Aircraft and Shipbuilding Industries Bill, which had been classified by the Speaker as hybrid. The then Labour Government put down a motion disregarding that. There was a draw on the first vote, so the Speaker left things the way they were. On the second vote, when the Speaker would have pushed things backwards had there been a draw, the then Government managed to create one more vote in their favour, which led to a degree of uproar. Speaker George Thomas—Viscount Tonybandy—dealt with that quite effectively when it came back to the Chair, then suspended the House and let the apologies come the following day.

That hybridity issue caused embarrassment to the Government. This one does too. When the hybridity was announced, the Government claimed that they were pleased, but they had spent all their time in the weeks before arguing against it being hybrid. It is hybrid because it affects other people's interests. When it comes to the instruction, I will go into more detail, but now I want to say, in friendship to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, that he should try the alternative process in parallel. In private or in public, he should say that if we now want the memorial very close to Westminster, which “we”—I say that in quotation marks—did not in September 2015, and if we want it open before the last

holocaust survivors die, that will not happen in the next five years under the present plans. He should think of an alternative, and compare the merits of both.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will now announce the result of today's deferred Division on the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023. The Ayes were 373 and the Noes were 28, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]

3.37 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate to put on the record my party's firm commitment to ensuring that the holocaust and subsequent genocides are not forgotten. We must take steps to actively remember. Because of that, part of the memorial needs to be focused on learning. The particular memorial that the Bill deals with is to be situated in London. I do not have a strong view about where it should be in London, but I have no objection to the Government's proposal, given that I represent East Renfrewshire—a constituency hundreds of miles away in a different country altogether. It is reasonable that I look to those who are closer.

I appreciate the range of views that have been expressed, but the thread that runs through this debate is one that we all take an interest in, regardless of our own geographies and the range of views on the detail. We all support the principle of taking practical steps to ensure that holocaust remembrance is made possible. I am sure that none of us thinks differently. That matters. The truth is that we need to reflect. We need to think about how to make sure that the cold reality of what happened is not lost or diluted as time passes. The remaining survivors are fewer and fewer with every year that passes. That in itself means that we need to take practical steps to ensure that history is preserved and remembered.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady is giving a powerful speech about something that is not just practically and politically important, but emotionally important. I believe there is a great emotional need in this country to do something to recognise the suffering of the holocaust on behalf of those citizens of this country who are survivors of it. Does she agree that we could argue forever about location, but we have a location, we have a plan and what is important is that it now goes ahead as quickly as possible?

Kirsten Oswald: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I agree with every word she said. She is spot-on when she talks about the emotional, human side of this issue. We are talking about human history—a history of individuals, families and friends—not about some unfathomable number of people who were murdered by the Nazis because of their identity. It is about how we protect and preserve these individual histories, even when the people who could give first-hand testimony are no longer with us.

I have heard the different views. We must respect those and still find a way for everyone to move forward. The Chief Rabbi has spoken about the worry that holocaust survivors have expressed to him, describing the panic in their voices as they say that they fear the world will forget in the course of time. Karen Pollock,

chief executive of the Holocaust Educational Trust, has said that time is running out; survivors will not be with us forever, and many who dreamed of taking their family to the memorial have, unfortunately, passed away. She said that those who are still with us hope to see the day that the memorial is complete, and pointed out that it is important to the liberators as well. She and the Chief Rabbi make very strong points.

The Holocaust Memorial Commission was asked what needed to be done to preserve the memory of the holocaust, and obviously a significant conversation went on, but that was nearly 10 years ago, and here we are in some kind of limbo while the arguments continue and the positions probably become more entrenched, because that is the nature of these things. As I said, I do not have an especially strong view on where a memorial should be located, but I do have a very strong view that we should not still be in a holding pattern nearly 10 years on. We need to make progress.

We need to move things along and make sure that in doing so, we take into account the views of survivors and the Jewish community. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) refer to the closure of the Jewish Museum in London because of funding problems. We need to think about that as well, because the museum's collection includes the testimony of holocaust survivors, and hearing those testimonies may become more difficult. All those things coming together suggests to me that we need to get on with delivering the memorial and the learning centre, to make sure that active remembrance and education are possible and accessible.

We need to make sure that the voices of those who survived are accessible. I have seen at first hand the profound impact that hearing from survivors, Henry and the late Ingrid Wuga, had on children in my constituency. The holocaust is certainly not the vague memory of some moment in history in the community where I live; it is part of the living memory of many families. I can well understand why people correctly have a very strong view that we need to preserve the testimonies. A holocaust memorial could be a powerful tool for doing that. It needs to be able to make history come to life, so that we can understand better.

I was fortunate to be able to visit Yad Vashem a number of years ago. Like the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) said of her visits to Auschwitz, I will carry the memory of my visit to Yad Vashem with me forever—seeing the faces of individual people who had been living perfectly ordinary, pedestrian lives before being plunged into unimaginable horror; seeing their shoes and their abandoned spectacles. It was a very powerful experience. That is why my colleagues and I support the construction of this centre.

When I was looking at the Yad Vashem website earlier today, I noticed that on this day—28 June—in 1941, Romanian and German soldiers, police, and masses of residents participated in an assault on the Jews of Iasi. Thousands of Jews were murdered in their homes and in the streets; thousands more were arrested, and the next day many were shot. The survivors of that assault, as well as other Jews rounded up from all parts of Iasi, were loaded on to sealed boxcars and transported. During that journey, thousands more perished from heat or suffocation. Over 10,000 Jews were killed.

That is why we need to get on with the memorial. These details—these threads of history—cannot be lost. This must go hand in hand with other initiatives that are already doing powerful work, such as the Lessons from Auschwitz project, which has had such an impact on schools in my area, as have Vision Schools Scotland and the excellent Gathering the Voices programme—which does exactly that, capturing the voices of those who survived. All those have a place in the fabric of how we remember, and the memorial can play a vital part in that as well. I think that in Scotland it would be welcomed as one of a range of ways of ensuring that this information is accessible to people.

I hope that the memorial will remember Jane Haining, a Scottish schoolmistress of whom I have spoken often here, who died at Auschwitz after refusing to leave the Jewish children in her care. She has been named as Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem, and will also be memorialised by the installation of a Stolpersteine in Edinburgh, thanks to an initiative from Angus Robertson MSP, the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture.

That story of Jane Haining—standing up for others because she knew that what was happening was wrong—could not be more resonant today. For us to know that the construction of a holocaust memorial is under way while atrocities continue in too many places across the world—the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) spoke to us about that—should give us pause for thought, and make us wish to proceed apace. In China, for instance, Uyghur Muslims are persecuted, sterilised, enslaved and forced to live in labour camps. The lessons we can take from a memorial could not be more relevant to the situations that they and too many others are facing. We need to ensure that we reflect on the lessons of the past.

As the Holocaust Educational Trust pointed out in its excellent briefing for today's debate, this kind of facility also allows us to better confront the contemporary rise of antisemitism. I think it important that we acknowledge the rising tide of extremist views, including holocaust denial. The Community Security Trust found last year that antisemitic incidents had reached a record high, with a 49% increase in such incidents in the first six months of 2021. Let us be clear: the climate is increasingly intolerant and hateful. Sickening and public displays of antisemitism are increasing both in the UK and overseas. Nowhere is immune, and we now also have to deal with the amplification of holocaust denial and distortion, conspiracy and misinformation in the online space.

To deal with that, the most powerful tool in our arsenal is education, which is why the learning element of the memorial matters so much. The facts of what happened could not be more resonant in the here and now. I hope that we can agree to proceed with the plan today.

3.48 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): The first holocaust survivor whom I met, as an 18-year-old working in a kibbutz in Israel, was Lena. She spoke as much English as I spoke Yiddish, but we got through it together. She was an amazing woman to work with and for. I will always be grateful for the support and friendship that she gave me, an 18-year-old away from home for the first time. For me, that was a lesson in human spirit and human survival.

[*Nickie Aiken*]

We are fortunate in this country to have many holocaust survivors who are still willing to share their stories. Sadly, however, this living testimony will not be with us forever, and their stories show us why the memorial is so important. Critically, today's debate is not about whether we should have a memorial—that, I think, is something on which we all agree—but about whether the right location is Victoria Tower Gardens, and, therefore, whether the Bill is necessary.

As we have heard, the Bill would amend the London County Council (Improvements) Act 1900, which preserves the park for the public, and repeal the prohibition on building in the park. That would permit the building of the holocaust memorial and learning centre. The centre is not just a simple monument; it would require excavations going down two storeys to fulfil a design that has come under heavy criticism on account of its scale and suitability for the area. Naturally, that has caused concern for many of my residents in the surrounding area and so, as the local MP for the proposed site, I stand in support of the Save Victoria Tower Gardens campaign.

The campaign is a group of local people who care deeply about this area. They have worked with a variety of groups, such as Historic England, the Thorney Island Society, the Buxton family, London Historic Parks and Gardens Trust and, most importantly, holocaust survivors, to make sure that we get the project right. After consulting those interest groups, the campaign has raised several concerns about the project, which come back to one major issue: location.

Location is a key consideration for every development, and it is no different in Westminster. There is a shortage of community parks in the City of Westminster, so the loss of even the smallest open space can have a big impact on the community. In central London, such losses are felt even more keenly.

Christine Jardine: I appreciate the concerns of the local community about their amenities, but in the suggested location, the holocaust memorial would offer more than just education and a reminder to the public. Does the hon. Lady agree that it would also offer a reminder to those of us in this place for generations to come about the danger of allowing a repeat and allowing racism—antisemitism—to grow? That is why the location, although I accept it is not ideal for everyone, is important.

Nickie Aiken: I agree that we must remember the holocaust—all holocausts, across the 20th and 21st centuries; sadly, they continue today—but this is about the location. As the local MP, and having been leader of Westminster City Council during the planning process—believe me, I saw it all, from start to finish—I know that the local people have no problem with the memorial; it is about the location. As I said, the concern is about the shortage of community parks in the City of Westminster. The park's loss will be felt.

It is important to outline what an important neighbourhood park Victoria Tower Gardens is for thousands of local people, and not just those in expensive houses and neighbourhoods. Let us not forget that yards from this place and Victoria Tower Gardens, thousands of people live in housing association and council homes. They do not have the benefit of gardens.

Every single green space is precious for them. I have spoken to people living on those estates and they fear that losing their local park will mean their children cannot play. Going for a walk or for lunch, or doing a media interview, is one thing, but losing a family park is another thing completely. There were more than 1,000 objections to the original planning application for the memorial, mostly on the grounds of loss of green space. I remember that time, and those were genuine concerns from local people.

The Save Victoria Tower Gardens campaign also noted the site's important legal functions and its role in protecting the Palace of Westminster world heritage site. That is an important point. We must remember that Victoria Tower Gardens is a grade II listed public park. For this reason, the design of the monument and learning centre matters greatly. Historic England, the Government's adviser on historic environment, has raised significant concerns about overwhelming the existing monuments. The gardens have notable existing memorials to oppression and emancipation: Rodin's "Burghers of Calais," the statue of the suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst and the Buxton memorial to the abolition of slavery.

There is a good argument, which I accept, that the presence of these monuments makes Victoria Tower Gardens an appropriate site for development. However, the proposed design of the holocaust memorial and learning centre is almost triple their size. The Save Victoria Tower Gardens campaign believes it will overwhelm the other monuments, perhaps making them fade away. The design was originally intended for a memorial in Ottawa, Canada, and it was imported here without much alteration and without taking into account the very different context.

The Save Victoria Tower Gardens campaign also has legitimate concerns that such extreme development will harm the park itself, and this has been clear from the very beginning of the project. The Secretary of State has left the Chamber, so I ask the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), to consider looking again at the current design of the memorial and the location of the learning centre as the Bill progresses through Parliament. The design is far too large, and it will dominate this public park.

In response to the original public exhibition run by the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation, there was a clear concern that the excavation operations will cause significant harm to established trees and invite concern about flooding. During the planning process, I remember the Environment Agency making very clear its objection because of the flood risk to this place. The Environment Agency has since changed its mind, and I do not know why, but it was very clear at the time.

Equally important is that the scale of development will considerably change the feeling of the park. It is not just a statue or small monument; this is a large-scale development that will need two storeys to be excavated for the learning centre. By its very design, it will lead to an increase in the number of visitors, which will distort the functionality of Victoria Tower Gardens as a place of recreation.

Local people remain concerned that Victoria Tower Gardens will cease to be a neighbourhood park and will become a civic space, dominated by the holocaust memorial and learning centre and its associated infrastructure

and security installations. In the meantime, the park will become a building site for many, many years, leading to a serious loss of amenity for local people and more congestion and noise pollution. Along with the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster, residents will have the simultaneous repair of Victoria Tower, the replacement of the Parliamentary Education Centre and a memorial construction that will last for years.

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend is making an intelligent speech, and she speaks with authority as the local Member of Parliament. When she talks about the loss of the park, is she talking about the temporary disruption caused by the construction phase? My understanding is that the park will remain. It will still be there in perpetuity for local people, but there will be a modest reduction in its size as a result of the memorial being built. We are not talking about the permanent loss of the park, are we?

Nickie Aiken: My right hon. Friend and I will have to agree to disagree, because this will change the nature of the park. At the moment, it is a community neighbourhood park. It has a playground at one end and a massive open space where local people, particularly children, can play, run around and take their dogs for a walk. The size of the current design will mean that the memorial completely changes the atmosphere of the park.

Mr Baron: May I perhaps help my hon. Friend a little? The estimate by the London Historic Parks & Gardens Trust is that up to 30% of the park will be lost, so this is a major construction. In addition to the excellent point she is making, for some of us this comes down to the essential principle about a lack of consultation about the siting. The public were consulted and Westminster City Council said no, and the Government have decided to override it. That troubles us; as I have said before, it is not how we do things in this country. Perhaps that is the central point here.

Nickie Aiken: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I was the leader of the council when the planning application was going through, and I remind the House that we were very surprised at the lack of consultation in many parts of the application. As I have said, there were 1,000 objections to the planning application within that process. The Father of the House was right when he outlined the issues between 2015 and 2016.

Sir Peter Bottomley: It is also worth remembering that when the Government decided to call in the application and take this away from Westminster City Council, they indicated that they had been asked to do that by the council—that was never true.

Let me just make a comment on the intervention by my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb). While the memorial and learning centre's basement box and bronze fins are being constructed, up to two thirds of the park would be unusable for people. As for the estimate that the Government have put forward, whether directly or through their advisory body, the foundation—that only about 7% or 8% of the park would be taken—no one else believes that.

Nickie Aiken: I thank the Father of the House for his intervention. I reassure him that I am not aware of any local authority that wants to have decisions on planning

applications taken away from it at any time, but particularly not where such a major application is going to really affect local people, because of the loss of amenity they are going to feel from the loss of this park. I agree that more consultation should have taken place, as this will change the make-up of this neighbourhood park. I am a Westminster resident, but many Members come here for the working week and go home. They may use Victoria Tower gardens for doing a media interview, going for a walk at lunchtime or meeting friends. However, I can tell them that the park is a vital amenity for many local people, particularly those living in social housing, who do not have the benefit of gardens in their homes. Taking away any amount of space from that public park will be a real shame.

I appreciate that this is a hugely complex and emotional issue. However, concerns about the Bill are not a nimby cause whereby the wish is to block all development. Rather, they are rooted in the reality that there is very little support among local people for this memorial being placed in Victoria Tower gardens. That is on the grounds of loss of green space, increased visitor numbers, environmental concerns, traffic and the effect on surrounding monuments. Rightly, there are strong policies in place about building on parks and public green spaces. It is obviously important to remember the horrors of the Holocaust—of course it is—and to ensure that the next generation, the one after, the one after that and those that come after should never forget what happened in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, and subsequent genocides since then. But for many, especially those who live in crowded urban areas such as Westminster, our neighbourhood parks and gardens are vital to the quality of residents' lives. That is why, for me, this is the right memorial but in the wrong location.

4.4 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): After 27 years in this place, I suppose I should never be surprised about the direction in which debates go, but it is slightly unseemly that we are spending so much time talking about such an emotive matter, down to the location of a particular monument. I understand entirely the views of local people, but this is a national—indeed, international—centre of democracy, which has world importance. Of course local residents matter, but so does the site itself, which has been here for centuries.

I will make a case for the location that the Government propose, but first let me reflect that today's debate takes place in the shadow of the most vile and appalling event: the unspeakable capacity of human beings to inflict the kinds of activities carried out by the Nazis against the Jews. Part of our debate needs to reflect upon that, as well as looking at local issues.

There is no doubt that a memorial is well overdue, but the Minister may well feel that some of the discussion about location and the nature of the monument is unseemly. I urge the Government to reflect carefully on the debate, and to try to get the discussion about where it is and how it is constructed out of here and into a place where a consensus can be arrived at.

In the explanatory notes to the Bill, the Government say the memorial

“will help people understand the way the lessons of the Holocaust apply more widely, including to other genocides.”

[Jon Trickett]

That makes me think of racism, which takes many different forms. For example, the slave trade is a great stain on our nation, and on other nations too. There are families and institutions that benefit from the wealth that originated from that horrible trade to this very day. Why do I mention that? I mention it because Members of the House, who may have stood in the very place where I am standing now, fought against slavery, and it was in this House that the anti-slavery legislation was passed. We built an anti-slavery monument. Where did we build it? We built it next to our Parliament, in the very location now proposed.

As other Members have said, the sculpture of the Burghers of Calais, an amazing monument to the human spirit, is in the same park, as well as a statue that is a tribute to the suffragettes. Where else would we put a memorial to what happened in the holocaust but alongside our Parliament, in the same place as those other sculptures?

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman's speech. The answer to his question is that the holocaust memorial, preferably without the basement box, could be put where the Buxton family memorial was put, which was in Parliament Square. It does not have to be in Victoria Tower gardens.

Jon Trickett: I thank the Father of the House, who I always listen to with respect. He is widely respected, but on this matter he may be wrong. I occasionally go to the anti-slavery monument and to look at the Burghers of Calais, which is an amazing sculpture. I then sometimes quietly go and sit on one of the benches, watch the river go by and think about the struggles for emancipation over the centuries, so many of which happened in this very building. I am not sure that putting a monument of the kind we are talking about in Parliament Square, surrounded as it is by traffic, is necessarily conducive to the quiet reflection that I and many others experience in the park.

I want to reflect on antisemitism, which was the root of the holocaust, and on my family's history. I have never spoken about this before, either in public or in private, but it has been on my mind throughout my life and I want to go through some issues, because antisemitism is on the rise. It has long disfigured so many parts of our western European culture, as well as parts of our nation. It is a vile, centuries old, unforgiveable hatred that gave rise to the most appalling crime here in Europe in the last century. As I have said, we all still live in its shadows.

Fascism and the holocaust occurred in Germany, but we must never pretend that antisemitism is solely restricted to that nation. I wish to reflect on the lives of previous generations of my family and on what I have seen. My ancestors escaped antisemitic pogroms not in Germany, but in Tsarist Russia. They came to Britain on their way to the United States. They stopped off in London—the great port of London—first. In Victorian times, Britain welcomed asylum seekers—Jews escaping the tyranny of the time. It is hard to imagine whether that could happen today. Although that is not the point that I wish to make, it is important to reflect on that.

As I said, my family were on their way to America from what is now Poland. They were heading for Liverpool to get the boat across to New York and to freedom, as

they saw it. They passed through Leeds. The older generation had by then become aged and infirm, so it was left to my grandmother, the youngest daughter, to stay and care for them—that was the tradition. The rest went on to Liverpool and then to Chicago. I have cousins who finally arrived in the west, in California. It is odd in a way to reflect that those cousins have almost circumnavigated the globe across four generations of my family.

Let me focus on the Leeds part of the family. They were hard-working cobblers—boot and shoe makers. They worked in a small place next to the synagogue on North Street, Leeds. There was a great Jewish community there. Although it was a tight-knit working class community, I heard many stories of harassment and racism, including violent attacks. The housing conditions were appalling—three generations living in slum housing, sharing one or, if they were lucky, two bedrooms. My grandparents had three children, one of whom was my mother. They lived in similar conditions. The house that I was brought up in was declared a slum and cleared. They were the generations of people who were building a life here.

My grandmother regularly told me that she lived in fear of the pogroms, from which she, her parents and grandparents had suffered in Russia. She said to me, "Here Jon, I need to tell you something. Whenever anyone unknown knocks on your door, you kid to be daft." That might not mean much to Members in this place, but what she meant was to pretend to be stupid if somebody in a shirt and tie—a bit like I am dressed today—knocks on the door. In other words, do not comply with the wishes of strangers, especially those who look like they are in authority, because they may well be representatives of a hostile force. That was her experience. She had a lifelong fear of strangers and of authority. Perhaps it was just one of her foibles, I do not know. Equally, though, it might have reflected a part of the wider Jewish experience.

Before the second world war, a stereotypical English gentleman who had attended Winchester College, a public school, launched the British fascist party. He was supported by a section of the establishment as well as by people from all sectors of society. This was Oswald Mosley. He decided to lead his blackshirts through the Jewish quarters in Leeds, where my family lived. It was a naked attempt to mobilise antisemitic sentiments to distract residents from the post-1929 depression and the conditions that prevailed in Leeds at the time.

As a Leeds-born citizen who eventually become leader of that great city's council, I am proud to tell the House that Mosley was refused permission to march through the Jewish areas. He did, however, rally his supporters on Holbeck Moor, in south Leeds, not far from where I came to live. Thirty thousand Jewish people turned out to resist the fascists. Jewish and gentile, socialists and communists, Liberals and Tories, trade unionists and fair-minded citizens, community groups and others rallied against Mosley. There was a battle and Mosley retired injured.

Members of my family were there. My mother and our family talked about that victory, but we did not fool ourselves that antisemitism had been quelled. Then came the second world war and the ghastly news of the concentration camps, which I imagine even today chills the bones of all of us in this House.

I do not want to exaggerate. Leeds is a tolerant place. Most people would say, “Live and let live”. That is the kind of people they are in West Yorkshire where I come from. When I was at school in the ‘50s and ‘60s, we lived on the edge of a large Jewish community. We got on pretty well, and I do not mean to say that the school was a bad place at all, but there were antisemitic actions, language and bullying in that school. I am not a violent man—my mother taught me to believe in non-violence—but I will not hide the fact that at times there were fights and there was resistance to the antisemites at the margins of the school, all motivated by anti-Jewish racism.

As I entered my teens, my mother began to say to me, “Let’s get out of here.” She wanted me to go to Israel to be on a kibbutz. The kibbutz seemed to offer a different way of living communally, inspired perhaps by some notions of common ownership, mutual endeavour, equality and peace. We decided that I would go to live on a kibbutz, but then the six-day war happened, and in any case we needed me to go out to work and earn a living at 16. Thinking about the six-day war, it is probably worth recording that our family knew that people could disagree with an elected Government and its actions, but that that is not the same as hating a whole nation or even a race. We can clearly see today that there are many Israelis who oppose their Government, and no one would suggest that they are being antisemitic in doing so.

I come now to a distasteful few sentences. When I joined the Labour party in 1969, there were many working-class Jewish socialists in our part of Leeds, and I never witnessed any antisemitism in any of those meetings. However, and I regret to have to record this, when I entered my constituency as the MP, only 12 miles away from Leeds, I was subjected to the most shocking antisemitic comment by a party member. It was vile. Equally, though, I am pleased to record that the individual concerned was confronted by fellow members for his outburst and was told he must never come back to another meeting.

Let me turn to one further final anecdote. I was out canvassing not so long ago in my constituency, which is in the wonderful area of Wakefield, when a man who I knew had a reputation for being a Nazi approached me. He was a man who could not control his emotions, a man with extreme anger, and he told me he was going to fill the streets with “patriots”, as he called them, and that they would eliminate people such as me from the area and from the country. It was a terrifying moment, but the police decided to record it as a hate crime and I am glad to say that he was charged and pled guilty to an antisemitic hate crime in Leeds Crown Court.

I hope that the House will understand that I have spoken in this way in order to condemn with every single fibre in my body all forms of racism and antisemitism. The holocaust is an appalling crime against our common humanity. It is right that we pledge today never to forgive or forget what happened, and never to let down our guard for a moment—because, while antiracism is a powerful force, antisemitism is still there and needs to be resisted.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing that very personal and compelling account. I agree with everything he said. I think he said it was his grandmother who talked about

the living scars in his family. I can say the same from my own experience. My father fled the holocaust with his mother, father and uncle, who have passed away. My grandmother, who was the living testimony in our family, passed away in 2005. I understand all the planning and site discussions and deliberations, and I hope they can be resolved in Committee, but the longer we talk about the technicalities, important as they are, the more we risk losing that living testimony without having something powerful to replace it. When I think about instilling the ethos of antisemitism in my children, that is the part that concerns me most.

Jon Trickett: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and I agree with him. With my kind of politics, it is very rare that I agree with anybody on the Conservative Benches, but it is good to recognise that these strong pulses of hatred towards racism are shared by all of us in the House.

Finally, let the memorial stand as a reminder of the need to fight injustice, just as our country did in the second world war. This is not a battle that can be finally won; it is a battle that we need to fight in each generation, and each one of us must stand in witness to what has happened. Let the monument stand as a reproach to humanity, that our species is capable of the most unspeakable crimes—but equally, as a sign that we are prepared to sacrifice ourselves, as so many people in our military did, to fight for a better world.

4.19 pm

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): I rise to speak in favour of the Bill, which I am pleased to see presented to the House for its Second Reading. I say for the record that I am secretary to the all-party parliamentary group on holocaust memorial.

The need for a permanent memorial and learning centre to remember the lives of those who perished in the holocaust has never been more pressing, and I thank the Government and colleagues from across the House for their commitment to this important project. Before I kick off, it is worth reiterating a comment that the Secretary of State made: the memorial will take up 7.5% of the park. That is helpful context for the debate. I will focus my remarks on two important reasons why the memorial is needed now more than ever.

First, as the number of survivors sadly dwindles, our generation has received the baton from those who experienced the atrocities of the holocaust to ensure that the lives lost are never forgotten. Without a physical memorial, that task is not only more difficult but susceptible to being forgotten by successive generations. The placing of a permanent, physical and fitting memorial to the millions of lives lost is the best way to ensure that that does not happen, especially given that the memorial will be right at the heart of the country, adjacent to Parliament. The juxtaposition of the mother of all Parliaments standing next to an ever-lasting memorial immortalising those who perished in one of the world’s worst periods could not be more stark. The new memorial and learning centre in Victoria Tower gardens will be among many other national memorials, and will place the UK on a par with countless other countries across the world. It will also demonstrate that holocaust memorial is a national priority that we take seriously.

[*Nicola Richards*]

On 16 June, this country and the world lost a true hero: Sir Ben Helfgott. Sir Ben was forced into slave labour at the age of 12, and would go on to survive a Nazi ghetto and a number of concentration camps. Ben's father, Moishe; mother, Sara; and little sister, Lusia, were all murdered. After liberation, Ben came to the UK as part of a group of survivors known as "The Boys" and would go on to become one of only two holocaust survivors to compete at the Olympics, captaining the British weightlifting team at the 1956 and 1960 Olympics.

Sir Ben dedicated most of his life to educating others about the atrocities of the holocaust. It is unfortunate that, although the memorial and learning centre was promised eight years ago, Sir Ben did not have the opportunity to see it for himself. He said that he had hoped to "one day take my family to the new national memorial and learning centre, telling the story of Britain and the holocaust." I can think of no better way to honour Sir Ben's life and legacy than for this House to vote in favour of the Bill and ensure that there is no further delay to the building.

The second reason it is essential that the memorial is built is the rise in antisemitism, in the UK and globally. I speak as the co-chair of the APPG on antisemitism when I say that education is the most effective way to combat the appalling rise in Jew hatred. I am delighted that the memorial will be accompanied by a learning centre so that people from across the country, as well as visitors from abroad, will be able to learn about what took place. Social media has made it much easier for misinformation to spread and for conspiracy theories to take hold in the minds of many. The learning centre will provide meaningful education, which, alongside holocaust education on the national curriculum, will help to counter antisemitism and ensure that a wide range of people are able to benefit from the teaching on offer.

I would like to end by quoting the Chief Rabbi, who perfectly summed up why we cannot delay the memorial any further. He said of holocaust survivors:

"There's a panic in their voices. They are saying one thing to me. Please, world, never forget. They know they cannot live forever. They are asking us to be their ambassadors. They fear the world will forget in the course of time. We have a responsibility to ensure we will remember".

I encourage all Members to vote to ensure that we do just that.

4.23 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I, too, rise to support the construction of the holocaust memorial and learning centre. I hope that we will be able to remove any remaining barriers and get the work started as soon as possible.

We have heard important voices, including my friend the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), raising concern about the location of the memorial. Of course, they must be listened to with courtesy and all consideration. However, surely it is right that the memorial be somewhere in close proximity to the heart of Britain's democracy, where we can reflect and remember the most extreme consequences of despotic dictatorships and the atrocities committed by elected and unelected regimes around the world. That must be what drives all of us here to do and

be better, and to unite in condemnation of the ethnic cleansing and genocide still being inflicted on many peoples today. The world looks to us for our collective voice and our actions, and a memorial to the victims of the holocaust is a positive and permanent signpost of our commitment to uphold human rights and affirm definitive rejection of anti-Jewish racism.

A memorial speaks louder than the badges we sometimes wear in this Chamber. It is a mark of our pledge to interfere and disrupt when we see mass murder, racial injustice, and acts of terror carried out by weak and failing Governments in their increasingly desperate pursuit of ultimate power over their own citizens. We see and condemn the treatment of people in Ethiopia, the Hazara persecuted in Afghanistan, Uyghurs, Rohingya, Ahmadi, Baluch and Christians around the world, but closer to home, our own recent past with regard to antisemitism is nothing to be proud of either, and we have heard a lot today about how it is absolutely on the rise.

My party in particular has moved considerably in the past few years, but that does not eliminate the need to be open and honest about our shameful record. A change of leadership and the adoption of a tougher approach are not necessarily all we need to do. When those of us who did speak up were trolled, hounded and harassed, particularly as new MPs, we received absolutely no support whatsoever. Indeed, the supporters of our former leader used his name in the written or verbal attacks spat at us across the rooms in which meetings were held. Although the majority of that unpleasant minority group of members decided to leave the Labour party on the election of a new leader, some do shamefully remain.

In March 2018, when the Jewish community felt they had no choice but to gather in protest, they chose Parliament Square and peacefully held placards reading, "Enough is Enough". While many members of our shadow Cabinet and Front-Bench MPs chose to do and say absolutely nothing—present company excepted—those of us who attended that rally to support our Jewish friends and colleagues were watched by a senior member of the former leader's staff, who stood under the arches as we re-entered through Carriage Gates and wrote down in his notebook the names of all who attended.

There followed almost two more years of relentless calls for some of us to be deselected and removed from our seats, with former colleagues and activist journalists inciting social media pile-ons, appearing at rallies and roadshows, and sharing platforms alongside celebrity socialists. Decent Jewish women, democratically elected as Members of Parliament, felt that they had no choice but to step away from this place. We must never allow such things to happen again.

For me, a memorial is a reminder to fight antisemitism wherever and whenever we see it, reminding ourselves that in the evil design to create a so-called Aryan master race, Hitler and the Nazis targeted and murdered millions of Jews, Roma and gay people. We cannot ever be complacent, and that nudge to remember ought to be somewhere we in this House can see and visit.

I will end with the words of Karen Pollock, chief executive of the Holocaust Educational Trust and friend to many in this House—my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) read some of her words earlier. She said:

“It is crucial to remember that the Holocaust Memorial—and remembering the Holocaust in general—is not about planning permission, or square footage, or underground pipes. What these discussions are about at their heart, is people.

People who were subjected to unimaginable suffering, simply because they were Jewish. People who were stripped of their homes, their citizenship and their dignity; and forced into overcrowded ghettos, labour camps, and concentration camps. People who were made to dig their own graves and were shot into pits in forests and ravines across Europe, or gassed to death in purpose-built killing centres.

And it is about people who against all odds survived, and made their home here in the UK.”

That is what we need to never forget. If there is a tangible reminder on our very doorstep, we have no excuse to ignore the plight of others persecuted by evil despotic regimes around the globe.

4.29 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) and her own personal testimony in terms of some of the, frankly, in this day and age, awful abuse that too many representatives in this House and members of the Jewish community have suffered. I say that as someone who had the greatest privilege when I was growing up: I grew up alongside the Jewish community. One of the most extraordinary things is that, when I used to go to school with my friends on our school coach every day, from Radlett to Watford, never did we think that 40 years later, antisemitism would be in the ascendancy in the way it so clearly is today, as Members have spoken about.

It is in that context that I welcome the Bill, and I congratulate both Front Benchers, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) and the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), on their contributions. We need to bring this memorial forward—I have always felt that. For me, that is unequivocal, but it is astonishing that it was the former Prime Minister David Cameron, many years ago now, who made the commitment that we would have the memorial and cited the location that has already been subject to a great deal of debate today. While the decision is welcome, the commitment to bring the memorial forward—which is absolutely essential—clearly has to be done with a great deal of sympathy for its surroundings. Members have spoken today about the sensitivities of the location, but it is vital that we go ahead with the memorial, because it serves as such a powerful and sombre reminder. It is a monument that represents the loss suffered by the Jewish community and Jewish people through that most horrendous and horrific period in our history. It is living history, and we should always remember that.

On that point, we should give some thought, consideration and support to many of the leaders within the Jewish community, including those from the Jewish Leadership Council. I have had the privilege of working with the CST and its leadership, both during my time as Home Secretary and as a Member of Parliament. It is so sobering that the reason why the CST exists today is still to protect the Jewish community while they live their lives, day in, day out. I still have parents who live with the Jewish community in a part of Hertfordshire and, when I visit them, we still see local private security firms outside the synagogue, driving up and down our roads to protect the community. We have incredible

Jewish schools that are protected, day in, day out—as we have heard today from testimony in this House—by private security firms. That is because of the rise of antisemitism, the level of intolerance and the hatred that wrongly exists across society, which is why education is so vital.

Of course, the holocaust marked one of the darkest and most sinister moments in the history of humanity. None of us can forget that, and we do not want any future generations to forget it, either. This is how we improve ourselves as human beings; it is how we learn to respect one another, work with each other and live alongside each other, regardless of our backgrounds, our faith or anything of that nature. That cruelty, shown in the most systematic persecution and that awful, barbaric phrase, “the extermination of the Jewish people in Europe”—it is a horrible sentence to even utter—along with the persecution and murder of other minority groups, continues to shock. It shakes us to our core as human beings, but it did happen in that way, and we have a responsibility and a moral duty to remember the barbarism that took place back then. Six million people were the victims of genocide, motivated—let us just think about this—by hatred, prejudice, and an intolerable and evil ideology.

I want in particular to pay tribute to the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust for the work they do. I also pay tribute—I am going to say this now—to many colleagues in this House, such as those who represent communities and those on the APPGs, but also those who have given voice to some of the intolerance that we see, day in, day out, and who champion their communities across the country.

I am afraid that, even in my time as Home Secretary, I witnessed the most abhorrent antisemitism. Representatives from the Jewish community came to see me frequently, I am sorry to say. We obviously worked with the police—we had to work with the police—to bring justice to members of the community. I recall—in fact, it was only two years ago—that we had those awful car rallies coming from certain parts of the country straight into north London, with the most vile abuse, hatred, intolerance and threats to harm and hurt members of the Jewish community taking place.

These organisations work tirelessly to educate and inform in our schools and elsewhere about the horrors of the past, the holocaust and other genocides. We should also remember other genocides that have taken place, and frequently too. It is important to spread and communicate the “Never again” message and to dispel some of the appalling narratives that have existed and the language that is used against these communities.

The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust do incredible work—we have seen this—in organising visits to Auschwitz and in the run-up to Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January. The Holocaust Educational Trust produces resources on the holocaust and other genocides for use in schools. I am sure many colleagues have been into their own local schools to see this work come together. I have been delighted to forward some of it to my own local schools. This year again, I joined many of my local schools as they held fitting commemorations, and recognised the work and learning of the Holocaust Educational Trust.

[Priti Patel]

The new memorial and learning centre will be an incredible facility for future generations and young people to come together, yes, to be educated and to learn about the horrors of the past, but also to make sure that such events actually change the way in which we think, for the betterment of humanity and society.

Many of us have met holocaust survivors or heard them speak—I have had the incredible privilege of meeting many, and also of growing up alongside some of them when I lived in Radlett in Hertfordshire. We have been moved by the accounts of the suffering and the loss. If I may, I will just commend the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) for the very strong way in which he spoke about his own family background and what took place in the 1950s in particular, which was absolutely shocking. That has gone on—we should recognise this—to shape many of these organisations. The CST exists for the very reason of what happened back then, and some of the leadership of the CST right now comes from some of those dreadful experiences.

The stories of resilience, the inspirational tales and the fortitude have gone on to define the Jewish community's successive generations. They have experienced and survived unimaginable suffering, and I pay tribute to them. I think frequently, given where I base myself now, in north London, about their own suffering, but also about the courage they still have to speak about their experiences and the campaigns they have led.

It is 78 years since the concentration camps, which were the sites of such horrors, were liberated, and thank goodness they were liberated. As each year passes, the number of holocaust survivors, sadly, reduces. So we think of them on a day like today, and I think we are privileged in this House to even have this debate to reflect and to recognise the past and the horrors, but also to pay tribute to them. I say that again within the context of what we see in this modern day, with antisemitism on the rise, social media intolerance, and abuse and trolling, which the hon. Member for Canterbury has spoken about.

That is why I think this Bill is so important. I would like to see it pass, but I also think that we have to demonstrate respect for many of the concerns that have been raised today; it is right that we do that in a very respectful way. I personally think that there can be no better place in our country to have a memorial located, at the heart of democracy, because it is a reminder of how fragile and precious our democracy is. We look around the world right now, and at how the flame of democracy can so easily be extinguished. Earlier today, there was a debate in Westminster Hall on Hong Kong, where people have been fleeing for their lives because of the national security laws.

This is also about the importance of our country standing up against those who commit such atrocities in the world, and our commitment to defend freedom, liberty and human rights. The Bill reflects that in the right way, and I am confident that the centre can be built in a sympathetic and respectful way. I hope that colleagues will work to ensure that that happens. That is why I support the passage of the Bill. I know that all colleagues will work with mutual recognition and respect for many of the sensitivities that have been aired today.

4.40 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I rise to support the Bill, and I speak as vice-chair of the all-party group on the holocaust memorial. I think that this is long overdue. It is taking too long to make progress on this important project. It is a project of real significance for us as a nation, as has been demonstrated on several occasions already during the debate. When we talk about the holocaust and the suffering—I made this point earlier in an intervention on the Secretary of State—we are talking not just about somebody else's history; we are talking about our history and our national story as well.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) who, as Home Secretary, was fearless and strong in tackling antisemitism. We thank her for the work she did in that area. It has been a real privilege to be in the Chamber to hear the remarkable speech by the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett). I enjoyed listening to his speech. I had no idea of anything to do with his family history. The words he spoke, he spoke with real power and authority, and I think they reinforced the strong argument that is coming from both sides of the House in favour of a national holocaust memorial.

I place on record my thanks and appreciation to the co-chairs of this national project, Lord Pickles, my good friend, and the right honourable Ed Balls. The fact that they are working so strongly and so well together speaks volumes about the cross-party consensus and support that underpin this project and they continue to do tireless work. As other Members have done, I pay tribute to the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for the work they do out in communities, and with young people doing holocaust education, ensuring that the important lessons of history continue to be learned.

I also thank both those organisations for the work they do in Parliament, because they organise meetings that many of us have been to. We have had the privilege of meeting holocaust survivors they have introduced us to in Parliament. Many of us have sat in jaw-dropping awe when we have listened to those holocaust survivors talk about their experiences, and about what they saw, witnessed and suffered during those dark years at the end of the 1930s and into the 1940s. They left us in wonder at how they could speak with such grace about reconciliation, unity and peace. As many Members have said, it is their memory, and the work they do, that we need to preserve.

We have heard tributes to Sir Ben Helfgott, who sadly died on 16 June. He was another remarkable holocaust survivor who devoted so much of his own time and years to holocaust education. Sadly, that generation is departing from us, so the question for us is, how do we preserve and continue their work? A number of Members, including the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), spoke about visiting Auschwitz; she spoke about how moved she was visiting that place. Many of us have had that opportunity and would testify to that. The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) spoke about visiting Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, which is one of the most moving and spiritual places I have ever been to. I add to that the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda, where I have visited several times. When we go to these places, to talk about a sense of history does not

do them a service; they have a powerful depth and spirituality that speaks to events of enormous, almost cosmic significance. It is vital to have a memorial here in the heart of our United Kingdom that speaks to those events of the holocaust and to the need to learn from them. For me, there is no better place for such a memorial than right here at the heart of our democracy in Westminster, next to the Houses of Parliament.

I listened with great interest to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), who spoke with real authority on behalf of her constituents. I am not sure how I would feel, were I a resident in the neighbourhood, but I am not; I see it in terms of the national picture and the national importance of this memorial, and we need to get on and deliver it. The Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), spoke about no progress being made five or eight years from now—what a disaster that would be. What will it say about this place and about us as a generation of politicians if we just go around in circles and cannot deliver something where there is such strong cross-party consensus and such strong support?

I hope that the Bill passes tonight with such a strong message of support that it is clear we need to get on and do it. I think the memorial can be done sympathetically. I do not know whether it will take up 7.5% of Victoria Tower gardens or a different figure—we have heard three different figures already this afternoon—but my understanding is that it will occupy only a modest space in the park and that the vast majority of it will still be left for local residents.

As with so many other significant developments—we see this in our own constituencies and regions as well—it is impossible to get unanimity on a particular location. My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) mentioned that there are Jewish voices who are opposed to the site of the holocaust memorial. I am afraid that we are not going to get unanimity on that particular site—it is just not going to happen. If we are going to make that the test of where a project like this should be located, the blunt truth is that it will never happen. There will continue to be opposition to it, but I am in no doubt that when it is constructed and people are visiting it, learning and sharing in that experience, they will be thankful that it has been built. We will look back on it and recognise it as an important thing that we delivered. I hope that the Bill passes strongly tonight.

4.47 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This has been a debate in two parts. First, we have heard moving testimony from Members on both sides of the House about the evils of antisemitism and some personal experiences, particularly from the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett). Everybody in the House agrees wholeheartedly with those moving testimonies, and everybody in the House accepts that we should have an appropriate memorial to the holocaust. That has been one part of the debate.

Then we have had two well researched, well thought-out speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken)—the local Member of Parliament—and my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), which have

not denied the need for a memorial, but in great detail have explained why this sort of memorial and the way it will be constructed are not appropriate for this site at this time.

This is such an important issue, and we are all united in wanting to do it well, so we should ensure that the memorial is done well. I have been to the holocaust museums in Berlin and Washington. They are the most comprehensive, moving, enormous edifices. People are taken through a whole series of rooms, explaining exactly how antisemitism originated and the final result of the holocaust. We should have that sort of holocaust museum in London.

The problem is that this site is so constrained that it cannot do justice to the cause and to the issue. We will have to dig down into the park and, while the centre will have two storeys, it will have only a couple of rooms, which will not allow the whole narrative to be developed. That is why the Imperial War Museum, which already has a good holocaust gallery, was quite right to make its offer. There is a lot of space next to that museum, and it was prepared—I am sure that it is prepared—to develop a world-class holocaust museum.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West in suggesting a compromise. I have asked a series of questions about this. I declare an interest in that I, like many Members of Parliament, live half a mile or a mile away and of course work in this building. I am conscious that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster said, this is one of the most overcrowded parts of the United Kingdom. Literally thousands of people live and work extremely close to this very small park. Anyone who goes there on a summer's afternoon, like those we have had in recent days, will see every inch of it packed with people who work and live in Westminster trying to get a bit of sun and air and green.

I have suggested a compromise to the Secretary of State and to many others. I, and I think many others, am perfectly happy with the concept of having a memorial to the holocaust in the park. Such a memorial could be aesthetically pleasing, dynamic and express the whole issue in powerful terms. I am conscious of the superb monuments that we already have in the park, which, for instance, detail anti-slavery. This country led the world campaign against the slave trade, and the Buxton memorial explains that campaign powerfully in an aesthetically beautiful way. There is also the superb Rodin monument, the Burghers of Calais, which explains that story in a powerful way, and the superb Pankhurst monument, which powerfully proclaims the fight for votes for women. I have always argued that it would be perfectly possible to have a monument fairly close to the playground that would tell the story but not, as my hon. Friend said, overpower the park.

The trouble with the Ottawa monument, which we are importing, is that it is simply huge. It is a vast mound with great metal spikes sticking out of it. It is frankly hideous, and it would completely or partially block from that end of the park the iconic view of the Palace of Westminster, which is the subject of thousands of photographs and pictures. As my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West said, if we had started the process without proposing a totally inadequate underground learning centre and just satisfied ourselves with a monument, that could already have been built. People give the powerful message that we should get on with this, so let

[Sir Edward Leigh]

us get on with building the monument. Whether we build it in Victoria Tower gardens or on College Green, as he said, let us get on with it. We do not need to start by building the underground learning centre.

The letter to *The Times* on 2 October signed by eight Jewish peers is worth highlighting. They expressed their concerns and reservations about the proposed project for Victoria Tower gardens, which is a grade II listed park, part of which is included in a UNESCO world heritage site that we are treaty bound to respect.

The gardens are under the purview of the Royal Parks, which has never supported siting such a prominent and large memorial there. Its chairman, Loyd Grossman, wrote to me specifically to clarify that. He said that the Royal Parks

“has concerns about the potential risk of such a building on the intrinsic qualities of a well-used public park in an area of the city with a limited number of open spaces.”

There are concerns that if that beautiful space is sacrificed, it would create a precedent that could be repeated in other green spaces under the management of the Royal Parks. Everyone knows that the park is frequently used on a daily basis by visitors to the city, those who work nearby and local residents. It would simply be impossible for Victoria Tower gardens to continue in its current, useful way if the plan goes ahead. The London County Council (Improvements) Act 1900 introduced statutory protections for Victoria Tower gardens that are being decisively undermined. That Act of Parliament was solemnly created to provide a green space for working class people in the middle of Westminster.

The purpose of the memorial is to commemorate victims of this great crime, and to teach current and future generations. That means that we want many people to go there. We hope that it will be well used. There are practical points: the existing pressures on Millbank will only be compounded by traffic related to people accessing the memorial. We have not been informed of any plans to deal with coach traffic and halting, which putting the memorial there would be bound to generate. There are no parking spaces or drop-off zones for coaches. The local Thorney Island Society has stated that it is

“obviously very concerned at the loss of this small valuable park, because it is difficult to imagine that a project of this size and importance would not dominate the space and transform it from a tranquil local park to a busy civic space”.

The subterranean nature of the plans for the holocaust memorial add a further layer of complication to using Victoria Tower gardens. This is a riparian location, right on the banks of the River Thames. As recently as June 2016, 50 local properties were flooded from underneath following heavy downpours. In such ancient marshland, it is all too easy for the water table to rise alarmingly when there is a period of sudden and heavy rainfall. Further objections can be raised on the grounds that Victoria Tower gardens is already home to existing memorials of a smaller but appropriate scale, as I have mentioned. Those incredibly important memorials to the slave trade and to votes for women will be overshadowed.

The design remit sent out to architecture firms competing to design the memorial included the criterion that the monument must

“enhance Victoria Tower Gardens—improving the visual and sensory experience of the green space”.

This plan simply does not meet that criterion. Instead, we will have an 80-metre ramp, creating a wide moat splitting the park, with paving areas replacing swathes of grass. Since it was created, Victoria Tower gardens has been associated with an uninterrupted sweep of grass between magnificent rows of trees, superbly framing the Palace of Westminster and Victoria Tower. If the plan goes ahead, that splendid view will be lost forever.

I sit on the programme board for the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster. The holocaust memorial project has a direct impact on this huge undertaking. Mr Deputy Speaker, as you are also on the board, you will know those problems well. Renovating the Palace will take many years—almost certainly over a decade. To do the job well, effectively and with good value for money, we will need as much flexibility as possible. Some part of Victoria Tower gardens will be useful as a staging ground for the works that will be undertaken at the Palace. We need as much wiggle room as possible. The holocaust memorial would make working on the Palace more constrictive and possibly more costly in both time and money.

There are suitable alternative locations. I want to stress this point: instead of building an entirely new holocaust learning centre, why do the Government not take advantage of the Imperial War Museum, where there is plenty of room? This site at the Imperial War Museum is less than half a mile away from the current proposed site, so it would still be an accessible and prominent central London location. I repeat that almost nobody objects to having a memorial in the park but not the underground learning centre.

For all those reasons—especially those given by my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) in her brilliant speech—the proposed design is simply the wrong design. In its complexity and controversy, it undermines what we are trying to achieve. I appeal to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who has now rejoined us in the Chamber, to try to achieve a compromise. This whole controversy, this whole delay, is doing no good to the cause. If he can work with the Father of the House and with Westminster City Council, I am sure that in a matter of months they could come to an agreement to build a worthy memorial. Then, in time, we could work with all interested parties to create a fantastic, world-class holocaust museum, which would explain the whole story properly. I am simply suggesting a compromise and a way forward. I hope the Secretary of State will agree that that compromise is worth considering.

5.1 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I rise to support this excellent Bill and to oppose the reasoned amendment. It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who made a coherent case for his own view.

I declare my interest as co-chairman since 2018 of the holocaust memorial all-party group. We have sought to obtain progress on the establishment of the holocaust memorial and learning centre, but progress has been too slow.

When we talk about the holocaust, it is hard to comprehend how 6 million men, women and children could systematically be murdered. When I was at school in Wembley, half of my class were Jewish and the rest of

various other religions, but never ever were we taught about the holocaust. It was not spoken about. Jewish families in our area did not talk about the holocaust; they chose to try to forget it. It is only relatively recently that we have spoken about the holocaust and its horrors. That is why the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust in educating our young people, and the not-so-young, about what actually happened is so important.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should be full of admiration for the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust and for the visits to the sites of terrible atrocities across Europe? Does he also agree that any visit to Auschwitz or another such site does more than bring home to people how devastating this all was? It seems to have happened just yesterday. That is why it is so right of him to reinforce the point that these events must never be forgotten and should be part of the education syllabus.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Like many others, I have been to Auschwitz. I went there with constituents and saw the true horrors—but today is not the day for remembering Auschwitz-Birkenau or any other camp; it is for dealing with the horrors of antisemitism.

My wife's family fled Germany in the early 20th century; even back then, antisemitism was rife. Also in the early 20th century, way before the great war and before the holocaust started, my family fled France because of antisemitism and programmes in operation in that country. This problem is not confined to one particular country.

Most people would say the holocaust began around 1933, when the Nazis gained power in Germany; although they had a minority of the vote, they were ruthless. The German population were experiencing very tough times, with hyperinflation and severe reparations to pay in the wake of the great war. In such times, they sought a scapegoat, and in "Mein Kampf" we see exactly where the finger was pointed, namely at the Jewish population. Civilians had no qualms about turning their backs on Jewish friends or neighbours, and we should remember that. They isolated them from society. The momentum grew, and Jewish businesses were attacked, books were burnt, and stringent regulations restricted the freedom of Jews in the country. We should also remember, however, that of the 6 million Jews who were murdered by the Nazis, only 100,000 were German Jews. Most of those who saw this coming got out of Germany as fast as they could.

In 1938, on the awful "night of broken glass"—more commonly referred to as Kristallnacht—Nazi mobs, SS troops and ordinary citizens torched synagogues throughout Germany. They destroyed German homes, schools, businesses, hospitals and cemeteries. When the second world war broke out in 1939, the persecution escalated severely. The antisemitic undertones had now become grave systematic murder. There is no doubt that the holocaust is one of the most tragic events that the world has seen, and the brutal, wicked murder of 6 million Jewish men, women and children by the Nazis and their collaborators during the second world war must never be forgotten.

The conditions undergone by Jewish communities during that time are incomprehensible today. The testimonies of survivors paint a grave picture of what

happened in the concentration camps: initially forced labour, then starvation, gas chambers and minimal hope of survival. Maria Ossowski, a brave holocaust survivor, described the experience as one

"which will haunt me all my life."

Even today, those survivors and their families must live with the remnants of their past, to which they were subjected simply because they were Jewish. It is essential that we commemorate the hardships that were undergone, to preserve the extraordinary stories of survival and give our future generations an accurate account of history in order to educate them and prevent such scenarios from ever occurring again. We must do all that we can to prevent genocides in any form and in any part of the world—the killing of innocent people simply because they are the wrong type of people.

The memorial will serve as a national monument to commemorate the men, women and children lost during the holocaust. Alongside it will be an education and learning centre, an accurate and detailed account of this slice of history with testimonies—this is an important element—from a British perspective. The hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) made a key point about what had happened to his family. As he said, there were undercurrents in this country of what was happening in Nazi Germany. Under Mosley and his Blackshirts, a dangerous energy was brewing in this country. They sought out members of Jewish communities, who were fearful to go on the streets—certainly after dark—and who were verbally and physically attacked during the organised rallies that Mosley held.

Many Members who are present will have visited memorials dedicated to the Jewish struggle, such as Yad Vashem in Israel. In 1992 I had the opportunity to visit the original Yad Vashem, which was even more powerful than the Yad Vashem of today, because it was more personal and intense. Today's Yad Vashem is a much bigger, bolder museum, but loses some of the original, key intentions. However, the powerful audio-visual exhibitions and the stories told by survivors send an exceptionally powerful message to visitors, ensuring that those narratives will live on forever as a stark reminder. It is expected that our site will attract half a million visitors a year, which emphasises how wide the outreach of the project will be.

The holocaust is fast moving from living history to just history. Sadly, holocaust survivors are dying, and far too many have passed on already. It is therefore important that we build the memorial at the earliest possible opportunity to pay tribute to those who have suffered in both the past and the present. The longer we take with this project, the fewer survivors will be left to see the finished memorial. Prime Minister David Cameron began the process in 2014, some eight years ago, and we still have no memorial. Devastatingly, we have lost many survivors in the last eight years, including the iconic Zigi Shipper. We need to press on urgently to ensure that as many as possible can be there to see this important site opened. Holocaust survivor Manfred Goldberg BEM recently put the situation in perfect perspective, saying:

"I was 84 when Prime Minister David Cameron first promised us survivors a national Holocaust Memorial in close proximity to the Houses of Parliament. Last month I celebrated my 93rd birthday and I pray to be able to attend the opening of this important project."

[*Bob Blackman*]

The Prime Minister at the time announced that the holocaust commission was to examine what more should be done in Britain to ensure that the memory of the holocaust is preserved and its lessons are never forgotten. The commission concluded that a national memorial should be built, stating:

“The evidence is clear that there should be a striking new Memorial to serve as the focal point for national commemoration of the Holocaust. It should be prominently located in Central London to attract the largest possible number of visitors and to make a bold statement about the importance Britain places on preserving the memory of the Holocaust. It would stand as a permanent affirmation of the values of British society.”

I could not have put it better myself. However, eight years on, we have made little or no progress, and with the complex parliamentary process it is predicted that things will take a further four years. That adds up to 12 years and counting—longer than the second world war and longer than the holocaust itself.

There has been much discussion of the proposed location of the memorial. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for her speech about the site. I understand completely her concerns as the local Member. I strongly believe that Victoria Tower Gardens—already home, as has been described, to another memorial—is the perfect location. With its close proximity to Parliament, it will both serve as a reminder to us decision makers to ensure that this never happens again, and attract large numbers of tourists to visit the site and learn the history. We should remember that large numbers of people come to this place already, so many will come to this place and go to the holocaust memorial centre too.

The Bill will permit Victoria Tower Gardens to house the memorial. No place in Britain is more suitable for a holocaust memorial and learning centre than Victoria Tower Gardens—right next to Parliament, the very institution where decisions on Britain’s response were made in the lead-up to the holocaust, during it and in its aftermath. I hope that we will see detail about the decisions that were made, what people knew about what was going on in the holocaust, and what we did as a nation as a result. The memorial will serve as a reminder of the potential for abuse of democratic institutions and its murderous consequences, in stark contrast to the true role of democracy in standing up to and combating racism, hatred and prejudice.

Only Parliament can change the law. It is right that Parliament should consider whether the unique significance of the holocaust justifies seeking an exception to the protections mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough, which were put in place by Parliament more than a century ago. I am aware that, for many reasons, several of my colleagues oppose the development. I hope that I can defuse their concerns and persuade them that this significant project should get the backing it deserves and that current plans should be protected.

The proposals for the memorial include sensitive landscaping that will improve Victoria Tower Gardens for all users. More than 90% of the area of the gardens will remain fully open after the memorial is built. Local residents and workers will be able to visit and enjoy the gardens just as they do now. Further, it is important

that the relevant section of the unique legislation that we seek to override—the 1900 Act—applies only to Victoria Tower Gardens, meaning that the Bill will not impact any future development rights at other sites.

In response to the many concerns about the environmental impact of the site, I am assured that landscape improvements to Victoria Tower Gardens will ensure that this important and well-used green space is made even more attractive and accessible than ever before. The new development will take only 7.5% of the current area, and all the mature London plane trees will be protected. Additional planting and improved drainage of the grassed area will increase the overall attractiveness of the gardens and reduce any potential risks of flooding. There will still be a clear and unobstructed view of Parliament from all areas of the park.

It is important to note that the holocaust memorial will not be the only memorial on the site. The Buxton memorial, as has been mentioned, was placed in Victoria Tower Gardens in 1957 to commemorate the emancipation of slaves in the British empire. For years, this well-placed memorial has attracted visitors and become a loved and popular part of the park.

Sir Edward Leigh: How many times bigger than the Buxton memorial is this proposed memorial? It is many times bigger, and it will completely overshadow it.

Bob Blackman: It is clearly a very different type of memorial. My right hon. Friend is referring to the holocaust memorial and the learning centre combined, but the learning centre will be underground. Only 7.5% of the park will be used for this purpose. The holocaust memorial will complement the Buxton memorial, being no greater in height and with bronze fins designed to step down progressively to the east, in visual deference to the Buxton memorial.

The Father of the House has suggested that the memorial would be better placed at the Imperial War Museum. Contrary to those comments, the Imperial War Museum has said it supports the current plans for the memorial to be situated in Victoria Tower gardens and that it has no wish for the memorial to be built on its site.

I reject the claim that the Jewish community does not want this memorial, which I cannot believe has been put forward and is simply untrue. Of course, as with any community, the Jewish community is not homogeneous—it does not agree on everything—and there will always be a difference of opinion to some degree. But the vast majority are in agreement that the proposals are good and that there is an urgent need to crack on with the project.

Prominent supporters of the memorial include the Chief Rabbi, the president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the chair of the Jewish Leadership Council and the chief executive of the Holocaust Educational Trust, as well as many holocaust survivors. Throughout this process, there have been multiple consultations with members of the Jewish and survivor community.

At every stage of the previous planning inquiry, individuals and groups were able to give written and oral evidence, which has been crucial to shaping the development. When we get through the parliamentary process, I hope they will have the same rights, as we would expect.

It is quite clear that the majority of the House agrees with the proposals, and we are determined, dedicated and devoted to ensuring the plans become reality as soon as possible. We must remember the horrors that people had to live through during that atrocious point in history, in order to ensure their stories are preserved as lessons for generations to come.

In deference to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards), who spoke earlier, I end with the words of Sir Ben Helfgott, a holocaust survivor and successful Olympic weightlifter, whose words should resonate with all of us when assessing the urgency of the project:

“I look forward to one day taking my family to the new national memorial and learning centre, telling the story of Britain and the Holocaust. And one day, I hope that my children and grandchildren will take their children and grandchildren, and that they will remember all those who came before them, including my mother Sara, my sister Lusie, and my father Moishe.”

Sadly, he died earlier this year, but I have no doubt that, with this memorial and learning centre, his memory and story will live on for his children, grandchildren and future generations to enjoy for many years. I support the Bill.

5.18 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and a privilege to wind-up this Second Reading debate for the Opposition.

I start by thanking all the hon. and right hon. Members who have taken part in this debate: the Father of the House; the right hon. Members for Witham (Priti Patel), for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb); the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) and for Harrow East; and my hon. Friends the Members for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) and for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield). Each made their respective case with both force and clarity.

The Bill concerns a matter that arouses strong emotions, and the debate has understandably reflected that fact, but everyone who has contributed this afternoon has done so in a considered and respectful way that has done justice to the significance of the issue at hand. Whatever differences might exist about precisely how we do so, we are united as a House in our commitment to remembering and learning from the holocaust.

The Opposition's position on the Bill is clear and unambiguous. As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State made clear at the outset of the debate, we support the construction of a national holocaust memorial and learning centre in Victoria Tower gardens, and we therefore welcome the Bill as a means to facilitate its establishment. Many who have spoken in the debate have touched upon the rationale for creating a national holocaust memorial and learning centre. As we have heard, the idea was first proposed in 2015, and it has enjoyed cross-party support from its inception. In the eight years that have passed since the idea was first mooted, the case for such a monument and institution has only grown. That is not only because of the alarming rise of anti-Jewish hate in recent years, but because as the number of those who survived the shoah dwindles and those who still remain with us grow ever frailer, it is

essential that we as a country do more to preserve the memory of this unique act of evil and those who perished in it.

It is also imperative that we continue to educate future generations about what happened, both as a mark of respect to those who were lost and those who survived, and as a warning about what happens when antisemitism, prejudice and hatred are allowed to flourish unchecked. Once constructed, the memorial will stand as a permanent reminder of the horrors of the past, and the need for a democratic citizenry to remain ever vigilant and willing to act when the values that underpin a free and tolerant society are undermined or threatened.

We on the Opposition Benches believe it is particularly important that the thematic exhibition that the proposed learning centre will house is not only engaging and reflective, but honest about Britain's complicated relationship with the holocaust. The proximity of the proposed memorial and learning centre to this House cannot and should not be taken to imply that the United Kingdom and its Parliament have an unimpeachable record when it comes to the knowledge of, and response to, the systematic mass killing of Jews by the Nazi regime.

Sir Edward Leigh: Let us put it on the record that, as Winston Churchill said, only one nation in the entire world fought Nazism and fascism from day one of the war to the last day of the war—it was this country and this Parliament.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I agree with him, although he will know of the many voices of dissent both at the time of and in the years leading up to the moment in which we took that stand. As I was going to say, the proximity of the proposed site renders it all the more important to confront openly the ambiguous and varied responses—and there were some—of our country's Parliament, Government and society to the still unsurpassed crimes that were carried out by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. We have heard about those examples today.

As the debate winds up, I want to take the opportunity, once again, to put on record our thanks to all those who have been involved in advancing this project, and holocaust education more generally, in recent years. The full list is far too extensive to read into the record, but they include the past and present members of the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation, including the right honourable Ed Balls, the right honourable Lord Eric Pickles and Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis; all those involved in developing the exhibition's narrative, particularly Yehudit Shendar, who is providing the curatorial lead; all the organisations that have striven to embed holocaust and genocide education and commemoration in our national life, particularly the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust; and finally, all the holocaust survivors who have campaigned for holocaust education and personally championed the project, including a number who will sadly not now see it come to fruition. In that regard, those of us on the Opposition side of the House think in particular of Sir Ben Helfgott, and convey our thoughts and sincere condolences to his family and friends.

I have felt it necessary to dwell again at some length on the rationale for establishing a national holocaust memorial and learning centre, given the Bill's ultimate purpose, but as has been mentioned, the principle of

[Matthew Pennycook]

doing so is almost entirely uncontested and not an issue that arises directly from the Bill. Instead, the Bill is concerned with making provision for, and in connection with, significant expenditure related to the establishment of the proposed memorial and centre, and removing pre-existing impediments that exist to the siting of it in Victoria Tower gardens, namely sections of the London County Council (Improvements) Act 1900, so that progress towards construction can be made.

I want to make it clear once again that the Opposition appreciate fully that the selection of Victoria Tower gardens as the chosen location for the memorial and centre has attracted robust and principled criticism and, in some cases, outright opposition, including from prominent members of the Jewish community and holocaust survivors. Several of those who contributed to the debate today have articulated some of the criticisms and objections that have been made in that regard. The reasoned amendment in the name of the Father of the House sets out a number of them.

As we have heard, concerns about the proposed location include the impact on the construction process; rising build costs; the potential generation of additional traffic in the area; security risks; environmental protections; the loss of public green space and amenity; and the impact on existing monuments and memorials.

Sir Peter Bottomley: When the National Audit Office carried out its report last year, it thought the cost had gone up to £102 million. Since then, we will probably need to add an extra 15%, because of inflation in construction. The expansion at Yad Vashem, which was referred to by hon. Members, was completed for \$100 million, so we will be spending much more for much less. I am not saying this to change the hon. Gentleman's argument—I am grateful for the way he is summarising the debate, and he is doing it very fairly.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the Father of the House. Build cost inflation is a serious issue, not just in relation to this project but across the country. That would be the case wherever the chosen location was if we are to move ahead with the memorial, as we must, but I take his point, which is a good one.

We know the concerns that have been raised about the adequacy of historical consultation. While the planning inquiry that took place in October 2022 enabled all interested parties to express their views and to raise these and other concerns and suggestions, the Opposition believe it is important that those with outstanding criticisms and objections have a chance to express them fully and be heard. The hybrid nature of the Bill and the resulting petitioning window that will be provided as a result of its designation will ensure that they are.

We hope that the Government will reflect carefully on the specific points that have been raised in the debate today. However, it is the considered view of Labour Members that this Bill needs to progress and that, amended or otherwise, it must receive Royal Assent as soon as is practically possible. There really can be no further delay if we are to have any chance whatsoever of having this vitally important project finally completed while at least some of those who survived the holocaust and made Britain their home are still with us. I think that would be the sincere wish of the whole House.

5.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): It is a real pleasure to conclude the debate. I sincerely thank Members from across the House for their thoughtful, powerful and often very personal contributions to the debate. I was moved to hear such support for the principles of this Bill from all sides of the House. Together we can put our personal politics to one side and get the holocaust memorial built, while there are still holocaust survivors alive to see it.

Regrettably, it is a sombre truth that holocaust survivors who found solace in the United Kingdom are passing away, so we cannot let this opportunity pass us by. We must pass this Bill. We must ensure that future generations remember tomorrow. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, the Bill will enable us to keep that solemn promise. Through it, we are pursuing our manifesto commitment and a moral commitment.

It is encouraging to know that there is broad agreement about the need for a prominent national holocaust memorial and learning centre, even among those few dissenting voices who have expressed concerns about the site in Victoria Tower gardens. What is not in dispute is that its location at the heart of our democracy has an unmatched historical, emotional and political significance.

I wish to spend a few moments replying to some of the concerns that have been mentioned, first, in the reasoned amendment, and, secondly, in some of the speeches. We are opposing the amendment. Many of these issues were examined in depth at the six-week public inquiry in 2020.

In his overall conclusion, the planning inspector was clear that the significant range of truly civic, educative, social and even moral public benefits that the proposals offer would demonstrably outweigh the identified harms that the proposals have been found to cause. A number of Members, including my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), raised concerns about the park and the environment. I stress that our proposal is to take only 7.5% of the area of the gardens, with the structure of our learning centre placed underground.

Nickie Aiken: I appreciate what the Minister is saying about the 7.5%. However, does she agree that placing the memorial and the learning centre in Victoria Tower gardens will change the whole atmosphere of the area, which is currently a neighbourhood park to a civic area.

Felicity Buchan: It is our full intention that all activities that, at the moment, occur in the park can continue to do so, and we are being very sensitive in our design of the memorial and the learning centre. On the 7.5% point, I wish to note that the planning inspector, in his decision, recorded that the figure was agreed by all the main parties to the inquiry. I also want to say that the gardens will be enhanced in many ways with new planting, better drainage and more accessible seating. It is important also to note that the Holocaust Memorial Bill itself cannot and will not do anything to alter environmental and green space protections. The Bill will remove the statutory obstacle to building the memorial and learning centre in Victoria Tower gardens, it does not provide

any sort of planning permission and other necessary consents. These are contingent on an entirely separate planning permission.

I wish to pick up on a few other points that were raised. On trees, I want to reassure everyone that all the mature London plane trees will be protected, and additional planting will increase the overall attractiveness. We are taking measures to minimise the risk of damage to tree roots. Flooding was also mentioned. A detailed flood-risk assessment prepared as part of the planning application has concluded that Victoria Tower gardens is heavily protected. However, we take the risk of flooding very seriously. The Environment Agency has sought planning conditions relating to the condition of the river wall, which we are happy to comply with.

The Buxton Memorial and the concerns about it being overshadowed were mentioned. I want to stress that the design of the memorial means that the Buxton Memorial will be kept in its current position and, with the addition of new landscaping and seating, its setting will be improved. The memorial will be no higher than the top of the Buxton Memorial and the fins will step down progressively.

Concerns were raised about the interaction with the restoration and renewal programme. I just want to stress that the memorial site is at the southern end of Victoria Tower gardens and need not prevent the use of the gardens as required by the R&R project for site offices.

There was mention of having the memorial at the Imperial War Museum. I reiterate that the Imperial War Museum is very supportive of our proposals and, indeed, the chair sits on the foundation board. There was also mention of the fact that the learning centre was too small, but it is of a comparable size to that of the exhibition space underground in Berlin. In the reasoned amendment there was mention of the fact that there should be an endowment fund for education, but nothing that we are doing precludes that. There was also mention of the fact that there is opposition from members of the Jewish community. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said, we are never going to get unanimity among any group of people, but we are delighted that we have the support of the Chief Rabbi and of every living Prime Minister, and broad representation from the Jewish community.

Consultation has been mentioned, and the Secretary of State addressed many of those issues, but we have over the years carried out extensive consultation. We looked at around 50 possible sites in central London, and there was a public inquiry as part of the planning process. We conducted a very thorough search of possible alternative suitable sites. All sites were assessed against

the same published criteria, which included visibility, accessibility, availability and affordability. Almost all the criteria in the 2015 site selection document can be met at Victoria Tower gardens. I thank Members across the House for their contributions in this important debate and for their support to deliver this long-overdue memorial.

5.36 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am not going to continue with the reasoned amendment on obvious grounds, which I spoke about earlier. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL BILL (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Holocaust Memorial Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State.—(*Ruth Edwards.*)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That in respect of—

(1) the Motions in the name of Secretary Michael Gove relating to

- (a) the Holocaust Memorial Bill, and
- (b) Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009,

the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings not later than one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order (notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16(1) (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), in respect of item (b)); such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and

(2) the Motion in the name of Penny Mordaunt relating to Proxy Voting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on that Motion not later than one hour after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

Holocaust Memorial Bill: Committal

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The four motions on the Holocaust Memorial Bill will be debated together. Amendments (a) and (b) tabled to motion 6 have been selected. I will invite Sir Peter Bottomley to move the selected amendments at the end of the debate as we dispose of each motion in turn. The debate that now takes place may range over all four motions.

5.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): I beg to move,

(1) That the Bill be committed to a Select Committee of five members, all of whom are to be nominated by the Committee of Selection.

(2) That in determining the composition of the Select Committee the Committee of Selection shall nominate three members from the Government and two members from opposition parties.

(3) That there shall stand referred to the Select Committee—

(a) any petition against the Bill submitted to the Private Bill Office during the period beginning at 10.00am on 29 June 2023 and ending at 5.00pm on 24 July 2023, and

(b) any petition which has been submitted to the Private Bill Office and in which the petitioners complain of—

(i) any amendment as proposed in the filled-up Bill,

(ii) any amendment as proposed by the member in charge of the Bill which, if the Bill were a private bill, could not be made except upon petition for additional provision, or

(iii) any matter which has arisen during the progress of the Bill before the Select Committee, (and references in this paragraph to the submission of a petition are to its submission electronically, by post or in person).

(4) That if no such petition as is mentioned in sub-paragraph (3)(a) above is presented, or if all such petitions are withdrawn before the meeting of the Committee, the order for the committal of the Bill to a Select Committee shall be discharged and the Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

(5) That, notwithstanding the practice of the House that appearances on petitions against an opposed private bill be required to be entered at the first meeting of the Select Committee on the Bill, in the case of any such petitions as are mentioned in paragraph 3(a) above on which appearances are not entered at that meeting, the Select Committee shall appoint a later day or days on which it will require appearances on those petitions to be entered.

(6) That any petitioner whose petition stands referred to the Select Committee shall, subject to the rules and orders of the House and to the prayer of that person's petition, be entitled to be heard in person or through counsel or agents upon that person's petition provided that it is prepared and signed in conformity with the rules and orders of the House, and the member in charge of the Bill shall be entitled to be heard through counsel or agents in favour of the Bill against that petition.

(7) That the Select Committee shall require any hearing in relation to a petition mentioned in paragraph 6 above to take place in person, unless exceptional circumstances apply.

(8) That in applying the rules of the House in relation to parliamentary agents, any reference to a petitioner in person shall be treated as including a reference to a duly authorised member or officer of an organisation, group or body.

(9) That the Select Committee have power to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House and to report from day to day the minutes of evidence taken before it.

(10) That three be the quorum of the Select Committee.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this, we shall discuss the following:

Motion 6—Holocaust Memorial Bill: Instruction—

That it be an instruction to the Select Committee to which the Holocaust Memorial Bill is committed to deal with the Bill as follows:

(1) That the Committee treats the principle of the Bill, as determined by the House on the Bill's Second Reading, as comprising the matters mentioned in paragraph 2; and those matters shall accordingly not be at issue during proceedings of the Committee.

(2) The matters referred to in paragraph (1) are—

(a) the Secretary of State may incur expenditure for or in connection with (i) a memorial commemorating the victims of the Holocaust, and (ii) a centre for learning relating to the memorial; and

(b) section 8(1) and (8) of the London County Council (Improvements) Act 1900 are not to prevent, restrict or otherwise affect the construction, use, operation, maintenance or improvement of such a memorial and centre for learning at Victoria Tower Gardens in the City of Westminster.

(3) Given paragraph (2) and as the Bill does not remove the need for planning permission and all other necessary consents being obtained in the usual way for the construction, use, operation, maintenance and improvement of the memorial and centre for learning, the Committee shall not hear any petition against the Bill to the extent that the petition relates to—

(a) the question of whether or not there should be a memorial commemorating the victims of the Holocaust or a centre for learning relating to the memorial, whether at Victoria Tower Gardens or elsewhere; or

(b) whether or not planning permission and all other necessary consents should be given for the memorial and centre for learning, or the terms and conditions on which they should be given.

(4) The Committee shall have power to consider any amendments proposed by the member in charge of the Bill which, if the Bill were a private bill, could not be made except upon petition for additional provision.

(5) Paragraph (4) applies only so far as the amendments proposed by the member in charge of the Bill fall within the principle of the Bill as provided for by paragraphs (1) and (2) above.

That these Orders be Standing Orders of the House.

Amendment (a) to motion 6, in paragraph (2)(a), leave out from “memorial” to the end of paragraph (2)(b).

Amendment (b), to motion 6, leave out paragraph (3).

Motion 7—Holocaust Memorial Bill: Carry-over—

That the following provisions shall apply in respect of the Holocaust Memorial Bill:

Suspension at end of current Session

(1) Further proceedings on the Bill shall be suspended from the day on which this Session of Parliament ends (“the current Session”) until the next Session of Parliament (“Session 2023–24”).

(2) If a Bill is presented in Session 2023–24 in the same terms as those in which the Bill stood when proceedings on it were suspended in the current Session—

(a) the Bill so presented shall be ordered to be printed and shall be deemed to have been read the first and second time;

(b) the Standing Orders and practice of the House applicable to the Bill, so far as complied with or dispensed with in the current Session, shall be deemed to have been complied with or (as the case may be) dispensed with in Session 2023–24;

(c) the Bill shall be dealt with in accordance with—

(i) paragraph 3, if proceedings in Select Committee were not completed when proceedings on the Bill were suspended,

(ii) paragraph 4, if proceedings in Public Bill Committee were begun but not completed when proceedings on the Bill were suspended,

- (iii) paragraph 5, if the Bill was waiting to be considered when proceedings on it were suspended,
- (iv) paragraph 6, if the Bill was waiting for third reading when proceedings on it were suspended, or
- (v) paragraph 7, if the Bill has been read the third time and sent to the House of Lords.

(3) If this paragraph applies—

(a) the Bill shall stand committed to a Select Committee of such Members as were members of the Committee when proceedings on the Bill were suspended in the current Session;

(b) any instruction of the House to the Committee in the current Session shall be an instruction to the Committee on the Bill in Session 2023–24;

(c) all petitions submitted in the current Session which stand referred to the Committee and which have not been withdrawn, and any petition submitted between the day on which the current Session ends and the day on which proceedings on the Bill are resumed in Session 2023–24 in accordance with this Order, shall stand referred to the Committee in Session 2023–24;

(d) any minutes of evidence taken and any papers laid before the Committee in the current Session shall stand referred to the Committee in Session 2023–24;

(e) only those petitions mentioned in sub-paragraph (c), and any petition which may be submitted to the Private Bill Office and in which the petitioners complain of any amendment proposed by the member in charge of the Bill which, if the Bill were a private bill, could not be made except upon petition for additional provision or of any matter which has arisen during the progress of the Bill before the Committee in Session 2023–24, shall stand referred to the Committee;

(f) any petitioners whose petitions stand referred to the Committee in Session 2023–24 shall, subject to the rules and orders of the House, and to the prayer of that person's petition, be entitled to be heard in person or through counsel or agents upon that person's petition provided that it is prepared and signed in conformity with the rules and orders of the House, and the member in charge of the Bill shall be entitled to be heard through counsel or agents in favour of the Bill against that petition;

(g) the Committee shall require any hearing in relation to a petition mentioned in sub-paragraph (f) above to take place in person, unless exceptional circumstances apply;

(h) in applying the rules of the House in relation to parliamentary agents, any reference to a petitioner in person shall be treated as including a reference to a duly authorised member or officer of an organisation, group or body;

- (i) the Committee shall have power to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House and to report from day to day minutes of evidence taken before it;

(j) three shall be the quorum of the Committee.

(4) If this paragraph applies, the Bill shall be deemed to have been reported from the Select Committee and to have been re-committed to a Public Bill Committee.

(5) If this paragraph applies—

(a) the Bill shall be deemed to have been reported from the Select Committee and from the Public Bill Committee, and

(b) the Bill shall be set down as an order of the day for consideration.

(6) If this paragraph applies—

(a) the Bill shall be deemed to have been reported from the Select Committee and from the Public Bill Committee and to have been considered, and

(b) the Bill shall be set down as an order of the day for third reading.

(7) If this paragraph applies, the Bill shall be deemed to have passed through all its stages in this House.

Other

(8) In paragraph (3) above, references to the submission of a petition are to its submission electronically, by post or in person.

That these Orders be Standing Orders of the House.

Motion 8—Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009—

That the Order of the House of 19 March 2013 (Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009) be amended, in paragraph (1)(a), by inserting, in the appropriate place, “the Select Committee on the Holocaust Memorial Bill”.

Felicity Buchan: The instruction motion, tabled in the name of the Secretary of State, sets out the matters that can properly be considered by the Select Committee when it hears petitions against the Bill. It is a custom of the House, and a well-established part of the process for hybrid Bills, that the Select Committee should not hear petitions that seek to challenge the principle of the Bill. The Second Reading debate that just concluded was the opportunity for this House to consider the principle of the Bill, and I am delighted that this House has given such support to the Bill.

It is familiar practice on hybrid Bills, for example with the current and recent High Speed 2 Bills, that the House should pass a motion giving instructions to the Select Committee on what precisely falls within the principle of the Bill. Such a motion helps to provide clarity for the Committee and, of course, for potential petitioners, so that no time should be wasted seeking to raise matters on the Bill's principle, on which the House has already expressed such a clear view.

In this case, the motion specifies that

“the Committee shall not hear any petition against the Bill to the extent that the petition relates to—

(a) the question of whether or not there should be a memorial commemorating the victims of the Holocaust or a centre for learning relating to the memorial, whether at Victoria Tower Gardens or elsewhere; or

(b) whether or not planning permission and all other necessary consents should be given for the memorial and centre for learning, or the terms and conditions on which they should be given.”

If the House agrees to pass the motion, the Select Committee would still have a good deal of scope to consider matters relating to clause 2 of the Bill—notably, the extent to which the restrictions in section 8 of the London County Council (Improvements) Act 1900 should be removed, and whether there should be any conditions on that removal.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): It is accepted that there is a principle to memorial, so what about my point on having an overground memorial—like other memorials—but not an underground learning centre? Will the Committee still be able to consider such a detail?

Felicity Buchan: The Committee can consider the extent and any conditions on the memorial in Victoria Tower gardens, so yes, that can be considered.

The established practice for Select Committees on hybrid Bills is that they consider petitions from people who are directly and especially affected by the proposals in the Bill. I understand that the House authorities will publish guidance for people who are considering whether to petition against the Bill. It will ultimately be a matter for the Select Committee to decide which petitioners to hear and which points in the petitions to consider.

[Felicity Buchan]

The motion is a necessary and important measure that supports the well-established principles and processes for dealing with a hybrid Bill. The amendments proposed by the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), risks undermining those established principles and processes, and could create confusion on the scope of the Committee's work, which would be unhelpful to the Committee and all participants, including petitioners. For those reasons, the Government do not accept the amendments. I commend the motion to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Father of the House.

5.41 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for the way in which she has introduced these four topics. We are talking mainly about the instruction motion; I do not think that the others are very exceptionable.

I think I may have served on more hybrid Bill Committees—and certainly for longer—than most people, including that of High Speed 2. I doubt that the situation is quite as my hon. Friend described it. Hybrid Bill procedure exists for a reason: to protect the rights of those who are specifically affected by a Bill and allow them to put their case to a Committee. By making clause 2 the principle of the Bill, as well as clause 1—as I said before, there is no controversy about clause 1—the Government have already spent £17 million or more achieving nothing. They are now proposing to spend an extra £80 million to £100 million achieving not very much. I suggested in a previous debate that the Government should consider how to get a national holocaust memorial up—close to Westminster, if they want—within two years. Of course, the Government would not, as I have explained before, achieve it in four to five years extra, over and above the eight years that have been used up so far.

To go back to the hybridity, it is a matter of record that the Government declared in front of the examiners that this was not a hybrid Bill. They were wrong; it is a hybrid Bill. The reason for a hybrid Bill is so that people have the right to petition. The Government tried to stop that. I think that it is fairly clear to anyone who looks at this that the Government are now seeking to achieve the same result by using this instruction. It is up to the Government to decide whether the instruction, as introduced, is an abuse.

It would be quite easy for the Government to stand up and say what things the petitioners might rightfully put in a petition and be heard on, rather than telling the Committee that they cannot be heard. In addition, because this is a local park for local people, I believe not just that advertisements should be put in newspapers or in the gazette, but that a leaflet should be given to every resident, no matter how small or large their home, from, say, Vauxhall Bridge, Victoria station, along Victoria Street and south of Victoria Street up to the embankment. Those people should be told how the procedure works, how they can petition, what they can petition on and how they can be represented together by a common agent, if they want to be. That is what happened in my experience on HS2.

The instruction, as described by the Minister, would make the whole Bill part of the principle of the Bill. That is not common. In fact, I do not know of it happening before. The whole of the Bill cannot be made the principle, because that then makes it impossible for the petitioners to have their cases heard effectively. So I think we need to accept that the petitioners will be heard on nearly everything that is not an abuse. If someone says, "I do not want any money spent on it," I can understand not allowing that. That is the principle, but the rest of it, I argue, is not.

Paragraph (3)(a) of motion 6 refers to a petition that relates to

"the question of whether or not there should be a memorial commemorating the victims of the Holocaust or a centre for learning relating to the memorial, whether at Victoria Tower Gardens or elsewhere".

I ask this explicitly: can either the Secretary of State or the Minister stand up and tell me now that, if someone wants to argue in front of the Committee that it would be better to have the basement box somewhere else and just have the memorial, would that petition potentially be heard by the Committee?

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): I think it would be a matter for the Committee.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I agree with the Secretary of State that it would be a matter for the Committee, but it is a matter for the Committee under the instructions.

By the way, if it helps those who are concerned about votes and trains, I intend to vote for both amendments, but force a Division only on one of them. I am trying to make sure that these issues will be considered in the House during the Bill's remaining stages and in the House of Lords as well, where I suspect there will be a degree of scrutiny.

This hybrid procedure gives ordinary people a chance to have their voices heard, and it allows the Committee to insert conditions when the Bill comes back to the House. Those conditions, I believe, could include—I am not going to tell the Committee what it has to do, although I volunteer to be a member if anyone wants to put me on it—saying that the Government should, before this Bill comes back for its further stages on the Floor of the House, show the alternatives to the present plans.

I do not think we should rely on the planning inspector, whose conditions were rather odd before, or on the Secretary of State's colleague making an independent decision on the Secretary of State's application. I think that may formally be an acceptable procedure, but it is not one that anyone would justify if we were giving a lecture on democracy in another country.

I believe that the Committee should have the capacity or ability to hear petitions that say, "If the Government say that the memorial only takes up 7.5% of the land in Victoria Tower Gardens, that should be written in as a condition in the Bill." I believe, notwithstanding the acceptability of paragraph (2)(a) about the money, that the Committee should be able to say that the House can consider the Bill on the condition that the total cost is not more than another £80 million, if we go ahead with the box, or preferably £20 million without the box, whether at the north end of Victoria Tower Gardens, or Parliament Square, or Whitehall, or College Green.

There are a whole series of other things I could say—I have a long, detailed speech and I apologise to those who helped me create the arguments—but I think the House will find it convenient if I leave it with this point. This hybrid Bill must be considered properly by the hybrid Committee, which should allow petitions to be heard. Local people will put their points of view forward. If some duplicate each other, hear them together, but do not exclude any point of practice or of principle if we want to get a holocaust memorial in the next two years. We will not with this process. It needs conditions to change it.

We will not even, in my view, get it within the next four or five years at £120 million, unless the Government wake up to the fact that this is sticking in a big box that does not do what the original plans wanted in a place where it is not appropriate. We can do better than that, and I ask the Secretary of State to recognise that that is the point of moving these amendments. I ask the House not to restrict the petitioners. The Government have now accepted that this is a hybrid Bill, so use the procedures properly and be democratic.

5.48 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I rise in support of the Father of the House's amendments for several reasons. No one is doubting, as I think we have all made clear in this debate, the need for a holocaust memorial. It is absolutely essential, so that we never forget the horror of the genocide and the holocaust, and a memorial would serve that purpose.

My central concern is a twofold absence, the first of which is the absence of a proper consultation as to the memorial's location. There was a consultation, which went through the normal planning procedure of Westminster City Council, but we will remember perhaps that the Secretary of State called it in. Since then, there seems to have been a process—almost a locomotive in action—that is determined that the following of a proper process is secondary to the decision that has already been made to site the memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens. Proper process has been sadly lacking. After all, we are only having this debate because those pushing for the siting of the memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens were informed by a High Court judge that they could not ride roughshod over an Act of Parliament that said that Victoria Tower Gardens should be preserved for permanent use as a public park. We should not forget that.

Sir Peter Bottomley *rose—*

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Baron: The Father of the House caught my eye first.

Sir Peter Bottomley: My hon. Friend has reminded me that the Government now say that admission to the memorial will be free in perpetuity. The same words—"in perpetuity"—are used in the London Act that protects the park from this kind of building. Who do we trust?

Mr Baron: I agree with the Father of the House: we are dealing with serious issues of trust here, and the public trusting what we say in this place.

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend said that he was going to speak in support of the Father of the House's amendments, but I am afraid that the points he is making belong to the debate that we had on Second Reading about the principles behind the Bill. It is quite wrong for him to try to return to the arguments that we made earlier this afternoon, when there was strong support from both sides of the House for passing the Bill.

Mr Baron: I disagree. If my right hon. Friend reads the amendments, they talk about the Bill removing

"the need for planning permission and all other necessary consents being obtained in the usual way for the construction, use, operation" and "maintenance" of the memorial. This is all part and parcel of the due process that has been sadly lacking in this whole endeavour for the Government to get their way in siting the memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens, come what may. It is very apt to say that a decision has been made at the centre. It has taken far too long, by the way—we can all agree with that; this process started in 2015, and here we are in 2023 still debating it—but the fact is that due process has not been followed. There has been a lack of transparency, to the point where a High Court judge has to say that we need to debate this matter in Parliament before those pushing for the siting of the memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens can have their way. We should be worried about that.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, I think we all very much support the establishment of a national holocaust memorial. Nobody dissents from that: it is about the way in which the process has been conducted, with a lack of transparency and a lack of due process. I almost think that there has been some sort of deviousness in getting us to this point.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to all those who are part of the Save Victoria Tower Gardens campaign—all of them local people who are so desperate to ensure that this vital piece of public park remains so? Does he agree that it is so important to hear their voices continually throughout this Bill process?

Mr Baron: I agree with my hon. Friend. That is why, coming back to the intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), the debate on this particular part of the Bill—the instruction—is very important, and it is why the Father of the House's amendments are very relevant. The Bill is trying to say, "We are not going to consider any other alternatives. We are not going to listen at all to any further suggestions as to how we can move this forward." That is wrong, given that the only consultation we have had so far by Westminster City Council has been called in by the Government. That is not how we do things in this country. We do depend on due process. We do depend on transparency. We do depend on the checks and balances that help make this country one of the best places to live and where the rule of law prevails. But here we have an approach that is shoddy, frankly. It lacks transparency, and the process is questionable. The one bit of consultation has been called in, and it is simply not good enough. So when the Father of the House rises to move his amendments, I hope that enough people will support him, and I will certainly be doing so.

5.55 pm

Felicity Buchan: I just want to address a few of the points that have been made. I clarify the fact that it is a matter for the Committee, ultimately, which petitioners to hear and which points to consider. This is a direction to the Committee, but, ultimately, especially in some of the examples, it would be for the Committee to decide. On whether to decide to set conditions—for instance, on the area of the garden—that would be within the remit of the Committee.

There was a discussion as to whether clause 2 was within the principle of the Bill. We have to remember that this is a Bill with only three clauses, one of which is about the extent of the Bill, so I would strongly argue that clause 1 and clause 2 are the principles of the Bill. In my mind, that is clear.

There was a concern raised that the planning decision would be made by a Minister in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I want to reassure the House that we have the strictest processes in place to divide the decision-making principles, so no Minister involved in the Holocaust Memorial Bill will in any way be involved in the planning decision. To use the banking term, there will be the strictest of Chinese walls.

I want to reassure the House that we have done the consultation, as the Secretary of State and I have set out, and that we are launching a very transparent process. However, the purpose of the Committee is not to re-debate the principles in clauses 1 and 2; it is to discuss conditions and extent. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL BILL: INSTRUCTION

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That it be an instruction to the Select Committee to which the Holocaust Memorial Bill is committed to deal with the Bill as follows:

(1) That the Committee treats the principle of the Bill, as determined by the House on the Bill's Second Reading, as comprising the matters mentioned in paragraph 2; and those matters shall accordingly not be at issue during proceedings of the Committee.

(2) The matters referred to in paragraph (1) are—

(a) the Secretary of State may incur expenditure for or in connection with (i) a memorial commemorating the victims of the Holocaust, and (ii) a centre for learning relating to the memorial; and

(b) section 8(1) and (8) of the London County Council (Improvements) Act 1900 are not to prevent, restrict or otherwise affect the construction, use, operation, maintenance or improvement of such a memorial and centre for learning at Victoria Tower Gardens in the City of Westminster.

(3) Given paragraph (2) and as the Bill does not remove the need for planning permission and all other necessary consents being obtained in the usual way for the construction, use, operation, maintenance and improvement of the memorial and centre for learning, the Committee shall not hear any petition against the Bill to the extent that the petition relates to—

(a) the question of whether or not there should be a memorial commemorating the victims of the Holocaust or a centre for learning relating to the memorial, whether at Victoria Tower Gardens or elsewhere; or

(b) whether or not planning permission and all other necessary consents should be given for the memorial and centre for learning, or the terms and conditions on which they should be given.

(4) The Committee shall have power to consider any amendments proposed by the member in charge of the Bill which, if the Bill were a private bill, could not be made except upon petition for additional provision.

(5) Paragraph (4) applies only so far as the amendments proposed by the member in charge of the Bill fall within the principle of the Bill as provided for by paragraphs (1) and (2) above.

That these Orders be Standing Orders of the House.—(*Felicity Buchan.*)

Amendment proposed: (a), to leave out from “memorial” in paragraph (2)(a) to the end of paragraph (2)(b).—(*Sir Peter Bottomley.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 11, Noes 379.

Division No. 276]

[5.58 pm

AYES

Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bridgen, Andrew
Duddridge, Sir James
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim

McCartney, Karl
Shannon, Jim
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Wragg, Mr William

Tellers for the Ayes:

Mr John Baron and
Sir Christopher Chope

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)

Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Argar, rh Edward
Ashworth, rh Jonathan

Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, rh Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baker, Duncan

Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Barker, Paula
Baynes, Simon
Beckett, rh Margaret

Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake

Betts, Mr Clive
Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)

Blackman, Bob
Blake, Olivia
Bone, Mr Peter (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)

Bowie, Andrew
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Bristow, Paul

Britcliffe, Sara
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Browne, Anthony

Bruce, Fiona
Bryant, Sir Chris
Buchan, Felicity
Buck, Ms Karen
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Rob
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carter, Andy
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Champion, Sarah
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)

Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)

Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse

Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy

Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Coyle, Neil

Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Cruddas, Jon

Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley

Daly, James
David, Wayne
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James

Davies, Mims
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Debonnaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Dixon, Samantha
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Double, Steve
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Elmore, Chris
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foord, Richard
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Furniss, Gill
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glen, rh John
 Glendon, Mary
 Gove, rh Michael
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Grundy, James
 Halfon, rh Robert

Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hammond, Stephen
 Harris, Carolyn
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollern, Kate
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Kim
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jones, Ruth
 Kane, Mike
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopresti, Jack
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Mak, Alan
 Malhotra, Seema

Malthouse, rh Kit
 Marson, Julie
 Maskell, Rachael
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McDonald, Andy
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 Mearns, Ian
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Millar, Robin
 Mills, Nigel
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Nandy, Lisa
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Norris, Alex
 O'Brien, Neil
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opperman, Guy
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Pawsey, Mark
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pollard, Luke
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Redwood, rh John
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela

Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trickett, Jon
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vickers, Martin
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Winter, Beth
 Wood, Mike

Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Stuart Anderson and
Fay Jones

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment proposed to motion 6: (b), leave out paragraph (3).—(Sir Peter Bottomley.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Question negated.

Main Question put and agreed to.

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL BILL: CARRY-OVER

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply in respect of the Holocaust Memorial Bill:

Suspension at end of current Session

(1) Further proceedings on the Bill shall be suspended from the day on which this Session of Parliament ends (“the current Session”) until the next Session of Parliament (“Session 2023–24”).

(2) If a Bill is presented in Session 2023–24 in the same terms as those in which the Bill stood when proceedings on it were suspended in the current Session—

(a) the Bill so presented shall be ordered to be printed and shall be deemed to have been read the first and second time;

(b) the Standing Orders and practice of the House applicable to the Bill, so far as complied with or dispensed with in the current Session, shall be deemed to have been complied with or (as the case may be) dispensed with in Session 2023–24;

(c) the Bill shall be dealt with in accordance with—

(i) paragraph 3, if proceedings in Select Committee were not completed when proceedings on the Bill were suspended,

(ii) paragraph 4, if proceedings in Public Bill Committee were begun but not completed when proceedings on the Bill were suspended,

(iii) paragraph 5, if the Bill was waiting to be considered when proceedings on it were suspended,

(iv) paragraph 6, if the Bill was waiting for third reading when proceedings on it were suspended, or

(v) paragraph 7, if the Bill has been read the third time and sent to the House of Lords.

(3) If this paragraph applies—

(a) the Bill shall stand committed to a Select Committee of such Members as were members of the Committee when proceedings on the Bill were suspended in the current Session;

(b) any instruction of the House to the Committee in the current Session shall be an instruction to the Committee on the Bill in Session 2023–24;

(c) all petitions submitted in the current Session which stand referred to the Committee and which have not been withdrawn, and any petition submitted between the day on which the current Session ends and the day on which proceedings on the Bill are resumed in Session 2023–24 in accordance with this Order, shall stand referred to the Committee in Session 2023–24;

(d) any minutes of evidence taken and any papers laid before the Committee in the current Session shall stand referred to the Committee in Session 2023–24;

(e) only those petitions mentioned in sub-paragraph (c), and any petition which may be submitted to the Private Bill Office and in which the petitioners complain of any amendment proposed by the member in charge of the Bill which, if the Bill were a private bill, could not be made except upon petition for additional provision or of any matter which has arisen during the progress of the Bill before the Committee in Session 2023–24, shall stand referred to the Committee;

(f) any petitioners whose petitions stand referred to the Committee in Session 2023–24 shall, subject to the rules and orders of the House, and to the prayer of that person’s petition, be entitled to be heard in person or through counsel or agents upon that person’s petition provided that it is prepared and signed in conformity

with the rules and orders of the House, and the member in charge of the Bill shall be entitled to be heard through counsel or agents in favour of the Bill against that petition;

(g) the Committee shall require any hearing in relation to a petition mentioned in sub-paragraph (f) above to take place in person, unless exceptional circumstances apply;

(h) in applying the rules of the House in relation to parliamentary agents, any reference to a petitioner in person shall be treated as including a reference to a duly authorised member or officer of an organisation, group or body;

(i) the Committee shall have power to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House and to report from day to day minutes of evidence taken before it;

(j) three shall be the quorum of the Committee.

(4) If this paragraph applies, the Bill shall be deemed to have been reported from the Select Committee and to have been re-committed to a Public Bill Committee.

(5) If this paragraph applies—

(a) the Bill shall be deemed to have been reported from the Select Committee and from the Public Bill Committee, and

(b) the Bill shall be set down as an order of the day for consideration.

(6) If this paragraph applies—

(a) the Bill shall be deemed to have been reported from the Select Committee and from the Public Bill Committee and to have been considered, and

(b) the Bill shall be set down as an order of the day for third reading.

(7) If this paragraph applies, the Bill shall be deemed to have passed through all its stages in this House.

Other

(8) In paragraph (3) above, references to the submission of a petition are to its submission electronically, by post or in person.

That these Orders be Standing Orders of the House.—(*Felicity Buchan.*)

POSITIONS FOR WHICH ADDITIONAL SALARIES ARE PAYABLE FOR THE PURPOSES OF SECTION 4A(2) OF THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS ACT 2009

Ordered,

That the Order of the House of 19 March 2013 (Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009) be amended, in paragraph (1)(a), by inserting, in the appropriate place, “the Select Committee on the Holocaust Memorial Bill”.—(*Felicity Buchan.*)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

CAPITAL GAINS TAX

That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Brazil) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 22 May, be approved.

That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (San Marino) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 22 May, be approved.—(*Ruth Edwards.*)

Question agreed to.

Proxy Voting

[Relevant documents: Third Report of the Procedure Committee, Proxy voting: Review of illness and injury pilot, HC 807, and the Government response, HC 1325; Correspondence from the Procedure Committee to the Leader of the House, on the proxy voting: review of illness and injury pilot, reported to the House on 7 June 2023.]

6.13 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):

I beg to move,

That—

(1) this House

(a) notes the Third Report from the Procedure Committee, on Proxy voting: Review of illness and injury pilot (HC 807), and, subject to paragraph (2) of this motion, approves the recommendations relating to extending the scheme on an ongoing basis and absences from the parliamentary estate in paragraphs 6, 7, 18 and 19 of that Report.

(b) endorses the proposals relating to the evidence required to obtain a proxy vote and the duration of such a vote set out in the letter dated 8 June from the Procedure Committee to the Leader of the House relating to arrangements for proxy voting for Members with a serious long-term illness or injury, and directs the Speaker to amend the scheme governing the operation of proxy voting in accordance with those proposals with effect from 11 September.

(2) the amendment to Standing Order No. 39A (Voting by proxy) made by the Orders of 12 October 2022 (Voting by proxy (amendment and extension)) and 26 April 2023 (Voting by proxy (extension of pilot arrangements)) shall have effect for the duration of the present Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Order. Will those leaving please do so quietly so that we can hear the Leader of the House?

Penny Mordaunt: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Following a successful pilot scheme and considered review by the Procedure Committee, the House is asked to approve a change to the Standing Orders to extend proxy voting to Members suffering long-term illness or injury until the end of this Parliament. The House is also asked to endorse further recommendations from the Procedure Committee to ensure that appropriate and suitably robust arrangements are put in place for Members who wish to apply for a proxy vote. It recommends that Members who avail themselves of the proxy voting system for reasons of long-term illness or injury must provide a certificate from a hospital consultant, and that any such proxy vote can be held for a maximum duration of seven months, with the possibility of further extension if recommended by both the consultant and the parliamentary health and wellbeing service. To give time for Mr Speaker to amend the scheme and for any affected Members to gather the necessary paperwork, the changes—if agreed—will take effect from 11 September.

The Government want to support a more inclusive culture and working environment in Parliament, and welcome the Procedure Committee's conclusion that the pilot has been a success. I am grateful to all Committee members and its Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), for all their work on this issue. In changing the procedures of this House, we must maintain the transparency of the voting process and ensure that the electorate can hold Members to account for the performance of

their parliamentary duties. I believe that the scheme, as amended, satisfies those priorities while providing sensible accommodations for Members, enabling them to discharge their responsibilities when prevented from doing so for reasons of long-term illness or injury.

Changes to the rules governing this House must be introduced with care. Extending the scheme to the end of this Parliament, rather than in perpetuity, will allow the House to consider and monitor its operation and consider any changes. I hope that the measures carry the support of Members. I thank colleagues for all the work done on the scheme, and I commend the motion to the House.

6.16 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for bringing forward this important motion. I join her in thanking the Chair of the Procedure Committee, her colleagues and the Committee staff for all of their hard work on proxy voting over many months. They have handled the issue sensitively and thoroughly.

I support the motion before us in the name of the Leader of the House. I have spoken before about the importance of Members being able to fulfil their core duty to vote on behalf of the people they represent even if they have a serious long-term condition or injury that prevents them from coming to the estate. It is right that colleagues who are suffering are able to recover properly in their own home. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), who is not in her place today, who has done so much to champion this cause.

It is right that we make this change for colleagues who might otherwise have dragged themselves into Parliament—as we have all known someone do—when it was probably unwise, or who have stayed at home because they had to and felt terrible about it. The process that we are debating aims to fix that. The Committee's report notes that the pilot scheme, which extended the eligibility for proxy voting, has enabled several Members to vote who would otherwise have been unable to do so. I am glad that they were able to continue representing their constituents in that way. It is welcome progress, and I support the extension of the scheme.

The Committee has carefully considered the principle of absence from the estate in eligibility for a proxy vote. That has been an essential element of the rationale for proxy voting in general since its introduction in 2019. There has been some deliberation on removing that principle from the Standing Orders. The intention is that Members who are well enough to come in and participate in some of the day's parliamentary proceedings can do so, and will not then be ineligible for a proxy vote if they cannot stay until a late vote or are not physically well enough to participate in a busy voting Lobby.

The Committee has issued welcome clarification stating that it should not become commonplace, and I agree. It has provided a helpful example of an MP who may be well enough to come in for an urgent question of particular relevance to their constituency, but then needs to go home. It seems that the Committee has worked through the issue and struck the right balance.

[Thangam Debbonaire]

I wish to put it on the record that, for some, proxy voting is not suitable, and there are other ways of managing absence. I was reassured to see that there are no proposed changes to the mechanisms that exist as political arrangements between the Whips' Offices. That also covers concerns about privacy that some have raised. That is important. Where they wish to do so, Members should—and under the proposed arrangement, still can—choose a more discreet pairing option or be nodded through. I can attest to the value of that option, as I used it in my first year here when I had a serious illness, and I am glad that it remains.

Parliament ought to be a model workplace, at the forefront of rights at work and accessibility, but it is also, crucially and exclusively, the centre of our democracy and a representation of that principle. I believe that the motion strikes the right balance between those principles and the unique requirements of an MP. It is proportionate and welcome, and I am glad to support it today.

6.20 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I am of the view that what cannot be said in five minutes is probably is not worth saying at all, so I will be brief, but it is incumbent on me to speak on behalf of the Chair of the Procedure Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), for whom I have the highest admiration, having been a member of her Committee since entering Parliament three and half years ago.

We know that proxy voting is a formal arrangement that allows Members who are absent on baby leave to have another Member register a vote on their behalf, but there have been repeated calls to review the process, and rightly so. Following the Procedure Committee report on the extension of eligibility for proxy voting to include serious long-term illness and injury, the House agreed to a pilot scheme, which ran earlier this year. It was successful, and the Committee was directed to review the operation of the pilot and make a report, which we have done. Since then, as we know, the Government have tabled the motion to give effect to some of the recommendations made by the Committee in its report and in its subsequent letter to the Leader of the House in June.

If I can, I will make the key proposals completely clear. First, the Procedure Committee recommended that the House extend eligibility for proxy voting to include serious long-term illness and injury on an ongoing basis. If passed, this motion will have effect until the end of this Parliament, but it is subject to wider review.

The new arrangements will require a note from a hospital consultant, rather than a GP. That is because we think that resetting the expectation at a level where a Member has required hospital care or is under the care of a consultant is about right. Occupational health will now play a role in the initial review of notes provided, seeking further information if necessary. That is important because Mr Speaker is ultimately responsible for making the call, and he needs assurance from a professional body to do that. A proxy vote for illness or injury will be allowed for a maximum of seven months, although it can be extended in certain circumstances and certification will remain with the Speaker.

I think what we are discussing today is reasonably clear, and I am happy to support the motion. The pilot has been useful and I am pleased to have been part of it as a member of the Procedure Committee. In recent months, Members have been able to exercise their vote when they might not otherwise have had the opportunity to do so, so it is a positive thing.

The proposals bring this place into line with human resources arrangements in other locations. We are a modern employer; we have to be a modern employer and we have to befit the role a modern employer plays. The proposals also allow discretion and privacy, which are important. The ability to register a proxy vote enables those who have a good medical reason not to come on to the estate to maintain their privacy and keep that reason from becoming more widely known. This is about doing the right thing as a good employer, and of course it is subject to review.

6.23 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for moving the motion this evening. We in the SNP support the recommendations made in the Procedure Committee's report and in its subsequent letter to the Leader of the House. We thank the members of the Committee for their efforts.

Proxy voting works. We saw that with the measures put in place during the pandemic and with the current pilot for Members suffering from injury or long-term ill health. It has enabled several Members to fulfil their responsibility to vote in Divisions when they would otherwise have been unable to do so.

I, too, pay special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), and I thank the shadow Leader of the House for her acknowledgement of my hon. Friend's efforts. She has been a trailblazer on this issue in many ways, bravely and eloquently drawing on her own very challenging experiences of serious illness to advocate for these reforms and for many other necessary improvements to accessibility in this place.

Proxy voting is a simple, common-sense and reasonable adjustment that allows Members to fulfil their obligations to their constituents without putting their health at risk. It is about ensuring equality and inclusivity for elected Members, and enabling them to do their jobs. The introduction of this reform on a permanent basis is long overdue, but very welcome.

6.24 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for moving the motion and for accepting the recommendations of the Procedure Committee, of which I am pleased to be a member.

The idea of extending proxy voting further was not entirely without controversy. Some people were very concerned about it—understandably, given that we are meant to be a Parliament where people gather and exchange views, and our voting system is designed to ensure that Members vote in person rather than via a proxy. Our task was to consider whether we should allow a proxy vote for Members who were suffering from a long-term illness or a serious injury; it was not to take into account those who had a short-term illness or were

travelling on parliamentary business, or who felt that this was an adaptation they needed in the long term for career reasons.

I think it fair to say that the trial was a success, but I also think there was evidence that some people were securing proxies in circumstances that were not envisaged in the creation of a scheme for those with serious long-term illnesses. We had always intended this to be a temporary measure allowing those who could not attend Parliament because they were too ill to have their voices heard at least in the voting Lobbies. The expectation was that at some point, they would come back and vote in the normal way. Personally, I would be sympathetic to allowing a proxy vote as a long-term adaptation for someone who was not fit to be here for the whole day, which I think is reasonable, but that is not what the Committee was tasked to do, and it would have to be the subject of further work if the House so wished.

There are some tweaks in the report. The requirement to produce a letter from any medical professional has been changed to a requirement to produce a letter from a consultant, to emphasise our expectation that a proxy vote would be used in the event of a serious illness probably involving hospital care. There is now the expectation of a seven-month time limit, intended to be in line with the arrangements for statutory sick pay, so we are not trying to make arrangements for Members that are different from those in the real world. This is meant to be a temporary situation from which Members will eventually emerge. The insertion of the reference to an occupational health review was an attempt to help Mr Speaker, with his discretion, to work out whether an application was actually related to a serious long-term illness.

If Members want the scheme to be a success and to be a permanent feature, I urge them not to apply for it on the grounds of a short-term illness or to extend maternity leave. They should not be speaking regularly in the Chamber and voting by proxy unless there is a very exceptional circumstance. They should not be at drinks dos on the parliamentary estate and voting by proxy. That is not what the scheme is intended for. It is intended for Members who are too ill to be here.

We considered whether there could be a very prescriptive scheme, with a list of conditions that were serious enough to be covered, but we worked out pretty quickly that we would probably be coming back here every few weeks to add a new condition that we had missed, which would leave Mr Speaker far too fettered in his discretion. We also accepted the persuasive evidence we heard that a Member in the final stages of recovery from an illness might be able to come back to work part time but might not be able to be here for a long night of voting into the early hours, and that there was clearly merit in the Speaker's having discretion to enable the Member to speak in the Chamber without having to be here for hours when they were not fit to be.

The shadow Leader of the House talked about the principle of a proxy vote being available only to those who are generally not on the parliamentary estate, but, as she noted, we did not include that as an absolute rule. If there is an emergency in a Member's constituency, the Member may want to break their leave and speak about it, but generally Members will be absent and will not be here for the whole day, or the whole week, or the

whole month. That is the balance we were trying to strike. We were trying to find a way to enable Mr Speaker to use his discretion to ensure that the scheme was not being abused, and to ensure that, generally, Members who are fit to be here should be voting in person, while those who are not fit to be here can vote by proxy. That is what we were trying to achieve, and I urge Members who make applications to stick to the spirit of it. I suspect we will have another review by the end of the Parliament so that we can see whether proxy voting should become a permanent fixture after the next election. I certainly hope that when we get the next review, we will see that the people who are using proxy voting have been sticking to the spirit and the intention of it, and that that will enable it to become a permanent feature.

6.29 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I very much support the motion and, as a member of the Procedure Committee, have been involved in some of the discussions of it.

One of the most important elements is that the amendment to the Standing Order is made only for the duration of this Parliament. My concern, which I expressed during the Committee's discussions, is that it is fine when we have a Government with a large working majority—people will not be too fussed about issues such as whether somebody with a medical condition who is on the estate is also able to have a proxy vote—but if, after the next general election, the balance between the Government and the Opposition were much closer, or there were even a hung Parliament, I can see that difficulties might arise and the Members of the new Parliament might want more rigour written into the Standing Order than I think there is in the current version.

That is why it is important that the amendment is made only for the duration of this Parliament. I hope that, during the rest of this Parliament, there will be an attempt on both sides of the House to see whether we can introduce some rigour and consistency into the way in which people with medical conditions can access proxies and the circumstances in which they cannot.

The motion is also valuable because, by inference, it excludes any suggestion that people who are temporarily suspended from the House for conduct unbecoming should be able to creep back in through the proxy voting system. People who are absent from the House because of their own conduct, which is nothing to do with health or baby leave, should under no circumstances be able to exercise a proxy vote. The motion does not facilitate that; I think, by inference, it excludes it. As I said in an earlier debate, if we allow people who are excluded from the estate because of conduct unbecoming to have proxy votes, that will contaminate the whole process. I am grateful to the Leader of the House for not contaminating this amendment to the Standing Order.

6.32 pm

Penny Mordaunt: I again thank the Procedure Committee and all right hon. and hon. Members who have worked with it to produce the proxy voting scheme. I hope that Members will support the motion. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

House of Commons Commission (External Member)

[Relevant document: House of Commons Commission, External members of the House of Commons Commission: nomination of candidate, HC 1377.]

6.33 pm

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

That, in pursuance of section 1(2B) of the House of Commons (Administration) Act 1978, as amended, Catherine Ward be appointed to the House of Commons Commission for a period of 18 months with immediate effect.

I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in thanking Louise Wilson, who served as an external member on the House of Commons Commission from June 2021 to November 2022. I wish her well in the future.

The Commission recommends that the House appoint Catherine Ward as an external member for an initial period of 18 months, with the possibility to extend for a further two years. I hope that the House will agree to her appointment today. I commend the motion to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Leader of the House.

6.33 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I rise briefly to support the motion. As the overall supervisory body of the House of Commons administration, the House of Commons Commission's agenda is jam-packed. It really does matter that we get these appointments right, and I believe that we have really got it right with Catherine's appointment.

We have a great deal of duties. We have been working hard on the introduction of a complex process to increase the safety of those on the estate, including risk-based exclusion. We have commissioned a review of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme. We have important work to do, not just for how this place works but for how the public view us.

Given the importance of their work, it is important that external members of the House of Commons Commission are well tested, carefully selected and able to bring extensive relevant experience to the Commission, and I can confirm that that is the case with this appointment. I was part of the thorough and fair recruitment process, which was led by a strong panel. Catherine was found to be the best candidate, with an effective mix of skills and knowledge that is correct for the Commission's work. With experience of being a non-executive director and a background in people management roles at board level, we believe she will bring a diverse range and depth of experience. I look forward to warmly welcoming Catherine as an external member of the House of Commons Commission.

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

6.35 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I offer my congratulations to Catherine Ward on her appointment, assuming she is confirmed tonight. I warmly welcome her to the role as an external member of the House of Commons Commission. Her career background is tremendously impressive, with experience in the creative, education and healthcare sectors, among others. She has a wealth of knowledge and expertise acquired from a diverse range of roles, so I am confident she will bring a unique perspective to the Commission. She also brings intimate knowledge of this place from her role as a non-executive director of human resources policy and the strategic support group at the House of Commons, and I am sure the other commissioners are looking forward to working with her.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 9(6)),

That the following amendment to Standing Order No. 10 (Sittings in Westminster Hall) be made: in paragraph (2)(b), leave out "be between 9.30am and 2.30pm" and insert "begin at 11.30am, be suspended from 1.30pm till 4.30pm and may then continue for up to a further three hours".—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

Question agreed to.

STANDING ORDERS ETC. (INDEPENDENT EXPERT PANEL)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 9(6)),

That—

(1) Standing Order No. 150A (Independent Expert Panel) be amended as follows:

- (a) In paragraph (1), insert "and Chair" after "members";
- (b) in paragraph (2), leave out "eight" and insert "its Chair and seven other"; and
- (c) in paragraph (4), leave out "The Panel may elect its own Chair." and insert "If the position of Chair of the Panel becomes vacant, the Panel may elect an interim Chair for the period of vacancy, who shall be entitled to exercise all powers vested in a Chair appointed in accordance with paragraph (1) of this Order.";

(2) Standing Order No. 150C (Appointment of Independent Expert Panel Members) be amended as follows:

- (a) In the title, leave out "Members" and insert "Chair and members";
- (b) in paragraph (1), leave out "Members of the Independent Expert Panel shall be appointed by a resolution of the House on a motion" and insert "The members of the Independent Expert Panel shall be appointed by resolutions of the House on motions";
- (c) at the end of paragraph (5), insert "A member of the panel may apply to be appointed to the position of Chair for the remainder of their original period of appointment."; and
- (d) after paragraph (7), insert new paragraph as follows:

"() In this Order, the term "member" includes the Chair of the Panel, and provisions relating to period of appointment apply to the total length of service on the Panel in any capacity."—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

Question agreed to.

New Covid Variants: Government Preparedness

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Fay Jones.)

6.36 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I rise to address this Government's preparedness for new covid-19 variants and other biological threats. Based on past experience, it is fair to say I am yet to be convinced that this Government are making the necessary progress in this regard. I will first address the Government's culture before moving on to extant concerns specific to pandemic preparedness.

Hindsight is of value only if we are prepared to use the lessons it reveals to ensure that the same mistakes or misjudgments are not repeated. When it comes to calamity and loss, vindication brings only a bitter taste, not solace or comfort. For those of us in this place, and beyond, who voiced genuinely held concerns about the UK Government's response to the pandemic, yesterday's evidence to the covid inquiry from the former Health Secretary is unlikely to elicit any sense of *schadenfreude*—just a deep sense of despair and sadness.

The former Health Secretary's testimony does not reflect well on those experts who allegedly gave him deeply flawed advice but, ultimately, he accepted that he alone carried ministerial responsibility for the "calamitous state of affairs" not only in his Department but in the agencies that reported to him, as Secretary of State. In short, he admitted that, when courage called, he failed to execute the responsibilities of his office. He is, of course, correct, but his apology rings hollow and does nothing to ameliorate the damage caused.

My abiding memory of the pandemic is the former Health Secretary's all-too-frequent glib responses from the Dispatch Box to questions intended to be helpful and constructive. I could devote further commentary to his shocking testimony, but I suggest that might be better served by a Privileges Committee inquiry or other serious investigation.

The shutting down of dissenting voices was all too commonplace, and not just in this place. Innova, the beneficiary of lucrative lateral flow test contracts, put pressure on *The Scotsman* for daring to publish my valid criticism of the reliability of its tests. Despite scrupulously evidencing my assertions, with the support of esteemed academics, the editorial team could not withstand the very deep pockets that Innova had, on the back of billions of pounds of public money spent on its devices.

In addition, pressure was applied to academic and clinical staff who raised concerns about the adequacy of the UK Government's pandemic response. Although I readily give my thanks to those staff for their ongoing encouragement and support, I am unable to name them, such is my concern that we are not yet out of the woods in terms of truth and reconciliation on these matters. That such a culture was allowed to flourish at a time of grave emergency is detestable.

Although it is clear that the UK Government must change, I see few earnest attempts to do so. I have asked too many questions on these matters to count, and I have led and contributed to multiple debates in this

Chamber and in Westminster Hall, but much of that was for naught. Concerns went ignored and commitments were readily discarded, even by those few souls who maintained a position during the ministerial churn from Prime Minister to Prime Minister to Prime Minister. This may seem tangential to the matter at hand, but Government culture is central to organisational learning for future preparedness. In its basic form, the management of any infection is not rocket science, but each strand is necessarily interdependent and must be rigorous in both design and application. The continued failure to understand that fundamental relationship will fatally undermine any strategic future planning.

In essence, robust surveillance and detection should lead to prompt isolation of the threat, followed by the administration of safe and effective treatments, and supported measures, with further screening and surveillance repeated until the threat is managed. Get any step of that process wrong and the risk quickly spirals out of control. Relying on detection and isolation alone will not work. As we know only too well, an over-reliance on vaccination in the absence of robust surveillance is, similarly, a fool's errand.

A recent briefing from the House of Commons Library set out the ambitions of the UK Health Security Agency and its Centre for Pandemic Preparedness. The CPP aims to ensure the UK's future pandemic responses are effective and efficient, and that they reduce the negative impacts of health threats. The CCP aims to become the world-leading hub for all aspects of pandemic preparedness. In addition, the briefing notes that the HSA is working in partnership with the United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention to turbocharge efforts to combat global pandemics and emerging health threats. Those are grand claims, grandiose perhaps, but the question remains: what does this mean in the practice of disease management and control?

In my Adjournment debate on the UK diagnostics industry in May last year, I voiced my concerns about the UK's lack of preparedness for a future pandemic strategy, whereas economies the world over were developing 10-year strategies for the same. I applaud the efforts of the HSA in conceptualising a detailed report and a tentative timeline to execute a 10-year science strategy. It emphasises transforming surveillance through genomic identification and characterisation of new covid-19 variants, and promoting the use of innovative diagnostics, which are promising steps in the direction I indicated last year.

However, there are still clamant concerns to be addressed on the implementation of this plan and the efficacy of the HSA as an institution to deliver on those ambitions. First, the partnerships section on page 31 of the strategy report that a

"10-year strategic collaboration with Moderna will ensure we are better prepared against future pandemic threats, including through an onshore mRNA Innovation and Technology Centre."

What is the basis of this "focused partnership" between the HSA and this single specific pharmaceutical company and a single specific vaccine technology? Recalling the Valneva vaccine production debacle and the adverse impact it had on the Scottish based company, may I ask what the rationale is behind such a partnership, as opposed to a more diffuse and cost-effective approach?

During a Westminster Hall debate in January 2022 I raised concerns about the UK Government's overemphasis on vaccination as the sole plank of their policy, noting

[Neale Hanvey]

that even with the vaccine success delivered by Dame Kate Bingham, they had placed all their eggs in the mRNA basket. That was, and still is, short-sighted. The Valneva vaccine was the only adjuvanted, inactivated, whole-virus vaccine technology, yet the UK Government pulled the contract just before the phase 3 results were published. They demonstrated that the vaccine was highly effective and safe. That makes it abundantly clear that Scotland does have the potential to lead the way for the world in the domain of innovation and vaccine strategy for pandemic preparedness, yet we are continually and systematically impeded by the UK Government in that ambition.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his persistence in trying to hold the Government to account on this subject. He refers to the culture, particularly in the Department of Health and Social Care, of keeping things to themselves, playing cards close to their chest, not having regulatory impact assessments and, in effect, as he says, imposing good ideas on the basis of heroic assumptions that are not being tested. May I encourage him to carry on his good work?

Neale Hanvey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind intervention and warm words. I take them in good grace. He makes an important point. Assertions were made throughout the pandemic that things were one way and, despite interrogation, any understanding that they could not possibly be that way was continually denied. That was very frustrating, and I thank him for his encouragement.

In November 2021, Dame Kate Bingham called the decision to cancel the Valneva contract “inexplicable”. Do the UK Government still not get that? Why are they still not listening to the one person who came through the pandemic with their reputation enhanced, because she did the job she was tasked to do and did it well?

The British Society for Immunology has told me that it supports the use of all vaccine technologies where they have proved safe and effective in clinical trials, stating that a broad portfolio of vaccines is important as we move forward in providing protection against future variants. It also notes that mRNA vaccines were deployed first as they were the first vaccines to be approved. However, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency has since approved the use of eight different covid-19 vaccines that utilise a variety of technologies, including mRNA, viral vector, whole virus and protein-based platforms. What is the Government’s strategy to harness the power of all technologies, considering their intended partnership with Moderna?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward the debate. Like the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), I understand exactly what he is trying to achieve. Lessons need to be learned. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that planning must be key to ensuring that our country can continue, Government can respond, our surgeons can operate and our teachers can teach? Should, God forbid, another pandemic emerge, we need to ensure we are better prepared and ready to do better.

Neale Hanvey: I thank the hon. Gentleman. In essence, we cannot unspill the milk. The milk was spilled and there were problems. We have to make sure that that does not happen again and that we learn from the process that led to such tragedy. We must make sure that we have not just a better approach, but the correct systems in place to ensure ongoing safety.

The BSI also emphasises a clear and urgent need for second and third-generation covid-19 vaccines, including a universal vaccine, a mucosal vaccine and vaccines that induce longer-lasting protection and immunity.

Furthermore, given that the “Innovation in diagnostics” part of the UKSHA science strategy specifically mentions “research and development of new diagnostic technologies and innovative platforms”,

that begs the question of how closely corporate entities, such as Moderna, will be involved in directing the process. Will the Minister write to me, setting out in plain detail how such a strategy will harness the expertise of the domestic diagnostic sector, through organisations such as the British In Vitro Diagnostics Association?

During the pandemic, the UK Government stood accused of undermining the domestic diagnostic sector, driving some companies under with empty promises of orders, while innovative artificial intelligence technologies such as the Caledonia AI blood test and the Novacyt AI saliva test were sidelined. Both technologies can be adapted to screen for covid and other emerging threats, such as Ebola and dengue fever. Uploading profile information to AI would allow new, instantaneous border screening for new threats.

While the 100 days mission to respond to future pandemic threats may seem ambitious, the reality is that there are around 1.5 million people airborne at any one time, so the case for rapid deployment of accurate diagnostic screening could not be clearer. Almost everyone has a smartphone, and dongle-based AI testing could be deployed internationally at the stroke of a key.

Following my last Adjournment debate, I was given a commitment by the Minister in the then Department for Business, Energy and Industry Strategy to jointly host a UK industry roundtable. Sadly, despite my persistence, that commitment was not kept. If we lose this intellectual capability and capacity through Government inaction, that would be a further betrayal of the domestic diagnostic sector. What are the Government doing to secure and develop these technologies now, and will the Minister commit to meet me to consider a way forward?

Secondly, the timeline for the science strategy stipulates the creation of a vaccine development and evaluation centre by bringing together the UKHSA’s laboratory-based activity expertise and leadership in vaccine discovery, development and education. What is the need for the creation of yet another organisation, and what mechanism of funding and accountability does the Minister envisage for this body? Furthermore, how will this body ethically accommodate the corporate priorities of Moderna?

I am especially concerned about sustainability. In April last year, the UKHSA itself was stripped of funding as part of the living with covid strategy, putting the jobs of 40% of its workforce at risk. Yesterday, in a media interview, Cambridge virologist Dr Chris Smith warned that there is a risk that we lose focus and deprioritise funding and planning for biological threats. He argued for nimble, well-equipped public health systems

in preference to top-down control. For grand strategic commitments to mean anything, funding and resources must find their way to the public health frontline. Can the Minister set out the plan and address how this new body will be insulated from political tumult and spin?

Thirdly, I remain uneasy with the undercurrent of institutional inefficacy from the days of Public Health England through to the UKHSA and the institutional vacuum in which emergencies are handled reactively by bodies such as the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies and Cobra. Module 1 of the current covid inquiry is a testimony to this continued trend. How does the Minister envisage the bolstering of these institutions in the face of future pandemics and, crucially, how will these institutions and partnerships be shielded from the perfidious private profiteering and VIP lanes that so compromised the UK Government throughout the pandemic?

Finally, there is another challenge at hand, which every single Member of this House will know from their inbox. It may be uncomfortable, but deal with it we must. The pandemic has driven a spike in online disinformation and misinformation, with social media the biggest source of false or misleading information about vaccines. However, we must ask, in light of the false reassurances admitted to yesterday by the former Health Secretary, whether silencing expert clinical voices is a solution to genuine concerns about the safety of novel therapeutic technologies. In my view, this challenge must be met with evidenced scientific argument and rigour, or we risk perpetuating the belief that something sinister is at hand.

My professional experience of managing cancer clinical trials and drug development teams is instructive: we need to take every reported adverse reaction seriously. That is the bedrock of developing and deploying safe therapeutic agents. There is also an opportunity to analyse outcomes on the back of the mass vaccination through a national clinical evaluation. Efforts must now be made to examine the vaccinated population and assess the efficacy and safety of the programme. That is quite normal.

Is vaccine injury possible? Of course it is. Injury is possible from exposure to any agent. The proposed mode of insult with mRNA—a systemic inflammatory response—is not a new phenomenon. There are established prophylactic protocols to manage such responses, but their efficacy must be tested. Pretending otherwise betrays the guiding words of Hippocrates—“first do no harm”. Systems for healthcare professionals and coroners to report suspected adverse drug reactions directly to MHRA already exist with the yellow card scheme, and they are very well established and used. Holding firm to principles of diligently reporting risk, minimising harm and ensuring ethical treatment do not indulge any conspiracy theory. They are fundamental to good clinical practice.

Members will also have received emails from constituents on the proposed role of the WHO international health regulations in co-ordinating future global pandemic responses. As I understand it, that proposal has now been modified to be non-binding on signatory states as a result of concerns over loss of local control and sovereignty. Yet it is of note that yesterday, the former Health Secretary attributed to the WHO the misguided advice he received. That deserves proper scrutiny. The response of Government should not be to mock, silence

or ridicule Members who raise those concerns on behalf of constituents. The only way to address them is through proper clinical evaluation and absolute transparency.

Before I conclude, I want to raise some further points of challenge from the British Society for Immunology. The fact that media attention has drifted from covid-19 does not mean it is no longer a significant issue. The rolling seven-day average of deaths sits at around 30 to 100 per day over the last three months. Despite that backdrop, very few people are testing for infection. Limited testing means that strains can circulate in an unrestricted manner. The more the virus circulates, the more opportunities there will be for the evolution of variants of concern.

In the absence of regular widespread testing, it is even more important for waste water surveillance to be maintained at a relatively high level, to act as an early warning system for new variants of concern. According to the BSI, Government must prioritise the development of next-generation vaccines and long-term immune monitoring to determine how long effective immunity lasts in the vaccinated population, scale up testing capacity to ensure that previous failure is not replicated, introduce asymptomatic testing in the NHS alongside testing of patients and ensure that NHS laboratories have plans in place for infection surges of all respiratory viruses.

Therapeutic options are currently very limited, especially in groups that respond poorly to vaccination, while access to antivirals and monoclonal antibody therapies remains patchy across the UK and there is currently no recommended treatment strategy for persistent covid-19. Integrated care boards have yet to announce what will happen when the covid medicines delivery units are retired, and clarity is urgently needed so that clinicians can communicate plans properly to affected patient groups.

The delayed effects of covid are complex and difficult to quantify, but at present there is no long-term management plan for long covid. All those challenges must be met. There is no argument in support of the “pick and mix” approach of the former Health Secretary. If we do not capitalise on hindsight, we are damned to repeat the mistakes of the past.

6.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I thank the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) for securing this debate and raising this important issue. It is correct that the Government are held to account on future pandemic preparedness and lessons learned from covid.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that pandemic preparedness is a devolved matter and Scotland, like all parts of the United Kingdom, faced huge pressures. I understand that the former Scottish Health Minister has been giving evidence today and has also pointed that out, saying that

“Scotland, like other countries throughout the world, was dealing with a virus which was unknown and new.”

She also said she did not believe that

“there is a plan that would have been possible that would have been able, in and of itself, to cope with covid-19.”

[Maria Caulfield]

That sets out how all four nations of the United Kingdom were learning about covid. With hindsight, it is very easy to look back and make recommendations, and we must learn from those. I look with interest to the results of the covid inquiry to make sure that we are as prepared as possible for any future pandemics, whether of covid or any other disease.

For most people, covid-19 is now a much less serious risk than it was three years ago, and that is in no small part because of the UK's world-leading vaccination programme. We were the first country in the world to administer an approved vaccine and the first European nation to protect half our population with at least one dose. That success continues, with vaccines and boosters still on offer to eligible groups, and we take recommendations on when to roll out booster programmes and who to vaccinate from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

Antivirals provide a further layer of protection for those who are immunocompromised, enabling us to effectively treat eligible people with covid-19. All those successes have come to protect us against the virus and allowed us to live with covid-19 and regain many of the freedoms that we lost during the pandemic.

We have scaled back our covid-19 response because of that reduced risk, but that does not mean that the response is not there. It is scaled back, but it is ready to be stepped up should we need it, focusing on testing, diagnosing, treating and protecting those at greater risk of severe illness. We are keeping vigilant at all times. I work closely with the UK Health Security Agency, which is the organisation that leads on pandemic preparedness. We take its advice extremely seriously.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Fay Jones.)

Maria Caulfield: We know that the virus has the potential to evolve with new covid-19 variants that may evade immunity and the vaccinations that we have in place. We also know that we could face new pathogens with pandemic potential, so we remain vigilant at all times not just in the United Kingdom but with our global partners.

It is imperative that we retain the ability to detect and identify any new covid-19 variants as well as wider threats. The House will be aware that the community infection survey ended in March. It was commissioned by UKHSA as part of a suite of covid-19 surveillance programmes and delivered by the Office for National Statistics. The survey was world-leading, playing a critical role in enabling decision making during the pandemic. However, it is right to ensure that that surveillance programme remains proportionate, cost-effective and commensurate with how we monitor a range of other infectious diseases that pose a similar risk to public health. That is why we have scaled it back, but again, should we need to, we can step it up.

That does not mean that we are not taking any action going forward. We are maintaining surveillance for covid-19 and respiratory pathogens through a number

of programmes. Those programmes will enable the evaluation and effectiveness of vaccination against a range of clinical outcomes, informing vaccine deployment and appropriate disease management. Our surveillance programmes are underpinned by the continuation of genomic sequencing to determine and assess variant severity and vaccine effectiveness.

A range of vaccines are still available, which clearly we monitor on an ongoing basis. mRNA vaccines are one part of our toolkit, but others are still available. That is why continued surveillance is important, but it is proportionate that it has been reduced since the peak of the pandemic. UKHSA continues to sequence covid samples each week, so should a variant of concern emerge, we would identify it relatively quickly. It publishes the results of that sequencing and surveillance in the national influenza and covid surveillance report.

Obviously, covid-19 is a global risk, so as well as looking at what is happening in the UK, we continue to support international surveillance, and we work closely in partnership with other organisations and international partners to monitor covid-19 globally. The Government continue to fund new variant assessment platforms, increasing the capacity to provide genomic sequencing in nine countries and establishing the International Pathogen Surveillance Network. That will enable us to be alive to the risks of covid-19 elsewhere in the world. I am sure that hon. Members will recognise the importance of that work and agree that it is vital to continue it to understand and respond to dangerous new variants should they emerge.

If a variant of concern with potential immune evasion is detected, the Government have proportionate contingency response capabilities in place, a range of which are set out. Those capabilities will support an initial response to any new and dangerous variant of concern. The Department for Health and Social Care and UKHSA continue to work together to ensure that appropriate commercial mechanisms are in place to support a longer response to covid-19, whether through testing or vaccination.

I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman that vaccination is the only tool in our armoury. Our surveillance is our key weapon in identifying a new variant of concern. We still have testing capability should we need it, and of course, our vaccination programmes are nimble and can respond to any new variant should it emerge.

Neale Hanvey: The Minister is giving an interesting response to the question about surveillance. What is the surveillance mechanism exactly? Can she take us through how the virus is being monitored in the wild? What practical steps are being taken? Is waste water being assessed? How is it being identified? What border controls are expected if there is a novel threat somewhere else in the world? How are we managing our borders and ensuring that the 1.5 million passengers in the air at any one time do not immediately bring a new threat right to our door?

Maria Caulfield: There are several ways, and I did try to set some of them out. As I said, UKHSA tests samples from covid-positive patients around the country every week and does genomic sequencing to identify new variants or variants of concern.

We are not currently doing international border checks, but we are working with international partners, so should a new variant emerge in another country, we can step up that capability. We introduced border controls on new arrivals a couple of months ago due to the risk of a new variant from China, but that was stepped down because testing showed that there was no risk to the general population. Waste water testing is also still available should it be required, so there is a range of testing capabilities to identify variants of concern and respond quite quickly.

Moving on to vaccines, we are developing mRNA capability, but not just in covid-19 vaccinations. That is one way of delivering covid vaccinations, but that capability is also being used for respiratory illnesses and cancer vaccination trials. There is the potential for that technology to be used in a range of vaccines, not just for covid-19. A range of different vaccines are available, and should a variant of concern or change of variant emerge, we will take advice from the JCVI as to which vaccine is best to use and which group of the population is best to vaccinate. That is an ongoing piece of work.

On some of the hon. Gentleman's other points, the covid inquiry is obviously ongoing. As the Minister responsible for pandemic preparedness, I am keen to learn the lessons about testing capability, PPE, and vulnerable groups that may need greater protection in future pandemics. But we also need to be live to the fact that a pathogen could emerge that is completely different from covid, flu, or avian flu, which we are also monitoring actively. We need to be nimble in our response to any future pandemic. My concern is that we may just look at covid as the only future threat, but that is absolutely not our policy; we are looking at a wide range of threats, both in the UK and abroad.

Sir Christopher Chope: The Minister referred to mRNA technology. Are the Government absolutely convinced that the technology is safe and effective? Are they in danger of putting all their eggs into that particular basket?

Maria Caulfield: We are certainly not putting all our eggs in the mRNA basket for covid, or for any other use of mRNA technology. Such vaccines must still pass the MHRA assessment in order to be licensed for use. As mRNA technology develops for other clinical conditions,

whether cancer or respiratory illnesses, those vaccines will also have to be awarded a licence by the MHRA. It is not the case that mRNA vaccines are given carte blanche because they have been used in covid; they will have to pass the necessary research hurdles to gain licences for future use. We are certainly not just relying on mRNA for covid—although it has been effective and the technology means that it can react to variants and be altered depending on the variant. We are using other vaccines for covid, and working with other partners. I reassure my hon. Friend on that.

I am very happy to continue updating Members on the progress that we are making and any future booster vaccination programmes for covid-19 that will be running, and to update the House on the work of UKHSA regarding monitoring, surveillance, and future testing capabilities.

Neale Hanvey: I thank the Minister for being a good sport and allowing me to intervene again. I did make a couple of requests in my contribution: I asked for some written feedback from the Minister, and whether she would be able to find time in her diary for a meeting to discuss some of the finer points. I would be very grateful if she would agree to that.

Maria Caulfield: I am very happy to meet up with the hon. Gentleman, and also to write to him regarding the specific points on which he asked for clarification. It is important that we give the public confidence that our vaccine portfolio is very diverse, guarding against both current variants and future variants. The contracts that we have in place with vaccine developers are flexible, so should the need arise, we have the ability to stand up vaccinations in a speedy manner. I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman and to meet with him, because in order to bust some of those myths that he has pointed out exist, it is important that we are open and transparent about the arrangements that are in place, the risks that we face, and the tools that we have in our arsenal to fight any future pandemic.

With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will draw my remarks to a close.

Question put and agreed to.

7.11 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

EDUCATION

That the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 (S.I., 2023, No. 602), dated 5 June 2023, a copy of which was laid before this House on 6 June, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 373, Noes 28.

Division No. 275]

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Antoniuzzi, Tonia
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Barker, Paula
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Betts, Mr Clive
Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Brennan, Kevin
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Browne, Anthony
Bryant, Sir Chris
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Rob
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carter, Andy
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William

Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, rh Alex
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Crosbie, Virginia
Cruddas, Jon
Cunningham, Alex
Daly, James
Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies-Jones, Alex
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Dixon, Samantha
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, Anneliese
Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Double, Steve
Dowd, Peter
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James
Dunne, rh Philip
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eastwood, Colum
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Jonathan
Edwards, Ruth
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellis, rh Sir Michael

Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Farry, Stephen
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Colleen
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Foord, Richard
Ford, rh Vicky
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glen, rh John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Andrew
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hammond, Stephen
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, rh Simon
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinds, rh Damian
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollern, Kate
Holmes, Paul
Hopkins, Rachel
Howarth, rh Sir George
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jarvis, Dan
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Kim

Johnston, David
Jones, Darren
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Jones, Ruth
Kane, Mike
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian
Keeley, Barbara
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kniveton, Kate
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Levy, Ian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Caroline
Mackrory, Cheryllyn
Maclean, Rachel
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Mak, Alan
Malhotra, Seema
Malthouse, rh Kit
Marson, Julie
Maskell, Rachael
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, rh Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miliband, rh Edward
Mills, Nigel
Mishra, Navendu
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy

Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Norris, Alex
 O'Brien, Neil
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opperman, Guy
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pollard, Luke
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Richards, Nicola
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean

Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Royston
 Smyth, Karin
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevens, Jo
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Tami, rh Mark

Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Throup, Maggie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trickett, Jon
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles

Webb, Suzanne
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williams, Hywel
 Winter, Beth
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Benton, Scott
 Blackman, Bob
 Bruce, Fiona
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cates, Miriam
 Davies, Philip
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Fletcher, Nick
 Girvan, Paul
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Grundy, James

Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Hughes, Eddie
 Kruger, Danny
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lockhart, Carla
 Longhi, Marco
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Millar, Robin
 Robinson, Gavin
 Shannon, Jim
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Wilson, rh Sammy

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 28 June 2023

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

Mortgage Prisoners

9.30 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered mortgage prisoners.

It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I want to begin this vital debate with something of a confession: like most Members, I did not know too much about mortgage prisoners until just a couple of weeks ago. While I understand that many here today will have been working away on the issue for a while and may be members of the all-party groups, I am still in a state of astonishment and, frankly, anger that the situation happened in the first place and has been perpetuated, I have to say, by successive British Governments.

While it may be convenient to lay these problems at the current tired Government's door—I hope the Minister will take that in the way it is meant—many of the disastrous decisions that brought this about took place under the previous Labour Government and have simply been rolled over in more than a decade of what seems like unbearable mental torture for those who are stuck in this predicament.

Let me thank my constituent Chris Dorman from Duntocher for allowing me to bring this issue before the House and for agreeing to share their story and that of their family so publicly. I am only sorry that in instances like this, we as MPs so often find it difficult to address historic injustices and can only highlight them and hope that the Government of the day will listen.

Before I tell Chris's story, I want to be clear at the outset about the questions to which I would like answers from the Minister. I think we now need to also ask the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), to consider them. Can we have a moratorium on evictions for mortgage prisoners? Can we put a cap on the standard variable rates being offered to victims? Will the Government—and, I hope, the official Opposition—pledge to set up a vehicle to work cross-party for those in closed-book prisons to pivot back into the mainstream market? Those are three fairly straightforward asks, to which the Minister can now take over an hour to find an answer; I may go on for some time. I know that those watching at home, including Chris and his family, will really appreciate an answer.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate, and as the founder and co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on mortgage prisoners I thank him for the work he is doing on the issue. The last Labour Government introduced a consultation to ensure that there was some protection for people when mortgages were sold on, and those measures were pulled away when the Conservatives came into power. Does he agree that we

need to go back to those considerations? I support what he said about the cap on SVRs—the APPG has been calling for a cap of 2% above the base rate.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. I will go on to the history of some of this. I hope that the APPG agrees not only about a cap on the standard variable rate, but about the other two issues I highlighted. I would be happy to work with the all-party group in future.

Let me turn to my constituent Chris Dorman. I have known Chris and his family over many years, especially his mum Rose, who was and remains to this day a legend in the history of my home town, Clydebank—a working-class history that is so seldom related or reflected in a place such as this. She was one of the founding members of the first credit union in Scotland, the Dalmeir Credit Union, helping countless families just like the one I grew up in. I was member 507; that takes me back some time.

That is relevant—and I hope the Minister will understand this—because we need to begin any discussion about mortgage prisoners with the firm rebuttal of any idea that these people are bad borrowers who are to blame for their own predicament. Chris comes from a family who know how mortgages work and how people should go about choosing a lender and a product that will not cause problems for them or their family in future scenarios. When he took out the mortgage with Northern Rock in 2003 to buy a flat, I do not doubt that he would have kicked the tyres of the agreement and known where to look for potential pitfalls. Of course, he would not have found any.

Northern Rock was a triple A lender, one of the largest lenders in the country and a fast-growing national presence that still had its roots in the north-east of England. I know about this because I got my first mortgage with Northern Rock at around the same time—and believe me, this is the point where I start to think, “There but for the grace of God go I.” I do not think it will be the last time in this debate when that is my overriding emotion.

In 2007, as Northern Rock crumbled in the bank run that heralded the next year's financial crash, Chris was forced on to an interest-only plan. Although for many people switching to an interest-only payment is a stopgap because of short-term financial circumstances, for people in Chris's position it has been the beginning of their problems. That entirely understandable decision has rendered them unable to change their lender, as many of us do these days, and move to a more attractive rate.

Instead, through the actions of the now nationalised Northern Rock, Chris was flung to the mercy of a standard variable rate that began to diverge significantly from the Bank of England's average SVR. The decision was quite deliberate. During a period when we were all dealing with the most significant global recession for decades, people like Chris were having to come to terms with that extra dollop of uncertainty. They probably did not know it at the time, but what would initially have felt like a short-term inconvenience was turning into an actual prison, even if there were already some organisations sounding the alarm.

Like so many, and some of our own constituents, Chris was forced to persist with an entirely inconvenient and increasingly costly arrangement and unable to switch

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

to a better deal, making a mockery of the idea of home ownership and the free market being liberating for individuals and families. Through the last decade he has been paying the 6% or 7% interest rates that many of us now complain of today.

This is where we begin to see a bit of the societal impact of the policy. The village of Duntocher, where Chris lives, is a fairly normal part of my constituency socioeconomically. It has poverty and wealth; it is not the wealthiest part of West Dunbartonshire. It is a community—it was an ancient Roman site and then a mill town that predates Clydebank itself—that has a lot of small locally owned businesses, which would have benefited from the thousands of pounds each year that Chris and his family were overpaying on their mortgage.

Let us not forget that for well over a decade the UK Government were the ultimate holders of that mortgage, through UK Asset Resolution. I can imagine myself thinking that the Government would not do anything so deliberately to harm the hundreds of thousands of UK residents in this position and that a sensible resolution would eventually be found. As we will see, there were numerous attempts to address the issue through the various Conservative Governments we have lived through so far. It was not a purgatory before things got better. They were about to get worse.

In 2019, UKAR sold a tranche of books, including Chris's, to a company called Heliodor. He had never heard of it, and with good reason, because it is an entity that neither I nor any of us here could borrow from. It is a vehicle that exists solely to serve the existing Northern Rock mortgages. Although it operates in a regulated market, Heliodor's ultimate owner, Topaz Finance Ltd, is not a regulated entity and relies on third-party administrators who are regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority in order to comply with its regulations.

However, and significantly in Chris's case, as Kath Scanlon et al's report from the London School of Economics points out, the setting of SVRs is not a regulated activity, meaning that a business opportunity for morally ambivalent vulture funds such as Topaz has been created, and people—our constituents—are offered up as hosts for a parasite.

Despite never having fallen behind on his payments, Chris found himself subject to a host of fees and other spurious admin charges. Incredibly, the principal he owed rose by almost £10,000 in a few short years, with no additional lending being offered. That pushed Chris into negative equity, as the amount he owed Heliodor became greater than the value of the flat he shares with his wife.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his speech and on securing the debate. My constituent Valerie has written to me. She is a mortgage prisoner, one of 200,000 across the country. She says exactly what the hon. Gentleman has said about Chris:

"I have been a mortgage prisoner since the initial crash of the market and despite never having missed any payments or been in arrears I am unable to remortgage as I cannot meet the new current affordability rates due to the LTV ratio of my property. I am now paying an almost 8% variable rate."

Is it not the key point here that mortgage prisoners such as Valerie have done nothing wrong? They have met all their payments and have never been in arrears, but they are trapped. They urgently need relief from the Government.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is correct, and the Government need to listen and take immediate action not only for Chris, but for the hon. Gentleman's constituent and the more than 200,000 others who I am sure are in the same predicament.

The cruellest part of this sorry tale of modern Britain is this: as Chris approaches the end of the 25-year term of his mortgage, having been forced into the interest-only plan just a few short years after he began to make repayments, he risks losing his family home of a quarter of a century unless he can come up with the full amount he owes to Heliodor. The aspect I find most galling is the inversion of the principle of home ownership, whereby people have ended up paying what is essentially rent to a vulture fund, which almost certainly knows it will be able to acquire the property at the end of the term.

Topaz Finance will have been licking its lips, I am sure, at a deal that is basically guaranteed to be paid twice: first, through the monthly payments that Chris and his wife have been making, and secondly when Topaz Finance sells their home from under them in 2029, at a healthy profit over what it picked the property up for in 2019.

As the House can imagine, the toll this has taken on Chris has been severe, as I am sure it has been for many of our constituents. Chris is unable to work, owing to the mental and psychological strain the situation has provoked, so it is down to his wife, a nurse, to work all the hours she can so they can stay in their home, although they understand the bitter irony that that is only a temporary respite until the hammer inevitably falls in 2029.

It is up to us as Members of Parliament to make sense of this personal calamity—not only for me and for Chris, but for the constituents of other Members—and to think of the consequences of Chris's story, with hundreds of thousands of people across these islands potentially affected. It is unthinkable.

In such a situation, how do we even begin to ensure not only that our constituents are protected from the avarice of these vulture funds, but that, somehow, there is some sort of recognition of the years they have lived under ever-increasing pressure? How do we make up for the opportunities missed—holidays not booked, families unable to grow, dreams unrealised? As Chris has said to me, this is essentially a form of legalised loan sharking, although unlike illegal loan sharks, vulture funds such as Topaz Finance do not break your legs, Mr Robertson; they break your spirit.

A small gleam of light has been the dawning realisation among mortgage prisoners that they have been exploited by so many of the actors that we are going to hear about today, and I want to thank UK Mortgage Prisoners for the work it has done, including the group's most recent report, "Setting the Record Straight", which helped me to understand that, tragically, the experience of my constituent Chris is very much not unique.

In the second part of my speech, I want to explore the opportunities to avoid this disaster that were missed along the way, and to ensure that the possibility of tens

of thousands or hundreds of thousands of mortgage prisoners being put out on the street and coming within the ambit of local councils and social services is very much acknowledged. It is important to cast our minds back to 2008, when Northern Rock was a prime lender and in the top five nationally. The LSE report I cited puts it very well:

“The problem of mortgage prisoners was largely created by the actions of successive UK governments in trying to address the excessively risky lending of the early 2000s. The prisoners...are a legacy of the rapid mortgage market expansion that took place prior to the Global Financial Crisis”.

By now we all know about the plethora of seemingly innovative mechanisms to enable wider home ownership, including high loan-to-value ratios. The banks that offered those novel products, such as Northern Rock or Bradford & Bingley, were household names—well-known brands that did not make people think twice about borrowing with them—and even the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, stated clearly in 2007:

“I can tell the House that Bank of England lending is secured against assets held by Northern Rock, which include high-quality mortgages with a significant protection margin built in and high-quality securities with the highest quality of credit rating.”—[*Official Report*, 19 November 2007; Vol. 467, c. 960.]

When those books were brought under the auspices of UKAR, borrowers could have been forgiven for thinking that all would be well: they were paying their mortgages, and the UK Government would ensure that they were not taken advantage of. However, even then there were warnings, inside and outside Government, about the potential risks of that approach. In 2009, the consumer group Which? told the Treasury Committee:

“Northern Rock’s mortgage business strategy seems to consist of telling many of its existing customers to go elsewhere and coming down hard on those who have got nowhere to go by having a relatively high standard variable rate and a ‘rapid’ move towards repossession.”

Even the Treasury, in the same year, was quite clear about the risks of allowing those unregulated firms to take over the Northern Rock book. It stated in a report that firms not engaging in regulated activity are not bound by the requirements of the FCA regulations, including, importantly, the requirement to treat customers fairly. It said:

“Non-regulated owners of regulated mortgage contracts may seek to maximise margins by raising interest rates and charges, potentially to levels that are unaffordable to borrowers.”

The same document stated, clear as day:

“Such activity clearly has the potential to cause severe harm to borrowers”.

Yet, incredibly, the UK Government carried on regardless.

Despite interest rates falling as the recession bit, that Government-owned bank settled on a margin of 4.29% over base for its SVR—an increase of 205% in its first year of operations. That is a scandal. In doing so, it made the prison absolutely complete, and hundreds of thousands of our constituents paid over the odds for a product they had bought in good faith, without being able to go anywhere else.

Why did that happen? The best explanation I can find is in the UK Mortgage Prisoners report, which says that the UK Government wanted to

“sell the books as soon as possible for as high a price as possible.” The action group’s report is a damning indictment of the continued failures of Government policy, but it manages to keep the obvious emotional distress caused

to its members just below the surface, to devastating effect. In meticulously researched tables, we see in black and white the money that has been lost to our economy from the detriment of keeping the SVR well above the base rate. From my calculations—I stand to be corrected by Chris—my constituent and his family have overpaid by at least £40,000.

If we cannot take away the pain and suffering this issue has caused over the years, we at least owe the victims an answer about why it happened. The LSE attributes it to the general climate created before the 2008 crash, but it is important to acknowledge how deep these roots are, because we are still dealing with so much of the fallout today.

The long tail of that era of neoliberal economics is still pernicious, because it confuses concepts such as taxpayer value with what any of us would normally take it to mean. Taxpayer value, to people like me, is not found in pauperising hundreds of thousands of households. It is not to be found in scraping back every single penny that taxpayers saw spent on ensuring that the economy did not collapse overnight.

Government is not a bank, with shareholders that need to see the principal of loans paid back in full. Government is an institution that is able to intervene in the economy at strategic moments. That is an idea that is slowly coming back into fashion, but I wonder how many of our national assets have found their way into the paws of this type of offshore capital in the intervening 40 years, leaving the taxpayer with all the costs, none of the benefits and absolutely hee-haw value.

The Government share much of the blame, and I am sure that we will hear from others of their myriad failings over the years, but we should take a moment to remember that the policy was conceived and established under a British Labour Government. Furthermore, that Government fully embraced the model of deregulated, neo-liberal economics; they continued the Thatcherite legacy of public assets being valued only where they were on the balance sheet, and taxpayers existed only in the abstract, not as individuals.

It was Gordon Brown—that saint who, we heard last week, could be elevated to the House of Lords—who set up the very FSA that allowed this tragedy to happen. The FSA, in his now infamous words, would herald

“not only light but limited regulation”

of financial markets. However, it will not do Chris or our constituents much good to dwell on the past. As I draw my remarks to a close, let us revisit my three questions for the Minister, which I think the shadow Minister should also reflect on. First, on evictions, as we begin to reach the end of the terms of those who took out 25 or 30-year mortgages at the beginning of the century, let us do what we can to lift the burden that they have carried over the years. I know, from reading briefings, that the Government are concerned about what they call the moral hazard of acting. If these people, in 2023, have not already had their houses repossessed, they must necessarily have kept up with repayments, so there is a strong case for saying that the moral hazard lies in the other direction: companies have been deliberately stringing them along.

Secondly, surely it is natural to put a cap on the SVRs being offered to mortgage prisoners, especially given the general climate of mortgage instability. Our constituents have been coping with high interest rates for a considerable

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

time. We gain nothing from pushing them further into debt, and in the past couple of days, some interest rates have been around 12.6%. Of course, there will be a cost to the taxpayer in the abstract, but this move will be an investment that pays itself back through the cascade of money into our local economies, instead of into the pockets of offshore vulture funds. The day of balance-sheet economics needs to end.

I understand that an amendment to the Financial Services and Markets Bill was put forward in the other House by the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group. I would be interested to hear whether the promise that the Government made when that amendment was withdrawn, to meet mortgage prisoners, has been fulfilled. The Minister knows a lot about that Bill.

Finally, the Government owe it to mortgage prisoners to find a way for them to help themselves out of this mess. They should look into providing a vehicle that allows mortgage prisoners to pivot back into the mainstream market. The first suggestion of the LSE report is that there should be free, comprehensive financial advice for all victims; almost 200,000 people should be contacted individually to help them navigate their way out of the quagmire that they find themselves in. As I said, it gives me no pleasure to conclude that it appears that there is nothing that we can do to make up for what UK Mortgage Prisoners calls the

“extortionate interest rates, severe financial restrictions and mobility and mental & physical issues caused by this Government-made scandal.”

However, that does not mean that we should not try. I hope that the Minister and the Government can see from the interest in today’s debate that they now have a chance to do what they can to make things right.

9.55 am

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (*Martin Docherty-Hughes*), who has just made an incredibly powerful speech.

Twice this week, I have spoken in Parliament about the banks and how constituents have been let down. The situation with mortgage prisoners is a scandal in its own right, and a great problem is that it is frankly not spoken about anywhere near enough in this House. For those of us who have constituents who are affected by the situation, as I do, it is utterly heartbreaking to hear the stories. We often hear stories of people’s plight in this place. The plight and the financial situations of mortgage prisoners are particularly devastating.

I am rarely lost for words, but yesterday, when I came off a call with a constituent who had given me an update on her story, I realised I had found it an incredibly emotional experience. I will not use her name, but she is one of 195,000 people across the country affected by this problem. Many people around the country will be struggling with higher mortgage rates, but mortgage prisoners are in an entirely separate situation; they are in a degree of difficulty that is beyond what the average person is probably experiencing with their increasing mortgage rate. That is through absolutely no fault of their own, but because of the situation that occurred back in 2008 with the banking crisis.

My constituent’s situation is, I am sure, replicated among the 195,000 people affected by this problem. She is paying £1,782 a month for her mortgage. She is in arrears. She is under a Heliodor mortgage—the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire mentioned that lender; I had never heard of it either—and is paying 9.24% to a lender that does not even have a lending licence. Many statistics suggest that the mortgage rates of millions of people across the country are shooting up by 5% or 6%, but some mortgage prisoners are paying 12% or 13%. Can anyone imagine what that pressure and stress must be doing to those households? The average mortgage prisoner is paying 9%. As has been echoed by hon. Members, we absolutely need to look at the standard variable rate, specifically for mortgage prisoners, because it is not right for families to end up in that situation. They are utterly trapped by what happened back in 2008, when mortgage books were sold off.

Another issue is that many mortgage prisoners are now older families; they got into this situation some 15 years ago, when the banking crisis first happened. In my questioning, I try to understand the situation. I ask questions such as, “Well, why can’t you exit this financial arrangement by selling up and moving on?” It is not that simple for families, who may well have children. The lady I spoke about has a family of three, and one child is disabled. Her situation is creating untold distress for her, and is affecting her mental and physical health. In constituencies such as mine, people cannot just sell their house and find another at an achievable price. I live in a beautiful area on the north Norfolk coast, where house prices are extremely high, the rental situation is extremely difficult, and the local housing list has roughly 3,000 people on it.

These are people’s homes. They are private homes. We must have some compassion and help people who, through no fault of their own, have ended up in this situation. As has been said, people cannot just move to another mortgage product, because they will simply fail to meet the lending criteria and the affordability test. My constituent was in a perfectly normal mortgage until the collapse of Northern Rock. We are told that there is help and support out there, but that is not always the case.

I am on the record as saying on Monday night that the Minister is a good man, and that when I talked about banking hubs, he listened to all the problems that I brought him about bank closures in my constituency. I say that again. If his officials are watching, will they please help my constituent? She would readily listen to help and advice. I asked her what one thing would help make the problem go away. One of her answers was, “Will the Minister engage with the mortgage prisoners group, so that he can understand the situation for so many people who have worked hard and got into this situation?”

Let me finish by saying that the Government have done a good job of dealing with the escalating problem of interest rates in recent weeks, including through the Chancellor’s meeting with all the lenders. I want those words on the record. We have worked extremely hard to help families up and down this country. Let us now go that extra mile for the cohort of people who are affected by the mortgage prisoners problem. They are hurting more than most people at the moment, because of their particular circumstances.

10.2 am

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) for securing the debate, and for his powerful opening speech on the issues faced by mortgage prisoners.

I also thank my constituent Mr Masood, who is a mortgage prisoner and who brought this issue to my attention five years ago. That led to the founding of the all-party parliamentary group on mortgage prisoners. He is one example of someone affected by the issue, and I know that other Members will have similar constituents. Their experiences will be reflected in those of many in the UK Mortgage Prisoners Facebook group—people whose families have paid the price for the situation facing mortgage prisoners. They have made huge sacrifices of their family income and their health just to try to stay in their home, a battle that seems to get harder and harder.

This debate is about mortgage prisoners, but it comes in the context of a much wider difficulty facing mortgage holders across the country as a result of the challenges in the economy, and the mismanagement of our economy over 13 years of cumulative failure and reduced resilience. That was certainly compounded by the mini-Budget last September, which saw the cost of borrowing rocket for Government, local government and households. My constituents are looking at a £4,000-plus increase in their mortgage payments this year on average.

I thank the Minister for meeting me, people from the Mortgage Prisoners Facebook group, and colleagues from the all-party parliamentary group relatively recently. That was important. We were discussing the LSE report, which Ministers have written to me about. I have concerns about the gaps in the letter I received on 13 June. Martin Lewis described mortgage prisoners as

“the forgotten victims of the financial crash”.

I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group, and we have heard from many mortgage prisoners about the sheer desperation of their situation, the harm caused by high interest rates, and the Government’s ongoing policy failures. I am concerned that Government and FCA policy are directly contributing to ongoing harm to mortgage prisoners.

When the Government sold the Northern Rock and Bradford & Bingley mortgages, they could have sold them to active lenders that would have offered mortgage prisoners new deals. UK Asset Resolution, however, told Lord McFall, the former Labour Chair of the Treasury Committee, that selling those loans would result in customers being offered new deals, extra lending and fixed rates. Whether or not that was in writing—I believe it should have been—that was the understanding when mortgages were sold on to Cerberus Capital Management and others. The requirement was not written into the contract when the loans were sold, and the vulture fund Cerberus, which bought the loans, refuses to offer customers new deals, extra lending and fixed rates.

The Government have sold the mortgages of mortgage prisoners to vulture funds and inactive lenders, which have exploited mortgage prisoners through high interest rates. FCA rules meant that for years, mortgage prisoners were told that they could not afford to pay less. That

was not true. Despite having regulatory oversight of many of those funds, the FCA has refused to intervene and ensure that mortgage prisoners are treated fairly. The FCA allows banks to exploit mortgage prisoners by holding them in separately authorised subsidiaries and keeping them on higher rates.

The Co-operative Banking Group exploits mortgage prisoners in a subsidiary called Mortgage Agency Services Number Five Ltd. Barclays holds mortgage prisoners in its Kensington Mortgages subsidiary, and is pushing for repossession from mortgage prisoners, such as Gregston Clarke, a delivery driver from south London. Both the chief executive officer of Barclays and the FCA know all about that case, but nothing is being done to help.

It is clear that the FCA and Government interventions to date have not worked. I reference that because the Minister speaks about the modified affordability assessment in his letter of 13 June. In April 2021, when the Government rejected amendments, supported in the other place, that would have provided help for mortgage prisoners, they commissioned the FCA to review data on the impact of reforms designed to remove barriers by introducing a new voluntary modified affordability assessment test that lenders could apply. The APPG set up a solutions working group to try to make that new test work as well as possible, but it simply was not attracting the support needed from the market. We worked to ensure that there was an effective communication strategy, and to challenge the FCA on how it was taking that forward.

The FCA’s review confirmed that interventions have had only a tiny impact so far. Only 2,200 of the almost 200,000 mortgage prisoners have been able to switch. Lenders had limited appetite for offering options to switch using the modified affordability test, and only 200 borrowers have been directly helped to switch as a result of the changes. The FCA continues to claim that many mortgage prisoners should be able to switch, but it has not done nearly enough to understand why so many are still stuck. The turmoil in the mortgage market following the mini-Budget made things worse and removed some of the escape routes that could still have been available.

Immediate action is vital, as the situation for mortgage prisoners is getting worse every day. The APPG has highlighted over several years that there is no way for them to gain any certainty over their mortgage payments. The firms that owned and administered the mortgages, which are inactive lenders, have refused to offer mortgage prisoners fixed rates.

The Bank of England has now increased the base rate 13 consecutive times since December 2021. The SVR for Northern Rock was originally around 2% above the base rate. Now SVRs charged to mortgage prisoners are 4% above the base rate, or even higher. The standard variable rate charged by Landmark Mortgages is currently 8.64%, and it will go up to closer to 9% following the interest rate rise last week. Other mortgage prisoners are paying rates of 10% or 12%, which is unacceptable and utterly crippling. Lenders are taking advantage of trapped customers, but the FCA and the Government do not seem to be willing to do anything for those who are being hit harder than other mortgage holders because of the peculiar circumstances in which they are trapped.

I pay tribute to Rachel Neale, Jill and other volunteers in the UK Mortgage Prisoners Facebook group, who witness the harm being done to mortgage prisoners

[Seema Malhotra]

every day. These prisoners may be families who are suffering, unable to heat their homes. They may be cancer patients enduring very miserable final years. The volunteers witness their sheer desperation. They themselves are mortgage prisoners who may suffer from ill health, and they also worry about how they will make payments on their homes. They are on the frontline, and they are expected to support mortgage prisoners without any support to do so, all in their own time as volunteers. They witness people's desperation as they face repossession caused by years of being exploited by inactive lenders. Some of those people have committed suicide, and others talk about committing suicide. It is particularly worrying that there is nothing to stop the mortgage prisoner problem getting worse. I pay tribute to those who are sitting in the Gallery, and I thank them for being here.

Anyone can find their mortgages sold on without their consent to an inactive lender, which could trap them on an SVR. The APPG has put forward proposals to cap standard variable rates for inactive lenders and require them to offer mortgage prisoners fixed rates. Those interventions would not affect the wider active market; they would be targeted at that particular set of mortgage prisoners because of their circumstances.

Martin Lewis has supported and co-funded research by LSE, which launched its report on 1 March at an event hosted by the all-party parliamentary group. At the launch, Martin Lewis said:

"People have been left in financial, physical and mental misery, exacerbated by the pandemic and cost of living crisis ripping through their already dire situations. When we put solutions to the Treasury in the past, it said it wanted to look at them, but couldn't as they weren't costed. Now, having fought tooth and nail to get some of the data needed from official institutions, it is costed. The Government has a moral and financial responsibility to mitigate some of the damage done."

Almost four months later, the Government have yet to provide a response to the recommendations in the LSE report. Every month of delay causes more harm to mortgage prisoners.

I want to mention the Chancellor's mortgage summit and the new mortgage charter, which was announced after the summit. It is important to note that lenders such as Landmark Mortgages, Heliodor Mortgages and Engaged Credit were not invited to the summit and—unless the Minister wants to correct me on this—have not signed up to the proposals that were discussed. We wrote to the Minister about the issue and asked for them to be invited to a meeting with the Chancellor. The new charter is voluntary, and there is still significant discretion for lenders. It is a far cry from the help now offered to all mortgage holders that was outlined last week by the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves).

As the APPG has pointed out, large loopholes remain in the FCA guidance. Although it includes a lot of action that lenders may take, such as extending terms, switching rates and switching to interest-only mortgages, it does not require any help to be offered. Lenders such as Landmark Mortgages can continue to trap people on high standard variable rates and offer no help. There is nothing for those coming to the end of their interest-only mortgage term and facing repossession.

The FCA interventions on mortgage prisoners, to which the Government continue to refer in their correspondence and debates, have not reduced the detriment being caused, and the Chancellor's mortgage summit provided no help for mortgage prisoners facing soaring SVRs. Mortgage prisoners are suffering hugely. It is an injustice, it is a scandal and it is getting worse for them every month. We need urgent action so that they are treated fairly and offered fixed rates. We need the Government to respond to the LSE report, to take responsibility and to work to deliver solutions that ensure fair treatment for all mortgage prisoners.

10.17 am

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my good friend and comrade, my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), on securing the debate and on giving an excellent outline of the position of so many people who are caught up in this scandal. I compliment the hon. Members for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) and for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on their excellent speeches, too.

As others have said, mortgage prisoners are people who cannot switch mortgages to a better deal, even if they are up to date with their payments. It is estimated that up to 40,000 people in Scotland are currently in the category of mortgage prisoners. Most mortgage prisoners have a mortgage in a closed book of an inactive firm, which means that the mortgage is held with a lender that can no longer make mortgage contracts because they are not authorised to do so. At the same time, regulators and lenders are imposing more stringent criteria on borrowing to help to prevent another financial crash, and many people are unable to meet the new conditions. As a result, they are unable to move to other deals, even if they would pay less by doing so.

Stakeholders including Martin Lewis and the UK Mortgage Prisoners action group have consistently criticised the Government for not taking action to help mortgage prisoners. Earlier this year, a report produced by the London School of Economics and funded by Martin Lewis said that the UK Government had made a surplus of £2.4 billion from the sale of mortgage books. It offered costed proposals that it argued would meet Government criteria for helping to solve the problem.

As we know, there have been previous parliamentary debates on the issue. In 2021, the Lords agreed an amendment to the Financial Services and Markets Bill that the Commons voted against during ping-pong. The Government argued that it would be an unacceptable and unfair intervention in the mortgage market; as a result, the Lords agreed to remove the amendment. The chief executive of the FCA told the Treasury Committee in May 2021 that further reforms to help to resolve the situation were up to Parliament. In March 2023, Lord Sharkey introduced an amendment to the Financial Services and Markets Bill that was identical to the one passed in 2021, but he agreed to withdraw it when the Government promised to meet stakeholders to discuss the proposals in the LSE report. I hope the Minister will update the House on where those discussions are.

It is abhorrent that people are at risk of losing their homes as a result of being mis-sold their mortgages

prior to the financial crash. Homeowners across the UK are being hit by soaring mortgage rates, but mortgage prisoners are being hit even harder.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: My opening speech explained why we got here. Does my hon. Friend agree that an addiction to a neo-liberal economic model is to blame for the treatment of mortgage prisoners?

Chris Stephens: I agree. There is also a poverty premium that we need to discuss, which I will come to shortly.

As Rachel Neale from the UK Mortgage Prisoners campaign group has noted, their interest rates have gone from 4.5% all the way up to 9%, 9.5%, 10% and above. A number of these homeowners have been trapped—

Seema Malhotra: Rachel Neale is present. I thank her for coming along today.

Chris Stephens: I am grateful that Rachel Neale and others who are caught up in this situation and who are in the action group are here in the Gallery today. I hope they looked forward to this debate, and I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure them and give them solutions, as a result of the debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire.

To put the figures into perspective, someone with an interest-only loan of £120,000 managed by Landmark Mortgages would have seen their payments shoot up by £5,100 a year even before the latest interest rate rise, which was announced last week. This is one of the starkest examples of the poverty premium that I have referred to in answering my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire. People who are unable to meet affordability criteria pay way over the odds for something for which people in better financial positions are charged much less. It is incredibly unfair that these individuals are paying the price for widespread irresponsible lending prior to 2008.

UK Mortgage Prisoners have highlighted the dire impact that being a mortgage prisoner has on people's mental health. I will quote Rachel Neale again:

"We have had people openly put on the [Facebook] group that they want to commit suicide if this rate rise happens because they have nowhere to go. It's devastating—families are in impoverished situations, they're facing homelessness."

That is the seriousness of the situation.

In 2020, UK Mortgage Prisoners carried out a survey among mortgage prisoners and found that 3% had contemplated suicide as a result of their situation. It is not unreasonable to assume that that already high figure will likely have increased during the current crisis.

The UK Government must finally take steps to support mortgage prisoners and enable them to re-mortgage with active lenders. The London School of Economics report on mortgage prisoners includes indicative costings, as requested by the Government. The report sets out a range of solutions for helping mortgage prisoners to be able to re-mortgage with active lenders, including free comprehensive financial advice for all mortgage prisoners, which is required for any borrower who might go on to access other solutions; interest-free equity loans to clear the unsecured element of Northern Rock's "Together" loans; Government equity loans that are interest-free for the first five years on the model of help to buy; and a fall-back option of a Government guarantee for active lenders to offer prisoners new mortgages.

It is estimated that those solutions could cost between £50 million and £348 million over 10 years, depending on take-up. While the overall outlay would be between £370 million to £2.7 billion, that is reduced to £50 million to £347 million net as the Government would hold some equity loans themselves.

The Government have a moral duty to act to support mortgage prisoners, because being in that position has a devastating impact on individuals, and because the UK Government made a surplus of £2.4 billion from the sale of the mortgage books, according to the London School of Economics report. It is an indictment of the UK Government that they have left it to an individual campaigner, Martin Lewis, to fund the study, despite being fully aware of the utter misery caused by the situation facing financial prisoners. Now that campaigners in the LSE have done the hard work and presented the UK Government with fully costed plans that meet their criteria, the very least they could do is to take the steps needed to bring those plans into action.

I will close with a quote from Rachel Neale from the group:

"The severe harm already endured for over a decade, compounded now by 10 consecutive rate rises, means time is not a currency mortgage prisoners have. The proposed solutions need to be considered in detail, and urgent action is required now before more homes and lives are lost."

I look forward to the Minister's response to that contribution.

10.25 am

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

As we have heard, this debate on mortgage prisoners takes place in the context of wider concerns about mortgages, as mortgage payers are being hit by increases in interest rates. People who have done the right thing by saving for a deposit and then buying a home now face their payments going up by hundreds of pounds a month through no fault of their own. The interest rate rises are affecting millions of families with mortgages, both those with a variable rate deal who are impacted month on month and those with a fixed-rate deal that has recently expired or is about to do so. The impact of the rises is being felt beyond mortgage payers and their families, as private renters are also often suffering an increase to their rent as a knock-on impact of higher interest rates.

Today's debate focuses on a particular group of mortgage payers: mortgage prisoners, who face the impact of the recent increases in interest rates on top of the historic uncompetitive rates of the deal they are on. We all know how much fear and hardship rising mortgage payments can cause, so I commend the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) for securing the debate. I also commend the work of Rachel Neale and other campaigners on this issue. I listened very carefully to the hon. Gentleman as he set out his points and talked about his constituent Chris and his family. I welcome the contributions of other Members, including the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) and my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), who mentioned her constituent Mr Masood. They set out much of the detail of the situation facing mortgage prisoners.

[James Murray]

As we heard, there are around 200,000 mortgage prisoners in the UK. That is the number estimated by Money Saving Expert, and it aligns broadly with the calculation by the Financial Conduct Authority of around 195,000 mortgage holders in closed books in 2021. Mortgage prisoners face being hit by the same interest rate rise as other mortgage payers, but without even having had the option to move to a cheaper rate deal in the past. We know how much stress, anxiety and hardship soaring mortgage payments cause to so many people across the country. The debate has given us a chance to focus on how particularly acute that is for mortgage prisoners who are already stuck on an uncompetitive deal. I very much look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the points raised by so many Members about mortgage prisoners.

I would also like to take this opportunity, briefly, to once again urge the Treasury to follow through on the broader plan we set out in recent days to help mortgage holders through the difficult times that so many are facing. Action for all mortgage payers is desperately needed, as banks are withdrawing mortgage deals and the average household is facing a hike of almost £240 a month on their mortgage. Across the UK, 13 years of economic failure has left us exposed. We have the highest inflation in the G7, and UK households are paying almost £100 a month more in mortgage payments than those in other European countries. Millions of households need help now, so it is deeply frustrating that the Government are refusing to make measures to help households mandatory.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am going to challenge the shadow Minister on some of the points I made earlier. Do his Front Benchers agree that we need a moratorium on evictions and a cap on standard variable rates? Will he pledge to support a cross-party vehicle for those on closed books to pivot back into the mainstream market—yes or no?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for setting out those points, and I add my voice to the call on the Minister to set out the Government's position. We are pushing for a wider response to help mortgage holders across the piece, but the Government are in a position to respond to the hon. Gentleman's points.

I want to use this opportunity to talk briefly about the wider impact of the mortgage rate increases on mortgage holders across the market. The plan that we set out in recent days would require lenders to allow borrowers to switch to interest-only mortgage payments and lengthen the term of their mortgage period, reverse support measures when the borrower requests, and put in place more protection for mortgage holders from repossession proceedings. We would instruct the FCA to ensure that mortgage holders' credit scores are not affected.

I also want to focus briefly on renters, who need to be part of the conversation about mortgage holders. They are being impacted by the increase in mortgage rates, and the Chancellor did not mention them on Monday. Will the Minister take this opportunity to refer to them?

The rise in interest rates as a result of the UK's being particularly exposed to inflation will see us paying more on our mortgages than our European neighbours. That

undermines the fundamental security that families across the UK need. We therefore urge the Government to follow our plan so that people across the UK are protected. I look forward to the Minister's response to the points we have made about mortgage prisoners.

10.31 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on securing the debate. I thank all Members for their contributions, including my hon. Friends the Members for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) and for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) and the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), whose chairwomanship of the all-party parliamentary group on mortgage prisoners does so much to increase the standing of Parliament.

Our primary role, as we represent our constituents, is to use our voice to ensure that nobody feels that they are being forgotten. Today's debate is proof of that. There are no easy answers, but this is Parliament at its finest, as it uses its powers to compel Ministers to come and account for themselves. I am grateful for the work of Rachel Neale and others in the Public Gallery who are continuing with this campaign.

I am humble about the potential failings of Government and regulators. It is not my role to sit here and mouth platitudes. I am not going to say that everyone always gets it right, and I cannot offer false hope. There is a lesson for us all in what we saw with the Horizon scandal, involving postmasters: every human process is fallible. As Minister, I will continue to keep an open and inquiring mind on such issues.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I will make the same points that I made to the shadow Minister. In the interests of openness, will the Minister consider at some point a moratorium on evictions and a cap on the standard variable rate? Will he pledge to support the creation of a cross-party vehicle to enable closed books to pivot back into the mainstream market?

Andrew Griffith: I was just starting, but I will try to address the points that Members have made in the debate, including those made by the hon. Gentleman.

The Government and I recognise the anxiety that people in general have about mortgages, and we will use the tools at our disposal to limit the rise in rates. I will leave the general points and address the specifics about what we are debating today. We spent a lot of parliamentary time yesterday debating the new mortgage charter, but this is clearly a different debate—about those who have been in this situation for a long time, such as the hon. Gentleman's constituent Chris and the constituents in Feltham and Heston and North Norfolk.

Seema Malhotra: Before the Minister moves on to the specifics, I want to make a general point. I thank him for his words about the work of the all-party parliamentary group and the UK Mortgage Prisoners group. We want to ensure that we get a solution—this is all about getting a solution to a challenge that has been intractable. Our strong belief is that more can be done, and it will take the Government to step forward and be bold about getting a solution, working with the regulator, which also needs to step up to the plate.

Andrew Griffith: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I have met her and campaigners previously, and I am happy to undertake to continue to do so. The best way to find solutions is by working together. I would caution that everything I have seen so far tells me that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. There are a very large number of categories. There is a temptation to aggregate to the largest possible number, but the FCA's analysis slices it down into more detail and recognises that there are varied circumstances in terms of why people have reached the position they have. I would love to hear more from the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire about his constituent Chris's circumstances. He told us that the mortgage was taken out in 2003, which was well before the change in Northern Rock post-2008. By 2007, it had already moved into an interest-only mortgage.

I am a data-led Minister, and as we unpick the data we often find co-mingled in these issues, understandably, the human stories of people who are vulnerable, have fallen on hard times and have been affected by the personal tragedies that all of us as Members hear in our constituency surgeries every week. But those are, to some degree, disconnected from their particular choice of mortgage and are circumstances that affect the wider taxpayer population.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I need to come back on that point. The only tragedy here is that my constituent and his wife will lose their home in 2029 if this Government and any future Government do not get their finger out.

Andrew Griffith: I hear the hon. Gentleman. As I say, one of the ways to explore solutions is, I would counsel, to look at the individual circumstances and see what remedies, if any, there are, based on particular cohorts.

Seema Malhotra: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Griffith: I will, and then I should make some progress.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the Minister for giving way again. I want to make two points. First, it is important to recognise, as the APPG has, that there will need to be longer-term solutions, but there also need to be short-term measures to deal with the situation specifically for mortgage prisoners among other mortgage holders.

Secondly, it is important not to characterise mortgage prisoners as people who have fallen on hard times. These are nurses, teachers and people in all professions. It is the circumstances of the mortgages and how they have been sold on that has been the issue. They have done nothing wrong, and they have not fallen on hard times. This is about the lack of support and protection of the terms on which they bought those mortgages, which were then taken away when the mortgages were sold on.

Andrew Griffith: That is fully understood. This is not about any attribution of fault. It is about looking at what the FCA found and the LSE report, which I have read and studied, did not disagree with: that there are a number of different cohorts within this broader category. As we seek solutions, sometimes we might find more illustration by looking at individual fact patterns. The

hon. Lady mentioned the modified affordability assessment, which was one attempt to move forward. She observed, rightly, that it helped a relatively limited number of people, and we should try to learn from that. There was an inertia among some, and many mortgage prisoners were contacted, but many fewer engaged in that process.

The Government have consistently committed ourselves, and I am committed, to looking for practical and proportionate options where we can deliver genuine benefits for groups of borrowers, and we are committed to looking at where such interventions would be fair. It is the role of Government to try to ensure fairness and parity across different groups in society, although—while I hear what has been said about the circumstances people are in—we cannot simply solve the problem if somebody is, for example, on an interest-only mortgage but there is no plan in place to repay the principal. That is not confined simply to borrowers on inactive mortgage books, as, sadly, it happens across the market, but we want to ensure that there is the maximum number of options to switch and that all those who might want to switch are aware of the options. There is an awareness issue, as well as the specific problems that people face in the switching process.

Let me address the points raised by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire. We heard about the idea of a cap on the standard variable rate for mortgage prisoners. I do not want to repeat all the arguments at length, but that would be a one-size-fits-all solution. It is not, in the view of the Government, appropriate to do that, and I do not want to create a false expectation.

On a moratorium on evictions, there are already well developed pre-action protocols. The remit of the Financial Ombudsman Service does apply, with other remedies behind that. The fact that inactive lenders are not regulated in the same way as active lenders by the FCA does not in any way mean that the remedies available through the FOS are not available. I am happy to work with the FOS to ensure that that point is understood, and to learn from it the data that it has, such as the number of people who have petitioned and sought its support on the issue. Perhaps in some cases that might offer a potential remedy.

Even the LSE's earlier report of November 2022 argued against the introduction of a standard variable cap, for some of the reasons that we have talked about. The Government have to be evidence-based. The LSE report of March 2023 did talk about free, comprehensive financial advice. Again, that reflects the bespoke nature of some of the problems, and potentially some of the routes forward for individuals. The Government provide significant independent financial advice that is free at the point of use through the Money and Pensions Service. The overall budget for that is £93 million.

I am interested in hearing, perhaps through the all-party parliamentary group, mortgage prisoners' experience of accessing that financial advice. That was the No. 1 recommendation of the LSE, and that experience could shed more light and data on the subject. I am happy to explore that with hon. Members and, if necessary, convene a meeting with the Money and Pensions Service, or with individualised debt advice charities, to see how we could try to scale that solution.

Seema Malhotra *rose—*

Andrew Griffith: The hon. Lady is trying to intervene.

Seema Malhotra: Very briefly. We would be happy to share that experience and to have the voice of the mortgage prisoners group heard. There is a slight concern that this is seen as the problem of the mortgage prisoners. They are very aware of their situation, and they had sought all sorts of advice. It would be helpful to share that experience and the work we have done with the FOS, which might be constructive with respect to how we move forward.

Andrew Griffith: I thank the hon. Lady for that constructive intervention. Again, I am committed to working with all comers as we try to find solutions that will help to move the situation forward. I understand the distress that people find themselves in. Whatever the situation was before, I understand that in an environment of rising rates people will feel the effects much more acutely, so I commit to work on that.

I want to fully address all the questions asked by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire. We have talked about the moratorium on evictions, and the existing legal framework applies in that space. A global cap on the standard variable rate is not the right or appropriate answer. In terms of working on a specific vehicle for those in closed books, again, I would rather work with the data and look at individual cohorts. As hon. Members have observed, a significant number of the so-called mortgage prisoners are now approaching the end, the maturity—the point at which the question is not necessarily about switching but about how to redeem or repay the capital or look at alternatives at the end of the process. That is one example of why a simple, single-point vehicle would not be the right answer.

We will continue to work with everybody who has expertise in this space, including those who have done work as part of the LSE report. We have to reconcile that duty with others who face similar circumstances, but perhaps are not in this particular category.

I have not responded to some of the more party political points, but I want to make sure that people feel the debate has been constructive and that they are being listened to. We will continue the dialogue and engagement to try to bring forward solutions where we can. We need to work with industry and the Financial Conduct Authority,

which is the regulator. I have mentioned the potential role for the Money and Pensions Service. We will continue to try to find solutions that would defuse some of the deleterious impact on people and get more people the ability to switch. No one has ever been explicitly prohibited from switching, but I understand that one of the unintended consequences of regulation has been that in some cases people have been prevented from shopping around in the market, as other constituents can.

Finally, from a broader economy perspective, we will continue to do everything we can to bear down on inflation and interest rates, and we hope to get as quickly as possible back to an environment where rates are not rising. I thank the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire for securing this debate today.

10.47 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I thank all Members here today for participating, and I thank the Mortgage Prisoners action group—some of its members are in the Public Gallery. Most importantly, I thank my constituent Chris. I commit to him, his family and so many other mortgage prisoners to continuing to campaign for them and their demand for justice. I leave the last word to the Mortgage Prisoners action group to set the record straight, given some of the points that have just been made:

“From research within the UK Mortgage Prisoners Group of 4,200 members less than 10 have benefited from the modified affordability criteria introduced in November 2019. It has, by all measures, been a failure. The Money and Pensions Service, who were introduced as the organisation for mortgage prisoners to go to for advice and clarification about being a ‘mortgage prisoner’ have in recent communications revealed that out of 445 client calls, 66% did not fit the criteria to access the better deals...and they are aware of only 36 people who have successfully remortgaged.”

In the group’s words,

“From this failed attempt at a market led intervention it is clear it is time for the Government to stop pretending that the markets can offer an adequate solution for mortgage prisoners.”

I hope that the Government are listening.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered mortgage prisoners.

10.49 am

Sitting suspended.

Rosebank Oilfield: Environmental Impacts

[Relevant documents: Fourth Report of the Environmental Audit Committee, Accelerating the transition from fossil fuels and securing energy supplies, HC 109, and the Government response, HC 1221.]

11 am

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I will call Caroline Lucas to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up at the end.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the environmental impacts of Rosebank oilfield.

It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Robertson, and to open this debate on the UK's largest undeveloped oilfield. I want to put this debate firmly in the context of the escalating climate emergency. Quite simply, approving the Rosebank oilfield would be a disaster for the climate. At nearly 500 million barrels of oil and gas, the development is enormous. It is triple the size of neighbouring Cambo, which drew nationwide protests back in 2021. If it were burned, its contents would produce over 200 million tonnes of carbon dioxide. That is more than the combined annual CO₂ emissions of all 28 low-income countries in the world, which together are home to 700 million people. Developing Rosebank would be an act of climate vandalism and would risk pushing us past safe climate limits.

In his reply, the Minister may seek to absolve himself of responsibility by saying, as he did in my previous debate on fossil fuels and the cost of living, that he is "confident that our approach is compatible with the journey to net zero."—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2023; Vol. 725, c. 248WH.] The Climate Change Committee has now confirmed once and for all that that narrative is false. Its damning progress report, which was published just this morning, is clear:

"Expansion of fossil fuel production is not in line with Net Zero."

Indeed, it goes on to spell out that while the UK

"will continue to need some oil and gas until it reaches Net Zero...this does not in itself justify the development of new North Sea fields."

I hope that we can therefore now put to bed the Government's disingenuous arguments and see them for what they are: a last-ditch, desperate attempt to justify propping up the fossil fuel industry.

If the Minister needs any more evidence to persuade him, I am happy to oblige. First, Rosebank's emissions would blow the allowance in the UK's carbon budgets for oil and gas production, exceeding the CCC's recommendation in the sixth carbon budget by 17%. That is presumably why Equinor is reportedly looking at sourcing renewable energy from the Viking windfarm on Shetland to electrify Rosebank's operations—but that is clean, cheap energy that should be used to power hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses, not an enormous oilfield. Developing Rosebank would actively reduce the UK's energy security.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): On the point about the use of renewable electricity for the extraction of oil, does the hon. Lady agree that it is disingenuous for lobby groups to talk about oilfields potentially saving carbon dioxide emissions? Does she also agree that comparing carbon emissions in the extraction of oil in the UK with carbon emissions elsewhere is both a red herring and greenwashing?

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Member will not be surprised to hear that I do indeed agree. Unfortunately, an awful lot of greenwashing goes on when it comes to this debate.

Secondly, it is not just the UK that must reach net zero by 2050 if we are to avoid the worst effects of global heating. According to the sixth assessment report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the whole world must be there by 2050 to stay below 1.5°. If we are to act in accordance with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities—which was, let us remember, a central tenet of the Paris agreement—it is clear that the UK, as one of the first countries to industrialise using fossil fuels, must go much further and faster than many others.

Thirdly, the Government's so-called climate checkpoint fails to take account of scope 3 emissions. In other words, the checkpoint simply ignores all the emissions that are produced when the oil and gas are actually burned, so it is no safeguard at all.

Finally, although Ministers try to ignore our global climate reality, the truth is that there is already far more coal, oil and gas in existing developments than can be safely burned if we are to have a liveable future. According to the UN report "The Production Gap", Governments already

"plan to produce more than double the amount of fossil fuels in 2030"

that would be consistent with staying below 1.5°. The International Energy Agency has made it clear that there can be no more oil and gas developments if we are to limit global temperatures to that critical threshold. Global scientists pretty much agree, yet we have a Government who somehow think they know better than hundreds of UK scientists and the vast majority of thousands of global scientists.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for all the leadership she shows on these issues. Is it not also the case that a lot of our constituents are showing the way as well? They have probably communicated to most of us here today the passion they feel, and they understand the need for a just transition. There are ways to meet both our climate goals and our energy requirements without new oil and gas exploration, exactly as she is outlining.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The majority of public opinion is on our side, and everyone from the Women's Institute to the scientists is saying the same thing.

I want to talk about climate leadership. Approving Rosebank would destroy any last shred of the UK's climate leadership. The UK's record was built on the Climate Change Act 2008 and on being the first major economy to enshrine net zero in law, but as the Climate Change Committee's report makes clear today, it has

[Caroline Lucas]

been decimated by the Government's approval of the UK's first coalmine in 30 years, and by the fact that they have issued more than 100 new exploration licences and are now failing to rule out this enormous oilfield. In the words of the CCC, the UK

"has lost its clear global leadership on climate action".

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing this valuable and important debate. I will speak freely and say that it is quite absurd that we are debating this issue today—the day after the four-year anniversary of the net zero target becoming law in the UK, and the morning that the CCC has released its scathing progress report to Parliament. The CCC says that its confidence in the UK reaching net zero is "markedly less" than it was a year ago, and that approving new fossil fuel infrastructure is sending mixed messages about the UK's climate plans. Does the hon. Member agree that this is a depressing conclusion from the CCC that shows a deficit in climate leadership where there should be none?

Caroline Lucas: I absolutely agree. In one sense, it is quite exquisite timing to have this debate and this discussion about Rosebank on the very morning of the CCC report, which is not only depressing but frankly damning when it comes to the Government's lack of action. On leadership, I will quote Lord Deben, the chairman of the Climate Change Committee, who has noted that the Government's commitment to the ongoing expansion of North sea oil and gas means that they have

"perfectly properly been called hypocrites".

Let me briefly turn to some of the bogus arguments that Ministers traditionally advance to try to justify the unjustifiable. I have been told time and again in this place that new licences are essential for our economy and for energy security. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth, especially when it comes to Rosebank.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. Of course Rosebank oilfield should not go ahead, and of course it is an act of climate vandalism for it to do so in the context of a climate emergency. Given the bogus arguments we hear from Government Ministers who justify the unjustifiable, is it not the case that oil and gas giants have far too much influence in our politics, and that we cannot solve the climate crisis if our political system and Government are in thrall to the corporate oil and gas interests?

Caroline Lucas: To reinforce what the hon. Member said, we know that the president of COP28 is going to be somebody who absolutely comes from that background, so it is not just a question of domestic collusion with oil companies. The big climate meeting happening later this year will be presided over by a president who we know is absolutely involved in the oil industry. We need to get fossil fuels out of politics once and for all.

Rosebank will not improve energy security, because 90% of its reserves are oil, not gas. Like the vast majority of oil from the North sea, it will be put in

tankers and exported overseas, because it is not suitable for UK refineries. Let us be really clear: there is no argument around energy security in favour of Rosebank.

Secondly, Rosebank will not bring down our energy bills, because it does not belong to us. Any oil and gas that is sold back to the UK will be sold at global prices. As the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), said in February last year:

"Additional UK production won't materially affect the wholesale market price."

Thirdly, Rosebank will not deliver long-term job security. Equinor claims that Rosebank will deliver 1,600 jobs, but the real number is less than a third of that, with the rest being short-term, temporary jobs just during construction. There are far more jobs, as we know, in a green energy future. What we need is a proper, just transition, hand in hand with the unions, for those workers and communities, to enable them to reap the benefits and rewards of those decent green jobs.

Fourthly, Rosebank will not be better for our planet than imports. Stopping Rosebank does not mean that we will import more oil. Let me say it again: the vast majority of oil from Rosebank will be exported. Even if Rosebank's oil did reach UK refineries, the development plans submitted show that it is likely to be more polluting than the oil and gas produced in Norway, our largest import partner. More oil production means more oil consumption, less oil production means less oil consumption—it is basic economics. What will bring down imports is reducing fossil fuel dependence across our energy system.

As if all that were not evidence enough, Rosebank is also disastrous for our marine environment. As the Minister will know, the pipeline required to transport Rosebank's tiny gas reserves would cut through the Faroe-Shetland sponge belt marine protected area, a precious and fragile ecosystem that is home to myriad species. How can the Government possibly reconcile this development with their commitment to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030, especially in the context of Equinor's assessment of potential damage to coral gardens having been questioned by the regulator? The development would lay infrastructure through a vital ocean habitat, and an oil spill from Rosebank would be potentially catastrophic. The UK already has the most fossil fuel developments in nature-protected sites in the whole world. Let us not add yet another.

There are also plenty of economic arguments against Rosebank, since the development would be staggeringly costly to the public purse. In the words of the UN Secretary-General, investing in new fossil fuel infrastructure is

"moral and economic madness".

It is madness, because if the Secretary of State fails to stop this project going ahead, the British public will carry almost all the costs of developing Rosebank, while the Norwegian owner, Equinor, gets to pocket the profit. To be specific, Equinor would receive more than £3.75 billion in tax breaks, thanks to this Government's subsidy regime. Will the Minister explain to me in what world it is acceptable to hand billions of public money to a climate-wrecking company that last year raked in record profits of almost £24 billion, let alone in the

midst of a cost of living scandal when the NHS is on its knees, mortgage rates are going through the roof and parents cannot afford to feed their children?

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making a compelling argument against licensing new extraction at Rosebank, and one that I agree with. Does it not seem common sense to most people that reliance on oil and gas will not be reduced by drilling for more of it? The ordinary folk of this country can see that. Why does she think the Government are engaged in this crass idiocy of arguing the opposite of common sense?

Would the hon. Lady also reflect on the differences in attitude between the Scottish Government—who have a more critical and hesitant view of new oil exploration in the North sea—and the current UK Government? Would it be better for the decision on the matter to be devolved to the Scottish Government to allow them to make a more considered decision?

Caroline Lucas: I broadly agree; I think it probably should be a devolved issue. I certainly think the Scottish Government are doing a much better job, with more progressive policies in the area of oil and gas. The hon. Gentleman would expect me to refer to the fact that there are Greens in coalition with the SNP in the Scottish Government, and I am pleased about the progress they have managed to make in this area.

I want to come to the position of His Majesty's official Opposition. I am sad to see none of them here in a formal capacity, though I am delighted to see Back Benchers. While I welcome their commitment not to issue new licences if they were to become the next Government, let me be clear that the revelation that they would not revoke Rosebank's licence is no less than a tacit endorsement of this climate catastrophe. I worry that the official Opposition, in refusing even to consider rescinding that licence, may as well have given the green light to the project.

I was shocked to hear hon. Members from the shadow Front Bench team saying that rescinding an existing licence sends exactly the wrong signal to investors all over the world. Frankly, that is absurd. It conflates projects that are already operating in the North sea with Rosebank, which is an entirely new development from which first oil is not expected until between 2026 and 2028. A final investment decision has not yet been taken, with developers saying that that will come shortly after approval. Investors are therefore still assessing whether to press ahead with Rosebank, so the official Opposition should have made it crystal clear to them that they should not press ahead with it.

While it would get more complicated to cancel Rosebank's licence if this reckless Government approved it, that does not mean that it would be impossible. I urge Labour to leave no legal stone unturned and no avenue unexplored to overturn this disastrous decision. That could include, for example, passing new legislation strengthening climate and environmental requirements and thus allowing a licence to be reviewed or revoked, following the Dutch example of phasing out coal power.

The risk of potentially being required to pay costs once again reinforces the urgent need for the UK to withdraw from the energy charter treaty, which allows fossil fuel giants essentially to hold British taxpayers to

ransom. Calls for that have so far fallen on deaf ears but have been bolstered by the Climate Change Committee today, which has said:

“There is a strong case for the UK to reconsider its membership”.

It was reported last week that Rosebank will be approved by the regulators in the next fortnight, after which the Secretary of State will have to decide whether to intervene or let it pass, giving the decision a de facto green light. Time is ticking for the Government to act. The only question is whether they will do the right thing for people and planet or commit a climate crime. The choice is clear, so I will conclude with a number of crucial questions for the Minister.

Will the Government review their approach to oil and gas licensing in the light of today's guidance from the Climate Change Committee? If they do not, do they really want to send the signal that they think they know better than hundreds of scientists nationally and thousands globally? Will they finally scrap the investment allowance, which sees the taxpayer pay fossil fuel companies huge amounts of money to pump yet more filthy oil and gas? Will they withdraw from the energy charter treaty, following many other European countries including France and Italy? Crucially, will the Government stop the development of Rosebank, or are they content to be on the wrong side of history?

I hope that when the Minister responds, he will make reference to the Climate Change Committee's report today. If he has not had time to read it all, I hope he will scroll back on this morning's “Today” programme and listen to Lord Deben at 8.45 am, where he will hear his fellow Conservative colleague, former Minister and now chair of the independent Climate Change Committee say that there is reduced confidence that targets will be met, that just because past targets have been met there is no guarantee that future ones will be, that only 33% of measures necessary to achieve the targets are actually in place and that, in terms of future targets, the Government “are in no state...to achieve those ends and it is...not true to say they will”.

Lord Deben also said that

“the Government is relying, for example, on technologies we don't have. It is not doing the things which we have to do.”

I very much hope the Minister will reflect on those words, as well as my own, and tell us today that the Government will not go ahead with the reckless decision to give a green light to Rosebank.

11.18 am

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing this important debate and on bringing us back into the positions in which we often seem to be in this Chamber.

The hon. Lady made reference to the Climate Change Committee. Lord Deben is coming to the end of a distinguished 10 years as chairman of that committee, which was set up in the Climate Change Act 2008 precisely to challenge Government, critique what we do and encourage further ambitious action. It is in no small part thanks to his leadership and his being waspish—I think his friends would say he was often waspish—from beginning to end that Governments have been challenged and driven to do what they should to deliver on climate. It is thanks to the Climate Change Committee and his

[Graham Stuart]

leadership that this country has cut its emissions by more than any other major economy in the world since 1990. It is partly thanks to him that we have gone from the risible position, left by the Opposition when they left power in 2010, of generating less than 7% of our electricity from renewables to now generating well over 40%. As recently as 2012, nearly 40% of our electricity came from coal, the most polluting of fossil fuels. Next year, it will be 0%.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion is fully aware, and I am sure she understands, that I cannot comment on the detail of the application for the proposed Rosebank oil and gas development. Development proposals for oilfields under existing licences, such as Rosebank, are a matter for the regulators—the North Sea Transition Authority and the Offshore Petroleum Regulator for Environment and Decommissioning—following their standard regulatory processes. As such, it would be neither appropriate nor helpful for me to engage in a running commentary on a live application ahead of a final decision being reached by both regulators.

What I can say is that, as is normal for such applications, the regulators submit all proposals for extensive scrutiny. That scrutiny includes a detailed environmental impact assessment process and an extensive consultation. Comment is invited on the proposals from a number of statutory nature conservation bodies, and there is an opportunity for members of the public and non-governmental organisations to engage in the decision-making process. Once both regulators have made their final decision about the Rosebank application, that decision, along with a detailed summary of OPRED's conclusions on its likely environmental impact, will be published on the OPRED website for all to see and critique.

To move away from the specifics of the Rosebank development, I am proud to say that, unlike those of most other countries, the UK's climate commitments are set in law. Of course, it was this Conservative Government who not only transformed the parlous state that we inherited from the previous Labour Administration, but set in law that we should move to net zero by 2050—we were the first major economy to do so. The UK is unswerving in its determination to meet its climate commitments, and has one of the most ambitious 2030 targets in the world. Between 1990 and 2021, we cut our emissions by 48% while growing the economy by 65%—we decarbonised faster than any other G7 or major economy. As we rapidly transition our energy systems, we are supporting emerging economies to do the same. We are advocating the phase-out of coal power and ending unabated fossil fuel use.

The reality is very different from the picture painted by the hon. Lady and those who intervened on her. This country, the most decarbonised major economy in the world, is more than 75% dependent on fossil fuels for its energy right now; that is the basis of this civilisation. Our aim is to accelerate the reduction in oil and gas use, but we recognise that they are essential to modern life, and will remain so for many years to come, including in the production of cement, steel, plastics, chemicals, medicines and fertilisers. We are a net importer of oil and gas, and a fast-declining producer, so I ask the hon. Lady not to use words such as “expansion”. By supporting new licences, we are moderating the savage decline in domestic production, and that is the right thing to do.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Graham Stuart: I will make a little more progress, and then I will come back to the hon. Lady.

Reducing the decline in domestic production will not increase the use of fossil fuels in the UK. The hon. Lady's economics seem rather upside down. It is demand that typically drives supply, rather than supply driving demand, although I recognise that there are movements in both directions. Increasing domestic production will avoid the need to substitute British gas with foreign liquified natural gas, which has much higher emission intensity. The effect of the proposal from the hon. Lady and His Majesty's Opposition would not be that we consume less fossil fuel; it would be that we import more in tankers. There is not the option to have more Norwegian gas. Not producing our own gas would result in generating higher emissions directly. As well as that, to pick up on the economics of this, they say that the proposal will not affect price. There is a global price; it is a global market. Our oil is traded. It goes to refineries and comes back in the form of medicines, plastics and other things that are vital to our modern society. It is an international market and we are net importers. It is important to recognise that there are tens of billions of pounds coming into the Exchequer, especially at the moment with the energy profits levy tax rate at 75%.

We cannot make out that new projects would somehow cost the taxpayer, or be subsidised by the taxpayer. North sea production brings tens of billions of pounds into the UK Exchequer. It makes a material difference to our energy security because we produce it here at home. It also supports hundreds of thousands of jobs, which His Majesty's Opposition and the Scottish National party have turned their faces against—and for what? Will there be an environmental gain? There will not be. It will not make a difference, by a single barrel of oil, to how much we consume. What it will do is lose hundreds of thousands of jobs, lose tens of billions of pounds for the Exchequer and lead to higher emissions. And it is worth the House recognising this killer point: it will remove the very supply chain that we need for the transition. The Climate Change Committee and every international body looking at this issue say that we need carbon capture, usage and storage, and we need hydrogen. Which companies, capabilities or engineering capacities are going to deliver those? It will be the jobs, people, balance sheets and skills that are vested in the traditional oil and gas companies, all of which are now involved in delivering the transition.

Tommy Sheppard: Will the Minister give way?

Graham Stuart: I will. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can explain why Scottish nationalist policies will have a negative effect on the environment and cause the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs in this country—for what?

Tommy Sheppard: With the greatest of respect, what the Minister says does not make sense. If most of the oil and gas coming out of Rosebank will be exported, how does not doing this lead to an increase in imports?

Graham Stuart: As I say, we are net importers in a global market. Oil and gas is processed in different places. It goes out and it comes back. As net importers,

the alternative to using that gas here is that we will have more tankers coming in. As the hon. Gentleman knows, or certainly should, the upstream emissions attached to that are two and a half times higher than the emissions attached to gas, which Scottish workers are producing from British fields to the benefit of every taxpayer and the energy security of this nation.

Caroline Lucas: It is interesting that the only alternative to one set of fossil fuels is another set of fossil fuels. That is exactly what Lord Deben criticised in his report today. If the Government had done what they were meant to do, and actually set out the investment in home insulation schemes and reduced energy demand, we might not be in this position. If they had scaled up much more in the many other technologies that are out there, we would perhaps not be in this position.

I come back to what the CCC said. I expect the Minister to disagree with me, but does he disagree with Lord Deben and the Climate Change Committee? They said:

“Expansion of fossil fuel production is not in line with Net Zero”.

They said that the UK will need “some oil and gas”, but that that does not

“justify the development of new North Sea fields.”

Does the Minister disagree with his colleague?

Graham Stuart: As I said, North sea oil and gas production is declining. It will continue to decline with new licences—

Caroline Lucas: That was not my question.

Graham Stuart: It will not be expanding; it will actually be reducing. Throughout that time, even as we bring down our demand—ahead of nearly all other countries—we will still be net importers of oil and gas. It makes no sense, or only in the parallel universe occupied by the bizarre fringes of politics does it make sense for us to import—*[Interruption.]* It will not make a difference, by a barrel of oil, to our consumption. However, it will make a difference to the balance sheet, the jobs and the capabilities that we need to do the transition.

The hon. Lady is quite right to challenge me on this country's past record on insulation—on the parlous state of the housing stock, for instance, and energy efficiency. In 2010, when we came into power, just 14% of homes were decently insulated with an energy performance certificate rating of C or above; in other words, 86% were not. That was the legacy from Labour. By the end of this year, it will be 50%; we have moved from 14% to 50%—

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. I do not want to bring this very lively debate to a close, but I am afraid I have to.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Hong Kong National Security Law Anniversary

[SIR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the anniversary of the Hong Kong National Security Law.

It is a pleasure to serve under your suzerainty, Sir George. I hope that this debate will focus not just on Hong Kong, but on some other abuses that have crept in on a wider front. There is a very good piece in the newspaper today by Benedict Rogers, a man who has lived out in Hong Kong and has fought for the rights of Hong Kong Chinese for many years. What he writes has a bearing on the whole debate:

“On 1 July 1997, the then Prince of Wales—now King Charles III—and the last Governor, Chris Patten—handed Hong Kong over to Chinese sovereignty. They did so on the basis of a promise, enshrined in a treaty, signed by Beijing. That promise was a ‘high degree of autonomy’ for Hong Kong, indeed the protection of Hong Kong’s basic freedoms, the rule of law, human rights and way of life at least for 50 years—until 2047. It was the promise of ‘one country, two systems’, enshrined in the Sino-British Joint Declaration which had been signed by Margaret Thatcher and Zhao Zhiyang, at the initiative of China’s paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, in 1984, and registered at the United Nations.”

That is an important statement, because it puts in context what we are doing today in Westminster Hall. The reality is that we had an agreement that protected the rights of the Hong Kong Chinese. Those rights were different from those of mainland China and were sustained by that agreement.

As we mark the grim third anniversary of the imposition of the national security law in Hong Kong, we have to pause to reflect on our actions in the UK in response to the original treaty and its subsequent trashing by the Chinese Government. We find, 26 years later, that all those promises have been broken. They were enshrined in an international treaty that was lodged at the UN, which obliged China and the UK Government to observe and protect the rights of the citizens of Hong Kong under “one country, two systems”.

The problem is that—although initial concerns were raised, announcements were made and the Government put out a defiant message and said, “This is wrong”—we have kind of stepped back progressively. I am not saying that good actions did not take place early on. The UK Government created the British national overseas scheme, which was generous, and I applaud them for that. It acted as a lifeline for many Hong Kong Chinese and enabled them to come over here, or at least have it in the metaphorical bank in case they needed to come over. Of course, it is worth saying that the Chinese Government do not recognise that scheme and therefore do not recognise any existing rights for the Hong Kong Chinese in Hong Kong who are able to claim BNO status, but it at least gives them a way out should they need it, although many will find it more difficult as time goes on.

My problem with the present position is that, knowing full well that the national security law has been imposed in Hong Kong in contravention of the treaty, which was trashed by that change and the subsequent arrest, incarceration, persecution and torture of those who,

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

once upon a time, campaigned for their legitimate democratic rights—things that we take for granted in the UK—the UK Government now seem to be hedging on upholding their promises to the people of Hong Kong under the Sino-British agreement. My hon. Friend the Minister must forgive me for making this point, but I am going to make it strongly. As one of several parliamentarians—there are two others here—who have been sanctioned by the Chinese Government for raising these issues, I think we have a right to at least try to speak on behalf of those who now find their rights and opportunities stripped away.

The problem is that the UK Government have never sanctioned any of those who were party to the national security law. None of those who governed Hong Kong subsequently has been sanctioned. Yet the US Government have sanctioned 10, I believe, of those responsible at the highest level. I do not understand that. Perhaps the Minister could explain it to me. It may be that I simply lack the intelligence to understand the nuances of Government policy or certain behind-the-scenes discussions—I am prepared to give way a little on that—but the fact is that a nation that had no particular responsibility for Hong Kong and was not a party to the Sino-British agreement has sanctioned 10 responsible people in Hong Kong, yet we have not sanctioned anybody. I hope that the Minister can explain to those of us who are not in the Government exactly why that is.

The figures show a bleak reality. Some 248 arrests have been made under the new law, and 140 individuals are facing charges. Over 1,000 political prisoners, as we would understand them, are in Hong Kong today, which highlights the severe suppression of dissent and the erosion of the basic freedoms that were guaranteed under the Sino-British agreement. The agreement was set to be in place until 2047. I am sorry to keep emphasising that point, but it needs emphasising. Many people think that this was just the normal transition. It was not. China had an obligation to continue with those rights and responsibilities, troubling though they may have been.

The rampant use of pre-trial detention under the national security law—over 100 individuals have been remanded in custody, for an average of nearly two and a half years—the disregard for due process and the prolonged detention without trial continue to raise serious questions about the existence of the rule of law and the protections of human rights in Hong Kong. Although sitting British judges no longer sit on the Court of Appeal in Hong Kong, I am sorry to say that there are many retired British judges who still choose to go to Hong Kong to promote the façade that they can somehow help in this regard.

Interestingly, the American Government circulated a document among US businesses a year and a half ago, I think, that recommended that businesses that were involved with or based in Hong Kong should recognise that the common law would no longer give them the protections that they would otherwise have been afforded in their business and contract relations. Will the Minister tell us exactly what we have advised businesses? Have we circulated any documents to them about whether they should be concerned about the placement of their headquarters in Hong Kong? I will certainly be happy to give way to the Minister if he wishes to make that clear.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on bringing yet another debate on Chinese human rights abuse to this House. I think the accusations that he has quite rightly made are an underestimate: by my reckoning, the US Government have in fact sanctioned some 11 people—former Chief Executive Carrie Lam, Chief Executive John Lee and nine other Hong Kong officials—for their role in the crackdowns in the city. The Foreign Office has very clearly said that the security law is a clear breach of the joint declaration. At the last count, I think at least 18 journalists have been arrested, numerous free speech media organisations have been closed down, several opposition parties have been driven out of operation and democratically elected places have been reduced to no more than 20% in forthcoming elections. I am sure my right hon. Friend will get on to this, but what have the UK Government actually done to show the Chinese that that oppressive activity has consequences? Nobody has been sanctioned, but what other sanctions have been brought to bear? What are the consequences of what the Chinese are doing?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I stand corrected. My hon. Friend is quite right: it is 11, which makes it even worse. Foremost among them is the Catholic entrepreneur and—most importantly—journalist Jimmy Lai, who languishes in prison on a trumped-up charge. I will come back to that point, because I have further questions to ask the UK Government, but I hope that the Minister has taken note of my hon. Friend's comments about the actions of the United States. Our words about the transgressions have remained words; they have not given rise to actions that I would have expected from the UK Government. I am sorry to say that. They are a Government I support, but a Government who at the moment I have to say are in deficit in this area. I want to point out a few more areas where I find our Government in deficit.

What assessment have the Government made of all those figures we have been chucking out, as young political prisoners, three quarters of whom are aged 30 or under, bear the brunt of this oppressive regime? It is deeply troubling that minors face the longest sentences of all, averaging something like 27 months, further exacerbating their plight. What also bothers me is that the Government, having not gone to Hong Kong officially, suddenly sent a Government Minister there a few weeks ago. As I understand it, now that his visits and meetings have been published, Lord Johnson met no democracy campaigners, said nothing officially or publicly about the Sino-British agreement, said nothing at all about the breach of human rights, said nothing at all about those sanctioned, and, to my knowledge, said nothing at all about the plight of the British citizen Jimmy Lai.

I want to stay on that point because, of all the things the Minister could have said, he could have said something about the bad behaviour with regard to a British passport holder and citizen. I want to say it again: Jimmy Lai is a British passport holder and citizen. As much as every one of us sitting in this room today, he has rights. At the front of the passport, it states “without let or hindrance”. What is the worth of the passport that I and everybody else in this room carry, if my Government will not call him a British citizen with rights under international law for consular access? America refers to him as a British citizen and passport holder. The European Union refers to him as a British citizen and passport holder. What country

does not refer to him as a British citizen and passport holder publicly? Sadly, that would be my Government—our Government. For some reason, the British Government take it upon themselves to know, beyond any other family member or Jimmy Lai himself, what is good for him. What is good for him is what he wants.

Jimmy Lai did not flee Hong Kong after the trashing of the Sino-British agreement. Why? Because he is a brave man who believed that as long as he stayed, he could be the guarantor of some of the rights that might disappear. He wanted to be the icon who believed in democracy and human rights, so that those who were fearful and fleeing, and worried for their lives and the lives of their family, would look to him and see a brave man standing on the hill saying, “I’m not going anywhere. This is my home.”

A British citizen, a brave man, now languishes in prison on a trumped-up charge that has nothing to do with reality. He faces a second court case later this year, where he will almost certainly be charged under the new security laws for sedition. Jimmy Lai knows, and his family know, that it is unlikely he will ever see the light of day outside that prison. He knew that from the very word go; he made his choices on the basis that he knew that from the very word go. He did not flee.

Surely Jimmy Lai wants us to say that he is a proud British citizen and passport holder. He is not a dual national, by the way. I wish the British Government would stop referring to him as a dual national: it plays into the Chinese Government’s hands, because they declare that they do not recognise dual nationals. He is not a dual national; he is a British passport holder. I want that to be very clear. His family, who I have spoken to and who had to flee to Taiwan, say he wants to be pronounced a British citizen and passport holder. All I ask is that at the end of the debate my hon. Friend the Minister gets up and says, “He is a British citizen and passport holder, and we intend to pursue the Chinese Government publicly for consular rights. He is a political prisoner, and there is no question beyond that.”

I congratulate and applaud my Government on the generous BNO scheme and on extending it. To give credit where credit is due, the Government have done well on that. The trouble is that after everything that has been going on and the failure to recognise even a British passport holder, many BNO passport holders in the UK are now fearful about their own status. We know that many of them have been hunted down in the UK by those terrible Chinese police stations, which are quite illegal but have existed in the UK for an unnecessarily long time. We know that they have been threatened and bullied about their status. They worry about their protections under a BNO scheme, which are far fewer than those of having a British passport and being a British citizen. I would like the Government to consider that our failure to act in that way for Jimmy Lai has consequences for those we would wish to protect in a wider scheme. One need only talk to them to understand their concerns. We need to make those changes and announcements.

On the basis of what my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, when will the UK Government put Hong Kong officials, who were responsible in the first place for many of those human rights abuses, under notice that they will be sanctioned? They should have been sanctioned by now. Is there a chance that the British Government are

reviewing it? I know what the British Government and the Minister will say: “We never discuss sanctions.” I wish he would say at least that he will take note of what we have said.

For Hongkongers facing the plight of having to risk entering the Chinese consulate for the renewal of their Hong Kong passports, this policy places them in a vulnerable position. They are worried. What alternative procedures will the Government pursue to give those people a greater sense of certainty, such as by providing other things like travel documents or establishing a successful and secure passport renewal process that does not necessitate entering the grounds of a Chinese consulate? I remind everybody that the last person I knew of who entered a Chinese consulate’s grounds was dragged there by the consul general, was beaten up and had his hair torn out. I met him afterwards, and he was traumatised. The Chinese Government did not do anything, and the British Government talked about the law, but he quietly disappeared later on and no apology was made. It was a terrible act. I understand why BNO passport holders here are fearful of what will happen to them if they enter the consulate. The big concern and fear is about whether they will come out again. Will the Government look for other ways for them to establish their legitimacy, other than being forced into this damaging process?

The visit of Liu Jianchao last week also sent a signal to many people who are here under the BNO scheme. It is deeply regrettable that the Government chose, for some reason, to host him. This is a man deeply involved in China’s controversial fox hunt operations, which hunt down Chinese dissidents around the world and seek to get them back to China using techniques that include threatening their families, televising that threat, and eventual torture and arrest on re-arrival. It is an example of China’s disregard for international norms and human rights that it behaves in that way so publicly. By welcoming this individual—there is a photograph of a Minister sitting next to him; given the abuse of international norms and human rights, I am astonished that we would allow a Government Minister to meet him and sit with him—are we not sending a chilling message to everybody else that we place that relationship on a higher plane than people’s human rights and liberties?

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): On the point about the Hong Kong national security law having extraterritorial reach, some in the People’s Republic refer to centuries of humiliation, when their forebears made concessions to other imperial powers. Does the right hon. Member think that since the crackdown in 2020 against students in Hong Kong who were simply singing songs and waving flags, it is reasonable to say that the People’s Republic is behaving in a repressive fashion that was typically associated with 19th-century imperial powers?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: These are abuses of human rights and democracy. The hon. Gentleman is right: this is an appalling return to a time we thought had long passed. We now respect people’s human rights, but that is not the case in China, and it is now not the case in Hong Kong. The worst part about the situation in Hong Kong, which he is right to raise, is that we were one of the guarantors, but we seem to be shuffling away from that guarantee. Where other countries have acted

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

on the abuse, we seem to be stepping back. I am concerned about that. I would love to know more about it from the Minister.

Tim Loughton: Going back to the visit by Liu Jianchao last week, a photograph was publicly promoted—through Government circles as well—with lots of smiling Chinese officials. I counted at least five parliamentary colleagues in that photo, including a senior Government Minister, sitting alongside a notorious senior Chinese Government official responsible for snatch-and-grab, effectively illegal, rendition. Given that my right hon. Friend and I and five other parliamentarians have been sanctioned by China, and that the Chinese ambassador and other Chinese Government officials are, quite rightly, banned from coming to this place as a result of the good work of the Speaker, does my right hon. Friend not think that no parliamentary colleagues should be seen sitting down with Chinese officials of this calibre and reputation? They should not be doing it, should they?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: My hon. Friend knows very well that I agree completely with him. I was shocked to see that picture. I wrote to the Prime Minister on the Sunday, shortly before Liu Jianchao was due to come over. I also wrote to the Speaker, who was in agreement that the meeting would clearly not take place in the House of Commons or Parliament generally. When I wrote to the Prime Minister, I was told I would get a reply at some point—although the man is gone now, so the reply will come after the event, which is sad, but there we go.

The point is that I did not know at that stage that Liu Jianchao was going to meet any officials; I was told that he was not and that he was going to meet MPs. I then saw the picture the hon. Gentleman referred to, in which a Government Minister is sitting front and centre next to this man, whose reputation is so utterly appalling that it beggars belief that anybody would want to sit next to him, but everyone in that picture is grinning and happy. That our colleagues should then attend is another thing, and I simply say that there should be some solidarity in this place. If people are sanctioned for standing up for their beliefs, we do not want to undermine that by sitting next to these characters. I would therefore like to know what assessment the Government made before the meeting with Liu Jianchao.

After all, this place should be a beacon of freedom. I have the highest respect for the procedures, processes and nature of Government—I served in Government myself for some years—and I understand the difficulties, but there is a particular reason why this individual should not have been allowed to sit next to a Government Minister. When the deputy governor of Xinjiang was going to come over here, I and others went out to the protests with the Uyghurs, because he was part of the design of the terrible system that is now, essentially, genocide against them.

We campaigned outside the Foreign Office, which eventually said that it would not allow an official to see him, although one had been going to. I was happy that it came to its senses and said no. By the way, when people say that British foreign policy cannot persuade anybody any more, it is not true, because every other

European country that was going to see him said no as a result. So we have some sway after all; we have some locus in this. I therefore want to ask the Minister what thought was given to this before this man arrived here.

I spoke earlier about Lord Johnson's visit, and I was astonished to find that the problems or the plight of the people we have spoken about today, who have been attacked, arrested and trashed, were not raised particularly—it was all meetings with business. I can understand it if he meets with business, but meeting with business in Hong Kong is not the same as meeting with business in the United States or the UK, where people have freedom of expression and are covered by human rights and a workable law. That is not the case in Hong Kong, and we cannot detach ourselves from what is going on politically in Hong Kong if we choose to go to Hong Kong to make business arrangements.

As I say, the American Government have already warned their businesses that common law does not protect them in Hong Kong in the way that it would have done under the Sino-British agreement. That is a really important point. English common law is the finest legal system in the world, and it is being adopted by countries all over the world, particularly for business deals. It is straightforward and much easier to operate, and it runs under a system that has been tested through time, and many people welcome that. However, the freedoms and rights in it disappear when they clash with the new law that exists in Hong Kong. That problem did not go away, and things like countering foreign sanctions, and businesses getting trashed as a result of these new laws, do not seem to have been raised either.

However, I want to return to Jimmy Lai. Of all the things I have spoken about today, this man should be in our thoughts. He is a brave democrat and a decent man. He is a journalist. He speaks truth unto power. He was fearless in the way that, when he had to, he attacked the Legislative Council and the decisions it made. He was constant and convinced in the role that he played.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that we should take decisive action to uphold the promise of protecting our citizens. I want to know what steps the Government intend to take, not only on many of those who are languishing in jail but, importantly, on Jimmy Lai, because he is iconic. Are we going to say to the Chinese Government, "Enough is enough. There are consequences to your actions. We intend now to tell the world that this man is a British citizen and a British passport holder. We have responsibilities for him, and we intend to claim those under international law. We are not prepared any longer to do things quietly behind the scenes. If you choose to go on down this road, we will sanction all those responsible for the introduction of the new laws and the crackdown, as America has already done"? We should be telling China that that is where we are going. I know that we worry about losing business with China, but sometimes the price of business can be too high, and I think that that is the case here.

All that I want to know is that we recognise a British citizen, we recognise a British passport holder and we treat them the same, no matter where they live or where they are. That is the point of the passport. I carry my passport with pride, but I doubt its provenance now, as a result of our attitude and the attitude of those at the Foreign Office to Jimmy Lai. I ask them simply to examine their conscience and to ask themselves whether,

if they had been incarcerated by a foreign Government that had broken an international agreement, they would not want the Government and the Foreign Office to stand up for them in the boldest and bravest ways, as they should?

I have two last points, and I will be brief. I understand that there is a lot of movement at the moment on the National Security Bill, which is providing the Government with some tools—for example, the enhanced tier of the foreign influence register scheme. However, we do not know yet whether China will be included in that enhanced tier. If my hon. Friend the Minister cannot respond to that point now, I ask him to take away the fact that we here in Westminster Hall, and more widely in the House, want China moved into that tier, because it poses a direct and constant threat.

The second thing, which I will finish on, is that an idea may be brewing in the Government that they want to do an energy trade deal with China. If that is the case, they need to rethink. The idea of rewarding China for its bad behaviour and becoming more dependent on an autocratic regime smacks of failed policy. I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to tell me at the end of the debate that there is no such discussion and that no such trade arrangement will be attempted.

In conclusion, this is a sad anniversary. These people, who have been arrested and incarcerated for the freedoms that we take for granted in the United Kingdom, need to be supported. Overall, the best thing we can do to show the Chinese Government that we shall not tolerate this is to say that Jimmy Lai is a British citizen—a British passport holder—and that we demand the rights that come with British citizenship, including consular access. I ask nothing more of my British Government than that they support a British passport holder.

3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on his continuing energy, enthusiasm and wisdom in highlighting this issue. Today we gather to discuss what has happened in the past three years, and he has outlined that very well and shown what has happened with the implementation of the national security law in Hong Kong.

Immediately after the passage of the National Security Law in 2020, universities fired academics involved in pro-democracy activities, and pro-democracy slogans and songs were banned in schools and universities. Statues and memorials were removed, and pro-democracy newspapers were shut, including *Apple Daily*, owned by British citizen Jimmy Lai, who currently sits in jail.

The right hon. Member put the case very well for Jimmy Lai, who is a British passport holder. I always carry my passport with me, and the first page says:

“Her Britannic Majesty’s Secretary of State requests and requires in the name of Her Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance, and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary.”

That is what the right hon. Member is asking for, and that is what I and others are asking for. We cannot understand, with respect, why our Minister and our Government have not grasped that, when it is clear to us what is asked for: the rights that that passport gives me and every other person here.

The Guardian reported that the entire Hong Kong opposition party quit after four of its members were disqualified from serving in office for being, in the words of the Chinese, “unpatriotic”. Those members were standing up for liberty and freedom in a process that they supported, and they were denied that right. In January 2021, 53 Hong Kong democrats and activists were charged under the national security law for participating in an unofficial democratic primary election in 2020. Some 47 of those 53 activists—known as the Hong Kong 47—are currently on trial in Hong Kong, charged under the national security law. It is the largest national security law trial to date, which gives an idea of the ferocity of the Chinese authorities against people who just want liberty.

Hong Kong’s rule of law and judicial system continue to be destroyed under the national security law. There are more than 1,400 political prisoners in Hong Kong, which also holds the highest proportion of female political prisoners in the world. Should we not be concerned about that? I think we are, because we are here today to reiterate these points. Foreign judges, including Lord Reed and Lord Hodge from the UK, have left Hong Kong, because they did not want to legitimise the current Administration, which continues to crush Hong Kong’s most basic civil liberties. As has been said, it is immoral that any British or foreign judge should sit in Hong Kong courts, regardless of how much they are paid. I again urge our Minister and our Government to ensure that no British judge sits on Hong Kong courts and profits from the current turmoil in that international city.

We have previously discussed the case of Jimmy Lai, and right hon. and hon. Members have reiterated it today. He is a British citizen who has been prevented from having his lawyer of choice. Even when it comes to giving a legal opinion, his right has been denied. The percentage of district council seats that are democratically chosen now sits at around 20%. There are clearly issues; I look to the Minister to ascertain how we can play our part in addressing these outrages and these attacks on democracy.

The Hong Kong authorities continue to erode freedom of the press. The Reporters Without Borders world press freedom index for 2023 makes for poor reading. Hong Kong was ranked 140 out of 180 countries. In 2022, it fell nearly 70 places on the previous year, exposing the grave impact of the national security law, which the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green referred to. Hong Kong is not the global financial hub that the world once knew. According to an Atlantic Council report that assessed the risks in Hong Kong’s business environment, when journalists’ right to report freely is threatened, all forms of reporting, including on the state of financial markets, may be affected. That has clearly had an impact on financial markets. Companies cannot thrive in that type of environment, and they are voting with their feet.

The Atlantic Council also raised concerns about the privacy of corporate data and the intellectual property rights of companies that continue to operate in and from Hong Kong. The influence of the Chinese authorities is detrimentally impacting on those businesses. The Government should do more to warn businesses and businesspeople of the risks they face working and investing in Hong Kong due to the national security law. May I ask

[Jim Shannon]

the Minister—I am ever mindful that he is not the Minister directly responsible—to respond to that question today?

Prior to the passage of the national security law in June 2020, the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), said that the national security law would violate Hong Kong's one country, two systems principle. After its passage, a statement was made affirming that the China-imposed national security law caused China to break its promise to Hong Kong that it would be able to govern itself and breached China's international commitments to Britain under the Sino-British joint declaration. Quite clearly, international law has been broken by China as well.

In the Government's latest six-monthly report on Hong Kong in May 2023, the Foreign Secretary urged Beijing to heed the call in an independent United Nations Human Rights Council report to remove the Beijing-imposed national security law in Hong Kong. What has happened since then? I suspect very little, but the question was posed by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green in introducing the debate, and I am posing it too.

In answer to a question about human rights in Hong Kong just last year, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon said in the other place:

"The Hong Kong authorities' decision to target leading pro-democracy figures including Cardinal Zen, Margaret Ng, Hui-Po-Keung and Denise Ho under the National Security Law is unacceptable."

The Chinese authorities seem to have a total disregard for what is happening. Since the passage of the national security law in 2020, the British Government have referred to it as a violation of the Sino-British joint declaration.

I welcome the fact that the British and Canadian Governments have offered generous visa schemes. The Government are to be congratulated on those schemes, which allow Hongkongers to escape from the oppressive consequences of the national security law. When he sums up, will the Minister say how we are working with our allies—Canada, the United States and other countries—to represent the Hongkongers?

While international support is welcome, it is clearly not enough. Hong Kong continues to deteriorate day by day. There is less freedom there today than there was the last time we had a debate—I think about three months, or indeed a year, ago. We must do more to protect the Hongkongers who have moved to the UK and who now face harassment and intimidation by the Chinese Communist party, including through the Confucius Institutes in British universities. I have constituents who are good friends of mine—I have known them for many, many years—who were clearly being tracked and whose activities were being monitored. We asked about that and were told that the information was sent on, and that the police forces—the Police Service of Northern Ireland, in particular—were aware of it, but the fact that it can happen is distressing, both for my constituents and for me as their elected representative.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to call for the release of British citizen Jimmy Lai, as did the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green and

others. That is one of the key demands of our Minister and our Government from this debate. Jimmy Lai has been behind bars for 910 days. We should continue to put pressure on the Hong Kong Government to immediately repeal the national security law, and we should speak out against legislation in Hong Kong that continues to destroy the rule of law, the judicial system, the free press and the vibrant financial centre that the world once knew. Today, we have a chance to make a plea on behalf of Jimmy Lai and all those who have been detained by the Chinese authorities. In this House, we have a duty to represent them to the fullest of our capabilities.

3.10 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) not just on securing a debate on this grim but important anniversary, but on his powerful and compelling speech. He made the case that we in this country, and specifically the Government, should do more than has been done in the past few years to push back against what the Chinese Government are doing, both in Hong Kong under the guise of their national security law and around the world, not least in this country.

I should say that the Government have done some good things: I congratulate them on introducing the BNO visa route for Hong Kong citizens, which was unquestionably a positive development. It provides the opportunity for BNO status holders and their families to live, work and study here in the UK. The figures speak for themselves: we have had more than 160,000 applications since the status was first introduced two and a half years ago. I am afraid that figure shows how essential it was for those who no longer feel that their way of life is safe in Hong Kong.

I am particularly grateful that the scheme was further opened to younger Hong Kong people following a campaign that I worked on with others who are present in the Chamber. As my right hon. Friend said, those born after 1997 are in many ways the most vulnerable to the Chinese Government's crackdown in Hong Kong, but until the Government agreed to change the law they were ineligible under the original scheme. Those are both positive steps. I do not want to be unremittingly negative, but I must point out that the BNO scheme is no substitute for holding Beijing to account across the board. The Government's routine answer to questions about Hong Kong is that they will not shirk their responsibilities to Hong Kong people and their commitments under the Sino-British joint declaration, but the supporting evidence that they always bring out is the BNO scheme, and so far nothing else.

We need to be clear that allowing Hongkongers to come to the UK does not hold Beijing to account for breaking international agreements with the UK. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister said what concrete action has been taken to hold the Chinese Government to account for what the UK Government call an "ongoing breach" of the Sino-British joint declaration, which is supposed to remain in force for another 24 years. Have they, for example, registered any formal objection to joint declaration breaches, as is provided under the Vienna convention on the law of treaties?

I am something of a heretic in that I wince slightly when the House of Commons demands that the British Government and Foreign Office Ministers take a stand and do something about practically every crisis that emerges around the world, for many of which the British Government have no locus to intervene, but in this case we absolutely do. We signed this treaty, so this is genuinely a British Government issue, and not just some kind of emotional attachment to democracy around the world, which we all have. The phrase the Government like to use is “robust pragmatism”. If that means anything, it must mean ensuring that those who break binding international agreements with us are not simply permitted to get away with it.

We have had some discussion already about Hongkongers in the UK. It is worth pointing out that this is the largest peacetime migration to the UK from outside Europe in history. The Uganda lifeboat scheme set up to assist those fleeing Idi Amin reached around 28,000 people. The Hong Kong scheme is already at 160,000. The Ugandan scheme came with a well-crafted integration plan. As recent conflicts between Hongkongers and the mainland Chinese authorities in this country have shown, such as the shocking attack on University of Southampton students earlier this month, full integration of Hong Kong people is not without difficulty.

Can the Minister tell us what efforts are being made to ensure that Hong Kong people feel safe in this country? How do the Government plan to address the issue of Chinese state-sponsored intimidation such as that mentioned earlier, perpetrated by the Chinese consul general in Manchester, on our soil? I am sure the Minister agrees with me that Hong Kong people are entitled to the same rights as the rest of us in the UK and must not feel as if their right to assembly and protest is somehow curtailed due to the Chinese Government’s intimidation techniques and transnational repression.

We must remain vigilant and responsive to the evolving needs of this growing constituency of fellow residents of this country. I hope the Government will continue to engage with BNO holders, the relevant organisation and the experts to develop policies that address their broader challenges, beyond visa provisions. We owe it to these brave individuals to provide them with the necessary support and opportunities to thrive in the UK.

We have had much discussion of the Jimmy Lai case and I know that many Hongkongers, in the wake of that case, feel unsafe when travelling. They fear that the UK, frankly, will not defend them if Beijing attempts to apprehend them in China, Hong Kong or even a third country from which they may be extradited. Again, can the Minister set out the Government’s policy regarding Hong Kong BNO holders when they travel outside this country?

It is also worth the Government considering a discrepancy in our approach to these people. It is not well known that Commonwealth citizens who do not require leave to remain in the UK are eligible to stand for Parliament. In correspondence with Luke de Pulford of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China last year, the former Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Dame Priti Patel) confirmed that that did not extend to Hong Kong people due to a now obsolete rule associated with an annex to the joint declaration. That is in spite of Hong Kong people

having been in the same category as those from Commonwealth countries previously for the purposes of immigration law. Many of the 160,000 people are already engaged with political parties in the UK and it feels wrong that they will be excluded from representative politics for another five years. I hope the Minister will agree to look at that.

One last individual case that the Government should consider is that of Andy Li, one of 12 Hongkongers who tried to flee Hong Kong in a boat in August 2020. All were apprehended and taken to Shenzhen prison. We do not know what happened there, but it was sufficiently awful to have persuaded Andy to testify against Jimmy Lai, a man he has never met. Andy has now been transferred to Hong Kong, where he was convicted for collusion with foreign forces. However, he has still not been sentenced, and it seems that the authorities will not do so until he has testified at Jimmy Lai’s trial, underlining the depths to which a once proud legal system has now sunk. Andy Li is a courageous, non-violent Hongkonger whose only crime was to work to defend the promises set out in the joint declaration and Basic Law. He is now in prison precisely because we failed to keep the Chinese Government to their promises.

Some of those sanctioned by the Chinese Government, including my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) and Lord Alton of Liverpool, were mentioned in Andy Li’s case file as an example of the foreign forces with which he is supposed to have colluded. It was on that basis that all those figures were warned by the Foreign Office of extradition to China as they are likely seen as criminal under the national security law, which claims universal jurisdiction even over foreign nationals. Again, I hope the Minister will agree with me that this House and the Government cannot stand by while people are imprisoned because of entirely legitimate work with Members of this place and will agree to redouble their efforts to see Andy Li freed.

I appreciate the difficulties that Ministers face in maintaining a position of robust pragmatism, but it is incumbent on them to defend the rule of law and international treaties, and they need to defend that position consistently and over a long period. That would be in the best traditions of the British Government and the British people. We owe it to Hongkongers to maintain the “robust” part of “robust pragmatism” for as long as it takes.

3.21 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I was not intending to speak in this debate, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and fellow sanctionee has spurred me on to fill the short gap that we might have in this debate. There is rarely a debate on China in this place that I am not chafing at the bit to participate in. I agree with everything that my right hon. Friends have said and I will not repeat it. Certainly the generosity and necessity of the BNO scheme has shown its worth. I fear that many more than the 160,000 former residents of Hong Kong here already will swell those numbers.

The rule of law, justice, free speech and anything resembling freedom were snuffed out over more than 60 years in Tibet. They have been snuffed out in recent years in Xinjiang and are now being aggressively snuffed out in Hong Kong. The rule of law, as any of us would

[Tim Loughton]

recognise it, does not exist in China. I want to give two examples. We had a meeting of the Conservative human rights commission at the beginning of this week and heard testimony from two very brave men who have been the victims and fallen foul of—I will not call it the Chinese justice system, because there is no justice—the Chinese legal system.

One of them, Peter Humphrey, is a 67-year-old British citizen from Surrey who had 48 years of experience in China. He did a lot of work in China and was working for GlaxoSmithKline when in July 2013 he and his wife were arrested and imprisoned on charges of illegal information gathering after conducting an investigation for GSK. They spent two years in Chinese prisons during which time Peter developed advanced prostate cancer because medical treatment was deliberately withheld in a bid to coerce a false confession. He was the first prominent member of the foreign business community in China to be imprisoned by the Xi Jinping regime and the case attracted extensive media coverage. He was also the first foreigner to be paraded in a cage on Chinese television in a notorious broadcast of a false and forced TV confession.

In 2019 there was the case of the Tesco Christmas cards, which gained a lot of attention when a six-year-old girl from Tooting opened a box of Christmas cards bought in Tesco to find that one of them had already been filled out. The cards were made in China. On the front the card featured a kitten in a Santa hat. However, inside one of the cards was this message:

“We are foreign prisoners in Shanghai Qingpu prison China. Forced to work against our will. Please help us and notify human rights organization. Use the link to contact Mr Peter Humphrey.”

So Peter was specifically mentioned in that note. It was from a prisoner in the gulag—one of many millions who were being forced into labour and used by companies in China to sell their goods to an unsuspecting Tesco, which, to give it its due, ceased business with the company that provided the goods. The trouble is that it is almost impossible to source where many of these things come from. We know how so many things are made in China and disguised in various component parts.

The second person who we heard testimony from earlier this week was a 42-year-old Romanian citizen, Marius Balo. Many of the people in the room were in tears at the testimonies that the men gave about their experiences at the hands of the Chinese Government. In 2014, Marius was wrongfully arrested, along with all the staff of the Chinese company for which he worked as a part-time employee. The company was accused of contract fraud, which Marius had known absolutely nothing about. It was entirely trumped up. He spent the next two years in a 12 square-metre cage with no way to contact anyone in the outside world, and a further six years in the same Shanghai prison as Peter Humphrey.

This is going on all the time. Those two men have been exceedingly brave in not hiding their experiences, but speaking up. They have done so on behalf of the many thousands of people in similar situations in Chinese jails and in the Chinese legal system. We owe them a debt of gratitude as they continue to speak up. It is estimated that there are something like 5 million prisoners in Chinese jails, of whom over 5,000 are estimated to be overseas nationals. We do not know how many of them

are British, and we do not know what support they are getting from British consular missions. Perhaps the Minister could tell us how many British nationals, in addition to Jimmy Lai, are in Chinese prisons at the moment and explain what support they are receiving.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I wonder whether my hon. Friend might be so bold as to ask the Minister how many have been in prison for longer than a year and are still awaiting trial. Many of these people have not even had the right to a trial.

Tim Loughton: That is entirely the point. It is not just a question of their having dodgy justice, but a question of their having to wait years and years, just like the 45 people who are still going through what is likely to be a six-month trial. They were in jail, restricted of their liberty, for many months before that.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green mentioned earlier, more than 100 people have been remanded in custody for an average of nearly two and a half years. Under trumped up charges, they are incarcerated in pretty grim conditions before they even have a chance to argue their case, if indeed they are given that chance. Often the defendants are not even allowed in court to argue their case. The jury system does not exist in many cases, and the verdict is predetermined. Something like 99.9% of all those prosecutions result in a conviction, and 99.9% of appeals against those convictions are turned down.

As I said, justice does not exist in Hong Kong and the whole of China. There have to be consequences when that specifically undermines British interests and when the British agreement has been, in the Foreign Office's own words, flouted and breached. Other nations seem to be taking that breach more seriously than one of the co-signatories of that agreement, which has a duty of care to the many millions of citizens still in Hong Kong, let alone the increasing number escaping its borders.

There is no rule of law, and the cases that I cited predate the national security law, since when things have got much worse. We know that the Chinese do nothing when faced with just a war of words. The only time the Chinese take notice is when those allegations have consequences and Governments follow through on those consequences. Other nations, particularly the Americans, have followed through with legislation that has had direct consequences for the ability to trade, for people's ability to travel, for investment and so on, and it is bizarre and completely unacceptable that we have not followed the Americans' lead on even a fraction of those.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent speech. I think what he is reaching for and what would be helpful to know from the Government is what we, the Foreign Office or the UK are doing to take action. He has mentioned sanctions. When people are effectively taken as pawns or hostages, the other thing we can and should do—in relation to Beijing, but also Iran, Russia and many other countries—is raise that under the new arbitrary detention mechanism alliance that we pioneered with Canada. Does my hon. Friend agree that sanctions and words alone are not enough, and that action in international fora that can embarrass those who take hostages is imperative?

Tim Loughton: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. That is just one of many devices available to the United Kingdom Government. For some reason, they have chosen to use none of them.

Let me give the Minister a series of questions; I hope that he has plenty of time to answer them and many others that have arisen. Do the Government agree with the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that the national security law

“has de facto abolished the independence of the judiciary of Hong Kong SAR”?

What steps will the Government take to communicate their discontent with China’s ongoing breaching of the internationally binding Sino-British joint declaration? It should not just be, “You are a bit naughty. We signed this agreement, and you do not seem to have stuck to it—would you mind awfully doing something about it?” It must not be that sort of “Dad’s Army” sergeant approach to things: “Would you mind awfully?” There have to be consequences. What are the Government doing about it? If the Chinese say nothing, what will we then do in response?

I have some more questions. What assessment have the Government made about reports that Hong Kong’s status as a financial centre is being used to bypass western sanctions on Russia? What assessment have the Government made of UK strategic assets currently held by the Hong Kong Government? What plans do the UK Government have to review the status of Hong Kong’s economic and trade offices in the UK following the enactment of the national security law and the incident at the Chinese consulate in Manchester, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green mentioned? Extraordinarily, the consul general not only admitted to having beaten up somebody who was protesting outside—there was no hiding it—but, when interviewed on television, said, “Well, it’s my job.” He was bang to rights. What further evidence was needed? It was on film—in his own words. He had broken the law and assaulted somebody who was freely at liberty in the United Kingdom. The Government did nothing until he was spirited away by the Chinese Government, and then it was too late.

I have three other questions. What actions are the Government taking to protect Hongkongers now in the UK who face harassment, intimidation and threats from agents of the Chinese Communist party after the incident in Manchester? Lots of people are rather scared that they are going to have a knock on their door. What steps are the Government taking to expand their Chinese expertise in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, including through the recruitment of Cantonese and Mandarin speakers?

Finally, what support are the Government offering to UK nationals who have been targeted by the national security law? I declare an interest, because those nationals include the seven parliamentarians who have been sanctioned under the national security law, the consequences of which, other than the bans on travel and investment, we do not know. We have been offered no protection or added support by the Government, and yet the Government continue to be willing to meet representatives of that regime and give them publicity, as if we were dealing with any other normal democratic nation that respects the rule of law. China does not. It does not in Hong

Kong. This law is appalling. We do not just need to say so; we need to make it clear to the Chinese that there are consequences from going through with it.

3.35 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing the debate, and I recognise his determination to keep the persecution in Hong Kong and the Government of China’s record on human rights more generally as live issues for consideration by this House and for response and action by the UK Government.

The UK’s history as a colonial power in Hong Kong has left a series of moral and legal obligations on this country. The population of Hong Kong, like the populations of many countries around the world, are still living with the legacy of an era and a mindset that saw territories and peoples as the playthings of men who thought themselves so powerful that they could decide the fate of empires from thousands of miles away in the Locarno Suite and the Map Room of King Charles Street. If that mindset is wrong in the present day, and we rightly condemn strong men and dictatorial regimes who seek to annex or govern territories without democratic mandates, we must also recognise that that kind of mindset was wrong when it was being exercised in this country in years gone by and be clear that we intend to learn lessons from the past and resolve to work for democracy, freedom and human rights around the whole world.

As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said at the start of the debate, even in the complex story of postcolonial transitions, the Sino-British agreement regarding the future of Hong Kong is probably unique. He was right to stress that of particular relevance to this debate is the agreement between both parties that the economic and social systems in Hong Kong prevailing in 1997 would remain unchanged, as would the rights and freedoms enjoyed by the population, with a commitment that this would last during the 50-year handover period. This was to be the basis of “one country, two systems”, and the agreement represented an internationally ratified and binding agreement between the UK and China.

We are now 26 years—a little more than halfway—through that period. It is clear from all the contributions to the debate that the pace of change in Hong Kong, particularly with regard to rights and freedoms, is considerably faster and more detrimental to those rights and freedoms than foreseen in the agreement. In short, the Government of China and the Chinese Communist party are not keeping up their end of the bargain.

Nowhere is that clearer than in the implementation of the national security law, passed by the Parliament in Beijing, bypassing and without reference to the Legislative Council in Hong Kong. I am sure the Minister will be quick to condemn central Government for making laws for territories that have established legislative autonomy without consent from the legislatures of those territories. We have heard how comprehensively the law restricts basic rights to freedom of speech and assembly in the name of preserving loosely defined national security in the face of so-called secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces.

[Patrick Grady]

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) was right in his valuable contribution to highlight that this is not new; this kind of oppression has been going on for a very long time, and he cited some important case studies. Amnesty International has said of the national security law:

“The consequences are grave—the undefined nature of key aspects of the law has created fear among people in Hong Kong” about what may

“put them at risk of criminal prosecution, removal to the mainland or deportation from the territory.”

We have heard about a number of specific cases where this law has been applied, demonstrating exactly the concerns raised when it was passed three years ago. The detention of Cardinal Joseph Zen, along with other humanitarian activists, was of particular concern. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, it highlights wider issues around the CCP's attitude to freedom of religion or belief in China.

The ongoing oppression and detention of journalist Jimmy Lai has been raised powerfully by just about all Members here, and a further law has been passed recently to specifically prevent him from being represented by foreign lawyers. It is important that the Minister responds to the extremely forceful points that have been made. This man holds a UK passport, and that is supposed to be worth something. If the rights outlined in his passport are diminished, the rights in all our passports are diminished, and how we are supposed to travel with confidence is of considerable concern.

The US-based Hong Kong Democracy Council says that the only countries incarcerating political prisoners at rates faster than Hong Kong are Myanmar and Belarus. Belarus, of course, sits outside the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights.

Given the special legal and moral responsibilities that the UK Government have towards Hong Kong and its people, it really is time for action, not words. We welcome the establishment of safe and legal routes for people from Hong Kong to come to the UK—perhaps that model could be applied to other parts of the world for people fleeing oppression who have historical or family ties to the UK—and we welcome the UK's acceptance that China is not upholding the Sino-British joint declaration, but more clearly has to be done. As the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said, there has to be action.

Hong Kong officials known to be violating human rights could be included on the UK's Magnitsky sanctions list. The Government could publish an asset audit of Hong Kong and Chinese officials linked to human rights abuses. They could establish an illicit finance commissioner to monitor the presence of such assets. As the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) hinted, they could explain what robust pragmatism actually means. What would be required to take a more robust and less pragmatic approach?

How does the Minister expect the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill to affect the ability of local authorities and other agencies to use their democratic processes to decide not to buy or invest in activities in China? We had examples of where people might not want to buy goods that had been manufactured

in China, for various reasons. Can he assure us that no state pension funds are being invested in stocks or bonds of firms complicit in gross human rights abuses?

Ministers will have heard these calls repeatedly from the SNP Benches and others today and in previous debates and are clearly paying close attention to them. I have no doubt that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green and others will continue to turn up the volume on these issues until we see meaningful action from the Government.

3.41 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George, and to hear once again an excellent speech from the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). He has consistently upheld human rights in Hong Kong and in China more generally. I firmly believe that these debates are strengthened when they are genuinely cross-party. It was also great to hear the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) underline the number of women affected by the national security legislation that came in three years ago this month.

We all know that the promised transition to full universal suffrage for the Legislative Council and the election of the Chief Executive of Hong Kong never materialised; following that, protests of growing strength have been seen repeatedly since the handover of sovereignty to China in 1997. It is for that reason that I, along with many other Members here, across the House and in the other place, belong to the Hong Kong Watch committee. We originally thought that that would be short-lived; unfortunately, it goes from strength to strength. We are now seeing the continuing breaching of the Sino-British agreement, and that means that, sadly, Hong Kong Watch has to carry on.

The effects of the national security legislation cannot be overstated. Before it was passed, there was at least a vestige of legal separation between the judicial, security and legal systems of Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, offering a vital buffer and protection for the people of Hong Kong. That has effectively been erased. The people of Hong Kong now live with the knowledge that their wrongdoing, perceived or otherwise in the eyes of Beijing, can see their deportation and detention in the Chinese mainland and away from the few safeguards of liberty that exist in Hong Kong.

Many Members have mentioned the case of Jimmy Lai, and I think it is appropriate to mention it again, as he is a British citizen and passport holder. Will the Minister comment on that case in his remarks? I raised the issue with the consul general based in Hong Kong when he was here for a visit a couple of months back, and was given assurances that a consular process is in place. It would be really helpful if the FCDO were to write back to us with an update on the number of visits, how regular those visits are and what the findings are of that consular work.

We are mindful that a recent Foreign Affairs Committee report on the way that British citizens in prison abroad are looked after generally was very critical of the Government. It would also be helpful in that regard to examine more closely exactly what the provision for Jimmy Lai is, as a prisoner who was simply using his freedom of expression, as well as how he is getting on and what the consul general and his team are doing.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. As a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I know we are concerned to hear whether Ministers can be more vocal when speaking out for British prisoners, or political prisoners across the board—in the case of not only Jimmy Lai, but Vladimir Kara-Murza.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Before I bring in the shadow Minister, I want to point out that I know the hon. Gentleman has an express interest in this subject, but it is not good to intervene right at the end of a debate without having listened to it.

Catherine West: Thank you very much, Sir George. I recognise that Members of the Select Committee do have special knowledge, but your ruling is your ruling.

Given that dark backdrop and the noticeable curtailment of their freedoms—again, those contained in a legally recognised treaty—it is no surprise that hundreds of thousands of Hongkongers have fled in recent years, with many now calling the UK home. We welcome them here with open arms. I am proud of the part that the Labour party—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), as former shadow Foreign Secretary, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), as my predecessor—played in urging the Government to amend the rules governing BNO passports, rightly opening up a pathway for citizenship for BNO passport holders, and providing hope for a new life away from China's erosion of Hong Kong's way of life.

That said, there remains significant concern in the community of Hongkongers now in the UK that they are still at risk of intimidation from the Chinese Government. I am afraid to say that the UK Government's response to that mounting fear has been woefully lacking, with the Foreign Secretary's response to me in the House the week before last being yet another example of Government Ministers passing the buck. I have repeatedly raised the need for a true concerted cross-Government approach to this growing threat, to ensure that Hongkongers, and other groups seeking refuge in the UK from the Chinese Government, are protected, whether they are working, studying or campaigning. I hope the Minister will address that question.

Although many now make their lives in the UK, we must pay due attention. We should not—indeed, cannot—turn our backs on those who remain in Hong Kong, and consider further erosion of Hong Kong's way of life as a fait accompli. Doing so would turn our backs on British citizens such as Jimmy Lai and give carte blanche for further breaches of international law. As a signatory of the Sino-British agreement we have a legal, not to mention a moral, duty to continue fighting for the rights promised to Hong Kong until 2047.

I am pleased that the Foreign Office continues to provide Parliament with a six-monthly report, but I am concerned that the level of interest has waned, with very little notice being given to the latest release of the report, despite its stating clearly that the Government believe China was in a continued state of non-compliance with the Sino-British agreement, and stating clearly and worryingly that freedom of the press came under increasing pressure.

I have some asks of the Minister. First, I know he values multilateral engagement. Will he tell the House what recent discussions Ministers have had with allied

Governments who have also criticised the treatment of Hong Kong and the implementation of the security legislation—specifically the US, Canada and Australia? Secondly, what discussions has he had with British business and multilateral corporations active in the UK about the impact of the legislation on their workforces, and the need to ensure that BNO passport holders can still gain access to any money or pensions they hold in Hong Kong bank accounts? I know he will be aware that that specific point has been raised by a number of Members across the House over the past few months.

Thirdly, will he update the House on the level of consular access Mr Lai is receiving, which I mentioned earlier? Finally, have the Government given any further consideration to the sanctioning of officials involved in the most repressive aspects of the crackdown on liberty in Hong Kong? I asked that question of the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who usually deals with this matter, and she said that the FCDO was looking at the matter of our sanctions being out of kilter with similar countries.

We will always be united in calling out the Chinese Government for their breach of the Sino-British agreement, and the curtailment of liberty in Hong Kong, specifically since the national security legislation was passed. Some freedoms remain available to Hongkongers, for which I am grateful, but we must be louder and stronger, and stand up where bullying occurs. We must condemn what has happened and continue to hold in our thoughts those in prison today, held as political prisoners by the Chinese Government.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this debate and for all the work he does in this area. I am also grateful to other right hon. and hon. Members for their important contributions, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West).

This has been a lively debate. I should say that I am answering on behalf of the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who is currently engaged on other parliamentary duties. I will try to cover the many questions that Members asked.

Three years ago, following widespread protests, Beijing imposed the national security law on Hong Kong, and the UK, along with international partners, immediately made clear our strong objection to it. We declared its imposition a further breach of the Sino-British joint declaration, which China willingly signed up to in 1984. The crackdown that accompanied the national security law has changed Hong Kong forever.

Three years on, we have seen how that opaque and sweeping law has undermined the rights and freedoms enshrined in the joint declaration and Hong Kong's

[Leo Docherty]

Basic Law. Hong Kong's governance, rights and social system are now much closer to mainland norms, and the autonomy promised under "one country, two systems" has been eroded. Hong Kong is less politically autonomous than at any time since the handover. Hong Kong authorities, under the direction of Beijing, have targeted critical voices across Hong Kong society. As Members highlighted, those facing prosecution include former political leaders, pro-democracy figures and members of Hong Kong's civil society, trade unions and media outlets.

Many of those arrested in 2019 and 2020 are only now going on trial. A panel of judges, hand-selected by Hong Kong's Chief Executive, hears those cases, and as they progress through the court, new legal precedents will be established, shaping the future rule of law in Hong Kong, which is deeply worrying.

One of the main figures is Jimmy Lai, whose case has been discussed extensively today. He was one of Hong Kong's most successful businessmen, and was the former publisher of *Apple Daily*. He has been prosecuted on multiple fronts in an obvious attempt to silence and discredit him. He is a British dual national—he is a British passport holder. Of course, he has never rescinded his Chinese nationality, which has a bearing on this case.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: He is not a dual national; his family has made that clear. He has one passport and one citizenship: British. He does not have any reference now to any dual nationality whatever. Will the Government please start calling that out?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. My understanding from officials is that Mr Lai has never rescinded his Chinese nationality, and we therefore refer to him as a British dual national. But of course, we care very deeply about his case, and we raise his detention with Chinese and Hong Kong authorities at every opportunity, making clear our objections to these politically driven prosecutions. The Foreign Secretary did so with Chinese Vice-President Han Zheng in May, and we have set out our concerns at the highest levels in Hong Kong. Our diplomats in Hong Kong have attended Mr Lai's court proceedings since his arrest in 2020, and will continue to do so. The Minister for the Indo-Pacific met Mr Lai's son Sebastien and their international legal team, and officials continue to support them. Mr Lai's national security trial is due to start in September, and we will of course monitor it exceptionally closely and will continue to press for consular access.

Mr Lai's case is of course not the only significant one, as we have heard. Hong Kong's largest national security trial is ongoing, with 47 former pro-democracy activists and politicians facing allegations of so-called subversion. Those cases and others demonstrate in the starkest way that the national security law is being used to stifle dissent. As to possible numbers and whether that includes any British nationals, I will ask my colleague the Indo-Pacific Minister to write to clarify that to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green.

The national security law has damaged Hong Kong's media landscape irrevocably. I commend the recent report published by the all-party group on Hong Kong, which highlighted the parlous state of media freedom there.

A city that was once ranked 18th in the world press freedom index now sits close to the bottom, at 140 out of 180 countries. The Chinese Government undertook to protect press freedom and freedom of speech in Hong Kong under the joint declaration, the Basic Law and, allegedly, the national security law, and yet outlets such as *Apple Daily* and *Stand News* have been forced to close. Their publishers and journalists face national security charges of being critical of the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities. We will always defend media freedom and the right of journalists to do their job.

The UK responded rapidly and decisively to the imposition of the national security law. As a demonstration of our commitment to Hong Kong and its people, as has been described today, we opened our doors to the people of Hong Kong looking for a home, creating a bespoke visa route. We have now granted more than 160,000 applications made by British nationals overseas wishing to come to the UK by that route. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford asked about the prospect of their political involvement and whether they should be debarred from being MPs, but I will ask my colleague the Indo-Pacific Minister to write in response, because that is an interesting point.

We are steadfast in our support for the Hong Kong diaspora and we are committed to ensuring their successful integration into local communities. We will not tolerate any attempt by any foreign power to intimidate, harass or harm individuals or communities in the UK. The defending democracy taskforce in the Home Office, under the Security Minister, is reviewing the UK's approach to transnational repression to ensure that the response across Government and law enforcement is robust and joined up.

In the broader context, we have suspended the UK-Hong Kong extradition treaty indefinitely, and we have extended to Hong Kong the arms embargo applied to mainland China since 1989. Meanwhile, we alert British nationals and businesses—that was raised today—to the impact of the national security law, and to the risks it poses, in our travel advice and in our overseas business risk guidance on the UK Government website.

The Foreign Secretary made clear our position on China in his speech at Mansion House in April. We will work with China where our interests converge, while steadfastly defending our national security and our values. The role of the Foreign Secretary and Ministers is to engage foreign Governments, including those with whom we disagree. I should tell colleagues that when Minister of State Lord Johnson visited, he spoke out in local media against the erosion of rights and freedoms in Hong Kong.

Time is tight and I want to leave time for my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green to wind up, so I will ask the Indo-Pacific Minister to write to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham to address his extensive list of valid and commendable questions, and to my right hon. Friend, who introduced the debate, about the National Security Bill and the prospect of any energy deal. I will ask the Minister to write with the answers to those questions. In closing, the UK will continue to stand up for the rights and freedoms of Hongkongers and the autonomy that Hong Kong was promised.

3.58 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I understand that my hon. Friend the Minister, who answered from the Government standpoint, had less time than he might have hoped for. That notwithstanding, I hope that he will follow up with answers to the questions that we asked—not least because being steadfast is one question, but taking action is another. I recommend a move from robust pragmatism to just robust action. That is the point of sanctions. Why have we not sanctioned any single person from the Administration on the imposition of the national security law? That is a consequence that China would lift its head up to.

I will finish simply on this single point. Jimmy Lai is a British passport holder and citizen. Every time the Government refer to him as a dual national, they play into the hands of the Chinese Government, who do not recognise dual nationality. I wish we would stop that nonsense. The price of freedom is very high, but the price of no freedom is even higher. We have a British Government believing in democracy and freedom; it is time that we told the Chinese Government that there are consequences when they strip away from people freedom and their rights.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Great British Nuclear

[Relevant document: Third Report of the Welsh Affairs Committee, Nuclear energy in Wales, HC 240.]

4 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered Great British Nuclear.

It is a pleasure to introduce this debate on Great British Nuclear. Quite simply, the formation of Great British Nuclear, headed by the interim CEO—the brilliant Gwen Parry-Jones, who lives on Anglesey—has given us the best opportunity in 40 years to kick-start a programme of new nuclear power stations in this country. I want to remind hon. Members, if they need reminding, that nuclear is vital to our journey to net zero, to our drive for energy security and to our prosperity as a country, with jobs and opportunity reaching every corner of these islands.

In just one technology, nuclear provides energy that is clean, reliable, affordable and British. It is the only technology that can say that. Common sense and every bit of modelling and evidence from countries right around the world tell us that we need nuclear, operating whatever the weather, to complement technologies such as wind and solar, and to wean us off imported fossil fuels.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. From the very beginning of her time in this House, her interest in her constituency and in nuclear power has been prominent, and I congratulate her on that. Does she not agree that the war in Ukraine and the accompanying fuel crisis have underlined the vital importance of nuclear's capacity, and that £20 billion for a large-scale plant, with additional support for small modular reactors for a plant that helps with this nation's self-sufficiency, is a price that we must be willing to pay? I have always supported nuclear, and I support the hon. Lady today.

Virginia Crosbie: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention and for his kind words. He is a true champion for his constituency and certainly for the nuclear sector. I absolutely agree with him. We have to invest in this new technology, and the time is now. It is important for net zero and for all those fantastic jobs. We cannot achieve net zero without it; we need that energy security.

Nuclear's record in local communities speaks for itself: it provides high-quality, long-term and skilled jobs that pay wages two or three times what people get outside the power station. My community and many others around the UK that have had nuclear power know that it delivers good-quality jobs and local investment—and they say they want more of it. That, as hon. Members may guess, is my particular interest in today's debate.

We have made great progress on nuclear in recent years, introducing the new regulated asset-based funding model, investing in Sizewell C and putting money into the Rolls-Royce reactor design. We also had the Chancellor's welcome announcement that we will green-label nuclear, crowned by the formation of Great British Nuclear. We even have, for the very first time, our very own Nuclear Minister.

I can attest to the wave of energy and optimism that GBN's formation has given to the industry. The Minister will know that technology vendors and developers from

[*Virginia Crosbie*]

all over the world have entered the small modular reactor down-selection process that GBN is running at the moment. Many have come to visit Wylfa in my constituency of Ynys Môn to see the best site in the UK for further nuclear development. The likes of GE Hitachi, Rolls-Royce and Last Energy have all toured the island.

Today, I want to focus on how GBN can convert reactor technology, sites and strong political support from the Government into new projects in constituencies such as Ynys Môn. I hope the Minister is listening carefully. If I start with the small modular reactor down-selection, we should expand the prize of winning. At the moment, that prize is co-funding to help to develop the winning technologies up to the point of a final investment decision.

That is a good start, but we can go further. The winner should get access to named sites that are suitable for building small modular reactors; access to a funding model, such as the regulated asset base model or contracts for difference, to help to raise money; and help from GBN to form the actual project companies that will develop, own and operate the nuclear power stations once they are built.

The first SMR being built in the western world, at Darlington in Ontario, Canada, followed exactly that model. About five years ago, Ontario Power Generation ran a selection process, as we are now, and at the start it was clear that whoever won the selection would build an SMR at the Darlington site and that Ontario Power Generation would develop, own and operate the site. The winners had a site, an order, and a project developer and operator. That is the model that we should follow, because that is how we give investors enough confidence to put their money into such projects.

I am delighted that the Energy Bill gives GBN the power to form subsidiaries and joint ventures with the private sector to do exactly that type of individual project development, and I want to hear how the Minister's Department will support GBN in doing just that. More than that, I want to hear whether the Minister has thought about awarding sites and offering funding modes to the winners to accelerate the process of deployment and quicken investor interest in the UK.

If the Minister needs sites to offer, I have one in mind: the best site for new nuclear in the UK, Wylfa. Our need for new nuclear means that we have to build more large-scale nuclear as well as small-scale nuclear. Large-scale nuclear, which is often unfairly maligned, has actually had a banner year. All three major western designs—the EPR, the AP1000 and the APR-1400—have connected reactors and entered commercial operation. Coincidentally, I think that the owners of those designs have all expressed an interest in a Wylfa site. Will the Minister say what further thought has been given to other large-scale projects after Sizewell C to capitalise on that interest, and also set out his thinking on the circumstances under which we will pursue more large-scale nuclear in this country?

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on a very important issue, which will hopefully help to secure Britain's future energy security. One of the challenges with Sizewell C, which I think will be reflected across the country, is EDF's failure to properly engage with many communities in Suffolk about their

legitimate but easily accommodated concerns about the construction of the plant. What could the Minister do to ensure better engagement for future nuclear plants?

Virginia Crosbie: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One of the reasons why nuclear sites are successful is support from the local community. That is absolutely vital, as we see with development consent orders for planning. We have seen that with Wylfa, and we have certainly seen it with Hinkley. It is vital that companies engage with local residents.

The Minister will know that Hinkley Point C provides nearly 10,000 jobs on site and supports over 3,000 jobs throughout the construction period, with companies based in Wales, and that £815 million is expected to be spent throughout the Welsh supply chain during construction. There are 22,000 people working across the country, and more than £5 billion spent across the region. What a prize a large-scale project is for a local community. I ask that large-scale developments and SMRs be pursued with equal vigour.

I know, of course, that there is the issue of money. I am convinced that the private sector is willing and able to invest in nuclear if it knows that the UK Government are standing right behind it and the nuclear projects. The planning, regulation, site access and funding models on offer are all within the Minister's gift, or the Government's gift. I am sure that the Minister will understand why investors are keen to see Ministers stand by projects, as they have with Sizewell C. That is my request to the Minister: that GBN is able to offer the Sizewell C model—regulated asset base funding, a Government support package and a 20% direct Government stake in the project—to the next two projects that the Government target to get to FID, the final investment decision, in the next Parliament and to all future projects. That would certainly be a godsend to investors and give communities such as mine real hope that new projects will get off the ground.

I will end on this note. On the island, we have been talking actively about new nuclear at Wylfa for 15 years or more. It has not happened, and it has been difficult for the local community to deal with that disappointment and still put their confidence in nuclear as a way to create opportunities for young people on the island. But they still put their confidence in nuclear. They still want the projects, investment and jobs. They look to me, the Minister and his colleagues to get it done. I simply ask him to return the faith that they have put in us, and to help us to get new nuclear at Wylfa over the line. Diolch yn fawr.

4.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George, and—my goodness me—to discuss nuclear with my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie). The passion that she brings to this debate is unmatched. The term “champion” is bandied about a lot in this building, but she genuinely is one of the greatest champions for nuclear. Indeed, ever since she arrived here in late 2019, she has been an incredible champion in Parliament for her constituency and its interests.

My hon. Friend has an impressive track record of championing her constituency, as I have said, to remain at the heart of decisions on the future of nuclear power, the investment that it could bring and the jobs that it

could create, both locally and across the United Kingdom. I will continue to encourage Government and Great British Nuclear to engage with communities such as hers that are considering whether their land might be suitable for the deployment of nuclear facilities in the near future.

The invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent rise in global energy prices have demonstrated the paramount importance of accelerating home-grown power and strengthening our national energy security. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) put that better than I ever could in his intervention. That is in addition to the significant contribution that nuclear could make to achieving our net zero objectives.

As part of our response, the Government have committed to ensuring that the UK is one of the best places in the world to invest in civil nuclear power, and are taking the necessary steps to revitalise the UK's nuclear industry. Last year alone, the Government made an historic investment of £700 million and became a shareholder in the Sizewell C project, in support of our long-standing objective to take a large-scale nuclear project to the point of final investment decision in this Parliament, subject to all relevant approvals.

Dr Poulter: The Minister will also be aware that the Secretary of State overruled some of the concerns with the development control process that supported Sizewell C going ahead. Although most of us accept the importance of investment in projects such as Sizewell C, one of the main concerns was about the failure of EDF to engage with legitimate concerns across Suffolk and its communities about the construction process and the eventual building of Sizewell C. What reassurance can the Minister give to residents that lessons will be learned from that?

Andrew Bowie: Perhaps it will reassure my hon. Friend to know that I made it a priority to visit the Sizewell C site, not just to see the site and meet EDF and the Sizewell C company, but to hear from and engage with local communities, including those with concerns about the project, how the consultation exercise was run and the engagement with the companies involved. I look forward to continuing my engagement with those individuals and communities that are concerned about the project and the vast number of critical national infrastructure projects that will be built in and around the hon. Gentleman's constituency. Those are critical pieces of national infrastructure, but in delivering this new investment into our grid and this incredible investment in Sizewell C, it is vital that we take communities with us and that they feel that they have had a say in the process of getting to the final decision on whether to proceed. I give my commitment, here today, that I will continue to meet the groups concerned and will do so right up to the point that there are spades in the ground at Sizewell. Indeed, whoever my successor is will do the same.

The British energy security strategy set out our ambition for deploying up to 24 GW of nuclear power by 2050, which would be 25% of our projected 2050 electricity demand. That includes two nuclear projects taking final investment decisions in the next Parliament. We also announced the creation of Great British Nuclear, which will be an arm's length body responsible for driving delivery of new nuclear projects, backed with the funding that it needs.

GBN will be at the heart of a programmatic approach that will give industry and investors the confidence necessary to deliver projects at pace, reducing costs through learning and replication. Earlier this year, the "Powering up Britain" set out our plans for GBN to launch a competitive selection process for choosing the best small modular reactor technologies in the UK.

In April, GBN launched the first stage of this process in the form of a market engagement exercise. The second phase, the down selection process, will be launched over the summer, with an ambition to assess and decide on the leading technologies by autumn. The Government will provide co-funding to be deployed by GBN to support the development of those technologies and will work with successful bidders on ensuring that the right financing and site arrangements are in place, in line with the commitment to progress projects in the next Parliament. The total level of development funding will be subject to future spending reviews. I hear the suggestions from my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn and will take them back to the GBN board.

GBN will work with the Government on access to potential sites for new nuclear projects to achieve our long-term ambition. This reflects our collective awareness of the growing local and regional interest in a number of sites for further nuclear development. We intend to publish consultation in 2023 as a first step towards the development of the new national policy statement for nuclear, to ensure our approach remains resilient to the needs of achieving net zero.

I assure my hon. Friend that community engagement will be central to the development of projects at each site. Developers will need to work with the host authorities and communities, statutory bodies and other key stakeholders to shape the proposals that will ultimately inform statutory consultation requirements and an application for a development consent order. Further engagement will also be undertaken as part of the wider regulatory processes to be completed prior to the construction and operation of a new power station.

The Government recognise the strong interest in and support for nuclear power across north Wales. The Government are also aware of the potential of the Wylfa site, which is included in the national policy statement for new nuclear power. Looking ahead, both Great British Nuclear and the national policy statement team would welcome any conversations with stakeholders who are considering whether their land might be suitable for the deployment of nuclear facilities in the future. GBN will, of course, support the Government's consideration of further large gigawatt-scale projects to help us deliver on our net zero ambitions.

Our commitment to a nuclear programme and GBN will put the UK on a path to achieving its ambition and becoming a global leader in civil nuclear power and SMRs, which could include the creation of high-value jobs and the development of our capabilities. I would like to close by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn for securing this important debate. I look forward to visiting Ynys Môn and continuing to engage with her and other stakeholders in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

4.17 pm

Sitting suspended.

In-work Poverty

4.30 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered in-work poverty.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Sir George. I am grateful to have secured this important debate on the scandal that is in-work poverty. Such a debate should not be needed in the 21st century in one of the wealthiest nations in the world, and yet here we are. I hope the debate will explore why so many people face unacceptable levels of poverty not when they are out of work, but while they are working and earning a living.

“If you work hard, you can earn a decent wage, buy a house and raise a family”—that is the promise the Government made to the country in their last election manifesto when they stated:

“We will help people and families throughout their lives by bringing down the cost of living and making sure that work always pays.”

I do not think it is controversial to say that I agree with that. People who work hard should be able to earn a decent wage, afford a home and raise a family. A job that pays, a home of their own and a family they can support are not great gifts bestowed by a generous Government; they are key indicators of a healthy and functioning society. They are our modest expectations and reasonable aspirations, and any half-competent Government should be expected to deliver them. Cruelly, over the past 13 years, this Conservative Government have not only failed to do their job and deliver for the British people; they have also, systematically, through either incompetence or intention—probably both—prevented millions across the UK from getting on in life, trapping them in an inescapable cycle of poverty and hardship.

Data from the Department for Work and Pensions shows that one in five people in the UK were in relative poverty in 2021-22. It is clear that working does not preclude a family or an individual from poverty. After housing costs, 71% of children and 57% of working-age adults who are in poverty are in poverty. In-work poverty has increased by a shocking 1.5 million people since the Conservatives took office in 2010. There are three overarching reasons why things have become so bad: earnings, housing and the cost of living. On each, the Government have taken a bad situation and made it much worse.

Wages today are at the same level as in 2005. That is the longest period of stagnation in terms of earnings in nearly 200 years. Public services have been cut to the bone, and many public sector workers have seen their pay significantly eroded by years of below-inflation rises. At the same time, there has been an explosion in the gig economy and other insecure work—a damning indictment of the Tories’ economic and political choices, which have forced ever more people to rely on the benefits system.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He mentions the gig economy. Three of the reasons for in-work poverty are insecure work and zero-hours contracts, bogus self-employment and low wages. The Government

made promises in response to the Taylor review eight years ago, but we are still waiting for that employment Bill. Does he agree that we need that employment Bill now?

Mr Dhesi: I could not agree more. I remember standing in this very place after I had managed to secure a debate on the Taylor review of modern working practices. In fact, some of the same Members who are here today also took part in that debate, during which we asked for the employment Bill to be introduced. It is shocking that only seven of the 53 agreed areas of legislation were enacted. Such intransigence is what leads to more in-work poverty.

For 13 years, successive Conservative Governments have sought to undermine social security in our country. Universal credit is not protecting working families from poverty. More than a third of children and working age adults in working families in receipt of universal credit are still in poverty after housing costs.

Ms Clarke, one of my constituents in Slough, is a nurse who supported the most vulnerable during the covid-19 pandemic. She is struggling to pay for the loans that she took out for her training and has to claim universal credit. For that, she must take annual leave to attend her appointments at the jobcentre. How is any of that fair or right? She is a nurse and a single mother without the support she clearly requires.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech about in-work poverty. Does he agree that universal free school meals would help alleviate in-work poverty for those at the lower end of the wage spectrum? They are already available in primary schools in Scotland and Wales, and the Mayor of London has announced that they will be extended to primary schools across London. Northern Ireland has a higher earnings threshold of £14,000, which is double the England threshold of £7,400. Does my hon. Friend agree that that would provide a massive boost and really help those people in work who are in poverty, especially the lady he has just spoken about?

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for free school meals. She is known as the all-party parliamentary group queen and has organised various events, including on free school meals. I remember highlighting their importance as we served them alongside dinner ladies and gents. I thank my hon. Friend, because I will bring home that point of view later in my speech.

The punitive benefits system is driving more people to use food banks. At Slough food bank in my constituency, kind and amazing people who undertake much-needed selfless service report that six in 10 of the people they support are on universal credit, and many of them are employed. Charities openly acknowledge that they would rather not exist because they do not want a society where working people are forced to rely on food parcels to survive.

It is worth noting that in 2010 the Trussell Trust operated only 35 food banks. Staggeringly, today that number is closer to 1,300 across the UK, and between April 2022 and March 2023, they gave out 3 million emergency food parcels. That is a third more than during the pandemic and double the number before the pandemic. What a shocking legacy this Government are leaving behind.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. In Barnsley we have seen a tripling of demand for food banks. As he rightly points out, we did not have any 10 to 15 years ago. It is because of the Government that, sadly, 35% of kids in Barnsley are growing up in poverty and families are relying on food banks. They are in work but cannot afford to pay their bills.

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend has eloquently explained what the experts across our country are explaining: this is happening before our very eyes and we should not allow the situation to deteriorate any further.

As many will know, housing is a huge and growing driver of in-work poverty. Thanks to the Government's failure to build enough new and affordable homes and new social housing, last year the gulf between price of houses and earnings in the UK was the worst since 1876. We really are back in Victorian times under this Government.

One of my Slough constituents privately rents and wrote to me for help. As many other private renters have experienced, they have been served with a section 21 no-fault eviction notice. Their partner works full time, but they themselves cannot work full-time hours because they have cancer. High rent costs mean that they cannot now find anywhere that is affordable. Although the family are on universal credit, it does not cover the basic cost of living. Even if they did find somewhere with an affordable rent, the need for a large deposit and a guarantor has erected huge barriers to finding new, long-term accommodation.

The supply of social housing has continued to plummet. The Government's promise—cancelled, then reinstated—to build 300,000 new homes each year has not materialised. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition said at Prime Minister's questions today, house building has collapsed and the Government are nowhere near their target, which means that more people are trapped in private rented accommodation as rents go through the roof. In turn, that means that people are taking longer to save for their first house. That is why levels of home ownership are down and private renting is up. Those who have been fortunate enough finally to buy a home after years and years of saving now face mortgage misery the likes of which we have not seen in generations or perhaps longer, thanks to this Government's inability to get to grips with inflation.

Perhaps if Ministers were more focused on supporting those impacted by their child benefit cap than on removing the cap on bankers' bonuses, and more focused on spending public money to invest in our public services than on giving away billions in failed personal protective equipment contracts to their mates and cronies, our economy would be in a much better place. Sadly, so many people are in dire straits. On top of stagnant earnings and unaffordable housing, we have a cost of living crisis, driving ever more people into in-work poverty. With food prices soaring and energy and utility bills going through the roof, many working people find themselves unable to put meals on the table, heat their home, pay their bills or provide for their families.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to hear that I have a slightly different interpretation of

some of the issues that he has presented today. However, one thing that we certainly agree on is that a lot of public sector workers have seen real-terms reductions in their pay; I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a practising NHS doctor. Does he agree that it is particularly important that the Government implement the recommendations of the national pay review bodies about public sector pay?

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. We may disagree about certain things, but hard-hitting facts are hard to ignore, especially when the truth hits us. I agree that the work of the independent pay review bodies is very important, but even this week we have seen the Government, including the Prime Minister, not accepting their recommendations. The Government are very selective in when they agree to the recommendations of the independent pay review bodies. That must change. They should either comply with them or completely disregard them; they cannot do both to suit their needs as required.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Can I just confirm that the position of the Labour Front Bench is that Labour would implement the recommendations of the public sector pay review bodies?

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Today I am not on the Labour Front Bench, but I am sure that the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), will highlight exactly what the Labour policy is in that regard. As far as I am concerned, I think it is very important that if we have independent pay review bodies, either they and their work are respected or we do not have them. I am sure that that will be teased out in due course.

The Office for Budget Responsibility forecast in March this year that real household disposable income per person—a measure of living standards—will fall by a cumulative 5.7% between 2022 and 2024. That would be the largest two-year fall since records began back in the 1950s.

One of my Slough constituents wrote to tell me that despite their family of five having a full-time worker and the support of universal credit, they still could not afford their children's school lunches—an issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) alluded to earlier. Imagine being a parent who has to send their children off to school knowing that they are hungry. They know that they have done everything they can to provide for them; they have worked hard, sought support and tried their hardest, but there is nothing more they can do and their children will be going hungry. It is a desperate situation for so many, and one we should not be seeing in the world's sixth largest economy.

Child poverty in the UK is overwhelmingly related to in-work poverty. Some 67% of children living in relative poverty in our country come from working households. Households in which at least one adult is in work have seen a steep rise in poverty under the Tories. Absolute poverty has not fallen since Labour was in power. It has stagnated while the Conservatives have been in power, but, most concerning, it has started to rise. Absolute child poverty is set to increase even more by the end of this year, meaning that another 400,000 children could be going hungry and cold day to day, or even homeless. Are the Government not ashamed?

Mrs Hodgson: I just want to add some further statistics to the ones that my hon. Friend is very helpfully providing us with on hungry children. On the economics of universal free school meals, PricewaterhouseCoopers did some work on the numbers and found that for every £1 invested in universal free school meals, the return on investment to the economy in savings on health, child poverty, malnutrition and all the rest is £1.71—so every £1 returns £1.71. Does my hon. Friend not think that that proves the policy would pay for itself?

Mr Dhesi: I defer to my hon. Friend's expertise. I am sure that the Minister is listening and will be looking at why that is so important.

We need a Government who will focus on breaking the cycle of poverty, who will ensure that respect and dignity are once more at the heart of our social security system, who will make it easier to own a home and raise a family, and who will put an end to the soaring use of food banks. We need an economy and a system that work for everyone, not just a select few, and that do not embed poverty through low-paid insecure work, leave children without meals or homes, or see the hard-working go hungry.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I will impose a four-minute limit on Back-Bench speakers. In view of the number of people who are standing, I may have to lower it again.

4.48 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for bringing this important debate to the Chamber.

I will start with a couple of statements made in the past week or so that I think are absolutely outrageous. The first was:

"I want people to be reassured that we've got to hold our nerve, stick to the plan and we will get through this."

That was from the Prime Minister. People who are in work, in poverty, will be wondering what on earth the Prime Minister—one of the richest people in the country—knows about in-work poverty. I have no doubt that the Prime Minister works very hard indeed, but he gets the rewards. As my hon. Friend the Member for Slough said earlier in his fantastic contribution, the likes of the Prime Minister will not have seen their kids go to school with an empty belly, holes in their shoes or clothes that have been passed down from older siblings or somewhere else. Indeed, will he have used a food bank, for heaven's sake? I have to ask that question.

The second statement I want to raise was from the Governor of the Bank of England, who said that

"we cannot continue to have the current level of wage increases...the current levels, I'll be absolutely honest, are unsustainable."

This is a man who is on more than half a million pounds. The same applies to him: he will not have had any difficulties when he has been making these decisions and telling people who are in poverty and cannot feed their own kids that they have to accept that they cannot have decent pay increases. The fact that inflation is as high as it is has nothing to do with wages for ordinary people. Ordinary people have not had wage increases.

There has been wage stagnation. The facts show quite clearly that there has not been much of an increase since 2005—and look at the situation in the country.

I have been on the picket lines with many people over the past few years. Most of them are fighting for decent wages, terms and conditions. Most of them are now having to use food banks. I ask the Minister: why on earth, in this day and age, in the sixth richest economy in the world, should teachers, nurses, doctors, ancillary workers and public sector workers have to rely on food banks? This is the UK. We are not a third world country. Can the Minister please tell us why it is right and why it is acceptable that people in the health service can do a hard day's graft and have to visit the food bank to feed their kids? Why are teachers having to do the same? Why are public sector workers, including one in five of those working in the DWP, claiming universal credit? It is an absolute outrage. The fact that people are saying that the route out of poverty is work is an absolute nonsense.

4.52 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for raising this important issue that affects all our constituencies. In the short time I have, I want to give a Northern Ireland perspective and give an example of what it means to be in in-work poverty by showing how it has affected just one of my constituents. Hon. Members who have spoken have raised vital points about in-work poverty, and those who speak after me will do the same.

I want to briefly highlight the effect of in-work poverty on children. There are approximately 450,000 children in Northern Ireland, and more than 100,000 of them are defined as living in poverty. The interesting figure is that the majority of those children—61%—live in households in which at least one parent is working. The hon. Member for Slough referred, as I will, to the situation where there is only one person in the household who is working.

I have the utmost respect for the Minister. He really wants to help; I say that honestly, and I know that in his reply he will try to address the issues we put forward. I have always found him to be amenable and he tries to give us the answers, so I look forward to that.

Almost one in four children in Northern Ireland live in a family who struggle to provide for their basic needs—a warm adequate home, nutritious food and appropriate clothing—and pay for childcare costs. Parents often have to go into debt to make ends meet and do not have the means to save money for unexpected costs or family outings when the family have just one person working. Children in poverty are twice as likely to leave school without five good GCSEs; they are also more likely to suffer poor mental health and fewer years of good physical health. The impact of poor mental and physical health is important.

It breaks my heart that there are parents working away at low-paid jobs, and yet they are physically unable to do better for their children. The sweat of their brow is not enough to bring a wage into the house that will help them adequately look after their children. For many people, the belief that they would be better off not working is a myth that we must fight hard and combat. I know that the Government want to fight and combat that, so I look forward to what the Minister has to say.

I want to give one example that I believe really illustrates what I am saying, which is that no one should be better off not working. I was helping a mother who is on universal credit with her uniform grant forms. She works part time, and she has three children by herself. Her partner pays her £5 a week. She received a wage increase, and her universal credit went down accordingly. When she mentioned it in work, her supervisor told her, “Well, drop your work by a couple of hours,” as she was no better off, but she stated that her mum raised her to work, and the less she took from the state, the better. That is a difficult view to hold as the cost of living skyrockets and those who are working and still poor do not see the benefit of their employers upping their wages. The hon. Member for Slough referred to people on universal credit who want to do the best they can, but who the system does not help. I have given an example, and so has the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery).

I believe we must have a system in which it pays to work, not to cut hours, and in which children are looked after in the scenario I described. I know that that is a system that the Government want in place. The first step is to ensure that those in work are not poor. People are struggling to pay their mortgage and put diesel in the car; they are cutting down on groceries and stopping their children going to the cinema with their friends whose parents are not working. More can and must be done, and we must take steps so that there can be no doubt that it pays to work. Many people in low-paid jobs are the people I see in my constituency office and the people who I and other MPs have a duty to help.

I thank the hon. Member for Slough and look forward to the contributions of other Members. I look to the Minister to respond with the answers that we wish to hear.

4.56 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for bringing this debate before the House. While I am on my feet, let me say that I am proud of the wonderful diversity in Newport West, and I wish all Muslims in my constituency and across the country Eid Mubarak today.

We are here to discuss such an important issue. I will speak briefly on behalf of the people of Newport West. Yesterday, I spoke in the House about the 9,500 people in Newport West who will now be forced to pay £2,400 more a year, thanks to the Tory mortgage bombshell and an inflation crisis made in Downing Street. It is clear from my surgeries and from all the emails and letters I receive from local people that after 13 years of Tory Government, people in Newport West are working harder and doing more but earning less in real terms. In-work poverty is a crisis that Ministers seem so unwilling to tackle.

One of my constituents recently contacted me to share her story. She has two school-age children, she works two jobs in two separate superstores and she is picking up overtime whenever it is available. She is really proud that she works, but she is not proud that she is struggling to pay for bus fares and to feed her children. This is the lived experience of our people,

these are the challenges that remain unaddressed by Tory Ministers, and these are the difficulties that were made in Downing Street.

I am increasingly hearing from local people, because they come to me after all other routes have been closed, as the systems that should support them have been cut to the bone by this Conservative Government. When the Minister winds up, I want him to tell me what I should say to my constituents and all those who have come to me with their stories of how their monthly pay packets simply do not cover the cost of living and survival. I am sure the Minister will be able to give us a number of stats to claim that things are all fine and hunky-dory—I was in Prime Minister’s Question Time today, too—but I know that my constituents are worse off. They are working all the hours they can get, but it is still not enough.

In-work poverty is very real. As has already been said, we are one of the richest countries in this world. It is a disgrace that people are forced to struggle like this. If Tory Ministers do not want to sort this out, they should get out of the way for a Government who will.

4.58 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for bringing forward this really important debate on in-work poverty.

Having a job should bring people security, so that they can raise their family, yet we are seeing so many more cases where being in work is leading to in-work poverty. Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that 61% of working-age adults in poverty live in a household where at least one adult is in work, and 11% of all workers live in a household in poverty. The poverty rate for part-time workers is double that for full-time workers—18% compared with 9%—and self-employed workers are twice as likely to be in poverty as employees, at 21% compared with 10%.

In-work poverty does not affect all groups equally. Ethnic minorities have substantially higher in-work poverty and higher child poverty rates. Many ethnic minority groups are more likely to have the types of jobs and working patterns that are associated with in-work poverty. This Conservative Government’s cost of living crisis has seen real-terms pay fall at the fastest rate since 2001, when records began. As we see mortgage rates increase and rents rise, millions face an increased risk of falling into in-work poverty.

I want to focus on housing. Around 2 million households in the private rented sector—around 38% of the total of those in the private rented sector—receive housing cost support through universal credit or housing benefit, yet the Government chose to freeze local housing allowance rates between 2016 and 2020. Although there was a change in 2020, in the pandemic, it has been frozen since that time. Institute for Fiscal Studies analysis shows that in Luton there is now a £100 deficit in the local housing allowance rate, compared with the lowest rents in the area. Office for National Statistics figures show that the median rent paid by tenants in Luton increased by 8% between March 2020 and March this year.

[Rachel Hopkins]

There is also a significant increase in the number of people in a negative budget; they are unable to meet their living costs, despite being in work. The causes of negative budgets are complex, but there are fundamentally two reasons: a low income from being in low-paid work, and having high household costs. Citizens Advice Luton is seeing increasing numbers of people in negative budget, increased personal debt and increased poverty.

I want to press the Minister. What do I say to those families who are working hard, yet struggling to meet their basic living costs? I am deeply concerned that the lack of action on the local housing allowance will mean that more and more of my Luton South constituents will face eviction, as they simply cannot afford their rent.

5.2 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), my Berkshire colleague, for his excellent work on this important issue. He is a doughty champion for people across our county, and is focused on his constituency. In the time allowed, I would also briefly like to thank families who are under enormous pressure at this time. They are working incredibly hard to keep up with a huge range of increases in costs, whether that is in the price of food, which has rocketed, energy costs, mortgages or rents.

I briefly want to mention some points, to which I hope the Minister will respond. I hope he will be able to direct his remarks to me, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) and my hon. Friend the Member for Slough, because we have many residents in high-cost areas who are under pressure because of the high cost of renting and buying homes in the south-east of England and other high-cost areas.

It is staggering that food prices have risen by around 20% in the past few months. Imagine the impact on most families. The cost of common staple goods, such as Weetabix, pasta, eggs and cheese, which every family rely on daily, and which are almost impossible to substitute in a weekly shop, have all gone up enormously. That is affecting people across the whole country in a most dreadful way. Families are struggling because of that, and there is no easy way to avoid it. Children are desperate for their favourite foods—they are often keen to have specific things. The cost of even own-brand items has gone up enormously.

Equally, the cost of housing has skyrocketed. I have mentioned constituents; there are those whom my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) mentioned in a debate yesterday, who face terrible pressures in the mortgage market. I mentioned a couple of constituents who are under enormous pressure, which is common in my area. There are huge additional costs on mortgages. I spoke about a family paying £800 extra a month for a mortgage on a three-bedroom property in a suburb. Another resident, who lives in Reading town centre, is having to pay an extra £400 a month on the mortgage on her flat. She is already suffering from the cladding crisis, because of unresolved cladding problems with the property. Imagine the pressure that a person in that situation is under at this terrible time.

I hope that the Minister will broaden his response and address some of the related issues around housing and the effect on renters. Landlords are under enormous pressure to put up rents because of the increase in mortgages. That is a hugely important related issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) made an excellent point about the number of families living on very modest incomes. Rents are increasing dramatically. In the area that I represent, there has been an increase in the proportion of people who rent and a decrease in the number of people who can afford to buy because of the high cost of housing. That puts pressure on many young families, many living in terraced housing or flats in our town centre.

In addition—I hope that the Minister will respond to this—energy prices are still extremely high. We still have not seen a proper windfall tax. There is still enormous pressure on households because of that problem, which will only get worse in winter, in the colder months. It might not seem immediate to some people, but it will be a huge challenge for many residents facing enormous costs. Many people in this country still live in poorly insulated properties. In the area that I represent, we have a very large number of terraced houses, as do many British cities and towns of a similar size, such as Derby and Portsmouth; so do London boroughs, and other areas in the north of England. Much of that housing stock is poorly insulated. That is a hugely important related problem, and I hope that the Minister can update us on the Government's action. So far, they have been woeful on that point. A series of problems has not been addressed by either the coalition Government or Conservative Governments.

5.6 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir George. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing the debate. It is one of those hour-long debates where I come along and wonder how many people will be in attendance. It would be fair to say that it has been a well-subscribed debate, hence the need for a time limit. I am only sorry that the only two Conservatives present are here because they are mandated to be. I would have thought that in-work poverty might have meant a little more than that.

We can look at a number of issues when we consider in-work poverty. People will say that it is incredibly complex. In reality, it happens because people do not have enough money. That is the brutal reality. We do not have a real living wage in this country; we have a con trick. The Government talk about their national living wage, but it is not a real living wage. It also appears, bizarrely—I pressed the hon. Member for Slough on this point—that the two main parties are not of the view that the national pay review body's recommendations should be implemented. That is deeply worrying; for many of those same staff we clapped during the pandemic, that talk will seem like hollow words if we do not back those recommendations.

The fact is that staff are struggling. I highlight the plight of members of the Public and Commercial Services Union. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) does a huge amount with them. The reality is that there are Department for Work and Pensions staff who administer the benefits system in the

UK who are being fed by a food bank because of poverty pay in their Department. If that does not shame DWP Ministers, I do not know what will.

The Government could do a number of things to tackle in-work poverty. First, they could look at the woeful rates of statutory sick pay. People have to earn a minimum of £123 a week before statutory sick pay kicks in. The Government should also look at fixing some of the known problems with universal credit, which of course is an in-work benefit. We often hear from the Government about the importance of people working their way out of poverty, but the people I represent, many of whom go out and do a decent day's work, are in a ridiculous situation. When they go to the supermarket, baby formula is behind the tills because people are stealing it, and butter is security-tagged. That is because people are put in a position where, frankly, they do not have enough money. That comes back to the same problem of in-work poverty.

The Government can talk all they like about the importance of working to get out of poverty, but as we have heard during today's debate, the biggest problem for people who are in poverty is that they are not being paid enough. I will finish by saying that one of the best ways to tackle in-work poverty is to join a trade union, and to use its leverage in the workplace to get a fair day's pay for a fair day's work.

5.9 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Sir George. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on introducing the debate, and on setting out a powerful and well-argued case for action on the scourge of in-work poverty. We also heard excellent contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), for Newport West (Ruth Jones), for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), and for Reading East (Matt Rodda).

A consistent theme of the debate has been the extent to which the problem of in-work poverty, which has increased over a number of years, has been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis that we have been grappling with over the past year. That is driven by such factors as core food inflation, which is worse in this country than in neighbouring countries; the housing cost crisis, which has been driven by rising mortgages and rents; and a decade of low wage growth.

The Trussell Trust's figures today, which should shame the Government—should shame any Government—show that the scourge of food insecurity is affecting millions of people. As was said by many hon. Friends, it has been proven that work is not in itself a means of ensuring that people are not food insecure. My food bank, and food banks in the constituencies of my hon. Friends, are reporting unprecedented demand for assistance from people who are working.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend want to comment on the fact that work is now not the route out of poverty, as we have heard? Nothing in what the Government propose on in-work progression will make an impact on that.

Ms Buck: I will touch on that in a second. We all want to see people in good, well-paid work. The fact that work is not a route out of poverty has been proven

amply in recent years, and more so than previously, but I would also say that work in itself is not necessarily a route out of poverty for people bringing up children. It has always been, and remains, the case that Government have a role to play in ensuring that working families, including those with children, receive support, and that that is not simply left to wages.

The story of in-work poverty over the last 13 years is one of wasted opportunity. One of the most underappreciated social changes of recent decades is the decline in family worklessness. When Labour came into government in 1997, one in five children were living in a workless household. On the most recent data, 9% of children are in workless households. The decline in family worklessness has been an almost continuous trend, outside of economic downturns, over the last two or more decades. There are not only far fewer children in workless families than there were a generation ago, but more couple families in which both adults are working, and fewer in which only one parent works. All those changes should be positive for poverty reduction.

“Work is the best route out of poverty” was always a glib soundbite that dismissed the challenges faced by people who cannot work, whether because of disability, health or caring responsibilities, but it is true that as a general rule parental employment greatly reduces the risk of poverty. On the face of it, then, the employment situation for families with children is incomparably better than it was a generation ago, yet despite continuing improvement in parental employment, child poverty was higher in 2021-22 than it was in 2010-11.

The link between increased employment and poverty reduction broke down somewhere around the middle of the last decade. Some 19% of children in families with someone in work were in poverty after housing costs. By 2019-20, that figure had risen to 26%. It fell back very slightly in the latest data, which are for 2021-22. I suspect that is to do with the boost provided to universal credit and other support during the pandemic.

Astonishingly, the poverty rate after housing costs for children in single-earner families with full-time work is now 44%. Given the changes to employment over this period, had the risk of poverty for working families remained where it was when Labour left office in 2010, we would now be looking at there being far fewer children in poverty. That is what I mean about a wasted opportunity. Just think: the historical record of Conservative-led Governments would be one of poverty reduction. Ministers would be able to proudly defend their record on child poverty. They would not need to switch poverty measures to confuse people. They would be quite happy to be judged on the headline relative poverty measure.

How did this all happen? Faced with employment trends that would have reduced poverty, we had policies that made working and out-of-work families poorer—specifically the benefit freeze, which permanently reduced the value of in-work and out-of-work support. Universal credit was designed around a single-earner household model, and it continues to provide poor rewards for second earners when they increase their hours and earnings. The Government's response to the weak incentives in universal credit is the crude stick of in-work conditionality. It is virtually an admission that they do not expect second earners to be dramatically better off if they increase their earnings.

[Ms Buck]

For too long, jobcentre policy has been concerned with getting people into any job without considering crucial aspects of job quality such as stability and predictability of earnings and progression. If we want work to be the main route to poverty reduction—and we do—for those who can work, it needs to be work where people can genuinely improve their incomes over time, rather than struggle with zero-hours contracts, unpredictable shift patterns and fluctuating earnings.

The lesson is that increasing parental employment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for reducing child poverty. If we want to reduce poverty, we need a genuinely supportive welfare state and a focus on job quality. These have been the missing ingredients in Government policy since 2010, leading to the squandering of opportunities for poverty reduction.

5.16 pm

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing this debate. He and others have raised a number of policy issues that are not in my portfolio, but I will try to deal with them briefly if I can.

In respect of housing, I am not the Housing Minister, but the hon. Member will be aware that in 2022-23, the Government are projected to spend £30 billion to support renters. That is 1.4% of GDP. He may criticise that as an insufficient sum, but it is the highest of any country in the OECD in relation to spending on housing rental support—the next highest is 0.9% of GDP. Clearly, the figure is higher than when we came into office.

The hon. Member's second point about housing related to the production of homes. We have built 2.2 million additional homes since coming into office. Housing starts are double the number we inherited from the Labour Government in 2010. More homes are meeting decent homes standards, and housing supply is up 10% in the last year for which we have figures. The most recent figures show a 20-year high in the number of new buyers.

On education, the hon. Member specifically raised free school meals. I am not aware that that is Labour Front-Bench policy, but he has the joy of the Back-Bench freedom to roam and create new policy. In any event, it is not even SNP policy. The SNP briefly adopted that, but obviously then parked it in a motorhome, and it has been driven off into the distance of some strange new world of new policy.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: Of course I will. I look forward to the hon. Gentleman's defence of all matters motorhomes and policy.

David Linden: I am certainly not going to stray into the Contempt of Court Act 1981, as I am sure the Minister would not either as a former solicitor. Given that he seems to know so much about the free school meals position in Scotland, will he outline to hon. Members when free school meals kick in? I am sure he knows.

Guy Opperman: As I indicated, I am not the Education Minister, but what I am going to do is set out the position. I will happily make the point that this is not Labour party policy. It used to be the case, as I understand it, that the SNP proposed universal free school meals, but recently it said that it would need to target that—in other words, it would need to make that means-tested.

Ruth Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: No, I am trying to answer this particular point. The reality of the situation on free school meals—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members may chunter away as much as they like, but I am going to try to set this out. On free school meals, under the benefits-based criteria, which I believe is what the SNP Government wish to use, 2 million of the most disadvantaged pupils are eligible for and claim a free school meal. That is 23.8% of all pupils in state-funded schools. The number eligible for free school meals has increased since 2016-17 from 1.128 million to 2.019 million. Almost 1.3 million additional infants enjoy a free healthy and nutritious meal at lunchtime, following the introduction by this Government—to be fair, in the coalition—of the universal infant free school meal policy in 2014. This Government have extended eligibility more than any other. Taken together, we spend more than £1 billion per annum delivering free lunches to the greatest ever proportion of schoolchildren—to more than one third of schoolchildren.

I will move away from those particular policies, because the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) raised a couple of points that I want to address. He was very critical of the Prime Minister, and it is perfectly his right to be so. The Prime Minister is a gentleman of wealth now, but the hon. Gentleman should remember that he is the son of a pharmacist and a GP, who grew up in Southampton.

The hon. Member also talked about his constituency. He will be aware that I set up the Northumberland Community Bank in Ashington in his constituency. The bank is the fastest growing credit union in the north and is, without a shadow of a doubt, doing amazing work in providing support for loans to local people in Northumberland. I say respectfully that that is an amazing institution, which I hope he supports.

Ian Lavery: Will the Minister kindly inform the House what those last remarks have to do with this debate?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman raised issues about support for working people. The Northumberland Community Bank is a fantastic institution that provides savings and loans to those in difficulties. It is a co-operative, which I am sure he supports; it was set up in Northumberland; it is a success story; and it is based in his constituency. I will move on.

The Government's support is underpinned by the wider welfare system, and I will try to set out some particular points on that. In 2023-24, we will spend around £276 billion through the welfare system in Great Britain, including £124 billion on people of working age and their children. Benefit rates and state pensions have increased by 10.1% for 2023-24 and the benefit cap has increased by the same amount. The reality of the situation is that this country has never spent as much as it presently does on this support.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I am going to make some progress.
[*Interruption.*]

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I do not want to be unkind to the hon. Lady, but in the previous debate, I did point out to an hon. Member that to arrive at the end of the debate and intervene is not necessarily the right way to go about things. If she insists, she can, but I just say that. I call the Minister.

Guy Opperman: Our commitment to protecting the most vulnerable is reflected in the action that we have taken over the past two years as people continue to face cost of living pressures, which are clearly evident and are fundamentally derived from the impact of the covid pandemic and the subsequent war in Ukraine, and the impact of that on energy and other costs.

Overall, in 2023 and 2024, we are providing total support worth more than £94 billion to help people with rising bills. That is an average of more than £3,300 per household. Last year, we made cost of living payments of up to £650 to over 8 million low-income households. This year, eligible households will continue to receive additional payments of up to £900. The first £301 payment to 8.3 million households—this support is worth more than £2.5 billion in total—has recently been paid. Further payments will be made this year. In addition, over 6 million people across the UK on eligible extra cost disability benefits have been paid a further £150 disability cost of living payment.

The practical reality is that we have made progress. In 2021-22, 1.7 million fewer people were in absolute poverty after housing costs than in 2009-10, including 400,000 fewer children. Furthermore, there are now nearly 1 million fewer workless households than in 2010. That is why, with more than 1 million vacancies across the UK, our focus is firmly on supporting people in work, and our core jobcentre offer provides a range of options, including face-to-face work coach support and help to boost interview and employment skills.

The taper has been changed, which I believe is very much of assistance. We have taken decisive action on making work pay by cutting the universal credit taper from 63% to 55% and by increasing the universal credit work allowance by £500 a year, allowing households to keep more of what they earn. The national living wage has increased by a record level of 9.7% to £10.42 per hour from this April, which represents a rise of more than £1,600 in the gross annual earnings of a full-time worker.

To help people to progress, we are extending the support offered by our jobcentres to low-paid workers, so that they can increase their hours and move into better-quality jobs. There are two key measures: the in-work progression offer and the increase in the administrative earnings thresholds in universal credit. The in-work progression offer is now live across all jobcentres in Great Britain. We estimate that about 1.4 million low-paid claimants are eligible for work coach support.

I am conscious of time, and I want to address a key issue. Legitimate points were made on the cost of living and earnings, but I am pleased that, today, the Department

for Work and Pensions raised the amount that working parents on universal credit may claim for childcare. This is up to £951 a month for one child and £1,630 for two or more children. That is an increase of approximately 47% on the previous limits, which were £646 and £1,108 respectively. That is a massive increase in childcare support for working parents and of massive assistance to those who work. I hope that the House will welcome that.

The Government are also helping eligible parents to cover the costs for the first month of childcare when they enter work and as they increase their working hours. In addition, the House will be aware of the expansion of the 30 hours of funded childcare that the Government originally introduced in 2017, extending the entitlement to eligible working parents for children aged from nine months old to when they start primary school. That will remove one of the largest hurdles that working parents face by giving a huge boost to the amount of funded childcare that they can access, saving them about £6,500 a year.

Taken collectively, we have heard loud and clear that there is a need for a better amount of support for this particular childcare. In respect of this point, we will provide £204 million of extra funding for local authorities to increase the hourly rates that they pay providers, and make sure that rates continue to go up each year.

The Government are committed to tackling poverty, both in and out of work. We are focusing on making work pay and on progression opportunities. We will ensure that everyone has the opportunity to move into a job where they can realise their potential.

5.27 pm

Mr Dhesi: Thank you, Sir George, for chairing today's important debate on in-work poverty. I thank the Minister, the Labour shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), and the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), for their responses, as well as other hon. Members who made such sobering, excellent contributions in speeches and interventions.

My gratitude also goes to the House of Commons Library for providing accurate and relevant statistics. I thank Crisis, the Trussell Trust, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Slough food bank for providing their analyses, as well as for the brilliant work that they do in my Slough constituency and across our country.

Ministers may want something to blame, whether that is covid, the war in Ukraine or the energy crisis, but the truth is that in-work poverty has been caused by low and insecure earnings, a high cost of living and little affordable housing. As my hon. Friends have eloquently explained, the problems are worse for marginalised communities, especially for many in ethnic minority communities.

All three of the problems that I have highlighted are consequences of Government incompetence and ideology. All three have led to stagnation and suffering. According to Crisis, one in four households who became homeless in 2022 had at least one person in work. The crisis of in-work poverty is leading to a crisis of in-work homelessness, caused by a toxic mix of low-paid, insecure

[*Mr Dhesi*]

work and a lack of affordable housing. That is why we have a situation in our country where many people are going into work without having a home to return to. We must be in a position whereby people in our country—or in any country—should be able to aspire to a decent

wage, to own their own home and to raise and support a family. The Government must ensure that people can aspire to do more than merely survive—

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 28 June 2023

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Service Live Training Events

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): I am pleased to update the House on Civil Service Live, the Government's annual, cross-Department series of training events to improve the skills available to public servants. These conferences give civil servants professional development opportunities to meet, learn from each other and share that learning across the civil service.

The threefold aim of Civil Service Live is to “educate, engage, and empower” staff in order that they can better support the Government's work to deliver services for communities across the UK, for instance by sharing innovative ways of working, learning new skills including in the use of data and developing digital public services or developing a better understanding of the way in which the system of government functions. We work with the Scottish Government and Welsh Government on these events.

Having begun on 7 June in Newcastle, Civil Service Live events have taken place or are due to take place across the United Kingdom. Over 5,000 officials of all kinds who work for the Government have gathered in dedicated events in Newcastle on 7 June, Glasgow on 15 June, in Belfast on 22 June, and in Exeter yesterday.

This year's programme of events will conclude with sessions in Manchester on 11 July, Cardiff on 13 July, and London on 18 and 19 July.

By the time all the sessions are concluded, I expect that as many as 20,000 civil servants will have taken part. We believe it is one of the largest learning events in Europe. As part of the evaluation measures we use, over 80% of attendees to date have said that they will do something differently with the information they have gained at the event, making a tangible difference to how our civil servants deliver public services.

[HCWS892]

DEFENCE

Astute Replacement Programme: Contingent Liability

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): I am today laying a departmental minute to advise that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has received approval from His Majesty's Treasury to recognise new contingent liabilities associated with the detailed design and long lead items contract with BAE Systems for the ship submersible nuclear AUKUS (known as “SSN-A”).

The departmental minute describes the contingent liabilities that the MOD will hold as part of the SSN-A programme. Negotiations are ongoing and the contingent liabilities will come into force on signature of the contract.

Our key industry partner for submarine construction, BAE Systems (BAES), has requested indemnities in addition to those set out within pre-approved Defence contractual conditions to provide financial provision

should the MOD decide to terminate the detailed design and long lead items contract or not award a follow-on contract with BAES. Both scenarios are highly remote as they would adversely impact support to the continuous at-sea deterrent, a top Defence strategic priority.

The attachment can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2023-06-28/HCWS887/>.

[HCWS887]

Armed Forces Personal Accident Insurance Scheme: Contingent Liability

The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): I have today laid a departmental minute to advise that the Department has entered into an agreement with its subcontracted personal accident insurer to enable continuation of personal accident insurance cover for around 60,000 policyholders before the expiry of the existing arrangement on 31 May 2023. This has ensured that our armed forces and civil servants deployed on operations continue to be able to take out personal accident insurance at reasonable premiums under the personal accident and optional life and critical illness insurance scheme (PAL Protect).

There have been times when service personnel have experienced difficulty in obtaining commercial personal accident or life insurance cover similar to that available to the general public due to the nature of their employment and the war risks associated with conflict situations. In keeping with the armed forces covenant, the Ministry of Defence is committed to ensuring that service personnel are not disadvantaged in their ability to access privately arranged personal accident and life insurance due to their employment. That is why this contract is so important; to make sure that our people have that option available to them.

The contingent liability would be for those injuries resulting from war or terrorism which are beyond the scheme provider's contractual responsibilities. The PAL Protect scheme will ensure that Government intervention is minimised to only addressing the specific gaps in market cover arising from the potential large-scale risks resulting from war or terrorism. The contingent liability will be required for the duration of the contract.

The attachment can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2023-06-28/HCWS890/>.

[HCWS890]

EDUCATION

Local Government Pension Scheme: Academy Guarantee Extension

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): The Department for Education has extended the local government pension scheme academy guarantee to include academy trust outsourced contracts—for example, outsourced catering services.

This extension will help academy trusts by reducing the costs of their outsourced contracts—for example, by lowering set-up costs, simplifying administrative processes and removing the requirement for a bond.

Detailed guidance on the extension has been published on gov.uk:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academies-and-local-government-pension-scheme-liabilities/dfe-local-government-pension-scheme-guarantee-for-academy-trusts-pensions-policy-for-outsourcing-arrangements>

[HCWS888]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Mental Health In-patient Services: Improving Safety

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): I refer hon. Members to the oral statement I will make in the House today, 28 June 2023, on improving safety in mental health in-patient services.

[HCWS889]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Holocaust Memorial: Forecast Cost

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): On 23 February, the Holocaust Memorial Bill had its First Reading in the House of Commons. Subject to Parliament's approval of the Bill, and subject also to the granting of planning consent, the Government will proceed to construct a fitting memorial to the 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered in the holocaust and all other victims of the Nazis and their collaborators.

Ahead of Second Reading of the Bill, I wish to update the House on the forecast costs for completion of the proposed holocaust memorial. Delays to the programme arising from the High Court challenge, together with the effects of construction price inflation, mean that forecast costs have increased since the estimates made in July 2021. Our current estimate of total costs to completion (excluding contingency) is set out in the table below. We expect that charitable donations will cover at least £25 million of these costs.

The memorial at Victoria Tower Gardens will help the whole nation to reflect on the importance of the holocaust and the lessons it holds for us today.

Spend and forecast (excluding contingency)

| | Previous Forecast Mar-22 | Current Forecast Mar-23 |
|---|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Figures in £m incl. VAT. Numbers may not sum due to rounding. | Forecast ¹ | Forecast ² |
| Client ³ | 9.6 | 14.3 |
| Design ⁴ | 11.2 | 11.9 |
| Exhibition and content development ⁵ | 14.8 | 15.9 |
| Construction ⁶ | 62.3 | 91.3 |
| Mobilisation ⁷ | 3.6 | 4.0 |
| Planning inquiry | 1.4 | 1.4 |
| Grand total | 102.9 | 138.8 |

Notes

¹ March 2022 forecast as published by the NAO in their report "Investigation into the management of the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre Report" dated 5 July 2022.

² Includes the inflationary impact of delays using the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) November 2022 CPI forecast (except for the construction and exhibition elements against which sector specific inflation estimates have been applied as advised by the programme's consultants).

³ Programme team and other programme costs: staff and contractors, rent, business case development, fundraising research, digital storage, communications, legal advice, community engagement, early programme expenditure (technical scoping reports, design competition). The key driver of the cost change is staff costs, primarily resulting from programme delays.

⁴ Up to FBC the key drivers of cost changes were refinement of plans and the costs of the planning inquiry. Since FBC the key driver is inflation followed by additional expenditure related to changing external cost managers.

⁵ Exhibition design and fit-out costs advised by cost consultants Greenway Associates and based at Q3 2022 prices. Inflation on exhibition delivery costs at an average 4.8% per annum has been applied based on BCIS (Building Cost Information Service) indices. Cost changes are a result of refinement of approach and inflationary impact of delays.

⁶ Costs are based on Q1 2022 prices; inflation based on AECOM Q4 2022 inflation indices (2022: 9%, 2023: 6.4%, 2024: 4%). Construction costs have increased primarily due to inflation resulting from both higher than envisaged construction inflation at OBC and FBC as well as delays to the programme.

⁷ Forecast of operation set-up costs: facilities management, security, staff/contractors, furniture, fixtures and equipment costs in year before opening. Increases are primarily due to refinements in forecasts at FBC stage, increased by inflation due to delays.

[HCWS891]

Petition

Wednesday 28 June 2023

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Bus Services in North Shropshire

The petition of residents of North Shropshire,

Declares that residents are concerned by the poor bus services in North Shropshire; express their frustration at struggling to use public transport to travel to key amenities like hospitals and schools; convey their difficulties in securing work opportunities due to lack of transport connections; and note that currently only one bus service operates on Sundays throughout the constituency.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take their concerns into account and act to ensure that bus connections are available to the residents of North Shropshire seven days per week, connecting local villages and towns.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Helen Morgan, *Official Report*, 13 June 2023; Vol. 734, c. 268.]

[P002837]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden):

The Government recognise the importance of bus services in ensuring communities can stay connected and access work, education and vital services such as healthcare. The Government also recognise that the sector is currently facing a number of challenges, including lower levels of patronage, and that this is having an impact on bus services.

On 17 May, the Department for Transport announced a long-term approach to support and improve bus services with an additional £300 million to support services from July 2023 until April 2025. This funding will provide the certainty that the sector needs to deliver sustainable networks that better reflect the needs of those who rely on bus services every day and builds on the more than £2 billion in emergency and recovery funding that the Government have provided since March 2020 to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Of this funding, Shropshire County Council will receive £1,490,492 in 2023-24 under the bus service improvement plan-plus mechanism. As part of this additional funding, flexibility surrounding the use of the funding was extended as a means to support existing services. The Department expects any local authority that wishes to make use of this new flexibility to carefully consider and confirm whether supporting existing routes would provide better value for money compared to their previous plans, and whether the routes they wish to support are likely to become sustainable in the longer term.

On 17 May, the Department for Transport also announced the extension of the bus fare cap scheme at £2 for a further four months from 1 July until 31 October to continue to encourage people back on to the bus, while saving passengers money during difficult economic times. This will then be followed by a longer-term fare cap of £2.50 from 1 November 2023 to 30 November 2024. We will also undertake a review of bus fares at the end of the £2.50 fare cap, to determine how best to support the sector in moving to a sustainable footing.

The Government are supportive of new forms of bus provision in areas that are currently not adequately served by conventional timetabled buses. Demand responsive transport is one such tool available for improving local bus service provision, including as a means of improving evening and weekend services, and providing access to services, education and sites of employment. The Government note that Shropshire Council is introducing a pilot demand responsive transport service around Shrewsbury later this year, with a view to potential extensions into other parts of the county.

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 28 June 2023

| | <i>Col. No.</i> | | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|---|-----------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------|
| PRIME MINISTER | 268 | SCOTLAND—continued | |
| Engagements | 268 | Cost of Living | 260 |
| SCOTLAND | 259 | Labour Market | 259 |
| Allegations of Impropriety in Public Life | 265 | Productive Forestry | 266 |
| Child Poverty | 267 | Support for the Energy Industry | 266 |

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 28 June 2023

| | <i>Col. No.</i> | | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|--|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| CABINET OFFICE | 11WS | EDUCATION | 12WS |
| Civil Service Live Training Events | 11WS | Local Government Pension Scheme: Academy Guarantee Extension | 12WS |
| DEFENCE | 11WS | HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE | 13WS |
| Armed Forces Personal Accident Insurance Scheme: Contingent Liability | 12WS | Mental Health In-patient Services: Improving Safety | 13WS |
| Astute Replacement Programme: Contingent Liability | 11WS | LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES | 13WS |
| | | Holocaust Memorial: Forecast Cost | 13WS |

PETITION

Wednesday 28 June 2023

| | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|--|-----------------|
| TRANSPORT | 3P |
| Bus Services in North Shropshire | 3P |

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Wednesday 5 July 2023**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 28 June 2023

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 259] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Scotland
Prime Minister

Speaker's Statement [Col. 268]

Water Industry: Financial Resilience [Col. 281]

Answer to urgent question—(Rebecca Pow)

Mental Health In-patient Services: Improving Safety [Col. 292]

Statement—(Steve Barclay)

Childcare Reform Package [Col. 307]

Statement—(Claire Coutinho)

Global Climate and Development Finance [Col. 318]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Liam Byrne)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Holocaust Memorial Bill [Col. 321]

Motion for Second Reading—(Michael Gove)—agreed to
Read a Second time

Holocaust Memorial Bill: Committal [Col. 365]

Motion—(Felicity Buchan)—agreed to

Holocaust Memorial Bill: Instruction [Col. 373]

Amendment (a)—(Sir Peter Bottomley)—on a Division, negatived
Amendment (b)—(Sir Peter Bottomley)—negatived
Motion—(Felicity Buchan)—agreed to

Holocaust Memorial Bill: Carry-Over [Col. 377]

Motion—(Felicity Buchan)—agreed to

Parliamentary Standards Act 2009 Section 4 A(2): Positions for which Additional Salaries Are Payable [Col. 378]

Motion—(Felicity Buchan)—agreed to

Proxy Voting [Col. 379]

Motion—(Penny Mordaunt)—agreed to

House of Commons Commission (External Member) [Col. 385]

Motion—(Penny Mordaunt)—agreed to

New Covid Variants: Government Preparedness [Col. 387]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 (S.I., 2023, No. 602) [Col. 397]

Motion, on a deferred Division, agreed to

Westminster Hall

Mortgage Prisoners [Col. 105WH]

Rosebank Oilfield: Environmental Impacts [Col. 125WH]

Hong Kong National Security Law Anniversary [Col. 134WH]

Great British Nuclear [Col. 158WH]

In-work Poverty [Col. 163WH]

General debates

Written Statements [Col. 11WS]

Petition [Col. 3P]

Observations
