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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 29 June 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS AND TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Scottish Trade and Culture

1. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What discussions she has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on promoting Scottish trade and culture overseas. [905681]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): I regularly discuss with my Cabinet colleagues promoting trade in Scotland as well as the United Kingdom as a whole. Just this week I chaired a meeting of the Board of Trade that focused on trade promotion across the nations, and held discussions, alongside the Secretary of State for Scotland, on ensuring that the Department's work delivers for the whole UK.

Patrick Grady: That sounds just wonderful, but I would like to know how the Secretary of State thinks ending freedom of movement has helped to promote Scottish trade and culture overseas. Does she think it is a good thing that musicians in Glasgow North now find it much more difficult to tour in Europe—one of the most important markets for traditional Scottish music nowadays—and that their merchandise can no longer be manufactured in Scotland but must be manufactured in the countries to which they are travelling because the customs costs have become so prohibitive?

Kemi Badenoch: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's early-morning snarkiness as he asks about what we are doing for Scotland. We understand that there are issues that people have across borders, and my Department works closely with musicians and with all those who trade across borders to see what we can do to resolve those issues. If there are specific cases in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, the Department is well placed to help his constituents with the issues he has described.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Scotch whisky is an iconic Scottish export, and it is also hugely important strategically to the whole UK. Had Ministers completed the free trade agreement with India by Diwali last year,

as was promised, the 150% tariff that producers of Scotch face when exporting to India could have been eliminated. Given that the 10th round of talks has recently ended, with an 11th planned soon, can the Secretary of State tell us whether the free trade agreement will be completed by Diwali this year?

Kemi Badenoch: I have said repeatedly that it is about the deal and not the day. Every single trade agreement that we negotiate is bespoke to the specific country and tailored to its economy, to ensure that it benefits both the UK and the counterpart country. I am happy to say that the Scotch Whisky Association is very pleased with what it has been hearing about negotiations from its Indian counterparts, and we are working hard to make sure that the industry is successful.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): The Scottish seafood industry has been hit with an estimated 50% increase in the cost of packaging owing to the requirement—thanks to the form of Brexit chosen by this Government—for export health certificates with every consignment. Does the Secretary of State accept that the form of Brexit that was chosen, and in particular the failure to align in respect of sanitary and phytosanitary matters, is adding costs to Scotland's iconic seafood sector at a time when it can barely afford to absorb such costs?

Kemi Badenoch: No, I do not accept that at all. If anything, what is increasing the costs is what the Scottish Government have been doing in relation to the deposit return scheme. While complaining about our divergence between here and the EU, they are trying to split the UK single market, and we are not going to let them do that.

Steel Industry: Decarbonisation

2. **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help the steel industry to decarbonise. [905682]

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Paris agreement made clear that the steel industry needs to cut emissions by 93% by 2050, and the Government recognise the vital role that the steel sector plays in our economy. The 2021 net zero strategy sets out our aim to make the transition to a low-carbon economy, and reaffirms our commitment to continuing to work with the steel industry on decarbonisation.

Stephen Kinnock: Hundreds of steelworkers gathered in Westminster yesterday to make absolutely clear their feeling that the Government are not doing enough, particularly in comparison with competitor nations, when it comes to investment in the transition to decarbonised steel. The numbers do not lie. The Government are also worryingly slow in introducing a carbon border adjustment mechanism. UK Steel has estimated that nearly 23 million tonnes of non-EU steel could flood the UK market if the UK fails to introduce its own carbon border adjustment mechanism at the same time as the EU in 2026. When will we see the Government stepping up and investing in green steel as is being done in competitor countries, and when can we expect the introduction of a British CBAM?

Ms Ghani: We have been supporting the steel industry, with more than £1 billion available in grants to help decarbonise the sector and the provision of more than £730 million to cover energy costs since 2013. The CBAM is clearly an issue for many countries, not just ours. We have just finished one consultation, and will produce a response in due course. A transitional reporting phase is due to start in October, with full introduction in 2026. The EU is still developing details about CBAM implementation, and has a consultation open on proposed reporting requirements until 11 July. I know that the hon. Member chairs the all-party parliamentary group for steel and metal related industries, and I urge him to ensure that all businesses express their views as strongly as possible. I think we are meeting on Monday to make sure that we can provide a substantial response.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Minister said that she recognises the vital role that steel plays in this country, but the UK is the only country in the G20 where steel production is falling. It is also the only G7 country whose Government do not insist on using domestically produced steel in defence contracts. Meanwhile, UK steel producers pay 62% more than their German counterparts for electricity. Labour's £3 billion green steel plan will give our industry the bright future that other countries are offering their steel sectors. Labour believes in our steel; why do this Government not?

Ms Ghani: I am not sure where Labour Members will get the money to fund that programme of work. I have not even got to the end of reading this paper but they will probably U-turn by the time I do, so I am not sure how sensible it is going to be. We have provided more than £1 billion for decarbonisation, unprecedented support to help with energy costs, and just recently, there was fantastic news from Celsa, when it was able to repay a Government loan of £30 million that we provided to them, sensibly spending taxpayers' money. There is and always has been support available. When it comes to procurement, it is absolutely right that we do everything we can to make sure that we have UK firms procuring UK steel.

Food Prices

3. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the potential impact of her Department's trade policies on food prices. [905683]

The Minister for International Trade (Nigel Huddleston): We recognise the important role that trade can play in improving food security. That is why our trade policy aims to help people to access good-quality and good-value food. Our free trade agreements help to remove market access barriers, supporting our importers and exporters. The new developing countries trading scheme, for example, reduces tariffs on nearly £1.4 billion-worth of agriculture goods, and we work with international partners, including at the World Trade Organisation, to remove trade barriers and strengthen the UK's global food supply.

Martyn Day: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer, but Melissa Leach, the director of the Institute of Development Studies, has spoken about the need to increase access to affordable, nutritious food. She said:

"Over the last decade, charities have stepped in to plug the gaps left by the state but this is not an acceptable or sustainable way to address the growing prevalence of hunger".

Does the Minister accept that his Government's commitment to Brexit has led to increasing prices of food that is imported and has contributed to food poverty in the UK?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that food price inflation is not unique to the UK; it is a global phenomenon that we all face. Actually, food price inflation peaked at 19.2% in the EU and at 19.2% in the UK, so we are facing the same problems. However, we have provided more than £94 billion-worth of support precisely to help the most vulnerable in society.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): There are many factors impacting food inflation, not least increasing global input costs, but surely the most important thing that my hon. Friend's Department can do to shore up British agriculture and have a positive impact on food prices is to carry on, full speed ahead, getting the new trade deals that will see British first-class produce sold as a premium product worldwide.

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. It is really important that we have support across the House for these important trade deals. They are good for the British economy, particularly good for British farmers, and good for prices in the UK. I hope, at some point, to see the Opposition parties supporting one of these important deals, which are transparently in the interests of British consumers in every nation and region of the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Since 2019, food prices in the UK have rocketed by 26%, a figure that is among the highest in the G7, yet the Prime Minister's plans for new border checks on highly perishable food from Europe could push prices up again. A veterinary agreement would cut the cost of bringing food into Britain from Europe. Given that many families are already struggling to put enough food on the table and that every significant business organisation supports a veterinary agreement with the EU, why will the Secretary of State not take the sensible and pragmatic step of starting negotiations for such an agreement?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that discussions are happening on an ongoing basis with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office about the trade and co-operation agreement and other matters. We have very constructive dialogue with our EU partners. In fact, the Secretary of State and I had a meeting with the EU ambassadors just yesterday.

As for our achievements since leaving the EU, it is important to stress one thing: we have been laser-focused on making sure that the benefits are for the British consumers. We have got rid of thousands and thousands of tariffs. We have liberalised tariffs, reduced them or eliminated them altogether. For example, to compare us with the EU, 27% of the EU's current external tariffs are zero-rated, whereas the proportion for the UK is 47%. We are significantly reducing tariffs, which is in the best interests of the British consumer, as a result of leaving the European Union.

Trade with Africa

4. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase trade with African countries. [905684]

The Minister for International Trade (Nigel Huddleston): To increase and grow trade with Africa, we are using our nine trade agreements, covering 18 African nations. In April 2024, the Prime Minister will host the second UK-Africa investment summit to showcase investment opportunities and advance two-way trade. Just this month, we launched the developing countries trading scheme, which covers 65 countries, including 37 African countries.

Mr Robertson: That is all good news, particularly the developing countries trading scheme. I was recently in Ethiopia for a trade visit. Can the Minister tell me how the developing countries trading scheme, in particular, will help Ethiopia?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for the work he does as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Ethiopia and many other countries. I was also in Ethiopia recently, and many people were praising my hon. Friend and his work. He is right that the developing countries trading scheme will reduce tariffs, which is a win-win both for developing countries, making it easier and cheaper for them to export to the UK, and for UK consumers because it will reduce prices. It is not just a matter of having the deal; we are laser-focused on making sure the benefits of the deal are realised, with more than 100 Department for Business and Trade officials working in Africa to make sure we get the full benefit of these deals.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): As the Government rightly consider new trade deals with other countries, what lessons will they learn from the hideous mistakes made in the New Zealand and Australia trade deals? The right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), a former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, rightly said that they are bad deals for Britain. Given that British farmers are so angry with this Government, having been thrown under the bus on animal welfare and on environmental and cost issues, will he learn lessons from those mistakes and make sure British farmers are protected, and that environmental and animal welfare standards are protected, too?

Nigel Huddleston: I am, quite frankly, astounded by the hon. Gentleman's comments. He is well aware, as I have said repeatedly and is widely acknowledged, that the trade deals we have developed, including with Australia and New Zealand, are economically beneficial right across the UK, including in his constituency. If he does not wish to support policies that are in the best economic interests of his constituency, that is something his constituents probably need to recognise come the next election.

Israel: Free Trade Agreement

5. **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): What progress she has made on negotiating a bilateral free trade agreement with Israel. [905685]

The Minister for International Trade (Nigel Huddleston):

We are continuing to make progress towards an upgraded UK-Israel free trade agreement, focused on services, procurement and innovation, and we concluded the second round of negotiations on 17 May. As two service-driven economies, this negotiation is an excellent opportunity to build on our existing goods-focused agreement, particularly to boost trade in services with an innovative, high-tech nation such as Israel.

Nicola Richards: The UK's trade with Israel increased by 42% in 2022 compared with 2021, and it is valued at £7.2 billion. Israel is a key trade and security partner in the region, and it is a world leader in many areas. Can the Minister update the House on the Department's progress on the trade aims outlined in the 2030 road map for UK-Israel bilateral relations, namely the establishment of a UK-Israel free trade agreement, the Britain-Israel Investment Group and a UK-Israel innovation and investment summit?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend is all over the numbers, which saves me from repeating them. The benefits of the trade agreement are obvious, and we continue to strengthen our trade relationship with Israel, which is a valued friend and ally. As outlined in the 2030 road map for UK-Israel relations, a service-based free trade agreement between our two nations will act as a cornerstone of this relationship in years to come. As such, we are pleased to have successfully concluded the second round of negotiations in London just last month, and we look forward to holding further talks in due course.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that very positive response. We in Northern Ireland are keen to ensure that the bilateral trade agreements benefit our companies as well. Some people and councils across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland wish to downgrade Israel's goods. I know that the Minister and our Government want to do the very opposite. Will the Minister tell the House what he is prepared to do to ensure that Israeli goods are promoted right across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Nigel Huddleston: Absolutely. Israel is already a really important trading partner, right across the UK, and it will continue to be so. As we negotiate this deal, it is important that we focus on the areas of greatest opportunity. Once the deal is done—of course, this is an upgrade—we will be actively working to make sure that the communications about the benefits of the deal are understood by everybody. We will be working with various bodies and groups, including the devolved Administrations and bodies, to make sure that we take full benefit from these deals. Signing the deal is one thing, but taking and making the best of the opportunities is another—we will be working on that as well.

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

6. **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that the UK's accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership increases economic opportunities for businesses and consumers. [905686]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): The CPTPP will be benefiting every nation and region of our country. In particular, UK firms will enjoy enhanced access to Malaysia for the first time, including a reduction on tariffs on whisky sales to Malaysia of 80% within 10 years, improving prospects for trade and opening up opportunities in an economy worth £330 billion.

Richard Graham: We should all congratulate the Secretary of State and her team on concluding the CPTPP negotiations, and it should be ratified any time now in New Zealand. Of course the most important new element of the trans-Pacific partnership is this first ever free trade agreement with our long-term friend and ally, Malaysia. Whether in cars, cyber, chocolates, vaccines or legal and other services, the opportunities for British exporters are considerable and, of course, the dividends from our investment there, such as the new Smith & Nephew plant, will also help our balance of payments. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that there is a great opportunity for us and Malaysia to work together on spreading the word, through our regional offices, the UK-ASEAN Business Council and every other means possible, to make sure that businesses in both countries are absolutely aware of the opportunities that the deal offers?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He will be pleased to know that Ministers in the Department met their counterpart, the Malaysian export Minister, this very week. A lot is going on between our two countries. The Department works closely with the UK-ASEAN Business Council, and our first bilateral joint economic trade committee with Malaysia is expected later this year. It will help promote the bilateral trade and investment and economic co-operation that he rightly champions as the trade envoy to that country. He will know that I will be signing the CPTPP agreement next month in New Zealand.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Clearly, it is vital that British businesses that want to export can access the benefits of trade deals. However, the Government admitted to me in a written answer that they have not modelled the benefits of the CPTPP for our hard-pressed manufacturing businesses, so will the Minister tell me how many UK manufacturers will benefit from the rules of origin requirements under the CPTPP?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Lady will know that we do not count the number of companies specifically in our modelling. The modelling happens at a very high level—it is macro-level modelling. What she should know is that rules of origin will benefit people who export to that region, particularly auto manufacturers, who are very pleased about the deal.

Israel: Free Trade Agreement

7. **Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** What steps her Department has taken to ensure that the free trade agreement with Israel complies with the UK's obligations in section 5 of United Nations Security Council resolution 2334. [905689]

12. **Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab):** What steps her Department has taken to ensure that the free trade agreement with Israel complies with international law. [905697]

14. **Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab):** What steps her Department has taken to ensure that the free trade agreement with Israel complies with the UK's obligations in section 5 of United Nations Security Council resolution 2334. [905699]

The Minister for International Trade (Nigel Huddleston): The UK's position on settlements is clear: they are illegal under international law, present an obstacle to peace and threaten the physical viability of a two-state solution, as set out in the UN Security Council resolution 2334 and restated recently by the UNSC presidential statement in February 2023. We repeatedly call on Israel to abide by its obligations under international law and have a regular dialogue with Israel on legal issues relating to the occupation.

Alan Brown: The Minister is clearly aware then that resolution 2334 states that countries must

"distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967."

I welcome his comments confirming that the Government's belief is that the settlements are illegal under international law. How will the Government ensure that goods and services from these illegal settlements—in effect, stolen land—are excluded from the benefits of a free trade agreement?

Nigel Huddleston: Under our existing agreement, Israeli goods from the state of Israel receive tariff preferences under the UK-Israel partnership agreement. Palestinian goods, from the Occupied Palestinian Territories, benefit from trade preferences in the interim UK-Palestinian Authority bilateral agreement. To be clear, only goods originating from the state of Israel are covered by our current FTA, and that will not change in the upgraded FTA.

Andy McDonald: Last week, it was reported by *The Jerusalem Post* that Israel's National Security Minister Ben-Gvir, who just 15 years ago was convicted of inciting racism and supporting a terrorist organisation, had told settlers in the illegal west bank outpost of Evyatar:

"The Land of Israel must be settled and at the same time as the settlement of the Land a military operation must be launched."

He then spoke of demolitions and the killing of "thousands" of Palestinians, in order to "fulfil our great mission." Will the Minister condemn those genocidal remarks about Palestinians, and ensure that any trade deal with Israel explicitly bans UK trade with those illegal settlements and makes binding regulations for companies to uphold human rights standards?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the UK is a leading advocate of human rights around the world. We have very frank conversations with our allies and we have frank and honest discussions across Government. In answer to the trade element of his question, as I said previously, only goods originating in the state of Israel are covered by our current FTA, and that will not change under the upgraded FTA.

Nadia Whittome: I welcome the Minister's restatement of Government policy in his previous answer, but if the UK signs a trade deal without a territorial clause defining the border between Israel and Palestine, it will be seen in legal terms as equivalent to letting Israel decide by default to include its settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories as part of Israel. Is the Minister aware that that risks a situation where, in effect, the UK recognises illegal settlements in the west bank as part of Israel, which is counter to the Government's stated policy?

Nigel Huddleston: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave a moment ago, but I wish to reiterate that it is long-standing UK foreign policy that Israeli settlements beyond the 1967 boundaries are illegal.

European Single Market: UK Withdrawal

8. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What recent assessment her Department has made of the potential effect of the UK's withdrawal from the European single market on business and trade. [905690]

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Having regained our regulatory sovereignty now that we have left the European Union, we are now able to ensure that our regulation is tailored to the UK economy, supports our businesses and protects our consumers. Having left the single market, we can focus on UK trade with the world, where total trade is up 24%, so the answer to his question is that the effect is that total trade is up.

Neale Hanvey: Resilient and effective routes to market are essential for trade. The congestion that is currently being experienced at Dover is a significant barrier to effective trade. We can add to that the HGV miles from Scotland to the south-east and the impact on the quantities carried, on perishables and on costs, never mind the environmental impact. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we reintroduce direct links from Scotland to mainland Europe and ensure trade is friction-free from Scotland?

Ms Ghani: I do not think the hon. Member heard my answer: trade is up. The reality is that this scaremongering just has to stop. The scaremongering is basically a cover for petty nationalism, and I would ask him to be passionate about the market that matters, which is between Scotland and England.

Neale Hanvey rose—

Ms Ghani: If the hon. Member was passionate about Scottish businesses and Scottish jobs, he would be passionate about the single market that matters.

Neonatal Care

9. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps she is taking to implement the Neonatal Care (Leave and Pay) Act 2023. [905694]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I thank my hon. Friend for being the foremost parliamentary champion for this important cause. The Neonatal Care (Leave and Pay)

Act 2023 will give eligible employed parents up to 12 weeks of extra paid leave if their new baby is admitted to neonatal care, providing extra support at a very worrying time. We are keen to introduce the new entitlements as quickly as possible.

Luke Hall: I thank the Minister for that answer and his Department for its work on delivering the Neonatal Care (Leave and Pay) Act. It is fantastic news for so many parents across the country. We all want to see this entitlement delivered as quickly as possible. It really should be possible for the Department to deliver it for April next year, as there is time to deliver the required statutory instruments and guidance. There are examples of where His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has been able to move forward quickly to deliver such changes. Will the Minister update the House on his work to drive through this important change, so that parents do not have to wait a second longer than necessary for this entitlement, which will support them during the most difficult and dark times in their life?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to press us on this. We need to do this as quickly as possible and we are keen, as I have said, to do that. Similar work does require updating HMRC IT systems and parliamentary consideration is, of course, required for secondary legislation. There are seven pieces of secondary legislation, and support is needed for employers and payroll providers to implement the changes. We cannot introduce this mid-year; it has to be at the start of the year. I therefore think it very unlikely that we will be able to do that before April 2025.

Battery Sector

10. **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the battery sector. [905695]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): I recently visited Williams Advanced Engineering, an excellent example of British engineers working at the cutting edge of battery technology, including on projects benefiting from the Faraday battery challenge. The Government's £541 million Faraday battery challenge has supported more than 140 organisations working across the UK, attracting over £400 million in co-investment, and enabled 500 researchers across more than 25 universities to improve and develop battery technologies.

Ian Levy: We know that the United Kingdom needs more battery production facilities in order to achieve net zero and build an automotive industry that is fit for the future. On the Blyth estuary, we have the best site in the UK for high-volume battery manufacturing, with green power supplies, a deep-water port, and a talented and willing workforce. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that this Government grasp the opportunity and do all that they can to bring much-needed new green jobs to south-east Northumberland?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, of course, I do agree with my hon. Friend. I know that Blyth has an excellent location for a gigafactory. I just want him to know, as he represents that constituency, that we continue to work closely with the local authority to secure the best outcome for that site.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State be slightly cautious about a battery-driven future? I recently visited JCB, which has developed a hydrogen combustion engine that is working well with heavy vehicles. Hydrogen is moving very fast indeed. Will she encourage the production of hydrogen and visit JCB just to see the really innovative work that it is doing? Will she stop the Transport Minister in the House of Lords dissing hydrogen as ineffective?

Kemi Badenoch: Far be it from me to stop our noble Friends in the other place from doing what they think is right. None the less, I do agree with the hon. Gentleman. My view is, let a thousand flowers bloom. Hydrogen is one of the viable ways of helping us to get to net zero, and the Government are looking at all possible options to make sure that we support the cutting-edge technology that will get us to our green transition.

Exports to the EU

11. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What the value of exports to the EU was in (a) 2016, (b) 2019 and (c) the last year for which data is available. [905696]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The value of UK exports, measured in current prices, to the EU—including goods and services—was £247 billion in 2016, £298 billion in 2019, and £340 billion in 2022. The EU remains the UK's largest export market, receiving 42% of UK exports in 2022.

Mr Hollobone: That is all very interesting, because, during the Brexit referendum, "Project Fear" told us that if we left the EU, millions of people would lose their jobs, our exports would collapse, and the economy would go into freefall. Here in 2023, with us outside the European Union, employment is at record highs and unemployment at record lows, the eurozone is in recession and we are not, and our exports to the EU are at record levels. Is it not now demonstrably true that we are always going to be better off out?

Kevin Hollinrake: As Churchill once said, the pessimist sees a crisis in every opportunity, but the optimist, which my hon. Friend is, sees an opportunity in every crisis. The UK's total exports have recovered to pre-pandemic levels measured against 2018. In 2022 UK exports were £815 billion, up 21% in current prices and up 0.5% once adjusted for inflation. There is no doubt that UK exports are excelling and will continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The truth is that in the year stated, exports to the EU fell as a proportion of total trade. Last month it was not inflation that halved, but exports of fruit to the EU. The British Chambers of Commerce has reported that more small and medium-sized enterprises are seeing exports falling than rising, and Britain has the lowest export rates in the G7. When a business tells me that it used to take three days for its products to reach shelves in Germany and now it takes 30, is it not fair to conclude

that the Government have failed on the economy, have no plan to make Brexit work and are making businesses pay the price?

Kevin Hollinrake: That backs up my comment on pessimism; the hon. Lady is cherry-picking the worst possible figures she can find. In my conversations this week at the OECD conference on SMEs, nations around the world were crying out to do business with the UK, and indeed are doing so. Of course we are trying to tackle market barriers where they exist. We are leading a whole-of-Government effort to remove a hit list of 100 market access barriers, including those arising in Europe, to open up opportunity to UK exporters worth more than £20 billion. The most recent statistics, for the year ending March 2023, show that 45 barriers were resolved in Europe in that year, compared with 41 in the previous year.

Exports: EU Withdrawal

13. **Amy Callaghan** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What recent assessment her Department has made of trends in the level of goods exports since the UK's withdrawal from the EU. [905698]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): On a similar theme to my previous answer, the UK's total exports have recovered to pre-pandemic levels measured against 2018. In 2022, UK exports were £815 billion, up 21% in current prices and by 0.5% once adjusted for inflation.

Amy Callaghan: I thank the Minister for that answer. However, since the UK left the European Union its trade surplus with the rest of the world has declined from £46 billion to £5 billion. Was it this Government's goal to wipe out the UK's trade surplus when they committed to leaving the European Union?

Kevin Hollinrake: I say again that UK trade with the EU has recovered to pre-pandemic levels when measured in current prices, worth £772 billion in 2022, 14% higher in current prices than in 2018. We are making significant progress, not just with the European Union but with the rest of the world. We see our place in the world as being able to trade with the entire world, not just focusing entirely on the EU.

Steel Industry

15. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help support the steel industry. [905701]

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Government are actively engaging with the steel industry for a sustainable future, and my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary recently visited Tata and British Steel to see work that is under way. Since 2020 the Government have provided some £35 million in direct funding to support steel producers, on top of the hundreds of millions of pounds in energy price relief for the sector since 2013.

Jessica Morden: I echo the earlier comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on the greater need for support to help our steel sector decarbonise. Steelworkers from my constituency rallied

in Parliament Square yesterday, calling for the Government to support our steel sector, yet they will have heard the Prime Minister's poor response to my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) at Prime Minister's questions, when he merely referred to pre-existing packages of support and funding that was not exclusive to steel in the first place. When will the Government accept the scale of the challenge and commit to helping?

Ms Ghani: We accept the scale of the challenge; it is a global challenge to decarbonise the sector and many countries are feeling it. However, a potential £1 billion in support is not a small measure—it is a large measure. Dealing with the procurement process to ensure that we have UK contractors securing UK steel in their programmes of work is not a small task, nor is dealing with energy prices. We have provided more than £730 million. When the sector needs support and we know it is a valid use of taxpayers' money, we have stepped in, such as with the more than £30 million in Government loans to Celsa Steel in 2020. That secured 1,800 jobs, and the money has been returned to the taxpayer. We are more than happy to work with the hon. Lady and all Members who have steel firms in their constituencies, but we are going to provide steady support for the long term.

Cornish Businesses

16. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce potential barriers to trade for Cornish businesses. [905702]

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We are targeting a global hit list of barriers whose removal will deliver massive new opportunities for UK businesses throughout the country, including in Cornwall. It is estimated that that will be worth more than £20 billion over five years. The Government are working to open up new markets, including for Cornish farmers. British lamb is now being exported to America for the first time in over 20 years, and British beef is being sent to the Philippines.

Mrs Murray: Many of the businesses in my constituency pay an additional tax by way of a toll to cross the Tamar, which can run into many thousands of pounds for them. What representations has the Department made to the Department for Transport to have that additional tax, which can make it harder to compete with firms in the rest of the UK, removed?

Ms Ghani: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that to my attention. She is such a powerful voice for Cornwall. I am surprised that the Department for Transport has not yet buckled, because I know what a champion she is for her constituency and the region. I will ask my team to engage on this matter with their counterparts at the DFT and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I know that she will not stop until she gets what she deserves for her constituents, so I am more than happy to give the strength to her elbow.

Trade Deals

17. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): How many trade deals have been agreed since 2019. [905703]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): We have secured trade deals with 70 countries, including the EU, since 2019—partners that accounted for £1.1 trillion of UK bilateral trade in 2022. As I mentioned earlier, in March we concluded negotiations with the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, the UK's biggest trade deal since Brexit. In addition, we have signed five new comprehensive trade deals tailored to the UK—those with Japan, Australia and New Zealand; a groundbreaking digital economy agreement with Singapore, and a digital trade agreement with Ukraine—as well as the programme of 63 non-EU continuity agreements.

Dr Evans: The post-Brexit developing countries trading scheme, which was alluded to in earlier questions, covers 65 developing countries and 3.3 billion people. Will my right hon. Friend spell out exactly what the benefits are for businesses and consumers in Hinckley and Bosworth, and the UK, and can she confirm that that is a more generous scheme than the EU scheme that we left?

Kemi Badenoch: I can confirm that our offer is now more generous than what the EU offers in terms of market access—for example, we allow the least developed countries to source raw materials from other markets and still import goods tariff-free. Overall, my hon. Friend's constituents will be pleased to know that the trade preferences in the developing countries trading scheme reduce import costs by more than £770 million a year. That is key because it helps to reduce prices and increase choice for UK businesses and consumers, and to tackle inflation, particularly for the highest-sold items such as clothes and food.

Trade with European Countries

18. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase trade with European countries. [905704]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): Europe remains a vital export destination for British businesses, with exports of £401 billion in 2022, an increase of 26% on the previous year in current prices. Only this week, I attended the OECD small and medium-sized enterprise conference, which dealt largely with international barriers to trade. We are determined to remove market barriers to make it easier, particularly for SMEs, to trade across borders.

Jeff Smith: On the subject of barriers to trade, not only is our world-leading cultural sector valuable in itself for our soft power, but it is an important part of our export trade. But our musicians face unnecessary red tape when trying to tour Europe. We need an EU-wide visa waiver for touring artists. The Secretary of State said earlier that her Department “works closely with musicians”, so what is it actually doing to resolve this problem?

Kevin Hollinrake: I know that my colleagues at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport are working hard with our European counterparts to try to ease the difficulties in that area—we recognise it as a problem. Many positive things are happening in current trade with the EU. Indeed, in 2022, the north-west—the hon.

Gentleman's region—exported £33 billion-worth of goods and £24.5 billion-worth of services, which is the area he is referring to. The north-west is the third largest area in the country for services exported to the EU.

Market Access to US

19. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What progress she has made on improving market access to the US. [905705]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): As part of the Atlantic declaration, we launched negotiations on a critical minerals agreement with the US, which will secure market access for a strategically important sector of the UK economy. My Department has secured tariff-free imports of UK steel and aluminium into the US, supporting 80,000 jobs in UK supply chains. We have removed the 25-year US ban on UK lamb, opening the market to 300 million US customers, and have signed five trade and economic development memorandums of understanding with individual US states, which imported £4.6 billion-worth of goods from the UK in 2022, most recently last week with Utah.

Mr Dhesi: In their 2019 election manifesto, the Conservatives declared to the British people:

“Our goals for British trade are... ambitious. We aim to have 80 per cent of UK trade covered by free trade agreements within the next three years, starting with the USA”.

However, there has been abject failure, with a free trade agreement nowhere in sight, and instead of coming clean on their incompetence, laughingly, Tories are now lining up to blame the Biden Administration for the lack of progress. Will the Secretary of State concede that the Government's failure to negotiate an FTA with the USA has potentially locked out British businesses from vital new markets created by the US Inflation Reduction Act?

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid that is not the case at all. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the detail of the Atlantic declaration, he will see that we are co-operating very closely with the US. On his point about our 2019 manifesto, we did say that that was what we were going to do, because the Administration at the time were willing. This Administration are not. It has nothing to do with the UK. They are not negotiating any FTAs with any countries. That is what the US trade representative has said to me in many meetings, and they have said that to EU counterparts.

If what the hon. Gentleman suggests is true, he is basically saying that every Government should be bound by their predecessor, in which case, should anything happen, he is saying that he agrees with everything this Government are doing and nothing should change. What we have negotiated with the Atlantic declaration is a success, and he should be praising this Government for achieving something so monumental.

Sir Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my interest as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to the United States for regional trade and investment. Our programme of MOUs with states in the United States is a major driver of improving market access and trade between the UK and the US. As I embark on a visit to Florida to advance our objectives there, will

my right hon. Friend use this opportunity to reaffirm not just that we want to enter into multiple MOUs with states in the United States, but that we want British businesses to step up to the opportunities they create and we want to create the mechanisms to allow business-to-business delivery?

Kemi Badenoch: Absolutely, I can affirm that. My right hon. Friend makes a very good point about the MOUs. The Opposition would like to present a false story about us not getting along with our US counterparts. The fact that so many states, knowing that their Federal Government are not negotiating an FTA, have decided to step up and negotiate MOUs with us shows that this country is still attracting a large amount of investment and co-operation from our international partners. We want British businesses to be able to take part in that, and we are doing everything we can to help them use the MOUs.

Topical Questions

T1. [905708] **Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): Last week, I was pleased to lead discussions with international partners and businesses at the Ukraine recovery conference and welcomed the Prime Minister of Ukraine and First Deputy Prime Minister to Mansion House, alongside over 150 companies, showcasing how UK companies in our private sector can use their ingenuity and expertise to support the reconstruction of Ukraine.

I was very proud to announce that the UK Government have backed a £26.3 million equivalent loan, which is an unprecedented transaction; the Business Bridge Ukraine platform, matching Ukrainian businesses with complementary partners; the UK-Ukraine tech bridge, to bring together UK and Ukrainian tech businesses to harness opportunities for innovation and collaboration; and the London conference framework on war risk insurance.

Nadia Whittome: Recent research by a former chief competition economist to the European Commission—shared with me by Unite the union—estimates that average UK mobile phone bills could rise by up to £300 a year in the case of a merger between Three and Vodafone. Is the Secretary of State aware of that risk, and will her Department be taking any action to prevent such a merger, which would be disastrous for competition in the mobile network operator sector?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Lady will know that we have an independent regulator, the Competition and Markets Authority, which would look at cases such as the one she raises and make a call on whether it would be harmful or beneficial to the UK economy. I trust the CMA—it has been doing a good job so far—and I look forward to seeing its read-outs on forthcoming mergers and proposals by large businesses in our country.

T3. [905710] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): Morocco is very much looking to do more trade and business with the United Kingdom. What are the Government doing to enable that country to do so?

The Minister for International Trade (Nigel Huddleston):

The UK is absolutely committed to enhancing trade with Morocco. In 2022 we did about £3.1 billion-worth of bilateral trade—up nearly 50% on 2021—and we are using our association agreement with Morocco to boost that even further. In February I visited Morocco and met my counterpart to discuss how we can maximise trade, including by tackling barriers in priority areas such as education, renewable energy and infrastructure. We are also supporting British businesses to take advantage of the significant opportunities in Morocco, including through £4.5 billion of available finance through the excellent UK Export Finance.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op):

It is now over 12 months since the audit reform Bill was promised in what was then the Queen's Speech, and it is over two years since the Business Department's final consultation on these matters closed. There is widespread agreement on the need for reform, which began following the devastating collapse of Carillion five years ago, yet the draft Bill has not even been published, despite Parliament regularly rising early due to the Government's light agenda. Does the Secretary of State support reform, and does she accept the recommendations of the Kingman review, the Brydon review and the CMA market study? If she does, when will we finally see some action?

Mr Speaker: Can I say to the Front Benchers that a lot of Members are standing? These are topical questions, which are meant to be short. If you want a long question, come in early, please. Help me to help our Back Benchers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): We do support reform and are keen to take forward primary legislation when parliamentary time allows. In the meantime, there are measures that we can take through secondary legislation, which we are taking forward. We are also looking to take forward insolvency reform, which is something else that we committed to do.

T4. [905711] **Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con):** The Abraham accords have ushered in unparalleled opportunities by lowering trade barriers in the middle east, so how can my hon. Friend maximise the trade potential of the 2030 road map for UK-Israel bilateral relations by engaging with the wider region?

Nigel Huddleston: Through our road map, the UK and Israel reaffirmed the historical significance of the Abraham accords—which have the potential to bring about advancements to security, co-existence, peace and prosperity for the region—and our commitment to work together to deepen and expand those developments, building on the progress of the Negev summit in March 2022. Through the Britain-Israeli investment group, we will also combine UK and Israeli expertise to help solve regional technology and sustainability issues right across the world.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): This week, the European Council adopted the EU's free trade agreement with New Zealand, which includes dedicated sustainable

food systems chapters, a dedicated trade and gender equality article, and a provision on trade and fossil fuel subsidies reforms. Can the Secretary of State explain why our trade deal with New Zealand, if it is so good, fell so far short on those issues?

Kemi Badenoch: I think the hon. Gentleman will find that, actually, the trade deal we negotiated with New Zealand makes things cheaper for our consumers, not more expensive, it is less protectionist and it is helping to improve relations between us and New Zealand. I disagree with his assessment of the EU-New Zealand free trade agreement: we looked at it and were actually quite pleased with what we got.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I am concerned that the UK is being left behind on hydrogen internal combustion engines. The EU and the USA are now recognising hydrogen combustion engines as zero emission, but the UK is refusing, which means that the automotive transformation fund for industrialising the technology is not available. I am working with brilliant companies such as BorgWarner in Stonehouse and the Renewable Hydrogen Alliance to raise this issue. I have spoken to the Secretary of State for Transport and I am raising it with the Prime Minister; I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business and Trade will use her brilliant brains on this matter too.

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani):

I hope that my hon. Friend will allow me to use my brain to help unlock this with the Department for Transport. We have the automotive transformation fund and the Advanced Propulsion Centre, so we are doing a huge amount of work in this space to ensure that we are not only on the cutting edge of electric zero-emission vehicles, but looking at what the opportunities are for hydrogen. We do not want to be left behind anywhere in this space, but we do need to align ourselves with the rest of our Departments, and I will do so.

T2. [905709] **Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** The Fresh Produce Consortium, which represents 70% of the UK's fresh produce supply chain, recently warned that post-Brexit import charges will hit small and medium-sized enterprises the hardest. Does the Minister accept that the post-Brexit trade deals are driving up already soaring food prices, as well as hitting small food producers at a time when they are facing real difficulties as a result of increased operating costs?

Nigel Huddleston: It should be transparently clear that the UK is conducting trade deals that are in the UK's economic interests. That is the criterion: we would not do them if they were not in the UK's interests. We are therefore working really hard, with a particular focus on opportunities for SMEs to trade not only with the EU but right around the world, where there are immense opportunities for further trade. We will continue to pursue opportunities in south Asia, Africa and South America—all over the world—where we have not taken full advantage of those opportunities. This will benefit many SMEs, including food and beverage producers, in the long term.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Over a third of the value of every Airbus sold in the world comes from the United Kingdom's aerospace manufacturing—whether

it is wings, engines, landing gear or other avionics—but all of the Airbus sales are recorded in international statistics as exports from France because the final take-off is from Toulouse. What can the Department do to try to make sure that the value of these exports, especially to the fast-growing Asia-Pacific region, is recognised as being partly from the UK?

Ms Ghani: This is a great opportunity to talk about Airbus's 500-plane deal with Indian airline IndiGo. It is the largest aviation deal in history, and it has been done on our watch. We are providing the certainty that businesses need in order to go out and confidently secure such contracts. A lot of the jobs will be in the UK, but I will take away what my hon. Friend said, because we want to be able to show precisely the level of investment in the UK and the number of jobs that are created by this deal.

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Ministers that they should be speaking to me, not to the Back Benches.

T5. [905712] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I welcome the Scottish Government's recent announcement that workers' rights will be a key element of a written constitution when Scotland becomes an independent nation. That is in stark contrast to this place, where this Government have legislated for only seven of the 53 recommendations of the Taylor review. When will they legislate for the other 46?

Kevin Hollinrake: We are taking forward a number of reforms, as the hon. Member is aware. There is a private Member's Bill, the Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Bill, which includes a day-one right to request flexible working, as well as the right to request predictable terms and conditions, which is one of the recommendations of the Taylor review. I think he should welcome those kinds of measures.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering is the beating heart of the east midlands economy, especially in bespoke gentlemen's footwear, with superb firms such as Loake, Cheaney, and Gaziano & Girling. Will the Government confirm that their free trade agreements and their efforts to reduce international trade barriers will help the local shoe industry in Kettering get on the front foot and take great strides forward?

Kevin Hollinrake: I was delighted to attend my hon. Friend's business conference in north Northamptonshire. As part of that, we passed the Loake shop in Kettering, which is a world leader in shoes—in fact, I am wearing a pair today—and he offered to try to get me a pair at a discounted price, which I very much look forward to. There are great export opportunities through that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Last year it was the energy companies; this year it is the water companies. The sectors have changed but the taxpayers are still on the hook. So will the Secretary of State commit to undertaking a review of the financial resilience of all companies in each regulated sector and to present her findings to the House?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman raises a very good point. He is right that we need to make sure there is resilience across the sector, and I think our regulators are best placed to do that. They are carrying out a number of reviews at the moment, and I and colleagues across Government are working closely with them.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Secretary of State earlier told my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) that she did not accept that Brexit was having a negative impact on the Scottish seafood industry. It is a bit like saying she does not accept that the earth is round—although, admittedly, sometimes people on her Back Benches need to be persuaded of that. If she does not think that Brexit is having a negative impact on the Scottish seafood industry, does she think it has been positive, or does she think there has not been any change at all?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman is entitled to his opinion, as I am entitled to mine. He has done absolutely nothing except try to re-litigate Brexit over and over again. The fact is that we are not going back into the EU. We are using our independent trade policy, negotiating with countries around the world and delivering more for the UK as well as for Scotland. Scottish businesses are happy with what we are doing, and in particular they are happy that the grown-ups in Westminster have stopped them making the catastrophic decisions that are destroying the internal market.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Secretary of State aware of just how much influence the Chinese Government and Chinese companies have on our economy? Is she aware that many times I have asked for an audit of how big that influence is? Does she share the concern of many businesses in our country that the Chinese Government are using subterfuge and espionage to further their interests?

Mr Speaker: That's three questions—pick whichever one.

Kemi Badenoch: I do not think we need an audit. China is our fourth largest export market, and we are aware of the economic challenge that it poses across the world. We work with countries across the world, but we have a pragmatic relationship with China. We need to use our influence to help them get to a better place, but I take the hon. Gentleman's point.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): How does it help UK Steel to decarbonise, or help the UK to reclaim its position of global leadership in reducing climate emissions, to support the opening of a sure-to-be-doomed new coalmine in west Cumbria?

Ms Ghani: I do not think the hon. Gentleman has ever had a positive story to tell about his region, let alone his constituency. We have a positive story on steel, and we have the same challenges as most countries in trying to deal with decarbonisation. We have issues around energy costs that we have been providing all our advanced manufacturing sectors with, and we want to ensure that we diversify our access to different forms of energy.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Going back to Brexit, can the Secretary of State name one Scottish sheep farmer who is happy with the Brexit

deal, or any seafood producers and exporters that she spoke to who are happy with Brexit? Can she name any Scottish farming sectors that are happy with Brexit?

Kemi Badenoch: It is not my job to memorise names of Scottish businesses, and just as I said in response to a previous question, SNP Members are not serious. Perhaps if they stood up and actually represented their businesses in trying to make use of all the opportunities we have, they would be in a better place.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): When it comes to increasing trade with African countries, what steps are being taken to ensure that increased trade is carried out with companies that take human rights seriously and are ethically aware in the treatment of their workers?

Nigel Huddleston: We are an advocate around the world for human rights. That is something that the Government take seriously and discuss across Government, including with trading partners with whom, as I said, we can have frank conversations. Through other bodies and institutions, including the work done by the Commonwealth, we continue to have those frank conversations.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Question Time this morning, the Minister for Industry and Economic Security, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), appears to have been confused about the nature of oral questions. I asked a supplementary question, which was ostensibly a polite request to meet the Minister to discuss matters of importance to my constituents. In her response, she chose to use a pejorative insult—clearly intended to be an insult—and that does not reflect well on the Government. I am a Member of this Parliament, just as any other Member, and I deserve to be able to ask questions about the interests of my constituency without that kind of harassment. She accused me of nationalism, but I suggest that the only nationalism on display is from those Benches—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not know whether the Minister wants to respond.

Ms Ghani *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: If not, there was nothing disorderly, and I cannot continue the debate. What I can say is that the hon. Member has certainly put his view on the record.

Business of the House

10.33 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 3 JULY—Second Reading of the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill.

TUESDAY 4 JULY—Estimates day (4th allotted day). There will be debates on estimates relating to the Department for Work and Pensions; and the Ministry of Justice, in so far as it relates to His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.

WEDNESDAY 5 JULY—Estimates day (5th allotted day). There will be debates on estimates relating to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, in so far as it relates to energy infrastructure; and the Department for Education, in so far as it relates to adult education, post-16 education, further education and colleges. At 7 pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

THURSDAY 6 JULY—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) (No. 2) Bill; followed by a general debate on building safety and social housing, to mark six years since the Grenfell Tower tragedy; followed by a motion on the role and status of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. The subjects for those debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 7 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 10 July includes:

MONDAY 10 JULY—Debate on the first special report of the Committee of Privileges; followed by remaining stages of the Electronic Trade Documents Bill [*Lords*]; followed by Second Reading of the Northern Ireland Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the forthcoming business. I am glad she has announced that the Government will follow precedent and allow MPs to approve the Privileges Committee special report released this morning. Its conclusions are clear; it found that senior Tory parliamentarians took it upon themselves to undermine the procedures of this House, and shamefully that includes a serving Minister and a former Leader of the House. The report noted that the matter was made more difficult because two of the Members mounting the most vociferous attacks on the Committee did so from the platform of their own hosted TV shows. That undermines democracy and undermines this House. We owe it to the members of the Privileges Committee to give them our support.

Frankly, it is about time that the Prime Minister showed up and showed some leadership. If he does not stand up for standards, what does he actually stand for? I urge this House to endorse the report a week on Monday. That matters, because the public need to be able to trust the system we have. When Ministers mislead the House, whether intentionally or not, and fail to correct the record, or when an MP, a Minister or, worst of all, a serving Prime Minister lies to this House, and

thereby to the public, the public need to know that we have proper processes for dealing with that, which we do. By undermining this Committee, the Members risk undermining democracy itself.

As we found out during last week's vote, when it comes to upholding standards, this Prime Minister stands down. Is that what he is planning to do again with this report? Is he really still happy for senior MPs in his own party to undermine and attack Britain's democratic institutions? Is it not time that he personally condemned those who sought to override Parliament's standards system to get one of their own off the hook?

We have breaking news that the plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda has been ruled unlawful. I am sure the Leader of the House was expecting me to welcome the long-awaited impact assessment for that Illegal Migration Bill—I would call it the bigger migration backlog Bill or, now, the unlawful migration Bill. I use the words "impact assessment" with a heavy dose of irony, as it does not tell us how much the Bill would cost or what the impact of any of its policies would be, so it is not much of an impact assessment, is it? The Leader of the House has previously described impact assessments as very handy and most helpful, and I could not agree more. Why did the Government wait so long to publish the impact assessment and then publish this one, which is neither handy nor helpful? Is that perhaps why she should not be surprised—nor should any of us—by the breaking news from the court?

While the current Prime Minister focuses on keeping Boris Johnson's sycophants in his own party happy, introduces new laws which by his Government's own admission will not work and now seem to have been found illegal, and swerves scrutiny, people up and down the country are left facing the cost of Tory mortgage penalties and soaring rents. The Leader of the Opposition, a man of honour and integrity, will restore trust in politics. He will show leadership on the issues that matter to working people and act immediately to bring down the cost of living.

Penny Mordaunt: May I first put on record my delight at hosting my Royal Navy squadron, the 2nd Mine Counter Measures Squadron, this week? I thank all Members who came to see and thank them—particularly you, Mr Speaker, and I thank you for addressing them.

I am delighted that this week we announced the consultation on the Oliver McGowan code of practice on statutory learning disability and autism training. I want to place on record my huge respect for the McGowan family, especially Paula McGowan OBE, Oliver's mum, for all that she has done to prevent the tragedy that happened to her family from occurring to others. I also send my good wishes to all celebrating Eid.

The hon. Lady raised the matter of the Privileges Committee's special report, which was out at 9 am. I hope that the fact that a debate on it was announced in the business statement reassures the House about how seriously the Government take matters of privilege. I reiterate that it is in the House's interests that we have such a Committee; it is there to defend our rights and privileges, and it is absolutely vital that Members of this House be prepared to serve on such Committees, so we are very happy to bring forward a debate on the report.

The hon. Lady mentioned the breaking news of the Court of Appeal judgment. It was a mixed judgment, because although what she says about the ruling on the policy is absolutely true, the Court also confirmed that Rwanda is a safe third country. This is clearly a matter for the Home Office to update the House on. We respect the Court's decision, and I think there will be a statement later today from the Home Secretary on that.

The hon. Lady knows that I have pushed Departments to make sure that impact assessments are published in a timely way; they are important. I hope all Members of the House will also consider the impact of us not having systems that are fit for purpose. We have to direct our finite resources for these matters at the people we need to help. If our asylum systems are overloaded and we are not able to send back people who do not have the right to be here, we are not using the finite resources we have effectively.

The hon. Lady mentions the cost of living crisis, particularly as it relates to housing costs. I understand how frightening and stressful those costs can be; it makes life incredibly complicated when people have to juggle how they will get through the week. These are very difficult times, and we are determined to ensure that families and individuals can get through them. There are unprecedented global challenges that we are having to deal with; for example, we have to stick to the plan on Ukraine, and not waver in our support. As Members will have heard in the Chancellor's statement on Monday, we have increased support for mortgage interest schemes, and there are all the other things that we have done regarding providers. There is also the new consumer duty placed on the Financial Conduct Authority, and of course there is the £94 billion for cost of living support measures. We will do everything that we can to ensure that families get through this difficult time, and further business will be announced in the usual way.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): On yesterday's Order Paper, the first listed item of business, subject to urgent questions and statements, was the Holocaust Memorial Bill. There was a notice on the Order Paper that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities would make a statement on the estimated cost of the memorial. The statement says, in column 13WS of *Hansard*, that the House was to be updated on the forecasted costs

"Ahead of Second Reading of the Bill"—[*Official Report*, 28 June 2023; Vol. 375, c. 13WS.]

That written statement was not available at the end of Prime Minister's questions at 12.36. It became available in the Library at 13.51, over an hour and a quarter later. It was not mentioned by either Minister in the debate on the Bill, and no Member of this House knew about it.

Will my right hon. Friend say to parliamentary Clerks, if not to the Cabinet, that that is no way to treat this House? Information that is important to the House should be available for a debate, especially as the statement said that the estimated cost of the memorial had gone up from £102 million to £138 million—an increase of over a third in one year. I hope she will agree that that is not the way to treat this place.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter and for his contribution to the debate yesterday. He will know that I take these matters very seriously.

We have stood up some additional training for the parliamentary teams and Clerks in Government Departments. We—my noble Friend Lord True and I—have also brought all the permanent secretaries over to Parliament and told them exactly what Members need to conduct their business well. He will know that I have also conducted, with the Commission, a survey of all Members to see what more we can do to ensure that they can do their job in the most effective way. I will certainly write to the Department and make sure it has heard his remarks today, and I will feed it back to the permanent secretary.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for the business and I endorse everything that the shadow Leader of the House said in relation to standards.

I would like to begin by paying tribute to former Scotland manager Craig Brown, one of two great Scots we lost this week. Winifred Margaret Ewing changed the course of Scottish politics when she won her triumphant by-election victory to this place in Hamilton in 1967. Winnie had the distinction of serving across three different Parliaments and opening the Scottish Parliament in 1999. There is no one who did more to popularise and internationalise the cause of Scottish independence. We will miss her greatly.

In Scotland this week, the iconic Caledonian Sleeper rail service was returned to public ownership, where it joined ScotRail, LNER—London North Eastern Railway—Northern Rail, Southeastern, Transport for Wales and TransPennine Express. Although they are often referred to as operators of last resort, experience shows that they make excellent operators of first resort. Perhaps the conclusion to draw is that some things just naturally belong in public ownership, like the water industry in Scotland. Given the current travails of Thames Water, may I suggest that the Leader of the House make time available for a debate on why the public interest should always take precedence over private profit not only in the rail sector but in the provision of water?

I understand that it is the Leader of the House's custom and practice to spend almost as much time responding to what the SNP spokesperson says as criticising public services in Scotland. Before she gets to that, may I ask that she make time for debates on why six police forces in England continue to remain in special measures and why a report published today shows that NHS staff sickness in England has hit a record high, so that we can find out what the Government intend to do about it?

This is the first time that I have had the honour of responding for my party at business questions. As much as I am looking forward to the Leader of the House's responses, I am looking forward very much to the inevitable YouTube clip that will follow. In Victorian times, similarly sensationalist outputs were often referred to as "penny dreadfuls". I very much hope that the Leader of the House does not disappoint in that regard.

Penny Mordaunt: I shall try to rise to the challenge. I thank the hon. Gentleman for stepping in today.

May I start by welcoming the fantastic export figures that Scotland recently announced? They are a fantastic tribute to Scotland's incredible creative businesses and producers, and I congratulate them on that.

[Penny Mordaunt]

I very much enjoyed the hon. Gentleman's discussing rail travel in Scotland with no regard to the Scottish nationalist Government's record on ScotRail. While we are on the topic of transport, I was briefly cheered this week that ferry services—[*Interruption.*] No, this is good news. I was cheered that ferry services were being stood up on the Uist route, but then news reached me that, due to demand outstripping availability, anyone in a camper van was not allowed to use them. I am sure it is nothing personal.

I do not wish to give a long answer, as it would upset the hon. Gentleman and you, Mr Speaker, although I am very sorry that again the SNP has taken an enormous amount of time over the past week to discuss independence but not cancer care, drug deaths, failing education standards, violent crime—at its highest since 2014—or its dismal record on climate change policies. I hope it will get back soon to talking about the issues that constituents are facing.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): This morning, I spoke to a national police conference about the police's new powers, under my Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022, which came into force this year, to tackle child marriage. The school summer holidays are traditionally when many young girls and boys are taken abroad to be married. Please could we have a statement about the preparations made to prevent child marriages this summer, including through criminal charges against those seeking to arrange such marriages?

Penny Mordaunt: May I thank my hon. Friend for her continued efforts on this very important matter. She will know that our dedicated forced marriage unit helps hundreds of victims a year and is providing support and advice to anyone in the UK. She will also know that the next Home Office questions are on Monday; I encourage her to raise this matter there, but I will also ensure that the Home Secretary has heard her desire for an update.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement.

The Backbench Business Committee formally agreed this week that, if awarded the time, on Thursday 13 July two debates will be held on behalf of the Liaison Committee. The subjects will be the second report of the Foreign Affairs Committee, "The cost of complacency: illicit finance and the war in Ukraine", and the third report from the Health and Social Care Committee, "Workforce: recruitment, training and retention in health and social care". If we are awarded the time, it is our intention to hold the second Sir David Amess memorial debate, otherwise known as matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment, on the last day before the summer recess.

As chair of the all-party group for football supporters, may I express my sympathy for the family of Craig Brown? He always struck me as a football manager who, in dire circumstances, would keep his head when all around were losing theirs. He was a bastion of

football and a manager of great renown for about four decades. I send my sympathy to his family. He was a rock of Scottish football.

Yesterday, at Prime Minister's questions, I asked the Prime Minister whether he would find time for primary legislation on the scourge of the indeterminate number of youngsters—roughly 140,000—who are missing from school altogether in England. The Education Secretary nodded when I asserted, having been told by the Minister for Schools, that primary legislation would be required to set up a national register to track those children and first, keep them safe, and secondly, try to get them into education. Will the Leader of the House please use her efforts in Cabinet to find time for primary legislation for this very important piece of work?

Penny Mordaunt: May I join the tributes paid by the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) to Craig Brown? I am sure the whole House would want to join those sentiments. I thank the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) for the helpful advert of forthcoming debates that his Committee is looking to schedule. I also thank him for his support and ideas about the Westminster Hall sitting hours changes that we have made this week—all credit to him for that suggestion and innovation.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this very important issue of so-called ghost children. It is vital that local authorities really understand where those children are and whether they are in school settings that are not Ofsted inspected, as opposed to being home schooled. I know that the Education Secretary is looking at this matter with urgency. I have had discussions with her and her officials about it. The hon. Gentleman is right about primary legislation, but we are also looking at the data held by different Departments to help us get a clearer picture now of where those children are.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I strongly agree with doing something for the children missing from education.

May I ask the Leader of the House what the Government can do to assist local authorities in getting education, health and care plans completed within the 20-week guidelines? Very few local authorities—sadly, including mine—are managing to do that. It really matters. I have one primary school where 17 of the 27 children arriving in year R in September have some level of special educational needs and disabilities, and five have statements. There will be a £30,000 extra cost out of existing budgets just for that one class alone. Could we please have a statement from the Government, or time to debate this issue, to see what we can do to assist local authorities with those challenging issues?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend has raised a very important matter. As he will know, we are providing support through reforms, but we are providing workforce support as well. We are setting up regional expert partnerships through the £70 million change programme, and in order to increase specialist provision locally we are investing £2.6 billion in new special school and alternative provision places. That includes 33 new special schools, with a further 49 in the pipeline. Provision is vital, as is ensuring that people have access to it. We are also providing an additional 5,000 early years special

educational needs co-ordinators. I shall ensure that the Department for Education knows of my hon. Friend's interest in this vital issue.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): On 21 February this year, during a Home Office statement on the Plymouth shootings in which we lost five people, the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), said that it would take the Home Office 60 days to reply to the inquest findings, including a report from the coroner on how to avert any further such tragedy. That 60-day period expired today.

We were promised another oral statement and a chance for Members to scrutinise the Government's response, but that response has been downgraded to a written ministerial statement, which means that Members of Parliament—including local MPs such as me—cannot ask questions on behalf of the families who are grieving and who want to avert a repeat of this tragedy. When will we have opportunities to bring Home Office Ministers to the House to ask them why they rejected so many of the coroner's recommendations, which would have made gun laws better and safer for all our communities so that a tragedy such as the one we saw in Plymouth could never be repeated?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman has raised a vital matter. Public safety is an issue for all of us, but for the families left grieving in the wake of that terrible event, what he has requested will be a key piece of information. He will probably know that a written ministerial statement was published today, and he will also know that we are investing £500,000 in a new training programme for police firearms licensing officers.

These matters are important to many Members, but particularly to the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues in Portsmouth. Home Office questions will take place on Monday, and I suggest that he raise this issue then, but given the sensitivities involving the families, I shall also ensure that the Home Secretary has heard what he has said today.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for wetlands, and as a lover of WWT Slimbridge, which is in my constituency, I was thrilled to learn that the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust had secured £21 million from Aviva. That is a massive endorsement which will make a huge difference to the creation of, and research on, salt marshes. Big business tends to be given a tough time by eco-campaigners, but many companies are investing in trying to improve the environment. Will my right hon. Friend agree to look into the work that WWT is doing around the country, and would she consider attending some of our parliamentary events, with or without her sword?

Penny Mordaunt: I should be very happy to attend some of those events, but it will have to be without my sword, because unfortunately the Tower of London would not let me take it home. I am sure all Members agree that my hon. Friend should be congratulated, as should those in her local area, on securing this fantastic investment to restore a coastal salt marsh that is key to so many species. As she will know, through our landmark Environment Act 2021 we have legally binding targets to halt and reverse the decline in species and reduce the

risk of their becoming extinct. These environments and habitats are vital to biodiversity. So I say to my hon. Friend, "Good on you—well done", and I shall be happy to help her in any way I can.

Mr Speaker: I call Christine Jardine as the Lib Dem representative.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): First, I associate myself with the remarks that have been made about Craig Brown. In my previous career as a journalist, I was fortunate enough to meet Mr Brown on several occasions. He was a gentleman and our thoughts are with his family.

A recent report by Shelter revealed just how bad homelessness has become in Scotland's four main cities, with Edinburgh being the worst case. Figures show that 5,000 people are living in temporary accommodation, including more than 2,000 children. That is a tenfold increase since 2002. Given the shortage of financial support from the Scottish Government for local authorities and the fact that homelessness is not confined to Scotland, is the Leader of the House willing to set aside time for a debate on how we can kick-start a co-ordinated approach with agencies to tackle this growing problem, and on how we can increase the number of social houses and the financial support available to local authorities?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important matter. As she knows, we have provided more than 2.2 million additional homes and delivered 632,600 affordable homes since we came to office. We have also helped many people take that step on to the property ladder. However, this is about not just housing supply but a whole raft of challenges that individuals and families face, and I know that this is a concern to many Members across the House. I am very happy to make sure that the Department has heard her call for time on the Floor of the House, and her plea has also been heard by the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who is sitting behind her.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): The Governor of the Bank of England earns more than £10,000 a week. The Bank made billions of pounds in profit from last year's catastrophic mini-Budget, and the bonuses that are jointly earned by his staff add up to more than £23 million. How can he use his lofty position to criticise workers who are struggling to get a pay increase, when pay rises have fallen so far behind inflation? Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss this issue and bust the myth that wages are somehow creating the inflation problem that we have at the moment?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I shall not rehearse the arguments that were made at Prime Minister's questions yesterday, but pay restraint is an important part of our getting through this very difficult time and, in particular, tackling inflation. The next opportunity to question the Treasury team on this matter is not until after recess, so I shall make sure that they have heard his concerns.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): This morning, I spoke to a leading figure in the night-time and festival industry. Since 2014, the Home Office has allowed drug testing to

[*Sam Tarry*]

take place at many festivals, potentially saving hundreds of lives. Just over a month ago, there was a screeching U-turn from the Home Office that was inexplicable to many festival organisers across the country. We had Glastonbury last weekend and we have many more festivals coming up across the rest of the summer.

For me, harm reduction has to be the focal point when organising those fantastic musical events. I would like a debate in Government time that gets to the bottom of that inexplicable Home Office U-turn, because in prior times the Home Office sanctioned this activity taking place on site at festivals, with Home Office branding. In fact, it has even permitted Greater Manchester police and Avon and Somerset police to allow this stuff to take place, as well as having their own forensic early warning systems in place, so that people can participate and make adult, informed choices about what they are and are not going to do in a much safer way.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I know that this is of concern to other Members. Our position on this issue has not changed: drug testing providers must have a licence to test for controlled drugs, including at festivals. We have always had that condition in place and we have made that clear, and law enforcement has always had a responsibility to uphold that legal requirement. We have not received any applications for drug testing at major festivals this summer, and we continue to keep an open dialogue with any potential applicants. He will know that Home Office questions are on Monday, so he may wish to pursue the matter with the Department.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My Norwegian constituent has made her life here with her Scottish husband and their son. She should be welcomed, but she had to win her right to residence via the courts. Six months on, her life is in limbo because the Home Office has not issued a biometric residence permit, which is preventing her from working, from accessing healthcare and from leaving the country. Can we have a statement on Home Office timescales for issuing residence permits? What can be done to expedite matters for my constituent, whose lawyer says this is the worst delay he has ever encountered?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about that unfortunate case. The hon. Gentleman will know, because I have advertised it many times—including, I think, to him—that the Home Office is offering surgeries and bespoke services to all Members, either face-to-face or remotely. He will know that Home Office questions are on Monday, and I encourage him to raise this matter with the Home Secretary and her Ministers.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I preface my remarks by saying that I completely appreciate how busy Ministers are and the workload they carry, which is why I have never before raised such a concern in Parliament.

On Sunday, there was a demonstration by detainees at Harmondsworth detention centre in my constituency. I emailed the relevant Minister on the various email accounts that are available to us, and I simply wanted to know what was happening. I was concerned about the

welfare of the detainees and staff, many of whom are my constituents, and I received no response on Sunday. I thought that, in the normal run of things, we would have had either an oral or written statement on Monday, as we have had in the past. Nothing happened, so we contacted the Minister's office again. Nothing happened on Tuesday, so we contacted the office again, and no response.

As you know, Mr Speaker, I also sought to raise the matter in the House on Tuesday, but other business understandably took precedence. I contacted the Minister's office on Wednesday and basically said that, if I had not heard anything by noon, I would be raising a point of order. Twenty minutes before noon, I received a reply, which was inaccurate.

I understand how busy people are, but this is just unacceptable behaviour when I have constituents and others contacting me about this incident. There are continuing problems, so I ask the Leader of the House, first, to raise this with the Ministers concerned and say that this behaviour is not acceptable. Secondly, I would welcome a debate in the House on what is happening at Harmondsworth, because there are continuing concerns about the welfare of both detainees and staff, and this has continued year after year without resolution.

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the right hon. Gentleman's experience. When there are particular incidents and situations, it is important that Members are able to get hold of the relevant people quickly, whether that be officials or Ministers. If he could take the trouble to send me an email with the details of what happened, I would be very happy to raise it with the Department.

Mr Speaker: I support the Leader of the House, and I am very concerned. Where a Member sees a serious incident in their constituency, I thought duty Ministers were available 24 hours a day. If the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) is unhappy, he should come back to me. I will be supporting the Leader of the House to ensure that Members are treated with the respect they are due. We should make sure Ministers are accountable on serious incidents.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I add my condolences to the families of Winnie Ewing and Craig Brown. Scotland has lost two legends, of politics and football, this week.

The Immigration Minister's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on Tuesday drew a pretty furious response from the Scottish Refugee Council, among others. The Minister said that "the SNP does not house refugees in Scotland."—[*Official Report*, 27 June 2023; Vol. 735, c. 152.]

The truth is that Scotland has housed more Syrian and Ukrainian refugees per head than his own Government. Moreover, the largest hotel for asylum seekers in the UK is in my constituency.

This needs to stop. Mr Speaker, when you and your deputies are asked about the accuracy of a ministerial response, you rightly say it is not a matter for the Chair. May I therefore ask the Leader of the House for a debate on changing the Standing Orders of this House so that we can make Ministers more accountable for the answers they give at the Dispatch Box?

Penny Mordaunt: That is a timely question, because the Procedure Committee has just produced a report on “Correcting the record”. Its recommendations are that the obligations on Ministers should be extended to all Members of this House. We take these matters very seriously. It is clear that if incorrect information has been given to the House—I do not know the details of the particular matter the hon. Gentleman raises—the record should be corrected, and in my experience that is what Ministers do.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I recently met a group of residents who live in a new build block that has a heat network. That means that they cannot access the domestic energy market and are not protected by the price cap, which leads to extortionate costs. More than 50% of London’s 200,000 homes supplied by heat networks are social housing, meaning that some of the poorest Londoners have been subject to uncapped bills. May we please have a debate on what can be done to protect those users from the wildly fluctuating energy market?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue. I encourage her to attend the next question session for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, which is next Tuesday, and raise it there. That Department is also running surgeries because of the complexity of the issues and the casework that hon. Members are dealing with in relation to the energy market and schemes such as the one she outlines. I encourage her to sit down with officials and have that bespoke surgery with them.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): This weekend, Bury football club has its first outing, away at Thackley, since it went into administration in 2020. As this is such a pivotal moment in the club’s history, will the Leader of the House join me in wishing Bury FC the best of luck for its first new season? Will she also pay tribute to the fans and volunteers who have worked tirelessly to make this happen? Up the Shakers!

Mr Speaker: I think you want to add, “Can we have a statement or a debate?”.

Penny Mordaunt: I know that all Members of this House take great interest in ensuring that our wonderful football clubs survive and thrive. As someone who was a shareholder in Portsmouth football club and saw it through the largest and fastest ever community buy-out, I know how difficult that can be. I take my hat off to all the volunteers who have kept Bury FC going and kept it playing, and I wish it all the luck at the weekend.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): Our language constantly evolves, with new words coming into common usage. Unfortunately, myocarditis is just such a word; very few of us would even have heard of it barely two years ago. When will the Government look into the reasons behind the explosion in cases of myocarditis, especially among the young, particularly given that this week evidence has emerged that it is affecting some new-born babies? May we have a statement and an urgent debate on this issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise this issue with the Department of Health and Social Care. He will know that the next questions to the

Secretary of State and his team are on 11 July. They will have in the Department people looking at particular therapy areas and they will also have good oversight of what research is taking place, whether in academia, research institutions or the third sector.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Leader of the House aware that more than 40 years ago the *Daily Mail*, I believe it was, said that the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), and I were road safety nuts because we led the campaign for seatbelt legislation? All these years later, we have succeeded in saving many, many lives. However, there is evidence that some people are no longer obeying the seatbelt legislation as well as they could and that children are being killed. Is she aware that the World Health Organisation said last week that the biggest killer of children and young people worldwide is not disease, but death on the road? Will she help us by enabling a debate in Government time about how we can help, worldwide, to stop this killing of children?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for all the work he does on those issues. As I know from my International Development Department days, he is right that road traffic accidents are one of the biggest killers and causes of trauma around the world. It is important to remind people of their obligations under the law and that such measures are a very good idea. I congratulate him on all he has done to secure those laws.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I add my condolences to the families of Winnie Ewing and Craig Brown.

I thank the Leader of the House for her commitment and her dedication to ensuring that there is proxy voting in this House.

Having had a recent issue of a dangerous dog in Milngavie, East Dunbartonshire, which attacked and killed another dog, will the Leader of the House prioritise animal welfare and make Government time for the recently dropped Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for what she says about the proxy voting scheme. I thank her for the efforts that she has taken to ensure that the scheme is available to Members and their votes can be secured, and for sharing her experiences in the debates leading up to the scheme coming to fruition.

On her question, several hon. Members have raised the matter of the escalating number of attacks. The hon. Lady will know that we are committed to the measures in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, but we will be bringing them forward in a different way, and I will announce that in the usual way.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): One thing that unites rural communities is our concern about access to medical services, which often challenge us. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on overnight medical cover in rural communities? From August, the out-of-hours provider of GP services in Cumbria has chosen to get rid of the on-call clinician at the Westmorland General Hospital in Kendal between 2 am and 8 am on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. That will mean that people in medical need in our

[Tim Farron]

community will need to wait for a clinician, if one is even available, to travel from Barrow-in-Furness or Penrith, up to an hour further away. Today we have launched a campaign to fight that cut, but should Parliament not protect vulnerable people in rural communities from damaging decisions such as that?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important matter. He will know that the next health questions are on 11 July and he can raise the issue then. I reassure him that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), is focused on all aspects of rural life, as demonstrated in her recent report, so he may also wish to raise the matter with her.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Sarcomas are cancers that can affect any part of the body, inside or outside, including muscles, bones, tendons, blood vessels and fatty tissues. Sarcoma is rare; 15 people are diagnosed every day in the UK, but that is still around 5,300 people a year, including families in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. Awareness of sarcoma is low, which limits the funding available for research. Will the Leader of the House facilitate a debate so that the House can raise awareness of sarcoma, which will undoubtedly help the vital need for research funding going forward?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising awareness of the issue. He will know that the work we have done since we took office in 2010, not only at the Department of Health and Social Care but with the Minister for Life Sciences, has involved sharing intellectual property, enabling smart people around the world to work on these problems and collectively arrive at greater innovation faster. That is vital to creating innovation and ensuring that our NHS can take up new treatments and faster diagnostics. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the subject.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On 2 August, it will be the 50th anniversary of the Summerland fire disaster on the Isle of Man. It was a terrible tragedy in which 50 people lost their lives, including family members of my constituents and of other Members' constituents. I was astonished to learn that the House has never debated that terrible tragedy, so I tried to secure a debate in Westminster Hall next week, when the relevant Department will be responding, but I was unsuccessful. I will apply for an Adjournment debate, but if that is not possible, will the Leader of the House give us some time before the recess to debate the matter? It is important that we get matters on the record before the 50th anniversary.

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on getting that matter on the record today. I know that it will mean a great deal to his constituents that he has done so and that he is doing everything he needs to do to secure a debate. There will be further opportunities for him to raise the matter, but I shall make sure that the relevant Department has heard what he has said today.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) and I have written twice to the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), requested an urgent meeting with him, and tabled early-day motion 1283 regarding the imminent closure of Park View Medical Centre in my constituency of Liverpool, West Derby.

[That this House notes with deep concern the proposed closure of the Park View Medical Centre; notes that the medical centre is located in Tuebrook in the constituency of Liverpool West Derby and also provides GP services to many constituents of Liverpool Wavertree; recognises that the medical centre has been at the centre of the community for decades and provides vital primary care services to constituents in one of the most deprived areas of Liverpool; notes with alarm that the Liverpool Integrated Care Board has written to all patients at the practice to inform them that it will be closing in July and that all patients will be transferred to GP practices within 1 mile radius of the building; places on record that local residents have voiced their strong opposition to the closure of Park View Medical centre and are campaigning to save this vital service; notes that the Members for Liverpool West Derby and Liverpool Wavertree have written to Cheshire and Merseyside ICB to ask that they revisit the decision to close Park View Medical Centre with the upmost urgency and to request meaningful discussions to consider the urgent steps that can be taken to save the service and protect its long-term future; and calls on the Department of Health to support the wishes of the local community and to take all steps available to keep the Park View Medical Centre open to protect the health and wellbeing of the whole community and future generations.]

The whole community is furious with the decision by the integrated care board and they are calling on the Government to assist. Will the Leader of the House make Government time for a debate on the impact of primary care service closures and make representations to the Minister concerned to respond urgently to our letters, so that Park View can be saved for the long-term health and wellbeing of all of my community?

Penny Mordaunt: These local services are obviously very important. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will know how much they mean to his constituents. He can raise his concerns directly with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on 11 July, but one thing that the Secretary of State is doing is ensuring that we have additional data on the performance of the hon. Gentleman's integrated care board so that he can benchmark it against others across the country. Having medical centres that people can access and that are in their local community is vital for good patient outcomes, and that is a big step forward that the Secretary of State has made.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am concerned about the desperate condition of the sons of my constituent, Mr Omar, who were unable to collect their visas and passports from the embassy in Sudan owing to the war in April, since when they have managed to travel to Ethiopia. After a very long and difficult journey, they are malnourished, out of money, in need of medical treatment and have been waiting for two weeks for a visa vignette. I have been told repeatedly that there is no timescale for the issuing of that. Will the

Leader of the House please ask the Home Secretary to make an urgent intervention in this case and make a statement to give us a timescale for future such cases?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about the case that the hon. Gentleman raises. He will know that we have Home Office questions on Monday. However, following this session, I shall make sure that he has the contact details of the Home Office official who is overseeing these bespoke surgeries for Members. I encourage him to set up such a meeting today.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): “Blessed are the cheesemakers.” That may be so, but exporting cheese from the south-west has become more challenging in recent years. Barber’s farm is a 191-year-old business. It claims to be the world’s oldest family cheddar cheese maker and is based in Ditcheat, between Somerton and Frome. On exporting, it says that it has become

“a paperwork nightmare that can lead to cheese and chilled foods stuck at ports everywhere.”

Please can we have a debate in Government time to ensure that west country farmers and producers can more easily export their dairy products?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important matter. He will know that our exports are the highest since records began. The export support service and the other schemes that are run by the Department for Business and Trade are offering bespoke support to businesses. I have made use of that in my own constituency. Officials from those services may visit that business or have a remote call with it to take it through how they can assist. Whether it is by finding the business an agent or helping it with particular elements of bureaucracy, it is a very effective service and I have to say that it has dramatically increased exports in my constituency, so I encourage him to do that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the past month, more than 230 churches have been burned, at least 64 Christians have been killed, and 10,000 people have been displaced in the Indian state of Manipur in violence against the Kuki-Zomi tribal people. The scale of this violence is vast and, because of internet blackouts, it is very difficult to know the true extent of what is happening; the figures that I have given are conservative estimates only. As the Leader of the House represents all of us in this House to the best of her ability, will she convey our concerns about the risk of atrocity crimes in this region and ask the appropriate Minister to write to me explaining the steps that are being taken to help de-escalate this very critical situation?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman again for raising the plight of people who often do not have the spotlight shone on what they are having to endure. I will certainly make sure the relevant Minister has heard his concerns and ask them to write to him with an update on the situation. He will know that we remain committed to defending freedom of religion or belief and to promoting respect and tolerance between communities.

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

BILLS PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND BUDGET (No. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Heaton-Harris, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Michael Gove, Secretary Alister Jack, Secretary David T C Davis, John Glen and Mr Steve Baker, presented a Bill to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the year ending 31 March 2024 (including income); to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland of certain sums for the service of that year; to authorise the use of those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland to borrow on the credit of those sums; and to repeal a spent provision.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Monday 3 July, and to be printed (Bill 338).

THAMES WATER (PUBLIC BENEFIT CORPORATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Farron, supported by Sarah Olney and Munira Wilson, presented a Bill to establish a new model of company structure for Thames Water, to be called a public benefit corporation; to require that public benefit corporation to consider public policy benefits, including reducing leaks and sewage dumping, as well as returns for shareholders; to limit the payment of dividends until a plan is in place to cut the corporation’s debt; and to require membership of the corporation’s board to include representatives of local environment groups.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 339).

ROYAL ASSENT

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

Shark Fins Act 2023

Co-operatives, Mutuals and Friendly Societies Act 2023

Child Support Collection (Domestic Abuse) Act 2023

Offenders (Day of Release from Detention) Act 2023

Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023

British Nationality (Regularisation of Past Practice) Act 2023

Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023

Financial Services and Markets Act 2023

Diocesan Stipends Funds (Amendment) Measure 2023

Backbench Business

Fishing Industry

11.27 am

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the fishing industry.

I start by congratulating and thanking the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who secured this important debate. Unfortunately, he has had to go back to Scotland on compassionate grounds; I am sure the whole House will wish him well.

Fisheries, as I am sure everyone in this House knows by now, loom reasonably large in my constituency, as they do for others taking part in this debate. Peterhead, the largest town in Aberdeenshire, is also the largest whitefish port in Europe, while Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire's third largest town, is Europe's largest port for nephrops. Macduff, the other port town around the coast, is still a very active port, as well as being the headquarters for Macduff Shipyards, the only manufacturer of steel hull fishing boats in Scotland, with additional facilities in Fraserburgh and the town of Buckie in the neighbouring constituency, Moray.

Dotted around the rest of the Banff and Buchan and Moray coast, like the rest of our island nation, we have smaller ports, smaller boats and smaller operations—but they are no less a part of the wider fishing industry that has been a mainstay of coastal communities for centuries. Also located in those major port towns are a wide variety of seafood processors. The subject of this debate is the fishing industry, but I will speak on the wider concept of fisheries as a whole. It is not just about catching the fish; we are talking about the whole supply chain and, as with any food supply chain, if one part fails, the whole chain loses out.

I have touched on the manufacture of fishing boats, but there are a wide range of businesses and jobs that depend on a thriving fisheries sector. I remember a fisherman once informing me, when his boat was in for summer maintenance that year, that he had something like 40 different businesses, most of them local, working on his boat. I will not list all 40 contractors—he did—but only one was not from north-east Scotland: the guy who had to come and install his Sky box. That just goes to show how one boat can employ so many people in the local area.

Towns such as Peterhead and Fraserburgh exist largely to serve the fisheries sector. There are all the other businesses, shops, community services and public facilities that exist to provide for all the people who work in that industry and the families who live in the community. There is a lot of economic activity in those port towns, but as with all industries and communities, particularly in the light of events of recent years, such as the pandemic and the rise in fuel prices since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, they are not without their challenges.

Other Members will, I know, talk more specifically about the issues faced in their constituencies. I will touch on a few key topics. I will talk about Brexit, the pros and cons of the trade and co-operation agreement, and what I believe to be a general benefit overall of leaving the EU and the common fisheries policy. I will also talk

about a range of challenges faced by the industry. Like everyone else, I will focus mainly on the challenges faced in my constituency, but there will be general concerns that many of us share. I will intersperse my remarks with questions for the Minister and her Department. If they can be answered today, great, but if not, a later response or meeting will suffice.

I will start with Brexit. We have left the common fisheries policy and are an independent coastal state. It seems strange to still be standing up and saying that, because it is a fundamental part of having left the EU, and, now that we have reached that status, it is a complete and utter no-brainer. However, it was by no means inevitable. At the very start of the negotiations on withdrawal from the EU—many of us in the Chamber bear the scars of that period—the EU chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, insisted that the UK could not leave the CFP and that EU fishing vessels must retain full freedom of access to UK waters. But we did leave the EU on 31 December 2020, and we left the CFP and took our place as an independent coastal state. Under the terms of the trade and co-operation agreement, which Opposition Members had gleefully predicted could not be reached, we left the EU with a deal—a deal that Scottish National party Members did not even vote for.

One major disappointment of the TCA, however, was the introduction of the so-called adjustment period, which we are still in the middle of. It is important to note that that it is aimed at helping the EU fisheries sector adjust before the day when that period comes to an end in July 2026, and to stress that full control over all vessels fishing in UK waters must fall to UK Ministers and officials, including those in the devolved Administrations. My first question to the Minister on this is: what are the Government doing in the meantime to ensure that, when July 2026 comes around, the most is made of those opportunities for British fishing interests, including what the industry would regard as “first call” on quota?

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman mentions the situation post 2026. I wonder whether he can respond to the point made by Mike Park, the chief executive of the Fraserburgh-based Scottish White Fish Producers Association, who told the *Daily Record* last week:

“One of the biggest negatives for me was the hyperbole spoken by the Michael Goves, the David Frosts, the Boris Johnsons, who all knew what was going on and they were still spinning it and spinning it. And they're still spinning it because, here we are, they're still talking about how post-2026, they will deliver. No, you won't. Go and read the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. Europe still gets the same amount of fish after 2026.”

Is he correct?

David Duguid: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman mentions Mr Park, whom I know extremely well. I am familiar with that *Daily Record* article, which is from, I think, last Monday. It was the first in a series of “Why Brexit is bad” articles. If I am not mistaken—and I stand to be corrected—that quote from Mr Park is not necessarily all that up to date. I talk to Mr Park on a—[*Interruption.*] The article was last week, but I am not sure the quote was that recent; I stand to be corrected on that. Opposition Members are good at pulling out quotes from the likes of Mike Park, Jimmy Buchan and other key individuals in the industry who are well respected in it, but I talk to them on almost a weekly

basis, and I know one thing for sure: neither Mike Park, Jimmy Buchan nor any of those others would agree with the SNP's stance of rejoining the EU and the common fisheries policy.

On Mr Park's remarks about what happens in 2026, that is precisely why I am asking the UK Government to confirm what they are doing now, to ensure that when we get to that point, we are not caught out by any surprises. We can be sure that the EU fisheries lobby groups will be pushing hard to get all the advantages, so we need to ensure that we are doing the same.

I have always acknowledged the disappointment felt by many in the industry that the trade and co-operation agreement, especially with the adjustment period, did not get as much as we wanted as quickly as we would have liked. Over the course of the adjustment period, 25% of the EU's fishing quota in UK waters will be transferred to the UK. For 2023, 140,000 tonnes of catching opportunities worth some £750 million have been secured for the UK. That is a £34 million increase on last year. As an independent coastal state, our Ministers and officials and those in the devolved Administrations have a far stronger voice in those annual negotiations than they ever would have had as merely one of 28 member states of the EU.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I apologise for interrupting my hon. Friend, because he is making an excellent speech, but in case he is not going to mention it—I am sure he is—may I point him to the specialised trade committees within the trade and co-operation agreement, which are there for sanitary and phytosanitary measures and for fisheries and will allow us to put on to the agenda issues that we are concerned about in our relationship with France? Does he agree that we must use those specialised trade committees?

David Duguid: I totally agree. I would like to say that my hon. Friend had the foresight of predicting something I was going to say in my comments, but I was not, so I am grateful that he brought that up, because he is correct.

We now have control over our own fisheries regulations and management systems. Of course, we cannot apply regulations on vessels coming into our waters that do not equally apply to our vessels, but that is fine; that is how agreements between independent coastal states operate.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): The fact that we will get our own waters back in a phased way may well be necessary, because we need more boats and we need to attract people into the industry. One of the weaknesses we have is that it is a hard life being a fisherman, and many people do not want to go into the industry.

David Duguid: Sadly, my hon. Friend makes a valid point. Fishing, like farming or going offshore and working on an oil rig, is not for everyone; it is a hard life and a hard job. In many ways, we need to have grown up around it or been born into it. It is a generational thing. I will come back to that point later in my remarks, if my hon. Friend can be patient.

While we were under the control of the common fisheries policy, decision making always felt distant and imposed on our fishing industry from afar. Fisheries

management is now managed more locally, with fisheries management plans run by local management groups to provide a formal and regular forum for engagement between fishermen, policymakers, scientists and regulators, not just for the good and the prosperity of the industry but for sustainability as well.

I have welcomed the fact that funding has been maintained, with £37 million being provided to replace the European maritime and fisheries fund, about £16 million of which goes directly to the Scottish Government to spend on fisheries and maritime issues. The £100 million UK seafood fund, which has also been welcomed, has been split between the topics of science and innovation, infrastructure, skills and training, and promotion of exports, which is a key element.

Can the Minister tell us what plans there are to help fund domestic marketing? She may be aware of the issues faced by those catching and supplying small haddock, for example, which is not traditionally an export species. How can the Government help to either promote more haddock consumption across the UK or open up new export markets for that fantastic product? I would also be interested to know what discussions the Department has had with Seafish, which I am told made a commercial decision last year to no longer promote seafood in the UK, preferring to focus on those growing export markets. I think everyone here would agree on the merits of fish as a high-quality, high-protein source of food with a relatively low carbon footprint.

On the subject of exports, I acknowledge that not every seafood exporter was fully ready to deal with the new export systems when they came into place immediately after we left the EU. I should also stress that many exporters—usually those who were already accustomed to exporting outside the European economic area—were ready to go with those new systems. The border operating model had gone through a few revisions, but had been available since it was rolled out in July the previous year. Funding and support had also been provided to impacted industries to help them prepare for the inevitability of the new systems. That included funding to devolved Administrations: for example, some £180 million was provided to the Scottish Government, which sadly I do not think was adequately applied to help exporters in Scotland. I also do not think the SNP Scottish Government helped the preparedness of our seafood exporters. I respect the view of the SNP as a political party that it did not want to leave the EU, but leave the EU we did, and it was something that we had to be prepared for.

It is also fair to acknowledge that even those exporters who had done everything right, who were accustomed to exporting around the world and got their paperwork systems in place, sadly fell foul of some of those IT systems crashing through no fault of their own. As such, I ask the Minister what assessment her Department has made of those export systems, and what improvements—for example, digitalisation and other time-saving methods—remain to be implemented.

I will now move on to the subject of spatial squeeze.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Before the hon. Gentleman moves off the subject of Brexit and fish processors, he has talked about mitigations, for example. Does he now admit that for fish processors and those exporting, Brexit has been a negative, not a positive?

David Duguid: I go back to the response I gave to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). In the last few minutes, I have acknowledged the challenges that leaving the EU has brought, but also the mitigations that have been put in place. Ultimately, though, the fishing industry and the seafood processing sector in my constituency do not have an appetite to return to the EU and the common fisheries policy. I take on board that there have been challenges, but as Elspeth Macdonald of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation said, whether we are talking about Brexit, access to labour or access to exports, those issues all pale into insignificance compared with the impact that covid had, for example, and certainly the impact of the highly protected marine areas, which I will also talk about.

Spatial squeeze is brought about by less and less of our seas being available for commercial fishing. That can be for a number of reasons, such as offshore wind or the imposition of the marine conservation areas I have just mentioned. Neither I nor the fishing industry are against renewable energy or marine conservation in principle, but it is worrying to read last year's combined report from the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, which predicted that almost 50% of waters could be restricted for fishing by 2050, compared with less than 1% in the year 2000. I realise that there are some special interest groups out there that would quite happily see the demise of the fishing industry for various ideological reasons, but I have already mentioned the huge impact that that could have, not just on the industry but on coastal communities as a whole.

On offshore wind and other renewable projects, all the industry is asking is to be at the table when planning decisions are being made—to be in the loop. I have seen that happen to reasonably good effect between the industry and some offshore wind developers, but sadly, that is not universal.

Similarly, on marine conservation, fishermen just want to be adequately consulted on not just on where but how, and even if, measures such as HPMAs should be applied. I cannot overstate how important it is to get that engagement right. In Scotland, the SNP and Green Scottish Government are in the process of implementing those HPMAs without adequate engagement or even a pilot scheme, not even waiting to see how the pilot schemes that are currently being carried out in English waters turn out. I completely agree with Elspeth Macdonald, chief executive of the SFF, who said yesterday:

"Nobody cares more about our marine environment than those who are dependent upon it for their livelihoods—from fishermen to salmon farmers to fish processors. Opposition to this policy, which lacks scientific rationale, is widespread throughout our coastal communities. The Scottish government needs to scrap it, not rebrand it, and carry out a complete rethink without pandering to the Greens whose desire to halt legitimate economic activity with a low carbon footprint is dangerous and damaging."

Kirsty Blackman: Does the hon. Member agree with his Prime Minister, who has said:

"I am committed to introducing pilots of Highly Protected Marine Areas in English waters, providing the highest level of protection for our seas, and safeguarding the 372 Marine Protected Areas?"

David Duguid: Yes—it was a manifesto commitment. *[Interruption.]* No, this gets raised time and again. When my MSP colleagues raise it in Holyrood, SNP

Members shout about how the UK Government are doing it and it was in the Conservative manifesto, but there are some major differences. At the moment, the UK Government are proposing 0.53% of English waters to be covered by HPMAs, while the Scottish Government are looking for 10%, which is 20 times as much. Not only that, but the Scottish Government only have the power to implement those HPMA within the 12-mile nautical zone, so fishing could in effect be banned in a huge area of our fishing waters. Again, I go back to the points, made not just by me but by those in the industry, about how the policy lacks a scientific rationale and is just being pushed through for ideological reasons. I appreciate that the Scottish Government are due to make a statement in the next hour or so on their response to the consultation, and I eagerly look forward to hearing it.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the way the Scottish Government are dealing with this will have a disproportionate adverse effect on small vessels, because they are unable to migrate to other areas?

David Duguid: My hon. Friend, as always, makes an absolutely valid point. There are all different sizes of operations, as I said earlier, and if one area is closed off to one particular group of fishermen in one community, it is much more difficult for smaller-scale fishermen in smaller boats to migrate to somewhere else to catch fish.

Another challenge faced by the sector is access to labour, as my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) mentioned. I know the Minister will be aware of this, but I reiterate that the catching sector is keen to work with the Government on it. For example, it welcomed the addition of offshore deck crew to the skilled worker immigration route in April 2021 and, more recently, the addition of fishing crew to the shortage occupation list.

One remaining stumbling block, however, is the standard of the written English test. The industry can find plenty of skilled workers who meet the requirements of the immigration system, but sadly not in the numbers required with the ability to meet the B1 English language test. I am already in discussions with the Home Office on this, as are other right hon. and hon. Members, with a request to reduce the English language standard—specifically for those fishermen who come in and out of the country on a rotational basis, with no desire to settle—from B1 to A2, which the industry believes is a far more appropriate level for the requirements of that job. I guess the question for the Minister is: can she help emphasise and reinforce this need with the Immigration Minister?

In the processing sector, the needs are different. Again, I have already engaged with the Home Office, asking that the facilitative support that the Home Secretary has offered to the catching sector is extended to the processing sector, and that the seasonal agricultural workers scheme is extended to include onshore seafood processing jobs of a seasonal nature. Unlike the tens of thousands of SAWS visas that have already been announced for agriculture, horticulture and some other food processing sectors, the seafood processing sector is only looking for a few hundred, or a couple of thousand at most. The ultimate aim is of course to use as many local workers as possible, but as my hon. Friend the Member for

Poole has pointed out, this is a generational issue, and it will take time to build enthusiasm in our local communities for people to get into the fishing industry again.

I will bring my comments to an end. I was going to say something about the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's plans to introduce medical certificates, but when I look around, I see at least three hon. Members who will make more of that point than I can. If I can make one last request of the Minister, will she meet me and arrange to meet stakeholders from the Banff and Buchan fishery sector to work through some of these issues? She would, of course, be welcome in my constituency at any time.

11.48 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate on the fishing industry.

Fiona SD 144, Seaforth HL 111, Sophie Leigh HL 9, Rockhopper of Percuel HL 138, Aura HL 294, Constant Friend BH 212 and Equity TH 377 are just some of the fishing vessels either sold or for sale from just one port in the north-east—Hartlepool—and there are many more along that coastline. The inshore fishing industry off much of the north-east coast was decimated two years ago, following the still unresolved mystery that led to the wipe out of the crustacean population. Sadly, today it is little better. Before I get into the detail of what needs to happen next, I wish to share with the House what has happened and is happening in fishing communities, particularly those in Hartlepool, Redcar and Whitby.

James Cole is chair of Whitby Commercial Fishing Association, which represents 20-plus small to medium-scale potting boats from Whitby and Staithes in north Yorkshire. He reports a huge reduction in catches in recent years and said:

“Our main concern is the 90%—”

Ninety per cent!—

“reduction in brown crab catches, and very little velvet crab to be seen either. Invasive species like starfish and whelks have taken over the die-off zone grounds.”

He adds that figures from the Whitby and Scarborough harbour office show a big drop in revenue from local boats. In the reporting first quarter of the year, Scarborough's shellfish landings were down by 87.5%, and Whitby landings by 93%.

It is clear, however, that a very different picture is being painted by the North Eastern Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority, which has appeared to claim that catches are robust. But the catch figures it relies on totally distort the reality facing inshore fishing communities. The catches reported included those from so-called “super crabbers”, which operate not inshore but 90 miles off the coast, and do not land catches in our area. One, MV Margilis, operates just 12 miles off our coast, plundering the sea life and giving it no time to replenish itself in the inshore areas. The Government, including the Secretary of State, have relied on those figures to deny any form of compensation to the inshore fishers, and claims of assistance being available have been misleading.

I have advised the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer) that I intended to mention her in my speech, because she is one of those who has also relied on those

figures. The hon. Member is being taken to task by the North East Fishing Collective, which issued a statement saying:

“It is with utter dismay and bewilderment that we find ourselves having to clarify the current situation for those concerned in order to have full transparency around the current issues that the fleet faces... It has been stated by the MP for Hartlepool that ‘prawners have experienced a temporary but significant reduction in their catches due to prawns burrowing into sands and moving away from usual catch areas.’ She also states that ‘the prawns and catches returned...but fishermen lost some valuable weeks of fishing.’... Whilst our MP may have spoken to some individuals, she has not spoken to the majority of the skippers in the fleet who are suffering indescribable hardship and lack of catches on the local prawn grounds where they have made their livings all of their working lives. These individuals have spent their careers fishing within the die-off zone and have first-hand experience which should have been collected and shared with the Minister of State at DEFRA in order to give a fair and accurate account for all involved.”

It is all the more important that accurate data is provided by Government agencies to spare Members of Parliament the embarrassment of making wholly inaccurate statements. A recent example was reported by fishers' leader Stan Rennie. On 25 May he steamed north from Hartlepool for nearly two hours, and shot seven fleets of trammel nets from Hawthorn to Nose's Point near Seaham, up to 4 miles offshore. On 26 May he collected 4 kg of cod, eight edible crabs, three lobsters weighing just 2 kg between them, and three monkfish. He said that instead of lots of crabs and lobsters, there were just starfish and brittle stars, which have taken over the barren ground. The other fishers report similar results, but many are now out of business. I am so aware that the Government have abandoned our north-east inshore fishers, and the Government's capital investment in new boats or upgraded equipment for the fishers is useless in an environment where there is little, if anything, to catch.

Going back to the boats sold or for sale at Hartlepool, half the potting fleet has been sold or is for sale, as are a third of the prawners—all since the disaster of two years ago. It is time for the Government to look again at compensating our inshore fishers. We have heard in the past about the fisheries and seafood scheme to help fishers, but the Minister knows, as I do, that it is there not to keep people in business, but to invest in the future. Sadly, many do not have a present, never mind a future. We all know that for our fishing industry not just to survive but to thrive, we need a healthy sea, which we certainly do not have off large parts of the north-east coast.

We can argue until there are no boats left over the cause of the devastation that ruined so many lives. The Minister's own independent scientific group could not determine what happened off the Tees, and reached the conclusion that it was probably some sort of pathogen—not the algae bloom that Ministers have depended on for months on end—but they simply do not know what happened. They could form an opinion only from the evidence provided to them, and they would have had no information about the deadly mix of contaminants being disposed of at sea.

In May I wrote to the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, trying to look to the future and seeking more comprehensive testing of the sea and sea life as it struggles to make a comeback in the north-east. I told him of my meeting with one of his independent scientists and the need to ensure that the Centre for Environment,

[Alex Cunningham]

Fisheries and Aquaculture Science and the Environment Agency provided an inventory of all remaining available samples from the original events of October 2021 and June 2022, so that scientists could conduct further analysis of the die-off. I am advised that knowing where all the samples are, what they are of and how they were collected and preserved would aid retesting for a broader range of potential pathogens. That is essentially to recommend that the samples be archived for future study by academics.

We also discussed the need for regular monitoring. I was rather surprised to hear there was anecdotal evidence of some very young crabs being spotted on the rocks at Saltburn, near Redcar. It is perhaps a sign of life returning, or maybe just a one-off. We do not know, because no monitoring of consequence is now taking place. I said in my letter that the Minister and I should agree that there is a need for consistent, rigorous scientific surveys of the recovery process to be established through an ongoing monitoring programme. The scientists mentioned evidence, for example, from posts on social media, of new recruitment of juvenile decapods in the affected area, but that is no substitute at all for an ongoing programme to monitor the area's recovery in a scientifically robust manner. That is critical to ensuring that recovery continues to progress as would be expected, and it would provide data on the post-impact effects of the removal of a significant component of the ecosystem.

I told the Minister that we cannot stop there. Ongoing monitoring efforts should also include a full suite of measures of environmental samples, as well as full faunal surveys. Environmental samples should include measurements of seabed oxygen levels, temperature and chemical contaminants in water and sediments. Faunal surveys that are spatially and temporally comparable and consistent should include targeted sampling of fauna to assess for disease. Any samples should be collected and preserved in a manner that will enable the full suite of analysis, including molecular screening, to be undertaken by the crustacean disease experts at CEFAS. Despite the ongoing devastation of the sea and sea life, sadly the Minister is not prepared to do anything for the north-east beyond the monthly water monitoring by the Environment Agency, which is done everywhere. He said that CEFAS will test the dredged materials disposal site this year on behalf of the Marine Management Organisation. That is simply not good enough. If there is failure to monitor emerging life on an ongoing basis, nothing will be done to nurture it.

The Minister should know that fishers, environmentalists, and the public on the north-east coast will not give up pressing for action, or showing up the Government for their inaction. Others continue to look for solutions; I am pleased to hear that a university is adopting artificial intelligence models used by the Norwegians to predict the effect of combining multiple contaminants at sea—a huge step forward from the UK approach of dealing with each contaminant in isolation. Early results are quite shocking. I hope that when we get further information, the Government will sit up and take notice. The cocktail of materials dumped from the Tees area may impact not just sea life but humans. I wonder what role those materials have played in local beaches losing their long-standing blue flag status.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to review the Department's approach to the affected area again, and to go beyond the routine testing regime that was outlined to me. I ask her to recognise that fishers and the supply chain continue to suffer. If they are not already out of business, they soon will be, unless we do something about this. I ask her to commit to working with universities and others on monitoring sea life over coming years, and to give us hope for a brighter future.

12.1 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I declare an interest as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on fisheries, and should make the House aware that for decades, I have had a very strong connection with the UK fishing industry. I wish to speak on a few matters faced today by UK fishers—although I use that term, I understand that women who work aboard fishing vessels often prefer to describe themselves as fishermen.

First, I will raise the matter of the ever-increasing competition for access to waters around our islands. Fishermen face continual displacement from large areas of sea due to vast offshore wind farms, and areas being designated as some form of marine protected area. Those designations are often made without any real consultation with the industry or its representatives. Please do not take that to mean that fishermen do not care about the marine environment or our energy security. However, we must ensure that all people are included in discussions about the use of our sea. By working together and listening to all voices, I am sure that we can manage the use of our waters in a way that works for everyone concerned, while protecting our valuable maritime waters for the future.

The report, "Spatial Squeeze in Fisheries", jointly commissioned by the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, concludes:

"The ability of the fishing industry to continue to produce healthy protein and contribute to food security and coastal communities depends on its future viability. This in turn will require close collaboration and cooperation with other sectors that are increasing their spatial footprint in the marine area, to ensure that such developments and nature conservation restrictions occur in a way that is compatible with the continuation of fishing activity and the viability of fishing businesses."

Has the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), or the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), had any discussions with fishing organisations about the report and its conclusions?

Turning to the 2026 negotiations, in January this year, the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries was before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, of which I am a member. He stated that conversations with the EU had not yet started, but that his ambition was to secure the best possible deal for the UK. Could my hon. Friend confirm that that ambition will at least be for sole access that UK fishermen currently have inside the six-mile limit, and that it will be extended out to 12 miles or the median line?

Anthony Mangnall: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene; she is making an excellent point. Does she agree with the former DEFRA Secretary, my right

hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who wrote in *Fishing News* about the need for us to ensure that foreign vessels follow our regulation within our six to 12-mile limit? I agree with what she is asking for, but it is also essential that, if it is equipment, net sizes or anything else, foreign vessels should follow those rules in our waters, which they currently do not.

Mrs Murray: I completely agree that all conservation measures that are set for UK fishermen should also apply to other member states' vessels and that they should be enforced.

A further matter I wish to raise concerns the implications for the fishing industry of the "work in fishing" convention 2007, which resulted from the International Labour Organisation conference of May 2007. I accept that this is not within my hon. Friend the Minister's portfolio, but I ask her to urgently speak to the shipping Minister about the requirements for fishermen to have a medical carried out by a GP. The draconian measure being introduced will prevent fishermen and fisherwomen going to sea if they do not have a medical by November this year. I can understand why that is necessary on large vessels, where operations are similar to those of other large merchant vessels, but to apply the requirement to small inshore fishing vessels is in my opinion an unnecessary and unacceptable expense.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Lady agree that the way that the regulation has been implemented has caused enormous stress and anxiety to an industry that already feels that regulations do not apply to them properly? The catch app and the roll-out of I-VMS—inshore vessel monitoring—have caused real distress to the sector. Does she further agree that the deaths we have seen at sea have come not from poor health, but from vessel instability and the lack of lifejackets being worn, and that Ministers should focus on where the risks are and where the experience is rather than going after a form of regulation that is just causing anxiety to our fishers?

Mrs Murray: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman. I will come on to express my personal experience on that.

Furthermore, it places a disproportionate financial burden on small inshore fishing vessels. Article 10, paragraph 2 of convention C188 provides for exemptions from the requirement on the basis of

"size of the vessel, availability of medical assistance and evacuation, duration of the voyage, area of operation, and type of fishing operation."

Sadly, all those have been ignored by the Department for Transport. The shipping Minister has allegedly refused to engage with industry representatives, and, indeed, refused to listen to cross-party MPs when we met last week. Some are here today.

As someone whose fisherman husband paid the ultimate sacrifice while striving to bring this valuable source of protein to our table, I fully support sensible safety measures being introduced. Indeed, working with the previous shipping Minister—I have told him I will mention him—my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), we were able to successfully find grant funding for the voluntary introduction of safety stop buttons for deck equipment aboard fishing

vessels. I will be forever grateful to him for assisting me with that positive measure. However, fishermen do not need to prove their fitness to undertake their occupation. I know from 24 and a half years of being married to a commercial small boat skipper-owner that fishermen are simply not as stupid as the Maritime and Coastguard Agency would have us believe. My late husband suffered a heart attack and was stopped from fishing for a number of weeks while he recovered. He could not go back to sea until the Regional Fisheries Group was happy that he was medically fit to return. Why should he have had to undergo an unnecessary medical?

I looked at the incident reports on the Marine Accident Investigation Branch website, because they are all there. As far as I can see, there were no occasions when a medical condition was identified as a cause of an accident. Even our Royal Navy personnel, who must comply with specific fitness tests periodically, do not need a regular medical certificate from their GP. This is just another in a long line of complaints that I have received about the way that the MCA causes financial hardships and stress to the fishing fleet, which remains very close to my heart.

I end with the case of a 15-metre trawler based in Cornwall, primarily fishing out of Newlyn, and partly owned by one of my constituents. It suffered a catastrophic main engine failure on 19 April while steaming back to the Newlyn harbour from its fishing grounds, and was safely towed in by another vessel. The vessel underwent inspection by a local marine engineer, who deemed the engine beyond economic repair, resulting in the need for a replacement engine. Current regulations set by the MCA state that the company would have to replace the current engine, which is classed as tier 1, with a tier 3 engine that complies with emissions standards in place for new vessels.

The company appreciates the reasoning behind the regulation and the need to reduce emissions, but it is not always practical given the supply chain timeframes for such purchases and deliveries of tier 3 engines, especially in emergency circumstances where there has been unexpected engine failure. The engine must be swiftly replaced to get the vessel operating, back at sea and making an income rather than being out of action for around half a year. The MCA offers a process to request exemption from having to install a tier 3 engine, which the owners submitted with good reasons for their request and asking to install a tier 2 engine, which would allow the vessel to return to sea and ensure that the business remained viable.

Unfortunately, the exemption request was rejected by the MCA, which leaves the business in a very precarious position. The MCA offered the option of a temporary dispensation, which would allow the installation of a tier 2 engine until a compliant unit became available. However, that is not financially viable, as the total cost is likely to exceed £100,000 in machinery alone, excluding additional liabilities and lost time at sea for two engine installations.

I thank the Minister and the Fisheries Minister, the right hon. Member for Sherwood, for their support for our fishing industry. I welcome the Fisheries Minister's comments and commitment, but I am asking that he speak to his colleagues at the Department for Transport to ensure that it matches that support. At the moment that Department appears very uncaring and with an

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attitude towards the industry—which is vital to the food security of our country—that could almost be described as contempt.

12.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in a debate on fishing. I do not believe there has been a fishing debate in this Chamber or in Westminster Hall that I have not participated in—some might say that I participate in most debates, but that is by the way. I am particularly interested in the fishing sector, as I represent the fishing village of Portavogie, where fishing is really important. I also represent in this House the fishing villages of Ardglass and Kilkeel, because the Member who represents that constituency does not attend this place and thereby abdicates his responsibility to his constituents on fishing issues in this House, where decisions are made, cases are put forward and representations can make a difference.

I commend the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) on his introduction, detail and contribution, which set the scene so well for us all to follow and, perhaps, add to in a small way. I am interested in fishing because when I arrived at Ards council for the first time in 1985—I also represented Strangford in the Assembly—fishing was key to our economic life in Strangford. I also knew many people who were crews on the fishing boats in Portavogie, my brother being one of them. I could never really understand the courage of those who wanted to be fishing crews, because on my visits to the boats in Portavogie it became clear right away how dangerous and claustrophobic the atmosphere was. Fishing is important. It delivers to the economy and it gives opportunities and jobs in my constituency.

With the recent negative economic news, and having seen the UK economy buffeted by forces that, for a large part, are outside of our control, it would be easy to feel pessimistic and downbeat about the future. But I come here not with grievances about what cannot be controlled or tales of pessimism, but with genuine optimism and some recommendations on how, if we make the most of the factors inside our control, we can deliver not a bleak but a bright future for our fishing industry. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan tried to look at the optimistic side. He referred to challenges—which there are—but it is about how we overcome the challenges. That is the way to look at it in this debate, as the hon. Gentleman referred to, and I back him up.

I know that the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) will make similar comments about the fishing crews, and others probably will, too. Like us, the Minister will be well briefed on the problems with crewing, so we are better served to focus on the solution, as I often try to do in this House. Whatever the issue, I always try to be solution-focused, and I want other Members to do the same in this debate.

The Fishermen's Welfare Alliance proposed that the reading and writing elements of the skilled visa language requirement be adjusted from B1 to A2. That is not a big request—it is tactical more than anything else—but it enables the fishing sector not just in my constituency but in that of the hon. Members for Banff and Buchan and for Totnes, and across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, to make fishing

viable and add to economic life. I underline that. It will help those in Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel and us all. That level better matches the standard of the highly skilled international fisherman who already form an integral and valued part of our fishing industry. That adjustment of the standard would be time-limited for the individual, to protect the integrity of the skilled visa system. The immigration Minister has said that he is prepared to consider that option.

David Duguid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and for some excellent points. He refers to the Westminster Hall debate that we had with the immigration Minister, which was positive and encouraging, and looked to the future. Does he agree that the migrant workers coming to his constituency are generally not looking to settle here in the UK? The immigration Minister himself said that the English language test had to be B1 because it is seen as a route to settlement, but if we could distinguish a non-route to settlement version of that visa, A2 would be more than enough.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman has clarified the matter. I hope that the Minister, although she does not have sole responsibility for this, can illustrate and take forward our thoughts. I usually meet the fishermen from eastern Europe and Africa who work in Portavogie on every second Saturday in the month, when I give advice sessions down at the harbour. They have made it very clear that they do not want to stay here; they want to go home.

What we are asking for will not have an undue impact on the visa system. It is a really simple arrangement which I think will assist what the immigration department is trying to do. The English language requirement can be adjusted from B1 to A2. The solution lies entirely within the Government's gift. It will hasten the adoption of skilled visas within the industry, and will give fishing vessel owners the business stability that they need to plan and invest in their own future. May I ask the Minister—whom we all respect greatly, and who always responds positively to our requests—to take this positive action, and throw DEFRA's full weight behind this proposal? It helps when there is consensus in the House, and I am convinced that there will be consensus today. Others, I am sure, will make that clear as well.

The second issue that I want to raise is every bit as important as the first. In recent years, we have seen fishermen across the UK lose access to prime fishing grounds to make way for the offshore energy industry and environmentally protected areas. That affects my fishermen back home because there are plans for wind farms just off the Antrim coast, where some of their fishing grounds are. We should always remember that fishermen were the original environmentalists, and few of them will deny that our natural habitats need stewardship, or that the decarbonisation of energy production is as important an aspiration for our society as it is for them. Indeed, we have seen Government policy for the management of the marine space reflect just how important it is. I would argue, however, that our food security is every bit as important. If recent global events have taught us anything, it is that the cheap food we have enjoyed up until now is not something that can be taken for granted. During Business and Trade questions this morning, Members referred to food price increases of some 20%, which have made family purchases very difficult.

We know that areas where fishing and energy production co-exist successfully are the exception rather than the rule. In most instances, such co-existence is impossible. Overlapping fishing with environmentally protected areas can be problematic, and that is a shame. Research commissioned by the Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation shows that our Northern Irish wild-caught prawns have a carbon footprint one third the size of that of the farmed, south-east Asian prawns favoured by UK supermarkets, so we should buy the home-produced ones and reduce the net carbon impact. I am not saying that we should not buy from the rest of the world, but if we want to do the right thing for our fishermen while also reducing carbon emissions, we should buy local—buy from Portavogie, buy from Ardglass, buy from Kilkeel, and yes, buy from the whole of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland collectively. According to one scientist from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, the harmful emissions from harvesting Northern Ireland prawns are an order of magnitude below those from other UK animal proteins.

Fishing is clearly not without its own environmental or carbon reduction merits, but, notwithstanding the food security that it supports, it is all too often treated as the poor relation in marine spatial management. Will the Minister support the fishing industry in its drive to produce healthy, affordable and environmentally responsible food by ensuring that food production areas are given their rightful significance and importance in the designation and allocation of marine space? That, too, is entirely within the Government's power.

The third issue lies somewhat closer to home. The renegotiation of UK-EU fishing opportunity and access draws closer. The ability to access our traditional fisheries in Irish EU waters was a formally submitted priority for Northern Ireland during the 2020 negotiations, but I have subsequently been told that the UK side—I say this respectfully—did not even put the matter on the table. How disappointing. We can imagine how it looks to Northern Ireland fishermen when they see that the UK allowed inshore access to some French boats, but did nothing to help our own. I ask the Minister to ensure that the Government do not allow Northern Ireland fishermen to be let down twice. Once is a mistake, but twice would be deliberate. Can the Minister assure us that in the upcoming negotiations, and notwithstanding the Voisinage agreement, any access to UK inshore waters for EU vessels should be part of a reciprocal arrangement allowing Northern Ireland fishermen access to their traditional fisheries in EU waters? This means so much to those fishermen in Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel whom I speak for in the House, and for whom others will speak just as strongly and passionately.

Let me end by returning to my first point about optimism. It is so important to be optimistic, to be “glass half-full” and focused on solutions. There is a bright future for our industry, and one that can be delivered by fishing businesses throughout this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but if that is to happen, we need the Government to grip those matters that lie in their control. That can be done in three ways: by helping the industry to make the most of the skilled visa system through the small technical changes that can make such a difference to the future, by recognising the importance of food security and protecting food production areas, and by using the

upcoming renegotiation of fishing opportunity as a chance to set right the problems caused by the old system. Therein lies our very bright future.

12.26 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to speak in the debate. May I start by saying how sorry I am not to see the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) in his place? He has been a strong voice on this topic; he has a fund of knowledge and understanding of the sector, and he always adds great weight to the subject. May I also say what a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)? He is an ever-present and, indeed, continual voice in every debate on the subject, and it is helpful to have a UK-wide perspective on how we can help the sector.

I am the treasurer of the all-party group for shellfish aquaculture, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell). We have had great success over the last few months in pushing the aquaculture sector, and I am particularly grateful to colleagues on both sides of the House who have joined our group. I will focus my remarks on both aquaculture and fishing, and on some of the problems that are faced by the sector, and I will end by, hopefully, reinforcing my view that there are huge opportunities in the sector that are yet to be recognised and yet to be seized. We need to talk more about the sector in this place, and to discuss how we can build it up throughout the United Kingdom.

My first point is about Pacific oysters. Those of us who have them in our coastal waters—I recognise that that does not constitute the whole United Kingdom—will know that they are incredibly prevalent, incredibly productive and incredibly delicious. Unfortunately, however, DEFRA's present position, which is a historical one, is that they are invasive and therefore should not be cultivated. I see my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) shaking her head, because the situation is different in Cornwall, and I am speaking from a Devon perspective. Before my hon. Friend intervenes and tells me I am wrong, let me make this point. We need to look at the areas where Pacific oysters are being empowered and are growing at an alarming rate because of climate change and rising water temperatures rising, and we need to think of ways in which we can utilise that and improve food security. If, for instance, DEFRA were to change its policies from invasive to naturalised, businesses would be able to harvest them, sell them, and grow the market.

As a result of DEFRA's wording on this subject, both landowners and the Duchy of Cornwall are now restricting the licences of those who are currently operating in my area. Three local firms are about to go out of business because they cannot renew their contracts. This very easy line change would help our markets across the UK. If we look at the sheer economics of the sector, we see that France outperforms us by about tenfold in this area, so there is money to be made and businesses to be created in coastal communities.

The second thing that has been particularly damaging for the aquaculture sector has been water quality. Around 80% of shellfish-harvesting waters in the UK do not meet the standard class A requirement for export. The confusion about whether we could still export from

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class B waters when we left the European Union has only compounded the problem. We need a better conversation about how we will allow aquaculture businesses to be set up and created and whether we can do that in highly protected marine areas. Not a single chemical is poured on live bivalve molluscs, Pacific oysters, razor clams or scallops. Where they are grown and harvested, they help to enhance marine biodiversity. If we can get this right, we will find a way to make highly protected marine areas all the more productive in improving marine biodiversity.

The third area is what we do in relation to EU trade flows, and my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) has made that point. The class B problem has restricted many businesses. I know that DEFRA has moved already in terms of going beneath the 53° line across the United Kingdom, where businesses can export and where we recognise new areas as class A, but we have to think about how we test. The UK wrote the rules in the European Union on how to test our waters, but we are perhaps the most stringent in employing them and we perform it in the strictest manner. The French, Dutch and Germans all test their waters using our rules but to a lesser standard, and the right of appeal is not there in the UK.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is yet another example of the UK Government gold-plating legislation unnecessarily?

Anthony Mangnall: I could not fail to agree with my hon. Friend; she is absolutely right. We have to look at how we can make the laws that we have passed work. This is not about lowering standards or looking at how we can put people's health at risk. It is about making sure that we can work with businesses and give them certainty. There is an extraordinary business called Offshore Shellfish that operates out of Brixham, with its harvest waters in Lyme bay. It is constantly at risk of a poor rating that would see it put out of business for a year. A business simply cannot operate on that basis, so we must look at reviewing those appeals.

I know that CEFAS has worked with the FSA on this issue, but any impetus from the Minister would be incredibly helpful to get that across the line. A change will cost no money. It will create businesses, jobs, opportunities and a fantastic, sustainable source of food. I have in front of me the figures in comparison with France. The UK produces 0.9 tonnes per kilometre of coastline whereas the equivalent figure in France is 17.3 tonnes. That is the scale of the disadvantage that we have and shows what we could achieve across our coastal waters and coastline. Indeed, that would help to level up in coastal communities.

Fishermen's medical certificates have been mentioned several times. There is not a single person in the Chamber who wants any lowering of standards or safety for fishermen. We understand not only how difficult fishing is, but the risks that go with it. We are asking the Government to look at putting in an exemption so that there is not the medical certificate requirement for vessels under 10 metres. There is already a law in place—regulation 14—to allow an exemption. I have to say, Minister—I hope this does not come across as pompous—that we had a meeting with a Minister from the Department for

Transport, and I have never heard a Minister speak with such contempt of this sector. To just say that this will automatically be implemented without consultation is—I am sorry to be so candid about it—a very shoddy way to treat a sector that needs our support.

Mrs Murray: Does my hon. Friend agree that that Minister did not seem to have a grasp of the marine accident investigation branch reports that are available? It was very clear that she had not looked at them to see whether there was evidence to introduce this legislation.

Anthony Mangnall: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and she was far more diplomatic than I was during the meeting, which probably means that her career in the Foreign Office is likely to be far greater than mine. I tabled a question in the House on this subject to ask how many people in the past four years had died at sea or had a serious injury from a medical condition. The response was that not a single one of the deaths or emergency responses was down to a medical condition; they were down to poor practice and poor equipment. We are putting in legislation that causes huge horror and difficulties. We must think about why we put in such things. If we want to change the practice and make sure that it is safer on vessels, let us do that and we will work hand in glove with people. However, to think that this will not impact small boat owners and small inshore fishermen on our coastal waters is just nuts.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The hon. Gentleman makes that point exceptionally well and echoes some of the concerns and arguments of the Welsh Fishermen's Association. He mentioned the lack of evidence. Does that not perhaps reflect the fact that those who drafted the regulations foresaw the potential for exempting smaller vessels by giving the Secretary of State the power to do so?

Anthony Mangnall: The hon. Gentleman makes the point perfectly. If the exemption is there, let us use it. It takes nothing other than the Minister standing at the Dispatch Box to say that regulation 14 will be used. I get the sense that there may be some cross-party support on this issue.

Luke Pollard: I was in that meeting as well. I do not wish to add to the piling on of that Minister, but there is a point to make about how regulations should be implemented, and there is a real problem with how this particular regulation is being implemented. Does the hon. Member agree that the way to build trust with the sector, which feels put on and over-regulated, is for the MCA, the DFT and possibly DEFRA to ensure that there is renewed trust between them and the sector? The absence of trust will not deliver the regulatory outcomes that the Minister wants and will only further corrode the already tense relationship between the fishing industry—especially those using small boats—and those who seek to regulate them.

Anthony Mangnall: The hon. Gentleman makes a fantastic point. Communication is key. We are not trying to overload the sector. We want to make sure that we take all the steps in the right way, but that means that organisations such as the MCA and DEFRA have to be very clear and concise. I say this to the Minister,

and I am sure that the Fisheries Minister is watching: they have been proactive in engaging with us and very clear about this, so this is not me having a dig at them.

Mrs Murray: I am sorry to take up so much of my hon. Friend's time. As someone whose husband suffered a fatal accident aboard his under 10 metre fishing vessel, I can honestly say that when his toggle caught in the net drum of his boat, no medical certificate issued by his GP would have prevented that. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Anthony Mangnall: I absolutely agree. As ever, my hon. Friend adds huge weight and knowledge to the debates on this topic. I hope that officials and Ministers across all Departments are listening to the points that we are making.

I am taking up far too much time, but I will just make three other quick points. I should also mention that my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) cannot be in this debate but wanted to emphasise that her view on medical certificates is very much aligned with those that have been expressed across the House.

Another concern about the fishing sector relates to the I-VMS—the inshore vessel monitoring system. That has been a difficult programme to roll out. We have to ensure that the MMO has learned from the shambles of the type approval process and does not repeat that. As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said, the MMO has to be open and transparent and must communicate in full with fishermen and the fishing community.

That brings me on to the catch app. I am perfectly willing and happy to accept that modern technology has a place in how we fish and farm, and that we must use it to our full advantage, but the app is still not functional. People still cannot enter some port locations or species or differentiate between male and female crabs. The computer literacy and, indeed, connectivity in some places across this country are of hugely varying quality, so there needs to be a bit of understanding. I have seen fishermen in my community suddenly being issued with non-compliance letters many months after the alleged incident happened. That only adds to the stress of those in a sector that is really under the cosh at the moment and which needs more support.

Luke Pollard: The catch app and the type verification for I-VMS are two good examples of over-burdensome regulation. The threat of criminality if someone cannot successfully weigh a fish—within 10% of its weight—while at sea without marine scales seems to be home-grown, massively over-burdensome and costly red tape that creates additional stress. Does the hon. Member agree that there must be a better way of doing this to ensure that fishers can be taken with the Government when they change the laws, not pitched against them?

Anthony Mangnall: Yes. Where we have seen huge progress is that the Fisheries Minister has been extremely proactive on this. I hope I am not speaking for him when I say he has told me that he agrees with the points we are making. It is about how the MCA is putting this in and regulating it. We have to make sure that what we say in this Chamber and what is being said in Departments is translating through to the organisations that enforce it.

If we get that right, we can suddenly do all the things that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport and Conservative Members are saying.

We have spoken a little about Brexit. There are huge opportunities outside the common fisheries policy, and Brixham in my constituency is a fantastic example of a fishing port that has had record sales since 2021. In 2021, it sold £43 million, in 2022 it sold £60 million, this year it is on course to sell £63 million and next year it is forecasting £67 million. By 2027, it expects to top £100 million-worth of sales. Brixham prepared for Brexit, and it is taking advantage of it. New boats are coming on line and being built, and the Government's capital allowance is a huge support to the sector. Do not think we are being doom and gloom about the sector; it is about ensuring that we recognise the difficulties of gold-plated legislation, rules and regulations and try to unlock them to make it easier and simpler, and about ensuring that we really talk up the sector.

We need to talk a lot more about food security in this country, and we need to talk about how we can be more self-sustainable. Our coastal waters offer that opportunity. We must make sure that, when we come back with the three-yearly reports on food security, fishing and aquaculture are fully embedded to help us answer the call for better food security and better local food on our plates.

It is a privilege to speak on behalf of the fishing community in my constituency and to know that so many colleagues on both sides of the House share similar views.

12.41 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Liberal Democrats would typically be represented in this debate by my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who has decades of experience representing fishermen and the fishing industry, whereas I have represented the town of Beer for merely a year. None the less, I will make a few comments that seek to represent the small fishing fleet of Beer. I will specifically comment on the trade and co-operation agreement with the European Union, access to labour and, finally, a level playing field for British fishermen and their competitors.

We have heard that the TCA with the European Union will be revisited in 2026. Fishing lobby groups have told me that they were disappointed by the TCA's first iteration, which is a bit of an understatement. I have heard others describe it as something of a betrayal. We heard in advance of 2016 that, as an independent coastal state, the UK might expect to have exclusive access to the 12 nautical mile zone and that we might have protected inshore fisheries. Instead, we have quota shares that still do not reflect the fisheries resources located within the UK's exclusive economic zone. EU vessels may catch up to 40,000 tonnes of non-quota species in UK waters, whereas UK fleets are allowed to catch only 12,000 tonnes in EU waters.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: The hon. Gentleman is using the statistics well, but can he tell me how many of his fishermen from Beer operate in the 6 to 12 mile limit, or on the other side of the median line in the channel?

Richard Foord: I do not know. I am also speaking about the UK fishing industry as a whole. It is not only the small number of fisheries based in Beer but the whole sector that has an interest and a stake in this.

Anthony Mangnall: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's speech and in how he wrestles with his party's position of rejoining the European Union and going back into the common fisheries policy. Surely that would end up with us sharing far more quotas and seeing far more boats in our waters.

Richard Foord: I was happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I will not have him make straw-man arguments that misrepresent my party's policy. However, I agree with him that the standards that apply to EU vessels fishing in UK waters must also apply to UK vessels fishing in UK waters. There must be equal treatment of UK and EU vessels. He is exactly right that having higher standards for UK fishermen is deterring the UK fishing industry and could potentially put fishermen out of business.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: I think the hon. Gentleman is a little confused. At the moment, the UK Government set the conservation measures for all vessels operating within the zero to 12-mile limit. Between 6 and 12 miles, some member states' vessels can come in and operate in our waters in a limited way. He says that regulations that apply to EU vessels must apply to UK vessels, but I think my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) is saying that what is imposed on UK vessels must also be imposed on EU vessels.

Richard Foord: I agree with the hon. Lady. I was simply agreeing with the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) about having a level playing field for UK and EU vessels fishing in the same waters. I will return to that point a little later.

As with many industries, fishing faces difficulties in recruiting new workers. The media have tended to focus their comments on the use of foreign workers to fill the gaps. Overseas workers definitely have a role to play, although that role has perhaps been exaggerated, because around 20% of fishermen working on UK boats are non-UK citizens. The proportion is higher in Scotland and Northern Ireland, which is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland has made so much of that point.

Commendable efforts have been made in the south-west to increase domestic recruitment, and I pay particular tribute to the South Western Fish Producer Organisation and South Devon College. I congratulate them on developing a fishing apprenticeship that is now taking on its first recruits.

Adding fisheries workers to the shortage occupation list was a commendable step, and it is making the skilled visa route much easier to follow, but the difficulties identified by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) in the written English requirement are right. These barriers need not be imposed. We understand that a level of verbal English-language proficiency is required, but imposing written requirements on people who do not need to write in the course of their job just adds pointless expense and delay to their recruitment.

David Duguid: I acknowledge and thank the hon. Gentleman for agreeing with my point. I also acknowledge, in his absence, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) who, along with me and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), has been a

strong advocate for the process of not just getting cheap foreign labour but helping the Government to facilitate that process.

Richard Foord: I thank the hon. Gentleman for pointing that out.

There is a little irony in how British boats fishing in the 6 to 12-mile zone are unable to employ foreign workers, yet overseas workers routinely make up a large proportion of the crew of EU vessels that work alongside those boats.

There is one other sense in which British commercial fishermen are not competing on a level playing field with EU commercial fishermen and our competitors have a competitive advantage over our fishermen. To make this point, I will quote directly from what I have been told by a constituent who lives in Seaton but whose son is a commercial fisherman who owns a trawler based in Brixham. She writes:

"They work all over and last week the boats fuel bill was nearly twelve thousand pounds for one trip. Many fishermen are struggling to pay fuel costs and unfortunately a lot will go under as a result. France is subsidising fuel costs for their fishing fleet. As usual, our fishermen are receiving no support whatsoever from their own government. These are good, hardworking men Richard who risk their lives at sea everyday in order to feed the nation. Most worked throughout the pandemic without any fuss and with very little thanks. They deserve help from our government to help with fuel costs. If they don't get some help, many will lose their livelihoods."

Her comments—

Anthony Mangnall: I apologise for interrupting, but as that person is operating in my constituency, I ask the hon. Gentleman to tell them to get in touch. Secondly, we must also recognise what the Government have done through offering funding for retrofitting vessels to make them greener and reduce their fuel prices, and through the fisheries and seafood schemes. A significant amount of money is available. It might not be a fuel subsidy, but we have done a great deal to help the sector reduce its emissions and the fuel it needs to use.

Richard Foord: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the duty on marine gas oil can be reclaimed, so this is not the same as buying petrol at a pump? Fishermen can reclaim the duty on their marine gas oil if they operate a commercial fishing vessel. Did he know that?

Richard Foord: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that. I do not know whether the fisherman in question knew that, but I can be sure to pass it on to my constituent. The overriding point, aside from the specifics of fuel to which she refers, is that we need equality of esteem for UK and EU vessels that are fishing in UK waters. Frankly, there are some people in this iconic industry who feel that in 2015-16 some of the arguments made in relation to fishing were duplicitous and that some fishermen were sold a pup.

12.52 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): Poole is the second largest natural harbour in the world and it has a long history of fishing, particularly in the north Atlantic. Indeed, the Dorset accent can sometimes be picked up

in the Newfoundland accent, because so many people from Dorset ended up going to that part of Canada. We no longer fish that distance, but we still have a live fishing industry, mainly now in under 12 metre boats. There is a great opportunity for fishing, because of our coming out of the EU and being able to catch more catch. This does require investment and persuading people to go into what is a hard living if they are to make it a success.

I recently held a meeting, organised by Lyn Bourne, at the Poole fishermen's dock. It was with a number of fishermen, including Mark Goulding, the skipper of Golden Girl PE1130. They were all a bit depressed, because they feel that we have come out of the EU and yet the various agencies are bringing in regulations that ought not to be applying to them. Those regulations are making their job more difficult and, in some cases, unviable. They expressed to me in clear terms that many of them feel, "The Government do not want us to continue fishing, otherwise why on earth would they be bringing in all these regulations?" I said that that is not true and that we want a vibrant and successful fishing industry. However, a number of things are landing on them that I do not think they particularly expected.

We ought to be doing all we can to keep people in the fishing industry, for reasons that many people in this debate have expressed. It is a potential growth industry and it is important, not least because of the "tail" created by fishermen, with all the other businesses fishing supports. It is easy to drive around Poole and see that the marine industry employs significantly more people in total than just fishermen, including those in various engineering and supply companies. So we want to do what we can to keep the industry going.

A number of points were made at that meeting. They have been raised in today's debate, but I will repeat some of them. Those fishermen feel that the regulations are unfair and that they are being pushed out of their livelihood; the MCA vessel surveys and medicals are very much to the fore in this. The catch-up was mentioned a moment ago, and it requires solo fishermen, as many of these people are, to control their boat safely on the return to the harbour, while measuring catches and filling in things on smartphone apps, often with wet hands, on a rolling boat, in the dark. A further requirement is for all fishermen to have medical fitness assessments, five-yearly up to the age of 65 and then annually, which of course is an additional cost.

On the medicals, many on the inshore fishing fleet never go over the horizon, yet they are required to pass tests required of those on offshore large ships. Lifetime fishermen are being warned that they may lose their livelihood because of minor diabetes, colour blindness or weight. A doctor's decision from a 30-minute consultation could leave them without an income and with no right of appeal. That is a concern to them. They also see that the MMO acknowledges that there ought to be grandfathered rights but does not spell out what that means. So there is a degree of pessimism among many of the small fishermen in Poole about what is going on.

David Duguid: My hon. Friend is making some excellent points, some of which have, as he admitted, been made already. He mentioned diabetes as one of the conditions that would stop somebody from going out fishing in a small boat. Does he agree with the chief executive of

the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, Elspeth Macdonald, who asked, "How can a long-distance lorry driver drive down a motorway at 50 or 60 mph with those precise same conditions, yet someone with them could not go out on a small boat within 6 to 12 miles?"

Sir Robert Syms: That is a good point; there is an element of gold-plating here. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), who chairs the all-party group on fisheries, made some important points about how we seem to be trying to solve a problem where there is not really one. This is rather like the British disease where members of a club start getting excited when one starts talking about the rules. Ministers ought to be a bit more robust with the agencies on what we need to do for safety and what does not make much difference but just makes earning a living far more difficult.

The I-VMS situation does not sound very good. Initially, the MMO had four suppliers. Many of the fishermen in Poole fitted an I-VMS from one of the suppliers that were subsequently suspended and are now waiting to see what happens. The MMO has said that it will provide £650,000 of grant funding to replace working equipment, but it may be replacing it with something less suitable than had been fitted. The MMO has not yet confirmed the procedure to follow for those with systems installed by the two suppliers that have been suspended. This is creating more uncertainty, because those fishermen might well be disallowed from fishing.

We need not only more clarity, but a bit of common sense in order to help and support our local fishermen. There is a great opportunity here, but we do require people who have given their life to fishing to continue with it. I get a strong feeling from the fishermen in Poole that most of them will continue to do it largely because they feel their obligation to hand on their boat to a relative, be it their son, grandson or whoever, as there is a strong tradition of fishing in certain families. They will not be doing it because they think they will be making a lot of money. Most of them think that some of these regulations are making their life more difficult than it needs to be.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to raise these issues only a few days after meeting them in the House. I hope that the Government and indeed the fisheries Minister, who has had a bit of a kicking today, review some of these things, as they ought, so that we can get a successful fishing industry that the Government support, rather than bringing in regulations that get in the way.

12.59 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) on leading it. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. Mr Deputy Speaker, I state at the outset that I chair a community interest company, REAF—the Renaissance of East Anglian Fisheries. My comments will focus on the inshore fleet and on the marketing, processing and retailing of fish in the east of England.

The UK's departure from the EU was intended to mark the start of the revival of the domestic UK fishing industry. We are yet to properly grasp this opportunity,

[*Peter Aldous*]

primarily due to the poor terms for fishing that were negotiated and are contained in the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement.

The Government have put in place the framework for improving the sector through the Fisheries Act 2020, which provides for the preparation and implementation of regional fisheries management plans, and through the creation of the UK seafood fund. Yet, for many in the industry, two and half years on from the signing of the TCA, we are still on the starting grid, there has been no significant improvement in business outlook and, in many respects, the situation has got worse. The industry has also been hit hard by the cost of living crisis, high energy and fuel costs and labour shortages.

I shall briefly highlight some of the challenges that the industry is facing in East Anglia. Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex adjoin fisheries ground 4C in the southern North sea, which is one of the richest fishing grounds in northern Europe, but I am afraid that the catch opportunities for local fishermen remain poor. That is because we do not have full control over our own waters and the inshore fleet, which fishes sustainably, has to compete with larger vessels, which are often non-UK registered and often supertrawlers. It is vital that that situation is addressed when the trade and co-operation agreement is renegotiated in 2026. The UK should also consider introducing measures to allow the inshore fleet to fish exclusively in the 12 nautical mile zone, which would benefit not only coastal communities and local economies, but fish stocks.

I acknowledge that the issue does not fall within the remit of the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), but, as we have heard, the requirement for fisherman to gain a ML5 medical certificate is causing enormous worry and distress within the inshore fleet, particularly for those operating single-handed vessels, who risk losing their livelihoods. The feedback that I have received from one fisherman is that when he rang his doctor's surgery, the receptionist had never heard of a ML5. When he got his appointment, seven weeks later, he had to print off the 14-page form and take it with him, and then he had to pay £125. The doctor expressed the opinion that the ML5 was far too strict and detailed, and that it was easier to pass a medical to drive an HGV or a 52-passenger coach. As we have heard, this is another example of British overzealous gold-plating, and I urge my hon. Friend and her colleagues in DEFRA to liaise closely with Baroness Vere to streamline the process.

Anthony Mangnall: It is clear how colleagues feel, but we should also take into account that the Department may well say that none of the people who have applied for the medical certificate have been rejected. However, many have been referred, which takes a great deal of time. It does not help the process and adds to the stress. My hon. Friend, like I and others in the House, will have fishermen in his constituency who will not want to carry on working because of the added bureaucracy. Is that the case in his constituency?

Peter Aldous: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I believe the inshore fleet is the future and the lifeblood of the industry. It will not have a future if there are no fishermen to operate those vessels, and very often they operate them on their own.

A vibrant fishing industry can play a vital role in levelling up and uplifting left-behind communities all around the UK, but to do so requires fish to be landed locally and then marketed, processed, sold and eaten locally, with specialist high-quality products, for which the UK has a long-established and enviable reputation, being sold further afield, whether in London's finest restaurants or around the world. REAF recognises that challenge and, in the coming months, it will be working up a seafood strategy for the east of England.

Unfortunately, that vision is in danger of being undermined by the Brixham fish market strategy of setting up hubs. I told my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes that I would be mentioning this issue. I am sure, when I have stated my case, he will want to intervene, and I will be happy to take that intervention. Brixham fish market has been setting up hubs around the UK, where local fishermen deposit their fish, which is then transported by road for sale in Brixham.

In the short term, I acknowledge that that sales outlet is attractive to many fishermen, due to the higher prices offered. However, in the longer term, its consequences could be disastrous. A cartel or monopoly could be created, to which fishermen would be beholden, and we would then have squandered that once in a lifetime opportunity to breathe life back into coastal economies all around the UK.

Mrs Murray: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that this is not isolated to Brixham? Plymouth fish market also overlands fish to the market and it also sells remotely. It is not something that is specifically isolated to one particular market.

Peter Aldous: I thank my hon. Friend and I acknowledge that, but I am drawing on experiences in the east of England. Brexit and levelling up, in so many respects, are about giving opportunities to very local communities and fishing sectors, in order to make the most of those opportunities in those locations. We heard a lot about that during the Brexit negotiations. I see the issue in Lowestoft. The Lowestoft Fish Producers' Organisation has an office in Lowestoft, but it does not land any fish in Lowestoft; it lands them in the Netherlands. It is not much better if that fish is then taken over land and sold in Brixham, or wherever. That is to the detriment of the community that I represent, which yearns to take advantage of the opportunity.

Anthony Mangnall: I strongly oppose my hon. Friend's suggestion that Brixham is a cartel; that is the wrong language to use. In the interests of seeing how this model might be replicated by other businesses and organisations, as my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) has said already, will he come down and see the organisations and Brixham Trawler Agents? He will see that this is something to be welcomed by communities across our coastal areas, and how other businesses can take ownership of the idea, so that we can find ways to land more fish not just at Brixham, but across all our respective ports.

Peter Aldous: There is not, as yet, a cartel or a monopoly. I am flagging up the fact that if we do not watch it, that is what could happen and that would not benefit the wider UK fishing industry.

David Duguid: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Peter Aldous: I will give way to my hon. Friend now before coming to my next point.

David Duguid: Let me just say this before my hon. Friend moves on from this topic. I find this matter fascinating. I was not aware that this was happening in Brixham. It brings to mind the fact that in Peterhead, in my constituency, we have one of the largest state-of-the-art fish markets in the country, if not in Europe. Catches from the west coast of Scotland and the islands find their way over to Peterhead market by road much faster than if those boats were to come around and land. It can work, but I appreciate that it can work in different places and in different ways. May I suggest not only to the chair of the all-party group on fisheries but to the treasurer that perhaps we should take my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) up on his invitation to see how the scheme might be proposed.

Peter Aldous: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Lowestoft was the fishing capital of the southern North sea for the fishing industry in the east of England, which years to regasp that crown. This is what Brexit is about. My sense is that we need to build local infrastructure, local markets and local processing all around the UK, and not concentrate them in one or two locations. I also wish to highlight another disadvantage of that concentrating in one or two locations, which is the complete lack of environmental sustainability of vans, in this instance, driving from the East Anglian hub of Southwold, in the Suffolk Coastal constituency of my right hon. Friend and neighbour the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, all the way to Brixham, which is a six and a half hour drive and a 350-mile journey. That is not environmentally sustainable in today's world.

I urge my hon. Friend the Minister, who is looking slightly bemused at my approach, to understand that this is an issue locally in Norfolk and Suffolk, which is causing a lot of concern and discussion in the industry. I urge her to take this matter back to her colleagues and look at the situation very closely. I suggest that one solution could be for her Department to prepare what I would call a national strategic plan of regional fish markets, which would then be the focus of their local industries. Money from the UK Seafood Fund could be directed and targeted at stimulating the creation of vibrant local fishing and seafood sectors all around the UK, not just in Brixham with those very impressive sales records. Let us distribute that all around the UK, and the UK as a whole, I suggest, will benefit most from such an approach.

Anthony Mangnall: This is perhaps now turning into a debate about Brixham, which of course I am always happy have. The model that is also being considered in Brixham is to have hubs outside of Brixham. My hon. Friend is right to make the point that it is not necessarily environmentally friendly to have huge amounts of trucks coming through, but Brixham is exploring having hubs in new communities. If any colleagues in this House are looking to have hubs set up, I am sure Brixham Trawler Agents would be delighted to come and see them.

Peter Aldous: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. A single hub-and-spoke model for the UK, I suggest, will not be to the benefit of the whole UK. What would be of benefit is hub-and-spoke models in individual regions. Mr Deputy Speaker, I will leave this issue for further discussion and debate. I welcome the fact that I have, hopefully, engendered a debate on this particular issue.

My final point is that the seas all around the UK are becoming increasingly crowded. I am referring to the spatial squeeze that many colleagues have mentioned this morning and that the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, among others, has identified.

In many respects, this enormous amount of activity is good news, as it will create the business that will bring new and exciting jobs to coastal communities all around the UK, but we do need to be responsible guardians of our waters. There is a need for a more strategic approach to marine planning, with the needs of the fishing industry being properly represented.

I am a great supporter of the offshore wind industry, but it is important to recognise that adding physical structures in the sea at the scale that we are currently doing will change patterns of oceanographic processes and hence biological processes. Some of this change might actually be for the better, but much of it could well lead to degradation and it is vital that we ensure that does not happen.

In conclusion, the UK fishing industry is not yet in the last-chance saloon—though I did listen carefully to the speech of the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham)—but there is a very strong sense of missed opportunity. In the medium term, the Government need to prepare themselves for a tough renegotiation of the trade and co-operation agreement in 2026. In the short term, there is a need for streamlined administrative processes and strategic thinking to ensure that the industry can flourish not only in East Anglia, but all around the UK.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We are now coming to the wind-up speeches, which will last eight minutes, 10 minutes and 10 minutes, and two minutes for David Duguid at the end. I am anticipating that the second debate will start no later than around quarter to two. Anybody who wishes to take part in that debate should start making their way to the Chamber now.

1.16 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who is not in his place, on their work in securing this debate. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate to happen.

Before I get into much of what I am going to say, I just want to confirm an announcement that has been made in the Scottish Parliament today by our Minister for Net Zero and Just Transition, Mairi McAllan. She said: "I can confirm today that the proposal as consulted on will not be progressed. This means that we will no longer seek to implement HPMA's across 10% of Scotland's seas by 2026."

As Mr Deputy Speaker will be aware, I have been sitting here during the course of this debate, so I have not had an opportunity to listen to the entire contents

[Kirsty Blackman]

of what has been said. I direct Members to have a look at that statement in the Scottish Parliament if they want any more information on what is happening in that regard.

I wish to start my contribution with a few comments on Brexit. As the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan said, there have been some issues and concerns along the way, particularly for fish processors and those who are choosing to export. It has not so much been the sea of opportunity that was promised, but more that people have been set adrift. The number of fishing vessels is continuing to go down. The number of fishers has also been down over the last period. I wish to quote from a number of different articles—not the one that was quoted earlier—including from *Politico*. Charlie Waodie from Hull said:

“I wish I had never voted for Brexit. They told us everything that we wanted to hear.”

James Wilson, the Welsh shellfish exporter said:

“Brexit has been absolutely, fundamentally, profoundly devastating. It’s utterly ***** us.”

You can imagine what the missing word is, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is the case that people feel that they were told lies in advance of the Brexit vote. They were told how great things were going to be, and they are not as great as they thought.

David Duguid: As I acknowledged in my opening remarks, a lot of concerns have been raised with me, as they have no doubt been raised with her. But may I just point out that it is very easy to cherry pick certain quotes from certain individuals at certain times. What I have found when talking to people in the industry as I do, week after week, some of those quotes are not necessarily generally indicative of the overall feeling.

Kirsty Blackman: I agree, and I said earlier that the hon. Gentleman had talked about some of the problems people have encountered and the barriers they have faced as a result of, in his words, not being as prepared as they could have been for Brexit. I did not shy away from that or suggest he was entirely positive about the whole thing in his speech. I understand, but I feel that, particularly for fish processors and those who are exporting, it has been a much more difficult process and situation, certainly than they were led to believe, but also than before Brexit.

Things are more difficult for people exporting to the EU now than they were previously. That is particularly important with shellfish or fish that will go off very quickly and require to be exported as quickly as possible to get to their final destination. In some cases, those exports are not taking particularly longer than they were before, but in other cases it is the level of uncertainty about when that shipment will arrive that is causing problems, as well as the number and cost of the additional hoops that businesses have to go through in order to export that excellent produce.

I want to talk about the UK visa schemes. I was glad to hear the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan talking about the importance of coastal communities, as he often does. Coastal communities are incredibly important and they are at risk of depopulation. That is a problem that we see particularly across rural Scotland and it is exacerbated by the earlier situation with visas and the current situation with immigration.

When Brexit was first on the cards, I made the case that in negotiating it, the Prime Minister should say, “Which are the industries that bring in the most money to the UK, the ones that are best for our economy and most important for our economy? Those are the industries we should protect. Secondly, which are the industries whose loss would cause decimation for communities? Those are the industries we should protect.” The Government chose not to negotiate in that way but, if they had, we would not be seeing the immigration system being obstructive to people who are looking to come and live in our rural communities. We would have seen the protection of fishing and farming communities.

We know that the loss of even a small number of people from those communities will have a devastating impact, because there are not that many people living there. My colleague the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan talked about the people who grow up in those families and who go into those industries as a result. I am originally from a fishing family, a couple of generations back. Their surname is West, a name that hon. Members have probably heard—certainly in Scottish fishing circles, if not in the rest of the UK.

I have some questions for the Minister on the expansion of the UK visa schemes and the shortage occupations that have been added. We have called consistently for more occupations to be added to the shortage occupation list. The UK Government need to make decisions on that with thought and care, but they also need to make them at speed, and to put the views and expertise of the industry ahead of any ideology about stopping immigration.

The shortage occupations that have been added are share fishermen, trawler skippers and experienced deckhands. I want to ask the Minister how many businesses have been in touch to seek support in applying for sponsorship for those new shortage occupations. I am led to believe that the Government are providing a dedicated visas contact for individuals, so they should have the ability to track the number of businesses that have been in touch. What percentage of applications for those occupations are being granted? Are they generally being granted? Do the Government feel that adding these three occupations is enough or are there more that require to be added?

The announcement was made at the end of May in the hope that it would be in time for the beginning of the summer season. Given the length of time it is taking to process visa applications, is the Minister clear that they are being expedited in order for the workers to be able to come here in time for the fishing season to start?

David Duguid *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before the hon. Lady gives way, just a reminder that I said eight minutes and we are there now.

David Duguid: I just want to make the hon. Lady aware that, around the same time—I think it was a couple of weeks earlier than the shortage occupation list announcement—the Home Secretary wrote to the industry, offering the fish catching sector additional facilitative support in getting visas through more quickly.

Kirsty Blackman: I appreciate that, but I want to know how it is working. I know the promises that were made, but what are the outcomes?

Lastly, fishing means a lot to Scotland. It means a lot to us. It is significantly higher proportion of our economy than it is for the rest of the UK. We care passionately about it, and fishing in the north-east of Scotland, or Scotland in general, is often different from fishing across the UK. We will do what we can to put the interests of those living, working and hoping to have successful businesses in Scotland first. I hope the Minister will take on board the questions and concerns we have raised, in order to ensure the continued prosperity of our fishing communities, rather than a continuation of the decimation that is happening.

1.25 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who cannot be here today, for securing this important debate and I thank the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) for filling in for him today.

As colleagues can see and will know, I am not my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), the shadow Fisheries Minister; my hon. Friend has asked me to send his apologies to the House for not being here, so I am also filling in. However, as the Member for Newport West I am very proud of the port in our city and of the coastline and marshes further down the constituency, so talking water, fishers and our environment is very important to me.

I want to start by remarking on how consensual and agreeable the debate has been today. That is quite surprising, in my experience, but I hope the Minister will take away the fact that there has been so much cross-party agreement on the problems and the way to go forward on them.

I pay tribute to the fishers up and down the country who go out in all weathers, day after day. While there are many different sectors, often with competing and conflicting views, in all cases it is clear that they are extremely hard-working people in the UK's most dangerous peacetime occupation. Too many lives are still lost and too many life-changing injuries still occur. During the pandemic and the lockdown periods, our fishers worked hard to support their local communities and to keep them fed, and we know they are all hugely valued.

However, I am sad to say that, for all their value, fishers have been sorely let down by this Government. The fishing industry, like so many UK sectors, was made a lot of promises in the run-up to 2016. It is fair to say that many feel that those promises have been broken or, at the very least, are yet to bear fruit.

At the end of 2020, Parliament passed the Fisheries Act 2020, which gave the Government the authority to act for us as an independent coastal nation outside the EU and outside the common fisheries policy. It allowed us to embark on bilateral agreements with our closest neighbours and potentially to negotiate much more favourable fish quotas for UK fishers.

The outcome of those negotiations was a huge disappointment and was greeted with widespread dismay. Under the terms agreed between the UK and the EU in the trade and co-operation agreement back in December 2020, the Government ceded access to fish in UK waters to EU vessels for six years and failed to establish an exclusive 12-mile limit. That result is a long way off taking back control of our waters. The financial consequences of those deals are far-reaching. The NFFO

has calculated that the sector will see losses of £64 million or more a year, totalling more than £300 million by 2026 unless changes are secured through international fisheries negotiation.

The English distant fleet has, to all intents and purposes, been sold out. Jane Sandell, the chief executive officer of UK Fisheries Ltd, is exasperated. Referring to the deal with Norway as

“yet another body blow for fishers in the North East of England”, she explains:

“The few extra tonnes of whitefish in the Norwegian zone won't come close to offsetting the loss in Svalbard due to the reduced TAC. Defra knows this and yet they simply don't seem to care about the English fleet.”

As a consequence, she has had to lay off 72 people in the last 18 months. I hope the Minister will be able to explain why the English distant fleet has fared so badly, and what she plans to do about it. I am talking particularly about the English fleet here, but I am concerned about DEFRA and the devolved Administrations working together. The Scottish and Welsh Governments have their roles, but DEFRA has a dual role and it needs to get it right.

The joint fisheries statement and the fisheries management plans pose additional challenges. Their objectives are certainly positive. We all want the UK to develop a

“vibrant, modern and resilient fishing industry and a healthy marine environment.”

I also recognise that it is no easy task to balance the need to produce a plentiful supply of food in the UK with our aspirations to ensure sustainable stocks and to protect, and repair the damage inflicted on, the marine environment. All three objectives are crucial. Maintaining stocks must be a primary goal for the fisheries management plans. It is in the interests of all concerned. Sadly, stock levels of cod in the west of Scotland have declined by 97% since the 1980s, and trawlers continue to operate in 98% of offshore protected areas.

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is making a good speech, and the many technical experts in the room will congratulate her on it. Does she agree that a good step to protect stocks and support UK fishing would be to ban foreign-owned super-trawlers that fish in our marine protected areas but do not land their catch in the UK and so do not create jobs in our country?

Ruth Jones: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for the industry. He has made that point perfectly well—as have many other Members—and yes, of course, I agree with him 100%.

Bycatch remains a serious problem. The Future Fisheries Alliance highlights studies that show that bycatch is responsible for the catching and killing of around 1,000 harbour porpoises, 250 common dolphins, 475 seals, and 35 minke and humpback whales in gill nets and other fishing gears in UK waters every year.

I spoke in a recent debate about marine protected areas as an important tool in safeguarding our ocean's future. I am deeply concerned about the ecological state of our seas, rivers and lakes, and the innumerable threats that they face from human activity. This House has been made well aware of the shockingly poor quality of the water in many parts of the UK, and of the Government's negligence when it comes to cleaning and

[Ruth Jones]

protecting our waters. Indeed, poor water quality is a major threat to the livelihoods of our shellfishers in particular. Shellfishers in West Mersea made it clear to us that it is an all too regular occurrence that effluent being discharged into the sea has meant that they have had to stop work. Maintaining a healthy, pollution-free environment can also be in the best interests of food producers.

As I said, I welcome the joint fisheries statement and the fisheries plan, but I just do not think that they provide the answers required to create a thriving and sustainable fishing industry. We need a more strategic solution to balancing the need to produce food, maintain stocks and protect the marine environment. The NFFO is understandably concerned about the spatial squeeze. The Government need a robust response to the potential displacement of fishing areas as more marine protected areas are introduced and more offshore wind farms are proposed. However desirable MPAs and wind farms are, they literally reduce the size of the pool for the catching sector, as the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) highlighted.

Questions remain about how UK fishing plans will interact with third countries, the extent to which plans will be based on data, and how fisheries management is simplified in future, not made as complicated as under the CFP. Is there not a danger that Brussels red tape will simply be replaced with UK red tape? While our competitors have developed strategies to bolster their fishing industry and ensure that they have the best possible chance of selling their produce abroad, our Government seem intent on making life more difficult.

The shellfish sector offers several examples of that, as the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) highlighted. Whereas numerous other European countries actively support the farming of Pacific oysters because they represent a sustainable method of producing high-quality marine protein, our Government actually hamper efforts to farm them—so much so that David Jarrad, chief executive of the Shellfish Association of Great Britain, has resorted to asking:

“Do we actually want a UK oyster industry?”

Moreover, our fishers are being held by UK regulators to much higher standards than their competitors when it comes to the system of testing our shellfish for *E. coli* levels. Of course, we all want to be assured that our food is safe, but surely the same standards should apply to imported goods. Our fishers are simply asking for a level playing field. To add insult to injury, the catching sector has been on the receiving end of additional regulation that is heavy-handed and disproportionate. The catch app, the inshore vessel monitoring system, and boat inspections by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency have been exacerbating the stress our fishers are experiencing. The medical fitness certificate is a particularly good example of the proliferation of red tape that has swamped the small fishing businesses under this Government. The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) spoke eloquently about that.

Safety will always be a top priority, but insisting that all fishermen and women over the age of 50 fall below a certain weight is an expensive, onerous and hugely anxiety-provoking solution to a problem that does not exist. It is hard to find any accident in the reports of the Marine Accident Investigation Branch that has been caused by a fisherman or woman being overweight.

Those challenges are enough to be grappling with, but the industry faces a range of other problems, including the fight to keep afloat against the rising tide of rocketing fuel costs and rising interest rates that devalue the pound; labour shortages, which have been exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic, and stricter immigration rules. It is little surprise, then, that the overall picture for fishing is causing concern—it is not the thriving industry we want to see. Preliminary economic estimates by industry body Seafish, reported in *Politico*, show that the number of active fishing vessels and full-time equivalent fishing-related jobs fell 6% in 2021-22 compared with 2019-20, continuing a decade-long trend.

It is no wonder that many of our brave fishermen and women are suffering from poor mental health. Those factors constitute an existential threat to hundreds of livelihoods. There has been plenty of lawmaking but no clear vision and no substantive answers to the challenges that the fishing industry faces. The Conservative approach to trade deals and negotiations with countries in distant waters is too often naïve and amateurish compared with our long-experienced and wily competitors. What is the plan? Where is the vision? I hope the Minister can enlighten us today.

The Labour party takes a different view. We think that knowing our destination makes it more likely that we will get there. A Labour Government will take action on three priorities for the fishing sector. We will back our British fishing industry and work together to see them get a fairer share of the quota in our waters—more fish caught in British waters and landed in British ports, supporting British processing jobs. We will work with fishers themselves to deliver improvements in safety standards and make our regulatory approach proportionate and risk-based. We will ensure that foreign boats that are allowed to fish in our waters follow the same rules as British boats. We will use the many frameworks and conventions already in place to ensure that we have a sustainable marine environment that is safeguarded for future generations, while ensuring that our food security needs are met.

The task is not a simple one—nobody says that it is—but our fishermen and women deserve to be truly valued and supported for all the invaluable work they do.

1.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): My goodness! What a passionate and vociferous lot we have on all Benches. They are all champions for the fishing industry. We have even had some fishing-activity rivalries between constituencies—I see all that as very healthy, as, I am sure, do you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) for stepping in at short notice to lead the debate. He is, of course, a huge champion for the fishing industry and speaks with such great knowledge given the ports in his constituency, including Peterhead and Fraserburgh, and the rich fishing grounds that he so often talks about in this place. We also send our best wishes to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who was going to lead the debate but could not be with us.

A lot of important points have been raised. I will try to deal with as many of them as I can in the time available. Those that I do not cover I will pass to the

Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), and I promise that he will reply to Members on any outstanding issues that must be dealt with.

Many Members have mentioned what a dangerous job fishing is in the UK. The collision last October between the Guiding Light and the Guiding Star, off the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan, was a reminder to us all of the dangers that our fishers face day in, day out. Fortunately, the crews of both vessels were rescued safely and no lives were lost, but we know that the outcomes of such instances are often sadly much more tragic, and I want to remember those who have lost their lives, not least—I am sure she will not mind me mentioning it—the husband of our hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray).

I will put out a few key points before I turn to the points that have been raised. First, I am really proud, as I believe we all are, of the contribution that fishing makes to the lifeblood of this nation and to our coastal and rural communities. We have only 22 miles of coast in Somerset, but we still love it and are very proud of it. Every time a fisherman goes to sea, they are helping to support their local communities and economies and to provide healthy, low-carbon, nutritious food.

Secondly, the fishing industry relies on a healthy ocean, and no one knows that more than the fisheries industry itself. I am so aware of it, as the Minister responsible for environmental quality. We must have a joint approach of achieving both economic sustainability and environmental sustainability; those two things go hand in hand for our seas.

Alex Cunningham: The Minister talked about water quality. She heard my speech about the issue affecting the north-east coast. Does she agree that we have to step up the testing not just on Teesside and off the North Yorkshire coast but across the country, if we are to ensure that our sea is healthy and sustaining sea life?

Rebecca Pow: I was going to come to the hon. Gentleman's point later, but it is this Government who have increased the testing and brought in all the monitoring. We have a real focus on the bathing water areas along our coasts. That has been made a top priority through our storm overflows discharge reduction plan and our plan for water.

Let me touch quickly on the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised about the area around Whitby and Scarborough. He will know that our chief scientific adviser invited a group of independent scientists to join a crustacean mortality panel to review all the evidence, and that panel was unable to identify a clear, convincing single cause for the mortality. We continue to monitor it—he is right: that is critical—and to look at any reports of dead sea life on the north-east coast. Everything we do must be based on scientific evidence, and monitoring is key to that.

The health of our fish stocks in our waters is improving. For 2023, 40% of total allowable catches were set consistent with International Council for the Exploration of the Sea advice, compared with 34% in 2022. That is the biggest improvement we have had since the metric was introduced in 2020. We look forward to ICES publishing its scientific assessments of many of our key stocks tomorrow.

We know that much more needs to be done to ensure that more of our stocks are fished at levels in line with the maximum sustainable yield and that we protect important species and habitats, ultimately reaching our goal of good environmental status. It was great news that the Shark Fins Bill received Royal Assent today, which is just one indication of the care we take with the species around our coasts—and even the other ones being fished off our waters—and of the steps we have taken.

Thirdly, I recognise that one of the greatest concerns of the sector is spatial pressure or spatial squeeze, to which many Members have referred, in particular my hon. Friends the Members for Banff and Buchan and for South East Cornwall. These pressures are significant. I was made well aware of that when I had offshore wind in my portfolio as the marine Minister. In Grimsby I met lobster farmers in the Holderness Fishing Industry Group who were concerned that growing offshore wind development, which is important for the nation, would reduce the industry. But through liaison and close working, they have worked out a good model so that they can continue to catch lobsters in a healthy, sustainable way and we can have offshore wind. That is a very good example.

In England, the cross-Government marine spatial prioritisation programme is helping to support a more strategic approach to managing all the pressures. The matter is devolved, and other nations will have their spatial issues. We are dealing with this in England, but it is important that everyone talks together and deals with it. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, everything going on around our coasts is important, and we must try to make these things work together. It is only with the input and involvement of the fishing industry that we can understand its views, with everybody having a piece of the sea—if we look at a map, we see that everybody does want a piece of it. It is a complicated picture, but we must work together to steer through it.

Fourthly, this Government have grabbed the opportunities offered by EU exit to start reforming our fisheries management arrangements here in the UK. We are moving away from the one-size-fits-all straitjacket of the common fisheries policy, which was so disliked by fishermen, to a fisheries management system that will better reflect the needs of our diverse industry here in the UK, support our coastal communities and better protect our marine environment. We have to take every opportunity.

The SNP and the Liberal Democrats wanted to stay in the common fisheries policy, but it is this Government who took the step to move out of it, and we have to take the opportunities of doing so. That includes the joint fisheries statement, which will provide a framework for sustainable fisheries management for years to come. It also includes our fisheries management plans, which are being developed with the fishing industry, the first six of which are due to be consulted on shortly. The idea is that they will become the gold standard for fisheries and used as a template. We have also consulted on how to share out from 2023 and beyond the additional fisheries quota gained from our exit from the EU and put in place reforms to strengthen the economic link conditions.

There has been a lot of talk today about trade and about the trade and co-operation agreement. The TCA set out a new quota-sharing arrangement for UK and

[Rebecca Pow]

EU fish stocks, with a significant uplift for UK fishers—25% of the average annual EU catch from UK waters is being phased in over five years from 2021, with further increases each year until 2026. There has been a lot of discussion about what will happen in 2026. In 2026, access to waters will become negotiable as part of the UK-EU annual consultations, and this could be used to pursue several possible objectives, such as increased quota shares in the stocks we fish and sustainability improvements. We have already begun talking with stakeholders to seek their views, and this will be increasingly important. I hear all the calls, which I will pass on to the Fisheries Minister, about making the most of the Brexit opportunities. Clearly, fishers want to see that, and we must ensure that it comes about.

Another key issue raised by many Members across the House was labour. I am pleased that the Home Secretary has offered seafood businesses a package of support to help them use the skilled worker route. In May, the Home Office announced that various fishing jobs, including trawler skippers and experienced deckhands on larger fishing vessels, would be added to the shortage occupation list this summer, and they will qualify for a lower salary threshold and lower visa application fees.

I hear the point about the English language made by my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan. I will raise that and ensure that the Fisheries Minister is made aware of it, but the Home Office is the lead Department on these things, as it would be for the issue raised by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) about how many people have applied for that visa. I urge her to contact the Home Office about that.

Mr Deputy Speaker has asked me to wind up, but I must mention seafood promotion. We have our £100 million seafood fund, which is being shared between large companies and small and medium-sized enterprises. Officials are working closely with the industry on small haddock. I loved the idea from my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) about regional fish food markets, even though it caused a bit of a storm between him and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall). We all want to eat more locally caught food.

If you will allow me, Mr Deputy Speaker, I must touch on the issue of medical certificates raised by my hon. Friends the Members for South East Cornwall, for Poole (Sir Robert Syms), for Totnes and for Waveney. I fully support the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's focus on improved safety, which I understand has unearthed significant non-compliance, but I recognise that those measures have caused concern in the fishing industry. The Fisheries Minister has been meeting with Baroness Vere. He will continue to have those meetings, and all the points raised in this debate will be passed to him, because we have to make this work for everyone. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) cannot be here, but I am delighted to report that her husband, who is a fisher in the under 10 metre group, has been through the process and has just got his certificate. I am sure that she will be pleased to share their experiences, but she does raise the challenges for that sector.

I will get the Fisheries Minister to write to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes about water quality and oysters. We have had a meeting about water quality. With my water quality hat on, I will just say that there

should be opportunities to sort out any issues for shellfish fishermen by working on the wider catchment basis that is in our plan for water, with catchment plans. That is the kind of thing we could be working on with our farmers and those all the way up the catchment, to sort out the problems that end up on the coast. If necessary, I am happy to look into that issue at another time.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you have been incredibly patient, but we have had so many questions; I have not been able to get through them all, but as I said at the beginning of my speech, it has been a really vibrant debate. The fishing industry has shown resilience, adapting to a new, changing world post Brexit. Obviously, there is still work to do. Our fisheries management plans will be a big step towards our new future. It is all about balance, working together and feeding in to make sure that we get the right outcomes economically, for the environment and for our communities. I thank everyone for taking part, and I will follow up on any outstanding issues with the Fisheries Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call David Duguid, who has two minutes.

1.51 pm

David Duguid: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for her response.

I will not go through every single Member, but I thank everybody who contributed to the debate. I will pick out a couple, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who mentioned that whenever there is a debate in this place about fisheries, people from all over these islands turn up to speak. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), said that this was a very good-natured debate with a lot of agreement on all sides. I think the biggest disagreement, which I am sure is not insurmountable, was on the Conservative Benches. We can all work together to resolve that.

I mentioned the Scottish Government's plans for HPMA's in my opening remarks, and they have been mentioned by others. As the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said, the Scottish Government have made a statement. Both she and I have been here in the Chamber rather than listening to that statement, so I have just managed to get a few headlines come through. I pay tribute to the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, the Scottish Seafood Association, the Scottish Association of Fish Producers Organisations, Salmon Scotland and the Communities Inshore Fisheries Alliance, among others, who have campaigned vigorously to get to the stage where the Scottish Government have—at the very least—shown signs of rethinking their plans. I congratulate them on that, and cautiously welcome what the Scottish Government have announced today, whether it is a pause or a delay. I respectfully caution them to not take the industry for granted. The industry must be engaged every step of the way, not just on where HPMA's might be in the future, but on the “why”, the “how” and even the “if” of HPMA's.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I see that my two minutes are up. I could talk about fishing all day, as I am sure everyone would agree, but I will close my remarks by thanking everyone again.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the fishing industry.

Artificial Intelligence

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I remind everybody that following the end of the debate that is about to begin, we will have a statement on the migration and economic development partnership. Anybody wishing to ask a question in that debate should start to make their way to the Chamber as soon as the wind-ups in the artificial intelligence debate begin.

1.54 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered artificial intelligence.

Is it not extraordinary that we have not previously had a general debate on what is the issue of our age? Artificial intelligence is already with us today, but its future impact has yet to truly be felt, or indeed understood.

My aim in requesting this debate—I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for awarding it—is twofold. First, it is to allow Members to express some views on an issue that has moved a long way since I was partially Minister for it, and even since the Government White Paper came out, which happened only very recently. Secondly, it is to provide people with an opportunity to express their views on a technology that has to be regulated in the public interest, but also has to be seized by Government to deliver the huge improvements in public services that we all know it is capable of. I hope that the industry will hear the views of parliamentarians, and—dare I say it?—perhaps better understand where the gaps in parliamentarians’ knowledge might be, although of course those gaps will be microscopic.

I will begin with a brief summary of where artificial intelligence is at, which will be self-avowedly superficial. At its best, AI is already allowing the NHS to analyse images better than ever before, augmenting the expertise of our brilliant and expanding workforce with technology that is in a way analogous to something like adaptive cruise control—it helps; it does not replace. It is not a technology to be scared of, and patients will welcome that tool being put at the disposal of staff.

We are already seeing AI being used to inform HR decisions such as hiring and firing—an area that is much more complex and much more in need of some kind of regulation. We see pupils using it to research—and sometimes write—their essays, and we sometimes see schools using AI to detect plagiarism. Every time I drive up to my constituency of Boston and Skegness, I listen to *Politico*’s “Playbook”, voiced by Amazon’s Polly AI system. It is everywhere; it is in the car too, helping me to drive it. AI is creating jobs in prompt engineering that did not exist just a few years ago, and while it is used to generate horrific child sex abuse images, it is also used to detect them.

I want to take one example of AI going rogue that a senior American colonel talked about. It was claimed that a drone was awarded points for destroying a certain set of targets. It consulted its human controller on whether it should take a certain course of action, and was told that it should not. Because it got points for those targets, it decided that the logical thing to do was to kill its human controller, and when it was told that it should not do so, it tried to target the control tower that was communicating with its controller. That is the stuff of nightmares, except for the fact that that colonel was

later declared to have misspoken. No such experiment ever took place, but just seconds ago, some people in this House might have believed that it did. AI is already damaging public trust in technology. It is damaging public trust in leadership and in democracy; that has already happened, and we must guard against it happening further. Both here in and America, elections are coming up soon.

Even in the most human sector, the creative industries, one radio presenter was recently reported to have uploaded her previous shows so that the artificial intelligence version of her could cover for her during the holidays. How are new staff to get their first break, if not on holiday cover? Millions of jobs in every sector are at stake. We also hear of analysts uploading the war games of Vladimir Putin to predict how he will fight in Ukraine, with remarkable accuracy. We hear of AI being used by those interested in antibiotics and by those interested in bioweapons. There are long-term challenges here, but there are very short-term ones too.

The Government’s White Paper promotes both innovation and regulation. It does so in the context of Britain being the most advanced nation outside America and China for AI research, development and, potentially, regulation. We can and should cement that success; we are helped by DeepMind, and by OpenAI’s decision only yesterday to open its first office outside the US in London. The Prime Minister’s proposed autumn summit should allow us to build a silicon bridge to the most important technology of this century, and I welcome it hugely.

I want to lay out some things that I hope could be considered at the summit and with this technology. First, the Government clearly need to understand where AI will augment existing possibilities and challenges, and most of those challenges will already be covered by legislation. Employment, for instance, is already regulated, and whether or not companies use AI to augment their HR system, it is already illegal to discriminate. We need to make sure that those existing laws continue to be reinforced, and that we do not waste time reinventing the wheel. We do not have that time, because the technology is already with us. Transparency will be key.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): The hon. Member is making an important speech. Is he aware of the AI system that, in identifying potential company chief executive officers, would identify only male CEOs because of the data that had been input? Even though there is existing legislation, we have to be mindful of the data that is going into new technology and AI systems.

Matt Warman: The hon. Member is absolutely right that, when done well, AI allows us to identify discrimination and seek to eliminate it, but when done badly, it cements it into the system in the worst possible way. That is partly why I say that transparency about the use of AI will be absolutely essential, even if we largely do not need new legislation. We need principles. When done right, in time this technology could end up costing us less money and delivering greater rewards, be that in the fields of discrimination or public services and everywhere in between.

There is a second-order point, which is that we need to understand where loopholes that the technology creates are not covered by existing bits of legislation.

[*Matt Warman*]

If we think back to the time we spent in his House debating upskirting, we did not do that because voyeurism was somehow legal; we did it because a loophole had been created by a new technology and a new set of circumstances, and it was right that we sought to close it. We urgently need to understand where those loopholes are now, thanks to artificial intelligence, and we need to understand more about where they will have the greatest effects.

In a similar vein, we need to understand, as I raised at Prime Minister's questions a few weeks ago, which parts of the economy and regions of the country will be most affected, so that we can focus the immense Government skills programmes on the areas that will be most affected. This is not a predictable industry, such as when we came to the end of the coalmining industry, and we are not able to draw obvious lines on obvious maps. We need to understand the economy and how this impacts on local areas. To take just one example, we know that call centres—those things that keep us waiting for hours on hold—are going to get a lot better thanks to artificial intelligence, but there are parts of the country that are particularly seeing an increase in local call centre employees. This will be a boom for the many people working in them, but it is also a hump that we need to get over, and we need to focus skills investment in certain areas and certain communities.

I do believe that, long term, we should be profoundly optimistic that artificial intelligence will create more jobs than it destroys, just as in every previous industrial revolution, but there will be a hump, and the Government need to help as much as they can in working with businesses to provide such opportunities. We should be optimistic that the agency that allows people to be happier in their work—personal agency—will be enhanced by the use of artificial intelligence, because it will take away some of the less exciting aspects of many jobs, particularly at the lower-paid end of the economy, but not by any means solely. There is no shame in eliminating dull parts of jobs from the economy, and there is no nobility in protecting people from inevitable technological change. History tells us that if we do seek to protect people from that technological change, we will impoverish them in the process.

I want to point to the areas where the Government surely must understand that potentially new offences are to be created beyond the tactical risk I have described. We know that it is already illegal to hack the NHS, for instance. That is a tactical problem, even if it might be somewhat different, so I want to take a novel example. We know that it is illegal to discriminate on the grounds of whether someone is pregnant or likely to get pregnant. Warehouses, many of them run by large businesses, gather a huge amount of data about their employees. They gather temperature data and movement data, and they monitor a huge amount. They gather data that goes far beyond anything we had previously seen just a few years ago, and from that data, companies can infer a huge amount, and they might easily infer from that whether someone is pregnant.

If we do that, which we already do, should we now say that it will be illegal to collect such data because it opens up a potential risk? I do not think we should, and I do not think anyone would seriously say we should, but it is open to a level of discrimination. Should we say

that such discrimination is illegal, which is the situation now—companies can gather data but it is what they do with it that matters—or should we say that it actually exposes people to risk and companies to a legal risk, and that it may take us backwards rather than forwards? Unsurprisingly, I think there is a middle ground that is the right option.

Suddenly, however, a question as mundane as collecting data about temperature and movements, ostensibly for employee welfare and to meet existing commitments, turns into a political decision: what information is too much and what analysis is too much? It brings us as politicians to questions that suddenly and much more quickly revert to ethics. There is a risk of huge and potentially dangerous information asymmetry. Some people say that there should be a right to a human review and a right to know what cannot be done. All these are ethical issues that come about because of the advent of artificial intelligence in the way that they have not done so previously. I commend to all Members the brilliant paper by Oxford University's Professor Adams-Prassl on a blueprint for regulating algorithmic management, and I commend it to the Government as well.

AI raises ethical considerations that we have to address in this place in order to come up with the principles-based regulation that we need, rather than trying to play an endless game of whack-a-mole with a system that is going to go far faster than the minds of legislators around the world. We cannot regulate in every instance; we have to regulate horizontally. As I say, the key theme surely must be transparency. A number of Members of Parliament have confessed—if that is the right word—to using AI to write their speeches, but I hope that no more people have used AI to write their speeches than those who have already confessed. Transparency has been key in this place, and it should be key in financial services and everywhere else. For instance, AI-generated videos could already be forced to use watermarking technology that would make it obvious that they are not the real deal. As we come up to an election, I think that such use of existing technology will be important. We need to identify the gaps—the lacunae—both in legislation and in practice.

Artificial intelligence is here with us today and it will be here for a very long time, at the very least augmenting human intelligence. Our endless creativity is what makes us human, and what makes us to some extent immune from being displaced by technology, but we also need to bear in mind that, ultimately, it is by us that decisions will be made about how far AI can be used and what AI cannot be used for. People see a threat when they read some of the most hyperbolic headlines, but these are primarily not about new crimes; they are about using AI for old crimes, but doing them a heck of a lot better.

I end by saying that the real risk here is not the risk of things being done to us by people using AI. The real risk is if we do not seize every possible opportunity, because seizing every possible opportunity will allow us to fend off the worst of AI and to make the greatest progress. If every student knows that teachers are not using it, far more fake essays will be submitted via ChatGPT. Every lawyer and every teacher should be encouraged to use this technology to the maximum safe extent, not to hope that it simply goes away. We know that judges have already seen lawyers constructing cases using AI and that many of the references in those cases were simply fictional, and the same is true of school essays.

The greatest risk to progress in our public services comes from not using AI: it comes not from malevolent people, but from our thinking that we should not embrace this technology. We should ask not what AI can do to us; we should ask what we can do with AI, and how Government and business can get the skills they need to do that best. There is a risk that we continue to lock in the 95% of AI compute that sits with just seven companies, or that we promote monopolies or the discrimination that the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) mentioned. This is an opportunity to avert that, not reinforce it, and to cement not prejudice but diversity. It means that we have an opportunity to use game-changing technology for the maximum benefit of society, and the maximum number of people in that society. We need to enrich the dialogue between Government, the private sector and the third sector, to get the most out of that.

This is a matter for regulation, and for global regulation, as is so much of the modern regulatory landscape. There will be regional variations, but there should also be global norms and principles. Outside the European Union and United States, Britain has that unique position I described, and the Prime Minister's summit this autumn will be a key opportunity—I hope all our invites are in the post, or at least in an email. I hope that will be an opportunity not just for the Prime Minister to show genuine global leadership, but also an opportunity to involve academia, parliamentarians and broader society in having that conversation, and allow the Government to seize the opportunity and regain some trust on this technology.

I urge the Minister to crack on, seize the day, and take the view that artificial intelligence will be with us for as long as we are around. It will make a huge difference to our world. Done right, it will make everything better; done badly, we will be far poorer for it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chair of the AI Committee, Darren Jones.

2.11 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, but if there is an AI Committee I am certainly interested in serving on it. I declare my interest, as set out in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and I thank the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) and the Backbench Business Committee for organising and agreeing to this important debate.

I will make the case for the Government to be more involved in the technology revolution, and explain what will happen if we leave it purely to the market. It is a case for a technology revolution that works in the interests of the British people, not against our interests. In my debate on artificial intelligence a few weeks ago, I painted a picture of the type of country Britain can become if we shape the technology revolution in our interests. It is a country where workers are better paid, have better work and more time off. It is a country where public servants have more time to serve the public, with better access and outcomes from our public services, at reduced cost to the taxpayer. It is a country where the technological revolution is seen as an exciting opportunity for workers and businesses alike—an opportunity to learn new things, improve the quality of our work, and create an economy that is successful, sustainable, and strong.

I also warned the House about the risks of the technology revolution if we merely allow ourselves to be shaped by it. That is a country where technology is put upon people, instead of being developed with them, and where productivity gains result in economic growth and higher profits, but leave workers behind with reduced hours or no job at all. It is where our public services remain in the analogue age and continue to fail, with increased provision from the private sector only for those who can afford it. It is a world in which the pace of innovation races ahead of society, creatively destroying the livelihoods of many millions of people, and where other countries leap ahead of our own, as we struggle to seize the economic opportunities of the technology revolution for our own economy, and through the potential for exports to support others.

The good news is that we are only really at the start of that journey, and we can shape the technology revolution in our interests if we choose to do so. But that means acting now. It means remembering, for all our discussions about artificial intelligence and computers, that we serve the people. It means being honest about the big questions that we do not yet have answers to. It is on some of those big questions that I will focus my remarks. That is not because I have fully formed answers to all of them at this stage, but because I think it important to put those big questions on the public record in this Parliament.

The big questions that I wish to address are these: how do we maintain a thriving, innovative economy for the technology sector; how can we avoid the risk of a new age of inequality; how can we guarantee the availability of work for people across the country; and how can we balance the power that workers have, and their access to training and skills? Fundamental to all those issues is the role and capacity of the state to support people in the transition.

We will all agree that creating a thriving, innovative economy is a good idea, and we all want Britain to be the go-to destination for investment, research and innovation. We all want the British people, wherever they are from and from whatever background, to know that if they have an idea, they can turn it into a successful business and benefit from it. As the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness alluded to, that means getting the balance right between regulation and economic opportunity, and creating the services that will support people in that journey. Ultimately, it means protecting the United Kingdom's status as a great place to invest, start, and scale up technology businesses.

Although we are in a relatively strong position today, we risk falling behind quickly if we do not pay attention. In that context, the risk of a new age of inequality is perhaps obvious. If the technology revolution is an extractive process, where big tech takes over the work currently done by humans and restricts the access to markets needed by new companies, power and wealth will be taken from workers and concentrated in the already powerful, wealthy and largely American big-tech companies. I say that not because I am anti-American or indeed anti-big tech, but because it is our job to have Britain's interest at the front of our minds.

Will big tech pick up the tab for universal credit payments to workers who have been made redundant? Will it pay for our public services in a situation where fewer people are in work paying less tax? Of course not. So we must shape this process in the interests of the British people. That means creating inclusive economic

[Darren Jones]

opportunities so that everybody can benefit. For example, where technology improves productivity and profits, workers should benefit from that with better pay and fewer days at work. Where workers come up with innovative ideas on how to use artificial intelligence in their workplace, they should be supported to protect their intellectual property and start their own business.

The availability of work is a more difficult question, and it underpins the risk of a new age of inequality. For many workers, artificial intelligence will replace the mundane and the routine. It can result in human workers being left with more interesting and meaningful work to do themselves. But if the productivity gains are so significant, there is conceivably a world in which we need fewer human workers than we have today. That could result in a four-day week, or even fewer days than that, with work being available still for the majority of people. The technology revolution will clearly create new jobs—a comfort provided to us by the history of previous industrial revolutions. However, that raises two questions, which relate to my next point about the power of workers and their access to training and skills.

There are too many examples today of technology being put upon workers, not developed with them. That creates a workplace culture that is worried about surveillance, oppression, and the risk of being performance managed or even fired by an algorithm. That must change, not just because it is the right thing to do but because, I believe, it is in the interests of business managers and owners for workers to want to use these new technologies, as opposed to feeling oppressed by them. On training, if someone who is a worker today wants to get ahead of this revolution, where do they turn? Unless they work in a particularly good business, the likelihood is that they have no idea where to go to get access to such training or skill support. Most people cannot just give up their job or go part time to complete a higher education course, so how do we provide access to free, relevant training that workers are entitled to take part in at work? How does the state partner with business to co-create and deliver that in the interests of our country and the economy? The role of the Government in this debate is not about legislation and regulation; it is about the services we provide, the welfare state and the social contract.

That takes me to my next point: the role and capacity of the Government to help people with the technology transition. Do we really think that our public services today are geared towards helping people benefit from what will take place? Do we really believe our welfare system is fit for purpose in helping people who find themselves out of work? Artificial intelligence will not just change the work of low-paid workers, who might just be able to get by on universal credit; it will also affect workers on middle and even higher incomes, including journalists, lawyers, creative sector workers, retail staff, public sector managers and many more. Those workers will have mortgages or rents to pay, and universal credit payments will go nowhere near covering their bills. If a significant number of people in our country find themselves out of work, what will they do? How will the Government respond? The system as it is designed today is not fit for that future.

I raise those questions not because I have easy answers to them, but because the probability of those outcomes is likely. The severity of the problem will be dictated by

what action we take now to mitigate those risks. In my view, the state and the Government must be prepared and must get themselves into a position to help people with the technology transition. There seems now to be political consensus about the opportunities of the technology revolution, and I welcome that, but the important unanswered question is: how? We cannot stop this technology revolution from happening. As I have said, we either shape it in our interests or face being shaped by it. We can sit by and watch the market develop, adapt and innovate, taking power and wealth away from workers and creating many of the problems I have explained today, leaving the Government and our public services to pick up the pieces, probably without sufficient resources to do so. Alternatively, we can decide today how this technology revolution will roll out across our country.

I was asked the other day whether I was worried that this technology-enabled future would create a world of despair for my children. My answer was that I am actually more worried about the effects of climate change. I say that because we knew about the causes and consequences of climate change in the 1970s, but we did nothing about it. We allowed companies to extract wealth and power and leave behind the damage for the public to pick up. We are now way behind where we need to be, and we are actively failing to turn it around, but with this technology revolution, we have an opportunity in front of us to show the public that a different, more hopeful future is possible for our country—a country filled with opportunity for better work, better pay and better public services. Let us not make the same mistakes as our predecessors in the 1970s, and let us not be trapped in the current debate of doom and despair for our country, even though there are many reasons to feel like that.

Let us seize this opportunity for modernisation and reform, remembering that it is about people and our country. We can put the technology revolution at the heart of our political agenda and our vision for a modern Britain with a strong, successful and sustainable economy. We can have a technology revolution that works in the interests of the British people and a Britain that is upgraded so that it works once again. However, to shape the technology revolution in our interests, that work must start now.

2.23 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing it and on his excellent speech and introduction. It is a pleasure to follow my fellow Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). Between the Business and Trade Committee and the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, we have a strong mutual interest in this debate, and I know all of our members take our responsibilities seriously.

This is one of the most extraordinary times for innovation and technology that this House has ever witnessed. If we had not been talking so much about Brexit and then covid, and perhaps more recently, Russia and Ukraine, our national conversation and—this goes to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness—debates in this Chamber, would have been far more about the technological revolution that is affecting all parts of the world and our national life.

It is true to say that, perhaps as well as the prominence that the discovery of vaccines against covid has engendered, AI has punctured through into public consciousness as a change in the development of technology. It has got people talking about it, and not before time. I say that because, as both Members who have made speeches have said, it is not a new technology, in so far as it is a technology at all. In fact, in a laconic question to one of the witnesses in front of our Committee, one member observed, “Was artificial intelligence not just maths and computers?” In fact, one of the witnesses said that in his view it was applied statistics. This has been going on for some time.

My Committee, the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee—I am delighted to see my colleague the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) here—is undertaking a fascinating and, we hope, impactful inquiry into the future governance of AI. We are taking it seriously to understand the full range of issues that do not have easy or glib answers—if they do, those are best avoided—and we want to help inform this House and the Government as to the best resolutions to some of the questions in front of us. We intend to publish a report in the autumn, but given the pace of debate on these issues and, as I am sure the hon. Lady will agree, the depth of the evidence we have heard so far, we hope to publish an interim report sooner than that. It would be wrong for me as Chair of the Committee to pre-empt the conclusions of our work, but we have taken a substantial amount of evidence in public, both oral and written, so I will draw on what we have found so far.

Having said that AI is not new—it draws on long-standing research and practice—it is nevertheless true to say that we are encountering an acceleration in its application and depth of progress. To some extent, the degree of public interest in it, without resolution to some of the policy questions that the hon. Member for Bristol North West alluded to, carries some risks. In fact, the nomenclature “artificial intelligence” is in some ways unhelpful. The word “artificial” is usually used in a pejorative, even disdainful way. When combined with the word “intelligence”, which is one of the most prized human attributes, the “artificial” rather negates the positivity of the “intelligence”, leading to thoughts of dystopia, rather than the more optimistic side of the argument to which my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness referred. Nevertheless, it is a subject matter with which we need to grapple.

In terms of the pervasiveness of AI, much of it is already familiar to us, whether it is navigation by sat-nav or suggestions of what we might buy from Amazon or Tesco. The analysis of data on our behaviour and the world is embedded, but it must be said that the launch of ChatGPT to the public just before Christmas has catapulted to mass attention the power already available in large language models. That is a breakthrough moment for millions of people around the world.

As my hon. Friend said, much of the current experience of AI is not only benign, but positively beneficial. The evidence that our Committee has taken has looked at particular applications and sectors. If we look at healthcare, for example, we took evidence from a medical company that has developed a means of recognising potential prostate cancer issues from MRI scans far before any symptoms present themselves, and with more accuracy than previous procedures. We heard from the chief

executive of a company that is using AI to accelerate drug discovery. It is designing drugs from data, and selecting the patients who stand to benefit from them. That means that uses could be found, among more accurately specified patient groups, for drugs that have failed clinical trials on the grounds not of safety but of efficacy. That could lead to a very early prospect of better health outcomes.

We heard evidence that the positive effects of AI on education are significant. Every pupil is different; we know that. Every good teacher tailors their teaching to the responses and aptitudes of each student, but that can be done so much better if the tailoring is augmented through the use of technology. As Professor Rose Luckin of University College London told us,

“students who might have been falling through the net can be helped to be brought back into the pack”

with the help of personalised AI. In the field of security, if intelligence assessments of a known attacker are paired with AI-rich facial recognition technology, suspects may be pinpointed and apprehended before they have the chance to execute a deadly attack.

There are many more advantages of AI, but we must not only observe but act on the risks that arise from the deployment of AI. Some have talked about the catastrophic potential of AI. Much of what is suggested, as in the case of the example given by my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness, is speculative, the work of fiction, and certainly in advance of any known pathway. It is important to keep a cool head on these matters. There has been talk in recent weeks of the possibility of AI killing many humans in the next couple of years. We should judge our words carefully. There are important threats, but portents of disaster must be met with thinking from cool, analytical heads, and concrete proposals for steps to take.

I very much applaud the seriousness with which the Government are approaching the subject of the governance of AI. For example, a very sensible starting point is making use of the deep knowledge of applications among our sector regulators, many of which enjoy great respect. I have mentioned medicine; take the medical regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. With its deep experience of supervising clinical trials and the drug discovery process, it is clear that it is the right starting point; we should draw on its experience and expertise. If AI is to be used in drug discovery or diagnostics, it makes sense to draw on the MHRA's years of deep experience, for which it is renowned worldwide.

It is also right to require regulators to come together to develop a joint understanding of the issues, and to ask them to work collectively on regulatory approaches, so that we avoid inconsistency and inadvertently applying different doctrines in different sectors. It is right that regulators should talk to each other, and that there should be coherence. Given the commonalities, there should be a substantial, well-funded, central capacity to develop regulatory competence across AI, as the Government White Paper proposed.

I welcome the Prime Minister's initiative, which the hon. Member for Bristol North West mentioned. In Washington, the Prime Minister agreed to convene a global summit on AI safety in the UK in the autumn. Like other technologies, AI certainly does not respect

[Greg Clark]

national boundaries. Our country has an outstanding reputation on AI, the research and development around it, and—at our best—regulatory policy and regulation, so it is absolutely right that we should lead the summit. I commend the Prime Minister for his initiative in securing that very important summit.

The security dimension will be of particular importance. Like-minded countries, including the US and Japan, have a strong interest in developing standards together. That reflects the fact that we see the world through similar eyes, and that the security of one of us is of prime importance to the others. The hon. Member for Bristol North West, in his debate a few weeks ago, made a strong point about international collaboration.

One reason why a cool-headed approach needs to be taken is that the subject is susceptible to the involvement of hot heads. We must recognise that heading off the risks is not straightforward; it requires deep reflection and consideration. Knee-jerk regulatory responses may prove unworkable, will not be widely taken up by other countries, and may therefore be injurious to the protections that policy innovation aims to deliver. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman that there is time for regulation, but not much time. We cannot hang around, but we need to take the appropriate time to get this right. My Committee will do what it can to assist on that.

If the Government reflect on these matters over the summer, their response should address a number of challenges that have arisen in this debate, and from the evidence that my Committee took. Solutions must draw on expertise from different sectors and professions, and indeed from people with expertise in the House, such as those contributing to this debate. Let me suggest briefly a number of challenges that a response on AI governance should address. One that has emerged is a challenge on bias and discrimination. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central has been clear and persistent in asking questions to ensure that the datasets on which algorithms are trained do not embed a degree of bias, leading to results that we would not otherwise tolerate. I dare say she will refer to those issues in her speech. For example, as has been mentioned, in certain recruitment settings, if data reflects the gender or ethnic background of previous staff, the profile of an “ideal” candidate may owe a great deal to past biases. That needs to be addressed in the governance regime.

There is a second and related point on the black box challenge. One feature of artificial intelligence is that the computer system learns from itself. The human operator or commissioner of the software may not know why the algorithm or AI software has made a recommendation or proposed a course of action. That is a big challenge for those of us who take an interest in science policy. The scientific method is all about transparency; it is about putting forward a hypothesis, testing it against the data, and either confirming or rejecting the hypothesis. That is all done publicly; publication is at the heart of the scientific method. If important conclusions are reached—and they may be accurate conclusions, with great predictive power—but we do not know how, because that is deep within the networks of the AI, that is a profound challenge to the scientific method and its applications.

Facial recognition software is a good example. The Metropolitan police is using facial recognition software

combined with AI. It commissioned a study—a very rigorous study—from the National Physical Laboratory, which looks at whether there is any racial bias that can be determined from the subjects that are detected through the AI algorithms. The study finds that there is no evidence of that, but that is on the basis of a comparison of outputs against other settings; it is not based on a knowledge of the algorithms, which in this case is proprietary. It may or may not be possible to look into the black box, but that is one question that I think Governments and regulators will need to address.

Dawn Butler: In evidence to the Committee—of which I am a member—the Met said that there was no bias in its facial recognition system, whereas its own report states that there is bias in the system, and a bias with regard to identifying black and Asian women. In fact, the results are 86% incorrect. There are lots of ways of selling the benefits of facial recognition. Other countries across Europe have banned certain facial recognition, while the UK has not. Does the right hon. Gentleman think that we need to look a lot more deeply into current applications of facial recognition?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. These challenges, as I put them, do not often have easy resolution. The question of detecting bias is a very important one. Both of us have taken evidence in the Committee and in due course we will need to consider our views on it, but she is right to highlight that as a challenge that needs to be addressed if public confidence and justice are to be served. It cannot be taken lightly or as read. We need to look at it very clearly.

There is a challenge on securing privacy. My hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness made a very good point about an employer taking people's temperatures, whether they could be an indication of pregnancy and the risk that that may be used in an illegal way. That is one example. I heard an example about the predictive power of financial information. The transaction that pays money to a solicitors' firm that is known to have a reputation for advising on divorce can be a very powerful indicator of a deterioration in the financial circumstances of a customer in about six months' time. Whether the bank can use that information, detecting a payment to a firm of divorce solicitors, to downgrade a credit rating in anticipation is a matter that I think at the very least should give rise to debate in this House. It shows that there are questions of privacy: the use of data gathered for one purpose for another.

Since we are talking about data, there is also a challenge around access to data. There is something of a paradox about this. The Committee has taken evidence from many software developers, which quite often are small businesses founded by a brilliant and capable individual. However, to train AI software, they need data. The bigger the dataset the more effective the training is, so there are real returns to economies of scale when it comes to data. There is a prospective contrast between potentially very small software developers who cannot do anything without access to data that may be in the hands of very large companies. Those of us who use Google know that it has a lot of information on us. I mentioned banks. They have a lot of information on us, too. That is not readily accessible to small start-ups, so access to data is something we will need to address.

Another challenge we need to address is access to compute, which is to say, the power to analyse data. Again, the bigger the computer, the bigger the compute power and the more effective and successful algorithms will be, but that can be a barrier to entry to smaller firms. If they are reserved to giants, that has profound consequences for the development of the industry. It is one of the reasons why I think the Government are right to consider plans for a dedicated compute resource in this country.

Those issues combine to make for what we might call an anti-trust challenge, to which the hon. Member for Bristol North West referred. There is a great danger that already we may concentrate market power in the hands of a very small number of companies, from which it is very difficult thereafter to diversify and have the degree of contestability and competition that the full benefits of AI should be able to respond to. Our regulators, in particular our competition regulators, will need to pay close attention to that.

Related to that is the law and regulation around intellectual property and copyright. In the creative industries, our copyright gives strong protection to people who create their own original work. The degree of modification or use without payment and licensing that is tolerable without damaging the returns and the vibrancy of our crucial creative sector is very important.

Another challenge is on liability, which mirrors some of the debates taking place about our large social media platforms. If we develop a piece of AI in an application that is used for illegal purposes, should we, as the developer or the person who licenses it, be responsible for its use by an end user or should that be a matter for them? In financial services, we have over time imposed strong requirements on providers of financial services, such as banks, to, in the jargon, know your customer—KYC. It is not sufficient just to say, “I had no reason to suppose that my facilities were going to be used for money laundering or drug trafficking.” There is a responsibility to find out what the intended use is. Those questions need to be addressed here. The hon. Member for Bristol North West raised questions about employment and the transition to a new model of employment, many of which have some upsides.

One of the classic definitions of a sentient computer is that it passes the Turing test: if there was a screen between a person and the computer they were interacting with, would they know that it was a computer, or would they think it was a human being? The experience of a lot of my constituents when dealing with some large bureaucracies is that even if there is a human on the end of the telephone, they might as well be a computer because they are driven by the script and the software. In fact, one might say that they fail the Turing test. The greater personalisation of AI may overcome what can be a pretty dispiriting experience for employees who have to park their humanity and read out a script to a consumer. There are big challenges but also opportunities there.

A couple of other things have been referred to, such as the challenge of international co-ordination. We have the agency to set our own rules, but there is no point in doing so without taking the opportunity to influence the world. We will be stronger if we have—at least among like-minded countries, and preferably beyond—a strong consensus about how we should proceed.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): My right hon. Friend’s words, “at least among like-minded countries”, triggered a thought. If we do not include China—in lots of other areas we exclude it for moral and ethical reasons—it will be a futile exercise. As far as I can tell, China wants to be involved. What is his view on involving countries such as China?

Greg Clark: My view is that it should be a global initiative. At the very least, strong security aspects will combine like-minded nations. We should advance that; we may put protections in place with other linked nations. I completely agree with my right hon. Friend that we should look to establish a global consensus. There is sometimes pessimism about whether it is possible to regulate genies that have come out of the bottle, but if we think of available technologies such as human cloning, there is not a country in the world—as far as I am aware—that has not recognised it as ethically wrong and acted against it. In fact, I think there is a person in China in jail at the moment for having attempted that.

I will draw my remarks to a close, having set out the rich range of challenges that stand before Governments around the world and our regulators. They are not easy things to get right, but it is of profound importance that we think carefully and put in place the best possible governance system to maximise the benefits and see off the harms that may result. For the Minister and his colleagues across Whitehall, it means a busy summer preparing for the summit, but I wish them well, and I look forward to the House taking a great interest in and participating in and around the planned summit.

2.51 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, of which I am a member. I congratulate the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing the debate and the Backbench Business Committee on allowing it.

I used to be a computer programmer, so I like tech—I need to put that out there. This debate on AI follows the categories of three types of people. I compare those three types of people to some friends that I used to go out partying with. One would get completely wasted; one would just sit in the corner and not want to get involved; and I would be the driver, so I would stay sober but enjoy the party. In this debate I like to think that I am staying sober, enjoying the party and making sure that everyone, myself included, gets home safely.

Darren Jones: Could I invite my hon. Friend to inform the House which of us in this debate is the one who got wasted?

Dawn Butler: I do not think my friend would look kindly on me if I said their name. I always made sure they got home safely—that is the main thing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) told me the other day that she asked ChatGPT to write a letter from her to constituents on the dangers of AI. This is what ChatGPT churned out:

“Dear [Constituent],

Thank you for reaching out to me with your concerns about large language model AI. I share your worries about the potential risks that this technology poses and I appreciate the opportunity to address them.

[Dawn Butler]

As you may be aware, large language model AI is an advanced form of artificial intelligence that can generate human-like text by training on vast amounts of data. While this technology has shown tremendous potential in various fields, including language translation, chatbots, and content creation, it also presents significant ethical, social, and legal challenges.

One of the main concerns about large language model AI is its potential to perpetuate biases and discrimination. If the data used to train these models are biased, the AI will learn and replicate those biases in its output, leading to harmful outcomes. Moreover, these models have the ability to generate highly realistic but entirely fake text, which could be used to spread disinformation, manipulate public opinion, and even harm individuals.

Therefore, I believe that the regulation and governance of large language model AI are essential to ensure that it is used ethically and responsibly. The UK government has been actively engaging with the tech industry, academia, and civil society to understand the implications of AI and develop a regulatory framework that promotes innovation while safeguarding human rights and values."

That, to me, is an illustration of the fact that even AI itself recognises that there are some issues with AI. It shows that we need clear regulation, which we do not quite have at the moment. There is still time for the Government's White Paper to change that, and I hope that debates of this kind will enable change to happen.

Many Members have referred to the use of AI for medical advances, and quantum computers will certainly enable medicines and medical solutions to be found much more quickly. However, as I said when evidence was being given to the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, even something as simple as body mass index, which is used in the medical world, is a flawed measurement. The use of BMI in the building of AI will integrate that bias into anything that the AI produces. Members may not be aware that the BMI scale was created not by a doctor but by an astronomer and mathematician in the 1800s. What he was trying to do was identify *l'homme moyen*—the average man—in statistical terms. The scale was never meant to be used in the medical world in the way that it is. People can be prevented from having certain medical procedures if their BMI is too high. The Committee was given no evidence that we would rule out, or mitigate, a flawed system such as BMI in the medical profession and the medical world. We should be worried about this, because in 10 or 20 years' time it will be too late to explain that BMI was always discriminatory against women, Asian men and black people. It is important for us to get this right now.

I recognise the huge benefits that AI can have, but I want to stress the need to stay sober and recognise the huge risks as well. When we ask certain organisations where they get their data from, the response is very opaque: they do not tell us where they are getting their data from. I understand that some of them get their mass data scraping from sites such as Reddit, which is not really where people would go to become informed on many things.

If we do not take this seriously, we will be automating discrimination. It will become so easy just to accept what the system is telling us, and people who are already marginalised will become further marginalised. Many, if not most, AI-powered systems have been shown to contain bias, whether against people of colour, women, people with disabilities or those with other protected characteristics. For instance, in the case of passport

applications, the system keeps on saying that a person's eyes are closed when in fact they have a disability. We must ensure that we measure the impact on the public's rights and freedoms alongside the advances in AI. We cannot become too carried away—or drunk—with all the benefits, without thinking about everything else.

At the beginning, I thought it reasonable for the Government to say, "We will just expand legislation that we already have," but when the Committee was taking evidence, I realised that we need to go a great deal further—that we need something like a digital Bill of Rights so that people understand and know their rights, and so that those rights are protected. At the moment, that is not the case.

There was a really stark example when we heard some information in regard to musicians, music and our voices. Our voices are currently not protected, so with the advancements of deepfake, anybody in this House can have their voice attached to something using deepfake and we would have no legal recourse, because at the moment our voices are not protected. I believe that we need a digital Bill of Rights that would outlaw the most dangerous uses of AI, which should have no place in a real democracy.

The Government should commit to strengthening the rights of the public so that they know what is AI-generated or whether facial recognition—the digital imprint of their face—is being used in any way. We know, for instance, that the Met police have on file millions of people's images—innocent people—that should not be there. Those images should be taken off the police database. If an innocent person's face is on the database and, at some point, that is put on a watch list, the domino effect means that they could be accused of doing something they have not done.

The UK's approach to AI currently diverges from that of our closest trading partners, and I find that quite strange. It is not a good thing and there is an apparent trade-off between progress and safety. I think we should always err on the side of safety and ethics. Progress will always happen; we cannot stop progress. Companies will always invest in AI. It is the future, so we do not have to worry about that—people will run away with that. What we have to do is ensure that we protect people's safety, because otherwise, instead of being industry leaders in the UK, we will be known as the country that has shoddy or poor practices. Nobody really wants that.

There are countries that are outlawing how facial recognition is used, for instance, but we are not doing that in the UK, so we are increasingly looking like the outlier in this discussion and protection around AI. Government's first job is to protect their citizens, so we should protect citizens now from the dangers of AI.

Harms are already arising from AI. The Government's recently published White Paper takes the view that strong, clear protections are simply not needed. I think the Government are wrong on that. Strong, clear protections are most definitely needed—and needed now. Even if the Government just catch up with what is happening in Europe and the US, that would be more than we are doing at the moment. We need new, legally binding regulations.

The White Paper currently has plans to water down data rights and data protection. The Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill paints an alarming picture. It will redefine what counts as personal data.

All these things have been put in place piecemeal to ensure that personal data is protected. If we lower the protection in the definition of what is personal data, that will mean that any company can use our personal data for anything it wants and we will have very limited recourse to stop that. At the end of the day, our personal data is ultimately what powers many AI systems, and it will be left ripe for exploitation and abuse. The proposals are woefully inadequate.

The scale of the challenge is vast, but instead of reining in this technology, the Government's approach is to let it off the leash, and that is problematic. When we received evidence from a representative from the Met police, she said that she has nothing to hide so what is the problem, for instance, in having the fingerprint, if you like, of her face everywhere that she goes? I am sure that we all have either curtains or blinds in our houses. If we are not doing anything illegal, why have curtains or blinds? Why not just let everyone look into our house? Most abuse happens in the home so, by the same argument, surely allowing everyone to look into each other's houses would eliminate a lot of abuse.

In our country we have the right to privacy, and people should have that right. Our digital fingerprints should not be taken without our consent, as we have policing by consent. The Met's use of live facial recognition and retrospective facial recognition is worrying. I had a meeting with Mark Rowley the other day and, to be honest, he did not really understand the implications, which is a worry.

Like many people, I could easily get carried away and get drunk with this AI debate, but I am the driver. I need to stay sober to make sure everyone gets home safely.

3.5 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). I join everyone in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing this important debate.

Everybody is talking about artificial intelligence, which is everywhere. An article in *The Sentinel*, Stoke's local paper, recently caught my eye. Last week, the Home Secretary visited my constituency to open a Home Office facility in Hanley, a development providing more than 500 new jobs in Stoke-on-Trent. The article reflected on the visit and, amusingly, compared the Home Secretary's responses to questions posed by the local media with the responses from an AI. Specifically, the Home Secretary was asked whether Stoke-on-Trent had taken more than its fair share of asylum seekers through the asylum dispersal scheme, and about the measures she is taking to ensure that asylum seekers are accommodated more evenly across the country. She replied:

"The new Home Office site is a vote of confidence in Stoke-on-Trent... They will be helping to bring down the asylum backlog and process applications more quickly."

The same question was posed to ChatGPT, which was asked to respond as if it were the Home Secretary. The AI responded:

"I acknowledge the city has indeed taken on a significant number of asylum seekers. This kind of uneven distribution can place stress on local resources and create tension within communities. It is clear we need a more balanced approach that ensures all regions share responsibility and benefits associated with welcoming those in need."

The AI also referred to reviewing the asylum dispersal scheme, strengthening collaboration with local authorities, infrastructure development and the importance of public awareness and engagement.

We all know what it is like to be on the receiving end of media questions, and a simple and straightforward answer is not always readily available. I suppose the AI's response offers more detail but, unsurprisingly, it does not tell us anything new. It is, after all, limited by the information that is currently on the internet when formulating its answers. Thankfully, AI is not taken to making things up—hopefully that will not happen, but it is one of the big debates.

This begs the question: what is truth? That is the fundamental question on this topic. We must develop a robust ethical framework for artificial intelligence. The UK should be commended for embracing the spirit of an entrepreneurial and innovative approach to artificial intelligence. We know that over-regulation stifles creativity and all the good things it has to offer. However, AI has become consumer-focused and increasingly accessible to people without technical expertise. Our regulatory stance must reflect this shift. Although there should be a departure from national regulatory micromanagement, the Government have a role to play in protecting the public against potential online harms. It cannot be left to self-regulation by individual companies.

Let us also remember that artificial intelligence operates within a global space. We cannot regulate the companies that are developing this technology if they are based in another nation. This is a complicated space in which to navigate and create safeguards.

Balancing those concerns is increasingly complex and challenging, and conversations such as this must help us to recognise that regulation is not impossible and that it is incredibly important to get it right. For example, when the tax authorities in the Netherlands employed an AI tool to detect potential childcare benefit fraud, it made mistakes, resulting in innocent families facing financial ruin and thousands of children being placed in state custody as a result of accusations. When the victims tried to challenge the decision, they were told that officials could not access the algorithmic inputs, so they were unable to establish how decisions had been made. That underlines the importance of checks and balances.

Dawn Butler: The hon. Lady is absolutely right on these concerns, especially as regards the Home Office. Big Brother Watch's "Biometric Britain" report spoke about how much money the Home Office is paying to companies, but we do not know who they are. If we do not know who these companies are, we will not then know how they gather, develop and use their data. Does she think it is important that we know who is getting money for what?

Jo Gideon: The hon. Lady makes a good point. Clearly, that is the big part of this debate: we have to have transparency, as it is essential. The Government's current plans, set out in the AI White Paper, do not place any new obligations on public bodies to be transparent about their use of AI; to make sure their AI tools meet accuracy and non-discrimination standards, as she rightly said; or to ensure that there are proper mechanisms in place for challenging or getting redress when AI decisions go wrong. What the White Paper proposes is a "test and

[Jo Gideon]

learn” approach to regulation, but we must also be proactive. Technology is changing rapidly, while policy lags behind. Once AI is beyond our control, implementing safeguards becomes implausible. We should acknowledge that we cannot afford to wait to see how its use might cause harm and undermine trust in our institutions.

While still encouraging sensible innovation, we should also learn from international experiences. We must encourage transparency and put in place the proper protections to avoid damage. Let us consider the financial sector, where banks traditionally analyse credit ratings and histories when deciding who to lend money to. I have recently been working with groups such as Burnley Savings and Loans, which manually underwrites all loans and assesses the risk of each loan by studying the business models and repayment plans of its customers. Would it be right to use AI to make such decisions? If we enter a world where there is no scope for gut feeling, human empathy and intuition, do we risk impoverishing our society? We need to be careful and consider how we want to use AI, being ethical and thoughtful, and remaining in control, rather than rolling it out wherever possible. We must strike the right balance.

Research indicates that AI and automation are most useful when complemented by human roles. The media can be negative about AI’s impact, leading to a general fear that people will lose their jobs as a result of its growth. However, historically, new technology has also led to new careers that were not initially apparent. It has been suggested that the impact of AI on the workplace could rival that of the industrial revolution. So the Government must equip the workforce of the future through skills forecasting and promoting education in STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths.

Furthermore, we must remain competitive in AI on the global stage, ensuring agility and adaptability, in order to give future generations the best chances. In conjunction with the all-party group on youth affairs, the YMCA has conducted polling on how young people feel about the future and the potential impact of AI on their careers. The results are going to be announced next month. It found that AI could not only lead to a large amount of job displacement, but provide opportunities for those from non-traditional backgrounds. More information on skills and demand will help inform young people to identify their career choices and support industries and businesses in preparing for the impact of AI.

I am pleased that the Department for Education has already launched a consultation on AI education, which is open until the end of August. Following that, we should work hard to ensure that schools and universities can quickly adapt to AI’s challenges. Cross-departmental discussion is important, bringing together AI experts and educators, to ensure that the UK is at the cutting edge of developments with AI and to provide advice to adapt to younger generations.

AI is hugely powerful and possesses immense potential. ChatGPT has recently caught everybody’s attention, and it can create good stories and news articles, like the one I shared. But that technology has been used for years and, right now, we are not keeping up. We need to be quicker at adapting to change, monitoring closely and being alert to potential dangers, and stepping in

when and where necessary, to ensure the safe and ethical development of AI for the future of our society and the welfare of future generations.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Recalling a conversation that we had earlier in the day, I am tempted to call Robin Millar in the style of Winston Churchill.

3.15 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): For the benefit of Members present, Mr Deputy Speaker and I had the chance to discuss and look at the qualities of ChatGPT. Within a matter of seconds, ChatGPT produced a 200-word speech in the style of Winston Churchill on the subject of road pricing. It was a powerful demonstration of what we are discussing today.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on conceiving the debate and bringing it to the Floor of the House. I thank the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), and the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), for their contributions. As a Back Bencher, it was fascinating to hear about their role as Chairs of those Committees and how they pursue lines of inquiry into a subject as important as this one.

I have been encouraged greatly by hon. Members from across the House by the careful and measured consideration they have taken of the subject. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) on perhaps the most engaging introduction to a speech that I have heard in many a week. My own thoughts went to the other character in the party who thinks they are sober, but everyone else can see that they are not. I leave it to those listening to the debate to decide which of us fits which caricature.

I have come to realise that this House is at its best when we consider and discuss the challenges and opportunities to our society, our lives and our ways of working. The debate addresses both challenge and opportunity. First, I will look at what AI is, because without knowing that, we cannot build on the subject or have meaningful discussion about what lies beyond. In considering the development of AI, I will look at how we in the UK have a unique advantage. I will also look at the inevitability of destruction, as some risk and challenge lies ahead. Finally, I hope to end on a more optimistic and positive note, and with some questions about what the future holds.

Like many of us, I remember where I was when I saw Nelson Mandela make that walk to freedom. I remember where I was when I saw the images on television of the Berlin wall coming down. And I remember where I was, sitting in a classroom, when I saw the tragedy of the NASA shuttle falling from the sky after its launch. I also remember where I was, and the computer I was sitting at, when I first engaged with ELIZA. Those who are familiar with artificial intelligence will know that ELIZA was a dummy program that provided the role of a counsellor or someone with whom people could engage. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells has already alluded to the Turing test, so I will not speak more of that, but that is where my fascination and interest with this matter started.

To bring things right up to date, as mentioned by Mr Deputy Speaker, we now have ChatGPT and the power of what that can do. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) and to the hon. Member for Brent Central because I am richer, not only for their contributions, but because I had a private bet with myself that at least two Members would use and quote from ChatGPT in the course of the debate, so I thank them both for an extra fiver in my jar as a result of their contributions.

In grounding our debate in an understanding of what AI is, I was glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness mentioned the simulation of an unarmed aerial vehicle and how it took out the operator for being the weak link in delivering what it had been tasked with doing. That, of course, is not the point of the story and he did well to go on to mention that the UAV had adapted—adapted to take that step. As a simulation, when that rule changed, it then changed again and said, “Now I will take out the communication means by which that operator, who I can no longer touch, controls myself”.

The principle there is exactly as hon. Members have mentioned: it can work only to the data that it is given and the rules with which it is set. That is the lesson from apocryphal stories such as those. In that particular case, there is a very important principle—it is this idea of a “human in the loop”. Within that cycle of data, processing, decision making and action, there must remain a human hand guiding it. The more critical the consequence—the more critical the action—the more important it is that that is there.

If we think of the potential application of AI in defence, it would be very straightforward—complex but straightforward—and certainly in the realms of what is possible, for AI to be used to interpret real-time satellite imagery to detect troop movements and to respond accordingly, or to recommend a response accordingly, and that is where the human in the loop becomes critical. These things are all possible with the technology that we have.

What AI does well is to find, learn and recognise patterns. In fact, we live our life in patterns at both a small and a large scale. AI is incredibly good—we could even say superhuman—at seeing those patterns and predicting next steps. We have all experienced things such as TikTok and Facebook on our phones. We find ourselves suddenly shaking our head and thinking, “Gosh, I have just lost 15 minutes or longer, scrolling through.” It is because the algorithms in the software are spotting a pattern of what we like to see, how long we dwell on it, what we do with that, and it then feeds us another similar item for us to consume.

Perhaps more constructively, artificial intelligence is now used in agriculture. Tractors will carry booms across their backs with multiple robots. Each one of those little robots will be using an optical sensor to look at individual plants that it is passing over and it will, in a split second, identify whether that plant is a crop that is wanted, or a weed that is not. More than that, it will identify whether it is a healthy plant, whether it is infected with a parasite or a mould, or whether it is infested with insects. It will then deliver a targeted squirt of whatever substance is needed—a nutrient, a weedkiller or a pesticide—to deal with that single plant. This is all being done in a tractor that is moving across a field without a driver,

because it is being guided by GPS and an autonomous system to maximise the efficiency of the coverage of that area. AI is used in all these things, but, again, it is about recognising patterns. There are advantages in that. There are no more harmful blanket administrations of pesticides, or the excessive use of chemicals, because these can now be very precisely targeted.

To any experts listening to this, let me say that I make no pretence of expertise. This is in some ways my own mimicry of the things that I have read and learned and am fascinated by. Experts will say that it is not patterns that AI is good at; it is abstractions. That can be a strange concept, but the idea of an abstraction is one of how we pull out of and create a model of what we are looking at. Without going into too much detail, there is something in what the hon. Member for Brent Central was talking about in terms of bias and prejudice within systems. I suggest that that does not actually exist within the system unless it is intentionally programmed. It is a layer that we apply on top of what the system produces and we call it this thing. The computer has no understanding of bias or prejudice; it is just processing—that is all. We apply an interpretation on top that can indeed be harmful and dangerous. We just need to be careful about that distinction.

Dawn Butler: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: AI does not create; it generates. It generates from the data that is being inputted. The simplified version is “rubbish in, rubbish out”—it is more complex than that, but that is the simplest way of saying it. If we do not sort out the biases before we put in the data, the data will be biased.

Robin Millar: The hon. Lady—my hon. Friend, if I may—is absolutely correct. It is important to understand that we are dealing with something that, as I will come onto in a moment, does not have a generalised intelligence, but is an artificial intelligence. That is why, if hon. Members will forgive me, I am perhaps labouring the point a little.

A good example is autonomous vehicles and the abstraction of events that the AI must create. It might be a car being driven erratically, for example. While the autonomous vehicle is driving along, its cameras are constantly scanning what is happening around it on the road. It needs to do that in order to recognise patterns against that abstraction and respond to them. Of course, once it has that learning, it can act very quickly: there are videos on the internet from the dashcams of cars driven autonomously and without a driver, slowing down, changing lane or moving to one side of the road because the car has predicted, based on the behaviour it is seeing of other cars on the road, that an accident is going to happen—and sure enough, seconds later, the accident occurs ahead, but the AI has successfully steered the vehicle to one side.

That is important, but the limitation is that, if the AI only learns about wandering cars and does not also learn about rocks rolling on to the road, a falling tree, a landslide, a plane crash, an animal running into the road, a wheelchair, a child’s stroller or an empty shopping cart, it will not know how to respond to those. These are sometimes called edge cases, because they are not the mainstream but happen on the edges. They are hugely important and they all have to be accounted for. Even in the event of a falling tree, the abstraction must allow

[Robin Millar]

for trees that are big or small, in leaf or bare, falling towards the car or across the road, so we can see both the challenges of what AI must do, and the accomplishment in how well it has done what it has done so far.

That highlights the Achilles heel of AI, because what I have tried to describe is what is called a generalised intelligence. Generalised intelligence is something that we as humans turn out to be quite good at, or at least something that it is hard for computers to replicate reliably. What a teenager can learn in a few hours—that is, driving a car—it takes billions of images and videos and scenarios for an AI to learn. A teenager in a car intuitively knows that a rock rolling down a hillside or a falling tree presents a real threat to the road and its users. The AI has to learn those things; it has to be told those things. Crucially, however, once AI knows those things, it can generate them faster and respond much more quickly and much more reliably.

I will just make the comment that it does have that ability to learn. To go back to the agricultural example, the years of gathering images of healthy and poorly plants, creating libraries and then teaching, can now be done much faster because of this ability to learn. That is another factor in what lies ahead. We have to think not just that change will come, but that the ability to change will also be faster in the future. I hope it is clear then that what AI is not is a mind of its own. There is no ghost in the machine. It cannot have motivation of its own origin, nor can it operate beyond the parameters set by its programs or the physical constraints built into its hardware.

As an aside, I should make a comment about hardware, since my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells and others may comment on it. In terms of hardware constraints, the suggestion is that the probability of the sudden take-off of general artificial intelligence in the future is very small. AI derives its abilities to make rapid calculations from parallelisation, that is, simultaneously running multiple calculations across central processing units.

The optimisation and instruction programme appears to have hit rapidly diminishing returns in the mid to late 2010s, as such processing speed is increasingly constrained by the number of CPUs available. An order-of-magnitude increase in throughput therefore requires similar increases in available hardware or an exceedingly expensive endeavour. In other words, basic engineering parameters mean that we cannot be suddenly blindsided, I would suggest, by the emergence of a malevolent global intelligence, as the movies would have us believe.

I am grateful for your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I establish this baseline about what AI can and cannot do. It is important to do so in order then to consider the question of development. The key point that I highlight is the opportunity we have to create in the UK—specifically in the post-Brexit UK—an environment for the development of AI. If colleagues will indulge me—I mean not to make political points—I will make an observation on the contrast between the environment we have here compared with other parts of the world.

In any rapidly developing area of technology, it is important to differentiate the unethical application of technology and the technology itself. Unfortunately the EU's AI Act illustrates a failure to recognise that distinction.

By banning models capable of emotional and facial recognition, for example, EU lawmakers may believe that they have banned a tool of mass surveillance, but in fact, they risk banning the development of a technology that may have a myriad of otherwise very good applications, such as therapies and educational tools that can adjust to user responses.

The same holds for the ban on models that use behaviour patterns to predict future actions. Caution around that is wise, but a rule preventing AI from performing a process that is already used by insurers, credit scorers, interest-rate setters and health planners across the world for fear that it might be used to develop a product for sale to nasty dictators is limiting. Perhaps the most egregious example of that conflation is the ban on models trained on published literature, a move that effectively risks lobotomising large language model research applications such as ChatGPT in the name of reducing the risk of online piracy. We might compare that to banning all factories simply to ensure that none is used to manufacture illegal firearms.

In short, and in words of one syllable: it is easy to ban stuff. But it is much harder—and this is the task to which we must apply ourselves—to create a moral framework within which regulation can help technology such as AI to flourish. To want to control and protect is understandable, but an inappropriate regulatory approach risks smothering the AI industry as it draws its first breaths. In fact, as experts will know better than me, AI is exceptionally good at finding loopholes in rules-based systems, so there is a deep irony to the idea that it might be the subject of a rules-based system but not find or use a way to navigate around it.

I am encouraged by the Government's contrasting approach and the strategy that they published last year. We have recognised that Britain is in a position to do so much better. Rather than constraining development before applications become apparent, we seek to look to those applications. We can do that because, unlike the tradition of Roman law, which is inherently prescriptive and underlines the thinking of many nations and, indeed, of the EU, the common law, as we have in this country, allows us to build an ethical framework for monitoring industries without resorting to blanket regulation that kills the underlying innovation.

That means that, in place of prescriptive dictates, regulators and judges, we can—in combination with industry leaders—innovate, evolve and formalise best practice proportionate to evolving threats. Given that the many applications of AI will be discoverable only through the trial and error of hundreds of dispersed sectors of the economy, that is the only option open to us that does not risk culling future prosperity and—without wishing to overdramatise—creating an invisible graveyard of unsaved lives.

It is a most un-British thing to say, but this British system is a better way. Indeed, it is being introduced to nations around the world. They are switching from a regulatory approach to one of common law for many reasons. First, it facilitates progress. Just as no legislator can presume to know all the positive applications of a new technology such as AI, they are also blind to its potential negative applications. In the UK, in this environment, AI could prove to be a game-changer for British bioengineering. The world-leading 100,000 Genomes Project and UK Biobank, combined with our upcoming

departure from the GDPR, promise AI-equipped researchers an unparalleled opportunity to uncover the genetic underpinnings of poor health and pharmaceutical efficacy, to the benefit of health services around the world.

The second reason is that it is more adaptable to threats. Decentralised systems of monitoring, involving industry professionals with a clear understanding of the technology, is the most effective form of risk management we can realistically devise. An adaptable system has the potential to insulate us from another risk of the AI era: technology in the hands of hostile powers and criminals. As in previous eras, unilateral disarmament would not make us safer. Instead, it would leave us without the tools to counteract the superior predictive abilities of our foes, rendering us a contemporary Qing dynasty marvelling at the arrival of steamships.

It is vital to recognise that AI is going to bring destruction. This is perhaps the most revolutionary technological innovation of our lifetime, and with it, AI brings the potential for creative destruction across the economy at a faster pace than even the world wide web. I will quote Oppenheimer when he cited the Bhagavad Gita, which says:

“Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.”

That is not to sensationalise and fall into the same trap I warned of at the start of my remarks, but it is important to recognise that there will be change. Every bit as much as we have seen the stripping out of personnel in factories as they are replaced by machinery, we will see the loss of sectors to this technology. The critical point is not to stop it but to recognise it, adapt and use it for its strengths to develop.

We should be upfront about this. A failure to do so risks a backlash to excess. We cannot react with regulation; we must harness this. The industrial revolution brought both unprecedented economic prosperity and massive disruption. For all we know, had the luddites enjoyed a world of universal suffrage, their cause may have triumphed, dooming us to material poverty thereafter. If Britain is to reap the benefits of this new era of innovation, we must be frank about its potential, including its disruptive potential, and be prepared to make a strong case to defend the future it promises. Should we fail in this task, surrendering instead to the temptations of reactionary hysteria, our future may not look like an apocalyptic Hollywood blockbuster. It will, however, resemble that common historical tale of a once-great power sleepwalking its way into irrelevance.

On a more hopeful note, I turn to the question of where next? I spoke before of the pattern-based approaches that amplify conformity, such as we see on TikTok and Facebook. This quality may be attractive to technocrats—predictability, patterns, finding gaps and filling them—but that points to an increasing conformity that I, and I think many others, find boring. Artificial intelligence should be exploring what is new and innovative.

What about awe—the experience and the reaction of our mind when seeing or realising something genuinely new that does not conform to past patterns? A genuinely intelligent system would regularly be creating a sense of awe and wonder as we experience new things. Contrast the joy when we find a new film of a type we have not seen before—it covers the pages of the newspapers, dominates conversations with our friends and brings life to our souls, even—with being fed another version

of the same old thing we have got used to, as some music apps are prone to do. Consider the teacher who encouraged us to try new things and have new experiences, and how we grew through taking those risks, rather than just hearing more of the same.

This begs key questions of governance, too. We have heard about a Bill of digital rights, and questions of freedom were rightly raised by the hon. Member for Brent Central, but what about a genuinely free-thinking future? What would AI bring to politics? We must address that question in this place. What system of government has the best record of dealing with such issues? Would it support an ultimate vision of fairness and equity via communism? Could it value and preserve traditions and concepts of beauty that could only be said, as Scruton argued, to have true value in a conservative context? These have always been big questions for any democracy, and I believe that AI may force us to address them in depth and at pace in the near future.

That brings me to a final point: the question of a moral approach. Here, I see hope and encouragement. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central talked about truth, and I believe that ultimately, all AI does is surface these deeper questions and issues. The one I would like to address, very briefly, is the point of justice. The law is a rulebook; patterns, abstractions, conformity and breach are all suited to AI, but such a system does not predict or produce mercy or forgiveness. As we heard at the national parliamentary prayer breakfast this week, justice opens the door to mercy and forgiveness. It is something that is vital to the future of any modern society.

We all seek justice—we often hear about it in this House—but I would suggest that what we really seek is what lies beyond: mercy and forgiveness. Likewise, when we talk about technology, it is often not the technology itself but what lies beyond it that is our aim. As such, I am encouraged that there will always be a place for humanity and those human qualities in our future. Indeed, I would argue, they are essential foundations for the future that lies ahead.

3.40 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I will keep my speech short and snappy, and not repeat anything that any other Member has said—I know that is unfashionable in this place. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on introducing the debate. He was one of the very best Ministers I have ever come across in my role on the Front Bench, and I am sorry to see him on the Back Benches; he is well due promotion, I would say. I am sure that has just damned his prospects for all eternity.

As my party's culture spokesperson, I am very keenly aware of the arts community's concerns about AI and its risks to the arts. I have now been twice—like you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure—to “ABBA Voyage”, once in my role on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and once as a guest of the wonderful Svana, its producer. As I am sure you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, the show uses AI and motion capture technology combined with a set of massive, ultra-high-quality screens to create an utterly magnificent gig. It felt like the entire audience was getting to see ABBA in their prime; indeed, it was perhaps even better than it would have been originally, because we now have ultra-modern

[John Nicolson]

sound quality, dazzling light shows and a vast arena in which to enjoy the show. It was history, airbrushed to perfection and made contemporary. It seems to be a success, having sold over 1 million tickets so far and with talk of its touring the world. In fact, it was so good that towards the end, some of the audience started waving at Agnetha and Björn. They had become completely convinced that they were not in fact AI, but real people. There were tears as people looked at Agnetha, which says something about the power of technology to persuade us, does it not?

Soon, I will be going to see Nile Rodgers—that really is a very good gig, as I do not need to tell the other Front Benchers present. Again, I am going to be his guest. He is a legendary guitarist, songwriter and singer; he gave evidence to our Select Committee; and he has sold 500 million albums worldwide. Nile will be incredible—he always is—but he will also be 70 years of age. It will not be a 1970s early funk gig. The audience will include the mature, people in the prime of middle youth such as myself, and also the Glastonbury generation. It is easy to envisage an AI Nile Rodgers, produced by a record company and perhaps touring in competition with the very real Nile Rodgers, competing for ticket sales with the great man himself. Indeed, it is easy to envisage the young recording artists of today signing away their rights to their likenesses and vocals in perpetuity, with long-term consequences.

Many in the arts sphere feel safe from AI, as they suspect that human creativity at the artistic level cannot be replicated. I very much hope that they are right, but once that human creativity has been captured, it can be reproduced eternally, perhaps with higher production levels. It is not, I feel, the sole responsibility of artists, musicians and playwrights to be concerning themselves with radical developments in AI. They have work to do as it is, and surely the job to protect them is ours. We need to get on top of the copyright issues, and we need to protect future performers from having their rights sold away along with their very first contracts. We as parliamentarians must think deeply, listen and research widely. I have heard some heartening—sometimes lengthy—speeches that show there is, cross party, an awareness and a willingness to grasp this, and that is deeply encouraging.

However, the UK Government have much to work on in their White Paper. They have a lot to do when they look at this and listen to the submissions, and they must provide improvements. It allows public institutions and private companies to use new experimental AI on us, and then try to correct the flaws subsequently. It uses us, our communities and our industries as guinea pigs to try out untested code to see whether that makes matters better or worse. I think the risks are many for the arts community, which is concerned deeply about fakery, and there is an argument that the AI White Paper empowers such digital fakery.

In closing, it is absolutely key that we listen to experts in this field, as we should always do to inform our decision making, but in particular to those in the arts and music industry because they will be so deeply affected.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the shadow Minister.

3.46 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is an honour to close this debate on behalf of the Opposition. I thank all colleagues for their contributions, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for bringing forward this interesting and thoughtful debate.

We can all agree that artificial intelligence has tremendous potential for social good. Indeed, we know that artificial intelligence technologies already contribute about £3.7 billion to the UK economy. There is some genuinely incredible innovation out there, much of which I have had the privilege of seeing at first hand over the past 18 months. Whether it be trained robots working with our armed forces as part of our defence and recovery efforts, apps to support female health or AI programmes that could one day make our working lives easier and more flexible, the opportunities really are endless.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the Government have been shouting as loudly as possible about their plans to capitalise on this innovation. However, it is crucial that innovation does not come at the expense of everyday working people. While Labour welcomes this debate, as a proud Welsh MP, I am clear that the Government need to go further to ensure that the discourse on AI and innovation is not focused entirely on the opportunities here in London.

That said, we can all recognise that technologies such as AI have the power to truly transform lives. This could range from improving medical services and delivering better, more efficient public services to working to deliver jobs and employment opportunities for all for generations to come. While AI and ChatGPT have been mentioned heavily today and are regularly in the headlines, much of this technology has been around for years or decades. I am therefore interested to hear from the Minister exactly why it took his Department so long to produce the long-overdue UK science and technology framework, which finally came out in March this year.

The same can be said of the Government's AI White Paper, which is out of date just months after being published. In the White Paper's foreword, the Secretary of State—the right hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan)—claims:

“My vision for an AI-enabled country is one where our NHS heroes are able to save lives using AI technologies that were unimaginable just a few decades ago.”

However, that points to the exact issue with this Government's approach to tech, which is that it absolutely fails to be forward-thinking.

The Government's current plan does not place any new obligations on public bodies to be transparent about their use of AI. That was put most powerfully by my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). AI tools need to meet accuracy and non-discrimination standards, and they need to ensure that there are proper mechanisms for challenge or redress when AI decisions do—as inevitably they will—go wrong. Instead, the White Paper promises a test and learn approach to regulation, which essentially translates to “hurt first, fix later”. This is a worrying approach for all involved. Let us be clear: our country is facing a choice right now about who benefits from the huge disruption that tech and AI will bring, and, in my hon. Friend's words, we need to “stay sober”. Will it be those who already hold wealth and power, or will it be

the starter firms trying to break in and disrupt the industry, the patients trying to book an appointment with their GP, or the workers using technology to enhance and improve their role?

The UK has many brilliant AI companies based here, and thriving sectors such as life sciences and professional services, which can support and capitalise on new technologies, but they risk being underutilised. The lack of certainty from the Government, who have no proper industrial strategy, is not only holding back UK tech businesses; it is stifling economic growth at the worst possible time. The reality is that other countries are already light years ahead. In Israel, police, fire and emergency services now come as a package deal, thanks to AI technology. Simple changes, such as having different phone numbers to call for separate emergency services, have allowed AI to play a central role in saving lives.

Of course, with any modernisation we must ensure that our laws keep up. Colleagues will be aware that the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill is in Committee right now, and that important Bill will go some way to address the large monopolies that have been allowed to proliferate online for far too long. Yet again, the Government have been too slow to act on getting the right balance between innovation and regulation. Labour recognises the challenges ahead, and none of us wants AI, or other intelligence technologies, to operate without proper regulation.

We recognise the concerns about risks, from the immediate to the existential, which need to be handled with care. However, the Government have failed even to cover the basics in their AI White Paper. Instead, they are doing as they have with too many other policy areas in this brief, and kicking the can down the road with consultations and road maps that will take up to two years to complete. I invite the Minister to imagine what technological developments will take place during that timeline, and I urge the Department to hurry up and get on with the job.

We have already heard that there are steps the Government could be taking right now to get ahead, including addressing growing calls for regulation to address foundation AI models. It does not take an expert to recognise that AI systems are not built from nothing, so what assessment has the Minister made of the merits of regulating those models now? I am sure he would have widespread support from colleagues, including those on the Conservative Benches, about concerns over AI, as well as from those who want to support start-ups and scale-ups, and who need clarity before developing their tech for the masses. We all want the UK tech industry to continue to thrive, but a responsible approach must also be part of that conversation.

The Government have an obligation to protect their citizens, and given their approach to online safety, with their last-minute amendments that severely weakened the Online Safety Bill, it will come as no surprise that I have concerns that this Government are not up to the job when it comes to regulating AI. That is why the Government must work harder to ensure that our laws are keeping pace. The only way we can ensure that they do is to have a Government in power who will harness technologies such as AI and constantly think to the future. It has become incredibly clear that that is not the Conservative Government's approach, and I am afraid that their lines on tech are simply not getting traction with the public, well rehearsed though they are.

It is all very well that the Prime Minister spent London Tech Week meeting AI CEOs and announcing that the UK will soon host a global summit on AI, but the Government have done little to reassure everyday working families that their lives will be improved, not impacted, by developments in the tech industry. We cannot put people's jobs at risk and simply hand them over to tech giants without thoughtful regulation. Many of our constituents have already paid a heavy price thanks to this Government's utter mishandling of the energy crisis and the increasing cost of living. They deserve better than to have their jobs put at further risk if the Government fail to take a sensible approach to regulating tech and AI.

There is also much work to be done to ensure that the opportunities afforded by these sectors truly are open to all. When we speak about AI and innovation, it can often feel as though it is a closed conversation, open only to those with specific educational paths or career trajectories. Although it is clear that the Prime Minister has a personal interest in the industry—frankly, I am not sure we heard much from his predecessors in recent years about it—the barriers still exist.

Ultimately, two-thirds of employers are struggling to recruit workers with digital skills. Skills such as software engineering are no longer sector specific, and the economy of the future will require those with digital skills across all industries. AI technologies need more than just mathematicians and statisticians; there is also strong demand for designers, creators and people who can think creatively. Labour will ensure that we have the skills across our economy to win the global race for the technologies of the future, by establishing a new national body to oversee a national effort to meet the skills needs of the coming decades across all regions and nations of the UK.

The Government talk a great deal about levelling up, but we all know it must be more than just an empty slogan. I am keen to hear from the Minister about the exact steps his Department is taking to address these issues.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, these industries rely on our ability to get online. That is a simple premise for some, but the unfortunate reality is that it is not so easy for most people. The Government's so-called commitment to getting people online is laughable. If they cannot get the basics right, including a reliable, fast broadband connection, how on earth can people across the UK be reassured that this Government's approach to AI and tech will not see them worse off, too?

Broadband is central to powering our increasingly digital economy, but the Government's slow roll-out has left parts of the UK, such as my hometown, stuck decades behind. In addition, once people are online, the Government have failed to legislate to educate. The Government have failed to commit to strong media literacy provisions in the Online Safety Bill. In fact, those were dropped in an earlier draft. How can we be assured that the Government will work to ensure that tech more widely is understood by the masses? The Government could have put these simple policies in place years ago, but instead they focus their efforts on landing press coverage for their minimal announcements during London Tech Week, which will, let us be honest, change little for the lives of the majority of people in the UK.

[Alex Davies-Jones]

On the other hand, Labour is listening. We are ambitious for technologies such as AI, and we want to see them embedded in our everyday services, whether to speed up welfare claims or diagnose patients in hospitals. Labour is committed to doing so responsibly, and we will work in partnership with businesses to face the future and address the challenges, opportunities and risks head-on. The Government's record on AI is limited, and far too often it is a case of too little, too late. Those in the industry are desperate for guidance, and Labour is all too ready to provide that clarity. I hope the Minister is listening.

3.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Paul Scully): I start by conveying my appreciation to my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for securing today's debate and for speaking so powerfully in opening what has been on the whole—until the word soup of the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), which I will cover in a second—a thoughtful debate about this important and complex topic.

We have had some considered speeches, and I will touch on some of those. We heard from the Chairman of the Business and Trade Committee, the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), about the risk to workers. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) spoke about how we have to choose our words carefully and keep cool heads in regulation, and that goes to the heart of what we are talking about today. The hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) talked about how, instead of constraining the technology, the Government are letting it off the leash, and I do not think that is right. When we talk about the AI White Paper, it is the flexibility that keeps it up to date, rather than it being out of date.

We heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) and for Aberconwy (Robin Millar), and the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) talked about the gigs he gets to go to. In the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, we have the sharp focus to look at AI and the digital skills that the hon. Member for Pontypridd was talking about. Six months ago, when I was in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, I had to leave a digital economy council meeting to go to a dinner with Dell. When I explained that, they said, "You're going to dinner with Adele?" I said, "No, it isn't. It is just Dell, unfortunately." We now have that sharp focus to address the AI White Paper.

First, let me talk about the fact that AI is fast becoming part of our daily lives. It is in our phones, our cars, our offices and our workplaces. The explosion in the use of AI tools such as DALL-E, Midjourney, ChatGPT and Bard shows that we are on the cusp of a new era of artificial intelligence. As my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness rightly asserted, it has the potential to bring enormous benefits to our society, and we must always remember that. We have to be aware of the risks and manage them carefully on an international basis, which is summed up by the global summit that the Prime Minister is hosting here this autumn, but we must always look to the opportunities, too, and how AI will change the world. That includes in

the NHS, where the use of automated lip readers such as Liopa are bringing a voice to the voiceless by improving treatments for patients who cannot speak, and where risk prediction tools, such as the Scottish Patients at Risk of Readmission and Admission tool, or SPARRA, can provide GPs in Scotland with monthly risk scores for patients and predict the likelihood of their being admitted to hospital.

AI can also change our economy, driving greater consumer choice, efficiencies and productivity. One only has to look at AI's impact through the widespread use of virtual assistants such as Siri, Cortana, Google Assistant and Alexa to see how AI is helping consumers to manage their daily lives more efficiently.

However, there are unique risks, too, so it is right that Governments around the world play their part in ensuring that this technology is developed and applied in a safe, transparent way. In the UK, the Government have long recognised the transformative potential of this technology, and we have sought to be ahead of the curve. With respect, I say to the hon. Member for Pontypridd that since 2014 we have invested £2.5 billion in building a thriving AI ecosystem; we are recognised as having the third biggest AI ecosystem in the world after America and China.

The AI sector deal that we announced back in 2018 was followed by our national AI strategy in 2021. That set out our 10-year vision for ensuring that the UK remains at the forefront of the AI revolution by investing in skills and infrastructure, driving adoption across sectors, and governing AI effectively through regulation, technical standards and assurance. The House will know that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister laid out his ambitions for the UK on AI at London Tech Week earlier this month. That ambition is for us to lead at home and abroad, and to lead change in our public services.

A theme discussed at some length today is the regulatory environment for artificial intelligence. As hon. Members will know, the Government committed to reviewing the AI regulatory and governance landscape in our national AI strategy. We subsequently published our AI regulation White Paper in March. The approach that the White Paper advocates is proportionate and adaptable. The proposed regulatory framework draws on the expertise of regulators. It supports them in considering AI in their sector by applying a set of high-level principles, which are outcomes-focused and designed to promote responsible AI innovation and adoption. We will work with and through regulators and others in the sector.

On the criticism of the White Paper, I have to say that industry supports our plans. We engaged with over 130 organisations on the proposals last year, and developers, business users and funders praised the flexibility of our approach, which will support innovation and build public trust. The White Paper remains very much in date because of its flexibility. Those who have read it know that its outcomes-focused, adaptable approach is deliberately designed to allow us to manage emerging and unforeseen risks, as well as those risks that we already know about.

The White Paper proposes a number of central support functions, which will be initially provided from within Government, but we will leverage activities and expertise from across the broader economy where possible. That will ensure that the framework effectively addresses AI risks in a way that is proportionate, future-proof and responsive.

Several people raised the issue of international co-operation. There we have shown true leadership. No country can tackle AI on its own, given its global nature. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced earlier this month that we will host the first major global summit on AI safety this autumn. The summit will consider the risks of AI, including frontier systems, and will discuss how those risks can be mitigated through internationally co-ordinated action. The summit will also be a platform where countries can work together on developing a shared approach to mitigating risks.

However, the summit cannot be viewed in isolation. It builds on the extensive work that we have done on strengthening AI safety with the OECD, the Council of Europe, the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence, and the UN, and through the G7 Hiroshima AI process. Bilaterally, we have also made great strides in co-ordinating on AI safety with key international partners. In June, the UK signed the Atlantic declaration with the US, in which we agreed to accelerate co-operation on AI, with a focus on ensuring its safe and responsible development. Further, in May, the UK agreed the Hiroshima accord with Japan, in which we committed to focusing UK-Japan AI discussions on promoting human-centric and trustworthy AI, and on interoperability between our AI governance frameworks. We intend to go even further. As per the G7 Hiroshima leaders May 2023 communiqué, we have committed to advancing international discussions on inclusive AI governance and interoperability to achieve our common vision and goal of trustworthy AI that is aligned with shared democratic values.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire spoke about AI in the creative industries. Obviously, the advent of AI has sent ripples of transformation across multiple industries, and the creative sphere is no exception. There are plenty of opportunities there, but there are also challenges that we have to address. The ability to automate creative tasks means that, in some cases, work such as copywriting, which could have taken hours if not days, could now take merely a few minutes. Some Members spoke about the risk of homogenising creativity, with the obvious concerns about intellectual property that stem from that. Again, I think it is right that we strike an appropriate balance in the regulation of AI to ensure that we do not stifle innovation, but that we ensure we protect the UK's thriving creative industries.

In conclusion, the Government remain entirely committed to ensuring that AI develops and is applied safely not just here, but around the world. By effectively

addressing the risks that Members have highlighted today, we can also seize the many opportunities that AI has to offer, from transforming our NHS with the discovery of new drugs, new treatments and new ways of supporting patients, to helping us race ahead to net zero and building a greener, fairer, stronger economy. We want to continue engaging with Members across this House, along with our partners in industry and academia, to deliver on those missions. We want to build the broadest possible coalition to ensure that the appropriate guard rails are in place for this technology to develop in a safe, fair and transparent way that will keep the UK right at the forefront of the AI revolution now and in the future. That is our vision and, working with hon. Members across the House, that is what we will deliver.

4.5 pm

Matt Warman: I thank all Members who contributed to what has been an important and, I hope, informative debate. We discussed a number of issues whose impact on humanity will be profound.

I want to touch briefly on discrimination, which the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) raised. If we get AI right, it will be the end of so much of the discrimination that has blighted society. If we get it wrong, it will supercharge it. If we have our eye on one thing for the future impact of AI, it must be fairness: fairness for workers across the country to take advantage of a technology that will make their jobs better and their lives happier and healthier; and fairness for people who have previously seen discrimination.

This technology will change huge aspects of this country. I am confident that the Government's approach, and the summit the Minister alluded to just a few seconds ago, will be a key part in Britain showing leadership; that this is a country where our values, which are so firmly against discrimination and so firmly in favour of opportunity, fairness and innovation, can lead the world. The summit will be a hugely important moment for the future of a technology that will shape our world. I look forward to the Prime Minister playing an important role in that and I look forward to the development of the policies the Minister outlined, to all our benefit. I thank everyone for the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered artificial intelligence.

Migration and Economic Development Partnership

4.7 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the UK's migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda.

The Government fundamentally believe that it is only by removing the incentive for people to take dangerous and unnecessary journeys that we will stop the boats and end the vicious cycle of people smuggling to UK shores. That is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) signed our groundbreaking migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda in April last year. The agreement allows individuals who arrive in the UK through dangerous, unnecessary and illegal routes to be relocated to Rwanda for the consideration of their asylum claim and to build a new life there.

I visited Kigali in March, meeting Rwanda's President and Foreign Minister, and signing an update to our memorandum of understanding that would bring it into line with our Illegal Migration Bill. Rwanda reiterated its commitment and capacity to receive thousands of individuals, process their claims and provide them with excellent care before they are transitioned to longer-term accommodation, with all the necessary support and services. And it is why, under the terms of that agreement, we attempted our first relocation flight to Rwanda: to demonstrate that if you come here illegally, you will be removed to a safe third country for your claim to be processed.

Importantly, Rwanda is a country where the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees itself operates an emergency transit scheme for migrants from Libya, and with which we have a robust agreement to protect asylum seekers from risk of harm. That first relocation flight was, unfortunately, frustrated by last-minute measures from the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, which has had the effect of pausing flights while our domestic legal proceedings are ongoing.

In December, the Divisional Court of the High Court comprehensively upheld the lawfulness of the partnership, confirming that Rwanda was a safe country. That judgment was appealed to the Court of Appeal, which heard the appeal in April and handed down its judgment earlier today. I respect the Court and welcome the fact that it unanimously found in the Government's favour on the vast majority of the appeals brought against the policy.

Unanimously, the Court of Appeal confirmed that removing asylum seekers to a safe country is entirely consistent with the Refugee convention, including article 31. The Court of Appeal found that it is lawful, in principle, for the Government to relocate people who come to the UK illegally to a safe third country; that the Government can designate countries as safe; and that our processes for determining eligibility for relocation are fair.

Unfortunately, two judges were of the view that there were deficiencies in the Rwanda asylum system that risked a breach of article 3 of the European convention on human rights. Importantly, their concerns were not that conditions in Rwanda would be unsafe, but that there was a possibility that they could be returned to other countries from Rwanda where they may suffer ill

treatment. It is therefore simply incorrect to say that the Court has found that conditions in Rwanda make it unsafe for individuals there. The Court of Appeal has merely ruled that there is a risk of refoulement from Rwanda to other countries.

The Lord Chief Justice took a different view. Agreeing with the High Court, he held that there was no real risk of individuals being sent to unsafe countries. He cited the strong assurance given by the Rwandan Government, the fact that Rwanda does not have returns agreements with those countries, and the powerful protections provided by monitoring arrangements that would be in place. The result is that the High Court's decision that Rwanda was a safe third country for the purposes of asylum relocation is reversed. We have a strong relationship with Rwanda. Both sides remain committed to the policy. Rwanda is a signatory to the United Nations conventions and has a strong track record of supporting refugees—including for the UNHCR.

This is a disappointing judgment, and we will seek permission to appeal it. We hope that the process will be swift. I am glad that the Court of Appeal has recognised in paragraph 16 of its summary judgment that it is an important consideration that should be dealt with in a timely fashion.

The judgment is disappointing for the majority of the British people, who have repeatedly voted for controlled migration, and for all those who want to see us deliver on our moral and democratic imperative to stop the boats. I am sure that all Members of this House would agree that the British public are compassionate, reasonable and fair minded. Since 2015, we have welcomed half a million people in need from all over the world, via our global safe and legal routes, as well as via our country-specific routes encompassing Ukraine, Hong Kong, Afghanistan and Syria.

But the British public are not naive. While our compassion to help people may be infinite, the public understand that our capacity to do so is finite and therefore precious. The British people will no longer indulge the polite fiction that we have a duty or infinite capacity to support everyone in the world who is fleeing persecution, nor anyone that would simply like to come here to improve their lot and succeeds in making it to our shores. That abuse is unfair on local communities forced to absorb thousands of illegal arrivals and the pressure on public services and social cohesion that this entails. It is unfair on taxpayers who foot the hotel bill—currently running to £6 million a day, and that could rise to £32 million a day by 2026—for people who have broken into this country.

It is unfair on those who play by the rules, and who want to see an asylum system that is fit for purpose, that our current system is exploited and turned against us by those with no right to be in the UK. It is unfair on those most in need of protection—particularly women, children, and those without the money to pay people smugglers—that our asylum system is overwhelmed by fit young men who have paid criminals thousands of pounds to smuggle them into the UK. It is unfair on people, and our partners in the developing world, that we in the west continue to maintain an asylum system so open to abuse that it incentivises mass flows of economic migration into Europe, lining the pockets of people smugglers and turning our seas into graveyards, all in the name of a phoney humanitarianism.

This is madness, and it must end. That that is why we, on the Government Benches, are committed to doing whatever it takes to stop the boats. The Government remain resolute that we will do exactly that, in partnership with Rwanda, and through changes to our law. That is the only way we will break the business model of the people smugglers, that is the only way we will save lives, and that is the only way we will stop the boats.

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

4.16 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Today's judgment shows that the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have no plan to fix the Tories' small boats chaos. Their only policy, to send everyone to Rwanda, is now completely unravelling. Ministers have admitted that it will cost £169,000 to send each person to Rwanda—on top of the £140 million cheques that they have already written, with more costs to come—but now the court has found that they did not even do the basic work to make sure that the Rwanda scheme was legal or safe.

Over four years, this Tory boats crisis has grown and grown, and the Government have completely broken the asylum system. They have failed to stop criminal gangs taking hold along our borders—gangs that have seen their profits soar from £3 million four years ago to more than £180 million today. They promised four years ago that they would end boat crossings in six months, but the number has increased more than twentyfold since then. Convictions for people smuggling have dropped, asylum decision making has collapsed—down by a third—but the costs of the asylum system have soared. A fivefold increase in the cost for just one person in the asylum system is no one else's fault; it is just Tory mismanagement and chaos, resulting in a backlog that has soared to a record high of 175,000. The projection of the Home Office itself is that those Tory failures will rise to a cost of £11 billion. That is the cost of the Government's failure—and instead of getting a grip on any of that, all they can come up with are gimmicks to make things worse.

This Rwanda scheme is unworkable, unethical, extortionately expensive, and a costly and damaging distraction from the urgent practical action that we should be taking—from the plan that Labour has set out to stop wasting all this money on a failing Rwanda scheme and instead to go after the criminal gangs, and to secure a stronger agreement with France and sort out the massive backlog that is costing a fortune: action to stop the dangerous boat crossings that are undermining our border security and putting lives at risk.

The Home Secretary has defended her Rwanda plan, but this is what the judgment reveals. Not only will it cost £169,000 for each person, as well as the £140 million cheques that have been sent; according to the Lord Chief Justice, there will be substantial sums of future aid support. How much? The Government are expecting Rwanda to take asylum decisions under a memorandum of understanding, but the judgment reveals that the Rwandan asylum system takes only about 100 decisions a year at the moment, and has a 100% rejection rate for Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen. Under the Israel Rwanda deal, the Government breached the memorandum of

understanding. People were routinely targeted by agents and gangs and moved clandestinely to Uganda, which has made trafficking worse.

The judgment also says that Rwanda has only one committee that takes all the asylum decisions and only one eligibility officer preparing cases. So on the idea that the Government are going to be able to deliver on their pledges, even the Lord Chief Justice, who finds that the scheme could be lawful, has said that it is only on the basis that the scheme is small—just 100 people.

The Home Secretary talks again today about thousands of people being sent. The Lord Chief Justice says that “the talk of Rwanda, within a few years, being a destination for thousands of asylum seekers”

is “political hyperbole”. A hundred people is less than 0.5% of those who arrived in the UK, so no wonder the Home Office admits there is no evidence that it will act as a deterrent. It is a total con on the British people.

There are two questions for the Home Secretary. Does she agree with the Lord Chief Justice that “thousands” is “political hyperbole” and that, even if she succeeds, it will just be a few hundred instead? And how long is she going to keep wasting all of this taxpayers' money on a failing policy and wasting everybody's time on ramping up the rhetoric rather than coming up with a serious plan?

This afternoon, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration set out a damning indictment of the Tory Home Office and its ability to pursue casework or have accurate data. It says that in the Home Office,

“there is no single version of the truth”

and concludes that

“This is no way to run a government department.”

But this Home Secretary is running it. She is running this chaos, failing to sort out the boats chaos, failing to clear the backlog or mend the broken asylum system, failing to get a grip. I do not doubt that she will now stand up and read from her pre-prepared script, blaming everyone else and making up stuff all about the Labour party rather than answering the two questions that she has been asked, rather than answering anybody's questions about the decisions that she has made. *[Interruption.]* She is in charge. The Tories have been in charge for 13 years. This is their chaos—their Tory chaos, their boats chaos and their broken asylum system. We do not need more slogans; we need solutions. We do not need more gimmicks; we need a Government with a grip. She is clearly not capable of it, so why does she not move over and give way to someone else?

Suella Braverman: I thank the right hon. Lady for her pre-prepared script as well—very well delivered. I have to say, she seems unusually upbeat today, which I find, frankly, quite odd, given that today's judgment will be frustrating for the majority of the British people who have repeatedly voted for controlled migration, for all those who want to see this Government deliver on our promise to stop the boats. I cannot help but contrast that public sentiment of disappointment with her excitement and delight today. As so many of her colleagues on the Opposition Benches are cheering this decision, we see an opposite view here.

Today is a bad day for the British people. Today is a good day for the people smugglers. It is a good day for Labour. As ever from the shadow Home Secretary,

[*Suella Braverman*]

there is no regard for the will of the British people. I know she sees the will of the British people as an inconvenience and an irritation, because her statement demonstrates that she simply has no empathy for the impact of illegal migration on local communities. She fails and refuses to recognise that those crossing by small boat are doing so illegally.

As ever from Labour, there is no alternative plan, and moreover, it does not care that it has no alternative plan. The truth is that our current system is rigged against the British people. That is why we are changing the law. The Labour party is perfectly content with this rigged system. Labour Members would like to keep it in place. That is why they are opposing our Illegal Migration Bill. That is why they would scrap our partnership with Rwanda. Rather than proposing any meaningful reforms to the asylum system, Labour would keep the system as it is to enable more people to come to the country illegally so that they can be settled into local communities more quickly. That is simply open borders masquerading as humanitarianism, and she should be honest with the British people.

I wonder if the right hon. Lady has actually read the judgment, given her gleeful disposition. Let me repeat some of it to her. Although the Court of Appeal did find by majority, with a dissenting view from the Lord Chief Justice, that there are deficiencies in the Rwandan asylum system, specifically relating to the risk of refoulement, all other grounds on which the appeal was brought were unanimously dismissed. That means the policy does not breach our obligations under the UN refugee convention and does not breach our domestic laws, as she and the Opposition have consistently maintained.

As I have said, we will seek permission to appeal the disappointing aspects of the judgment, but I think the British people will see quite clearly that, while we are trying to stop the boats, Labour has simply obstructed progress time and time again and has offered no solutions. The Prime Minister and I have promised to do whatever it takes to stop the boats; Labour has apparently pledged to do whatever it takes to stop us stopping the boats.

Mr Speaker: Order. This statement is about migration, not the Labour party. This is about what the Government are doing, I do not want to interfere or intervene, but we need to stick to what the statement is meant to be about.

Suella Braverman: In conclusion, in any event, while Labour continues to celebrate today's judgment and continues to celebrate every obstacle in our way, we will not be deterred and will not give up. We will do whatever it takes to stop the boats for the British people.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): While respecting the authority of the Court of Appeal, I share the Home Secretary's disappointment at its judgment. I welcome the fact that she will take the judgment to the Supreme Court.

Does the Home Secretary think that the case before the Supreme Court will be strengthened if she brings forward the safe and legal routes now written into the Illegal Migration Bill, so that there are clear options for genuine asylum seekers not to have to use irregular or illegal routes? Secondly, can she write into the Rwanda

agreement a default position that, if the Rwandan Government try to move these people on to a third country, a right of appeal could be heard in the United Kingdom? Does she not think those measures might strengthen her case before the Supreme Court? We have heard not a scintilla of a practical solution to this problem from the Opposition Front Bench?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I am grateful for his constructive input. The Illegal Migration Bill, which is currently making its way through Parliament, makes reference to and contains provisions relating to safe and legal routes, and we are in discussions about how and when those routes will be rolled out. They are an important element of our overall plan to stop the boats. It is vital that we support genuine claimants in need of support, which is why I am very proud of our track record of supporting and welcoming half a million people to the United Kingdom through humanitarian routes in recent years.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement.

The Home Secretary says she is disappointed by the High Court's decision, but is she not being a bit coy? Is she not delighted? Is this not exactly what the Government wanted all along? A fight with the judiciary, a fight with the House of Lords and triangulating the official Opposition, does this not play straight into their dog-whistle agenda? The human rights of people fleeing war, oppression and famine are simply an afterthought.

The economic impact assessment finally dragged out of the Government last week shows the eye-watering potential cost to the taxpayer of the Rwanda scheme and the wider implications of the Illegal Migration Bill. On top of the £120 million that the Home Secretary has already paid to Rwanda, why is she now determined to put even more cost on the public purse by further appealing this ruling to the Supreme Court? Or has that also been part of the plan all along? She says that her dream is of planes full of refugees taking off for Rwanda, but is she not actually dreaming of the opportunity to take the UK out of the European convention on human rights?

Scotland wants no part of the Tories' hostile immigration environment. Despite the ludicrous claims of the Minister for Immigration earlier in the week, Glasgow and communities across Scotland are proud to welcome refugees. We need immigration to help develop our economy and enrich our society and culture, and we want to offer refuge to those who need it most.

While the Government refuse to devolve immigration powers to Scotland, they need to accept the court's ruling that their illegal migration policies are themselves illegal. It is time to establish instead safe and legal routes for people who are fleeing wars, famine and climate change. At the very least, the Government need to pay attention to the amendments passed and about to be passed in the House of Lords. The Home Secretary urgently needs to respond to the Council of Europe's anti-torture committee, which has found incidents of inhumane and degrading treatment of asylum seekers

at the Manston facility. Ultimately, the message from the Court is clear: enough with the language of, “Stop the boats”, it is time to stop the Bill.

Suella Braverman: As the hon. Gentleman can imagine, I disagree with pretty much everything he has just said. In particular, I want to make it clear that I have the utmost respect for the Court of Appeal. Senior judges considered this appeal in the right and proper manner. We maintain our respect for the judiciary, but it is entirely legitimate for us to disagree with points they have made in certain findings. That is why we have made it clear that we disagree with some of the findings delivered today in the judgment, which is why we are seeking permission to appeal against them.

Let us be clear: the SNP is interested in asylum seekers only if they are housed elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Just last week, the SNP Government and the Labour leader of Edinburgh Council conspired to oppose our using a vessel to accommodate asylum seekers in Leith—that same vessel, in the same berth, had until recently housed Ukrainians—despite this having been value for money, despite being offered more cash to help and despite Edinburgh taking fewer than its fair share of asylum seekers. It is staggering to witness the stench of hypocrisy that hangs heavy over the SNP’s fake humanitarianism.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Meanwhile, constituencies are overwhelmed, as local services will be at RAF Scampton. What alternative plan is there? Does the Home Secretary not realise that every year we produce a migration Bill and we are tied up in knots by human rights lawyers? What we have been suggesting for two years in the Common Sense Group is that the refugee convention was made for a different world, as was the human rights convention, and we simply must have a derogation, so that we can detain people and then deport them. We will never solve this problem otherwise.

Suella Braverman: Again, I put on record my thanks to my right hon. Friend and his community for their support on RAF Scampton. I know that they have very serious concerns, and we are working intensively with him and the local authorities to enable the site to be rolled out and the appropriate support to be put on for those who will be occupying it. On the legal frameworks, he makes a very powerful point. Last year, we saw the Strasbourg court operate in a way that was opaque, irregular and unfair when it comes to the will of the British people. That is why we have included measures in our legislation that is making its way through Parliament to avoid that scenario repeating itself.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Having crashed the economy, impoverished so many of my constituents with the Tory mortgage premium and utterly failed to deliver the economic prosperity that they need, the Government’s one policy that was supposed to distract from all this chaos is now shown to be, as we have always said, unworkable, as well as being immoral and eye-wateringly expensive. Why does the Home Secretary not just fix the asylum system, instead of trying to outsource it?

Suella Braverman: It is pretty rich of the hon. Lady to complain about our plans, given that her party has put forward a series of botched policies, flip-flops, U-turns

and changes on the economy and energy prices. Moreover, when it comes to stopping the boats and illegal migration, Labour Members have no plan. They do not speak for the British people; they speak for their vested interests. They would rather campaign to stop the deportation of foreign criminals and vote against every measure we have put forward to reform our asylum system than be on the side of the British people and stop the boats.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): We all know that the Home Secretary’s instincts on this are right. However, the wider Government promised to stop the boats and clearly we have not stopped them yet, so I fully support her decision to seek leave to appeal to the Supreme Court, as I think will most people in this country. Given legal procedural issues and judicial recesses, it could take months for the case to reach the Supreme Court, let alone for a judgment to be handed down. In the meantime, the boats will keep coming, now probably all summer.

May I ask the Home Secretary two questions? First, with her extensive legal experience, can anything be practicably done to expedite the Supreme Court’s decision in this case? Secondly, was my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) right that the only way we will ultimately solve the problem is to achieve a derogation from the ECHR?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the Home Secretary answers those two questions, I have been very lenient to the right hon. Gentleman but that does not set a precedent. Each Member who asks a question gets one question. On this occasion I will allow the Home Secretary to answer both questions, but I am not creating a precedent. One question, and we do not need an opening preamble either—just a question.

Suella Braverman: My right hon. Friend speaks powerfully. On the timelines to which we are subject, the Court of Appeal has asked for submissions on permission to appeal by 6 July. We will adhere to that timetable, which I think he would agree is swift. Thereafter, it is in the hands of the Court. I am encouraged by paragraph 16 of the summary judgment, which notes the need for swiftness when considering the matter, but ultimately the Court sets the timetable and we will follow any timeline it sets.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Some 160,000 asylum seekers languishing in this country are awaiting a decision. Would the best deterrent not be competence in processing those 160,000 people and returning the ones who are not genuine refugees? Would that not send out a message? Can a comparison not be made between what has happened today and the backlog of 160,000 asylum seekers, as both are down to the incompetence of the Home Secretary, who seems distracted by playing games?

Suella Braverman: This is not about playing games; it is about saving lives. Diminishing it in that way does not do justice to the complexity and the enormity of the challenge that we are all facing. We are making progress. As the Prime Minister set out a few weeks ago, we are making progress on the legacy backlog of the initial decisions, which have fallen by 17,000. That is thanks to measures and interventions that we have introduced,

[*Suella Braverman*]

including streamlining the process, increasing the number of caseworkers and making decisions in a swifter fashion. Step by step, we will bear down on the backlog, as we have promised to do so.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents in Kettering are completely fed up with Labour's opposition and delay to the Illegal Migration Bill, and with the courts frustrating the Rwanda plan. Will the Home Secretary answer this question for my constituents: how on earth can Rwanda be deemed not to be a safe country, when the UN Refugee Agency itself has its own asylum scheme, part funded by the European Union, to send asylum seekers to Rwanda?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend makes a very good point and I refer him to the dissenting judgment of the Lord Chief Justice. It is quite a long judgment, but if he has the time he should read paragraph 498 particularly, which sets out similar points to his. The Lord Chief Justice finds that there are strong grounds to disagree with the other judges and that there is no real risk of people who are being relocated to Rwanda being treated in an unsafe or unlawful way. I take a lot of confidence from his dissenting judgment.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I receive support on these issues from the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy project. I am also co-chair of the all-party group on migration. Would the Secretary of State be willing to sit down with me and some Afghan refugees who arrived on small boats and explain what she meant in her statement by "phoney humanitarianism", which, I hope Members agree, is a deeply offensive phrase?

Suella Braverman: I have met refugees and I have met people who have fled persecution and sought humanitarian protection. I am very proud of what this country has offered and the tradition of the British people to extend the hand of friendship and compassion to those in need. We have 500,000 people coming to our shores, fleeing persecution for humanitarian purposes. What I object to is people fleeing a safe country such as France, paying evil people-smuggling gangs, risking their lives and the lives of others in the pursuit of an illegal trade. That is what we are trying to stop and I wish the hon. Lady would get behind it.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and for her assurance that she will appeal this as quickly as possible, because, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) said, speed is of the essence. My constituents want to see a fair and just asylum system, the boats stopped and the people smugglers put out of business once and for all. Does she share my despair that the only answers we hear from Opposition Members are, "We won't have a queue when we just open the doors"?

Suella Braverman: Again, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. Opposition Members would rather put all their efforts into campaigning to stop us deporting foreign

criminals than support our legislation to stop the boats. They would rather vote against all our measures to improve our asylum system than stopping the boats. They are a joke. They are not on the side of the British people. They are on the wrong side of this argument again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: It does not mean that we are at the end of the statement. It just means that, in the circumstances, I am being kind to the hon. Member for Strangford.

Jim Shannon: I am sure the Secretary of State was saying, "Great, it is all over." I jest, but it is not fair to do so, because it is a very serious matter.

Although I agree with the Secretary of State that there must be an end to boatloads of young refugees circumnavigating the system in place, the Court has determined that the risk of refoulement from Rwanda to other countries means that the Government's policy cannot be carried out legally. Will the Secretary of State outline how she believes the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can stop the influx while fulfilling our human rights obligations, which is not just a legal matter, but a moral one.

Suella Braverman: The hon. Gentleman is right: this is not just a legal matter; it is a moral one and it is of a political salience that I have not seen for a long time in our country. The vast majority of the British people want us to stop the boats. They want us to fix this problem. That is why I am encouraged with every step that we take on this journey. The reality is that we believe in the lawfulness of our agreement with Rwanda, and, as the Court found, the conditions in which people will be accommodated in Rwanda per se are lawful and they will be treated lawfully and humanely. It is about whether there is a risk of refoulement—of them being relocated on to a third country that may not be safe. That is the point of dispute in the judgment. We are seeking permission to appeal. We believe in the lawfulness of this scheme and we have confidence in delivering it as soon as possible.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): A 33-year-old man seeking asylum and housed in a hotel in Skegness has very recently been charged with the rape of a stranger in a public park. The Home Secretary knows how outraged people in Skegness are. She knows from our conversations how outraged I am. Does she agree that any setback to the Government's policy to stop the boats will be greeted with horror by people in Skegness, that she should appeal the judgment as quickly as possible, that she should pursue the Illegal Migration Bill through Parliament as quickly as possible, and that anyone trying to stand in the way of that is fundamentally disagreeing with the rightly held legitimate views of constituents such as mine?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend puts it very well, and from our discussions I know how energetically he is advocating on behalf of his local community as they bear some of the burden of this national challenge. It is

a fallacy—one that those on the Opposition Benches seem to indulge time and again—that everyone on these boats is coming for humanitarian purposes and fleeing some form of persecution. The reality is that a large proportion of them are coming for economic reasons. Many of them have chosen deliberately to leave a safe country such as France and to pay people-smuggling gangs large amounts of money in pursuit of a life in the United Kingdom—not as a refugee, not for humanitarian reasons. That poses public safety issues. The protection of our borders is about national security. That is why it is imperative and essential that we fix the problem and stop the boats.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): We have learned a few things today: first, that the Home Secretary respects the courts, for which we should be grateful; secondly, that after 13 years the Government have a rigged system; and thirdly, that we are going to continue to pour taxpayers' money into her failed system. In August, her Bill will stop asylum decisions and mean that people in detention will not be moved on further. Given the number of people we already have in hotels, how many more detention centres and hotels is she going to need, and at what cost?

Suella Braverman: What we know is that 45,000 people arrived here illegally last year and it is costing the taxpayer £6 million per day in hotel accommodation, totalling £3 billion per year to service our asylum system. That is an unacceptable situation. We are proposing a plan through our Illegal Migration Bill that says that, if someone arrives here illegally, they will be detained and thereafter swiftly removed. That, in combination with our world-leading partnership with Rwanda, will inject the deterrence necessary to stop the boats.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): Unless we actually believe in open borders, we simply have to have a policy of detaining and removing illegal immigrants, either back to their own country or to a safe third country. There really is not any other option, so the policy is the right one. I am glad that the court has concluded that the policy complies with the Geneva convention and that Rwanda itself is a safe country; the problem, as the Home Secretary has been saying, is with onward relocation. Previously, the Government negotiated a deal with Jordan that enabled the return of Abu Qatada. Does the Home Secretary agree that to win our appeal, it might be necessary to get some sort of commitment from the Rwandan Government that they will not refole asylum seekers to places where they might be persecuted? Will she undertake to negotiate with the Government of Rwanda to achieve that, and how quickly does she think we might get the planes to take off?

Suella Braverman: We are in constant and ongoing discussion with our partners in Rwanda. I am grateful for their statement today, which reiterates and reconfirms their commitment to our partnership and their determination to deliver it. They have a strong track record of supporting 100,000 migrants and refugees from their region, and they work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Rwanda is a safe country, as we maintain. However, we will always review our arrangements to ensure that they are in the best possible state.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): One of my constituents has applied for his wife and daughter to come to the UK from Afghanistan, where their human rights as a woman and a girl are being denied by the Taliban on a daily basis. The Home Office refused their applications, but a court disagreed and ruled that they should be allowed to come. My constituent is distraught that the Home Secretary is choosing to appeal, seeking to stop this family fleeing persecution and being reunited in the UK via a safe and legal route. Why does she think it is a justifiable use of taxpayers' money to keep challenging the decisions of our courts, as she has announced today she will do in relation to the inhumane and failed Rwanda scheme, rather than taking responsibility for the failures on her watch?

Suella Braverman: What is inhumane, I am afraid, is the Opposition's stance on this subject. They maintain a principled objection—a ludicrous objection, frankly—to our measures, which will save lives, which are humanitarian at core and which will break the people-smuggling gangs. The fact that they continue to oppose those humanitarian measures is beyond me and frankly not in keeping with the tradition of the Labour party.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): I spoke with a constituent on Victoria Street, Grimsby a few weeks ago. He said to me that we will never send illegal migrants back to Rwanda because the left-wing establishment will never allow it to happen. Is he right?

Suella Braverman: The Prime Minister and I have made a promise to the British people to stop the boats. I believe that that is what the British people want us to do fervently and passionately. We are working flat out day in, day out to deliver the measures, to deliver our Bill, to deliver the extra resources and to deliver our partnership with Rwanda. I believe that we will deliver on that promise, and we will get there in the end.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The only policy idea that the Government have is unravelling in front of our eyes. They have built an entire piece of legislation around an idea that is just not working. They also admit that delays in processing asylum claims are part of their deterrence strategy. What is the Home Secretary's back-up plan?

Suella Braverman: Well, what is the hon. Lady's plan? Her plan is to throw a bit more money at the National Crime Agency, speed up the asylum system and add more safe and legal routes. Frankly, that is not a plan. I really urge those on the Labour Benches to take a long, hard look at what they are proposing, because they do not have a plan to stop the boats. What they are proposing is open borders and uncontrolled migration. It is not a plan and it is not what the British people want.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I believe that this is fundamentally a question of democracy: the British people have repeatedly voted for control of immigration, and my Newcastle-under-Lyme constituents expect us to stop the boats. I am grateful for the confirmation in today's ruling that the policy itself is legal. Will the Home Secretary do whatever is necessary—be it by appealing the ruling, by getting a memorandum of

[Aaron Bell]

understanding with the Rwandans on the point on which the Government lost, or through legislation in this House—to ensure that we deliver on that promise and stop the boats?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend speaks for the British people in his powerful question. My answer is simple: yes.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Contrary to what the Home Secretary has just told the House, the vast majority of those in the boats are Iranians and Afghans—just 1% are Albanians. Iranians and Afghans have an asylum grant rate of 98%, because—surprise, surprise, given what is happening in those countries—they are refugees fleeing persecution. The only phoney thing here is the Home Secretary's attempt to avoid responsibility for spending so much taxpayers' money on a policy on which—going by the judgment, and yes, I have read it—she clearly did not do her due diligence.

The Home Secretary will have had to put forward a budget. She says that the Government will do whatever it takes to make this policy work. Are they going to spend whatever it takes? Will she be honest with the British public about how much money she has allocated to continue on this folly to save her blushes in the run-up to the general election? It could go towards processing cases and getting the backlog down.

Suella Braverman: I am not in the business of taking lectures from Labour on this issue.

Stella Creasy: How much money?

Suella Braverman: The reality is that last year, 12,000 Albanians came—

Stella Creasy: How much money?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady has asked her question. It is discourteous for her to sit there repeating it when the Home Secretary is answering it. A bit of courtesy is necessary on all sides.

Suella Braverman: Last year, 30% of those arriving on the boats came from Albania, a safe country—a country from which they are not feasibly fleeing persecution or torture—so it is, again, a fallacy to suggest that everyone coming on the boats is somehow vulnerable or is coming here for humanitarian reasons. The vast majority are young, healthy men. The vast majority are paying willingly for those journeys. They are procuring them from people-smuggling gangs—criminal gangs—and they are coming here, knowingly and willingly breaking our laws, to seek a better life. That is not what humanitarian protection is all about. That is not what refugee status is all about. That is why we need to stop the boats.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I agree with the Lord Chief Justice. Despite what we have heard from Opposition Members, one of the three judges thought we were right; these are finely balanced issues. Of course, the court was preoccupied not so much with the ability of Rwanda to host asylum seekers but with its ability to process their claims. We might find that other countries are willing to work with us but

are also not able to evidence their ability to process claims as well as they can evidence their ability to look after people. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on plans to allow us to process the claims ourselves while people are in a third country, so that we can overcome some of these barriers?

Suella Braverman: We have in recent months put in a huge amount of extra resource focused on the processing of asylum claims. We have increased the number of caseworkers, and we are on track to have over 2,000 caseworkers by September. We have improved and streamlined the process, and we have simplified the guidance, so that we can make decisions and process cases more quickly.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I actually agree with one thing that the Home Secretary has said today: this is hugely frustrating, because the majority of people in this country do want to see an end to the vile, evil people smuggling that is costing lives in the channel. But perhaps the time has come to accept that this immoral, unworkable, expensive scheme, which has now also been found to be illegal, is not the correct way to go about it. Perhaps the Home Secretary might consider the voices from all sides of the House that are saying, “Add more safe legal routes, clamp down on the people smugglers, end the backlog and fix the system.”

Suella Braverman: What is immoral is the position that the Lib Dems have taken in this whole debate. By opposing our humanitarian plans to save lives and stop the people-smuggling gangs, they have put themselves on the same side as the criminal people-smuggling gangs and as open borders. That is what is not moral. That is not what will save lives, and that is not what will stop the boats.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Let us be clear: we all want to see an end to the small boat crossings, and it is wrong of the Home Secretary to try to mischaracterise the Labour position on that front. But the Rwanda policy—if we can call it a policy—was never going to make sufficient inroads into the number of people seeking asylum here to make any difference at all. As the shadow Home Secretary said, it is political hyperbole and it is a total con. I ask the Home Secretary again—and this time, perhaps she will not try to make me answer the question—what is her plan if Rwanda is not an opportunity for the Government to address the issue?

Suella Braverman: It is not over yet. This is a Court of Appeal judgment. We have made it clear that we are seeking permission to appeal it, and we will await the outcome of the next level in the process and the next decision from the courts. It is premature to assume that this is the end of the policy. We maintain a high level of confidence in the lawfulness of the policy. We are committed to delivering it and to working in partnership with Rwanda.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Today's judgment says that Rwanda's physical capacity for housing asylum seekers is limited to 100 people. That represents less than 0.5% of the people who crossed the channel last year. Why on earth, then, have the Government already given £140 million to Rwanda for what is clearly an unethical and unworkable scheme?

Suella Braverman: Both Rwanda and the United Kingdom have made it clear that the scheme is uncapped. Indeed, when I visited Rwanda a few months ago, I visited some of the new accommodation that has been constructed for the precise purpose of supporting people who will be relocated to Rwanda. With respect, I disagree with the hon. Lady. There is potential in our agreement with Rwanda. We have confidence in its lawfulness, and we hope to deliver it as soon as possible.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Court of Appeal has ruled that the Government cannot send refugees to Rwanda. The scheme would cost taxpayers tens of thousands of extra pounds per refugee, yet the Government still seem to want to spend extra millions to challenge the ruling in the Supreme Court. Have the Government thought instead about simply paying for the Arsenal football team's Visit Rwanda sponsorship deal, which would cost less and achieve more than this gimmick of a scheme?

Suella Braverman: What disappoints me is that the hon. Gentleman is failing to grapple with the challenge and the costs that we are incurring right now: £6 million a day on hotel accommodation and £3 billion a year on our asylum system. That cannot go on, which is why the Prime Minister and I have pledged to do whatever it takes to stop the boats, bear down on our asylum backlog and deliver our legislation and our partnership with Rwanda.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): Today's judgment is clear that Rwanda has repeatedly breached its memorandum of understanding with Israel. The Home Secretary is a lawyer, so why is she handing over hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money without doing the basic work to check that the arrangements are legally sound?

Suella Braverman: This judgment, and this dispute, is about our partnership and our agreement with Rwanda, which was secured last year. As the Lord Chief Justice found, it is subject to robust monitoring—a committee that inspects its operation—and very strong and robust

assurances from Rwanda on its delivery. Those give me confidence, which is why I am determined to roll it out as soon as possible.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I have another question on the Government's spending of money, because today's judgment stated that the Rwandan system for refugees is neither reliably fair nor effective, so why did Ministers sign up to sending £140 million to Rwanda without checking that first?

Suella Braverman: We have been up front about the costs of our partnership with Rwanda, and that is a matter of public record. However, what is absolutely clear—I am sorry that I have to repeat it again, but the hon. Gentleman does not seem to be getting the point—is that we are spending £6 million a day on hotel accommodation and £3 billion a year on our asylum system. That cannot continue, which is why we will do whatever it takes to stop the boats.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That concludes proceedings on the statement from the Home Secretary. I thank everybody for taking part.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I strongly support what the Home Secretary has been saying, but I am concerned with ensuring that, in the ping-pong that will ensue when the Illegal Migration Bill returns from the House of Lords—that should be quite soon, we hope—we will not in any way be inhibited by the fact that judicial proceedings are taking place. It will be a really quite important debate, and we need to be able to conduct it with as much latitude as possible, so I seek your guidance. Perhaps I could ask you to give that some thought, if I may.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. It is a point of order, which is a good start—points of order are not usually points of order—and I can assure him that sub judice rules do not apply while legislation is being considered. While the actual process of legislating is under way, sub judice rules do not apply, so the hon. Gentleman need not worry on that ground.

Lawfare

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Joy Morrissey.)

5.3 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): On 20 January last year, I opened a Backbench Business debate on the use of lawfare and strategic litigation against public participation by those seeking to suppress public debate, bully people into submission and conceal vital information that is in the public interest. Free speech matters—that is a truism of our age—but why does it matter? There are many reasons, but the important one is that free speech helps keep our society clean; free of corruption, criminality and the abuse of power.

Typically, such corruption is curbed when whistleblowers expose it; when journalists and a free press report it; and when politicians or judicial authorities act on it. As such, over-mighty men and organisations that have acquired their power and money through corrupt means hate free speech, and use their wealth to suppress it. To do that, they use SLAPPs—strategic litigation against public participation.

SLAPPs are a suite of litigious techniques, used by corrupt plutocrats, that are designed to intimidate, suppress and destroy the same whistleblowers, journalists and politicians who are trying to expose malpractice. They are designed to do this even when the plutocrat has no substantive case at all. They are designed to grind down decent, honest, public-spirited people and ruin them.

Earlier this week in the House of Lords, the Government introduced the first legislative changes designed to tackle this issue of lawfare—SLAPPs. In the intervening period, the problem has been exemplified by the actions of the businessman Mohamed Amersi. I have already named this gentleman several times in the House in connection with our colleague Charlotte Leslie, who had to face two and a half years of fighting Amersi's spurious legal claims against her. That court case was concluded in Charlotte Leslie's favour a few weeks ago.

The judge found that Amersi's case failed on the facts, but, importantly, he added that "several aspects" of Amersi's conduct gave "real cause for concern" about the intent behind his legal case. Amersi delayed the start of defamation proceedings, took an "exorbitant approach to the litigation"

and pursued an unnecessarily complex case. He also pursued a data protection claim and a defamation claim in succession rather than properly in one action, thereby spinning out the case and maximising the stress and cost on Charlotte Leslie. This was clearly an attempt to bully, intimidate and financially ruin Ms Leslie in order to suppress the truth. These are the classic characteristics of a SLAPP case, being designed to destroy free speech, not to deliver justice. The judge also noted that Amersi offered to drop his claim against Charlotte Leslie if he got his way and was given the green light to launch a rival group to Ms Leslie's Conservative Middle East Council. This was a clear attempt to blackmail the Conservative party via a sort of judicial hostage taking.

These are all standard SLAPP tactics, which is unsurprising given that Mr Amersi was represented by Carter-Ruck, the go-to law firm for every bad actor seeking to undermine or misuse British justice. However, Carter-Ruck is not the only law firm willing to aid legal intimidation by dishonest and dishonourable means, if

paid the right price. Others include CMS, Mishcon de Reya, Skadden, Taylor Wessing, Schillings and Harbottle & Lewis.

Charlotte Leslie is not alone in facing lawfare at the hands of Mr Amersi. He is also suing the BBC's "Panorama" programme, and he has threatened *The Guardian*, Chatham House and *Private Eye*. He has also used legal threats to bully King's College London into withdrawing a report on tax avoidance, tax evasion, economic crime and the way this has impacted on our public space and politics. The report was written in 2021 by the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), who was a visiting professor at King's College and is a long-standing campaigner against international corruption. The report was published in May 2022, but due to Amersi's threats it was removed a few weeks later. This report was in the public interest, and highly relevant to our debates on the role and influence of Russian oligarchs and on the economic crime Bill, but access to it by the public, and indeed by Members, was prevented.

Why did Amersi do this? Because he did not like what was being written about him, and because our laws allow those with deep pockets to bully people, suppress negative commentary in the media and stop us holding their actions to public account—and because he is rich enough to do it. But what was it that Mr Amersi wanted to conceal with his SLAPPs? In a word, the truth—a long history of involvement in corruption, in bribery and in buying access to politicians.

Amersi is a wealthy businessman who made large sums of money in Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Nepal, which are all countries where corruption is rife. In 2005, Amersi made \$4 million arranging the acquisition of a Russian telecoms company on behalf of a company he knew was secretly owned by a powerful Putin ally, the then Russian telecoms Minister, Leonid Reiman. He made another \$1.5 million by buying and selling on a Russian telecoms venture, Komet, which was backed by a Russian general. In the UK, Amersi used his fortune to gain access to powerful people. He coined the term "access capitalism", describing his own attempts to gain access to the royal household and Ministers, with payments to Prince Charles's charities and the Conservative party. He and his partner gave £750,000 to the Conservative party, and he makes no bones about what he thought he was buying.

When the Pandora papers were leaked in 2021, they exposed some of the most egregious instances of corruption, economic crime and money laundering. Amersi was in the thick of it. Following the leak, a joint investigation by the BBC and *The Guardian* revealed that he profited from a corrupt deal involving the Swedish energy company Telia, and a high-profile kleptocrat in Uzbekistan. Most of the investigation relied on court documents, and a settlement reached between the Telia and the US Department of Justice, following a four-year investigation into that company's activities. A leaked internal company report described the activities of a consultant called "Mr XY", who it transpires is Mohamed Amersi. It said that some of the payments to Amersi

"may have been utilised to improperly acquire regulatory benefits and/or secure the go-ahead of the transaction."

The report recommended that Telia sack him. That is not surprising, given that Telia's former chief compliance officer said that he had been

"involved in one of the biggest corruption scandals that we have seen in Sweden."

Amersi helped to facilitate a \$220 million purchase of shares from a shell company owned by the daughter of the Uzbek President at the time. That share purchase was in fact a concealed bribe—that was the clear view of the US Department of Justice. Mr Amersi pocketed a \$500,000 million “success fee” following the deal. He claims he was employed by Telia, at a rate of \$10 million a year, for his advanced skills and aptitude for negotiating. Despite those apparent skills, he claims not to have realised that a financial arrangement he helped design facilitated a multimillion dollar bribe. Either he knew it was a bribe, or he was extremely naive and therefore grossly overpaid. I know my view, but I will leave the public to decide theirs.

This is precisely why the right hon. Member for Barking wrote about Mr Amersi in her report last year. This story had already been reported in *The Guardian* and the BBC, and this is the first paragraph that he wanted removed from the right hon. Lady’s paper—I will quote exactly:

“The figures behind the [Pandora] leak are mind-boggling, and the documents contain many scandalous stories which really confirm how utterly awful the abuse of offshore has become. The papers bring to light how Conservative Party donor, Mohamed Amersi, allegedly used BVI-based companies to profit from apparently corrupt deals between a Swedish telecoms giant and a key power broker in the kleptocratic regime in Uzbekistan. They reveal the offshore structures deployed by Putin’s inner circle of oligarchs and allies to buy million-dollar properties along the Monaco seafront. They demonstrate that money flows into onshore tax havens, such as US states like South Dakota, where there is around \$360 billion hidden in secret trusts, including money that could have been derived from corrupt regimes or criminal activities.”

This is the second paragraph that he wanted removed:

“Comments from Mohamed Amersi, a Kenyan-born telecoms millionaire who, as previously discussed, was named in the Pandora Papers, seems to confirm that political donations can have a sinister purpose, after he described his frustrations at what he called ‘access capitalism’. Amersi previously admitted to buying access to Prince Charles and he has also donated £750,000 to the Conservative Party since 2017. He claims to have paid £250,000 to become a member of the party’s ‘Advisory Board’ which has regular meetings with Boris Johnson and leading Cabinet members, and claims that he was promised the chairmanship of a new body, the Conservative Friends of the Middle East and North Africa, a promise that has yet to materialise. The role would have given him significant power and influence as he would have acted as a link between Governments in the region and British Ministers. Amersi is now mired in an international corruption scandal.”

The report of the right hon. Member for Barking, “Losing our moral compass” was about illicit finance and its corrosive impact. It summarised and analysed the features of many corruption cases in the public domain. It was a well-researched and argued paper, designed to inform public debate and written to show how dirty money threatens the integrity of our economy and our political institutions. Ironically, what followed illustrates how right she was.

Within days of the report being published, King’s College and the right hon. Member received legal threats. Through his lawyers at Carter-Ruck, Amersi branded the report highly defamatory. He demanded an apology and that the passages referring to him be either changed or entirely removed. Amersi bullied King’s College into removing the paper. As notional defenders of academic freedom, it should have stood up to him, but it capitulated in the face of his threats. His threat effectively silenced the right hon. Member and suppressed her vital work exposing economic crime and dirty money.

We know that Amersi is no stranger to using his financial might to get what he wants. He has previously paid to meet senior members of the royal family, but organisations such as the Conservative party and Buckingham Palace take serious reputational risks in associating with people like Amersi. His attempts to remove important information from public view are a textbook example of strategic litigation against public participation. They are clearly an exercise in lawfare.

We have an individual with deep pockets who can use British lawyers and courts to suppress the publication of information that is clearly in the public interest. It is done in the knowledge that lengthy legal battles will likely bankrupt politicians, journalists, academic institutions, whistleblowers and others who are brave enough to tell the truth about public corruption. Amersi, like many oligarchs with huge wealth of doubtful origin, is in the business of silencing people. His actions are an example of how the rich and powerful can silence anyone who criticises them. The kleptocrats, oligarchs and bad actors do not care if that means stifling free speech or public debate. Now they are even prepared to try to silence elected Members of Parliament and to block the publication of information that is plainly in the public interest.

We find ourselves in a dangerous situation, where the abuse of the legal system is now damaging the very core of our democracy. The cases faced by the right hon. Member for Barking and Charlotte Leslie serve as a glaring example of that. It is to the disadvantage of the whole country when public interest investigations by Tom Burgis, HarperCollins, Catherine Belton, Eliot Higgins, openDemocracy, Oliver Bullough and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism are shut down. Fortunately, the Government responded quickly to our debates on this issue last January. They almost immediately held a major consultation, which resulted in proposals for reform. On Tuesday this week, they introduced the first anti-SLAPP measures in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, which is currently making its way through Parliament.

The measures will empower the courts to strike out SLAPPs before trial. They will also prevent courts from ordering defendants to pay claimants’ costs in relation to a SLAPP claim, unless misconduct by the defendants justifies that. Once a claim is deemed to be a SLAPP, the burden will be on the claimant to prove that their claim is more likely than not to succeed. If not, the claim can be struck out. This is a welcome reversal of the burden of proof. Taken together, these measures are a great win for those looking to shine a spotlight on economic crime and speak truth to power, but we must go further.

As things stand, the measures only apply to economic crimes. Approximately 70% of the crimes listed in April 2022 in the Foreign Policy Centre report were connected to financial crime and corruption, but SLAPPs have also been used to silence reporting on human rights abuses, labour practices, regulatory non-compliance and an array of other abuses that do not relate to economic crime. To be truly effective, we must broaden anti-SLAPP provisions so that they apply to all defamation lawsuits, because ultimately we want to ensure that people such as Wagner’s chief, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who has been in the news this week, are not able to silence and intimidate journalists, as he did to a Bellingcat reporter earlier this year. I welcome the commitment from Lord Bellamy on Tuesday that the Government will complete

“the jigsaw as soon as a suitable legislative vehicle appears.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 27 June 2023; Vol. 831, c. 629.]

[Mr David Davis]

The issue will not end with reforms to defamation law. Data protection law and subject access requests are becoming yet another weapon for bullying people into silence. We also need proper regulation of private investigators, who in many instances have enabled SLAPPs through intrusive and often illegal surveillance or hacking. Justice Nicklin said that the tactic that Amersi's lawyers used against Charlotte Leslie—that of bringing separate claims in succession—

“can be a hallmark of abusive conduct”.

I think he was being delicate in that reference to SLAPPs.

We could improve the Government's proposals by allowing the courts to make the law firms and solicitors involved in SLAPPs pay the cost to the public purse, and so take the fight directly to those who enable SLAPPs. The London lawyers I listed earlier—Carter-Ruck and the rest—have designed a litany of tactics not to promote justice, but to suppress truth; not to protect reputations, but to silence legitimate criticism; not to ensure accountability, but to cover up corruption. That behaviour should not go unpunished. They should be made to meet the costs of wasting the courts' time.

Our legal system is a source of pride. Britain is home to some of the fairest and best courts in the world. We cannot allow individuals with deep pockets and questionable motives to exploit our justice system and destroy our reputation as a trusted jurisdiction. Expanding anti-SLAPP measures will put an end to this perversion of our legal system that seeks to intimidate, threaten, and suppress British journalists, academics, civil society, and sitting Members of Parliament. We have made good progress, but if we fail to understand the magnitude of this issue and to fully address this problem, then, as the right hon. Member for Barking stated in her report, we are truly at risk of losing our moral compass.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) for securing this important debate. It gives me an opportunity to restate the Government's commitment to freedom of speech and the protection of journalists. First, let me emphasise that investigative journalism is a central plank of a functioning democracy. The UK launched a national action plan in 2021 to ensure that we continue to foster an environment in which journalists feel safe from physical harm and intimidation, and where those who threaten them are properly held to account. Our aim is to ensure that journalists operating in the UK are as safe as possible, to reduce the number of attacks on and threats issued to journalists, and to ensure that those responsible for such action are brought to justice.

The UK may not face the same challenges as other states, but it is clear that journalists operating here still face threats to their personal safety, largely through online abuse. As we rely on journalists to hold powerful actors to account for our collective good, lawfare that targets our public watchdogs through aggressive, intimidatory tactics must be stamped out.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought home the urgent need for Government action on strategic lawsuits against public participation, as my right hon. Friend has laid out clearly. SLAPPs are an increasingly common lawfare

tactic, and there are reports that hostile states could finance litigation in the UK to obstruct worthwhile investigations into corruption and other wrongdoing, as my right hon. Friend has set out many times. We know that the Government's decisive action on sanctions has already urged firms to review their Russian client list, and mitigated threats to national security. Insurers are increasingly cautious about granting professional indemnity insurance, and that reflects the fact that there is greater scrutiny of Russian-linked litigation.

As this House will recall, the Government published a call for evidence on SLAPPs in 2022. I thank the 120 respondents, who submitted evidence of the highest quality. Through that invaluable evidence and a series of stakeholder engagement roundtables, we heard the shocking impact that these cases can have on the wellbeing and livelihood of investigative journalists who report under immense financial and psychological pressure so that we, as a collective, are well informed. They must be protected so that they are able to continue their valuable work. SLAPPs present a novel challenge to free speech and we are immensely grateful to the call for evidence respondents for helping to ensure that we get this right and deliver the outcome we want to see.

Free speech is a fundamental cornerstone of our democracy, so I am pleased to confirm that the Government have acted decisively to legislate, tabling amendments to the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, which introduce measures to tackle SLAPPs related to economic crime. The Government still intend to introduce comprehensive anti-SLAPPs legislation when parliamentary time allows. If I may, I might gently suggest that my right hon. Friend applies for a private Member's Bill. A Government legislative vehicle may take some time to appear, so a private Member's Bill in the next Session might be suitable lighter codicil for this particular piece of legislation. We intend to go further, but we believe that the measures we have introduced will catch the majority of SLAPPs. At least 70% of the cases referenced in a 2022 report about SLAPPs and article 19 by the Foreign Policy Centre were connected to financial crime and corruption. The provisions should therefore target a significant proportion of cases.

Recent court cases have shown that SLAPPs are difficult to identify and there is a notable difference in legal and judicial opinion on what constitutes a SLAPP, both domestically and overseas. To rectify that, we have introduced a statutory definition to enable clearer identification of SLAPPs related to economic crime, according to common characteristics. Those characteristics may include aggressive pre-action communications and targeting of individuals where their publishers would be more appropriate. Today, we know that defendants are intimidated by the prospect of years of litigation that require expensive legal defence. We have therefore introduced an early dismissal process which will effectively stop claimants from financially and psychologically exhausting their opponents via abusive means, cutting short cases which have no merit.

With respect to economic crime, no longer will claimants be able to suppress legitimate investigation into and reporting on matters of public interest by bringing baseless claims. The crippling costs currently borne by SLAPPs defendants will be addressed through a new costs protection regime, which will ensure that journalists and free speech advocates are able to litigate without

fear of bankruptcy. The regime will be introduced in secondary legislation, once the principles are set out in statute. The regime will frustrate a central plank of SLAPP claims: the weaponisation of costs.

In addition, stakeholder engagement continues to be a vital part of our monitoring effort to ensure that the Government's response to the issue of SLAPPs is appropriate and effective. We are working closely with the Solicitors Regulation Authority, which should be applauded for its action on SLAPPs. In February, it published a thematic review of the behaviour in disputes of 25 law firms suspected of SLAPP activity, a deep dive into conduct that may breach ethical or regulatory duties. It also issued, in March, additional guidance on conduct in disputes. This shows that our system of regulation is adapting at pace to novel challenges.

I must underline that the vast majority of legal professionals operating in this jurisdiction do so with utmost integrity and regard for the rule of law. Therefore, it is vital to protect the integrity of our legal system and our judiciary from the reputational risk that SLAPPs pose.

Our common law system is world-renowned, precisely because of the quality of the practitioners and procedures that we use. It must remain that way. The importance we place on access to justice and an independent judiciary naturally leads to foreign litigants choosing to do business in our courts, but we must not, and will not, allow the process and procedures to be abused for most improper purposes. That must be stopped, as my right hon. Friend laid out, including attempts to conceal economic crime.

I thank my right hon. Friend for continuing to champion this critical issue, and our stakeholders who have tirelessly campaigned against abuse of the legal system. I would like to end by repeating his own words. He said:

"Our legal system is a source of pride. Britain is home to some of the fairest and best courts in the world. We cannot allow individuals with deep pockets and questionable motives to exploit our justice system and destroy our reputation as a trusted jurisdiction."

The Government could not have put it better.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 29 June 2023

[MRS PAULINE LATHAM *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Electronic Cigarettes

1.30 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham)
(Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered electronic cigarette use.

E-cigarettes were introduced as a stop-smoking device, but in my opinion they have moved from being a stop-smoking device to an alternative addiction. Indeed, they are attracting many non-smokers. In 2007, there were around 10.6 million smokers, according to official figures. The number fell to 6.6 million in 2022, so 4 million smokers had stopped. Sadly, it is estimated that around 1 million of those people died, which means that around 3 million quit smoking. That is undoubtedly a huge success, although it cannot be attributed entirely to vapes.

In the Health and Social Care Committee yesterday, we heard from the industry that it estimates that around 5 million people currently vape in the UK, which means that, even by the most generous estimates, 2 million of them were not smokers beforehand—a significant proportion of the vaping market. With the market estimated to be worth £4 billion a year, these products clearly have huge profit margins. Vapes have been available for a long time, but if they are genuinely safe, healthy devices that save lives by stopping people smoking, why does the NHS not provide any on prescription? I wonder whether it is because they are not safe and the NHS has been unable to develop the safety profile as well as it might wish.

The idea that e-cigarettes are 95% safer than smoking was quantified by Public Health England. Members will no doubt have heard the figure before, because the vaping lobby never tires of repeating it, but if we look into its origins, its veracity seems to suddenly disappear. The figure originated in a 2014 paper in a journal called *European Addiction Research*, but it comes with some important caveats. The study was partly funded by the Italian Anti-Smoking League, and one of its authors was a member of that organisation and served as a consultant to an e-cigarette distributor at the time. That blatant potential conflict of interest did not escape the journal's editors, who added a warning note at the end of the paper, but it certainly escaped subsequent reporting of the figure.

The scientific journal *The Lancet* was even more excoriating of the original article, accusing it of having “an almost total absence of evidence”

and of being based on

“the opinions of a small groups of individuals with no prespecified expertise in tobacco control”.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the paper is seriously outdated. Since 2014, a plethora of evidence has emerged about the negative effects of these novel and fast-evolving

devices, in studies that were never considered when the figure of 95% was reached. I am concerned that the statistic will age about as well as the claims made to past generations about the health benefits of smoking.

As we delve deeper into the topic, it becomes evident that a growing body of evidence links vaping to severe complications. Chronic bronchitis, emphysema, increased blood pressure and significantly worse physical performance are just some of the adverse effects associated with vaping that scientists have found. Furthermore, the high nicotine content, which some say is roughly equivalent to between 40 and 50 cigarettes in a disposable vape, poses a grave risk to the health and wellbeing of young people. We heard yesterday in the Health and Social Care Committee from Dr Helen Stewart of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health—I should declare my interest as a member of that college and a consultant paediatrician—who told us about the difficulties that children are facing. Some of them are not going to the toilet during school time because the clouds of vapour they experience there trigger their asthma and make them unwell. We heard about children collapsing, too.

The number of children vaping is increasing. The evidence submitted to the Health and Social Care Committee by the vaping industry suggests that over 83% of children have never vaped or are unaware of vaping, but that flies in the face of the experience of most of the children, teachers and doctors I have spoken to. Indeed, a report on Blackpool published by Healthwatch in May found that a staggering 31% of children and young people claim to vape or sometimes vape. More disturbingly still, when I asked Healthwatch if it could break down its figures by age, it said that one in ten 10 and 11-year-olds vapes. These are children in year 6. That rises to nearly one in five 12 to 13-year-olds, while for 16 to 17-year-olds the figure was almost one in two. We have also noticed that the number of children vaping is rising extremely quickly.

I would like share a distressing incident from my constituency. In just one school, St George's Academy in Sleaford, there have been eight reported cases of children collapsing after vaping. Those incidents occurred at different times with different children. I was deeply troubled to hear about this, so I went to visit them and met with one of the intelligence officers from Lincolnshire police, who had collected five vapes from another school.

In just those five vapes they found Velvana Fridex Eko, a modern non-toxic coolant intended for cooling cast iron and aluminium engines, as well as Avanti coolant antifreeze, Steol-M, which is designed for filling hydraulic devices, and Rauvolfia serpentina, or Indian snakeroot. Also found was Agip antifreeze, trichloroethylene, and poster and watercolour varnish—1-methoxy-2-propanol—along with diethylene glycol diacetate and 2-methoxyethyl acetate, a substance that may damage fertility and unborn children and is harmful to the skin if inhaled or swallowed. They also found aviptadil, a synthetic vasoactive intestinal peptide that is used to treat certain medical conditions.

These vapes do not contain what the children think they do, and they can be very dangerous. The police found that some children had significant health issues. The eight children who collapsed in Sleaford were taken to hospital. Thankfully, they have all recovered, but in one description given to me, a child taken to hospital in the back of a car had one side of his face drooped down

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

as if he had had a stroke. His mother was clearly terrified by this. Another young boy said that he thought he was walking along through the marketplace in Sleaford when he realised that people were gathered around someone who had collapsed. Then he realised, as if looking from above, that that person was him. We have heard some really scary stories about what has been going on.

We hear that vaping is a good route to quitting, but we should balance the fact that it may help adults to quit with the need to keep these devices away from children. One of the things that makes vapes attractive to children is how inexpensive they are. We have seen them at £4 each, three for a tenner and those sorts of prices, which is clearly within pocket money range. When children can get disposables so cheaply, they are easy to discard. If a child finds that mum or dad is coming down the corridor or up to the bedroom, they can dispose of them quite quickly. When teachers come into the toilet, they can be disposed of, including in sanitary waste bins, which poses other hazards, too.

How much nicotine is in vapes? The average disposable contains 2 ml of e-liquid at 20 mg/ml nicotine strength, which I am told is the equivalent of 40 to 50 cigarettes. The reason for that is that people only take about 10% of the nicotine from cigarettes into their lungs—the rest of the time it just goes into the air—so vapes are stronger in many cases than cigarettes.

The other issue I want to raise with the Minister today is marketing tactics. We heard yesterday from the chief executive of Totally Wicked, who I challenged on his marketing techniques. Totally Wicked sponsors Blackburn Rovers and a rugby team as well, so the stadium is called Totally Wicked. The young men on the pitch—the heroes, as he called them, who those young men and women admire so much—are running around with T-shirts emblazoned with “Totally Wicked”. He said that the young people’s ones do not have that logo on. I checked this morning and found no evidence of them selling any junior shirts, which begs the question of what happened to them all. The suspicion might be that they have disappeared off sale—we do not know.

The Online Safety Bill offers an opportunity to ensure that vapes are not advertised on platforms such as TikTok. Vapes have bright, attractive packaging, with colours and flavours such as bubble gum. Why does an adult smoker need a unicorn milkshake-flavoured vape to quit? My 12-year-old daughter is too old for unicorns, she would tell me now, so why an adult would need a unicorn, I do not know. These vapes have become fashion accessories, and are being matched to outfits. Walk into any corner shop and we can see a whole rainbow from which to choose. There are understandable concerns that some manufacturers are deliberately doing that. They would all deny it, of course, and I hope that it is not the case, but with flavours such as unicorn milkshake, bubble gum, candy floss and green Gummy Bear, it is clear that these things are far too attractive to children. I ask the Minister to consider whether, if these are truly stop-smoking devices and not lifestyle products that are attractive to children, they really need to be coloured and flavoured. I do not think they do.

The environmental impact of disposable vapes has been highlighted by a number of my colleagues in the House on a number of occasions. Some 1.3 million disposable vapes are discarded in the UK every week.

The vast majority are not recycled. Their complex construction and high nicotine concentration make proper disposal challenging. They also contain lithium batteries, a precious and vital resource in our transition away from fossil fuels that is being discarded willy-nilly, sometimes into rivers and water courses. That further exacerbates the environmental consequences.

Vapes have also been known to cause fires in bins, bin lorries and recycling centres. They pose a danger. I am also advised that the plastic, because the nicotine salts leak into it, becomes hazardous waste and is non-recyclable in any case. I urge the Government to back my ten-minute rule Bill and to ban these devices. A ban has been backed by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. It is a widely supported measure.

As well as the issue with colours and flavours, we need tougher regulations on the advertising and marketing of vaping products. Health warnings should cover 65% of the front and back of the pack, in the same way as for tobacco. Sports club sponsorships should be banned. I cannot see why these products need to be advertised on sporting shirts; there is also the worry that that will make them more attractive to children.

When the former Government brought in bans on where people could smoke and where cigarettes could be displayed, the number of smokers dropped dramatically. I appreciate that that is a nanny state measure and, as Conservatives, we are reluctant to bring in nanny state measures. Nevertheless, it did work. If we were to ask people now whether we should reverse that measure, I do not think that many, if any, would agree. I suggest that as a sensible step forward.

At the moment, we are banning sweets at the till because we think that will help to stop people becoming obese, but I have been into shops where those sweets have been replaced with vapes. I am sure most people would much prefer that their child had a packet of Rolos than a vape.

My third point is about regulation. The industry is actually quite positive on this issue, and is keen for regulation—at least, that is what they say. At the moment, anyone can sell a vape. When I take my son for a haircut, we could get three lemon-flavoured vapes for £1 while we are there. He is only eight, so he will not be getting any, but we could. If we go to the sweetie shops on Oxford Street, we can buy them along with the candy.

Having the same sort of regulations as for tobacco or alcohol would mean that people would have to be licensed and would be challenged to make sure that vapes did not get into the hands of children, and there would be bigger fines. I saw an example of someone being fined £200 for selling these things to children. That is clearly no disincentive. A proper regulatory framework, where people lose their ability to sell these fairly lucrative products in the event that they break the regulations, will reduce the supply to children.

I also wanted to raise taxation. I appreciate that it is not the Minister’s responsibility, but he can raise it with the Chancellor and other colleagues. This measure was supported by Action on Smoking and Health in the Health Committee yesterday. If vapes are around £4 and a packet of cigarettes is £12, we could add considerable amounts—ASH is asking for a £5 tax on every disposable vape—as a way of taking them out of the range of children’s pocket money, while making sure that they

are still cheaper than a packet of cigarettes for those adults who genuinely are smokers who wish to quit. Children are very price-sensitive and we need to deter them from this harmful habit.

My final point is about education. We heard from the headteacher of St George's Academy yesterday in the Health Committee. Children need to know about vapes, and understand that they are not lifestyle products for them to use but aids for adults to stop smoking. The relationships, sex and health education curriculum review that is being done at the moment offers Ministers an opportunity to ensure that that happens. I am interested to hear what the Minister has to say.

1.45 pm

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): It is always a pleasure to speak in a debate that you chair, Mrs Latham, and today is no exception. While I do not disagree with the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), I do come at the issue from a very different angle.

Every smoker is different. The reason they smoke and the reason they struggle to quit is different, and their ultimate method of quitting is different too. In my case, after smoking for the vast majority of the last 40 years, I can honestly say that I totally enjoyed virtually every cigarette I had over those decades. Quitting was never on my agenda, despite persistent nudging from friends and family members. Imagine my horror, then, when I was presented with a device called an IQOS, just to try out. It was even presented as a bet that I would find the experience similar to smoking a cigarette, but it would be about 90% less harmful for me. Just for the record, I do not have any shares in the company, nor do I stand to make any financial gain from the device.

The IQOS uses heated tobacco. On 12 March, I smoked my last traditional cigarette, and now, after losing the bet, use heated tobacco on a daily basis. My long-standing smoker's cough has completely disappeared, and my breathing is now far stronger—I am sure that with the loss of a few more pounds it will become even stronger still.

I support the Government in their embrace of tobacco harm reduction strategies. I urge the Minister to continue to ensure access to a full range of less harmful alternatives to smoking. As we have seen, people who want to stop smoking use a variety of methods and aids to do so, whether that is patches, pouches, hypnosis, tablets or even going cold turkey. While for me the IQOS and the heated tobacco system is perfect, many people also use vapes.

While anything is better than smoking for one's health, there are approximately 3.3 million vapers—although I think my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham said the figure was about 5 million in the UK. The only problem with vaping—apart from all the things she brought up—is that, according to Action on Smoking and Health, 35% of vapers also smoke cigarettes. The vape is dual use: people use it in places where they cannot smoke, and they smoke in places where they can. I strongly believe from my own experience that this is because vapes do not mimic the feeling of a cigarette as heated tobacco does.

On electronic cigarettes especially, I share my hon. Friend's concerns about youth accessing vaping products. I am pleased that there are studies that have shown that heated tobacco products are less attractive than vapes

to younger people who have never smoked. Additionally, the same research into heated tobacco products shows that they pose significantly less risk to users than traditional cigarettes. By heating tobacco rather than burning it, those products produce substantially less harmful and potentially harmful chemicals than cigarettes. That makes them less harmful for users—and, of course, they have stopped my long-standing cough.

We see the impact of reduced-risk tobacco products evidenced in some of the most progressive countries in the world. For example, in Japan, the first country to launch heated tobacco products, the sale of cigarettes has fallen by an average of 9.5% annually, compared with 1.8% before the introduction of heated tobacco. As a result, the burden on its healthcare system has also eased considerably, with a statistically significant reduction in rates of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and ischemic heart disease.

Another reduced-risk tobacco product is Snus, which is not available in the UK, but is largely responsible for Sweden's national smoking rate of 6%. That figure puts Sweden in place to be the first country in the world to reach smoke-free status. That is a target that the UK is due to miss by 2030—although I hope the Minister will tell me different. As we work to reduce the NHS backlog, it is essential that we take a pragmatic and evidence-led approach, and note research in countries such as Japan and Sweden where harm reduction policies are having a significant impact on reducing smoking rates and, as such, there is reduced demand on their health services.

While there are further lessons we can learn from other nations, we in the UK should be proud of our role as a world leader in harm reduction. For example, the Government's "swap to stop" scheme is the first of its kind in the world. It is essential that the UK stands up for its positive harm reduction policies at international forums, such as at the upcoming COP10 to the World Health Organisation framework convention on tobacco control in Panama in November. Now the UK has left the EU, we have the freedom to speak up and ensure that our sovereignty and our health and taxation policy formation are protected. If we do not use that opportunity in November, the WHO may seek to impede our taxation sovereignty in this area. Indeed, more widely, it threatens to stop access to heated tobacco products—that is where the self-interest comes in, of course—as it looks to get signatories to apply the same rules to heated tobacco products and other nicotine products, such as vapes, as we currently do to cigarettes, despite their less harmful nature. As such, I would be grateful if the Minister outlined what plans he has to stand up for vaping and heated tobacco at COP10 in November, and committed to opposing any recommendations that are counter to our own sovereign-established position here in the UK.

As I have said, I am grateful for the opportunity to raise my personal experience of quitting smoking through the use of reduced-risk products, and we have a positive story to tell here in the UK about our approach to harm reduction. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about his plans to protect health in the UK. It has made a huge impact on my life, even after just four short months.

1.52 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see the MP for the second-best Rolls-Royce site in the UK in the Chair, Mrs Latham.

[Gavin Newlands]

I congratulate the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson)—if I can read my own writing, which is a first—on securing the debate. She set out the issues rather well and debunked many of the various questions—sorry, various assertions; I said I could not read my own writing—that the vaping industry likes to promulgate in the media.

The hon. Member spoke about the incidents at St George's Academy, with eight reported cases of children collapsing after vaping. I will not try to repeat the rather horrific menu of ingredients that our children are being exposed to, but that was clearly deeply concerning. The hon. Member cited, among other things, marketing techniques. I could not agree with her more, and I will elaborate on that later. She said her 12-year-old would probably say she is too old for unicorns, but I would say you are never too old for Scotland's national animal.

The right hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) took a different tack, and I am genuinely pleased for him about his tobacco harm reduction journey. As somebody who grew up with a parent who smoked—I will not say, “in a smoke-filled house”; that would be doing my mother a disservice—I have always hated tobacco, to be perfectly honest, and the thought of heated tobacco is not something that sounds particularly nice. While largely based on the right hon. Member's experience, his speech was a bit of an advert for heated tobacco. It may well have a place in reducing tobacco harm, but I am not sure whether it reduces the harm enough. I also disagree with his final point about the World Health Organisation recommendations to make vapes and other tobacco products as difficult to acquire as cigarettes, but I am more than happy to learn more about that.

As the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham said, the number of people using e-cigarettes in the UK has risen astronomically. It has now reached around 5 million people, which is over 8% of the population. That unprecedented increase in such a short time raises serious questions about the safety of e-cigarettes from both a public health and environmental point of view. Current evidence shows that the use of e-cigarettes is less harmful and risky than smoking tobacco, but that does not mean that e-cigarettes are not harmful; they are only the lesser of two evils.

According to a 2022 YouGov survey, the occasional and regular use of e-cigarettes among 11 to 17-year-olds has doubled since the previous year. As a father of a 13-year-old and a 16-year-old, I find that deeply concerning. The adolescent brain is particularly vulnerable to the effects of nicotine. Vaping can impact young people's brain development, impacting their cognitive functions such as attention, memory and learning.

The same study found that 40% of those using e-cigarettes have never smoked tobacco. The WHO has also stated there is evidence to suggest that “never-smoker”—a new phrase to me—minors who use e-cigarettes are twice as likely to take up smoking later in life. That raises serious concerns, as the consumption of nicotine in children and adolescents can lead to long-term developmental consequences and potential learning and anxiety disorders.

We have said many times in this place that the scale of mental health problems, particularly among young people, was increasing significantly before the pandemic, but

that increase became exponential during it. Frontline staff working with children and young people at Catch22 are concerned that vaping is a habit used to cope with those negative feelings. Running away from negative feelings and problems by using substances is a dangerous path which has led many adults to addiction and mental issues later in life. In short, vaping is a gateway to riskier behaviour, problematic or dependent substance use, and mental health issues.

As we have touched on already, serious concerns have rightly been raised about the marketing of e-cigarettes. Specifically, the colourful branding and variety of flavours has been likened to that of sweets and other confectionary. Combined with content that glamorises e-cigarettes on popular social media platforms such as TikTok, those tactics can lead to misinformation about the dangers of vaping among the younger generations.

In July, an investigation by *The Observer* found that ElfBar, a company with no moral or social compass, was flouting rules to promote its products to young people in Britain. Items were advertised in TikTok videos by influencers, who in some cases claimed to be paid for the promotions and to benefit from free products. The videos, many of which showed influencers vaping on camera, were not age-restricted and were not always clearly marked as ads. Some attracted hundreds of thousands of views on TikTok, which is used by half of eight to 11-year-olds and three quarters of 16 to 17-year-olds. ElfBar is no longer able to sell its products domestically, with China having banned them, but it is free to export them to our young people.

E-cigarette emissions contain nicotine and other toxic substances that are harmful to users and to non-users, who are exposed to aerosols at second hand. Some products claiming to be nicotine-free have been found to contain nicotine. In addition, while cigarette smokers tend to be more discreet about blowing their smoke away from other people, in my experience many vapers have no qualms about blowing large plumes of emissions, which at times resemble small clouds, anywhere and everywhere. The result is that many of us cannot avoid walking through or breathing in their vapours.

Cheap and easy-to-use disposable vapes are booming in popularity, creating a mass waste issue. Shockingly, an estimated 13.5 million disposable vapes are bought in Scotland annually—two and a half disposable vapes per man, woman and child. Discarded vapes result in 10 tonnes of lithium being sent to landfill each year, which is equivalent to the lithium content of 1,200 electric vehicle batteries. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency has stated that when single-use batteries are disposed of incorrectly, which in most cases they are, heavy metals may leak into the ground when the battery casing corrodes. That can cause soil and water pollution, and endanger wildlife and human health. Scotland is trying to move towards a circular economy and a waste-free society, and working to support the recycling of electronic cigarettes, but any regulation to ban them must come from Westminster.

Of course the waste is a huge factor, but it pales into insignificance compared with the risk to our children and young adults that vaping poses. Despite what anyone from the industry says, the flavours, styling and advertising are quite clearly aimed at the young. My view is not only that advertising should be banned, but that disposable vapes should be banned as soon as possible. What are

the Government doing to address the wide availability of disposable vapes to young people—vapes that, as we have heard, are often illegal and substantially more dangerous? More widely, what are the Government doing to tackle vaping among young people and children?

Although e-cigarettes are intended to be a healthier alternative to tobacco, recent research shows a completely different and, to be frank, fairly frightening picture. Too little is known about the long-term impact of e-cigs, and the demographic using vapes is far from what I am sure many envisaged. With statistics showing the escalation in younger generations using e-cigarettes, it is crystal clear that, beyond the point I just made about banning disposables, stricter regulations on marketing and sales are essential if we are to protect future generations. A study by Action on Smoking and Health found that corner shops were the “main source of purchase” for children and young people, so we must do more to crack down on shopkeepers who sell disposable vapes to those who are under-age.

Finally, it is critical that more research is carried out to ensure that we understand the long-term impact that vaping and exposure to high levels of nicotine has on health. We must never forget that nicotine is a highly addictive drug and can have a catastrophic impact on people's health.

2.2 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham, and to respond to the points made in the course of this afternoon's debate on behalf of the official Opposition. I thank the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) not just for securing the debate, but for the enormous amount of campaigning work that she is doing on this issue and for the wide-ranging and detailed scene-setting speech she gave at the beginning, which highlighted the extent of the challenge and the severity of the risk to children's health.

Sadly, I think the hon. Lady has more work to do on her colleagues in the Government when it comes to her proposal to ban disposable vapes. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care gave a speech this week on “recasting prevention from a Conservative perspective”—

whatever that means—in which he argued that bans are left wing and an affront to personal freedom. I look forward to finding out what that means for the Government's drugs policy, but let me be the first to welcome the hon. Lady—our new comrade—to the left. The lyrics to “The Red Flag” are in the post.

I will address the point raised by the right hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker). The central argument put forward by the vaping industry is that, at their most effective, e-cigarettes are a useful tool for driving down smoking rates. As Dr Javed Khan highlighted in his 2030 smokefree review, if we want to create a smokefree Britain, using vapes and other smoking cessation aids will be essential in reaching that ambition, but we should be under no illusion: although vapes are unquestionably less harmful than cigarettes, they are none the less harmful products.

I share the deep concerns that Members have expressed about the impact that the vaping industry is having on children, because it is not targeting children to get them off cigarettes, but to get them on nicotine. I do not care what the industry leaders told the Health and Social

Care Committee yesterday; frankly, they are insulting the public's intelligence. If someone walks down pretty much any high street in our country today, they will be able to buy brightly coloured vapes and e-liquids with names such as Vimto Breeze, Mango Ice, or indeed Unicorns. There is no doubt that these products are being designed, packaged, marketed and sold deliberately to children.

It is no wonder that there has been an explosion of under-age vaping in recent years. Action on Smoking and Health estimates that in just the last three years, under-age vaping has increased by 50%, which shows that the vast majority of kids are being exposed to e-cigarette promotions. In this debate today, we have heard about the impact of illicit goods and the harmful substances that many of these products, which are often sold to children, contain. I personally have heard horrifying stories about the extent of their promotion on popular social media platforms, where children are able to buy them with ease, although, frankly, they can also chance their arm quite successfully on our high streets.

The effects of these products should seriously trouble us all. Teachers have to monitor toilets in schools where children congregate to vape; children make up excuses to leave their classroom in order to satisfy their nicotine cravings; and children in primary school, aged nine or younger, end up in hospital because of the impact of vaping. Paediatric chest physicians report that children are being put in intensive care units for conditions such as lung bleeding, lung collapse and lungs filling up with fat. One girl who started vaping while she was at school told the BBC last week that she has:

“no control over it. I start to get shaky and it's almost all I can think of.”

I have seen some people warning of a “moral panic” about under-age vaping, but children who are addicted to a drug are unable to focus in the classroom, and it affects their behaviour in other ways, too. We cannot sit back and allow a new generation of kids to get hooked on nicotine.

I recognise that this concern is shared by Members across the House, but I have to say that it is hard to swallow the comments of Ministers, including the Prime Minister, who try to grab headlines today by promising a crackdown on under-age vaping at some time in the future, because they had a chance to vote for such a crackdown two years ago. Labour tabled an amendment to the Health and Care Act 2022 to ban the marketing of vapes to under-18s, and it was Conservative Members who voted it down. I hope that Ministers have had a genuine change of heart, but either way there will be action on this issue after the general election. The next Labour Government will come down like a ton of bricks on companies pushing nicotine to children and we will ban the branding and advertising of vapes to children.

I want to press the Minister on the Government's progress towards their Smokefree 2030 target, which Cancer Research UK estimates they are set to miss by nine years. That will result in thousands of additional deaths due to the health impacts of tobacco and pile more and more pressure on an already overburdened national health service. Cancer Research UK also estimates that, on current trends, smoking will cause one million cancer cases by 2040. What are the Government planning to do to get us back on track?

[Wes Streeting]

What has happened to the Government's tobacco control plan, which was promised in December 2021? Prevention is better than cure, so the next Labour Government will shift the NHS from being a service focused only on treating sickness to one that prevents ill health in the first place, because that approach is better for patients and less expensive for the taxpayer. We would make all hospital trusts integrate smoking cessation interventions into routine care and we would expect every trust to have a named lead on smoking cessation. This would come alongside work with councils to improve access to e-cigarettes as a stop-smoking aid, and a clamp-down on the pervasive myths peddled by the tobacco industry that smoking reduces stress and anxiety.

That is Labour's plan to build a healthier society; that is Labour putting the vaping industry on notice that we will not sit idly by and allow a generation of young people to become addicted to nicotine. Where is the Government's plan?

2.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), who is a former colleague in the Department for Health and Social Care. I thank her not only for this debate and her brilliant speech, which was full of interesting observations and ideas, striking and concerning anecdotes, and great wit, but for her work in really driving the debate on vaping in recent months and years. She has been a leading voice in this area. Likewise, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) for his interesting insights.

Before I get into the main body of my speech, I will address some of the specific issues raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham asked about the availability of prescription products. The reason they are not available is that the producers have not come forward with them at this stage. We remain hopeful that that will happen, but we are reliant on commercial companies wanting to do it. That is not about concerns that it is less safe than smoking; it is just about commercial partners bringing that forward for approval.

The SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), pointed out that, interestingly, vaping products are not available in China, even though it exports them to the rest of the world. I do not think that that has as much to do with the Chinese Communist party's position on public health as it does with the fact that it gets huge revenues from its ownership of the tobacco industry, which is still extremely big in China. I think it has more to do with that than with an enlightened view on the relative safety of vaping and smoking.

The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), asked specifically what we are doing on smoking. Smoking rates came down from some 40% in the 1970s to 21% in 2010, and they are now at a record low of 13%. That is partly because we have doubled excise duties and brought in a minimum excise tax on the cheapest cigarettes, but it is also because we continue to take further measures, including the measures I announced recently, such as the help for a million

smokers to "swap to stop", which is an innovative, world-first policy, and our provision of health incentives to help those smoking during pregnancy to stop. We know from partners in local areas that evidence-based policy works. Much has been done and there is yet more to do in the future.

I absolutely understand the concerns, and I am just as motivated as my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham by the challenge of youth vaping. Until recently, our regulations, such as the minimum age of sale, advertising restrictions and the cap on nicotine levels, had been holding down vaping rates. However, over the last two years we have started to see a surge in the use and promotion of cheap, colourful products that do not always comply with our regulations. As hon. Members have mentioned, there has been a sharp increase in children vaping and the awareness of vaping. That is of great concern to me, for exactly the same reason that it concerns my hon. Friend.

Despite its high effectiveness as a tool to help adults quit smoking, we are absolutely aware of the risks that vapes pose to children. Vapes are not risk-free. Nicotine is highly addictive, it can be harmful and there are unanswered questions on long-term use, as raised by my hon. Friend. As Professor Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer, said:

"If you smoke, vaping is much safer; if you don't smoke, don't vape".

Last month, the Prime Minister announced several new measures to tackle youth vaping, including taking steps to close the loophole in our laws that allows the vaping industry to give out free samples of vapes to under-18s. Recent data suggests that 2% of 11 to 15-year-old ever vapers—approximately 20,000 of them—said that they were given it by a vape company, so we will stop that.

Secondly, the Prime Minister announced that we will update the health education curriculum to teach kids about the risks of vaping, as called for by my hon. Friend, just as schools do for the risks of smoking and excessive drinking. To support that, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities is producing a new resource pack for schools on vaping for the start of the new academic year. The resources have been informed by research with teachers and young people. The activities will feature films made with young people in which they will talk in their own words about the issues around vaping, as well as a clear presentation of the latest evidence. Those resources build on other content we have already produced for young people, including on the Frank and Better Health websites, and input into educational resources produced by partners including the Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education Association.

The Prime Minister also announced that we will review the rules on selling nicotine-free vapes to under-18s, to ensure that our rules keep pace with what is happening in the industry, and review the rules on issuing fines to shops selling vapes to under-18s, to allow local trading standards to issue on-the-spot fines and fixed penalty notices more easily. That will complement existing fine and penalty procedures and cover both illegal and underage sales for vapes and tobacco. Those steps build on measures we are already undertaking.

Earlier this year, in April, I announced new measures to step up our efforts to stop kids getting hooked on vaping. First, we launched a call for evidence on youth vaping to identify opportunities to reduce the number

of children accessing and using vape products, and to explore where Government can go further. That explored a range of issues, several of which were touched on by my hon. Friend, including the appearance and characteristics of vapes, the marketing and promotion of vapes, and the role of social media, as touched on by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North. It sought to better understand the vape market, looking at issues such as the price of low-cost products, mentioned by my hon. Friend, and the environmental impact of vapes. The call for evidence closed on 6 June, and Department of Health and Social Care officials have begun to carefully examine the responses. We will be publishing our response in early autumn, identifying and outlining areas where we can go further.

I also announced in April that we are going further to enforce the existing rules on vaping. I announced a specialised illicit vaping enforcement squad, which is a dedicated team to tackle underage vape sales and the illicit products that young people have access to. That will hold companies to account and enforce our current rules. We are providing an extra £3 million to trading standards, which will help share knowledge and intelligence across the country. It will undertake test purchasing, disrupt illicit supply, including from organised crime gangs, and remove illegal products from shelves at our borders, which will tackle the horrifying issue raised by my hon. Friend about the content of some illicit vapes. There will be more testing to ensure compliance with our rules, and we will be bolstering the training capacity of trading standards too.

Companies failing to comply with the law will absolutely be held to account. In some cases, we have already got companies to withdraw products from their shelves if they have not met our rules. I am pleased to announce that National Trading Standards has begun setting up the operation, gathering intelligence, training staff and bolstering capacity to begin field work later this summer.

I absolutely appreciate the calls for single-use vapes to be banned due to their environmental impact, and also because of their appeal to young people. In 2022, about 52% of young people who vaped used disposable products, compared with just 8% in 2021. We are concerned by the increasing use of these products and their improper disposal, for the reasons my hon. Friend mentioned. We are exploring a whole range of options to address this through the youth vaping call for evidence.

This is absolutely not a reason for not doing anything, but one of the issues we will have to deal with is the nature of the industry, which is based in Shenzhen, is highly nimble and manufactures lots of different things. It will be a challenge to address issues specific to disposable vapes, because the industry will try to get around them by saying, “This is potentially refillable.” In theory, my biro is refillable, but in practice, and if it was cheap, it can simply be thrown away. Careful consideration needs to be given to the question of what is and is not disposable, if we are going to put some weight on it. I am not in any way arguing that nothing can be done, but extremely careful thought is required to ensure that the actions we take are highly effective.

All vapes, including single-use vapes, fall within the scope of the UK’s Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations 2013, which require importers and manufacturers of vapes to finance the cost of collection and proper treatment of all equipment that is

disposed of via local authority household waste sites and returned to retailers and internet sellers. From an environmental perspective, the starting point must be to assist businesses to understand their obligations and bring them into compliance. If we can achieve that, the environmental impacts can be reduced. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will shortly be consulting on reforming the WEEE Regulations to ensure that more of this material is properly recycled.

We are committed to doing all we can to prevent children from starting vaping, and we are already taking robust action in a range of areas. We are also looking closely at how we can go further. As I mentioned, early this autumn we will publish the response to the youth vaping call for evidence and outline our next steps, and we want to move fast.

Craig Whittaker: Before the Minister concludes, does he have any thoughts on the World Health Organisation forum in Panama this November and whether the UK will be subscribing to the WHO requests or pursuing our own policies as a sovereign nation?

Neil O’Brien: My right hon. Friend asks an important question. We will set out our position for that conference of the parties in due course. On the question of heat-not-vape products, they are, as far as one can see from the evidence, more dangerous and contain more toxic chemicals than vapes, so there is a concern about the use of those products. When I was on the Science and Technology Committee, I remember looking at all these different products and the new things on the market. There is a substantial gap in terms of safety. It may be that they are safer than smoking, but there are serious concerns about the health effects of heat-not-burn products—even more significant than those about vapes, which have been raised in this debate.

I end as I began by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham for all the work she has done to drive this important debate. As constituency MPs, we all see this important and growing issue in our schools and through talking to young people. We are moving at pace and will continue to do so to address these challenges. It is important that we calibrate our approach correctly so that it is effective. We have already done a number of things, and we stand ready to do more to tackle this extremely important issue.

2.20 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson: I thank everyone who has contributed to this debate. It was interesting to hear that my right hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) has given up smoking, on which I congratulate him. I hope he will soon be able to give up heated tobacco as well; I am sure his health will benefit.

I also thank the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), and the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for their support. I think I am correct in saying that there was support from all corners of the House for doing everything possible to ensure that children cannot get their hands on vapes.

I welcome the measures in the Minister’s speech, particularly those on education, preventing the distribution of free vapes, the introduction of the enforcement team and nicotine-free vapes. I also welcome the consultation,

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

but we need to be quick about this because more children are vaping every day. That means that every day more children are becoming addicted and developing a nicotine habit that they will find difficult to break.

One of the challenges of quitting smoking is giving up nicotine, and giving up the nicotine in vapes is no different; in fact, it may be more difficult. I urge the Minister to look very closely at banning disposables and at marketing. He did not mention this in his speech, but I do not think that vapes should be advertised on the kits of any sports team. In shops, vapes are often positioned in the front of display cabinets where children can see them. I have seen advertisements for vapes on taxis and things like that—they should not be there.

The Minister's review should look closely at flavours and colours, because I do not think they are necessary for stop-smoking devices. He should regulate where they can be sold and increase the penalties for those that break the rules. The Minister did not mention tax. I appreciate that that is a matter for the Treasury, but vaping companies should be taxed heavily to lift their pocket money. That is the right way to go.

As well as education, children need support. A huge number of children are already addicted to vaping products, and they need support. When they realise and are educated about the harms and wish to quit, they will need support and help to do so.

Perhaps my most important ask of the Minister is for him to look at the latest evidence. The 95% safer approach was predicated on evidence that is not terribly robust and on a study that is nearly 10 years old. It was based on an apparent absence of evidence of harm, but we are now seeing evidence of harm. I urge him to review the evidence. We are in a situation in which our headteachers are telling us that children must be able to vape so that they can discuss the flavours to fit in with their peer group, and we must get away from that. This issue is urgent and I urge the Minister to act quickly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered electronic cigarette use.

2.23 pm

Sitting suspended.

Bladder and Bowel Continence Care

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered bladder and bowel continence care.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. This week is World Continence Week, so I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating this debate on what is often a taboo subject, and therefore something of a neglected area of healthcare. Continence issues affect millions of people in England and across our whole country.

In 2018, the NHS England “Excellence in Continence Care” guidance was published. It estimated that there are 14 million people of all ages in England with bladder problems, and a further 6.5 million—again, of all ages—with bowel problems. Those are huge numbers, which is why this debate matters. Continence problems can take away people's freedom and mobility, in some cases leading to people becoming housebound. Those problems can also lead to depression and wellbeing issues.

The Paediatric Continence Forum has informed me that continence difficulties, including bedwetting, daytime wetting, constipation, soiling and difficulties with toilet training are predicted to affect approximately one in 10 children. Unless treated, those problems can perpetuate into adolescence and adulthood. They have significant cost implications for the NHS in unplanned admissions, A&E attendance, costly consultant appointments and so on. Children need a community-based and nurse-led service.

I was honoured to take over as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for bladder and bowel continence care, following the excellent work of my predecessors, the late Baroness Greengross and Rosie Cooper. It was the APPG that lobbied NHS England to produce the guidance that I have spoken about. I am also grateful for the many clinicians, royal colleges, charities, patient advocates and patients themselves who have given freely of their time and expertise to assist the APPG in bringing forward the debate today.

I am concerned that there has been little monitoring or review of the implementation of the “Excellence in Continence Care” guidance produced by NHS England. I hope the Minister will tell us what he is doing to address that. The last full published audit of continence care was carried out by the Royal College of Physicians in 2010. Dr Adrian Wagg, then the clinical director of the national audit of continence care, painted a stark picture when he said:

“Bladder and bowel incontinence affects 1 in 5 people causing ill health, depression, social isolation, and costing the NHS millions of pounds. Although these are treatable conditions, people of all ages, and vulnerable groups in particular (frail older people and younger people with learning disability) continue to suffer unnecessarily and often in silence, with a ‘life sentence’ of bladder and/or bowel incontinence”.

An up-to-date audit would provide a complete list of services and show regional gaps in provision. It could benchmark improvements. We could look at the number of services and specialists, identify areas for training

programmes, recruitment and commissioning, as well as identifying the causes of incontinence and looking at the impact on the quality of life and comorbidities. Such an audit would also need to look at the costs involved and where savings might be made. I hope the Minister will commit to an updated audit.

Many people are too embarrassed even to talk to their GP about these issues. People suffer in silence and can become depressed and isolated, before eventually seeking help. That can affect employment, education and socialising. There is some evidence that half of people with those conditions will wait five years or more before seeking medical advice. The lack of awareness and promotion of pelvic floor health leads to acceptance of bladder weakness, particularly as part of ageing or as a result of childbirth; by the way, pelvic health is every bit as important for men as for women.

I note that NHS England's maternity and women's health team has an excellent initiative on perinatal pelvic health, which is very encouraging to see. I also commend NHS England for launching a programme in 2021 for pregnant women and new mothers to prevent and treat incontinence and other pelvic floor issues. It has 14 pilot sites around the country, and I would like to know what learning has come from these and what the next steps for the NHS are.

One of the most important things I can do in this debate is to promote the bladder and bowel CONFidence app, which is packed with helpful pelvic floor health advice. It was commissioned by the Florence Nightingale Foundation to celebrate the year of the nurse and midwife in 2020. The project was led by Dr Nikki Cotterill, professor in continence care at the University of the West of England. The app aims to provide quality-assured health and wellbeing information, promote safe self-care and aims to reduce avoidable demand on services. It signposts services and other sources of support and makes it easier for people to get help. I would like to know from the Minister what the NHS can do to promote the app and ensure that the information on it is widely known.

I understand that the NHS workforce plan is imminent. I very much hope that there is a plan to increase the number of specialist continence nurses, as many of them are retiring. I ask the Minister if NHS England is working with the General Medical Council to mandate that the medical, nursing and physiotherapy curriculums include bladder and bowel continence training more extensively in their syllabuses in all these areas. I would also like to know if Health Education England will be providing more specialist education courses for both stoma and urology continence nurses to enter the profession.

The APPG has worked with the Nursing and Midwifery Council to get basic training for bladder and bowel continence in their standards for nurses and midwives. We would like to see this mandated in their curriculum and be applied to general practitioner education standards as well. I would also like to know if the Minister has had any conversations with the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Royal College of Nursing about continuing professional development, including one-day training courses on continence care. This has huge potential to upskill the existing workforce to deal with this problem.

For many people, incontinence should not be accepted as a normal part of life. A high proportion of cases are curable, particularly bladder weakness. Consulting a

medical professional may flag indications of underlying causes such as bladder, bowel or prostate cancer, which is why the five-year waits for a first consultation are so concerning. There is variability of access to specialist support across the country.

One of the clinicians who advises the APPG, Professor Charles Knowles, wrote the excellent report on pelvic floor services in 2021. I hope the Government took careful note of it, because it was a combination of work by 30 experts and made recommendations in six areas: awareness and education, technology-enabled care, integration of expertise, surgery procedures and premises, utilising human resources and novel approaches to freeing up resources.

As parliamentary co-conspirator with my friend and constituent Tim Briggs CBE, the originator of the Getting It Right First Time programme, I would like to know whether there is a GIRFT programme for continence care. If there is not, there certainly should be, because it has had amazing results in all the other specialisms. Are the royal colleges and the Department of Health and Social Care able to give greater direction on the need for so-called benign surgery for bladder and bowel conditions, which people are currently waiting longer for and can badly affect quality of life and wellbeing? I understand that clinicians who work with the APPG have highlighted that they believe there is racial inequality in the provision of continence care. Can we start investigating this by publishing ethnicity data on NHS treatment rates in continence care?

The APPG has led the Boys Need Bins campaign, given that men's toilets very rarely have sanitary disposal provision. Around 11% of men in the 60-to-64 age group have urinary incontinence—that would include quite a few Members of the House—and the percentage rises with age. That figure does not include other continence issues, such as the need to use stoma bags. Men who need to use pads, catheters, stoma bags and other related items need to be able to dispose of their used products hygienically, discreetly and correctly.

One in eight men diagnosed with prostate cancer is likely to experience some degree of incontinence as a side effect, and men often say that this poses a greater problem to them than the cancer diagnosis itself. Prostate Cancer UK alerted me to the following comment in its survey regarding men having to use disabled toilets:

"Consequently, men are often forced to use disabled toilets in order to dispose of their pad or associated stoma bag products in the provided sanitary bin. It is important to note that nearly 1 in 4 men stated that they are not disabled so find it 'embarrassing' to use this toilet to access a sanitary bin whilst 42% stated feeling embarrassed, stressed, and anxious about using a disabled toilet, as they had experienced or felt that people will judge them. Indeed, one man told us that: 'Whilst at a football ground, I had to ask a (male) steward if I could have access to an accessible toilet...(and) he commented, "You don't look very disabled"'. This experience...felt inappropriate, degrading, humiliating and embarrassing."

What do the Government expect these men to do when there is no disposal provision where they work or are being educated?

In June 2022, the BBC Radio 4 "PM" programme had a discussion about this issue that led Prostate Cancer UK and a number of other organisations to support the Boys Need Bins campaign. The campaign targets employers, hospitality venues, sports venues, retail outlets and local authorities—Winchester Council, for example, has successfully implemented such a scheme.

[*Andrew Selous*]

We have had reports of a postcode lottery in the supply of products needed. Getting the right products could lead to a reduction in urinary tract infection and skin problems such as dermatitis and pressure ulcers, and reduce costly hospital admissions. I would like reassurance that the NHS will look at the total costs in the patient pathway and not just at the unit cost per product, which could be a false economy, leading to higher costs for the taxpayer and less good outcomes for patients.

One of the most upsetting facts I discovered while preparing for the debate is that of hospital-acquired incontinence. A National Institute for Health and Care Research-funded study was published in June 2022 by the Geller Institute of Ageing and Memory, which is based at the University of West London. The research revealed that among patients with dementia admitted to hospital, over a third developed hospital-acquired incontinence, having previously been continent. There were some very upsetting accounts of patients who were not allowed to leave their bedside to reach the toilet, and even patients who were able to get to the toilet unaided were required to ask permission. Should there not be a right to self-toilet if someone can get to the loo on their own? The Spinal Injuries Association has contacted me to say that some of its members' carers were not allowed to accompany them to hospital, leading to deep distress when people were not able to get to a toilet.

This is a very sensitive and delicate issue that does not get enough attention, and let me say straight away that I have all the sympathy in the world for nurses and healthcare assistants, who are rushed off their feet. We will not find the right way forward in this debate, but I implore the Minister to take this issue back to the Department so that we can preserve the continence, and therefore the dignity, of as many hospital patients as possible. If we get these issues right, we can save the NHS money that is currently spent on pads and appliances, reduce comorbidities and hospital admissions, and improve the lives and wellbeing of so many people.

A large number of people are admitted to hospital with urinary tract infections caused by catheter-associated urinary tract infection, and that greatly increases A&E attendance and unplanned admissions. Clinicians who advise the all-party group say that improving catheter care in the community would significantly reduce A&E attendance and hospital admissions.

I draw Members' attention to a new service in Cornwall that has been piloting a continence car service run by NHS Cornwall 111. The cars are staffed by specialist paramedics who have additional skills, including catheter/continence management. The service reports that this has meant fewer patients being transferred to hospital and has taken the pressure off the local ambulance service. That seems to be yet another shining example of best practice in the NHS, so my question to the Minister is: what is NHS England doing to urgently evaluate it? If it is as good as it appears to be, we should mainstream it across all integrated care boards.

I want to give the last word to a young person in their 20s who has lived with chronic issues of bowel and bladder continence all through their life. This person wrote to me this week after seeing the debate advertised to say that they had never been referred to a specialist

unit outside of paediatrics. It was only through a friend that they found out about the world-leading continence facilities at Northwick Park Hospital.

The pads that this person used suddenly stopped at one point because they had not been graduated from the paediatric to the adult system. They were discharged from the paediatric system and were no longer on anyone else's system even though they have a lifelong condition. Despite the issues, this young adult works in an office and shares a flat with friends, ostensibly having a normal life even though since infancy they have needed to change pads three times a day to maintain cleanliness.

This person has three requests: first, they want the whole issue to be destigmatised in the public's mind. Secondly, they want schools, colleges and universities and employers to care for students and workers experiencing these conditions sensitively and in an informed way. Lastly, they want proactive support for people living with bladder and bowel incontinence to explain the range of possible treatments available and the offer of mental health support for patients living with these conditions.

I salute the courage of this outstanding young adult for not being defeated by these issues and for working and leading a normal life. I want the Minister to take their comments to heart and back to the Department for action.

3.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for allowing me to speak, Sir Graham, on the subject of bladder and bowel continence care. I thank the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) for securing and leading the debate. It is not an easy subject to talk about—it is quite difficult—and for us men it is even more difficult because we usually try to avoid these issues or put them off, so it is good to air the subject for those who have these problems, and to ensure that they know that these things are better understood by the Department of Health and Social Care, by the Minister and by the shadow Minister.

I recently met those behind the Dispose with Dignity campaign. They work closely with Boys Need Bins to raise awareness of male incontinence—bowel or bladder—and to help to break the taboo and the silence around this experience for men. I believe that this debate will be the springboard for that aim. That is why I am here. I am happy to add my support to the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire. This is the platform and place to ensure that this debate is heard.

In the UK, somewhere between 3 million and 6 million people experience urinary incontinence. Although leaks have traditionally been seen by society as a women's issue, as the advertisements on TV would indicate, one in three men aged over 65 are estimated to have urinary incontinence. One in eight men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer and some will experience incontinence as a side effect of their treatment. As many as 60% of men who have a radical prostatectomy may experience urinary incontinence.

That brings me to my first questions to the Minister, who always grasps the issues that we bring to him and responds in a positive fashion. What are the numbers for those with prostate cancer? Are those numbers increasing? Are more men having prostate problems

than in the past? What is being done by the Department of Health and Social Care to raise awareness of the symptoms of prostate cancer?

As I said earlier, many men do not go to see the doctor when there is something wrong. They should. It could be to do with pride, or embarrassment or shame, or just because they do not want to bother anybody. Whatever it may be, it needs to be addressed. I hope the Minister can tell us what is being done. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire said that sometimes men do not go to see their doctor even when they have had symptoms for five years; that is just too long to wait.

A poll of 500 men, half of whom have been diagnosed with prostate cancer—which shows that they are more likely to have these difficulties—shows that some men are resorting to desperate strategies to overcome the near certainty that they will be unable to find somewhere appropriate to dispose of used products outside the home. The survey found that their strategies include taking a bag out with them that they empty when back at home, and asking their partner to keep used products in their handbag, which creates a public health concern by its very nature, is unnecessary in the times we live in, and adds further pressure to partners who may also be in a caregiving role. They love their partner—that is never in doubt—but it can be quite challenging.

Approximately one in three men surveyed—32%—said that they were wearing pads longer than advised, which can cause further health risks. A quarter, or 25%, acknowledged that they have resorted to flushing them down the toilet, even though the water companies and the health service say that should not be done. Their initial response is to get rid of it, which is perhaps why that is happening.

Of the 504 men surveyed with experience of urinary incontinence, two in five, or some 44%, experience anxiety about using public toilets; more than a third leave the house less often—in other words, they just do not bother going out, because they feel that is the best way to deal with it; and almost eight in 10 stated that they feel anxious about a lack of suitable facilities when leaving the home, which is another indication of their concerns.

More than one in four men feel depressed about the impact that experiencing urinary incontinence has on their life, with that figure soaring to 100% of those aged 16-25—the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire gave an example of a young fella at work. Everyone will agree that this situation is unacceptable. Mental health support should be made readily available.

There is currently no obligation on businesses, local councils or organisations with bathroom facilities to provide male sanitary bins in male toilets. It is time for that to be considered. The Government must change the situation so that men who experience incontinence can dispose of products easily, hygienically and with dignity, offering them the opportunity to live a better quality of life, free from embarrassment, stress or shame.

The Dispose with Dignity campaign is calling for the Health and Safety Executive-approved code of practice and guidance to be updated—the Minister's thoughts on this would be helpful—to ensure that men have adequate access to male incontinence bins, thereby enabling them to have a better quality of life, free from shame and embarrassment. If that guidance is not updated,

men will be forced to resort to unsanitary or environmentally damaging means of disposing of incontinence pads. Providing bins in disabled toilets is not an acceptable solution on its own; distinct and separate provision must be made for men in male toilets.

Urinary infection is not experienced exclusively by older men, so support, guidance and provision for all men is crucial. We have to look at the bigger picture—the spectrum of men from 16 to 66. I had a very positive meeting with the Dispose with Dignity campaign. Is the Minister prepared to meet that group? I think the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire seeks the same thing. Even going through the civil service would be a positive step forward. It would enable other interested MPs to understand the physical and mental health implications of not having access to adequate sanitary provision, and to discuss potential regulatory solutions.

I believe that we can and must do better to ensure that men and women have dignity in their bladder and bowel continence care. I know that the Minister will take all that on board and will consider how we can do this better. This debate is the first step in achieving just that.

3.26 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on his moving opening speech. I also thank Prostate Cancer UK, PRS, the Men's Health Forum and the Absorbent Hygiene Product Manufacturers Association for their campaigning work on this issue.

Since becoming a Member of this House in 2019, a key policy area that I have campaigned on is improving men's health. The Boys Need Bins and Dispose with Dignity campaigns fall within that remit. They seek to break the taboo around this type of experience, which many men face but is never discussed.

There is no need for me to repeat the statistics that my hon. Friend set out, although they are important. However, the fact that we are having this debate at all shows that there is a need to discuss not only this issue but men's health more broadly. In many ways, it shows that we are not taking men's health seriously enough. It seems obvious to me that amending the Health and Safety Executive's code of practice and guidance is necessary to ensure that men have access to the support they clearly want and need. It would be interesting to hear whether the Government support that in the name of equality, inclusion and dignity.

As I have stated many times in the House, and directly to Ministers, we need a men's health strategy and a Minister directly accountable and responsible for delivery. Piecemeal initiatives and campaigns are welcome, but we would not have to do that work if we had an overarching strategy to look at all the health issues facing men and all the causes, and deliver all the solutions, just as the women's health strategy does.

In addition to the statistics that underpin this debate, it is vital never to forget that one in five men do not live to 65, 33 men die every day of prostate cancer, and 13 men die every day by suicide. The psychological harm caused by this issue has a negative mental health impact on men. An overarching strategy would pull all that together. If we can have a women's health strategy—which we need—why can we not have a men's health

[Nick Fletcher]

strategy too? We could then deal with this issue under that umbrella. It could be the first win for the Government under a men's health strategy.

It is important to deal with the common myth that men do not seek support for their health, and that they want to tough it out because they are men. Recent research from the Movember Foundation shows that men are more likely than women to make an appointment to see a health practitioner as soon as they think they have a physical health problem. Research from the Men and Boys Coalition shows that three in five men say they face barriers to seeing GPs.

The increasing problem with men's health, which is in crisis, shows that the health sector is not male-friendly enough. Whether through the NHS, public health provision via councils or support through mental health services, supporting a men's health strategy would start to change that, as would the initiative we are discussing today. People wrongly say, "Men do not speak up about their health," when on issues like this they do and have. We must listen and act or men will think, "What's the point?"

The Prostate Cancer UK campaign led by the actor Colin McFarlane shows that men are speaking up. There is even the annual March for Men happening next month—I encourage Members to sign up. We can no longer ignore these men, so we need the Government to change the code of practice and we need councils and health bodies to take a lead. I see that Winchester City Council is already doing so. We need to make it normal for bins to be provided—a new normal so that it is not seen as an issue or a pain, but just as the normal way of doing things. We need this normal and a new way of supporting men's health.

I urge the Government to change the code of practice and—importantly—create a men's health strategy and a Minister with accountability for this issue. We owe it to the men in our society and the women they share their lives with to deliver all this and more.

3.31 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I commend the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on this comprehensive and moving debate. He gave voice not just to a particular individual but to many people, and that is one of the highlights of being in this place. I also commend the hon. Members for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for being here and for their work on Boys Need Bins and men's health. It is unusual that I am the only woman in this debate. I am happy to be in this company because the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire is right that there is a taboo and we all need to work together to reduce the stigma.

It is estimated that 14 million people in the UK have some degree of urinary incontinence, while at least 6.5 million people experience bowel control difficulties. Those numbers are staggering. Although it affects twice as many women as men, one in 25 men over the age of 40 also experience urinary incontinence. Gynaecology waiting lists have faced the biggest increase of all medical specialities, with more than half a million women in the UK on gynaecology waiting lists last year. That is

something I recently discussed with Dr Ranee Thakar and Kate Lancaster at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

We have known about the need for education and prevention for many years. It is something I worked on in the health service in the late 1980s, but we still have not seen the results, and people are living with poor continence all the time. It is different for everyone, but we have heard about some of the significant impacts that incontinence can have on quality of life and mental health, as well as through a reduction in physical and social activity. We should remember that in most cases the problem can be either prevented, cured or managed so that it does not interfere with daily life, but to do that the right support must be available so that we can all live our lives with dignity.

There are excellent innovations and surgical products for stoma wearers, and I pay tribute to the health staff, from specialist nurses to pelvic floor physios, who go over and above to support those with continence issues and to help people to adjust to life-changing surgery. Too often people with continence issues face unnecessary hurdles, and we have heard some today—whether that is a lack of public toilets, lack of awareness or, indeed, the normalisation of continued incontinence following childbirth. Those impacts cannot be underestimated, and I know from my constituents how a lack of amenities can cause isolation, while a lack of awareness around care can lead to people living with these problems for far longer than they should have to. There are also financial pressures on the NHS as a result of poor continence care, from costs associated with hospitalisation or catheterisation to high workload pressures and increased laundry costs. That means the cost to the NHS of incontinence-related care is more than £5 billion every year.

Many people are admitted to hospital with urinary tract infections, often caused by catheter-associated urinary tract infections. That increases A&E attendance and costly unplanned admissions. Improving catheter care in the community would significantly ease the burden and reduce A&E attendance and hospital admissions. That is one reason why the Labour party will shift more care out of hospitals into the community, so that the NHS becomes more of a neighbourhood service.

In Bristol, we are fortunate to have highly recognised work in this area. The CONfidence app, which has already been mentioned, is led by Dr Nikki Cotterill in association with the University of the West of England and Bristol Health Partners. I commend that work to the Minister. It aims to address inequalities for patients with pelvic floor disorders and improve services for the future, as well to provide vital care and support to people who are suffering in silence.

Another project conducted by Bristol Health Partners and the West of England Academic Health Science Network highlighted six opportunities, which I think are worth listing. We need to help people by improving perception; communication; the environment; health services; recognition and support, particularly for mental health issues and anxiety; and participation in society.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire addressed the issue of race inequalities, which we are looking at in Bristol. We have a project to explore the barriers faced by women with incontinence in the Somali community, which I hope all of us across the country can learn from. Not everyone everywhere has the same experience,

so it is important that we share. However, everyone facing these problems deserves access to high-quality information and suitable treatment in an NHS that is supported and fit for the future. You would expect me to say this, Sir Graham, but 13 years of Conservative Government have not helped the health service. Waiting lists and preventive care in the community are at breaking point.

People who support those living with incontinence need quality training to ensure the right bowel and bladder care regime for each patient. That is particularly important for those with mobility issues who rely on carers either at home or in a community setting. Nurses are currently required to learn specialist continence care on the job, because of the removal of NHS training courses over the last few years. That adds additional pressure to already overworked nursing and caring staff, putting patients' quality of life and their health at risk. We are still waiting for the workforce plan, although we hear that it is imminent. I agree with the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire that those living with incontinence would welcome an update from the Minister on whether the Government will introduce NHS training courses on stoma and continence care for nursing and care professionals.

This is not just an individual health matter, but a public health matter. It would be helpful if the Minister could explain what discussions he is having with integrated care boards throughout the country about tackling incontinence as a prevention issue, knowing, as we have heard, that it affects one in five people across the country. From the examples we have heard, it is clear that specialist treatment and support, including mental health support, is vital. How are the Government ensuring that those who need that support receive it, and particularly those in harder-to-reach communities?

Much has been promised in the women's health strategy, but we are still awaiting action on things from tackling gynaecology waiting lists to appointing a deputy women's health ambassador. We have heard good promises but we need to see the findings. Also, any disruption to the flow of medical devices into the UK would have a devastating impact on those who rely on them, and urology projects are no exception. Can the Minister give any assurances to the industry in respect of the sustainability of production and regulatory alignment post Brexit?

Finally, can the Minister provide any information on updating the guidance regarding the disposal of sanitary dressings in the building regulations and in approved document M? I understand that that work has been ongoing since 2020, but it would address many of the issues that have been raised today. If he cannot provide an update now, will he do so in writing? I think the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire would appreciate that too.

3.38 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. It is unusual to have almost an hour to respond to a Westminster Hall debate. I assure you that I do not intend to use all that time, but I will endeavour to answer as many questions as possible.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on securing this important debate, and on his appointment as chair of

the all-party parliamentary group for bladder and bowel continence care. I join him in paying tribute to campaigners such as the Urology Foundation for their incredible work during Continence Week and throughout the year.

I thank my hon. Friend for sharing the experience of the young adult who contacted him. That is what this debate, and this place, is all about. It is about destigmatising the issue, which was the No. 1 ask of that young adult. It is also about trying to bring about positive change not just for him but for patients up and down the country, especially given how many people we know are affected by continence issues.

We know—my hon. Friend set this out very articulately and eloquently—that incontinence is an issue with which too many suffer in silence. We must all learn to speak more openly about it. As the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) rightly set out, it is estimated that around 14 million men, women, young people and children, of all ages, are living with bladder problems. As has also been pointed out, all continence problems can be debilitating and life-changing. As we have heard, they can affect a wide range of care groups and can be of particular concern to the ageing population.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire rightly set out, this also creates pressures for our healthcare system. Complications and treatments for continence problems—for example, pressure ulcers, urinary tract infections, catheterisation, which my hon. Friend pointed to, or faecal impaction—can all lead to admission and extended stays in hospital, which we should try to avoid wherever possible. The need to do what is right for patients and healthcare professionals alike means that care pathways should be commissioned to ensure the early assessment and effective management of incontinence.

To improve continence care across the whole public health and care system, NHS England has established the national bladder and bowel health project to improve continence care. As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, it has also published “Excellence in Continence Care”, which is a practical guide for leaders and commissioners. That includes guidance for commissioners—so ICBs—and leaders in healthcare systems to ensure that people who are diagnosed with UTIs receive high-quality treatment.

I have heard my hon. Friend's concerns about the implementation of the continence care guidelines. I will, as he asked, take this back to the Department and raise it with the Minister for Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), to discuss what more we can do alongside NHS England.

On 9 May, NHS England published its delivery plan for recovering access to primary care. It is an ambitious plan that includes proposals to improve options for community-based services to treat urinary tract infections. As part of that, appropriately trained community pharmacists will be commissioned to provide a clinical service to care for patients with urinary symptoms, providing timely access to assessment, information and advice.

In addition—this does fall within my direct remit in the Department—the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has produced guidance on the management of faecal incontinence in adults, which healthcare professionals and commissioners are expected to take fully into account as part of the delivery of services. That guidance outlines that management strategies should consider diet, bowel habit, toilet access, medication

[*Will Quince*]

and, importantly, coping strategies. Those management strategies will be required to account for the sensitive and socially stigmatising nature of incontinence, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire set out. We know how important that is to patients, their families and—as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out—their carers.

I want to touch on another area, which my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire touched on also, which is antimicrobial resistance, because we have updated the 2019 to 2024 national action plan on tackling antimicrobial resistance. The plan is core to this debate because it outlines that the UK will enhance the prevention of UTIs by providing early, accurate diagnosis and treatment of suspected and confirmed UTIs. That includes the prescription and use of antibiotics and therapeutics for older people, both in their own homes, which is critical, and in care homes, so that patients get the care they need, when and where they need it, and are less likely to suffer from the discomfort of urinary tract infections, or indeed secondary infections, which we know can follow.

To improve bowel care for people with spinal cord injury, NHS England has also published a service specification, with specialist multidisciplinary teams that provide advice and care in bowel management, including promoting and managing continence. My hon. Friend also referred to medtech, and I am really passionate—

Andrew Selous: The Minister might not be able to respond to this now, but before he moves on to the tech, the Spinal Injuries Association made the very good point that a lot of people with spinal injuries have carers—trained people—who are willing to come in and assist the very hard-pressed hospital staff, but are unable to. Can that be looked at? I get the complications, and I am not asking the Minister for an answer now, but one of my children spent some time in healthcare in hospitals in Africa, and in many parts of the world, if a patient's family and friends do not go into the hospital, they will not survive. If we completely keep carers out and bar the door, have we not gone a little too far? There have to be standards, of course—it would have to be done in agreement with the staff and there would have to be a risk assessment. I absolutely get all that, but the current position seems bizarre, when there are hard-pressed staff and carers who are willing to come into hospital with their patients, so I wonder whether that could be looked at.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Instinctively, I totally agree with him, and I would be very happy to meet him to discuss, alongside NHS England, what more we would need to do to enable that to happen. I suspect that, in this kind of area, an individual with incontinence would often much rather have a family member, a carer or another trusted loved one support them through that process, alongside trained medical professions than anything else. So it is a good point, a fair challenge and one I will take away and consider in more detail.

Let me turn to medtech, which is a real passion of mine. We want to make sure that patients in our NHS get access to the most cutting-edge technological advances. We talk a lot about pharmaceuticals, but medtech is

something that we should take very seriously, too. Earlier this year, we published our first ever medtech strategy, which says that the lowest price does not always translate to the best value. That is an important point, because the Government believe that the value of a product should be considered across the whole patient pathway, not in terms of the individual cost.

The application and adoption of value-based procurement in the NHS is a key priority in the medtech strategy, in order to realise, as I have set out, the potential of that technology to improve patient outcomes and, importantly and alongside that, to support the NHS workforce. Without getting too technical, the strategy includes a commitment to modernise part IX of the drug tariff, which lists devices that can be prescribed in the NHS.

The reason I am labouring this point is that the Government and I recognise how important patient choice is, and that a range of continence products is really important to living well with this condition. That is why there is a focus on making changes to part IX. By re-categorising part IX into groups of clinically comparable products that are interchangeable by their nature, cost-effectiveness can be compared fairly, and ICBs and clinicians will be more informed and more likely to use part IX. Doing so will also enable companies that are making innovative products to enter the market and encourage further innovation in this space, which will ultimately only benefit patients. We will continue to support the provision of a range of continence products in part IX of the drug tariff, to ensure equitable access for all patients.

The reason I labour the point about patient choice is that we must ensure that patients have a voice in the product range available in the drug tariff, so that patients' interests are at the heart of how the tariff operates. We are currently engaging with patient groups, which is really important, and a targeted consultation will be launched later this summer to ensure that the tariff continues to be able to provide effective products to patients.

My hon. Friend and others also referred to the long-term workforce plan and the need for specialist continence nurses. I have spent the last few months saying that the plan will be published “soon”, then “very soon” and now “imminently”. I do not know if I can say “very imminently”—I am not sure there is such a thing—although I have spent most of today talking about the NHS long-term workforce plan. I anticipate spending most of tomorrow, and indeed Monday, talking about the NHS long-term plan. My hon. Friend and others will not have to wait very long before they will be able to read the plan in full. I am sure that he and others will understand why it would not be right for me to share details of it ahead of publication, but I mean it when I say that he will not have to wait very long at all.

On the points about public toilets and accessible toilets, I am conscious that I am straying into the territory of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which has responsibility for building regulations. It approves documents for the provision of toilets in publicly accessible buildings, which falls under the Building Act 1984 and the Building Regulations 2010. That legislation does not currently require sanitary bins in men's toilets, but I understand the points made by my hon. Friends the Members for South West Bedfordshire and for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), as well as the hon. Member for Strangford, about the

anxiety that men feel. They make a compelling argument, and I would encourage them to raise it with the relevant Minister at DLUHC—I will do that too.

I understand that Colostomy UK has a stoma-friendly toilet campaign that is aimed at organisations, businesses and individuals. The campaign focuses specifically on accessible toilet facilities and the needs of people living with a stoma. The hon. Member for Strangford makes a fair challenge to the civil service and Government Departments to lead by example on that point. I will raise the issue with the Cabinet Office to see whether it is something we should explore further.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire for alerting me to the bladder and bowel CONFidence app, which was something that I was not aware of before my research ahead of the debate. I now know that a number of NHS trusts and medical centres are aware of the app and promote its use. Following this debate, I will look into whether NHS England could reference the app on its health webpages, which would be really helpful. I will also look into what more we can do to promote the app, as it sounds like a great tool.

My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley raised the possibility of a men's health strategy, and specifically a Minister with responsibility for men's health. I know it is an issue that he is hugely passionate about and has campaigned long and hard on. I can give him the assurance that the major conditions strategy will take into account the needs of both men and women. Of course, we recognise that different approaches need to be taken for men and women in the provision of treatment of major conditions, especially over the whole course of life.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, in *Men's Health*—which is not a magazine I have read, but I have seen the cover—explicitly invited men to respond to the call for evidence to help us to ensure that the strategy takes into account the needs of men. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley wants the Government to go further on this issue. He has already raised the issue with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), and I would also be happy to meet with him to discuss it.

Andrew Selous: I ask the Minister to forgive me if he was coming to this, but before he concludes, will he say a little bit about the third of dementia patients who go into hospital continent and come out incontinent? Many of them are actually trying to get to the toilet but have had difficulty. I find that very upsetting. As I said, it is not an easy issue, and I 100% get the pressures on the staff, but I think the issue is something that has not been spoken about. It has just happened under the radar. I am not expecting an answer today, but I would like a recognition that the Minister has clocked it, is concerned about it, and will take it back to the Department, because I was really upset when I learnt about that figure.

Will Quince: I entirely understand why my hon. Friend would be upset. In truth, I do not have an answer for him immediately. If he holds fire, however, I am going to make a broader offer to meet with him directly or alongside the APPG to discuss that and any other issues with NHS England and officials in the Department who are experts in the area. He raises a powerful point, and it is an issue that we need to explore further.

The hon. Member for Strangford raised prostate cancer statistics. I will write to him specifically, because I know he would like more detail on this issue. He is absolutely right that there has been a considerable increase in diagnoses of prostate cancer. I think the statistics are that in 2020 we diagnosed something in the region of 36,000 cases, whereas in 2000 it was 25,000, which is something like a 45% increase. Diagnosis is generally a good thing, especially early diagnosis, because it means that we are catching the disease early. However, I understand that about 51% of prostate cancers were diagnosed at an early stage in 2021, which demonstrates that we have a lot more to do in that space. I will write to the hon. Gentleman on that point, and will raise it with my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent.

I have not answered all the questions that my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire asked. As tempting as it is to take up the remaining 35 minutes of the debate, I will commit to meeting with him personally, or indeed with the all-party parliamentary group and campaigners, alongside NHS England and the Department, to talk about some of the other issues in detail. I think they certainly warrant that, so I would be delighted to do that.

In summary, NHS England has published its delivery plan, which sets out our proposals to improve options for community-based services to treat urinary tract infections. In addition, NICE has produced guidance on the management of faecal incontinence in adults. The annual spend on incontinence products from part IX items alone is approximately £255 million. As I said, we know how important patient choice is and understand that having a range of continence products is important to living well with this condition. That is why I can promise that there will be a focus on making changes to part IX of the drug tariff.

To conclude, I know that many people who experience bladder and/or bowel problems experience stigma, a point made eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire. They can be embarrassed to talk about the symptoms with friends, family and even, to some extent, healthcare professionals. That is why I am particularly pleased that my hon. Friend secured today's debate, which has provided me the opportunity to play a small part in tackling the stigma that surrounds this issue. I think all hon. Members that have taken part in this debate have helped to defeat the stigma that surrounds the issue. I am not so naive as to think that there will be thousands watching this debate at home, but the debates are kept online and I hope people will watch. They will realise that it is vital to talk to medical professionals about their health issues and problems in this space and, wherever they feel it is necessary, to seek out professional care.

3.58 pm

Andrew Selous: Thank you, Sir Graham, for looking after us this afternoon; I thank all my colleagues who came along. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is such a stalwart of these debates, was so right to say that this has traditionally been seen as a women's issue. He pointed out that it is not and talked about the impact on intimate relationships, which is vital to highlight as well. He talked about the importance of the Dispose with Dignity campaign and the needs around it, which we have heard good commitments on from the Minister on today.

[*Andrew Selous*]

My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) also supported the Boys Need Bins campaign and talked about the negative impact on men's mental health. He called on us to listen and act, and asked how this issue could fit within the men's health strategy. I am extremely grateful to him for coming along. I completely agree with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), that this is an issue we need to prevent, cure and manage. She is 100% right about that. I am grateful for her support for the app, which comes from her part of the world.

I am hugely grateful to the Minister for his commitments. I will take him up on that meeting. I will also put him down as a Boys Need Bins champion in Government. I know it is not his departmental responsibility, but if he can be there with us to try to make progress, I will take that as a win this afternoon. I look forward to the meeting.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered bladder and bowel continence care.

4 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 29 June 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Insolvency Service Annual Plan 2023-24

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I have set performance targets for the Insolvency Service for the financial year 2023-24. The Insolvency Service is the Government agency that delivers public services to those affected by financial distress, or failure, by providing frameworks to deal with insolvency and the financial misconduct that sometimes accompanies or leads to it.

The Insolvency Service aims to deliver economic confidence through a fair corporate and personal insolvency regime that gives investors and lenders confidence to take the commercial risks necessary to support economic growth. It has a crucial role to play in supporting businesses and individuals in financial difficulty or facing redundancy owing to their employer's insolvency.

This year, the Insolvency Service has reinforced its commitment to putting customer satisfaction and real-life impacts at the heart of its services and to supporting the Government in delivering against their priority to protect consumers and support businesses to thrive, and make the UK a safe place to do business.

I have set measures and targets at a level which will drive the Insolvency Service to deliver its essential services effectively for its stakeholders. These measures include:

Measure	2023-24 Target
Covid 19 support scheme misconduct/fraud related outcomes as a percentage of all disqualifications and criminal outcomes ¹	49% or better
Customer Satisfaction score	84% or better
Average number of days taken to process redundancy payment claims	14 days or less
Issue reports to creditors within fifteen days of interviewing (percentage issued)	94% or better
Percentage of Breathing Space statutory notices issued electronically	85% or better
Volume of cases where any distribution is made	19,000
Value of distributions to creditors and debtors	£39 million

The Insolvency Service's annual plan for 2023-24 is published in full on gov.uk.

¹ This target seeks to ensure that addressing covid support fraud remains a key priority for overall enforcement activity, as such we want to see 49% or more of our total enforcement outcomes related to this type of misconduct.

Shared Parental Leave

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The Government have today published our response to the consultation on parental leave and pay. This confirms that the Government will make changes to paternity leave, delivering our manifesto commitment to make it easier to take.

In July 2019, the Government consulted on whether the current arrangements for parental leave and pay met our policy objectives, and if more could be done to better balance the gender division of parental leave and pay between parents. We sought views on the costs and benefits of reforming parental entitlements, and any trade-offs that might need to accompany such reform.

The Government response, published today and placed in the House Library, sets out the changes now planned for paternity leave, fulfilling our commitment to make it easier to take. The Government will legislate when parliamentary time allows to:

Give employed fathers and partners more choice and flexibility around how and when they take their paternity leave, allowing them to take two separate blocks of one week of leave if they wish;

Give employed fathers and partners the ability to take their leave at any time in the first year, rather than just in the first eight weeks after birth or placement for adoption; and

Change the notice requirements for paternity leave to make these more proportionate to the amount of time the father/parent plans to take off work. We will cut the amount of notice of dates from 15 weeks before the expected week of childbirth to 28 days before the leave will be taken. This will give parents more flexibility in planning to take the leave that they need.

The territorial extent of the proposals included in the Government consultation response extends to Great Britain—employment law is devolved to Northern Ireland. These changes are anticipated to take effect in April 2024, subject to parliamentary scheduling.

More details of the Government's plans can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/good-work-plan-proposals-to-support-families>.

Shared Parental Leave and Pay Evaluation

The Government are also publishing today the shared parental leave and pay (SPL) evaluation, which has assessed the extent to which the implementation and take-up of SPL achieved its original objectives: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/shared-parental-leave-spl-evaluation>.

The evaluation showed positive results for both parents and business, boasting greater work-life balance for parents, and improving retention and recruitment for employers. The uptake of SPL was also in line with projections made at its roll-out and has doubled between 2015-16 and 2021-22.

The Government are committed to supporting labour market participation, including participation by parents. Parental leave and pay policies give employed parents a right to time off work in the first year of their child's life and supports them in their return to work. This represents an important part of our drive to deliver growth by helping people to access and stay in work.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Lowland Agricultural Peat Taskforce

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I have today published the lowland agricultural peat taskforce report and Government response. It is available on gov.uk.

Peatlands, when restored and functioning healthily, abate carbon emissions and provide a long-term carbon store, while also delivering wider benefits such as increased biodiversity and improved water quality, drought resilience and flood risk mitigation. Lowland peatlands also provide some of our most valuable agricultural soils and, if managed sustainably, can contribute to food security for years to come.

Degraded lowland peatlands account for 3% of England's overall greenhouse gas emissions and 88% of all emissions from peat in England. Reducing these emissions by rewetting our peatlands will be vital to the UK's efforts to achieve net zero emissions by 2050.

The lowland agriculture peat taskforce was chaired by Robert Caudwell, a farmer and chair of the Association of Drainage Authorities. The taskforce brought together a range of stakeholders—including farmers, water management authorities, conservationists and academics—for the first time to explore how lowland agricultural peat soils can be better managed to protect productive agriculture and contribute to the Government's legally binding net zero targets. I want to thank Mr Caudwell and the taskforce for their work.

The report culminated in a set of recommendations to the Government and the wider sector that emphasise the importance of water management in the preservation of England's lowland peat soils. The Government response sets out our intention to take forward action on all 14 of the report's recommendations, supporting the rewetting of peat soils where appropriate and changing the way we farm on them to ensure the continuation of profitable agriculture.

We have already begun work to address some of the recommendations of the taskforce report. This includes: new funding of over £7.5 million for water management for peat; designing options in the new environmental land management schemes for lowland peat; developing a £6.6 million lowland peatlands research and development programme; launching a £5.6 million paludiculture exploration fund; and developing a new England peat map to be launched in 2024.

[HCWS894]

TREASURY

Post Office Compensation Update

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): This House is aware that the Post Office Horizon scandal has had a devastating impact on the lives of many postmasters since it began over 20 years ago. The Government are deeply concerned about ensuring the fair treatment of this group. The tax treatment of payments made under the Horizon shortfall scheme (HSS) and the group litigation order (GLO) scheme is of vital importance to ensure fair compensation, and a

key part of this is the consistency of such treatment with other historic compensation schemes, and the principles behind such decisions.

The Government have already announced their decision that payments made under the GLO scheme and payments made to postmasters with overturned convictions will not be liable for income tax and that top-up payments will be made to ensure that the compensation of those on the HSS is not unduly reduced by tax.

Today, we go further to correct the historic injustices by announcing that the Government will not collect any inheritance tax (IHT) that may arise in relation to payments made under the HSS and the GLO scheme to victims of the Post Office Horizon scandal. This brings the IHT treatment of payments made to victims under the HSS and the GLO scheme in line with those made to postmasters with overturned convictions. This exemption recognises the unusual status of the HSS and the GLO scheme, and the egregious nature of the Post Office Horizon scandal.

The Government will legislate to exempt these payments from IHT in due course, but to ensure that recipients have certainty over their tax position prior to legislation being introduced, from today HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) will not collect any IHT in relation to payments made up to the date the legislation comes into force. Any IHT paid by the personal representatives of estates who did not previously qualify for relief from IHT on HSS and GLO scheme payments will now be entitled to a refund from HMRC.

With the Government being the sole shareholder in the Post Office, we will continue to work across Government and with the Post Office to ensure the postmasters get the full compensation they deserve.

[HCWS896]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Firearms Licensing

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): On 8 March, the Government received prevention of future deaths reports from Mr Ian Arrow, the senior coroner for Plymouth, Torbay and South Devon, following the inquests into the deaths of the five people who were shot and killed by Jake Davison in Keyham on 12 August 2021.

I am extremely grateful to the senior coroner for his prevention of future deaths reports, which contain a number of significant recommendations including changes to legislation, changes to the statutory guidance for chief officers of police, and changes to firearms licensing more generally. The Government have also received recommendations in the report by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) following its investigation into Devon and Cornwall police's decision making in relation to Jake Davison's possession of a shotgun and shotgun certificate, with finalised formal recommendations received on 2 May 2023, and in the report by the Scottish Affairs Select Committee following its review of firearms licensing regulations in Scotland, which was published on 22 December 2022. This review was established following the fatal shooting of John MacKinnon on the

Isle of Skye on 10 August 2022. I am also grateful to the Scottish Affairs Committee and the IOPC for their work and recommendations.

We have been giving careful consideration to the recommendations. While public safety is, of course, our chief concern, it is also right that our approach should reflect the fact that the vast majority of licensed firearms holders are law abiding and cause no concern. It is this balance that we are seeking to strike in shaping our response.

One issue we are moving forward on straightaway is police training. The Government have agreed to provide £500,000 in funding to support the development and roll out of a new national training package produced by the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council. In due course, this training will become mandatory for police firearms licensing teams.

His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services will also be undertaking a thematic inspection of police forces' arrangements in respect of firearms licensing in 2024-25. In addition to this, and as I referred to in my statement to the House on 21 February on the Plymouth shootings, in respect of Devon and Cornwall police implementing the recommendations made to them by the IOPC in its report, I have also asked the inspectorate, in conjunction with the police and crime commissioner for Devon and Cornwall, to carry out an early inspection of Devon and Cornwall police's firearms licensing arrangements and the improvements they are undertaking. This inspection is already under way and is due to report by the end of July.

The Government are also in the process of reviewing firearms licensing fees to move to full cost recovery for the police. We intend to consult on the new fees this summer and to bring forward the necessary statutory instrument to make the fee changes later this year.

As I have said, public safety is our priority. At the same time, the measures to manage the risk to public safety must be proportionate and balanced with the fact that the vast majority of licensed firearms holders are law abiding and cause no concern.

It is for this reason that the Government have decided not to proceed with recommendations on aligning shotgun and firearms legislation. Shotguns are already subject to significant controls, and they are important in helping farmers control vermin on their land, as well as being used in a variety of rural pursuits. We will keep this under review, but we are currently of the view that additional controls on shotguns are unnecessary and would have a negative impact on their legitimate use.

We have also considered carefully the senior coroner's concern that the wording of the legislation—this refers to sections 27 and 28 of the Firearms Act 1968—creates a presumption in law in favour of granting a firearms licence to an applicant being granted because it uses the words “shall be granted”, which might in some way impact on how the police assess that applicant's suitability. We do not agree that this is the effect of the legislation. The legislation sets out specific conditions which must be met before the licence is granted, which includes meeting the conditions on suitability to the satisfaction of the police. We have therefore decided not to progress this particular recommendation from the coroner in respect of sections 27 and 28 of the Firearms Act 1968.

The other significant recommendations made to the Government will be the subject of an open, public consultation which is being launched today. I should

emphasise at the outset that no decisions have been made on these recommendations, and we are consulting to seek as broad a range of views as possible on what has been proposed.

The consultation includes recommendations made by the senior coroner, and also the recommendations made in the two other important reports from the Independent Office for Police Conduct and the Scottish Affairs Committee.

The Government have been giving very full and careful consideration to all three reports and accompanying recommendations. Some of the recommendations are wide-ranging and far-reaching, and the Government want to hear views on what has been suggested before we seek to bring forward any changes.

It is in that context that the Home Office is today publishing a public consultation paper on firearms licensing. The consultation will run for eight weeks. Responses to the consultation will be considered fully and carefully. Following that, should the Government conclude that legislative changes are necessary, we will of course consult formally on any specific legislative proposals before they are introduced, accompanied by the relevant impact assessments. Should we decide to proceed on the other recommended measures, such as changes to the statutory guidance, these would be introduced as soon as possible.

A copy of the consultation will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS895]

Undercover Policing Inquiry: Tranche 1 Interim Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): Today the undercover policing inquiry has published its first report. The inquiry was established in 2015 to inquire into, and report on, undercover police operations conducted by English and Welsh police forces in England and Wales since 1968. The inquiry has split its investigations into three modules: modules 1 and 2 are further broken down into six separate tranches. This interim report relates to tranche 1: the work of Special Demonstration Squad officers and managers and those affected by their deployments, in the years between 1968 and 1982.

This first report has taken eight years to compile, at a cost of over £64 million, a significant amount of which has been spent on legal costs. I know that those affected by the issues under examination will wish this inquiry to come to its conclusions swiftly, so as to bring accountability and closure. The Government are engaged with the inquiry chair and continue to stress the importance of delivering as soon as practicable.

The Government will carefully consider the contents of this report. I would like to thank all those who have engaged with the inquiry to support its work.

I would also like to thank Sir John Mitting for his work.

I have today laid the inquiry's report before the House, and it will also be published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS898]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Building Safety: Joint Inspection Team Indemnity

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): I am today informing the House of four proposed changes to the indemnity the Government provides for the joint inspection team (JIT). The JIT currently provides support and advice for local authorities on the enforcement process under the Housing Act 2004 against private sector, high-rise residential buildings with known cladding issues. Its work includes supporting LAs with inspecting buildings, serving enforcement notices, and prosecuting landlords that do not comply with the notices.

We are proposing expanding the scope of the indemnity so that the JIT can:

Support enforcement against medium-rise buildings;

Support enforcement against social housing providers;

Support LAs to use new enforcement powers under the Building Safety Act 2022;

Support enforcement against buildings without requiring advance evidence of an external wall defect.

I am laying a departmental minute providing further details of the change to the contingent liability. More details on the JIT were previously set out in statements and associated departmental minutes of 11 December 2018, HCWS1169; 25 June 2019, HCWS16541; and 11 March 2021, HCWS8421.

[HCWS899]

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